

BACCANO!

Crack Flag

バッカーノ!
1710



成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

 電撃文庫

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——2003年 ヴイクター・タルボット曰く

「ヒューイニフョレにて。」

あの傭れ子ロリスドについて俺達が理解するには、

まずは奴の世帯を調べることが必要だと思っわけだ。

まあ、俺もセフドの新株と二株にあの土地に行った大事はあるんだが……

その時には、ヒューイはなんだかよく分からない奴だったからな。

だが、改めて調べてみて解った事もある。

あの、自分の娘する実験体としか思っていないような冷血野郎にも、

恋人みてえな女はいたらしい。

あいつ自身の口からそれを聞いた事はないし、エルマーに聞くのもなんか嫌だ。

ただ……なあ、俺達錬金術師の間でも、あのヒューイの奴を不気味がってる奴は多かった。

実際氣味の悪い奴なのは確かだし、俺も何度か奴にも寒え湯を飲まされた。

しかし、興味箱が花畑をエルマーの奴は別として、

マイザの奴まで「ヒューイはそんなに怖い人ではありませんよう」なんて言いやがる。

つまり、昔と今は性格が違うのかもしれないな、あるいは、

マクサトやエルマーはヒューイの本性を知ってるのかもしれない。

その辺が、奴がロットワレンティーンにはまだ始めてから、

俺達と会うまでの数年間にあると思ってる。

……まずは、この古い戯曲に書かれた奴とその恋人の話しな話……

ジャン・ヒュール・アッカルドとかいう詩人が書いたこの戯曲が真実なのかどうか、

そこから調べる必要があるさうだ。」



2003, The Words of Victor Talbot

[Huey Laforet.

If we want to understand that damn terrorist, we first have to look into his hometown.

Sure, I've been there with old man Szilard before, but by then, Huey was totally unreadable.

But there was one thing I found out during my investigation.

That cold-blooded monster who saw his own daughters as experiments? He actually had something like a girlfriend. 'Course, he never told me about her personally, and I felt pretty uncomfortable asking Elmer. So I never asked about her.

The thing is... well, a *lot* of us alchemists thought Huey was a suspicious guy. He *was* pretty creepy--no doubt about that--and I ended up falling for some of his schemes too.

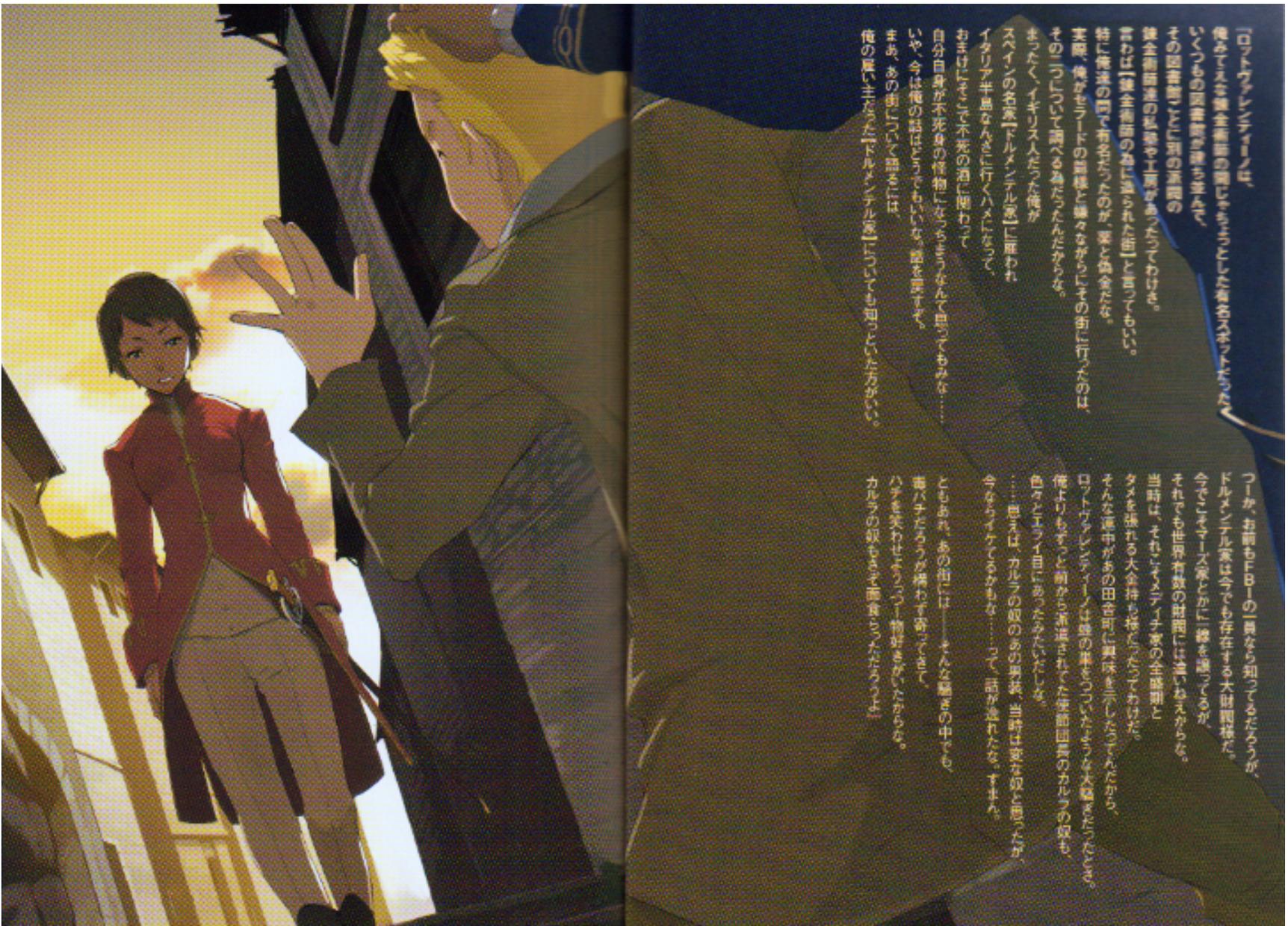
But let's set aside Elmer, who's always off in his little world of flowers and kittens. Thing is, even *Maiza* says, "Huey isn't such a scary person".

In other words, this might mean that Huey's personality changed somewhere down the line. Or maybe Maiza and Elmer know his true face--the one *we* know nothing about.

I think the key to all this might lie somewhere in the years between when he settled in Lotto Valentino and when we met him for the first time.

First of all, we need to investigate this old play--the story about him and a woman we believe might be this lover of his.

We need to see if this story written by the poet Jean-Pierre Accardo holds a grain of truth.]



「ロリアン・ウィルソン」

俺もてんやが全米新聞の面びきりして下りた者だもんな。で、その四半期は「全米新聞」を創った。

「全米新聞」の成功は、俺の人生の転機だった。

特に俺の面びきり有名だったのが、要と金だな。

実際、俺がモブの組織と絡むながら「その街」に行きたのは、その二つについて聞ける身だったからな。

まったく、イギリス人だった俺が

スペインの名家「ドルメン家」に雇われ

イタリヤ半島なんざに行くハメになって、

おまけにそこで不死身の酒に聞かされて、

自分自身が不死身の怪物にならちまうなんて思ってもいな……

いや、今は俺の話はどうでもいいな。話を聞かすぞ。

まあ、あの街について話さねば。

俺の雇い主だった「ドルメン家」についても知っていた方がいい。

「フーカ、お前もFBIの二面なら知ってるだろうが、

ドルメン家は今でも存在する大財閥だ。

今でこそ「スズ」でしか「権」を握ってるが、

それでも世界有数の財閥には違いないからな。

当時は、それと「スズ」の全盛期と

タメを操る大金持ちだった。たしてわけた。

そんな運中があつた田舎町に異変を示した。だから、

ロリアン・ウィルソンは、俺の面びきりした。もう、大騒ぎだった。

俺よりもずっと前から「スズ」を操る「ドルメン家」のカルラの娘も、

色々と「スズ」目にあつたみたいだしな。

……思えば、カルラの娘のあの男装、当時は俺を娘で思ってたが、

今ならいけるかもな……」って、話が逸れたな。すまん。

ともあれ、あの街には、そんな騒ぎの中でも、

毒ハチだろが構わず寄って来て、

心算を笑わせつつ「物好きだ」からな。

カルラの娘も、その面びきりした。で、

[Lotto Valentino was a pretty famous place among alchemists like me.

There were libraries everywhere you looked. Each library had its own private classes and workshops from different schools of alchemy.

In other words, it was basically a "city built for alchemists".

Some of the more popular issues for us back then were drugs and counterfeit currency. In fact, that's what brought me and old man Szilard to that city--we were investigating them.

Honestly, to think an Englishman like me would be hired by House Dormentaire and sent off to the Italian peninsula... And *then* I ended up getting mixed up with the Elixir of Immortality. I never realized I'd end up turning into an undying monster-

Anyway, never mind my story. Let's get back on topic.

What I'm trying to say is, if you want to know more about the city, it's a good idea to know some things about my employer, House Dormentaire.

Of course, an FBI agent like you'd already know--the Dormentaires are still around--filthy rich, I might add. Although they've been losing steam compared to the Maas family these days, they're still one of the most prominent families in the world.

What I'm saying is, at the time, they were so rich they could practically rival the House of Medici at its peak.

Think about it--what do you think happened when people that powerful suddenly showed an interest in this tiny countryside town? All of Lotto Valentino fell into confusion, like the entire town'd collectively disturbed a nest of hornets.

I think Carla--the leader of the delegation--went through a lot of trouble back then, since she'd been there since long before me.

...Now that I think about it... back then, I thought it was strange that she dressed like a man, but now that I think about it, she might not have been so bad after all-

Sorry. I'm getting off topic again.

In any event, this town was home to a certain eccentric who'd even approach one of these disturbed hornets, regardless of the risks, and try to make it smile. Carla must have been pretty confused.]



「ま、ロッドヴァレンティーン」は、それこそ他の街の何倍も鍊金術師が居たってわけだ。当然アトワエナマナマナに乗って不死者になった連中の殆どは、ロッドヴァレンティーン出身の奴らだった。そのロッドヴァレンティーンの鍊金術師達は基本的に別々の貴族から出資を受けて、派閥みたいなもんがあつたんだが……マイサーの師匠のダルトンは、その中でも一際有名で、鶴唳みたいなもんだ。

ただ、おかしなもんで、マイサーの師匠はダルトンなんだが、アヴァーロ家が出資してたのは、寧ろ別の街の鍊金術師達だ。ほら、お前にも前に資料見せた。ベツカロアトやチエスフ・ネイエルなんかいた工房だも……。その工房の主……チエスの父親は、俺が街に着く数年前に、事故で死んでしまったらしいが、アヴァーロ家に誘致される形で、工房の連中は元と、ロッドヴァレンティーンに居たってわけだ。その工房から不死者になったのは、他にフェルメートの方がいるんだが……。奴についてはよく分かんない。ドルメンテル家とも繋がりがあつたんだが、俺は殆ど話したことがないな。チエスの保護者ってのは知ってるが、まあ、そのチエスに……いや、これはヒューイには関係のない話だ。

ともあれ、ヒューイ・フロレットはその街に自分の過去を置いてきた。死ねない人間かどうかわからないが、俺はさっさと戻らな。それになるのは、奴が俺に自分の本性を露してきただけで、思わぬ方向に俺を過去女のが、それとも、本気で大事だから、取立て動かし給えたのか……おい、ヒューイ、さあてめえ、貴族チエスのことを、じゃあねえ！ 結構な事なつたわ、ヒューイ……！
……と、如の過去について探している……

……ん、へん。
……かいて本並に……。
「ヒューイ、何かが目的で永遠の命を俺の手に入れたらどう思う？」
その言葉が、奴の過去の中に少しも目づかれはいいんだが「

[The population of alchemists in Lotto Valentino was several times greater than those of other cities. Naturally, that's where most of the Advenna Avis immortals came from.

Most of the Lotto Valentino alchemists were being funded by their own aristocrats, so they were arranged in something like their own schools...

Maiza's teacher, Dalton, was the most well-known among Lotto Valentino's alchemists. Kind of like their leader.

There was one strange thing, though.

Maiza's teacher was Dalton, but the Avaro family was supporting *another* group of alchemists from out of town, and no one else.

You remember the files I showed you before? I'm talking about the workshops to which the likes of Begg Garott and Czeslaw Meyer were connected.

Of course, the master of the workshop--Czes's father--apparently died in an accident several years before I arrived.

I'm saying that the workshop guys were completely uprooted and relocated to Lotto Valentino, practically chained to the Avaro family.

There was someone else from that group, a guy named Fermet...

But I don't know much about him. He was also connected to House Dormentaire, but we almost never spoke to each other.

I know that he used to be Czes's guardian, but in the end, Czes-

Wait. That's got nothing to do with Huey.

In any case, Huey Laforet left his past behind in that city. This might sound like a line from a cheap poem, but this is what I think. The thing that bugs me is-

Did he leave behind his old self back in Lotto Valentino because he wanted to forget his painful past? Or did he forcibly cut himself off from it because his past was just that precious to him...?

Hey. I saw you laugh just now.

'Pretty poetic of me'? As if!

Hurry up and dig up more info on him, or you're up for a salary review!

Damn.

But really...

Huey Laforet...

What was he thinking when he pursued and attained immortality? What was his purpose?

I hope the answer, or at least a part of it, lies somewhere in his past.]

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Design Yoshitoko Kamada

The girl had once committed a certain crime.

But her sin was covered up in secrecy, regardless of her own will.

And so the girl lived on in peace.

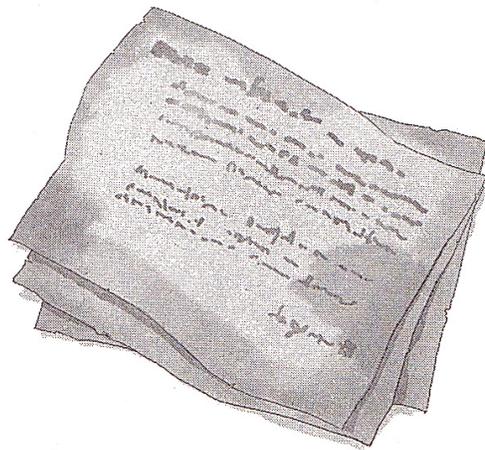
She never once considered seeking out happiness for herself.

Yet she had not resolved to repent for her crimes.

She was just wandering aimlessly, not knowing what to do.

That is why I reached out a hand towards her, without even knowing what lay in the future--blind even to the steep cliff that awaited before us.

Epilogue A



2003, Italy. The city of Lotto Valentino.

The young man's discovery of the box could have been nothing less than a coincidence.

He was a young wanderer in his twenties. His parents had perished in an accident several years ago, leaving him to squander the inheritance on his travels around the world.

The young man had finally returned to his hometown of Lotto Valentino because his reserves of cash were running low. He was looking for things he could pawn off for profit.

Lotto Valentino was a small city that lay northwest of Naples.

It had a rather long history in its own right. The ports that had been built in the days of the city's founding still existed to serve today's tourists and businesses.

This city of streets was filled with tiny alleyways, almost like a labyrinth. The view of the azure skies that sprawled out over the tiny roads surrounded by white stone walls was practically a tourist attraction in and of itself.

Lotto Valentino boasted one of the highest library counts in Italy. The historical and artistic values of these archives sometimes drew in television crews from overseas. But otherwise, it was a peaceful and nondescript port town.

At least, this was what the young man thought of his hometown.

His house was located on the edges of the city.

One day, he found a mysterious jewelry case in the attic.

Actually, the box was rather big to be called a jewelry case. If it was more lavishly ornamented, he would have no qualms about calling it a treasure chest.

It was about the size of a small bathtub, and it was the first time that the young man laid eyes on it.

In the corner of the attic was a precariously stacked pile of old furniture.

He had noticed a hidden space in this run-down corner of the wall. The young man had broken it down completely and discovered the chest.

He looked upon this concealed chest with great expectations.

It was said that his ancestor was a rather famous poet from this very city. The ancestor had also written several plays, copies of which were kept in some of the libraries in Lotto Valentino.

Perhaps the chest contained artworks or treasures passed down from this ancestor.

The young man, an avid traveler, found his heart racing. Not out of greed, but out of the sheer sense of adventure this sealed box offered.

He soon opened the lock. He lifted the lid. His face fell.

Inside the chest were hundreds of thousands of pieces of parchment.

It certainly didn't look like it would fetch a large sum.

However, the young man considered the possibility that the scraps of parchment bore some poems or writings by his ancestor. It occurred to him that he might be able to sell them to museums and the like.

'If the poems are any good, maybe they'll become famous?'

The young man, shamelessly considering using his ancestor's name to make profits, quickly began to read through the words written on the parchment.

It was written in an archaic style from about three hundred years ago. However, the young man had been fond of reading classics during his student life, and as such was able to barely understand the words on the parchment.

There were some difficult passages here and there, but he could reference one of the many libraries in town for help. It was fortunate that the man in charge of the local library was particularly well-versed in this field.

Thanks to these overlapping coincidences, the young man was able to decipher the extensive passages written upon the parchment.

He ended up reading them.

He ended up reading this bundle of aged writings.

The story that took place over several years in Lotto Valentino, intentionally written on parchment in an era when paper was readily available.

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[Here I record some of my personal testimony--some things that must be told, yet cannot be said.

Where to begin?

When I convey my thoughts to those I have yet to meet, I usually do so in poetry. But I wonder if it would be appropriate to do the same when I am doing nothing but recounting my own memories.

I even find myself thinking I would prefer that this bundle of parchments--which I do not doubt will be a large one--will never be discovered by anyone.

But what can I do, when things have already come to this? The fact that you are reading these words means that this letter has been discovered.

Or perhaps you are some translator, deciphering these words for a discoverer who cannot read them on his own.

In any event, that is of no concern to me.

I will never know who you are--you who are reading these accounts of mine.

This does not mean I am committing suicide. Once I finish writing, I plan to hide this account somewhere where it will not be discovered for fifty to a hundred years.

I say this again: I have no intention of committing suicide.

The act of taking one's own life is a foolish thing that goes against the will of God. I write this again for emphasis.

My name is Jean-Pierre Accardo.

I am a man who writes poetry and prose for meagre pay, but I am unused to writing this sort of letter. That is why I ask this of the reader: It may be somewhat difficult a read, but please finish

No.

If you find this a difficult read, then I ask that you immediately put these accounts back where you found them and forget about them altogether.

You may even burn them if you so wish.

I am only writing this letter in order to ease my own conscience.

If you have decided to accept all this and continue reading, there is something I want you to know about.

I want you to know about the unbelievable things I had seen.

The many alchemists who had gotten their hands on eternal life.

You, my reader, might see these words and dismiss them as foolishness.

Or perhaps you are living in a world where immortality is part of the mundane.

However, in the era in which I live, it is a mere fantasy--a dream that all know is impossible but pursue nonetheless.

Yes.

A fantasy.

And yet I had seen it in the flesh.

I had seen an undying man.

The things I record from this point on are part of the true history of Lotto Valentino.

Not all of them are first-hand accounts. Some of my accounts are second-hand.

But first, I will have to explain the "Immortals" I had witnessed.

I first witnessed the "regeneration" in the year 1707.

I had been invited to a party hosted by a prominent aristocratic family of the city, the Avaro family.]

CHAPTER 1:

SO YOU ARE
CURIOUS ABOUT
IMMORTALITY?



1707, Lotto Valentino. The Avaro Estate.

The northwest area of the jurisdiction of Naples, on the Italian peninsula.

Lotto Valentino was a town by the sea, located near the outskirts of Naples. It was a relatively small city, with a population of about fifty thousand.

This city of steep cliff faces and sea-facing stone buildings was not quite as grand or majestic as some of its neighbors--it merely existed in quiet solitude.

Lotto Valentino was a port town along the trade routes of Naples. It had a relatively fair climate thanks to its place by the Mediterranean Sea. There were even fruit orchards on the outskirts of the city.

The Tyrrhenian Sea--a part of the Mediterranean--sparkled as brightly as usual, giving off a glow that turned every view of Lotto Valentino into a veritable work of art.

The streets almost looked like a copy of Naples in miniature, but the city itself had no particular draws or attractions. Very few people entered and left this city, with the exception of merchants and traders.

Eventually, the countless libraries and stone buildings would themselves become tourist attractions, but at this point in time it was nothing but a common countryside town with common countryside sights.

But even in this small city, the nights of the aristocrats filled the darkness with dazzling light.

<=>

It was an enchanting evening.

The chandelier hanging from the ceiling would not be out of place in a royal palace. There were nearly a hundred candles burning on the decorative metal candlesticks, filling the vast chamber with a warm glow.

This majestically decorated hall was the place of socialization for dozens of high-ranking individuals, lost in merry chatter.

The vibrant colors that filled the hall made obvious the social status of these people.

Hundreds of words emerged and made their way back and forth, all conversations completely suited to the atmosphere of the chamber. It was almost as if every occupant of this hall had been cast out of a mold labeled "aristocracy".

But one man, who had slightly broken the trend, stood by himself, sighing in a corner.

"I really shouldn't be here..." The man mumbled to himself, not even bothering to hide his discomfort, but his words fell on deaf ears.

The clothes he wore were quite obviously of lower quality than those worn by others around him. An aristocrat would occasionally glance over at him suspiciously, then turn away.

The young man reaffirmed the fact that he was truly an outsider, and inhaled in preparation for an even louder sigh.

"Jean. You're here."

He froze and turned around, surprised by the sudden tone of affability directed towards him from among the mass of aristocrats.

Standing before him was a tall man with sharp eyes.

He was dressed similarly to the other noblemen, but there was a certain age-inappropriate air to him that distinguished the man from the others.

He carried himself almost like the leader of a group of bandits, but the young man called "Jean"--Jean-Pierre Accardo--infused his sigh with relief as he exhaled.

"What, you're here too, Aile?"

"My father *is* the host, after all. ...Also, call me Maiza while you're here. Everyone will think it's strange if they hear you address me by a nickname at my own home."

"So you *do* worry about that stuff after all, eh? But you know, just a couple of years ago, you were telling everyone to call you Aile, just to rebel against your parents, weren't you?"

Jean's earlier awkwardness evaporated. He let out a hearty laugh and gave the other man--who was almost a head taller than himself--a slap on the back. The man called "Maiza" frowned slightly.

"Who cares? It's true I hate the name 'Maiza' (Miser), but bothering my parents in a place like this won't convince them to change it."

"Ever consider getting disowned? Then you won't have to be an 'Avaro'¹ anymore, either."

"...I did seriously consider that once."

Maiza turned his head with an audible crack and looked down towards his friend.

"Anyway, is this your first time at a party like this? You look so scared it's almost like you're about to be eaten alive by rats."

"...To be honest, it's pretty uncomfortable. I'd have gone back already if I hadn't met you here."

Jean leaned against the wall alone and looked out at the crowded scene before him.

"People, people, people. I see nothing but people before my eyes. But they're not full of energy, like the ones who walk through the streets. And yet they're not as somber as mourners at a funeral. It's as if they're all acting out of some hidden agenda--poking at one another, suspecting others, and plotting to get them onto their sides. ...is this the cheap kind of impression you wanted a poet like me to deliver?"

Jean suddenly switched his tone from ambiguity to honesty. Maiza shook his head.

"No one expects anything out of you as a poet. You're best at speaking, after all... but then again, you're abnormally fast when it comes to reading and writing, too."

"I was born in a city of libraries--might as take advantage of that."

Jean shrugged. Maiza sighed and continued.

"And yet somehow, your foolish poems and plays are critically acclaimed, bringing you to a place like this... correct?"

"Stop mocking me. I'm sure you have some talents of your own. I know you're not the type to settle for being the leader of a gang of delinquents for the rest of your life."

¹ "Avaro" also means "Miser" in Spanish and Italian.

Jean laughed so condescendingly it almost sounded fake. Maiza turned his narrow eyes towards the walls and briefly fell into thought.

Maiza Avaro was a young man in his twenties living in Lotto Valentino, and was the leader of a group of aristocratic delinquents called the "Rotten Eggs". He was also the eldest son of the Avaro family, one of the most influential powers in this city. As a powerful and prominent aristocrat in his own right, he had organized the Rotten Eggs as a form of rebellion against his family and Lotto Valentino, creating some semblance of notoriety on the streets.

Of course, most of that notoriety was the fault of the other members of the gang. Maiza himself had not taken the lead in their wrongdoings. The reason he was their leader regardless was because of his power--in particular, his skill with the knife, which was said to be unparalleled in the city.

Jean, the bad company that had been Maiza's friend, was the son of a traveling merchant who had put down his roots in this port town. He was not the kind of man who would normally be welcomed in a gathering of the elite.

However, Jean was the only poet in the city. Having been acknowledged for his talent with words at a young age, his name was rather well known both in and out of Lotto Valentino.

Of course, the man himself was somewhat disgruntled by the fact that his main focus--poetry--was less celebrated than his plays, which were written from time to time when he had the chance. But regardless of his own vexation, Jean-Pierre had been invited to this party as a playwright.

"I'm grateful for the fact that your father invited me here. But frankly, I want to go home right now." Jean did not even try to hide his grievances. Maiza laughed bitterly.

"Don't say that. Spending time in places like this might be useful as a reference for when you write your plays."

"The imagery surfaces more clearly when I don't know the reality of things. Ugh, it's no wonder all you eggs are rotten. How do you *breathe* in a place like this?" Jean complained, and once again considered leaving--

"Excuse me... are you, by any chance, Jean-Pierre Accardo?"

A tentative voice suddenly entered their conversation.

Jean and Maiza both turned around. Standing before them was a young man.

He was around the same age as them. The long bangs covering his eyes made it difficult to read his expression, but the faintest hints of a somewhat excited smile graced his lips.

He was dressed differently from an aristocrat or a merchant. In fact, his clothing was most reminiscent of a scholar.

"Yes, I am... and who might you be?" Jean asked doubtfully. The young man looked slightly taken aback as he replied in an embarrassed tone.

"Oh, please excuse my manners. It seems my excitement at seeing a man I respect so much has gotten the better of me. I am the assistant of an alchemist close to the Avaro family..."

There was a cool smile upon the man's lips as he politely greeted Jean and Maiza.

"My name is Lebreau. Lebreau Fermet Viralesque. It is an honor to make your acquaintance."

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[That was when I first met that alchemist--or to be precise, that was when I met that *novice* alchemist.

He was a very straightforward man.

I found the way he covered his eyes rather suspicious at first, but further discussions with the man led me to erase these doubts from my mind altogether. It is strange to say, but he was someone I could open up to, like an old friend. Put simply, he was very easy to talk to.

In any event, *he* was the beginning of it all.

It is embarrassing to say, but until that moment, I had never seen a so-called alchemist.

I had never gone out of my way to seek them out, either.

It was not that I considered alchemy a fraud. I had other reasons for my disinterest.

This is a shameful secret of Lotto Valentino, but there is something to which I must testify. It is one of the reasons I am hiding my accounts so that they will only be discovered by later generations.

Until the year 1705, the city of Lotto Valentino had existed in rather unusual circumstances.

The commoners had a monopoly on the drugs and counterfeits that the alchemists had brought to the city. They were planning to use the profits from these products to buy out the entire city from the aristocrats.

Then, a serial killer known as the "Mask Maker" appeared and plunged the city into great confusion. But this is not what I intend to write about here, so I will forgo the details of this incident.

We had committed a certain crime.

At the time, *all* those who lived in the city were guilty of the same sin.

I was not directly taking part in the creation of the drugs and counterfeits, but I was privy to the workings of the operation. I also knew that children in certain circumstances were subject to unimaginable horrors in the process of the creation of the drugs.

And yet I did nothing.

Some thought it only natural to use the children as tools, and others thought it immoral. The varied opinions created tiny ripples in the ocean of our collective operation, but in the end none of them mattered. We were all equally at fault in our inaction. The citizens of Lotto Valentino were united in this sin that tied us all together.

The serial killer called the Mask Maker made these crimes known in 1705, but I will not delve into the details, as not even I have a full understanding of the incident.

Of course, I will discuss the Mask Maker later on in my accounts. However, there is still a long way to go before I do so.

At any rate, we had attempted to lay the blame upon the alchemists. I had known this time also that innocent lives would be crushed or broken, yet I did nothing.

As with the Mask Maker, I will forgo the details of the incident for now.

If fate is on your side, perhaps you will learn the details of what occurred in the year 1705. *My* accounts were merely not destined favorably towards you.

Allow me to get back to the heart of the matter.

This guilt of mine was the reason I did not actively seek out the alchemists.

I knew that Maiza's family had close ties with a group of alchemists from a neighboring city. Among them was a man named Begg Garott, a so-called authority on the creation of drugs. He was the one who brought the prototype of the previously mentioned drug to this city.

Of course, I was oblivious to all of this at the time.]

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"...Oh. A friend of Begg?"

Lebreau greeted Maiza again when he heard mention of Begg's name.

"I've been told that my fellow student Begg is quite indebted to you, sir."

"Where is he?"

"I believe he is meeting with your honored father. Right now I'm here to look after this boy."

"Looking after...?"

Jean and Maiza tilted their heads in unison. Almost simultaneously, a tiny child poked out his head from behind Lebreau.

"Be polite and introduce yourself, Czes."

The small silhouette bowed at the alchemist's urging and introduced himself in an awkward mumble.

"Um... I-it's an honor to meet you. My name is Czeslaw Meyer."

The boy could not be more than six years of age. He looked up at Maiza's tall form with fear in his eyes. Jean found himself laughing uncontrollably at this sight.

"Hey, you're scaring the kid, Maiza."

Maiza ignored his friend's jibe. He bowed down and laid a hand on the boy's head.

"It's nice to meet you. My name is Maiza, but everyone calls me Aile."

"More like you *make* us call you that."

"The idiot here's Jean-Pierre. Just call him Jean."

The young man forced his curt expression into a smile. Czeslaw nervously glanced around like a lost child.

Lebreau gently interjected as if to shield Czes.

"I'm sorry. Czes is a bit shy around strangers. He's our teacher's only son, you see..."

"Yes. I've heard from Begg."

Maiza found himself suddenly filled with complex emotions about the boy called Czeslaw, but he forced them back and smiled bitterly.

"I'm sure an alchemist like you must have plenty to talk about. I hope you enjoy the party."

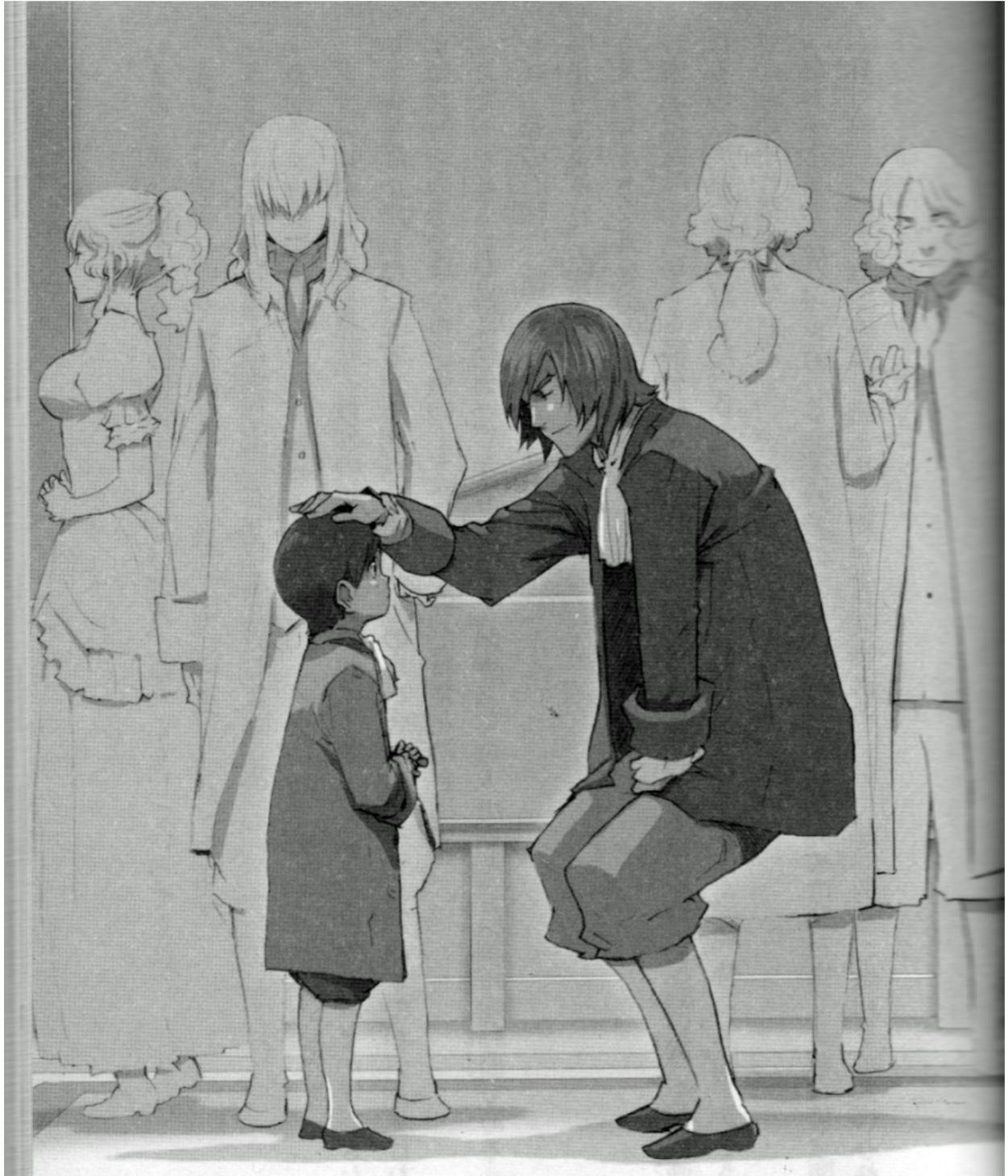
He then gestured towards Jean.

"It seems like you're a fan of the playwright here."

"What?"

Jean drew a blank for a moment, then remembered that Lebreau had walked up to *him*, not Maiza. Lebreau smiled on cue, and took Jean's hands in his own with the look of a delighted child.

"Yes! Absolutely! You don't know how humbled I am to finally meet you, Jean-Pierre. I greatly enjoyed your newest play, [The Stone Pillar of Dorcho Street]."



"Please, you flatter me."

The compliment was enough to make Jean blush like a tomato.

He had mixed feelings about the fact that his plays--which he had only written for the money--were better known than his poetry, his true passion. He wasn't angry about this, however. Jean was red with embarrassment.

Lebreau patted Czes's head and continued, almost as if he had read Jean's mind.

"I've also read your first poetry collection. Excuse me for saying this, but it was just so creative that I could not believe they were your debut works."

"What...?"

"I suppose it's because of this underlying creativity of yours that your new path as a playwright has produced works that capture the hearts of the audience so well. I had little more on my heart than idle curiosity when I first stepped into this city, but I never would have expected to run into you. I am truly honored."

"Hah! Well spoken, but flattery will get you nowhere."

Despite his somewhat curt words, Jean's lips were trembling as if he was just about to burst out into laughter. Maiza looked at him and drew a conclusion:

'Jean's really happy about this.'

Lebreau's compliments continued on. Jean listened with embarrassment plastered over his face, but he didn't try to stop Lebreau.

Maiza was astounded, but he chose not to interject. Instead he turned to the little boy who was hiding in Lebreau's shadow.

'So this is Czes...'

Begg, an alchemist he was acquainted with, had mentioned this boy before.

'I'd heard his parents had died in an accident.'

So Begg and this... Lebreau Fermet... are acting as a family for him.

Poor thing. And he's still so young.

...No, maybe it's fortunate that he has guardians looking after him at all.'

Maiza recalled a certain group of children who inhabited the city.

*'...Someone like him could have easily ended up being sold away and dragged into this city... and been forced to take part in **that** work. There's no worry about that now, but still...'*

Lost in his memories, Maiza once again looked at the young boy before him.

Czeslaw was indeed a very shy child. He tightly clutched Lebreau's sleeve, unwilling to let go. Maiza finally succumbed to his boredom and decided to speak to him.

"Czeslaw... or should I call you Czes? Are you hungry at all? Shall I get you something?"

Czes flinched slightly when Maiza spoke to him. He then looked up at Maiza with eyes like that of a small kitten, and nervously voiced his thought.

"...Sherbet."

Upon hearing this, Lebreau quickly turned from his discussion with Jean and tried to convince Czes otherwise with a sheepish smile.

"Now, now, Czes. Don't be so selfish."

"...But Fermet, I want to eat sherbet."

Czes looked up and begged his guardian. Maiza smiled.

"All right. I'll get you some right now."

"Please, there's no need. Sherbet is too much of a luxury."

The likes of refrigeration machines had not yet been invented in the early 18th century. Although insulation devices existed, the concept of a box that froze water was still some time away.

Sherbet, however, was a thing of the present. Naturally, frozen treats made with snow or natural ice had existed since time immemorial. However, there was a slightly different method of creating these treats in this particular time period.

It had been discovered that dissolving potassium nitrate in water drained the heat from its surroundings. From that point on, aristocrats, who could afford to obtain great quantities of the substance, utilized this technique for the refrigeration of wine. The method was also applied to freeze fruit juice and the like to create sherbet.

Of course, it wasn't something the likes of a commoner could normally afford. It was a luxury item that only the privileged could enjoy.

"I'm terribly sorry. The boy's just very fond of frozen treats, you see. He made quite a fuss when we visited a town in the north in the past. Would you believe that he poured sugar and honey over the snow on the ground to eat it?"

"But... snow's delicious..."

Czes timidly bowed his head. Maiza gave the boy a pat on the head.

"No, don't worry about it. I'm sure we have some left over for the ladies, so I'll have a servant bring some over."

Maiza departed, leaving behind an odd combination of poet, alchemist, and child. The awkward absence of compliments left Jean scrambling for a topic of conversation.

'What do I say? There's no way I could follow a conversation on alchemy and the like...'

And once again, Lebreau's words made it seem as though he had read Jean's mind.

"Have you heard of the Cafe le Procope?"

"Pardon?"

"Supposedly it's a cafe in Paris, built by the Sicilian merchant Francois Procope. It also sells frozen treats. I've heard it said that it is a rather popular establishment for artists, scholars, playwrights, and poets like yourself. Perhaps you should pay it a visit if you happen to pass by."

Realizing that this man was truly treating him as an artist, Jean once again found himself flustered. He replied very quickly.

"...Oh, I have no plans to go all the way to Paris. I get the feeling that I'll never be able to leave this city. Probably end up being buried here, too."

"I see. Perhaps that will be so, if you so desire it."

"..."

A part of Jean realized that he had actually been expecting a warmer answer like "Of course not. Yours is the kind of brilliance that must go out into the world". He flushed.

However, Lebreau continued with words that would turn Jean's flush an even deeper shade of red.

"But whether you desire it or not, the words you have recorded in your poems and plays are going out into the world. How else do you think I would have known of you and spoken to you here?"

"You're embarrassing me. Maybe you could tell me a bit more about yourself, Lebreau."

Jean had just blurted out something to ease his own embarrassment, but he instantly found himself regretting what he said.

'What good would it be to listen to an alchemist-'

However, it was too late to take back what he had said. Lebreau smiled brightly.

"Oh, well, my apologies. You see, even if I were to speak of alchemy, a mere apprentice like myself would not be able to so eloquently convey the intricacies of the study..."

"If you put it that way, I'm just an ignorant layman when it comes to alchemy. The details probably won't penetrate my thick skull. I'm more interested in it for reference, like for a play or a piece of poetry."

"Perhaps a play about a group of fools who are captivated by the idea of turning base metals into gold?" Lebreau laughed. Jean quickly shook his head.

"No, no! I wouldn't do something so presumptuous--"

"Please, don't worry. I think it is a foolish idea myself."

"?"

Jean was confused. Lebreau smiled.

"The philosopher's stone, homunculi, turning base metals into gold, and the magnum opus--the identification of man with God... On their own, these goals seem like foolishness, a chasing of the wind. We do not try to transmute gold out of *greed*, but to others, we are nothing but mad scholars driven by avarice... It is only natural for the world to see us as such in this day and age."

"No, I never--"

"Please, don't misunderstand. I am not disparaging my own field of studies. After all, the fact that this so-called meaningless chasing of the wind is what created many practical applications of science. Alchemy is something I revere."

"Oh."

'Thank goodness I actually understand what he's saying.'

Jean nodded in relief. However-

"But it is also true that this is a study to be feared."

Lebreau's words were rather unexpected.

"Pardon?"

"They say that those who deal with the study are a part of the discipline of alchemy, but matters concerning those, who, to a layman's eyes, have further surpassed this realm and entered the world of sorcery... Is that not the kind of thing that would inspire your creativity?"

"Well, I wonder... I'm the kind of man who finds matters to complain about in *reality*... The idea of creating gold itself is *already* part of the realm of sorcery for me."

"Perhaps you are right."

Lebreau continued speaking, his smile never broken. His tone had changed to that of an impish child who had just come up with a prank.

"But perhaps a first-hand look might change your opinion."

"You'll show me the creation of gold? That's quite the claim. I can just picture the gold prices plummeting and the markets falling into chaos." Jean joked harmlessly, but Lebreau quietly shook his head.

"If only that could be true. Of course, to the untrained eye, the counterfeits being created in this city would work just as well."

"...Hey. I know it's obvious that alchemists like you know about that, but it's best not to talk about it where aristocrats can hear you." Jean chided Lebreau, lowering his voice and quickly looking around.

It was true that the counterfeits were still going around, but the masterminds behind it had yet to be found.

However, the entire topic had become something of a taboo to the aristocrats, who had once nearly lost their city to the commoners thanks to them.

The counterfeits, along with the drugs, were likely what led Maiza to despise this corrupt city and form the Rotten Eggs in retaliation. Knowing all this just made Jean more nervous.

"Please excuse me. In any case... what would you say if I told you that I could show you something similar to 'sorcery' in person?"

"Could you just get to the point? What's this 'sorcery' you're talking about?"

Jean was rather wary of his surroundings now. He had intended for his question to be vaguely agreeable, but Lebreau's reply turned his eyes into dinner plates.

"Immortality."

"What?"

"What would you do if I told you... that alchemists who have attained immortality live on these very streets?"

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The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[Initially, I thought it to be little more than a bad joke.

However, despite the fact that I had only known him a short time, Lebreau did not seem like a man for idle pranks.

When I pressed further, he told me that a man called Dalton, an alchemy teacher who was in charge of one of the libraries in town, had once summoned a 'devil' and attained immortality.

Supposedly Dalton was an acquaintance of Lebreau's, and it was mostly for the purpose of meeting with him that Lebreau had come to this city.

Lebreau told me that if I was interested, he would set up an appointment with Dalton for me.

Why me? I asked him.

'Because I want someone with a clear view of the world to know of the truth.' He replied with a smile.

And I fell prey to these incredibly simple words. I was willingly played by him.

After all, it would be a lie to say that I was uninterested.

Perhaps you already consider these writings unbelievable.

Perhaps the first mention of devils and the like has driven you to put these confessions back in the box where you found them.

Perhaps I could be thankful if that is what you had done.

After all, even I, the writer of these accounts, still find myself unable to fully comprehend the sight I'd seen, despite the years that had passed by.]

[Now, if you have turned over to the next page, I will assume that you still have an interest in my accounts.

I will not ask if you have caught a scent of truthfulness in my writings or if you are curious to see where this piece of so-called fiction will take you. I will merely respect the fact that you have moved on to the next piece of parchment.

I have no conclusive idea of what the future will be like, but I will take all possibilities into account and record the following.

In the end, despite my reservations, I snuck out of the party to go see this man called Dalton.

Of course, I was not the only fool who was curious about immortality.]

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"You didn't have to tag along too, Maiza."

"Call me Aile."

"You start with that as soon as we step out of your house? You're a spoiled brat, you know that? If you're worried about me, maybe you should start thinking about giving me some *freedom*, don't you think?"

"I'm not particularly worried about you. Also, if I'm worried about someone, that's all the more reason to *restrict* their freedom. ...I'm just curious about this Dalton fellow."

Walking along with Jean were Maiza, Lebreau, Czes, and another alchemist who had joined them a little later--Begg Garott.

As the son of an aristocrat, Maiza was not actually permitted to mix with people like those currently in his company. However, the fact that he led the Rotten Eggs mean that he didn't care very much about the status of the people he dealt with.

Maiza lowered his voice so that the alchemists, who were walking ahead of them, could not hear.

"This man called Dalton is full of mysteries. I don't know the details, but apparently he's somehow connected to that skirt-chasing Count."

"By 'skirt-chasing'... you mean Count Boronial? He's the governor, you know. Why don't you at least try to show him a little respect?"

"I started thinking a bit better of him when he quashed the riot two years ago, but not by much. Maybe if he'd stop being such a womanizer my brother wouldn't be in such a bind."

"Now that you mention it, you said your little brother was smitten with one of the young maids, right? Her name was... Sylvie, or something? If anyone finds out, getting disowned would be the *least* of his worries--the girl might suffer first. It's a bit too classic for me to write a play about, though."

Maiza glared at Jean's unsavory choice of jokes and returned to the topic at hand.

"...Anyway, just like my father is working with Begg over there, the Count is connected to this alchemist named Dalton."

Maiza cracked his neck and narrowed his eyes.

"How do you think the Count would react once he finds out that the old man's immortal? No doubt he'd start funding immortality research to 'have eternal beauties tending to me at my side' or something."

"Setting me aside, what is this Lebreau thinking, getting *you* involved with this too?"

"...What do you mean, 'setting me aside'?"

"He gave me the offer because he appreciates my talents. I wonder if a walking ball of violence like you'd even be able to appreciate half the miracle of immortality."

Jean laughed jokingly, despite Maiza's serious attitude. The moment he found himself being slapped in the back of the head by Maiza, Lebreau, who was walking ahead of them, turned around.

"It is simple, really. Sir Maiza is somehow different from the other aristocrats. That is why I determined that it would be best to show you this incongruity that lies beneath the surface of the city. For both of you, of course."

'So he was listening to us.' Maiza and Jean thought at once, and frowned abashedly.

Maiza sighed, and, perhaps in an attempt to excuse himself, threw out a question with a look of stoicism.

"I don't know what you're talking about when you say it's for both of us. But anyway, would this Dalton fellow really be willing to show us anything about this immortality business of yours?"

"It doesn't seem like he's being particularly secretive about it. And even then, suppose there were rumors about his apparent immortality going around. What man would be able to relay the rumor with a straight face?"

"...I'd probably think he was either drunk or high."

"That is correct. Facts that are too far removed from one's supposed reality will sound like an overblown joke, whether or not they are real. That is the essence of humanity. ... Oh, it looks like we're here. Well, Begg?"

Upon being addressed by Lebreau, Begg turned around.

He was wearing a turban, and his chin was covered in stubble. It would be difficult for even the kindest of people to call him a man of pleasant appearance.

But the fact that Czes, holding his hand in the darkness, had a look of peace, showed that he was at least someone the boy trusted very much.

Jean drew his conclusions from these facts and did not worry himself too much about this alchemist, who was also an acquaintance of Maiza.

One thing, however, was that Begg was a strangely talkative man. Jean recalled that he was talking with Czes all throughout their walk to see Dalton. Perhaps this was why Lebreau had gotten bored of the conversation and begun to listen to Jean's conversation with Maiza.

"We're here now. It seems Dalton is at his usual haunt. But I must say I am shocked. To think an unsociable man like Fermet would say he wanted to bring someone over. I worried he might have eaten something strange at the party, but to think it would be Maiza, of all people. And the other is the poet behind Lebreau's favourite anthology. What a grand coincidence."

Begg rambled on almost as he had no time to even breathe, and entered the library.

At this moment, they would pass by a small group of people.

These people were still young. Perhaps they were townsfolk visiting the library, or alchemy students on their way home from class.

Several libraries in Lotto Valentino were privately owned by alchemists. For Jean, who avoided alchemists altogether, this particular library was one he deemed 'not for use'.

Jean tried his best to not make eye contact.

However, one of the people passing by him stopped in his tracks and called out in a loud voice.

"Oh, Mister Aile!"

"?"

Everyone turned towards Maiza and the young man.

Three people had been in the middle of exiting the library.

One was a young man with black hair and golden eyes, wearing a cold look on his face.

Another was a young woman with long blond hair, red-faced and standing very close to the black-haired young man.

The one who had called out to Maiza was a young man with blond hair and blue eyes, likely of North European descent. He was neither handsome nor ugly--he was a very nondescript young man who wore his childlike smile well.

They were all perhaps around sixteen or seventeen years of age.

They certainly didn't look like members of the Rotten Eggs, but they didn't seem to be aristocrats, either. Jean curiously awaited Maiza's response to see what kind of people they were.

"...Hey. It's been a while, Elmer. I see that creepy smile of yours hasn't changed a bit."

Maiza's reply was calm. He showed neither joy nor discomfort at this reunion.

Then, the young man called Elmer replied with a voice that held no fear for the tall delinquent aristocrat.

"You should try smiling some more yourself, Mister Aile."

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Several minutes later, on the streets.

"...Elmer. That man just now was the leader of the Rotten Eggs, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. Mister Aile."

The trio that had left the library began discussing the people they had just passed by.

"Why do you think he was there?"

"Dunno. Maybe he wanted to read something?"

"...Do you recognize the person who was beside him?"

The young man called Elmer thought for a moment. He then waved his hand and laughed.

"I have no idea who he is. Why're you so curious?"

"No, it's just... that man with the long bangs. For a second there, he looked surprised to see me."

"Really? Why didn't you just ask him?"

"Who do you think I am? You?" The black-haired young man mumbled, with a kind of bluntness rivaling even that of the leader of the Rotten Eggs. The girl walking beside him clapped her hands together.

"I bet he was so taken by how beautiful you were, Huey! Maybe he thought you were a girl!"

"That's not a very pleasant thought."

Out of the desire to escape any further unwanted mental imagery, the black-haired young man abandoned his curiosity about the people he had just seen. To him, the man they had just seen mattered nothing, whether they were previously acquainted or not.

At least, not yet.

If he had thought just a little more deeply about the man with the long bangs at this point in time--if he had only been slightly more cautious--their destinies might have changed greatly.

But they would not know of this until some time later.

It would take only several years for them to realize this.

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At the same time, inside the Third Library.

The libraries of Lotto Valentino had been built by the aristocrats almost as if in competition.

Their architecture positively radiated the kind of extravagant grandeur that the aristocracy would delight in showing off.

Among these libraries was one particular building that was lacking in any particularly gaudy ornamentation, yet still exuded a sense of rich history.

It was a place called the Third Library. Unusually enough, it was not funded by a Spanish aristocrat, but a nobleman from an island in northern Prussia.

Currently, a strange quintet of individuals were wandering this library.

Some of the lanterns on their way were lit, revealing the fact that there was still someone in the building.

"Hey, who was that kid we ran into just now?"

"I don't really know him that well. But I run into him on the streets from time to time. He seems to be bored, the way he just comes up to me and starts talking."

"He must be a weird one, talking to a scary guy like you so lightly."

"Maybe he's a bit like you."

The group made its way through the stone halls, making small talk along the way. As the library was otherwise empty, their footsteps alone were the only sounds echoing across the cold night air.

"...Begg? I'm scared."

"Scared? This is what night is always like, Czes. And our neighborhood is much darker than this. You're just not used to this place is all. And if you're already nervous, then just meeting old Dalton might scare you out of your wits."

The moment Begg smiled at the terrified Czes, the light at the far end of the corridor flickered.

A silhouette then appeared on the corner wall. It was a huge, round shape, reminiscent of a dark serpent.

"Eeeeeek!"

Czes clung on to Begg's leg with a girlish squeal. In turn, his scream ended up scaring Jean, who flinched.

"...What an uproar. Quiet yourselves, or you will damage the books."

From behind the corner emerged a dark silver hook, the arc of which was the size of an apple.

Jean's eyes widened, but an elderly, white-haired man then emerged from around the corner.

It seemed that the old man was using the hook as a prosthetic arm in place of his missing right hand.

His long beard and mustache, the wide-brimmed hat over his head, and the way he carried himself--less like an alchemist and more like a warrior or a merchant--along with his hooked hand, was not too far off from a typical image of a pirate straight out of the Caribbean.

Czes trembled, frightened half to death by the old man. Jean also found himself covered in cold sweat.

Lebreau, however, approached the man and greeted him politely, speaking to him without reservation.

"It has been a long time, Professor Dalton."

"Hm... Why all these guests? This is only supposed to be a routine visit."

"Why are you wearing a hook today? What happened to the wooden arm you usually wear?"

"It was a bit out of sorts, so I left it to a craftsman I know well... and one of my students was practically begging me to try using a hook."

The old man called Dalton lifted the brim of his hat with his hook and glanced over at Jean and Maiza.

"Ho... What unusual guests we have today. The eldest son of the Avaro family, and the only poet in all of Lotto Valentino. I don't recall hearing that either of you were learning alchemy... So you are curious about immortality?"

Jean and Maiza looked at one another in disbelief. The man before them was snowy-haired and elderly, missing his right arm. He was very far indeed from their image of immortal life.

'But then again... when you consider the gods of Greek myth and the sages of the Orient, I suppose he's not too far removed from the idea, either...' Jean mused idly. Maiza, however, glared at the man with a look sharp enough to kill.

"So you know about us, old man? Let's set the poet aside for now. What good is it for you to know the face of a simple young aristocrat?"

Dalton countered Maiza's look with a face of absolute calm.

"An alchemist has his own ways of knowing these things. I believe that all men are equal before this peculiar field of study, be he an aristocrat, a commoner, or a criminal. If you wish to learn, I shall teach you everything I know." The old man replied, as if responding to a request to teach someone.

"Tch. Don't make me laugh. I was just curious to see what kind of fraud would be working with that skirt-chasing Count."

Maiza's reply sounded like nothing less than provocation. Dalton finally broke his expressionless mask.

However, the look on his face was far from that of anger--rather, it was a slight grin.

"A fraud, you say? I must admit, that isn't such an unbelievable idea. As long as we humans are incapable of completely sharing our senses with others, it would be impossible for one to accurately convey the blueness of the sky to another. In that sense, the act of teaching another could be considered a form of fraud. After all, the

truth only exists *within* oneself, no matter how much one struggles to make things otherwise."

"...What the hell are you rambling about? Are you drunk, old man?"

"I do not pick and choose between potential students, but I suggest you fix that tongue of yours. As you have said, it is already very common for an alchemist to be called a fraud--therefore, the least he can do is clean up his speech. Yes, perhaps the first lesson should concern your tone? You may begin by holding your tongue."

"Shut your trap, you loon--"

"Hey, calm down, Mai-I mean, Aile."

Jean tried to stop Maiza from blowing up at the old man.

But things suddenly began to go in an unexpected direction.

"Begg, cover the boy's eyes. It will be **too much** for a child to see."

At Dalton's bidding, Begg put his palms over Czes's face.

"Huh? B-Begg! What's this?"

Czes's anxious screams and Dalton's hook being raised into the air occurred almost simultaneously.

"What--"

One of the people standing here would find the hook tearing into their flesh.

That was what Jean had begun to expect, but he found himself rooted to the spot, unable to do anything but twitch in place.

Maiza seemed to be thinking the same thing. Unlike Jean, however, he charged towards Dalton.

But he was too late.

The hook made its way through the air far faster than an old man should have been able to move.

And fresh blood splattered over the lights.

However, the blood did not belong to any of the library's guests.

Dalton had torn out his own throat with the hook, scattering his own blood across the library corridor.

Jean and Maiza stood still, lost in shock.

Begg also widened his eyes in surprise. The oblivious Czes trembled as he tightly held on to Begg's sleeves.

Lebreau was the only one watching everything calmly, but Jean and the others did not notice this. Only Dalton, blood spewing from his throat, looked up at Lebreau's face with a look of incredulity.

There was silence.

The sound of cascading blood soon stopped. A marvelous sight then unfolded before their eyes.

'You may begin by holding your tongue.'

Just as Dalton had ordered him earlier, Maiza remained as silent--and still--as a stone.

However, he looked as though he was on the verge of angrily denouncing the ghastly sight of the old man before him and running out of the building.

Jean knew Maiza well--he could already very clearly imagine Maiza's yelling.

But they would not be truly silent until a short moment later.

The blood began to squirm.



Dalton's throat stopped bleeding. And almost as if in response, the blood that had splattered over the stone floor and walls had begun to twitch and crawl--each and every drop that filled the corridor.

It wasn't just each *drop* of blood. Pieces even smaller than that began to writhe as if they had minds of their own, and crawled out from between the stone tiles.

The blood began weaving together and moving, like red fungi spreading at hundreds of times its ordinary speed.

The mass of blood twitched like a crowd of pilgrims on their way home. It then traveled from Dalton's ankles towards his throat, **soaking his clothing along the way**.

Jean and Maiza wondered for a moment if these logic-defying movements before them were perhaps a dream, or a hallucination.

The bloodstained clothes, floors, walls, and ceilings regained their original colour as if nothing had ever happened.

The crimson movement almost made it look like the clock was winding backwards.

What in the world was going on?

But before they could comprehend it all, or even begin to try and grasp the situation, the blood had all been absorbed back into Dalton's neck. In the end, even the wound on his throat was no more.

"I never get used to seeing this sight."

"I'd heard of the rumors, but it's another thing altogether to behold it in person. I was certain I had overdosed and was hallucinating."

"B-Begg? What's going on? I can't see."

The alchemists began commenting on the sight amongst themselves.

"..."

"..."

Meanwhile, Jean and Maiza, who had been taken completely by surprise at this display of immortality, had been rendered dumbstruck--they did not even have a chance to scream.

They wondered if they were still in the real world, if the floor beneath their feet was still solid.

"That is enough. I will give you a passing grade on your assignment to remain silent."

Dalton cracked his neck and looked over at Maiza and Jean.

"Now, I have omitted the tedious theories and shown you the practical results directly. Let me ask you again. It is not so splendid a thing as its name makes it out to be, and it may also be called 'sorcery', not even deserving to be included in the studies of alchemy. However... are you still curious about immortality?"

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[To begin with the conclusion, Maiza became Dalton's student on the spot.

I was in no small shock. I was so surprised because, despite Maiza's incurable delinquency, I had wanted to believe that even *he* was above the base lust for immortal life. I did not want to believe that someone like him, who wanted a long, full life, would choose something so fleeting and self-indulgent.

But now, as I look back on it, perhaps Maiza desired power of his own--power that would help him leave behind the 'air' of this city.

This air would remain in Lotto Valentino as long as the counterfeits and drugs continued circulating through her streets. However, a young aristocrat like Maiza had no power to change things. Perhaps that was the conclusion he had reached. In other words, the mysterious power of immortality that Dalton had demonstrated--whether alchemy or sorcery--was one such 'power' that Maiza happened to come across.

Seeing Maiza that way, on the contrary, made me less inclined to bow my head towards Dalton like he had.

To be honest, I had wanted to fall to my knees before the man and plead with him to give me immortality. My reasons were simple. I wanted to live forever. That was all.

Perhaps that was why I was humbled by the way Maiza decided to learn alchemy from Dalton. He wanted this power out of an honest desire to do good, not out of some foolish dream. Of course, I am speaking in hindsight.

Yes... I think back on it, years from then, and find myself truly glad that I did not seek immortality.

Of course, immortality could not have been so simple a thing to attain. But if I had joined that fate, I would have fallen to the level of a stone, stagnant for all of time.

No, even a stone erodes away with the ages. Joining them would have made me *less* than a stone. Perhaps I would have become something that should not exist in this world. I am almost certain that, the moment I were to become immortal, I would no longer be able to compose poetry or write plays.

However-

I do not think that the shock of witnessing this show of immortality was for naught.

After all, this incident--this sight--became the trigger that would shape my future.

To be honest, until that point in time, my life had been stagnant.

I had finally felt that, despite being mired in the thick air of Lotto Valentino, despite being unable to express myself in anything but ironic jest, I had become someone special.

Of course, my assumption had been mistaken. I was merely a witness. Seeing a miracle does not make one a saint.

However, that incident changed my destiny forever.

I will state now that, even as I write these letters, I am an ordinary man. No more immortal than any other.

No. I am not an ordinary man, either. I am nothing but a coward.

I found myself utilizing the inspiration that took hold of me at that moment in time.

The tale of a man who had grasped immortality. The melancholy and irony that haunted his immortal life. The tragedy of a man, a city, and a nation that pursued his power in vain.

It was by coincidence that this play became a success. In the following half year, I had become an even more renowned playwright than before.

Of course, the War of the Spanish Succession was still in full force at the time. Naples was taken by Austria. The Italian peninsula was sucked into the war, and my position as a playwright became something more precarious than a rotting chair.

Yet I remained seated because I was comfortable.

I had drawn inspiration from something not my own. I had not stepped into the world as Maiza had. I had merely turned my own impulses into story form for my own benefit.

I was a coward who drank of the sweet nectar without exposing himself to danger.

As I fell into worry and guilt, Lebreau came and told me, "You are sharing your ideas with the rest of the world--you should not feel guilty. Rather, I feel that you should be proud of yourself."

And I accepted his words.

At least, I went through the motions of accepting them. I felt that, if I hadn't, I would have broken to pieces.

I had accepted his alluring words, excusing myself by saying that his kindness should not go to waste. I'm sure that other artists also pride themselves upon similar ideas.

But I am different. I am not so great a man.

Perhaps I was already a broken man at that point.

No, I believe I *was* already broken.

I was able to free myself from stagnation by encountering the reality of immortality, but now I found myself unable to stop.

Just as a fish is unable to close its eyes or stop swimming, I was now compelled to run forward without stopping or turning.

That was why I did what I did.

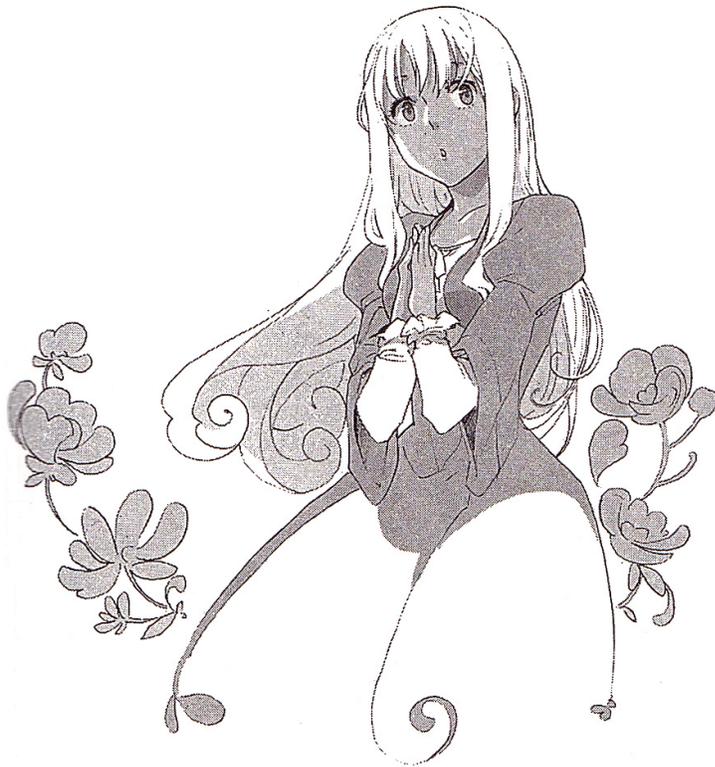
That was why I had taken the actions that led to my self-hatred, and the writing of these letters.

This is repentance for the sin I would commit several years later.

I do not presume to think that I will be forgiven, but I write these accounts in the hope that at least, in the act of your reading, she will find salvation.]

CHAPTER 2:

I'M NOT AN
IDIOT



Winter, 1709. Lotto Valentino.

It was a time of uneasy peace.

The War of the Spanish Succession raged through Europe, mercilessly swallowing the Italian peninsula into the conflict. It had now been two years since the Kingdom of Naples had fallen under Austrian rule.

However, the change in leadership had affected Lotto Valentino surprisingly little.

Esperanza Boronial was still the governor of the city. The townsfolk lived no differently than they had when they were under Spanish rule.

Whatever was happening in the upper echelons of society, at least, did not affect the commoners.

However, it was still very unnatural that Lotto Valentino had not been caught up in the ever-expanding war across Europe, in spite of its proximity to Naples. Historians would later record this pocket of peace as a 'peculiar neutral ground'. Even so, although the citizens of Lotto Valentino could feel the uneasy tension in their daily lives, their routines remained unchanged.

This was because they had already known for several years now that Lotto Valentino was a place that was discreetly sequestered away from the world at large.

The people of Lotto Valentino also knew full well that they themselves were the ones behind the drugs that led to this self-imposed isolation.

It had already been four years since a serial killer called the 'Mask Maker' had terrorized the streets, but the city had yet to shrug off the murky air of its past.

However, there were a select few who were free of this overbearing cloud.

Some were those who had been fighting it from the start, like the leader of the Rotten Eggs.

Others were young children or visiting merchants, who were completely oblivious to the incident from four years ago.

And others--

"Huey! Huey! Did you hear? Did you hear? The theatre's going to start showing Jean-Pierre Accardo's new play next month!"

Lotto Valentino's marketplace was situated near the harbor. Fittingly enough for a port town on a busy trade route, the market was full of all kinds of exotic curiosities and the lively crowds that came to do business.

People of multitudes of races frequented this place--Romans, Celts, Greeks, Arabians, Germans, and Phoenicians among them. Of course, this was common fare for all port towns, not just Lotto Valentino.

Despite the overlying peace, however, dark shadows of the ongoing war loomed over the people and the ships arriving in port.

Even still, the energy of the merchants in the market were enough to slowly ease the people's anxiety.

And one blushing girl called out cheerfully to her companion, as if trying not to lose out to her spirited surroundings.

"S-so, Huey? What I'm trying to say is... I can pull some strings at the theatre... Want to go see the new play together?"

She was a woman with a childish look, despite her mature figure. Her long blond hair fluttered in the breeze. Perhaps she was around eighteen years old, but her tone and gestures made her look somewhat younger.

The recipient of her smitten request was a stoic-looking young man with black hair and golden eyes.

"...I'm not interested."

The young man's--Huey Laforet's--reply was as cold as his expression, but the young woman persisted.

"But that doesn't mean you *can't* watch the play, right?"

"That also means I don't *have to* watch the play. I'm not interested in theatre. If you're that curious, go watch it by yourself, Monica."

Huey was cold to the end. The young woman--Monica--looked down sadly and sulked.

"It's no fun if you don't come along, Huey..."

"If you really want to spend so much time with me, why do we have to go see a play? We could just go for a walk somewhere around here."

Huey's response instantly returned cheer to Monica's face.

"Th-that's fine with me!"

"Never mind. I'm going home now."

"Huh?! U-uh? Whaaat...?"

"See you tomorrow." Huey mumbled plainly, looking Monica in the eye. He quickly walked away from the marketplace.

An outsider watching this scene would probably consider his actions very cold and abrupt. But Monica merely sighed and blushed.

'I'm so happy.'

Huey looked me in the eye and said, 'See you tomorrow.'

It was a simple gesture, but she was satisfied.

Monica knew the truth. She knew that Huey Laforet despised **almost** everything in the world.

She knew of only one other person in the world whom Huey would greet eye-to-eye.

As one of the chosen two, Monica took great enjoyment in her privilege for the past several years. Anyone who knew what she was thinking would probably deem her strange.

Of course, Monica already knew that about herself. She knew she was abnormal.

But that didn't matter to her.

Monica escaped the marketplace and entered an alleyway where no one would bother her, holding her hands over her chest .

She called back the image of Huey's cold face, bowed her head, and smiled again.

But her little moment of happiness was shattered by a rough voice calling to her from behind.

"Hey there, sis. Looks like you just got brushed off."

Monica slowly raised her head. The blush faded from her face.

A group of unfamiliar men were standing in a line before her, blocking off the alleyway exit.

The men carried themselves crudely--from their clothing, Monica guessed that they might be crewmen from a merchant vessel. The men spoke Italian, which made it likely that they worked aboard a local ship. But in any event, it didn't seem like they were merely nosy sailors trying to cheer up a young woman.

"Don't be sad just 'cause you got dumped by a pansy like that."

"Why don't you give us a little tour around town?"

The men were probably working for a ship leaving today or tomorrow. Perhaps they were planning to take advantage of a disheartened girl, making use of their impending departure to escape any repercussions.

But it wouldn't matter whether the sailors were planning to take her by charm or brute force. They had chosen the wrong target.

For one thing, Monica was not under the impression that she had been rejected by Huey. Therefore the sailors' proposal sounded like nothing but provocation to her.

And another--

"..."

Monica's innocent smile from earlier had vanished. Her face, bowed towards the ground, was cold and absolutely emotionless.

It was as if she was wearing a mask.

Her eyes alone betrayed the **clear hostility--the bloodlust** within her.

However, the sailors had let down their guard. They were completely oblivious.

"Hm? We can play nice with you all night. Don't be shy."

One of the sailors reached out towards Monica's chest with no warning.

And the very next moment, he stopped in his tracks, his forearm searing in pain.

"!! Aaaaaargh! What the--?"

The sailor quickly stepped back to look at his arm.

Blood was dripping from just past his elbow.

"Wh-wh-what the hell?!"

The confused man quickly pressed down on his arm, oblivious to what had just happened.

"Oh my goodness! You're hurt!" Monica screamed, ignoring the injured man's cries.

"Shit! What the fuck?! What hit me, dammit?!"

The man rolled up his sleeve. Blood was spreading over his tanned skin. It was obvious that it was not a mere scratch, but a very deep stab wound.

"You might have scraped an old wound against something...! You have to get to a doctor right away!"

"Huh? Oh. Right."

The man scowled in pain and terror. Monica anxiously glanced at the street outside the alleyway.

"If you just make a right turn on that street, you'll see the hospital sign! There's tetanus going around in town, so you have to hurry..."

"T-tetanus?!"

"H-hey. Never mind. Let's get you to the doctor."

"Shit! How the hell did this happen...?"

The sudden drawing of blood and the change of subject threw the men into a panic. Although, as seafarers, they were used to injuries like this, the unexpected nature of this wound had confused them.

The men quickly left the alley with their injured friend, unwilling to waste even another second on Monica.

Monica glared at them as they left, then turned on her heel and left the alleyway as if nothing had happened.

Suddenly, a young man popped out in front of her.

He seemed to have been there for quite some time now. He stepped onto a liquor barrel and greeted Monica, his back turned against the blue sky.

"Haha! I always love watching you play innocent, Monimoni."

"...Were you watching the whole time, Elmer?"

Monica's expressionless mask crumbled instantly, only to be replaced by a slightly flushed yet innocent scowl.

"Don't make such a scary face. You'll make it a dead giveaway."

Elmer's words were almost mocking, but there wasn't a single drop of malice in his tone. The unusual young man laughed and clapped his hands together.

"All right, then! You managed to get out of trouble, **no one figured out that you were the one who hurt the guy**, and the sailor's going to find a doctor and get better! Everything's going to be great. Come on, Monimoni! Laugh!"

"Don't worry, Elmer."

Monica sighed deeply and smiled wryly. She revealed the bloodied tip of the stiletto she had been concealing in her sleeve.

"I'm not an idiot. I won't be found out that easily."

The innocent face she showed Huey.

The cold, mask she had shown the sailors.

The slightly mature smile she wore in front of Elmer.

Each of these expressions made her look like a different person, but in reality, all of them were different aspects of the true face of the woman named Monica Campanella.

Monica was an alchemy student at the Third Library.

She was just a girl who was smitten with Huey Laforet, someone who always kept her distance from others.

At least, this was what people thought of her until a certain incident four years ago.

And even now, years after the event, very few people were aware of her multifaceted true self.

She did not have split personalities. Monica intentionally divided her own faces into multiple masks.

However, Elmer--one of the few who were in on this secret--did not at all mind this quality of hers.

"I heard that a totally new ship just made port, so I came down here to check it out. You have no idea how surprised I was when I saw those guys bothering you, Monimoni."

"Just because you're smiling doesn't mean you sound convincing, Elmer." Monica sighed again. Elmer pressed down on his cheeks with his palms and laughed.

"Come on, turn that frown upside-down!"

"I guess I could fake a smile."

"Aww... that's not fair."

Elmer chuckled, hopped off the pile of barrels, and tapped Monica on the shoulder.

"What about Huey? He went home already?"

"Yeah. I asked him if he wanted to see a play together, but he says he doesn't want to."

"Same as always, huh. I could help you find a play that can make him smile."

"It's okay. I don't want to force him to laugh."

Monica slowly shook her head. She leaned against the wall and looked up at the clear sky.

"I love Huey just as he is. I love everything about him, even the way he's so aloof all the time."

Monica's voice would probably tremble and shake if she were to confess these feelings to Huey himself. But she was surprisingly calm when she disclosed her feelings to their mutual friend, Elmer C. Albatross.

It was the kind of confession that could embarrass even a third party, but Elmer just nodded with a "Yeah" and continued to lend Monica his ears.

"...You're so lucky you can talk to Huey so easily."

"Huh? Don't tell me you're jealous, Monimoni? I'll say this again, but I don't lean that way."

"Girls can get jealous over boys' friendships, you know... There."

Monica stood upright, dusted her clothes, and continued.

"It's already been four years, huh."

"Why the sudden reminiscence?"

"Getting attacked by those men... It just reminded me of something."

Monica recalled a time when she had been getting closer to Huey, around when they first ran into Elmer.

'When I was about to be attacked by the Rotten Eggs... Huey rescued me.'

Of course, *Huey* was the one who had been attacked first, and he had merely been defending himself--but it seemed that Monica had fancifully reorganized the memory in her mind into a romantic moment.

"So many things happened in less than ten days after I asked Huey out. You coming to this city was one of them, Elmer."

Monica cast down her eyes slightly and smiled nostalgically.

"You figured out my secret, we managed to help Huey have a change of heart, and we tried to save the kids in Lotto Valentino... so many things happened back then. Well, I guess a lot of things happened afterwards, too."

"Yeah. I wonder how many memories we have that we can look back and smile at."

"But you know... We've known one another for four years now, but we still know almost nothing about one another."

"That so?" Elmer cocked his head. Monica continued solemnly.

"It's not like I know everything about what happened to Huey before, and I don't know anything about you. I don't think you or Huey know anything about my past, either. Wait. Maybe you know a little?"

Monica watched the people walking through the streets and visualized her own past over the sight.

"To be honest, I can't imagine what kind of a life you must have lived before."

"I could tell you if you want me to."

"That's not fair. When we share secrets, we share them together."

"Haha! I can't wait. Maybe I'll be able to smile then!"

Elmer followed Monica out of the alley.

Although Monica's steps were much lighter and spirited than when she was with Huey, there wasn't a hint of romantic affection towards Elmer in her eyes. She then voiced this fact in confirmation.

"I like you as a friend, Elmer. And I like Huey romantically."

"That so? I'm glad to hear. I hope Huey'll be even happier."

The sight of her easygoing friend brought a chuckle to Monica's lips. It wasn't faked this time--it was a completely natural smile brought upon by joy.

Monica set her sights on the harbor, her long hair fluttering in the wind.

"I know I shouldn't, but sometimes I think--"

"Yeah?"

"I think... I want these moments to last for--"

Monica suddenly stopped.

"?"

It wasn't just her words. Monica's entire body had frozen completely.

The sea breeze strengthened into a gale, blowing back her hair and whipping it into a frenzy. It was almost as if the wind was trying to convey the state of Monica's mind.

"Monimoni?"

Elmer cocked his head and walked around to look Monica in the face.

Her eyes were frozen wide in shock, fixed at a certain point in the harbor.

"?"

Elmer followed her line of sight.

At the end of her gaze was a certain ship.

Despite the sheer number of ships moored at the harbor, Elmer was quite sure that he had found the ship Monica was staring at. This was because this particular vessel was much more eye-catching than any other in the area.

The hull was painted black. A strange crest with an hourglass motif was painted on its side.

The crest was centered around a golden hourglass, which was surrounded by multiple circular designs. It was rather similar to the shield-centered crest with golden circles that belonged to House Medici.

"That... ship..."

"Oh! That's the ship I was talking about. The big one that just made port. Isn't it amazing? I wonder where it's from."

"..."

"But really, an hourglass? That's just like a pirate ship."

The skull-and-crossbones design had not yet been popularized among pirates at this point in history. Instead, pirate vessels would have all kinds of different flag designs, and the most popular of them was the hourglass, symbolizing the unspoken threat of "your time is up".

The hourglass motif would eventually soar in popularity thanks to a pirate called Blackbeard, whose flag also depicted the skull and crossbones design. As a result, the two images would later become the quintessential symbols of piracy. Blackbeard, however, had yet to set foot into the stage of this era. Only oddballs like Elmer had the kind of knowledge needed to identify the hourglass as a symbol of piracy.

"...How...?" Monica gasped, ignoring Elmer's explanation, as if *she* had been the one given the warning of the hourglass.

Her face was pale. Her lips trembled, and her eyes remained glassy and open.

Elmer knew of Monica's many 'true faces', but even he had never seen such an expression on Monica before.



"What's wrong, Monimoni?"

Elmer withdrew his smile and shook Monica's shoulders with concern. But she did not even react. She sank to her knees in half-collapse.

"How... why *here*...?" She continued to stutter.

Her face was dark with despair.

<=>

At the same time, the harbor.

"Just looking up at this thing makes me want to fall to my knees in despair."

"Quite. Of course, someone who is *on* that ship might feel as safe as anyone inside a fortress."

The townspeople looked up at the great ship. Its military-inspired design prompted them to fearfully mutter amongst themselves, "Is the war finally here on our doorstep?"

Jean-Pierre stood with his back to these murmurs, speaking to Lebreau beside him.

"So I came here since you wanted me to see this thing so badly. Now what? You want this creepy thing to inspire me to write a war story? Or do you want me to write an anti-war poem and praise peace or something?"

"You know as well as I that I would never try to influence your creative work, Jean². I would also like to add that this is not a warship."

"What? Are you kidding me?"

For a moment, Jean wondered if it was the gigantic black hull of the ship that had led him to believe that this was a warship, but he took note of the dozens of gunports on the hull of the ship and frowned.

² Lebreau originally addresses Jean as 'sensei', a respectful term used to address professionals and the like.

"How is that *not* a warship?"

"The design may be similar, but this ship is not used for battle. It's actually a transport vessel used by a certain Spanish aristocrat. The gunports are there for purely defensive purposes."

"If you put it that way, you could make the ship man-powered and call it a canoe."

"Is that so? My apologies, then." Lebreau laughed. Jean continued to question him.

"So what's a ship like this doing here? Doesn't the kingdom take custody of ships like this during wartime?"

"House Dormentaire, the owner of this ship, has already 'donated' multiple warships to the kingdom's cause. Although they are not well known, the Dormentaires are one of the richest families in Europe, along with the Maas family in England. I believe they could even be a match for House Medici at its peak."

"Well, good for those bastards. Just listening to that makes me want to write up some dirt about them."

"I am glad to know that I've inspired you."

Jean's spirits were uplifted by Lebreau, who treated him with a sincere mix of friendship and respect.

It had been two years since they had first met, and Jean now found himself counting Lebreau among his closest friends. He still knew almost nothing of alchemy, and he had no interest in learning about it. He met Lebreau about once a month, so Maiza, who was studying under Dalton, likely saw Lebreau more often than he did.

However, Jean was certain that his world was expanding, and his art becoming more refined, thanks to the fact that Lebreau would inspire him each time they met.

"Come to think of it, I hear you're coming to settle here for good soon?"

"I'm afraid so, as the war is getting much too close to our current location for our liking... And of course, now that our master has passed, we will need to use the services of the libraries here."

"You're bringing everyone with you? Including the servants?"

"Yes. Actually, some of them are originally from Lotto Valentino. Of course, one of them doesn't have very good memories of this place..."

Lebreau seemed a bit concerned, but Jean did not pry.

To Jean, Lebreau was a good friend, a fan who respected him, and a partner who provided him with ideas.

At first he was hesitant to use these ideas because it felt too much like he was being dependent on another person, but the praise he received from his audience swept away these insecurities.

The poet Jean-Pierre Accardo now as good as counted Lebreau Fermet Viralesque as an inextricable part of life.

"So why do you suppose someone so high and mighty sent his ship to a backwater town like this? It doesn't look like they're here to resupply..."

It was quite a reasonable question. Lebreau nodded.

"They're causing quite a fuss by coming with a ship so large..."

"But I hear that they have come to find someone."

<=>

At the same time, the northeast area of Lotto Valentino.

The city's elevation rose dramatically the further the land became from the sea.

The aristocratic quarter of the city was situated in one such elevated location. The elite flaunted their riches over the city, looking down upon the land from their grand estates.

The biggest of these estates was built at the highest point in this area. It was the kind of structure that an ignorant man could mistake for a royal palace.

Although Lotto Valentino, under Spanish rule, was by no means a wealthy town, the manor's sheer exuberance was enough to silence any worries about the city's economic woes.

The manor was primarily white in colour, and was surrounded by a garden that harmoniously blended with the sights of the city. It was enough to twice floor anyone who set foot in the estate.

It looked almost like a white fortress floating upon a lush garden of flowers.

Servants scurried about the manor's interior like ants. Even their little movements served as an attractive contribution to the manor's intricate decorations.

The one strange thing about this manor, however, was this:

Of the countless servants in this estate, over ninety percent of them were women.

"My lord, you have a guest." One of the few male servants, a steward, politely addressed his lord.

"Dormentaire dogs, by the looks of things. Others I would send away without hesitation, but this is quite the predicament... Perhaps I could craft an excuse to have them leave."

The reply came from a man of eccentric appearance who had been buried in the chair in his office.

He was dressed as one might expect from the aristocrat who was master of this estate.

Of course, the only thing about his manner of dress that made him look like a nobleman was the fact that his clothing was made of the kind of fabric that only an aristocrat would be able to afford.

He looked to be just shy of thirty years of age. He wore a light habit à la française, and his shirt was decorated with modest jewelry. Over his back was written a large, foreign symbol. It was a word some would recognize as 火, a character meaning 'fire', but most people would see it as little more than a meaningless image.

Unusually for an aristocrat, he did not wear a wig, nor did he have a fake mole, a popular trend among nobles at the time. Perhaps to make up for this, however, he wore an extravagant tricorne on his head, and drew in small stars under his goggling eyes.

Whether from lack of sleep or as a fashion statement, there were bags under his eyes. It was a rather confusing appearance, to say the least.

If he were a fool on a theatre stage, he would be lauded as a man true to his art--but not only did this man live at the highest point in Lotto Valentino, he was also the most powerful aristocrat in the entire city.

Esperanza Boronial.

He was a Count of the Kingdom of Spain.

At the same time, he was the young aristocrat governing this small city, and a man who, due to his eccentric appearance, was often mockingly called "The Clown Count".

Although officially, Lotto Valentino was under the jurisdiction of the Viceroy of Naples, certain circumstances had placed this man in charge of the city.

This hierarchy remained unchanged even after Naples had fallen to Austria. Although Lotto Valentino was now under the rule of another Spanish city, Count Boronial remained Lotto Valentino's governor, with his city counted as a special, self-governing dominion.

There were rumors that the Boronial family had been practically kicked to the wayside by the motherland due to some unfortunate event in the past. The Count's bizarre looks did nothing to dissuade these hushed murmurs.

"Inform the guest that I have been afflicted with a malady that strikes only men--I will explode and die if I come face-to-face with another man. Make sure to add that anyone who comes into contact with my scattered flesh and blood will also die by the same means." The Count prattled.

The steward did not even blink as he replied.

"My lord, I'm afraid that is not a believable claim."

"How would you know without even trying? ...No. Wait. ...Yes. How would you know without at least making this claim first? How could you say that it is an unbelievable claim? What is life? Life is something that is built up through a series of challenges and struggles. To live any other way is no better than death. Believe this. Believe that the guest is a *fool* who will accept my lies as a truth and flee!"

The Count's ramblings grew more and more inane, but the steward clung to logic and reason.

"First of all, if my lord were to be afflicted with such an illness, I would have to be afflicted in turn in order to bring this message to the guest. Not only that--

"The Dormentaire guest is a woman."

Esperanza immediately sprung from his chair like a jack-in-the-box.

"Why did you not say this to begin with? Alas, I have kept the lady waiting for nearly two full minutes!"

The Count instantly made his way to a mirror, examined his appearance, and departed to greet his guest.

His extraordinary love of women was the reason Maiza and other aristocrats called him a lecher and a philanderer. Of course, skirt-chasing aristocrats were not uncommon in and of themselves--it was merely that Esperanza was on an entirely different level from them.

Hiring mostly female servants was not enough for this man. He loved all women equally. However, this did not mean he took a woman to bed every night. Esperanza was merely content to gaze upon a woman as she went about her daily life. It was not the sort of hobby others could easily understand.

When other aristocrats visited his manor, he would ask them, "Please consider the words of all women here as my own". His oddness made him the butt of many jokes, both among aristocrats in Spain and among the nobles in his home of Lotto Valentino.

However, there were rumors that he had dueled other aristocrats back in Spain due to an incident relating to a woman. This was why none dared to insult a woman in his presence.

"It is an honor, my lord. I am Carla Alvarez Santonia, the leader of the delegation from House Dormentaire."

The woman standing at the entrance was perhaps in her early twenties. She was of impeccable appearance, but her sharp eyes and imposing bearing made her seem a few years older than that.

Her attitude was not the only thing about her that was unlike a woman of her time.

The clothing over her tanned skin was very similar to that of a men's military uniform. In addition, her short hair made it easy for her to be mistaken for a man from a distance, particularly from behind. Of course, those like Esperanza could figure out that she was female from the shape of her hips.

If she were to bind her chest, Carla would be a definitive cross-dresser. The way she carried herself, armed with a sword, almost made it seem like she was half-actively looking to be mistaken for a man.

Needless to say, her manner of dress was extremely peculiar for the time and place. The only exception might be women working in certain roles in theaters. Yet the man who bore the appearance of a clown--as if to match--addressed her no differently than he would any other female guest.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Carla. I am Esperanza Boronial. I pray that Lady Luck will grace you with her presence through the length of your visit."

"..."

For a single moment, a glint appeared in Carla's eye, then vanished.

"What might be the matter, Miss Carla?"

"I-it is nothing, my lord."

Though Carla's answer was steady and without hesitation, Esperanza tentatively pursued this line of conversation.

"I apologize if I have somehow offended you in my ignorance."

Carla was taken aback by the governor's humble attitude. She found herself being honest with him.

"No, my lord. I am the one who should apologize. I was merely surprised--you see, everyone who sets their eyes upon me for the first time regards me with curiosity or mockery. This was the first time I'd been treated so... normally."

"You think much too well of me. You see, I always gaze upon all women in this world with curiosity. I find myself wondering, 'how could such a marvelous work of art exist in this world?'"

"Please, my lord. You are wasting your words of kindness on your humble servant."

"There is no need to put yourself down. But I must wonder. Why do others stare at you with curiosity? Other than the fact of your extraordinary beauty, I mean?"

Carla narrowed her eyes and looked directly at Esperanza.

She noted that there was not a hint of condescension or ridicule on his face. She sighed quietly.



'Amazing.

'He's just as eccentric as they say.'

Carla was from a family of servants that had worked for House Dormentaire for generations.

A large number of her family members had served as guards for House Dormentaire. Despite being a woman, Carla, who had been a capable and outgoing leader since childhood, had been given the position of bodyguard thanks to certain circumstances.

Of course, few men of this era would take easily to serving under a woman's command. As a result, Carla never joined a team or squad of guards, instead keeping mostly to guarding beautiful women in places men were not allowed to enter.

The reason she had been chosen as the leader of House Dormentaire's delegation to Lotto Valentino was because the Dormentaires knew very well what kind of a man Esperanza was.

However, they had also taken him too lightly, going by rumors of him being nothing but a womanizing lecher.

Now that she had come face-to-face with this man, Carla realized that *she* was the one regarding the clownish Count with curiosity, while the Count subjected her to no prejudice whatsoever.

"It is true that I am sometimes ridiculed for my masculine appearance." She said ashamedly.

Although Carla had her reasons for dressing the way she did, she had never imagined that she would end up excusing herself this way.

She found herself gripped by a strange emotion, but she righted herself and erased her own feelings in order to focus on the mission.

"I will be honest, my lord. Should the mission assigned to me by my masters, House Dormentaire, be successful, it may bring you great suffering."

"What might that mean?"

Esperanza tilted his head. Carla continued stoically.

"My mission here is to root out a certain criminal. This mission will pick at an old wound of yours, my lord, and it will prove that this villain had been shamelessly hiding in my lord's city all this time."

Esperanza exhaled, and half-mumbled to himself.

"I see. I had thought this might be the case..."

It seemed Carla had heard his mutterings--she coolly revealed to Esperanza the contents of her mission.

"I am here to find someone... an irredeemable criminal to both your family and House Dormentaire--the murderer who took the lives of the eldest Dormentaire son, my lord's honored parents, and... my lord's younger sister, Maribel Boronial."

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[At the time, Lotto Valentino treated the Dormentaires as it would an alien substance.

Lotto Valentino had already treated the sailors of merchant ships as outlanders. To the townsfolk, Spanish aristocrats were probably nothing more than an uncomfortable rash.

That was what I had also thought.

But now, as I write this letter, I know the truth.

That, if anything, *Lotto Valentino* was the alien substance.

It was a foreign entity to the Italian peninsula, this continent, and the entire world.

Lotto Valentino was nothing but a sequestered foreign object that relished its own isolation.

Perhaps this was why I so longed for the outside world, while holding contempt for the land in which I lived.

At the time I was ignorant even to my own hatred, but now that I look back on my old poems and songs, I am shocked to see just how much I had filled the pages with bitterness for my world.

Let us get back to the matter at hand.

Lotto Valentino, a city built on fantasies and lies, had suddenly been invaded by the 'reality' of House Dormentaire.

The townsfolk were frightened.

The 1705 incident had ended with many people being thrown in prison. The people had already tasted the terrifying power of the aristocrats and the military. To someone from a war-torn land, this might sound like a trivial fear, but as I mentioned earlier, Lotto Valentino was a special place. At one point in time, its *commoners* were the ones with power over the land.

It had only been a few years since they had experienced this reality--or rather, this abnormality. Could you imagine how deeply the sight of this great warship making port affected these terrified souls?

However, the moment Lebreau took me to see the ship, I fell under the illusion of an impending freedom.

I looked at the nearly eighty gunports on the ship and began to harbor a certain hope in my heart.

Just as Maiza hoped to find the power to change the world in the promise of immortality.

Just as a novice alchemist gathered riches in order to destroy the world.

Just as a young woman tried to destroy the thin barrier that stood between herself and the one she loved.

Just as a madman who desired the smiles of the world tried to find his own happiness in the laughter of others.

Just as a fiercely loyal hound held pride in her own fangs and chains.

Just as a clownish aristocrat innocently wished for the happiness of all women.

Just like them, I had held hope in the 'changes' the warship would bring about.

People live by finding hope and clinging to the rope that hangs from under it.

Some clutch at it until they end up cutting their own lifelines, but that in itself is the driving force that leads a man to make something of his life.

Even a man enlightened to the fact that hope does not exist will hope that his hopeless days continue peacefully forever. If not, he will hope that death will free him from his doldrum days.

In any event, I had hope in the changes that this ship might bring upon the town.

I was excited for the prospect of wonderment, just as I had felt in 1707 when I had seen an immortal for the first time. I was excited for the prospect of seeing change sweep through this place.

Of course, I have no intention of entrusting the fulfillment of my hopes to another.

If I wanted to embrace this world, I needed a passionate fire to carry me through.

And it was my self-appointed mission to create the first sparks of this flame.

I had been consumed by pride.

I had believed that the meagre praises I received were a sign that I had the power to change the world.

They did not, but... ultimately, in some ways, my plays *did* end up changing the world.

It ended up completely destroying the worlds of a select few people.

This was not the ending I had wanted.

This is why I have decided to leave these accounts.

You may have already noticed, but this is not just a random collection of my eyewitness accounts and testimonies regarding immortality, for one.

If that were the case, I would not try to hide these accounts after writing them. I do not feel like changing my mind right now, and I doubt my decision will waver even after I complete these writings.

This letter is both my repentance and confession.

In the story of the barber who whispered to the reed that the king had the ears of a donkey, I am at once both the barber and the king.

If this secret is revealed to the world, I will be executed at my own hands.

In other words, your role, reader, is the reed. You are the reeds that will spread this secret to the world.

But I do not believe that I am so merciful as the donkey-eared king as to forgive myself.

This is why these accounts will be hidden.

I do not know if the story of the donkey-eared king is still known in your time. I cannot guarantee that my metaphor will be understood.

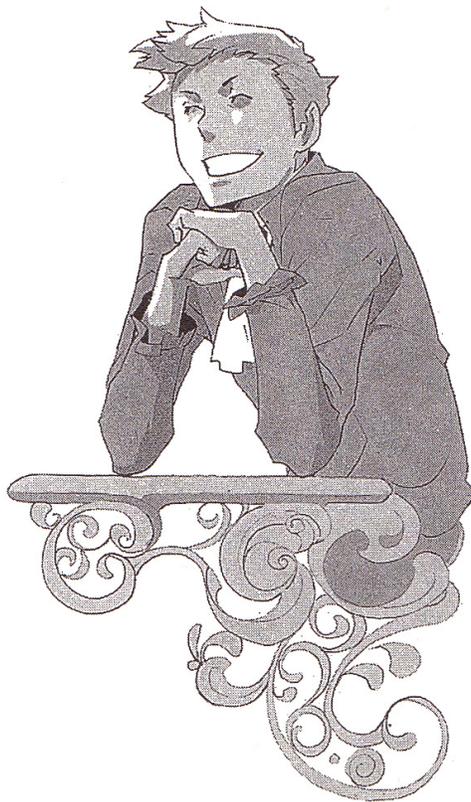
But this is the truth.

I have committed a terrible crime.

I have committed an indelible sin--the sin of divulging the secrets hidden in this world.]

CHAPTER 3:

MAYBE HE'S LOVESICK



1709, Lotto Valentino. A storehouse in the harbor area.

The streets of the storehouse district were deserted. Not a single ship was moored nearby.

In one corner of this district was a particular storehouse--it was almost completely empty, making it look like a part of a ghost town. But the second floor of the storehouse was filled with a surprisingly cheerful voice.

"So what do you say? Wanna try sneaking aboard the ship together? I promise it's going to be fun!"

Of course, the source of the voice was not the inhabitant of this storehouse.

"Doesn't *sound* like fun." Its resident replied coldly.

"Aww..."

"'Aww' what?"

"Aww..."

Huey Laforet sighed loudly at Elmer's childish responses.

"Please, let's be logical here. I understand that Monica was shocked to see the ship, but why does that mean we have to sneak aboard it?"

Elmer had walked Monica home earlier, as she looked very ill. He had then come straight to Huey's house to explain Monica's reaction to the ship and propose a plan.

"If we look around, maybe we'll find a way to calm her down."

"Don't be stupid. You don't even know *why* Monica reacted that way in the first place."

"Nope!"

"You don't have to be so enthusiastic..."

Huey had kept his eyes on his book all this time, but he soon closed it and slowly looked up at Elmer's face.

The Smile Junkie was grinning innocently. It was as if he had no trepidations at all about the plan he had just proposed.

"I know I don't know the reason, but I'm not too sure we should ask her. And I don't think she'd tell me if I asked, so I thought it might be faster to just get out there and do some legwork."

"...Sometimes I almost want to respect your optimism."

Huey smiled wryly and shook his head.

If anyone other than Elmer or Monica who knew Huey could see this, they would probably find Huey's reaction strange.

Huey would normally put on fake smiles intended for deception, or otherwise an expressionless mask. He almost never put on such human smiles before others. There were perhaps three or so people in all of Lotto Valentino who could get this reaction out of him.

Huey gave Elmer a familiar wry grin and continued pessimistically.

"Besides, you don't even know what it is about that ship that scared Monica so much. Maybe she had a bad experience with a warship, or maybe she just doesn't like black ships."

"But I'm pretty sure she said, 'Why *here*?', so I'm thinking... She might have been surprised by that shiny gold hourglass mark-"

"That still doesn't mean we'd be able to board a *warship*. And what if it's got something to do with a past Monica doesn't want us to know about? If we figure out things she wants to keep secret from us, we'll just drive her further into a corner."

Huey's argument was logical and grounded in common sense. But Elmer just cocked his head.

"Huh? If that happens, we can just pretend we never found out anything and forget about it."

"...Your optimism never ceases to amaze me."

Huey sighed loudly and leaned back on his chair. He then picked up a strange contraption that had been lying on the desk and began fiddling with it.

"What's that?" Elmer asked curiously.

Huey put the contraption on his hand. Several thin tubes were attached to the end of the device, and the tubes were connected to a leather pouch Huey wore at his side.

"It's just something for a little magic trick."

Huey stood up, stepped away from his piles of paper and books, and waved his hand towards an empty space in the storehouse.

Suddenly, a small fireball emerged from his hand, erupted into light in midair, and dissipated instantly.

"Whoa?!" Elmer yelled, spooked by the sudden fire. Huey ignored him and took hold of the strange device.

The device was rather small. It could be completely hidden from view if one looked at just the back of Huey's hand.

Huey checked his grip on the device and muttered to himself.

"...All I have to do now is attach it to a glove or something."

"Wow... That was amazing! How'd you do that? Magic?" Elmer's eyes were shining with curiosity. Huey sat down again.

"It's not a big deal. I was just thinking about how to recreate Greek Fire, when I managed to create an incendiary fuel by adding naphtha to a combination of other elements. This device spews out that solution and ignites it at the same time... in other words, it's just a simple toy."

Huey started to fiddle with the dangerous toy again. Elmer clapped his hands together in praise.

"Awesome! That's so cool! You're so hardworking, Huey!"

Greek Fire was a chemical weapon that was used by the Roman Empire centuries ago, which utilized a water that could be set on fire. There were many mysteries surrounding its composition, so Greek Fire was said to be impossible to recreate. However, there were many alchemists who were independently pursuing the elusive formula.

Setting aside the question of whether he had managed to recreate Greek Fire, the fact that a young man who was still a year shy of twenty could create such a device was commendable in its own right.

Perhaps his skills were thanks to Dalton or Renee's teachings, or perhaps he was just a born genius. Either way, if Huey's abilities were to be made known to the world, other alchemists would be on his heels trying to figure out his methods.

However, there was currently only one alchemist at his side--a novice who was busy complimenting his friend.

"That's Huey for you! You really like working with this kind of stuff, huh?"

"...Hmph."

"But come to think of it, a lot of your research and inventions use fire. Did you have a bad experience with it before or something?"

"...No, not really. It might look that way because I just have a habit of using whatever I happen to come across first."

Huey's answer was cold, but he had just lied.

He had an idea of what Elmer might have been getting at.

The village in which he had lived had been devastated by the witch hunts.

Huey's own mother was accused of witchcraft, and was tried and killed.

However, she had not been burned at the stake.

What young Huey had seen was the countless villagers being being burned to death, thanks to his mother's final confession. He had been deeply scarred by the sight of the young woman he had considered a sister to him screaming as she died at the stake.

Was his obsession with fire because of fear? Or was it because of his hatred towards the villagers who accused his mother of witchcraft? Or was it because the reminder of his mother's enemies burning to death helped him feel a sense of justice?

Not even Huey himself knew the answers.

If he had to say one thing, though, it was this: If he really was going to end up destroying the world, he felt it most appropriate that he burn it to the ground.

To Huey Laforet, the entire world was like a witch--something to be hunted and burned. This was why he held such destructive ideas, but Huey's hatred for the world had thinned somewhat over the years.

The culprit responsible for the waning of Huey's ideals clapped his hands together.

"It's settled! You'll use your magic to scare the guards, and I'll sneak onto the ship in the confusion!"

"If you want a commotion, it might just be easier to set a haystack on fire or something." Huey suggested darkly. Elmer nodded in astonishment.

"Then we'll just have to make sure we burn just enough hay so it won't be dangerous. People won't be able to smile if the fire spreads and burns houses or kills people."

"I never said I was actually going to go through with it. Why do you need my help in the first place?"

"You don't want Monica to get depressed and kill herself either, right?"

"...You're pretty creepy for an optimist, you know that? And another thing... don't you ever think that I might not even care if Monica just went off and died?" Huey smiled condescendingly. Elmer's response was simple.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because **your smile just now was fake**. I wonder why..."

"..."

Elmer had a talent for seeing through fake smiles. As he was a man who delighted in the smiles of others, it was just a secondary ability he picked up from his years of observation. To the untrained eye, however, his precise skill almost seemed like mind-reading or magic.

"..."

Huey maintained his silence. Elmer laughed quietly and put a hand on his shoulder.

"You always *act* like you're pushing Monimoni away, but it's interesting how you express your real feelings that way."

"What do *you* know? What makes you so sure?"

"I know something about you that you can't see for yourself."

"...Don't make me laugh."

Huey smiled wryly again and fell into thought for a moment.

He then covered up his feelings towards Monica and announced his plan of action.

"We'll decide what to do after we see how Monica's doing tomorrow."

"What if she skips class?"

"...Then we'll just pretend we're concerned about her health and go to visit her."

Elmer's smile brightened.

"I knew it! You really *do* like Monimoni! That thing about 'pretending to be concerned' is just a big lie, right?"

Huey responded to Elmer's teasing remarks with a face of stone. He pretended not to care.

"It's not about liking or disliking her.

"As long as we are the Mask Makers, you, Monica, and I share the same fate."

<=>

Huey Laforet.

Elmer C. Albatross.

Monica Campanella.

They were alchemy students at the Third Library, studying under Dalton.

At the same time, they shared a certain secret between them.

The Mask Maker.

They were members of a serial killing group that had once terrorized the city.

Of course, Huey and Elmer hadn't actually killed people. The group originated when, due to certain circumstances, Monica took on the secret identity of the Mask Maker and 'observed' the suicides of a certain group of people.

And thanks to an incident in 1705, the Mask Maker was combined with Huey Laforet's counterfeiting ring in order to form a single organization.

Only the three of them knew of this truth. Huey had never revealed his identity to the counterfeiters, preferring instead to control them from the shadows.

Elmer had personally done nothing. However, he was the one that unmasked the true faces of Huey and Monica, and he had been the glue that bound them together.

It had been several years since, and the strange relationship of the Mask Makers was no different than it had been in the past.

The shameful secrets of Lotto Valentino had been exposed through the incident in 1705. The abused children (many of whom had lost their fellow friends) had been granted a new life.

Ever since then, Huey had ended his direct involvement with the counterfeiting operations, although it seemed that he was still masterminding something behind the scenes. Elmer knew of this, but he never pried into it.

Instead, he would constantly tell Huey, "If we're going to do something bad anyway, let's try to make it so everyone can smile". Huey had initially reacted to the suggestion with hostility, but over the years he had found himself responding with bitter laughter.

And whether or not he was aware of this change within himself, Huey continued to guard himself with the mask of a 'student of Dalton', not even touching Monica or Elmer's pasts.

And as usual, he made his way to the Third Library.

"Oh, I'm really sorry about yesterday, Elmer. I suddenly felt really sick. Maybe I had something bad for lunch?" Monica said cheerily in a corner of the archive, which was being used as a classroom.

The lecture had not yet begun. The instructor, Renee Palmades Brinvillier, had yet to arrive.

Monica started off with a bright apology as she approached Elmer's partially occupied table.

Elmer, however, picked her words apart with a smile.

"Really? But yesterday, you said, "Why *here*?"

"I was just saying, 'why did I suddenly feel sick as soon as I got here?'."

The smile accompanying Monica's quick answer looked genuine, even to Elmer.

Huey sat alone, watching the two carry on their conversation.

He flipped through his book at his seat by the window, observing them from a distance.

Outwardly, there was nothing strange about her. But something nagged at Huey's thoughts.

Monica was herself. She laughed as she always did. Huey was sure she was truly smiling, as Elmer would have pointed it out if this were not the case.

But he could feel that something was off.

'What is it?'

'What's so different today?'

Huey turned to his book and fell into thought.

He could not even begin to guess, but a strange sense of anxiety crept over his heart.

'...'

Although he tried to ignore it, the sensation of apprehension crawled up and began to swirl around his throat. Huey again glanced over towards Monica.

She was still engaged in small talk with Elmer and the other students. There was nothing strange about her.

But Huey finally noticed the cause of his concern.

Things were undoubtedly different today.

He had been staring in Monica's direction for some time now, but she would not turn to look at him.

Normally, she would glance back towards him without fail, whether she was in the middle of a conversation or in listening to the lecture.

Huey clearly recalled an instance of this happening only a few days ago. He remembered being astonished, thinking, *'How does she not get tired of staring at the same face for nearly five years?'*

The longer he stared, the more time passed without Monica returning his gaze.

Perhaps she had finally gotten sick of looking at him--but because this sudden change bothered Huey, he had decided to go speak to her as a test.

However, he was soon interrupted.

"Sorry for the wait, every-eeeeeeek!"

An absentminded voice entered the class and broke out into a scream, instantly cutting short the conversations that filled the room.

The shapely, bespectacled female alchemist who had just entered the room had ended up knocking over a tall stack of books with her chest. The books fell to the floor with a loud crash.

The woman's students roared in laughter.

Instead of laughing, however, Huey sighed and decided to hold off on talking to Monica until later.

He glanced at her one last time, but she still did not look back.

It was almost as if she was purposely avoiding his gaze.

<=>

"And so, if we utilize an amalgamation accelerant during the process of refining bismuth..."

Renee's relaxed voice continued to rattle off scientific terms.

Class continued as usual. Huey resolved to act as he usually did, half-ignoring Renee's lecture and focusing on the view out the window and the book in front of him.

And time passed--

Huey happened to glance out the window when he noticed a strange group of people approaching the library.

'Soldiers?'

The men walked towards the building, dressed in form-fitting clothes and carrying themselves with impeccable posture.

'...No. The one in charge... is a woman?'

Huey was tipped off by the leader's slightly large chest and feminine facial features, but he had no way of knowing for sure. Although he had confidence in his eyesight, he could have been mistaken.

'No. What kind of a woman would dress like that?'

He logically pieced together the facts and began drawing conclusions from them.

'The town militia...? No, they don't look like the City Police, either.'

'But those don't look like formal military uniforms...'

'What is going on here?'

A sense of unease ballooned in his heart.

The memory of nearly being arrested five years ago, when the students of this school had been falsely accused of being the Mask Maker, was still fresh in his mind.

Of course, it hadn't been a *completely* false accusation.

'...I'll just keep an eye out for now.'

Huey mentally began to plan out escape routes, but the classroom was on the second floor. He determined that, in the worst case scenario, he might have to jump out of the window. He kept a close watch on the classroom door.

In the end, the lecture ended without incident. Huey wondered if he was being too paranoid, and looked over at Monica again.

She still would not look at him.

'...What is this?'

'What am I thinking?'

The only difference between today and every day preceding it was the fact that Huey was now rid of an annoying gaze that was fixed on him all day. He was frustrated with himself for being uneasy about something that should have been this liberating.

'This is ridiculous.'

'It's almost like I'm concerned about Monica.'

Huey Laforet considered everything in the world an enemy.

This opinion had not really changed since he was about fifteen years old.

Currently, he was still devising ways to take vengeance on the world and find satisfaction. If he were to ultimately reach the conclusion of 'mass murder', he would carry it out without hesitation, no matter what consequence awaited him afterwards.

Huey had a book of names in his heart, which recorded the identities of every person he had met so far.

Each person had been identically labeled as an enemy.

It was a rather normal, if skewed, way of thinking for a teenaged boy, but part of the reason for his hatred was due to his unfortunate past.

However, thanks to a certain incident, the pages of Monica and Elmer had lost the 'enemy' label.

Not even Huey himself had been able to come up with a verdict for them.

What did they mean to him? Were they enemies, like everyone else? Or were they allies who were worth sharing his life with?

It might be a rather foolish idea to divide the world into nothing but enemies and allies, but Huey had decided that he didn't mind being called a fool. This was why he determined that he had to be extremely careful when passing judgement.

It had been several years since then, but Huey was still at a loss. In fact, he had forgotten outright about the matter of determining whether Elmer and Monica were enemies or allies.

'...It can't be.'

Huey had noticed this change in himself, but he forced the idea out of his mind.

'There's no way I'd feel comfortable about suspending judgement... right?

'But...

'Is this the conclusion of my metamorphosis?'

From the moment Elmer arrived in Lotto Valentino, Huey had a feeling that something about himself would change.

Had he truly undergone a transformation?

'No, now's not the time for this.' He sighed quietly.

During the break, Huey walked over to Monica, who was talking to Elmer.

"Monica."

"Oh... Huey! What is it?!"

Monica smiled abashedly as usual, but Huey was still strangely uneasy. Perhaps the anxiety might disappear if he could logically explain what was so different today, but the only explanation that came to mind was 'just because'. Huey was angry at himself.

But he completely masked these emotions and spoke to Monica without expression.

"I heard you felt sick after I left yesterday. Are you feeling better?"

"Huh?! O-oh! Did Elmer tell you?! E-Elmer, you blabbermouth!"

Monica began beating her hands against Elmer's shoulder. But Huey saw this as nothing more than Monica's unnecessarily childish attempt to hide something.

"I really was just feeling a bit nauseous! Don't worry about it!"

"I see... So you're fine now?"

"I'm all better!" Monica replied energetically.

Huey fell into thought.

In that short silence, he looked at the ceiling, the walls, and Elmer, and finally settled his gaze on Monica, his decision made.

"You told me yesterday that you could pull some strings at the theatre. Could you still do that for today?"

"?"

Monica tilted her head, still smiling.

"I'm interested. Let's go watch that new play together."

"...!"

Shock spread over Monica's face.

Monica wasn't the only one. The entire class, composed of young people of all ages, from ten-year old girls to men in their twenties, fell into chaos.

(H-hey, did you just hear that?!)

(Huey... asked Monica on a date?)

(What's with him all of a sudden? He was always so cold to her.)

(That Dense Bookworm finally accepted Monica's feelings!)

(Congratulations, Monica! I'm so happy for you!)

(Damn it! I was hoping Monica might give up on him one of these days...)

(Elmer! Elmer! What's wrong with Huey?! Is he sick?)

(Is he gonna die?!)

(Nah. Maybe he's lovesick! Ahahaha!)

(My god... Some crazy ship makes port, and now even Huey's going crazy. What's going on here?)

(What's happening to Lotto Valentino...?)

(Maybe we should tell Professor Archangelo?)

(Professor Renee might even take off her clothes for us.)

(Actually, we'll *help* her do that! Elmer! Got any good ideas?!)

(...Maybe if we make the room really really warm, she'll take off her clothes! All the guys will smile, and Renee's going to smile because she's not hot anymore... Yeah! It's a perfect smile plan! This is great!)

(Wait! I believe that Professor Renee might take off her clothes if we just ask her seriously!)

Huey's expression hardened as his ears were assaulted by the commotion.

'Th-these people...'

In contrast to Huey's own disinterest in his class, it seemed that his fellow novice alchemists were very interested in Monica and Huey's relationship. The students were taken by surprise today, after four years without progression. They seemed to be greatly enjoying the situation.

'Wait. So they were calling me a "Dense Bookworm" all this time...?'

Huey desperately tried to maintain his neutral expression, and looked around the classroom. The conversation had already moved on to the topic of Renee, but Huey snatched Elmer by the back of his shirt mid-conversation. He whispered into Elmer's ear with an annoyed tone.

"...Why are you getting involved with this commotion like nothing's wrong?"

"Hey now, you have to relax, Huey! At this rate, you're gonna go from 'Dense Bookworm' to 'Sensitive Bookworm'!"

"Don't tell me... *you* made up the nickname...?!"

"You're welcome. Though, I just made up the name 'Dense Bunny'. It just changed to 'Bookworm' somewhere down the line." Elmer said nonchalantly.

Huey strengthened his grip on Elmer's collar, but he soon released his hold and turned towards Monica.

"...Anyway, that's my answer, Monica. If you're up for it."

"Um... W-well... it depends on the day of the week. I can't make it today, but I'll definitely be free next week!"

"I see."

Huey was taken slightly by surprise, as he had been expecting to go today. He started to make his way back to his seat, but he noticed the curious gazes of his classmates locked onto him. He sighed and left the classroom without a word.

"Oh?! Huey! Where are you going?!"

Monica hurriedly followed him out of the classroom.

Another commotion broke out in the classroom in the aftermath.

(...Did they just elope?)

(Looks like they're ditching afternoon classes.)

(I wanna skip too. Professor Archangelo's teaching the afternoon class, right?)

(I wish it was Professor Renee...)

(Hey Elmer! Huey left because he was embarrassed, right?)

(Of course!)

(He acts all cold, but he really liked Monica back all this time.)

(Elmer was right! He really *is* human on the inside!)

(Huey's just a really shy person!

(So if he and Monica end up together, let's all smile and congratulate them!)

<=>

At the same time, the Third Library's Special Archives.

"...This is quite a... spirited library." A young woman mumbled, listening to the laughter of the students on the second floor.

Fossils and skeletal models lined the walls, enveloping the archive in an otherworldly atmosphere.

There was a large, open space that stretched from a corner of the room to the centre of the archives. From the perspective of the chair in the middle, the archive almost looked like a sitting room made to flaunt its owner's collection.

However, the guest--the tan-skinned woman named Carla--was not looking at the collection, but rather, the man before her.

"If they are bothering you, I will quiet them. It is up to you." The elderly man--Dalton--replied, his wooden hand creaking.

Carla faced down the alchemist who owned this place.

Although the archive was rather large, there was a limit to the number of people who could occupy the room. Carla was speaking to the old man alone, leaving her subordinates on standby outside.

When she first heard that Dalton was an elderly alchemist, Carla had visualized a frail old man with limbs like twigs. When she saw him in the flesh, however, Dalton, with his surprisingly large frame and sense of authority, looked less like an alchemist and more like a grizzled old sea hand or the captain of a pirate vessel.

Carla's eyes then wandered onto the hook on the desk that was obviously made as a prosthetic. Dalton was wearing a normal wooden hand right now, but if he had worn the hook, he would not be out of place on a pirate ship in the Caribbean.

However, Carla was not intimidated. She continued boldly.

"As we have written in the letter we sent earlier, I would like to inform you that we, the delegation of House Dormentaire, will be residing in Lotto Valentino for a lengthy period of time. It is possible that my men may frequent this library, so I am here to ask your permission for entry. I promise you that, as a basic rule, we will not disturb the patrons and students."

"'As a basic rule', you say? I believe your presence in this city is already in defiance of the basic norms." Dalton replied. Although he spoke in a joking tone, his expression was hard as a rock. "But I suppose it is a good thing that you are minding your manners like this. Do you intend to visit *every* institution in this city to introduce yourself like this?"

"Yes, with the exceptions of public facilities and private residences. We have no intention of stirring up unnecessary panic among the citizenry. We have chosen to visit you first because we have heard that the libraries are deeply connected to the aristocracy, and that Count Esperanza Boronial is rather particular with the Third Library."

"Of course. In other words, you are here to clearly state 'We will be staying in this city from now on, so stay out of our way!'"

"I will not deny it." Carla replied sincerely, despite knowing the impudence of her own request.

Dalton determined that, despite the fact that she was a woman, Carla was not one to be taken lightly.

"So... I hear you have come to Lotto Valentino to find a criminal."

"That is correct."

"... **Is that really all?**" Dalton glared at Carla, one eyebrow arched.

"... You suspect something, sir?" Carla asked indifferently.

"I ask that you refrain from answering yes-or-no questions with yet another question. It's just as good as admitting that you *do* have an ulterior motive. ...Of course, I will not get in your way as long as you do not disrupt our classes."

Dalton went back to looking at the documents in his hands, having lost interest.

"If you will excuse me, then."

Carla stood up, having finished her work.

And as she reached for the door handle, Dalton suddenly spoke to her with a softer tone.

"Look at my manners. I've forgotten one thing."

"Yes...? What might that be, sir?"

Carla turned back towards Dalton, standing up straight. Dalton grinned.

"Welcome to Lotto Valentino, good lady."

<=>

Somewhere in the marketplace.

"Breaktime's almost over, Huey!"

Huey completely ignored Monica's rule-abiding call and slowly made his way away from the library. Monica followed after him, not intending to force him back to class.

Huey remained silent, and Monica went quiet. A soft breeze blew around them as if matching their pace. The socially awkward young man and the smitten young woman blended into the streets in silence.

For a couple nearing their twenties, it was almost a childish sight.

Monica, walking behind Huey, seemed to be satisfied with the situation. She smiled softly and bowed her head.

However, the silence only lasted a moment--before they found themselves in a deserted alleyway.

"...What happened to you?"

"Huh...?"

Huey stopped midway up the sloping alley and leaned against the wall.

"Even I can tell something's wrong with you."

"Wh-what are you saying? I'm just fine-"

"You don't have to make excuses." Huey interrupted, slightly more resolute than before. Monica went quiet and looked away.

Her behaviour confirmed Huey's suspicions.

'Monica is hiding something.'

"What makes you think something's wrong with me?" Monica asked stubbornly, still refusing to meet his eyes.

Huey was about to reply, but he stopped himself.

He didn't feel like saying, 'Because you won't look at me'. He looked away for a moment, then turned towards her again and spoke.

"Don't forget. As fellow Mask Makers, we're basically on the same boat. I've been observing you all this time, since if you change your mind, I might be affected in turn... so *of course* I can tell when something's wrong with you."

"...I see."

Monica seemed to have accepted this. She went silent again with a dark look.

A breeze blew between them. Time passed.

There was no one else around to snap them out of the seemingly never-ending silence--

Huey then sighed, and with a serious look, asked Monica a question.

"Is it something you can't even tell *me*?"

"...Yeah."

Monica did not hesitate to answer.

When she replied, and even afterwards, Monica kept her eyes glued to the floor. Her lips were barely twisted into a smile, but she was trying desperately to hide her eyes from Huey.

Huey was not so foolish as to be ignorant of the implications.

However, he did not have the kind of prudence to free Monica from of her worries.

"All right. I won't force you to tell me." He answered. Huey then slowly approached Monica.

Monica tried to turn away outright, not willing to let the one she loved see her expression--

But Huey took hold of her right arm.

"Oh..."

Monica's eyes widened in shock.

"We're late for afternoon class anyway." Said Huey.

"Um. Oh, um... Huey?" Monica tilted her head in confusion. Huey pulled her by the arm and started climbing the hill again.

"Sometimes, you should help me kill time, too."

<=>

Lotto Valentino marketplace.

As a certain pair walked on, ignoring their scheduled classes, another student who had ditched the lecture was walking along the market streets.

'I wonder if Professor Archangelo will get mad when he hears that three people are playing hooky. Anyway, I'd better think up a way to make him smile tomorrow.' Elmer thought, as he tailed a certain group of people.

He kept a constant distance from them, following them under the cover of the market crowds.

Elmer had seen this group by chance when he glanced out the window during the break, not long after Huey and Monica had left. They were dressed like soldiers, but they did not seem to be from the Spanish military. He was particularly curious about one of them, who was dressed rather unusually. So Elmer had gone down to the first floor to covertly approach them.

He then noticed that they wore the crest of the golden hourglass, which was identical to the one on the black ship.

'So they're connected to that ship.'

'What should I do? Follow them quietly, or be upfront and say hi to them?'

Neither of these plans sounded plausible, but Elmer was a man without restraint. He seriously considered the problem, and finally chose the latter--the choice with at least a semblance of normalcy--and decided to make his move.

Suddenly, someone grabbed him by the back of the shirt and pulled him back.

"Guuuh?!"

Elmer tried to find his throat some room to breathe by flailing about, and looked back.

Standing behind him was a bespectacled man about half a head taller than himself.

"What are you up to, Elmer?" The man asked pleasantly.

Elmer's eyes widened. He then broke out into a grin and called his friend's name.

"Hey, Maiza! It's been too long!"

"We just saw each other at the library last week. ...In any event, what are planning?" Maiza asked, then looked over at the group of people at the end of the street, back at Elmer, and sighed with a knowing look.

"Elmer..."

"Yeah?"

"You're poking your nose into other people's business again, aren't you?"

Maiza Avaro had gone through some radical changes in the past few years. Everything about him, from his tone, appearance, and expression, was like that of a completely different person from back when he was the leader of the Rotten Eggs. He looked more like a scholar than an aristocrat, but everyone who knew him was shocked by this change, whispering all kinds of things behind his back.

Whether this change was truly a sign that Maiza was maturing remained to be seen. But seeing his 180 degree change, many aristocrats had begun to say, "You've grown up so well" to the son of the powerful aristocrat.

Maiza had never taken lessons alongside Elmer, but he had been half-teaching himself alchemy, with instructions from Dalton. Over the past few years, he had exhausted all the reading material in the Third Library, and was now personally compiling an archive of useful information.

Naturally, he had taken to frequenting the Third Library, and ended up seeing Elmer more often. They had more chances to speak to each other than before. And it was because Maiza had previously seen Elmer's personality and decisiveness in action that he could instinctively tell Elmer was up to something.

"Wow... Anyway, what a coincidence seeing you here, Maiza." Elmer laughed as if trying to hide something. Maiza fixed his glasses with one hand and sighed again.

"It was half inevitable. I have some business with those people as well."

"Huh? You know them?"

"No. It's just that something about them bothers me, and I was observing them just in case. ...And who do I find but a familiar face sneaking after them?"

"That's just like you, Maiza." Elmer laughed and slapped Maiza on the back, without even explaining just what about this line of thought was so much like Maiza. He then smoothly segued into a question.

"Anyway, who are those people?"

"...You followed them without even knowing that?"

"I was following them to figure that out." The Smile Junkie laughed. Maiza sighed for the third time today and gave a resigned chuckle.

"...You really never have your priorities in order, do you?"

<=>

Lotto Valentino hills.

There was a partially open hillock in Lotto Valentino, slightly higher in elevation than the Boronial Manor.

Behind the hill was a large forest. In front of it the sight of all of Lotto Valentino stretched outward. It was a pastoral place, with wildflowers blooming on the ground.

Lovers tended to use this place to meet in secret, so the occasional couple could be seen looking down on the streets from this hill.

And as if to verify this rumor, a young man and woman looked down at the city from where they stood.

"...Hey. Remember back when everyone in the classroom started making a scene?"

"Yeah?"

Huey and Monica spoke, looking upon the sight of Lotto Valentino stretched out before them.

Huey's face was devoid of expression, but he was chatting casually--something he never normally did.

"Those guys... they've changed. Well, I never thought they'd be the kind of people who'd make a commotion like that..."

"I bet it's because of Elmer. Everyone's gotten so much more cheerful. He's friends with everyone else, not just us, you know..."

"I find that fascinating, considering that everything he says infuriates me. ...No, I guess, in one sense, anyone who's studying alchemy is an eccentric--so it makes sense for birds of a feather to flock together..."

Huey had spoken with the intent of making light of them, but Monica broke out into laughter.

"...! Ahaha! Hahahaha!"

Huey was taken aback--he had not seen this kind of laugh from her before.

"? What's wrong?"

"Huey...! That was just too funny...! Ahahahaha!"

"? Did I say something strange?"

"You said that everyone in the class is an eccentric..."

Monica finally stopped laughing, and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"But you know? Huey, *you're* the one who's closest with Elmer!"

"...!"

Huey widened his eyes and tried to come up with a negative response.

But his throat couldn't produce a sound. His mind was blank.

He plunked down onto the grass in defeat, and looked up at Monica with an expressionless face.

"Does it really look that way?"

"It does."

"Elmer always annoys me. I can't stand that optimism of his, and he always tells me to smile, without even considering how I might feel."

"Yeah."

Monica nodded sympathetically. Huey continued his questioning.

"I always end up wasting so much of my time because of him. And you still think Elmer and I are best friends?"

"Maybe it's *because* you're so close that you can waste time together?"

"..."

Huey went quiet and looked around himself.

The flowers and plants were buffeted by the sea breeze. It sounded almost like they were laughing at him.

Huey sighed loudly, feeling uncomfortable even at the hypothetical gazes of anthropomorphized flowers.

"Well, I guess you could put it that way..." Huey laughed bitterly in resignation.

Monica then spoke in a somewhat lonely voice.

"You know, I've always been jealous of Elmer."

"I didn't think you saw us *that way*..."

"N-no! That's not what I meant... It's just that you spend so much time with Elmer..."

Monica sat down beside Huey, looked up at the sky, and continued.

"I've known you for longer than he did, but you know? Elmer finds out new things about you every single day! I was just a bit envious of him. It felt like you and Elmer were moving forward together, but I was being left behind."

"..."

"But I like Elmer too, so I can't just hate him so easily... W-wait! Don't get me wrong, okay? I like Elmer as a *friend*. It's completely different from the way I like you!"

"I know."

Huey put his hands on the ground and looked up at the heavens, imitating Monica.

The sky was a clear azure. It almost felt like a gigantic blue canvas would fall over them at any moment.

Up until a few years ago, Huey would think, *'I wish the world would just fall into that sky and shatter.'* whenever he looked up at the sky.

But now he realized that he was slightly *scared* of such a notion. Huey felt a chill, visualizing the world turning upside-down, and everything but himself--or himself and nothing else--falling towards the sky.

'Oh... I get it.'

Huey went over the changes in himself and slowly drew conclusions.

'I didn't even want to think about it before, when I was in front of other people, but...'

Occasionally glancing over at Monica, Huey slowly drew forth the conclusion that he had once pushed back into the deepest recesses of his mind.

'Maybe I'm scared.'

'I'm... I'm afraid of losing this connection to Monica and Elmer.'

'No, that's not it. That's too vague of a way to put it.'

'I... I even find myself thinking that I'm comfortable in this world.'

'That's all there is to it.'

Huey smiled wryly at his own twisted way of thinking and finally spoke.

"But you got one thing wrong."

"Huh...?"

"I didn't just waste time with *Elmer*. You wasted a lot of my time, too. ... In fact, since we've known each other longer... Maybe I've spent more time with *you*, Monica."

Monica did not answer.

Nothing but silence sounded between them, and only the sound of flowers rustling in the wind echoed across the hill.

It occurred to Huey that he might have said something to upset Monica, so he looked over at her face.

She was crying.

"Huh?!"

Huey knew for a fact that what he had just said had made Monica at least a little bit happier.

But Monica was now shedding tears with an empty look on her face.

"H-hey, Monica! Are you feeling okay?!"

This was an unfamiliar situation for Huey, who had always feigned aloofness. He stumbled for answers as he shook Monica by the shoulders.

"No... no. I-I'm fine. I'm s-sorry. Huey."

Monica tried to force a grin, occasionally swallowing her tears and sobs.

Huey didn't have to be Elmer to figure out that she was faking her smile.

"Hey, don't force yourself like that. What's with you all of a sudden?"

"...I-it's just that... I-I'm so happy."

"?"

"What you just told me... A-and how you b-brought me t-to a beautiful p-place like this... I-I'm so, so h-happy. Th-that you just ch-chatted with me. That y-you talked about yourself... I-I'm so, so, happy..."

Monica stuttered between sobs, but her tears didn't look like tears of joy.

"I'm so s-stupid, aren't I...? I-it's not like w-we're g-going out or anything..."

She tried her best to calm her voice, but it was impossible to contain her flood of emotions.

Monica's tears and words became a great wave that spilled forth before Huey.

"But... But you know, I was happy. You were here, and I was envious of Elmer, but I couldn't hate Elmer, either... No, that's not all. I never cared about the others in our class, but... I talked to them with Elmer... and somewhere down the line, I started to like them... and then I started to like you even more, and...!"

"..."

"Ever since... ever since you accepted the Mask Maker's secret... Ever since the three of us shared that secret... I thought, maybe that we were one. I thought that you and I were one! But now... I noticed that... I was so much happier just now... even without those secrets... I'm happier when you just talk to me about normal stuff... and I-I just wish... I wish this moment could just last forever, and...!"

Perhaps Monica was trying to retain her sense of self by continuing to talk.

Maybe the emotions spiraling through her had swelled so much that she couldn't hold them within herself any longer.

Despite his conclusions, Huey could do nothing for her but continue listening.

"But... no. This isn't right. I... I...! I don't have that right! I, I shouldn't be allowed to want that kind of happiness... but I-I tried to forget that, and... I tried to run away...! But... ...!"

Monica suddenly went silent. Perhaps she couldn't even figure out what she was trying to say anymore.

She trembled as if in fear of something, and avoided Huey's eyes entirely.

"A-Ah, ah..."

Monica's face twisted into a mess of emotions, unable to contain everything, as she prepared to scream--

But suddenly, she was pulled into Huey's tight embrace.

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

"It's okay. I'm not going to make you tell me about your past." Huey mumbled plainly. His gaze was locked on to some point in the sea, but his voice was directed to the woman in his arms.

"Even if you've done something that the world will never forgive... it won't matter to me. I'm interested in you, just the way you are right now."

"..."

"We're a team, right? So even if you're broken, and even if your true face is revealed and the world turns against you..."

It was for a single instant, but Huey looked Monica in the eye.

And seeing Monica's genuine, almost *innocent* face, Huey momentarily blushed and mumbled--

"I'll make you a new mask."

Huey Laforet, age 19.

He was a young man who was caught up in the mad dream of self-perfection and hatred of the world.

And this was the first time he had ever blushed for Monica.

It had been ten years since his face had last flushed--the first instance was for a young woman in his village, who treated him like her own brother.

She was the woman who consoled him when his mother had been accused of witchcraft.

Of course, that woman had been one of the very villagers who had accused his mother of the crime.



<=>

At the same time, in front of the warship in the Lotto Valentino harbor.

Carla, the leader of the delegation, stood before the jet-black warship and sighed.

'This is absurd.'

The warship had been specially designed to be larger than other vessels with the same number of gunports. It was armed with all the necessities of a warship, as well as residential facilities for aristocrats.

The ship was normally used to transport members of House Dormентаire, but none of them were part of the delegation. As such, no one, not even Carla, occupied the space used by the masters.

If an aristocrat was actually on board, the ship would be accompanied by an escort fleet. But this ship was structured so solidly that it almost looked like it was even built under the assumption that the *escort* would turn against it.

'To think I would end up using this ship for so ludicrous a mission...'

Obviously, Carla had shared her living quarters with the men during the journey.

Because she was a woman, she had been made light of by the crewmen, and even almost assaulted in her sleep. Ultimately, a total of seven men had been tossed overboard.

She had them pulled back aboard, not wanting to risk death for fear of a rebellion, but over the course of these repeated punishments the crewmen eventually came to see her as someone not to be trifled with. They managed to make port in Lotto Valentino without incident.

'I suppose I'm glad these men follow my orders, but...'

The members of the delegation standing before her were private soldiers placed under her command by House Dormентаire. It would be a stretch to call them veterans, but they were well-trained men with good heads on their shoulders.

They accomplished their missions with mechanical stoicism, which sometimes frightened even Carla.

Although the fact that they did as they were ordered without looking down on her for being a female leader was refreshing, Carla still felt uneasy.

'It's almost like they're keeping watch over me.'

When Carla first arrived in Lotto Valentino, the city struck her as an ordinary, peaceful town.

The markets were filled with energy, and the sound of marching soldiers was a thing of another world. She could sense that her delegation was like an outsider, tearing down this tranquility and drawing anxiety over the town.

The Governor, Esperanza Boronial, was just as eccentric as the rumors made him out to be, but he seemed to be a good man. Carla would never voice this thought, but she found herself more fond of the Count than the people of House Dormentaire.

And yet she found herself assaulted by an ominous sensation as she walked through the city streets. It was quite similar to the inexplicable unease she felt with the stoic men who marched behind her.

There was only a single church in all of Lotto Valentino, and even this lone building was lying in a state of half-collapse on the outskirts of town. She saw almost no clergymen or faithful of any sort.

Even still, this city was almost **too orderly**.

The citizens were polite and lively. The muddled air that pervaded other cities was surprisingly absent here.

According to prior reports, there seemed to have been a group of delinquents called the Rotten Eggs, but they were more or less inactive at this point in time.

'Still, something is off.'

'It's as if the people are being forced to act orderly out of some kind of fear.'

'But Esperanza doesn't look like the kind of man who would rule with an iron fist.'

Carla could not fathom just who or what was controlling the city. She fell deeper into an inexplicable sense of unease.

In the midst of her personal musings, she found herself facing another source of anxiety.

She had noticed movement from the shadow that had been tailing the delegation up until around the middle of the marketplace.

The pursuer was so easy to notice that Carla almost suspected that this man was just a decoy to keep her mind off a more skilled pursuer following her trail.

And as if to support her theory, the pursuer's shadow disappeared somewhere down the line, taking with him the noticeable rustling he made wherever he went.

'What was that all about? It looks like he'd been following us out of the library... Is Dalton behind this...?'

Carla could tell after exchanging only a few short words with the man that she could not let her guard down against Dalton.

But was he so impulsive a man as to send a tail after her so quickly?

The more she thought, the more her head began to ache. Carla sighed again.

'It's all just nothing but confusion.'

'Although... I suppose this mission is an absurdity in and of itself.'

<=>

Several months earlier, Dormentaire estate gardens.

"Lotto Valentino, my lady?"

"Yes. I'm sure you've at least heard of it?"

The garden was extravagant enough to be right at home in a royal palace.

Most of the landscape was verdant green. The garden existed in a splendid display of its master's riches.

It was in a corner of the garden, in front of a fountain powered by elevation differences, that Carla looked upon the noblewoman whom she protected.

The woman, wearing a luxurious dress, covered her face with a veil. It was impossible to determine her age or expression.

The woman looked towards the fountain as she spoke in a voice both youthful and elegant.

"I've received contact from the spy we sent to Lotto Valentino. It seems that there is a possibility that the killer who slew a member of House Dormentaire ten years ago is staying in that city."

"? Then is it not simply a matter of apprehending the criminal immediately, my lady?"

"I'm afraid not. I can't divulge the details, but this isn't the kind of incident *we* want to bring up to the surface, either. That's why we have to send in Dormentaire's private soldiers... and I want *you* to lead them."

"..."

Carla was somewhat taken aback by her mistress's command. She was a mere bodyguard--there must be plenty of others in the service of House Dormentaire who were much more suited to the mission.

"Your face is saying, 'Why me?'. I'm sorry about that, dear. But it's best to send a woman up against the Clown Count of Lotto Valentino. Well... There's no need to worry. I'll be placing some very reliable men under your command."

The woman smiled faintly. Carla forced back her doubt and replied politely.

"I understand, my lady. I will make contact with the spy and arrest or dispose of the killer."

"My goodness, Carla dear. Don't be such a silly thing! Talk of the killer is just an excuse! We can't have you *really* going out on that mission. Even if you *do* find the killer, you shouldn't do anything about it~."

The noblewoman's words did nothing but confuse Carla even further. Seeing Carla's mystified expression, the woman laughed and continued.

"You see, there's all kinds of nasty rumors floating around that place. Things like immortality, some new drugs, and fake gold that most people can't tell apart."

"..."

The sudden talk of immortality made Carla wonder for a moment if she was being made fun of. But the woman just giggled, as if she had read Carla's mind.

"Well, you know Szilard, right? The old alchemist who works for our family? Even *he* laughed about immortality, but it looks like he's quite curious about that fake gold. He was going around saying that he could recreate it perfectly if he could just figure out the formula."

"... In other words, you would like me to find the formula, my lady?"

"I *love* how you're so quick to catch on to things, Carla! Now, you *know* how greedy our family is, right?"

"..."

Carla remained silent, voicing neither agreement or dissent. She had determined that she had no right to be judging the moral stance of the family she served.

"Oh, you're such a *good girl*, Carla. I like that about you. But in any event, I want it all. *Every last thing*. Immortality, counterfeit gold, drugs--isn't it just such a shame that Dormентаire can't control all of them for these poor people?"

Carla wondered what her mistress meant by 'poor people', but she determined that she would be given the answer of 'everyone', and decided to remain silent. This did not mean that she understood everything, however.

And as if Carla's confusion was of no concern to her, the woman smiled vainly from behind the veil and spoke delightedly.

"According to the dear little spy, Lotto Valentino is like a little city in a glass box made by the alchemists."

"..."

"What I want you to do is to *shatter that box into bits*.

"No matter how many years it takes."

<=>

Present day, Lotto Valentino harbor district.

And so, Carla found herself here.

To be perfectly frank, she had initially thought that she was sent here as a roundabout way of being kicked out of service.

She had thought that these fairytale stories of immortality, and the mission of finding these secrets no matter how long it took, was just a fancy way of saying that she was being driven out into the countryside.

Had she made some mistake? The thought nagged her all throughout the journey.

But when she came to Lotto Valentino and felt this unease for herself, Carla came to a realization.

Perhaps her orders were not some excuse to send her away, but exactly what they were at face value.

'Even still... immortality? Ridiculous.' Carla thought, looking around the harbor, *'and when is the spy going to contact me...?'*

At this point, the entire town already knew that the Dormentaire ship had made port. Their spy would make contact with the delegation if he knew about their presence, but Carla knew nothing about him other than his name.

In any event, the pursuer she had just seen and the unwelcome attitude of the townspeople drove Carla to keep up her guard at all times.

Several hours later.

Carla had finished making the rounds through the harbor area, the marketplace, and several libraries.

Two silhouettes stood in her path in the deserted alleyway.

One of them was a tall, bespectacled man. He had an air of gentleness about him. Standing beside him was a young man with a peaceful grin.

'?

'The smiling one... is the the man who'd be following us earlier?'

"...? Have you some business with us?" Carla asked, stopping in place. The tall man waved his hand and responded.

"No, it is nothing. I just find it a surprise to run into House Dormentaire's delegation in a place like this. My name is Maiza... Maiza Avaro. This is my close friend, Elmer."

"!"

In Lotto Valentino, the Avaro family of aristocrats was second only to the Boronial family. They did not come even close to matching the Dormentaires, but in the confines of the city, the power of the Avaros could not be underestimated.

"It is an honor, sir." Carla replied as stoically as she could.

She quickly introduced herself, and went on to discreetly try and figure out Maiza's reasons for speaking to her.

"... It seems your friend here has been interested in us **for quite some time now.**"

Carla had intended to just get a reaction out of the smiling young man, if he really was the one who was following them earlier. His response, however, came a a shock to her.

"Yes! That's exactly why I followed you!" He smiled.

"... " "... "

Everyone went silent.

The young man called Elmer ignored the quiet and continued obliviously.

"I might end up sneaking onto your ship or something, but I'd like it if you could kindly laugh it offffffffmmmmmp." "

"Excuse me, it seems my friend is somewhat confused." Maiza explained with a smile, covering Elmer's mouth. "Setting him aside, I'm sorry to say that the townspeople as a whole are unnerved by your presence. If you could perhaps disclose your reason for being here, I could pass it on to the other aristocrats myself and try to restore some semblance of calm to Lotto Valentino."

"...I have already informed Count Boronial of the purposes of my visit."

"I'm sure you understand, but it is rather difficult for other aristocrats to approach him. I ask this of you in order to ensure proper communication."

Although Maiza's tone was humble, his words concealed the hidden message: "Disclose your mission if you don't want trouble". Although Carla could just as well have

written off his threat, she determined that it would not be in her best interests to turn local aristocrats against her so early on. She disclosed the details of her cover mission.

"We are here to root out a criminal who has trespassed against House Dormентаire. We have our own reasons for this pursuit, and I ask you, as a fellow aristocrat, to understand House Dormентаire's position."

"...Of course. I can finally rest easy."

Maiza tapped Elmer on the head and continued.

"My friend here is rather... eccentric. He may cause you some trouble in the future, but I will personally apologize for his actions in advance. Please show him your kindness."

The delegation exchanged empty greetings with them and left Maiza and Elmer.

"That woman was dressed rather strangely. ...In any event, I'm sure she's had ample time to remember your face."

"Is that supposed to matter at all?"

"I know you well enough to see that you'll be getting involved, sooner or later." Maiza smiled wryly, looking down at Elmer. "I've merely lowered your chances of being killed outright should they capture you. Of course, I have no way of guaranteeing just how much your connection to the Avaro family will help you in such an event."

"I get it! You're amazing, Maiza! You're a genius!"

"Please, don't overuse the word 'genius'. It almost sounds like sarcasm. And to be honest, I would like to tell you to keep your nose out of this, but I suppose my advice will fall on deaf ears."

"Of course! Wait, maybe I'll think about promising to stay away from this business if you promise to break out into laughter... huh?"

Elmer suddenly stopped and looked back towards the delegation, which was headed in the direction of the harbor.

It seemed that, just as they had done earlier, someone had interrupted the delegation to speak to them.

That itself was not so notable, but Elmer noticed something else.

"That's..."

"? What is the matter? Elmer?"

Maiza made to tap Elmer on the shoulder to snap him out of it, but found his hand reaching nothing but thin air.

Elmer bounded off alone, unrestrained.

He dashed into an alleyway--almost as if he was not chasing the delegation, but trying to get ahead of them.

<=>

"I have safely received the message. I will hear a more detailed report at a later time."

"... Thank you."

The young woman stoically speaking with Carla was dressed similarly to the other townsfolk.

She looked to be slightly younger than twenty. Although she was polite, there was something like a shadow cast over her.

"... You seem quite uneasy. Do you have some problem with us?"

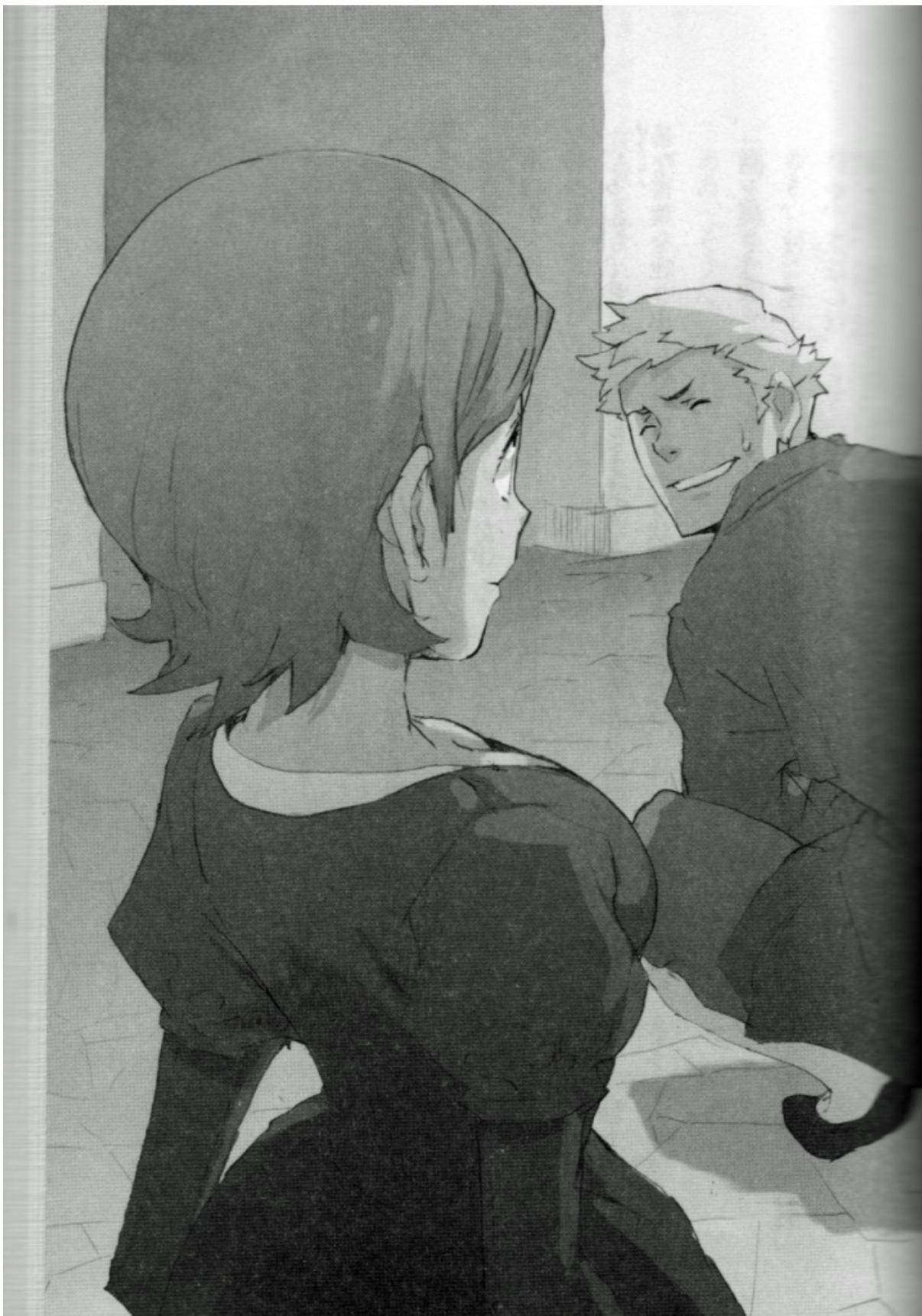
"No, ma'am. It's just that I have some mixed feelings about this city-aahhhh!"

A pair of hands suddenly popped out from behind the girl's downcast eyes and covered her face.

"Guess who!"

The very next moment, the questioner--Elmer--found his ribs being assaulted by the woman's elbow. He rolled onto the ground with a mix of a laugh and a yelp.

"Ahaha! Gah... Haha! I didn't expect an answer that strong! You know, in English, they call that an 'elbow'... maybe it's connected to my name? It's only one syllable apart! But if it makes you happy, I'll gladly change my name to Elbow! Ugh... ouch..."



Meanwhile, the woman who had landed the hit on Elmer instantly lost her dark look. There was a sparkle in her eye as she called his name.

"Elmer...? Elmer!"

Carla widened her eyes in confusion. Maiza ran over, tilting his head.

Elmer laughed, his pain forgotten, and greeted his old friend.

"It's been a while, Niki. ...So have you found a place to die?"

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The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[Maiza's transformation was unbelievable to behold.

Were humans truly capable of such a radical change in so short a time?

Even amidst my awe, I found myself wondering--perhaps his gentle demeanor was all just an act. Perhaps he would go back to being Aile when no one was present.

Of course, I would have no way of knowing in either event. Even if I could observe him in his solitude, I could no longer picture Maiza speaking in vulgar tones as he had in the past.

Let us get back to the story.

Yes, the beautiful cross-dresser--Carla--had come to Lotto Valentino in pursuit of a criminal.

Or rather, this was her excuse for being in the city. In reality, she had come to search Lotto Valentino. She was here to search this land filled with alchemy and lies, a place that existed in near-fantasy.

I would not learn of this until later. After all, I was extremely occupied at the time.

My newest play had been released, to critical acclaim. I spent my days monotonously attending fetes hosted by my patrons, and returning home drunk to desperately try and weave another tale.

Those were tedious days.

I could have just as well ignored my patrons' parties, but I had thrown myself into these celebrations--not for the sake of more patronage, but because I wanted to feel in person the praise of my audience.

Praise was what drove me forward.

At the same time, I held a certain pride about myself--that I did not pander to my audience.

I had something like a sense of duty to these people--a duty to reveal to them the hidden truths of the world, so they could be enlightened. I have mentioned this before, but... By doing this, I was able to fulfill my self-appointed duty, receive praise for doing so, *and* finally earn money for myself, all at once!

How could I ever think of leaving such a life?

I grasped the world as my audience without having to pander to another or sell my soul.

I had *nothing* to fear.

I was guilty of *nothing*.

I had attained *everything* through talent alone!

...This was what I had thought at the time.

I had absolute faith in this belief.

But now that I look back on it, my success *did* come through a deal with the devil.

The soul I sold, however, was not my own.

I had sold the soul--the life--of another.

I had earned the coin of praise by greedily selling another's soul.

I had been privy to many of the inner workings of the world ever since I had first been acquainted with alchemy. Whether I liked it or not, I saw the entire world as upside-down, ever since I met that immortal man.

...

You may not yet understand what I am saying.

This is the story I had written which played in the theaters when the ship first made port. I hope that the scripts are still intact in your time, but I will give you a quick summary.

It is the tale of a boy consumed by magics, and his vengeance against the world.

When the boy was young, his mother had been accused of witchcraft by the other villagers.

...At the time, the church was being rather nosy about trying to bury the barbaric act of witch hunts in secrecy, so I did not use the term 'witch hunt' in scripts bound for other cities. The Lotto Valentino version, however, was uncensored.

In any event, the boy's mother was declared innocent in the trial.

She had given her own life in order to prove that those who had accused her were the *true* servants of the devil.

These servants were most of the villagers who had defended the boy. The very same people who gave him encouragement and consoled him.

The boy had been betrayed by his world. This was when he met the devil.

The devil gave him the power to burn away the entire world. The boy became a warlock and began his revenge, but he ultimately regained his humanity and threw himself and the devil into his own flames. This is the story of the play.

'Magic' in this case was actually a thinly veiled metaphor for alchemy.

... Yes.

Just as my use of the word 'actually' implies, this story had its origins in fact.

I had merely re-imagined the tale after hearing the original story.

I could not let this terrifying reality of the witch hunts be lost to history.

This was why I had written the play.

I believed in my own sense of justice.

I believed that this was my *duty*.

After all, the one who had first told me the story had tearfully pleaded with me to let this tale be known to the world.

The one who told me this story was... Lebreau.

How did he know of this tale?

The answer is simple.

He was at the village when the witch trials took place.

Not as a villager, of course.

Recall the so-called Inquisitors of dubious authenticity, who had come to the village to hunt witches.

Lebreau was the only son of the Inquisitors' leader.

He told me the story of the trial between his sobs.

He told me that he wanted to pay off his father's sins.

That he had wanted to forget the past, but he could not forgive himself for being powerless in his youth.

That he had wanted to take this truth with him to the grave, but that he could not just sit back and watch people live in a constructed peace, not knowing what had really happened.

Yet no one would lend him their ears.

This was why he had become an alchemist--to prove with logic and reason that the witch hunts were a thing of madness and folly.

This was why I wrote this tale into a play.

I could not just sit idly by.

Who could blame me?

Who could admonish me for my actions?

I was merely in ignorance.

I was ignorant. There was something I had not known.

To think, the boy who had been betrayed by the world and lost his mother was still alive!

To think, he was living right here in Lotto Valentino!]

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One week later, in front of the Lotto Valentino theatre.

"Sounds fun, doesn't it, Huey?"

"I don't even know what it's about yet."

"Me neither, but apparently it's really good! I got the tickets from one of the patisserie regulars. He's a stagehand here, and he told me that it's a story that makes you think about love and the relationships between people!"

"Sounds overdone." Huey mumbled with a wry grin, but he looked over at Monica, standing beside him.

She seemed to have gone back to normal in the past week. He was surprised at himself for being so worried about her, but Huey felt like he could now be more honest to his own feelings about her now.

Elmer and the others at the school had teased them endlessly all week, but Huey found himself even *liking* their jokes now.

'How long has it been since I was so relaxed?'

It was a mystifying thought, but he hoped that watching this play together would help Monica go back to her old self.

'Don't tell me Elmer's rubbed off on me, too.'

Huey sighed, but he was in a rather good mood today. He silently hoped for Monica's recovery.

He was completely oblivious to the fact that the play they would soon see would completely shatter his heart.

He stepped into the theatre, ignorant to what was to come.

The curtains rose, casting a dark shadow over Lotto Valentino.

CHAPTER 4:

THEY'RE SO GULLIBLE



1709, late autumn. In front of the Lotto Valentino theatre.

"Look, Jean. These crowds are a testament to your gifted writing."

Lebreau addressed his companion, watching the theatre-goers enduring the chilly winds to gather around the theatre entrance.

"Not at all... I didn't even think up this story myself." Jean replied humbly.

"What does that matter? Your words are the key to revealing the hidden truths of the world, and they will move the hearts of your audience--the people of this city."

Lebreau looked up at the sky, looking rather touched.

"I have no illusions of my sins being washed away so easily, but... I hope that bringing salvation to that poor boy's past will bring healing to hearts that have been hurt in any way by the witch hunts."

"Course, the church might be on our heels any day now."

"Yet you still released this play into the world. That is something to be proud of, Jean. Truly... I don't know how to thank you."

"Never mind that. I just did it for the money is all. I needed some coin."

Although Jean politely turned down Lebreau's compliment, he was mentally relishing this sense of accomplishment.

The play was a runaway success. His next piece was already scheduled to premiere in Lotto Valentino's theatre. The script was nearly complete; all he had to do was create a conclusion.

But only the ending would be his own creation.

Jean-Pierre Accardo.

The play currently showing in the theatre was not the only one of its kind--the one he was currently writing was also based on certain 'facts'.

However, his hesitance in composing the ending of the new play was not for a lack of imagination. It was actually because of a nagging feeling in his heart that continued to get in the way of his writing.

"Lebreau."

"Yes?"

"About the piece I'm writing... Do you *really* think it'll be all right to show it in Lotto Valentino?"

"..."

Lebreau went silent. Jean struggled for words.

"W-well, I... I mean, it's a bit... you know, to say this, but... I don't care about being singled out by the skirt-chasing Count, and I doubt he'd try to reprimand me, but... isn't it bad for *you* if I make these things known to the world?"

"It is no trouble. After all, only *you* are privy to the fact that I am aware of these secrets. Not even our workshop's patron knows about my knowledge. Ideally, I would take these secrets to the grave, but... I cannot stand by and watch this shadow being cast over Lotto Valentino any longer."

It seemed that Lebreau was once again the one who had presented the 'truth' to Jean for use in a play. Lebreau seemed to be personally pained by the recollection of this particular incident, his face fraught with reluctance.

"And... if the one connected to this incident- no, the *culprit* is still in this city... I would hope for a conclusion of confession and repentance."

"But you know... I even find myself wanting to tell the *culprit* to **escape** from here."

"If that is what you wish for, that I suppose it will also do. If the culprit still denies the crime, even when the contents of the play become known to all... I suppose escape will still be an option."

"You think so?" Jean asked reluctantly. Lebreau smiled gently and nodded.

"Of course. Jean, you have a talent for words--words that can speak for those who cannot do so for themselves. And your words have the power to *change the world*. The excited faces of the people lined up here assures me so."

Jean once again looked over at the lineup in front of the theatre.

'For others, huh?

'I'm just writing for myself.

'I'm a terrible hypocrite...'

Jean thought to himself, and smiled.

It was as if he was trying to ease his guilt by lowering himself to the level of a mere hypocrite.

<=>

1709, towards the end of the year.

Lotto Valentino hills.

The browned grass on the hillside fluttered in the cold sea breeze.

Elmer stood alone on the hill, but he turned around with a smile when he noticed a presence behind him.

"You're late, Niki."

"You're just early, Elmer." The woman replied with a sigh. Elmer laughed sheepishly with an "I guess".

As usual for this place frequented by couples, a young man and woman stood side-by-side together, looking over the city. But things were quite different when it came to this particular pair.

"Are Monica and Huey still not coming to the library?" Niki asked with with a cold look.

"Nope."

"...But it's already been *months*."

"I know."

Elmer answered without hesitation, but there was something lonely about his smile.

Elmer and Niki first met during a certain incident several years ago.

Niki had left town once before, but a strange twist of fate had brought her back. She was now working as hired help at one of the libraries, at the service of the alchemists there. It seemed that these alchemists had relocated to Lotto Valentino from elsewhere about half a year earlier.

And one week after Elmer was reunited with Niki, a certain couple disappeared from the city altogether.

Huey and Monica.

Elmer and their fellow classmates had teased them to death on the day they went to the theatre.

But the next day, neither of them showed up to class.

What could have happened?

Some worried, "I hope they didn't get into trouble". Others whispered, "I bet they eloped together!". Reactions were varied. But after a month passed with no news, Huey and Monica's presence slowly began fading from the classroom.

Now, several months since that day, their classmates almost never spoke of them.

"You're worried, right?" Elmer asked. Niki nodded.

"I never really got to talk with them, but... They *did* save me once. ...And..."

"And?"

"I'm **one of the Mask Makers, too**. Of course I'm worried about them."

Niki was originally fated to die in this city.

She would either take her own life or lose it at the hands of another. These were the only paths before her.

But two encounters with the Mask Maker later, she found herself embroiled in the fates of others, and attained for herself a new choice.

She had the left this place in order to find for herself a place where she could die.

"It's been a month since we last met, huh... So, have you found a place where you can die with a smile yet?"

"I don't know."

Elmer's question brought memories flooding back to Niki's mind.

Immediately after leaving Lotto Valentino, she had managed to find a ride to a neighboring town on a carriage. Niki was not adverse to the idea of just traveling as far as she could before perishing to exhaustion.

However, she dozed off on the carriage ride. When she awakened, she had arrived at an alchemists' workshop.

Niki would not find out until a little later that this workshop was the origin of the drugs that had changed both Lotto Valentino and her own life. But to her, the drugs were a thing of the past. The alchemists here were not to blame for the horrors she had experienced.

Having found salvation through her meeting with Elmer, Niki had resolved to leave the workshop quietly without foisting the blame onto the alchemists.

But one thing stopped her.

It was a novice alchemist at the workshop, a man named Fermet.

"So you are seeking a place to die? That is not a place that can be found. It is a destination one naturally arrives at, at the end of one's life. Whether or not you can smile when the time comes is a matter of how you have lived your life thus far."

He was a captivating man.

Niki never intended to speak about her past, but she found the words tumbling from her lips on their own. She felt a strange sense of warmth and comfort in Fermet, and began to disclose her thoughts and grievances to him one by one.

Fermet had responded with a gentle smile.

"Our master recently perished in an accident. My heart aches for young Czeslaw, who has been left behind. Perhaps I could ask you to stay here, and act as a sister to the boy? Of course, we have some money left in the workshop with which to pay you. I understand that this is not the kind of service one can just buy with money, but... I beg this of you--with your eyes that have accepted death--please take Czes's hand."

"Mr. Fermet and Mr. Begg are both very kind people. This might be one-sided, but I'd even be happy to do work at their workshop."

"Ohhh. So that's why you spy for them, too."

"Honestly, I'm not too fond of *that* job... but I have no choice."

While she usually did odd jobs for the alchemists, Niki was also working as a messenger between the Dormentaire delegation and the workshop.

Elmer had heard that Fermet's workshop had the patronage of many different aristocrats. The Avaro family was their primary patron in Lotto Valentino, but in terms of Europe as a whole, House Dormentaire was the overwhelming leader in the funding of their alchemists.

"I think Mr. Fermet is looking into all kinds of suspicious dealings in Lotto Valentino and reporting it to the Dormentaires. He sometimes asks me to deliver letters to them. Of course, I don't know how to read, so I don't know what they're about."

Niki, who had never even been given the opportunity to learn to read and write, narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Personally, I'd be glad to see Lotto Valentino's secrets being spilled to the world, but... I just don't want to have anything to do with this place. That's why I feel so reluctant."

"I see..." Elmer replied, casting down his eyes slightly.

"Oh, but don't get me wrong. I love talking to you, and I know that there are good people here, like lord Esperanza." Niki smiled, trying to console Elmer. However, a shadow fell over her face.

"But really... I wonder where Monica and Huey are."

She then looked over at Elmer.

"This is just a hunch, but I bet **you know where they are. Right, Elmer?**"

She asked honestly.

Elmer's answer was equally frank.

"Yup. Of course I do."

Niki sighed in astonishment and shook her head.

"But you can't tell anyone where they are... is that how it works out?"

"Yeah. I promised.

"But I get the feeling they should crawl out from their hiding places and get moving soon."

<=>

That same night, somewhere in Lotto Valentino.

"So that's what happened. I told Niki to smile some more, but she never did. I guess I need to train harder."

"Is that even something you can train for?"

Two male voices rang out in a room lit by candlelight.

One of them, Elmer, was smiling as he always did. The other--Huey--was completely without expression.

Normally, his question just earlier would have been accompanied by a wry grin. But this time it was utterly blank, just like the face of the mask Huey was fiddling with.

"So, you still don't feel like going to see Monimoni?" Elmer asked with unchanged nonchalance.

"No."

"But I'm glad to see you're still working behind the scenes as the Mask Maker. You're not completely broken."

"... Maybe I would be better off being broken." Huey mumbled.

<=>

Several months ago, Monica had dragged Huey to the theatre.

It was a play by Jean-Pierre Accardo, a local poet. However, Huey and Monica **already knew the contents of the story**.

But they would not realize this fact until the curtains had risen.

It was the story of Huey's hidden past. He had told Monica about it several years ago.

It took less than twenty minutes for Huey to realize that the story was based on his own experiences. It seemed that Monica had come to the same conclusion at around the same point. She began trembling, occasionally glancing over at Huey.

Huey, however, was completely silent.

He showed no emotion whatsoever. He did not spare a glance at Monica.

He just sat there and watched the players reenact his own past.

Huey said nothing, even after the play. He didn't even try to look at Monica.

He could hear her holding back sobs behind him.

"No... no... it's not what it looks like, Huey..."

Maybe she was crying.

But Huey would never know for sure, as he never turned back to look at her.

In the end, Huey left her without a word.

He did not show up to the library the next day.

Monica also disappeared that day, vanishing from the city.

<=>

"If breaking down will make you smile, I'd definitely help... but anyway, if Monimoni wanted to see you again, she'd have come here to visit already. Maybe it means neither you or Monimoni are brave enough to face each other?"

"..."

"You don't want to *never see her again*, right?" Elmer asked nonchalantly. Huey went silent.

He had hidden himself in one of the Mask Maker hideouts, but this place wasn't his personal hiding spot. His fellow Mask Makers Elmer and Monica also knew of this place.

Elmer had initially come straight to this place when Huey had first disappeared.

"Deep down, you actually want her to come see you. Right?"

Elmer grabbed a gold piece that was sitting on the desk and tossed it upwards.

"You know, I went to see the play too. The final showing was three days ago, so I asked Speran to pull some strings and get me a ticket. They started playing something new yesterday."

"...I see."

"Headmaster Dalton didn't tell me everything, but it was pretty obvious. The play was based on you, right?"

"...Yeah. I never even told *you*. Not even Dalton knows... and you know something else? All the little details I only told Monica were right up there on stage, being reenacted to perfection." Huey mumbled stoically.

Elmer tossed the gold piece, caught it, tossed it upwards again, and repeated himself. He then put the coin back on the desk and addressed his icy-faced friend.

"So you suspect Monica? You think *she* revealed your secrets to the guy, and took you to the theatre to flaunt that?"

"..."

Huey's expression faltered.

It was as if he was desperately holding back the emotions building within himself.

Elmer just smiled and continued.

"It just doesn't make sense... and you already realized that by now, right? Monica would *never* have taken you to the play if she'd known the story beforehand. I guess you could argue that she took you there so you could get over your past, but that's just not like her. *I* might be able to do something like that, though." Elmer concluded. Huey maintained his silence.

Elmer, however, ignored Huey's discomfort. He didn't even try to sympathetically erase his own smile.

"Besides, she likes *everything* about you--even the way you hate the world! In any case, what's most important right now is whether or not you trust Monica Campanella."

"...Trust?"

"I'm asking, do you trust that Monica hasn't betrayed you?"

Huey did not nod or shake his head. He just looked at Elmer as he gave his answer.

"I'm sick of being betrayed. You saw the play. Those kind villagers--the nice lady next door. They *all* accused my mother of witchcraft. The play never went into this detail, but... until that point, I *trusted* humans. I felt something close to *love* for the lady who treated me like her own brother."

"So you're saying you don't want to care for people, because they might betray and hurt you?"

"...It certainly isn't *pleasant*. My mind is so much more at peace when I just don't trust anyone to begin with."

"'Peace', huh? That sounds kind of weird, coming from someone who wants to destroy the world. So you're saying you don't trust me, either?" Elmer goaded him. Huey immediately nodded.

"I never trusted you to begin with. In fact, of everyone I know, I trust you the *least*."

"What?!"

"It doesn't matter what promises we make, what secrets we share, or what understandings we reach. **If you decide to make someone laugh, you won't hesitate to stoop to treachery and betray my trust.**"

Huey was testing Elmer with his conclusion.

And just as Huey expected, Elmer thought for a few seconds, then nodded agreeably.

"Yeah! You're right! Wait! This isn't good! You shouldn't trust someone like me, Huey! You have to be careful!" Elmer warned him sincerely. Huey sighed.

"Maybe I found it easy to open up to you because I never trusted you in the first place."

"Couldn't you open your heart to Monica like that?"

"She's not as hard to deal with as you."

Elmer tried to steer the conversation back to Monica. Huey quickly erased the emotions that began to surface.

"Then let me change my question. I'll change it just a tiny bit."

"..."

"So, I was going to ask, 'Do you **want to trust her?**', but this is a problem, huh."

Elmer paused, but he continued in his usual tone, just as Huey began to close his heart.

"Whether or not you trust Monica, and whether or not you want to trust her doesn't matter at this point, but..."

Elmer grinned impishly. He nodded and immediately reached for the heart of the matter.

It was also the most tactless question he could have ever asked.

"Do you love Monica?"

<=>

Several hours later, Boronial manor office.

"Hey there, Speran. Just wanted to say hi."

"I have no time to waste on men." Esperanza replied, a frown creasing his brow. He rearranged the papers on his desk and looked up at Elmer. "...But you're not here to see me, are you?"

"You catch on quick, Speran!"

Elmer addressed his old friend, the aristocrat, without a hint of hesitance.

"...**I want to see Monica.** Is that all right?"

"...Yes. She's calmed down some." The Count replied, and gestured to the steward who stood at a corner of the room.

The steward politely greeted Elmer and went out into the hall to lead him to a certain location.

Elmer followed the steward out, and Esperanza's voice followed him.

"I dislike making requests to men, but this is not something fit for an official decree. I suppose asking a personal favor will have to do."

"Take care of Monica... take care of my sister."

Esperanza's voice was filled with a sort of emotion he rarely expressed. Elmer wondered what kind of a face he was making as he was saying this, but did not turn back.

"You're asking the wrong man, Speran.

"You should tell that to the guy who turned red as a tomato when he mumbled, 'I think I want to love Monica!'"

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Several minutes later, somewhere in the Boronial manor.

In a corner of the storeroom, which was on the other side of the manor from the office, was a hidden door that led to a secret bedroom.

It was a small, but neat chamber. A girl sitting in the corner greeted Elmer.

"Oh... Elmer... you came."

Monica poked her face out from the blanket wrapped around herself. She smiled weakly, playing with the Mask Maker mask in one hand.

Whether due to some sickness of the mind, or a physical illness, her smile was plainly laced with suffering.

Elmer, however, did not hesitate. He answered her smile with an energetic one of his own and cheerfully waved at her.

"Hey there! I'm here to check up on you, Monimoni."

Monica Campanella was the younger sister of Esperanza Boronial.

On the surface, she was nothing more than a novice alchemist. The only ones who knew the truth about her were the aristocrats and the head of the City Police.

It seemed that she was the Count's half-sister, but she was an illegitimate child born to a mistress. This was why Esperanza was said to be uncomfortable about letting her circumstances be known. The other aristocrats also maintained their silence on the matter of her heritage.

The aristocrats' silence, however, was not borne of pity or sympathy for Monica or Esperanza. It was merely because, to most people, Monica Campanella was a non-entity--someone they could not care less about.

Elmer was one of the few who knew of her heritage. He also did not care for her bloodline, but in a different way from the noblemen. He merely considered her a friend--a fellow Mask Maker and a classmate.

This was why, when Monica disappeared and left even the patisserie, Elmer was able to determine that Monica had holed up in this manor.

Her psyche had been extremely fragile in the months since her disappearance. In fact, Elmer had only been allowed to see her five times so far.

"I talked to Huey before I came."

Elmer was quick to tactlessly mention a name that violently rattled Monica.

"...!"

Monica's expression went cold. She quickly put on the mask she had been holding. It was only after she completely concealed her emotions and forcibly erased them that she could talk back to Elmer.

"...And what of it?"

Monica switched her tone to that of the Mask Maker. Elmer nodded confidently.

"What do you say about **going to see him *right now*?**"

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

"You already have a pretty good idea of where Huey is right now, right?"

"What is the meaning of this?! Are you out of your mind, Elmer?!" Monica yelled as the Mask Maker, her voice filled with rage. "How could you presume that I could... face Huey... a-after what... h-happened...!"

"Your tone's getting all mixed up, Monimoni."

"Silence! Are you here to make light of me?!"

Monica glared at Elmer from under the mask. Elmer just shook his head.

"I'm not here to laugh at you. I'm here to make you laugh."

"...You still insist on going on this way."

The voice coming from beneath the mask was neither astonished nor scornful; it sounded more lonely than anything else.

"Elmer C. Albatross. You... you truly want to bring a smile to the woman wearing this mask? What meaning does her laughter hold to you? Is it love?! Is it that you wish to hold her in your arms?! You already know that is impossible. Monica Campanella's heart longs for one man, and no other! What worth is there to her smile now... now that she has been rejected by that man, her dreams broken? What worth is there to the smile of a woman who is nothing but a shell of her former self?!"

The mask spat out one self-deprecating scream after another. Monica was not a separate being from the Mask Maker--it was merely one of the facets of her true nature. This was why the mask's words were self-abuse, directed towards Monica herself.

The Smile Junkie, however, ignored her emotional plight and remained true to his own desires.

"Any real smile is good enough for me."

"..."

"Let me put it this way. It doesn't matter whether it's a prolific serial killer, an emperor, a slave, someone who's going to die in three seconds, a saint, God, or the devil. All of their smiles are worth the same to me as long as they're genuine."

"...You are a truly selfish man."

The Mask Maker shook her head in disbelief.

The blanket wrapped around her made her look very much like the serial killer. But the frightening air of the murderer vanished somewhere along the way. The voice coming from behind the mask was filled with nothing but melancholy.

"You do not know this, but... Monica Campanella... has no right to be happy. She never had the right to smile in the first place."

"You think so?"

Elmer approached Monica and took away her mask.

"Huh?! Ah... ah... don't... please give it back..." Monica sniffled, holding back a sob.

Elmer put the mask over his own face.

"Everyone has the right to laugh--whether you're male or female, young or old, good or evil. No one has the right to stop a man on the gallows from smiling, even as he's being hung."

"...That's not likely. I'd *never* let someone who killed a loved one die with a smile."

"And you don't need to let him. But even if you wanted to stop him from smiling, you can't physically do that unless you go up there and cover his mouth. I guess another way would be to make him face enough despair to stop smiling. Of course, *I'd* never do anything like that."

"You really are weird. You're not normal." Monica complained, but there was a small, bitter smile on her face.

"Then you should laugh. Like this!"

Elmer pulled open his mouth with his thumbs and index fingers, demonstrating a huge grin. But the loneliness in Monica's smile persisted.

Several seconds of awkwardness later, Elmer sighed in defeat.

"...If you don't want to see Huey, I can't force you to. But you want to know the truth, right?"

"...What?"

"You know Jean-Pierre Accardo? The playwright?"

"What would you say if I told you that I pulled some strings and set up a little appointment with him tonight?"

<=>

One hour later, an abandoned house in Lotto Valentino.

'Elmer said he'd bring him here...

'Is that poet really going to come?'

The dilapidated building stood on the edge of town, surrounded by forests. There was no sign of movement anywhere.

The house was said to have once belonged to some aristocrat whose family had fallen decades ago. The manor was now little more than a deserted ruin used by children to test their courage.

They had several times discussed using this place as a Mask Maker hideout, but each time they excluded this place as a candidate, as it was not a very secret location.

Monica was currently dressed as the Mask Maker, clutching a familiar stiletto in one hand.

She had no idea why the poet had even written such a play, but first she would have to find out if he held any ill intentions towards Huey.

'...And if he's Huey's enemy...'

Monica tightly gripped the stiletto and prepared herself.

Suddenly, the scenery outside her mask changed.

A silhouette clad in a large cloak that covered him from head to toe entered the ruined manor. His movements were clear, even under the moonlight shining through the window.

It seemed that he was also being cautious. He carefully looked around.

Monica watched this silhouette from far above him--from her perch on the rusted chandelier. She stilled herself, managing to remain silent despite the countless rusted metal ornaments hanging from the chandelier.

One wrong move, and the pieces of metal would break out into a cacophony that would instantly give away her location.

Despite the tension, however, Monica was deadly calm.

'Where's Elmer?

'He said he was going to bring the poet here...

'Or did the poet do something to him...?'

Visions of the worst-case scenario flashed through Monica's mind. She decided to take action.

She kicked off the chandelier and leapt onto the railings of the entrance stairway.

Naturally, the sound of chains and ornaments rattled through the room. The silhouette, sensitized to sounds in the darkness, reflexively looked up towards the chandelier.

Monica took advantage of her faltering opponent. She charged at him from behind and put the tip of her stiletto at his throat.

"Don't move." She warned him, and moved the tip of the stiletto towards his chin.

Suddenly, the knife bumped into something.

'...?'

'A mask...?'

The question popped up into Monica's mind just as the silhouette spoke for the first time.

"Monica...?"

The moment the voice reached her ears, Monica finally fell into confusion.

'?!'

It was a voice she knew well--the voice she knew best.

She hurriedly stepped away from the silhouette, put some distance between themselves, and slowly looked him in the face.

The moonlight shone through the entrance window, enveloping the silhouette in a gentle light.

It was the **Mask Maker**, his face covered by a very familiar wooden mask.

"H-Huey...?!"

"...What are you doing here, Monica?"

Their real voices escaped from behind the masks. Monica immediately fell to her knees.

"...Don't tell me... Did that idiot Elmer tell you he was going to bring the playwright here?" Huey asked plainly.

"Yeah..." Monica nodded vigorously. She would not be in so much confusion if she were in her usual Mask Maker state, but the current Monica was had been completely bewildered by the first sight of Huey in months.

Huey, meanwhile, sighed loudly from under the mask in defeat.

"We fell for it. ...No. Maybe I've been half-expecting something like this from the start."

"What... are you talking about?" Monica squeezed out her failing voice. Huey continued coolly.

"Elmer played both of us for fools.

"After all, he wouldn't even be fazed if we started calling him a liar."

<=>

At the same time, somewhere in Lotto Valentino.

"I can't believe they both fell for such an obvious trick... They're so gullible."

A lantern light bounced through the streets in the middle of the night. Elmer smiled and looked up at the sky, walking through the alleyways with a skip in his step.

"Hopefully they won't end up falling for a bad guy's plot or anything."

He was headed for a specific destination, as if to try and take responsibility for his own lie.

He was going to see the only poet in town, Jean-Pierre Accardo.

<=>

The abandoned house.

"..."

"..."

An overwhelming silence enveloped Huey and Monica.

The chandelier continued to creak and swing overhead, acting as the only proof that time was still passing between them.

Monica was not in willing silence--her heart was overflowing with things she had wanted to tell Huey--things she wanted to make clear.

'I didn't reveal your secrets to anyone! It wasn't me!

'So please... Please trust me! Please!'

But she could not bring herself to voice her thoughts.

Monica wondered if she even had the *right* to speak. In the past several months, she had sustained short conversations with Elmer, her brother, and the maid who brought her food. She had not *forgotten* to speak. The culprit behind her speechlessness was her own swelling emotions, which paralyzed her heart and voice, rendering her mute.

'No... It's all right, even if you don't trust me. It's all right, even if you hate me!'

'But... but...'

Not even her own thoughts could complete the sentence.

What did she want from him? Was it love? To be loved? Or did she just want to be at his side? Did she want his permission to continue existing, despite her crimes?

Huey's sudden return into her life confused Monica. She could not pinpoint what it was that she wanted from him. It was as if all of her desperate longing for him up until just a few minutes ago had been forgotten.

'...What is it that I want from Huey?'

In contrast to Monica, Huey's silence was one borne of cold calculation.

'So this is what all that was about.'

Huey had vaguely suspected that Elmer was up to something nosy, likely in connection to Monica.

Despite his suspicions, however, Huey still stepped into the abandoned house as Elmer had instructed.

'Maybe... I was partly looking forward to this?'

Maybe... by coming here, I wanted to see Monica.'

Underneath his mask, Huey reprimanded himself for wavering so much. He then turned to thoughts that he had been avoiding all these months, spurred on by the situation at hand.

'What am I thinking?'

'Did I... want to see Monica again after all?'

Huey and Monica had something in common in the past few months--they had completely paralyzed their thoughts about one another.

Elmer's occasional visits would be the only things snapping their thoughts back to recollections of each other.

The rest of the time, they had each stopped the progression of their psyches--Monica, by spending her days nostalgically pining for her memories with Huey. Huey, by doing his best to keep her off his mind.

But at this very moment, the chains that held them back were released. Everything they had stowed away in their willful ignorance came flooding back at once.

There was nothing but silence between them. They both stood almost completely still.

But their eyes, watching from behind their masks, finally met. And in their hearts swirled a storm of emotions that could be no further removed from stillness.

It was almost as if they were trying to reclaim their lost days in a matter of seconds.

<=>

Somewhere in Lotto Valentino.

"So according to Maiza, this should be the poet's house..." Elmer mumbled to himself, looking up at a certain residence.

It was a sturdy-looking building, not much different from the other houses nearby. It certainly did not look very much like the typical image of an artist's abode.

It was already almost midnight. It would not be polite--or even logical--to suddenly barge in for a visit. Not even Elmer could just walk right in, as the City Police might get involved if things went badly.

Maiza had told him, "Perhaps I could introduce him to you personally? I don't know why you want to speak to him so suddenly, but he seems to be rather busy these days. It

might be difficult to get a hold of him.". But Elmer did not ask Maiza for the favor, as it would require for him to disclose details about Huey's past to Maiza.

This was why Elmer had talked the information out of Maiza and come alone. However, this was as far as his planning had gone.

'What to do... should I sneak inside?'

'But I'm not sure if I can do something like that as well as Monica can.'

'Maybe I should go get my Mask Maker outfit.'

Elmer stood in front of the door, considering options that were, in some sense, more bizarre than just marching inside.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps reached his ears.

"? Is someone on a walk this late at night?"

Elmer set aside thoughts of his own late-night escapade to ponder about the owner of the approaching footsteps. He did not try to run, however. From a distance, Elmer looked like nothing more than a young man standing on the roadside, lost in thought. Despite his slightly suspicious behaviour, he was likely not going to be pursued or arrested.

At least, that was what Elmer had thought. But fate had other plans in store.

The footsteps belonged to a familiar face.

"...You."

"Oh, it's you, Miss Carla! Nice to see you again!"

Elmer greeted the lantern-holding Dormентаire delegate as if he were greeting an old friend.

Carla had been living in this city for months now.

The Dormентаire ship would occasionally leave port, but Carla and the many members of the delegation remained behind. In fact, each time the ship left it only returned with more people who wore the hourglass crest.

But the months that passed by eventually helped the townsfolk adjust to the presence of the anomalies. There were now well over a hundred members of the Dormентаire

delegation, and thanks to the honest character of their leader Carla, it would not be an exaggeration to say that they were now fully integrated into Lotto Valentino society.

On the other hand, it seemed that they were still having difficulty in their so-called manhunt.

The frightening leader of the delegation sighed and spoke.

"...It's the middle of the night. Perhaps you could lower your voice."

In her left hand was a lantern, while her right hand was free--presumably to be able to draw her weapon at a moment's notice.

She continued to stubbornly persist in dressing like a man. As such, rumors about her spread in town like wildfire, leading to incidents in which she would be attacked as she made the evening rounds alone.

Of course, the attacks only occurred during the first month or so after her arrival.

Carla had successfully fought off every single attacker--several of whom had lost their wrists or the ability to reproduce.

Nowadays local men cowered in fear before her, and the only ones who tried to jump her were ignorant greenhorn sailors.

Carla was probably still being cautious for the express purpose of keeping herself safe from such attackers.

"Wow! I'm so glad I ran into someone I know! It really *is* scary, walking by myself at night. But now it's going to be okay! I don't know how to fight, but I promise I make for great company. So you should relax and smile."

"What are you talking about? Are you drunk?"

As Elmer puffed up his chest, Carla tilted her head.

They had run into each other several times on the street, and she had stopped him from trying to sneak onto their ship several times. Yet Carla still could not get a grasp of this man's personality. She had kept an ear out for him, as he was connected to both the Avaro family and the third library--but she could not even figure out whether or not he was harmful to their mission. Carla had mentally deemed him a man akin to a jellyfish.

"What are you doing in a place like this? You have some business with the resident?"

"No, well... I *do* have some business with him, but it's too late today. I was just wondering whether I should come back tomorrow or sneak in."

"... 'Sneak in'?"

Elmer's answer was so nonchalant that, for a moment, Carla doubted her ears.

She then made to ask him again, but was interrupted when the poet's front door opened.

"Do you have some business with me?"

The voices from outside had drawn out the young poet--Jean-Pierre Accardo himself.

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[That was my first meeting with Elmer C. Albatross.

It seemed that we had met in passing several times in the past, but as I recall, this was the first time we met and spoke face-to-face. At the time, I had no idea that he was a friend of Maiza or Monica Campanella.

I had an inkling of why the Dormentaire delegate would pay my house a visit, so I had no problems in countering her.

As I had expected, the woman called Carla had come to file a complaint about my newest play. To be specific, she was suspicious that part of the story had been modeled on House Dormentaire.

However, this was all still a part of our calculations.

“The new play does indeed feature aristocrats modeled upon the Dormentaires--but I only used them as a motif. The story itself does not relate to House Dormentaire, and above all, the play is a piece of fiction”, I told her.

She accepted my claim, and despite her dissatisfaction, left my presence.

It all went according to plan.

I had come up with this plan in order to buy myself some time.

Although, to be perfectly honest, it was Lebreau who suggested the idea.

In any event, the play that was being shown at the time was nothing more than a prototype.

From that point onwards, I began to alter the script little by little--towards perfection.

As long as the title of the play remained unchanged, Carla and the other Dormentaire delegates would not suspect a thing. In that sense, I could even count it a blessing that the leader of the delegation visited me immediately upon seeing the prototype. After all, even if other members of the delegation were to voice their concerns at a later time, they would not be able to investigate further as long as the leader gave the play her approval.

Little by little, I changed the core of the play--and like a budding flower, the truth finally came into full bloom.

...I will disclose the contents of the play later in my accounts.

In any event, the young man called Elmer had come to see me because of the play that had recently finished showing at the theaters.

He asked me directly if the story was based on factual events.

The play was, of course, written to make the truth known... but I feared that the church would be hot on my heels if I were to acknowledge this fact. So I lied and told him, “I used multiple sources and conflated the tale myself”.

No, perhaps I just did not want to admit that I had received the idea for my acclaimed play from someone else. This was why I did not tell him the truth.

My answer was accompanied by a smile--but Elmer simply replied thus:

"You just started forcing your smile."

Those few words were enough to make me feel as though my heart would stop.

My smile *was* feigned. After all, I was in no mood to be able to genuinely smile.

However, the fact that I had been seen through made me feel as though he had discovered everything I had hidden about myself.

To be frank, I even considered silencing that young man where he stood. Of course, I never had the nerve to do such a thing.

The young man did not pry further, but as he left, he said this to me:

"Don't make such a scary face. You have to smile."

He spoke as if he were pacifying his own child.

But I could not smile.

For some reason, I even began to feel hesitation at doing my work--the work of altering my play. I began to wonder: will the smiles I earn by my work truly be genuine?

But in the end, I followed through with the plan.

For days upon days, dozens upon dozens of times, I edited the script little by little. The changes were minuscule enough that they would not inconvenience the actors. Eventually, I re-created the stage--the entire story.

I was closing in on the truth.

I look back on my actions and realize that I would have been wise to stop at that point.

If I had given up when Elmer pointed out my fake smile... Perhaps I would now be laughing with my family, without any need to leave behind such testimonies. I could be truly smiling, from the bottom of my heart.

Now, it is all much too late.

In the end, my actions momentarily destroyed the smiles of many, including myself.]

<=>

The abandoned house.

How much time had passed?

In reality, it might have been only a few minutes--or even seconds.

But to the two Mask Makers, it felt as though it had been an eternity.

Huey, wearing the wooden mask, was the first to break the stillness.

He quietly took off his mask. The moonlight shone in through the window, illuminating his indistinct expression.

"..."

The sight of Huey's face froze Monica in place.

She took in the fact that the man standing before her *was* Huey Laforet in the flesh. Her entire body trembled, and she could barely remain standing. Every time Huey took another step towards her Monica felt as though her skin was turning itself inside-out.

She had to say something. But the more she urged herself to speak, the less her body obeyed. Eventually, even breathing became difficult.

For an instant in the confusion, Monica reached the conclusion of self-harm. But the stiletto she had brought with her had long since fallen to the ground, robbing her of the

chance. She was disarmed, and not even her teeth would stop chattering long enough for her to bite her own tongue.

Then, Huey reached out towards Monica's abandoned face.

And he slowly peeled away her mask.

"Ah..."

Both of their faces were now visible in the dim light.

'/...

'I have to say something... anything...'

Monica gathered all her strength and twisted her lips to at least call out Huey's name.

"Hu-"

But she was interrupted--

As Huey slowly pulled her into his arms.

"...!"

It was just like the time on the hill, the week before they went to see the play--but even stronger than before. Huey closely embraced Monica.

"I've been thinking... all this time."

Huey whispered into Monica's ear, as if he was talking to himself. But there was no doubt that the words were meant for her.

It was as if their bodies had become one.

"I don't trust you."

"...!"

"And I'm still not completely convinced that you weren't the one who revealed my past to the playwright."

Monica's trembling had ceased the moment she had been embraced. Huey's statement had saddened her, but her reply made its way out of her mouth without difficulty.

"...Yeah. That's all right."

"I'm going to use you for my own ends. That's not going to change."

"Yeah."

'That's all right.'

She could bring herself to manage a nod.

'But... Please...'

She just could not muster up the following words.

'Please don't leave me.'

This single request caught at her throat and refused to leave.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and Monica felt as though her heart was tearing itself apart. Her mask was gone; there was nothing there to shield her tear-streaked face.

She didn't want Huey to see her like this, but Monica was powerless to do anything at this point. A wave of despair consumed her, almost enough for her to again consider harming herself.

But-

"But even still... is it all right if I could love you?"

"...Huh?"

At first, Monica did not comprehend these words.

Huey just held her tighter and reiterated himself.

"I can't bring myself to trust you. But even if you were to betray me, and even if you were to become my enemy... would it be okay for me to love you?"

"Huey..."

"Could you... let me love you?"

A single tear streaked down Monica's face.

But this time, it was for a completely different reason from the tears she had shed earlier.

"You're terrible... You're terrible, Huey..."

As her tears began to fall, Monica's voice began to waver again. But her words this time were full of immeasurable strength.

"It's just like before... You're saying this because you know... you know that I can't refuse..."

"...I'm sorry."

"You're terrible... the worst... Huey... Huey...!"

As she continued to call out Huey's name, Monica remembered what he had told her once on the hilltop.

'Even if your true face is revealed and the world turns against you--

'I'll make you a new mask.'

But in the midst of her tears, Monica was now certain of something.

She would no longer need a mask.

She didn't need to wear a mask in front of Huey. She could show him her true face, just as she was.

And with these thoughts in mind, she continued to sob in his arms--

The young man--the Mask Maker--held his arms tightly around her, understanding that deep inside, the two of them were the same.

The abandoned house went dark as even the moonlight dimmed.

Huey and Monica finally accepted one another's feelings.



CHAPTER 5:

I'LL SHOW YOU
THE GREATEST
SMILE IN THE
WORLD



1710.

Monica Campanella was lost in her dreams.

Ever since the night Huey Laforet accepted her feelings, she had lost herself in the same dream every night.

The dream, however, was never clear--it was just a vague, recurring sensation of the moment he embraced her.

How much time had passed since then?

Monica returned to the waking world and fell into thought from under her blankets.

Morning had dawned on the long night when they had come together.

Huey and Monica resumed attending classes at the library from that point on. Their fellow students showered them with questions, but Elmer made up a believable excuse and quickly ended the commotion on a heartwarming note.

This incident had cemented their classmates' beliefs that the two were now an item. Monica found herself being constantly congratulated and affectionately teased.

Wrapped up in her blanket, Monica smiled and looked back on those days long past.

'Yeah... those were happy days.'

'What everyone in the class said to me... the way they joked with me, and how they gave us their blessings...'

'I was so happy.'

Until then, Monica had considered everyone other than Huey nothing more than faceless masses on the streets.

She came into regular contact with her classmates, but none of them particularly moved her heart.

Huey was all she needed. He was her only source of solace in the world.

But she found her opinions changing--each and every one of her classmates' encouragements brought her pure, unadulterated joy.

'I was... so... happy...'

Looking back on her nostalgic past, Monica slowly poked her head out from under the blanket and took in the present reality that was before her.

Above her was a slightly low ceiling.

She was in a small room that barely fit her modest bed and a tiny table.

It was a space rather similar to the secret chamber in the corner of the Boronial manor storehouse.

But there was one obvious difference.

It was the roughly-built iron bars that took the place of a door.

<=>

Things had started several months earlier.

Monica walked through the Lotto Valentino market place as she took the arm of the young man walking beside her.

"...Hey. It's hard to walk like this."

"Don't worry, Huey! I'll catch you if you think you're going to fall over!"

"Do you even know how ridiculous you sound right now?" Huey mumbled in an annoyed tone, but he did not try to shake her off. In fact, he blushed and looked towards the sea as if in an attempt to conceal his embarrassment.

It had been several months since their reunion at the abandoned house, and their relationship was now common knowledge throughout all of Lotto Valentino.

They had never been very conscious of it, but both Huey and Monica were well known in the city for their good looks. It was only natural that rumors about their relationship spread like wildfire. Even those who did not know them personally would often see 'an affectionate-looking couple in the marketplace'.

Perhaps it was around this time that Monica started to see the streets in a different light.

Coincidentally, Huey had recently slightly loosened the chains on the city's elites from his financial rule over part of Lotto Valentino's economy. It was not strange for Monica to think that *this* was the cause of the renewed sense of energy on the streets.

Objectively, however, the city had changed little.

Monica enjoyed her days to their fullest, oblivious to the fact that the only change that had occurred was not to the city, but to *herself*.

During these days, she buried her past deep inside her.

"Where are you going today, Huey?" Monica asked.

"Elmer was going on about how he got his hands on Captain Kidd's treasure maps," Huey replied with a wry smile, "maybe we should go laugh at him."

"They can't be real, right?"

"Not likely. A sailor who just came into town was selling two bundles for three pieces each. Even if it *is* real, it's probably not very valuable."

These days, Elmer was living in an empty house in a corner of the city. He had been living as a houseguest at the Boronial estate when he had first arrived, but Esperanza finally kicked him out ("I will not stand for a man taking up the guest room forever."), leaving Elmer to wander the streets.

As they made their way to Elmer's residence, Huey glanced over towards the sea.

"The wind's pretty strong today." Huey muttered to himself. He suddenly realized that Monica's hand on his arm had stiffened.

"What's wrong? ...Oh."

Monica was staring at a point on the water with a dark look.

A gigantic black ship made its way into port from the open seas. Light triumphantly glinted off the golden hourglass crest painted upon its hull.

"...So it's back again, huh."

"Are they going to bring even more people with them again...?"

Monica looked like a child trembling in fear of the dark.

Huey still had no idea why she feared House Dormentaire so much. She only told him, "I'll tell you one day, when the time is right", and showed no sign of revealing the truth anytime soon.

"...I wish I could just get rid of them right now." Huey mumbled, narrowing his eyes.

Monica quickly shook her head.

"Don't worry, Huey! I'll be fine!"

"...I see."

Around this time, Huey had been using his position as the Mask Maker in order to slowly gather information.

He didn't directly use the Mask Maker name, but the moniker was well known to certain powers in the city. They supposed that the Mask Maker was an organization that ran the counterfeiting ring and held control over part of the economy of Lotto Valentino and other cities. The young man in the wooden mask was known to them as the Mask Makers' messenger.

Of course, Huey was actually one of the key members of the organization, but he used this misunderstanding to his advantage and concealed his identity, playing the part of 'a member of a large organization called the Mask Makers', while gathering information.

One thing he was looking for in particular was information about a man named Jean-Pierre Accardo.

Although Huey constantly made excuses and *said* otherwise, he no longer suspected Monica in any way.

Then how did the playwright know about his past? It could not be a mere coincidence. In other words, someone must have told him about it.

'Who would know about it other than myself... ?

'A survivor from the village...

'Or maybe one of the Inquisitors.'

Huey vividly recalled the image of the Inquisitors, whose knightly style of dress made a big impression on his childhood self.

He only learned of this later, but the men were not genuine, church-sanctioned Inquisitors.

In that sense, *they* were the ones who started everything--but since Huey considered the entire world his enemy, he did not despise them any more than he despised the rest of the world.

But things were different now.

'If those bastards are in this city...'

Huey went through a series of unpleasant thoughts and continued to carefully collect information.

However, Jean-Pierre had disappeared recently, leaving no clue as to his whereabouts.

It seemed, though, that he was still in contact with the players at the theatre for the purposes of the play he was writing.

Thanks to Jean-Pierre's unfortunately thoughtful timing, Huey had found himself without a lead at the critical moment.

'Elmer said he talked to him once... but he said he never found out anything really useful.'

But going by what Elmer said, there was one thing that bothered Huey.

"I don't know exactly why, but from what I could tell, he was forcing his smile."

Perhaps the poet had shown Elmer a fake smile out of annoyance, but Huey had his suspicions about him. So he labelled Jean-Pierre a potential target and continued to gather more information.

Another topic Huey was looking into was House Dormentaire.

He was very careful when dealing with them, as they could potentially reveal Monica's past to the world, but Huey learned nothing about their reason for being in Lotto Valentino.

He had been told that they were searching for someone, but they didn't seem to be asking for the cooperation of the City Police or the aristocrats. Perhaps, then, they were using this 'search' as a cover for another mission.

Huey could not risk making the wrong move as long as their motives were unclear.

This was why he started to scale back the Mask Maker's operations. Huey also gave strict orders to Monica and Elmer to hold off from taking any actions.

Elmer, of course, was working with things completely unrelated to the Mask Maker, much to the aristocrat Maiza Avaro's chagrin.

'In any case, why did the leader of the Rotten Eggs suddenly start holing up in the library?'

'Is old man Dalton planning something...?'

'It's just as I thought. This city won't be so easy.'

Huey realized that he had more to be cautious of than he had originally expected.

He was getting tired of these tedious days, but he wouldn't trade Monica's presence for the world.

He never would have expected himself to change so much, back when he first started the counterfeiting operation.

In the past, he could not permit himself to give part of his heart to another. Huey was sure that his younger self would look at him now and angrily claim, "You've fallen!". But still Huey loved Monica.

He had alienated himself from her in the months between their first hug on the hilltop to Elmer's trickery and their reunion. In hindsight, however, the distance between them in those months might have done more good than harm.

In any event, Monica was now an inextricable part of Huey's life. It was somewhat ironic, considering the fact that he considered the entire world his enemy. It spurred him to recall happier times, back when he lived with his mother before the witch hunts.

"Even if things *don't* turn out well... I'll do something about it. Don't worry."

Huey was not idly trying to cheer her up. He truly intended to do as he said.

"...Thank you."

Monica smiled. Huey grinned bitterly.

The poison began to spread through the streets as if it was mocking them, but they remained oblivious to its presence.

The poet Jean-Pierre's misdirected goodwill and vanity had already stirred up the first wave of change in the city.

No one noticed it at first, but little by little, the poison of truth began eating away at Lotto Valentino.

<=>

Several weeks later, the patisserie in the east end.

It was in the patisserie where Monica lived and worked that the first traces of the poison began seeping into her, blended with the fragrance of sweets.

"I'm home! Do you need a hand, ma'am?" Monica smiled energetically, having just returned from class.

"Welcome back, Monica. I'm fine right now, so why don't you go out and have fun with Huey?" The plump woman who owned the patisserie replied brightly.

"O-oh! You're embarrassing me!"

"Don't be shy. I don't know what Huey's going to do for a living after graduating from alchemy class, but you two are going to get married afterwards, right?"

"...! M-m-m-m-married?!" Monica stuttered, beet red. The patisserie owner laughed awkwardly.

"You're all grown up, Monica, but sometimes I can't see you as anything but a little girl. Anyway, if you *are* going to get married, it's best to get it done soon."

"Oh..."

"You **already know, right?**"

"Oh... Um... Yeah."

Monica bowed her head bashfully. The older woman laughed heartily.

"Oh well. Take you time, you hear?"

Monica bowed her head at the owner and headed for the stairs to her room.

"Oh, wait a second. Where is my head at? Can I talk to you for a sec, Monica?" The owner suddenly asked in a somewhat serious tone.

"Yes?"

"You didn't run into anyone strange on your way home, right?"

"Huh? I didn't see anyone particularly strange..."

"That so? That's a relief. I hear there's a group of thugs who're looking into students at the libraries, that's why. One of them came right up to our front door and asked how long you've been living here, and how old Freya next door was when she started going to the alchemy school. He was so nosy I ended up dumping a sack of flour on him and kicking him out."

Monica smiled sheepishly as the owner animatedly explained the situation. Despite the grin, however, she felt as though her insides were being crushed by some unknown pressure.

"W-were they the Dormentaire delegates?"

"What? No, probably not. They're probably delinquents. You know, the Dormentaire men are a bit suspicious, but the lady in charge is a sweet, polite thing. I would have been nicer if someone like *her* was asking the questions."

"Oh... I see..."

Monica let out a sigh of relief and slowly climbed up the stairs, a seed of fear planted in her heart.

<=>

One week later, the Third Library.

The fear never left Monica, but nothing noteworthy had happened in the past week.

She attended the alchemy classes, talked with Huey, and was affectionately teased by Elmer and the other classmates. Each day passed by normally as if had been predestined from the start.

Monica's happiness lay in those uneventful days.

But the seed of fear in her heart slowly began eating away at her, putting her more on edge.

Perhaps this was why she ended up listening in on a certain conversation.

"My landlord says he saw Jean-Pierre's new play!" One student said to Elmer, who was sitting in a corner of the archives.

"Really? I heard it's really good! I wanted to go see it too, but tickets are pretty hard to find these days. Last time I asked a friend to get me a ticket, but he says this one's so popular it's going to take him some time." Elmer replied with a slightly envious look.

"I'm jealous of you for even having a friend like that. Anyway, my landlord only *just* managed to get a ticket, and *he* had to ask someone who works at the theatre. You know, before Jean-Pierre started writing actual plays, that theatre only played commedia dell'artes. I bet that's why the whole town's buzzing about his plays--they're a breath of fresh air."

"Huh. I actually like commedia dell'artes, too. I love watching the clowns fight."

"Probably 'cause you're you."

It was an ordinary conversation. The mention of Jean-Pierre rattled Monica for a moment, but the exchange so far was not enough to disturb her.

But the exchange that followed finally exposed her to the poison brewed by Jean-Pierre.

"So my landlord talked to someone who saw the play earlier than him, and he figured out that the script was slightly different from before."

"That's not really unusual, though."

"No, but I think Jean-Pierre's doing something really risky right now."

"What do you mean?"

"Apparently, he's arguing that it's actually a really old script, but... my landlord said that it was really obvious that **the second half of the play was modeled after Lotto Valentino and those guys from the black ship.**"

'...!'

Monica's neck cracked as her fingertips began trembling.

'The black ship...

'The play was... modeled after House Dormentaire?'

Anxiety tugged at her from inside, squeezing at her heart.

Monica took deep breaths, doing her best to hide her unease. She slowly went over the information in her mind, only to be gripped by an even greater fear.

'...He said... "the second half".'

'...So what about the first half...?'

Monica knew full well why the men on the black ship were here in Lotto Valentino. Her brother Esperanza had told her himself.

If the second half of the play showed the current situation of House Dormentaire's presence in Lotto Valentino, then perhaps the first half detailed **the incident that brought them to the city in the first place.**

'It can't be.'

'It just can't be.'

Monica repeated herself over and over again.

But no matter how much she tried, she could not shake off the anxiety tugging at her heart.

So several days later, she used the same connection as before to get herself a ticket to see the play.

And Monica--

<=>

Evening, Boronial manor office.

"...Hm? It's you."

Esperanza looked up, noticing a presence. Standing before him was his younger sister, dressed as the Mask Maker.

"It's been a long time since you came to see me while dressed this oddly. Your heart must have recovered greatly if you're here to mock me... I suppose I should thank Elmer and that lover of yours." Said Esperanza, ignoring his own unusual appearance.

The Mask Maker remained quiet for a moment, then bowed her head slightly and spoke.

"I am here to say goodbye."

"...?"

Esperanza was surprised enough by the statement that he frowned and took his hands off his paperwork to give Monica his full attention. The Mask Maker stood absolutely still in front of the door, quietly speaking in Monica's voice.

"My lord, Count Esperanza Boronial. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for showing such grace and kindness to your sinful servant."

Esperanza felt something very off about the Mask Maker's polite show of thanks. He got up from his seat.

"...What are you saying? This isn't like you."

There was something strange going on. Esperanza tried to at least delay Monica by talking to her.

Monica, however, was quicker. She took off her mask. There was a hint of sadness in the smile she wore as she interrupted her brother.

"Thank you so much, big brother."

"Hey... what's going on? What are you saying all of a sudden?"

"You know, big brother? I was so very happy that I got to live up until now. You shielded me all this time so I could meet all kinds of people. ...So, I want to tell you something. I know that I don't have the right to feel this way, but..."

It looked as if tears were welling up in Monica's eyes as she finished, but she quickly placed the mask over her face again before Esperanza could get a good look.

Monica's voice echoed from beneath the mask once more as she finally left the office.

"I... I was happy."

"**Maribel**... wait! What are you planning?!"

Esperanza hurriedly ran outside the office in pursuit, but the hallway was empty. One of the windows was wide open, leaving the candles flickering in the evening breeze.

That day, Monica Campanella once again disappeared from Lotto Valentino.

This time, she did not reveal her whereabouts to Elmer, or even her own brother Esperanza.

She left without even saying goodbye to her beloved Huey Laforet.

<=>

Several days later, Huey's house.

"You don't look so good, Huey. You feeling all right?"

"..."

Surprisingly, Elmer's voice was missing its ever-present cheer.

Huey did not respond. He fidgeted with a set of devices on his desk with a dark look on his face. It looked as if he was trying to anchor himself to reality by working with his hands.

"It's been three days since Monica went missing. Did you find any news about her?"

"..."

"I see."

Elmer sighed loudly, reading the answer in Huey's silence.

It was only yesterday that a runner from the Boronial family had brought a message asking if he knew where Monica had gone. Huey and Elmer, however, were already aware that something had happened.

Monica had not shown up to class, so they decided to visit the patisserie out of worry that she might have fallen ill.

"She hasn't come home since yesterday... I was so sure she was with you, Huey..."

They said goodbye to the worried patisserie owner and left. Elmer then asked Huey a question.

"She never said anything?"

"...Nothing at all."

Huey truly had no idea why she had gone missing.

Everything was fine up until just yesterday. They talked as they always did, and parted ways as usual.

Everything was fine. Everything must have been fine. For Huey, at least.

Perhaps he had wronged her in some way that he had not noticed? Huey worried for her, but he still had no clue what might have happened.

Days passed without any new leads.

Huey and Elmer had spoken to Esperanza and the patisserie owner again, but they were told that there was nothing particularly strange about Monica the day she disappeared. The patisserie owner just told them that, on the day before, Monica had said goodbye: "Thank you for taking care of me all these years".

The patisserie owner had assumed that Monica was planning to leave and marry Huey, but Huey himself had no idea where she had gone.

But there was one thing that might have had something to do with her disappearance.

"...Have you heard? People are going around digging up information about girls who are attending alchemy classes. It's not just our school, either."

"Yeah. Professor Archangelo told everyone to watch out... Wait, you think Monimoni's been kidnapped by them?"

"...I don't want to think about it."

The back of Huey's chair creaked. He narrowed his eyes, his expression noticeably blurring.

A younger Huey might not have worn such a human expression. In the past, he would have merely been miffed that he had lost a useful tool. But now, he was truly worried for Monica's safety.

Elmer swallowed his desire to celebrate the change that had swept across his friend and decided to focus on finding Monica.

In that sense, Elmer was even more barren of emotion than Huey.

To the Smile Junkie, losing Monica was not like losing a loved one--rather, it was closer to the feeling of 'smiles disappearing from my world'--the sensation of losing a tool that brought him happiness. If something were to happen to Monica, it would steal away not only *her* smile, but the smiles of Huey, Esperanza, and the patisserie owner. This was the greatest threat Elmer saw against himself.

Despite appearances, Huey held a very human heart within himself. On the other hand, Elmer *appeared* to be more caring than anyone, but was completely empty on the

inside. Perhaps they were matched so well because they filled in each other's differences.

And Monica was also someone who matched them well.

Huey and Elmer were silent, but perhaps their common goal of finding Monica didn't need words to be made clear.

From that night forth, Huey and Elmer began scouring Lotto Valentino--the former as the Mask Maker, and the latter as an alchemy student.

They soon began to detect traces of the poison circulating through the city.

<=>

Several days later, nighttime.

Flames burst forth in the pitch-dark alleyway.

A bright orange light erupted for a moment, and heat assaulted the face of a man who had fallen with his back to the wall.

"Gaaaaaahhhh!"

The flames disappeared in an instant, but the man's terror showed no sign of vanishing.

As the man trembled like a frightened animal, a man who had just **shot fire from his hand** quietly began interrogating him.

"...Why are you searching for the alchemists?"

"S-so it's true! The Mask Maker *was* working with the alchemists! B-b-b-but... I-I-never heard that y-you could use magic...!" The man cried, his lungs, throat, tongue, and teeth all rattling from shock.

The masked man continued.

"I will ask you again. Why are you looking for the alchemists?"

He slowly placed his right hand--equipped with a certain device--over the man's face.

"W-w-w-wait! No! You've got nothing to do with this! You're a man! We're looking for a woman!"

"...Why are you after female alchemists?"

"C-cause I hear that play's actually based on a real story..."

"...The play?"

"Y-yeah! Y'know, Jean-Pierre's new play? Didn't see it *myself*, but I heard it from someone who did! He said it couldn't have been a made-up story! There was no way it wasn't based on those Dormentaire freaks..."

'The play...?'

The Mask Maker--Huey--was rattled.

He knew for a fact that the play from earlier had finished its run, and a new one was being shown in the theaters.

'So why is Jean-Pierre's name coming up again?'

Huey hesitated, but the man before him continued to spill his secrets in terror, as if to assert that it had nothing to do with himself.

"They say that the Dormentaires might give us a huge reward if we find that woman who killed the aristocrat...! So these days, all the off-duty sailors are going around looking for a 'lady alchemist!'"

<=>

At the same time, the Avaro manor drawing room.

"The possibility of Miss Monica's connection to the Dormentaires..."

Maiza attentively listened to Elmer's problems, despite the latter's unannounced late-night visit.

"I know it's not much use to sneak aboard their ship at this point, but I thought maybe they'd made a big move recently."

"Hm... I don't think anything on a large scale has happened recently, other than the ship's return from the Spanish mainland..."

Maiza put his fingers over his mouth and paused in thought.

As Elmer began to speak up, Maiza suddenly muttered, "It can't be..." and made a suggestion.

"...Have you heard about the play that's currently playing at the Lotto Valentino theatre?"

"Yeah. Jean-Pierre's new play."

"I had been invited to one of their showings not long after it had started playing... and it seemed that the story was modeled after House Dormентаire and this city. The story itself was about a young man and woman who escape from an aristocrat who seems to be a reference to House Dormентаire."

Maiza sighed and continued.

"But I had recently heard from an aristocrat acquaintance of mine, who had gone to see the play more recently... And it seems that the script has been altered multiple times, and is continuing to change."

"It's *changing*?"

"Yes. At first, the similarities to House Dormентаire were so slight that only one well acquainted with them might make a possible connection. But I've been told that the more recent script makes it clear to anyone in Lotto Valentino that the characters were based on the Dormentaires."

Maiza sighed again, unable to understand what his friend Jean was doing. Elmer took a sip of black tea and spoke.

"Maybe it's just a nod to the people here. But then again, considering that it's *House Dormентаire* we're dealing with, I think it might be too much of a risk for something so trivial. ...But still, I can't condemn him if he just wants to bring smiles to people who are watching the play."

"I only hope that is the case... In any event, it seems that the overarching story is also changing. I feel rather uneasy about all this... I'm worried for Jean."

"What if you explained the situation to the players? They're still in contact with him for the new scripts, right?"

"He suddenly went into hiding not too long ago. I've been told that he sent them a 'final draft' of the script and disappeared completely." Maiza explained irritably. "I had never noticed anything off about him. Perhaps it was because I had focused so much on alchemy--if I could call it that. Perhaps it was because I was so fascinated by Professor Dalton's supernatural power that I had lost sight of my friend somewhere down the line."

"Professor Dalton's 'supernatural power'? What's that all about?"

"N-no, pay it no mind."

"Oh well. Anyway, you gotta smile, Maiza. Isn't it at least a little bit nice to think your friend's grown up while you haven't been paying attention? It's only natural for people to change. You shouldn't be sad just because your friend's become a different person while you weren't looking. Maybe he's planning something for Lotto Valentino's sake. Don't be too pessimistic."

Elmer demonstrated that he still had no grasp of tact. Maiza, however, seemed to have been cheered up by his irrationality. He sighed quietly and smiled.

"And yet... *you* never change."

<=>

At the same time, aboard the Dormентаire ship.

On the outside, the Dormентаire private ship looked like a warship--but within its hull was a residential quarter for the aristocracy. Of course, it was just a miniaturized bedroom containing the bare essentials.

Other than a bed, there was a chair and a table. The furniture looked cheap enough to belong to a commoner's home--it was difficult to connect them to the imposing image of the black warship.

This room had no windows. There was only a single door.

In some ways, it was like a fortress built to keep an aristocrat safe in case of an attack. But from another perspective, it also looked like an inescapable prison.

A certain young woman was actually imprisoned within.

She was an unforgivable criminal by the name of Monica Campanella.

"...Here's your food."

Monica slowly raised her head to the voice of a woman.

She had been sitting face-down at a table, but her hair and clothes were not at all ruffled.

Her eyes showed no hint of sadness or despair, only determination.

And standing opposite her was a tan-skinned woman dressed in a soldier's uniform embroidered with the Dormентаire crest.

"Thank you... um... Miss Carla."

"There's no need."

Carla quietly turned down Monica's gratitude and looked at her sharply.

"...You really have no regrets?"

"None whatsoever."

Monica nodded with an elegant smile. Carla narrowed her eyes.

She silently watched as Monica ate her bread at the desk standing between them.

Monica looked like nothing more than a plain, ordinary village girl. There was nothing aristocratic about her appearance.

Neither imprisonment nor transportation were an option. It almost looked as though they had plucked some girl off the streets to present as their target.

It was in the midst of all this that Monica brought great shock to Carla and House Dormентаire.

"...I still can't understand this." Carla looked Monica in the eye. "Are you... truly the criminal we are after?"

Monica smiled softly and nodded.

"I... was the one who... stole the life of Gardi Dormентаire, the eldest son of House Dormентаire."

"..."

She could not bring herself to understand. Carla could not just accept the fact that the woman before her was the criminal.

In fact, Monica was not a criminal they had captured at the end of a long and arduous hunt--she had just appeared out of nowhere and surrendered herself.

On that day, they had searched the streets under the pretense of pursuing the criminal as usual. As they returned to the ship, however, this woman named Monica suddenly appeared before them.

"I'm the criminal you're searching for." She had said.

In reality, Carla had known of her from the start. After all, Monica Campanella was known to the leaders of the City Police and the aristocrats as Esperanza Boronial's younger half-sister.

"...You may *act* the part of a mere student, but you are Count Esperanza Boronial's sister. What you have just said will not be taken so lightly as a jest."

"A jest... Yes. If only. If only the sin that stains my memories, and the sensation of stabbing that man--if only all of this had been some big joke, things would have been so much happier." Monica whispered plainly.

Carla sighed.

She had known from the beginning. The report from the Dormентаire spy had confirmed that this woman was the criminal who had taken a Dormентаire life.

But it was thanks to her knowledge that she was able to purposely ignore the woman all this time. After all, Carla's mission was not her arrest, but to take over Lotto Valentino.

She was to tear through this city inside and out under the pretense of searching for a criminal. She would use their position to its advantage and search for this city's Achilles Heel. She would cut small holes in the glass box built by the alchemists, and deliver it to House Dormентаire. This was her purpose for being here.

But what had just happened surpassed all of her calculations.

She had never expected that the criminal, who was only an excuse for their continued presence here, would walk right up to them of her own will.

"Allow me to properly introduce myself... My name is Monica Campanella. However, this is a pseudonym I had been given ten years ago."

"..."

"My true name is... **Maribel Boronial**. I am the living phantom of House Boronial, who was said to have died ten years ago. And I am... the criminal who stabbed to death one of your masters, a member of House Dormentaire."

Carla looked as if she'd just swallowed a bug.

'Maribel Boronial.

So that's what happened.'

Monica Campanella was not some bastard child born to a mistress. She was a full-blooded aristocrat, born of the same parents as Esperanza.

However, records in Spain claimed that Maribel Boronial was dead.

The burglar who had stabbed Gardi Dormentaire to death ten years ago also stole away the lives of Maribel and her parents, who happened to be at the scene.

At least, that was what the records claimed.

But in reality, Maribel had changed her name, abandoned her noble status, and was living in Lotto Valentino as a novice alchemist.

Monica awaited Carla's response, not touching her food.

"...Why?" Carla mumbled, half to herself.

"Pardon?"

"Why did you reveal yourself *now*?"

It was a logical question. It had already been several months since the Dormentaire ship first made port. It did not make sense for her to have turned herself in at a time like this if her confession was out of guilt.

On a related note, Carla was also suspicious about the spy's report. The young woman before her did not even look twenty, and could not have been more than ten years old at

the time of the incident. Carla could not believe that a little girl could be responsible for the deaths of three people.

"What in the world happened that night...? You say you killed Master Gardi Dormentaire, but what of your parents? Count and Countess Boronial? The records say that they were also killed. Was it your doing as well?" Carla asked, out of personal curiosity. Monica tilted her head questioningly.

"Wasn't **it** all planned by you?"

"...What are you talking about?"

"The play that's showing in theaters right now."

Monica's calm face suddenly faltered for a moment.

She then sighed, composing herself again, and continued.

"Isn't Jean-Pierre Accardo working with you?"

"?"

"Aren't *you* the ones who provided the script for the play that's showing in Lotto Valentino's theatre? The story that reenacted that cursed night?"

"...? Wait a second. Are you talking about the play that's being shown now? If I recall, it was a tragedy about a nobleman's elopement. I checked the script on the opening day. There was nothing about it that connected to the incident..."

"That must have been the first version. The play that's currently being shown... I believe it is the same play as the one you've seen *only in name*."

"What...?"

Carla was dumbstruck. Monica slowly began to explain.

She did not wear the face of the girl smitten with Huey, nor did she wear the face of the Mask Maker.

She was merely a pitiful aristocrat who had no choice but to escape from her crimes.

"I will confess everything.

"I will confess everything about my crimes--the story that is being told in the play."

<=>

Everything before the girl was bathed in a sea of red.

In reality, the red was only a *part* of what the girl saw, but it was the only colour that registered in her eyes.

Occasionally a glint of silver would emerge and disappear again into the sea of red.

The red danced in a strange rhythm in front of the girl, who was not yet ten. It danced and danced and danced.

It circled around, staining the bodies of her parents.

Why had this happened?

She was too young to understand.

Gardi Dormентаire was the eldest son of House Dormентаire.

Thanks to his peculiar 'tastes', however, he had often made trouble for his family.

But the great power of Dormентаire buried these problems in darkness. This was why no one outside House Dormентаire knew of his preferences.

Of course, a little girl would have no idea what any of this meant, even if she had been told outright.

The girl, the daughter of an aristocrat, accompanied her parents to a party hosted by House Dormентаire.

There she ran into someone.

He was a kindly-looking man.

This was the first time she had ever really spoken with a male aristocrat other than her father and brother.

This was why she was not at all wary around him.

Not even her parents were cautious around him. In fact, they smiled and bowed towards him.

Neither the girl nor her parents knew the man's true nature.

If an unjust god were to claim that 'ignorance is a crime', no one in the world would be innocent.

And as a result, *all* were subject to unjust punishment.

The girl followed the aristocrat to a chamber in the heart of the manor.

They walked through what seemed like a gigantic maze of hallways. The room was at the end of a dead-end corridor.

Why had she followed the man? Not even *she* knew. All the girl was aware of was the fact that the man looked kind enough, and that her parents treated him with great respect--which must have meant that he was a great man.

Perhaps it would be unreasonable to have expected otherwise from a young girl's judgement.

When she entered the darkened room, the girl noticed someone sleeping on the floor.

She saw a little girl around her own age lying on the floor, naked, and wondered if she wasn't cold.

"Oh? Looks like I forgot to take care of this one." The man said, as he pushed the fallen girl's body under the bed.

Only when she saw the way he treated the girl--like a broken and useless doll--did she realize that there was something terribly off about him. Both him *and* the little girl who did not resist despite being roughly shoved out of sight.

"Don't worry. You just need to stay still. In fact, you should be *proud!* The fact that I've met someone like you today means I've been saved. My sins have been forgiven."

The girl found herself stepping back, not understanding what the man was telling her.



"I'm right, right?! If God--and the world--didn't forgive me, then I wouldn't *be* here, and I'd never have met someone so special like you today! Yes! The very fact that you've appeared before me means that my sins have been forgiven!"

'I'm scared.

'I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared!'

The girl finally realized that she had set foot into a place she should not have.

She realized that she was with a man whom she should not be with.

She quickly turned and made for the exit, but it was too late.

The man's large hands covered her mouth, preventing her from screaming.

He easily lifted her struggling form and tossed her onto the bed.

And just as the innocent girl was about to be defiled by the depraved aristocrat--

"Maribel!"

Her parents ran into the room, having realized that their daughter was gone.

They had arrived in the nick of time.

And because of their timely arrival, the girl's vision soon went red.

<=>

"...My throat was being squeezed, so I was unable to see for the first few moments during my coughing fit. But... By the time my eyes adjusted and I could see... I saw my parents... stabbed to death by the man with a candlestick."

"..."

As she listened to Monica's monotone voice, Carla realized that her own throat had started to go dry.

'Is this... something I'm even permitted to know?'

Her mistress, the one who had sent her here, had never gone into detail about the death of Gardi Dormentaire. In fact, Gardi's name itself was practically a taboo in their conversations.

This was why she had her suspicions about the spy's claim that this girl was the culprit. But the sheer weight in Monica's words made it difficult for her to disbelieve her.

"It did not occur to me at the time that my parents had died. Even though I *knew* that they could not have survived being stabbed through the throat."

"..."

"That's right. I never knew that people could die so easily."

Monica looked down and slowly shook her head.

"I managed to take hold of a candlestick beside me, and tried to save my mother and father... the candle was still lit, and it fell to the floor... my eyes noticed all the red... and the bedsheets caught on fire...!"

<=>

A fountain of red illuminated by red flames.

The two reds simultaneously stained the girl's vision.

The aristocrat, spooked by the flames, turned around in panic.

The spear-length candlestick the girl held out with her eyes shut was **absorbed into** the man's neck.

The sensation of the candlestick disappearing into his flesh became a bizarre softness that branded her hands, memories, and heart.

The sickening recoil of splitting flesh accompanied the shower of warm blood spilling over her face.

The red that covered her sight trapped her in a world of darkness.

The heat of the blood dripping over her face and the heat of the spreading fire threatened to burn her, body and soul.

The girl called for her parents, but they did not respond.

By the time she began to cry for her brother, the flames caught on to the bodies of her already deceased parents, and the aristocrat who was clinging to life by a thread.

<=>

"I was immediately rescued by House Dormентаire's servants, who had noticed the fire. I told them everything... including the fact that I had stabbed the man. I was not told until much later... that the man I stabbed was Gardi... Gardi Dormентаire."

"... And yet you were not tried for your crimes."

"They said it was because they did not wish to let the crimes of their eldest son be known to the world. After all, House Boronial was a prominent family in its own right. If an official trial were to take place, they would have to reveal that my parents had been killed by Gardi. And... House Boronial had produced many powerful people. It wouldn't be so easy to pin all of the crimes on me."

"So that's why they made it look like... everyone in the room was killed by an unknown intruder." Carla extrapolated, in order to try and come to an understanding with the facts.

Monica nodded slightly.

"I ended up losing my aristocratic status. They told me that the girl who... died... in that room had been 'bought' by Gardi. They proposed a trade; the girl, who had been so badly burned that she could not be identified, would be buried as Maribel Boronial."

"And they did this to prevent you from speaking out as an aristocrat once you were older, correct?"

If Monica were to claim later that she were an aristocrat, House Dormентаire would seek to enforce the consequences upon her, even at the cost of their own son's name. This was all the more reason for Maribel Boronial to die.

Although it was difficult to fault the girl for her actions, her guilt or innocence did not matter. House Dormентаire was just that powerful.

It might have been easiest for them to just get rid of the girl altogether, but to claim that she was responsible for four deaths was just too unbelievable. This was why House Dormentaire had chosen to barter with her by **concealing** her crimes.

"The Boronial family lost most of its influence to House Dormentaire. My brother... agreed to those terms in order to protect me."

Monica resentfully bit her lip, tightly clutching her skirt.

"This was why my brother was kicked out to the countryside... The fact that we had a vacation home on that hill to begin with was a factor, but... very few aristocrats want to come here, because this city is special in many ways."

"I see... I understand what you're trying to say, although I cannot say all your claims are believable."

Inwardly, Carla had some sympathy for her. However, she made sure not to reveal her thoughts and spoke plainly to Monica.

"I have a question. If all this is true, as you say, then why did you come forward and confess your crimes?"

"...? Wasn't your delegation here to find me?"

'That's just an excuse.' Carla almost voiced the thought, but she managed to hold it back in the nick of time.

"Seeing as how I've eluded capture for months... I suppose my brother has protected me yet again. ...Several months ago, I had fallen into despair, and I had entrusted myself with my brother, not even caring that I might be caught..."

"..."

'What?'

'What is she talking about?'

Esperanza was the first one Carla had spoken to.

However, when she told him, "I have come to arrest the criminal who murdered your family", he had replied, "In other words, you are planning to stay in Lotto Valentino for an extended period of time to carry out your plans, and you wish for me to pretend I didn't notice, my lady?" with an understanding look.

He had then added, "I have a responsibility to this city. There is the matter of having to choose between my loved ones and the people in my care, you see... So I will give you free rein as long as you do not drive me to that decision."

At the time, Carla had not known much about the situation, and was unable to fully understand what he had meant. But now--she understood everything.

But she still had some questions.

"Why does this girl think we're looking for her?"

"If the trade was already made years ago, she should have no reason to fear us so much."

"Why now?" Carla asked. This time, Monica tilted her head.

"Weren't *you* the one who ordered Jean-Pierre to write that play?"

"...?"

"I had wanted to escape, if possible. I wanted to forget it had happened. But I understand that even a man like him had loved ones... So if there is someone who wishes to put me on trial, then I will surrender. So..."

Monica inhaled, and for the first time, let her emotions show before Carla.

"So please! Please stop that play! *I'm* the one at fault! Huey... he has nothing to do with this! He doesn't know about my past! So... so... please..."

Monica went silent, overcome by her own emotions.

She hadn't been consumed by anger or sadness, but something closer to desperation.

And on the other side of the desperation was her affection for the one she loved.

<=>

The girl had killed a high-ranking aristocrat, foisted her noble name to an unknown girl, and feigned her own demise.

She then found a new life as an alchemy student, hiding in a certain city.

She lived in peace, as if her past tragedy had been nothing more than a nightmare.

But the city changed when the aristocrat's ship made port.

The man she had killed was a monster who had tried to rape a young girl and even killed her parents, but even *he* had been mourned in death.

He had a younger sister.

The woman did not even try to believe her brother's crimes.

She *had* to root out the criminal at all costs.

But the one she searched for was already legally dead. Not even the girl's family would speak of her again. In that case, the culprit must be found in secrecy and buried in darkness.

Meanwhile, the girl had seen the ship in the harbor. She was afraid, but she could not lose this happiness she had fought so hard for.

And one person reached out a hand to her.

It was the **boy who had made a deal with the devil--the boy who had lost his mother to the witch hunts and was betrayed by the villagers he had trusted.** Together, they made a pact with the devil and burned down the aristocrat's ship. But the flames spread to the city, and in the end, the girl, robbed of her happiness, disappeared from the world along with the boy.

This was the story being played out by the experienced actors on the stage.

Huey glared at the stage throughout the entirety of the play, and Elmer watched the story unfold with a melancholy expression.

Even after the curtains had closed and the crowds had left, Huey remained in his seat, head bowed.

Elmer could hear something creaking near Huey's right hand.

"Don't even think about it, Huey. Burning down the theater won't make anyone happy, and it won't save anyone." Elmer mumbled, looking up at the ceiling from his seat next to Huey. "It won't save you, or Monica. ...But anyway, I see you brought that with you."

"...Yeah. I know. I know, all right?" Huey replied, but the creaking in his sleeve would not stop.

Having watched the play, Huey now understood everything, even without concrete proof.

The play just now--especially the first half--had been modeled on Monica's past.

And it was just as close to the truth as the previous play about his own past had been.

"Jean-Pierre Accardo..."

"If I burn him to death... maybe I'll be able to smile just a little."

<=>

"What... is this...?!"

Carla had ordered one of her men to bring her a copy of the current script.

The contents of the play were completely different from the story she had seen on opening day.

The script must have been altered little by little over the course of its theatrical run.

Carla quaked in rage, but she held her voice still as she gave her men an order.

"Find Jean-Pierre Accardo and drag him over here. ...Quickly."

But ultimately, not even the full delegation, numbering at over a hundred, could find a trace of Jean-Pierre.

Days upon days passed.

<=>

1710. Somewhere in Lotto Valentino.

The day after Huey and Elmer went to see the play, the theatre began showing another piece.

It was a commedia dell'arte that was rather popular back in its day--a piece Jean-Pierre had nothing to do with.

No one knew why such a popular play was discontinued.

But the townsfolk whispered among themselves, already sure of the answer.

[So it must have been true. The play was showing the secrets of House Dormentaire.]

[The Dormentaire delegation must have stopped the performances.]

No one had any proof, but they had confidence in their conjecture. The disappearance of Jean-Pierre Accardo only added fuel to the fire.

However, over a hundred members of the Dormentaire delegation walked the streets of Lotto Valentino. The rumors made their way through the city slowly, through friends, family, lovers, or drinking sessions.

It was almost like a poison spreading through the body.

"Any leads?"

"...I'm almost certain that the Dormentaire delegation is keeping her somewhere." Huey answered.

Huey and Elmer were currently in one of the Mask Maker hideouts. Huey's eyes were bloodshot, and his complexion looked far from healthy.

"Looks like someone from Dormентаire bought several sets of women's clothing from the tailor at the marketplace. It's not the kind of thing that Carla woman would wear, so we can assume that they were buying a change of clothes for someone."

"That's amazing! We have hope now! That means they're at least letting her change, and the fact that they bought multiple sets means she's not in immediate danger!"

"Times like this, I guess I should be thankful for your unending optimism."

Huey knew that they were working with an optimistic outlook. In the worst case scenario, she could have been transported to the aristocrat's family, tortured, and executed, just as it was detailed in the play.

But the ship had not yet set sail, and it showed no sign of leaving anytime soon.

"But anyway... If she said goodbye to Speran and the patisserie lady, I guess... Monica turned herself in?"

Elmer wondered out loud, arms crossed. Huey looked at the floor.

"...Then why didn't she say anything to me...? Why did she turn herself in in the first place...?"

"Isn't it obvious? I thought even a Dense Bunny like you could understand that much."

"It's not a matter of understanding--it's a matter of *accepting* it."

'Yeah, I do understand.'

'Monica saw that play.'

The play contained a character who was quite obviously modeled on Huey. The audience could easily figure out that he was the protagonist of the previous Jean-Pierre play, and though this story decision was met with mixed reaction, it served to popularize the play even more.

After seeing the play, Monica must have realized that, at this rate, the townsfolk would figure out her identity. And as long as they accepted the play as a reflection of the truth, Huey Laforet would also be found out.

If rumors that 'the man portrayed as the demon who burned down the city at the end of the play exists in the real world' were to spread, Monica would not be the only one in danger. There was a chance that Huey would also be arrested by House Dormентаire as an accomplice.

The fact that he understand her situation so well infuriated him even more.

He wanted to yell at Monica, 'Don't make me laugh! You think something like that's going to give me trouble?!'.

But there was no one to yell at.

There was silence between Huey and Elmer. It locked Huey's heart into stillness and filled the hideout.

How many seconds, minutes, and hours had passed?

Elmer was surprisingly silent all this time, not even trying to joke around.

It was almost like he was waiting for Huey to speak.

Just as one of the candles began to burn out, Huey broke the silence and spoke up, having made his decision.

"...Actually, for the past few days... I've been thinking about sneaking aboard that ship."

"..."

"But it looks like they've fortified their security in the past few days. I might have been able to do it before, but there's no way now. and it's not like I have any political influence, either."

"Speran was saying something like that too. He knows that Monica might be on that ship, but he's the acting governor. House Dormентаire basically has Lotto Valentino hostage, so he can't make any rash moves."

"Yeah... It's been *months* since those hourglass bastards started bringing in reinforcements, but the townsfolk don't see them as terrifying outsiders anymore. At this point, they're treating them more like slightly creepy neighbors. ...Not only that, turning House Dormентаire against us means that, in the worst case scenario, Lotto Valentino itself might be destroyed. From what I've looked into, House Dormентаire really has that kind of power."

Huey paused.

He then looked Elmer in the eye, face full of determination.

"But I'm going to turn them against me anyway."

"..."

Elmer was silent. Huey continued, showing something like a glint of madness in his eyes.

"That's right. I don't care if I have to sacrifice this city in order to fight them and save Monica. Jean-Pierre Accardo's play couldn't be closer to the truth. I'll burn this city to the ground if it means I can save her!"

He then looked at Elmer with a somewhat sad expression.

"But... my chances of doing this alone are dismal. That's why I want you to join me. I know I'm just selfishly *using* everything I can in order to save Monica! But I'm going to set aside my pride and ask for your help. So please-"

Elmer suddenly put up a hand to interrupt Huey.

"...?"

"Hm..."

Elmer was listening very seriously.

So he smiled gently as he asked Huey a question.

"Are you going to be happy if we rescue Monica?"

"...Of course."

"Are you going to smile once you see her again?"

"I'll show you the greatest smile in the world."

There was no hesitation in Huey's answer.

Elmer seemed to be satisfied with the reply. He laughed.

"You should have just said so from the beginning. That alone's enough reason for me to help you."

<=>

Carla was going through some mental anguish of her own.

'What am I supposed to do?'

She had managed to end the play's run in the theaters, but its contents had spread among the citizenry through word of mouth. Her mission of looking into immortality, counterfeits, and drugs had not been revealed, but the play had forced her hand. She had no choice now but to accomplish her decoy mission.

And since Monica was under their custody, they had no excuse for staying in the city any longer.

Unfortunately, they had found almost no leads about the secrets of the city.

They had the choice of deeming Monica mad and releasing her, but things had already gone too far. At this rate, the citizens would be motivated by 'the Dormентаire reward' or just plain curiosity and pursue Monica.

If such a thing were to happen, the question of "Why doesn't Dormентаire arrest the criminal when they already know who she is?" would come up, earning them unnecessary suspicion from the alchemists and the local aristocrats.

The most logical solution would be to kill Monica in secret and claim that the culprit had gone missing. But Carla did not have such authority at this point. And if Monica's confession and the contents of the play were true, Carla almost felt *sympathy* for her situation.

'How in the world was Jean-Pierre able to write such a play?'

'Antagonizing House Dormентаire is mad enough, but how does he know so much about Monica... Maribel Boronial's past?'

'Could it be...? Our spy in the alchemy workshop...? Does Jean-Pierre have a connection to someone in the workshop...?'

'But even I had no idea about Master Gardi's... preferences. It's difficult to believe anyone else would know about it.'

The more she thought about it, the more it confused her.

This wasn't the only question. In the play, the hunt for Monica was ordered by 'Gardi's sister', who resented the killer. This could not have been further from the truth.

After all, Carla had been ordered by **Gardi's sister herself**--"Talk of the killer is just an excuse! We can't have you *really* going out on that mission. Even if you *do* find the killer, you shouldn't do anything about it~.", she had ordered with a smile.

Carla clearly recalled the cold sweat running down her back as she saw her mistress talk as if her brother's death did not matter in the least.

'Why was that part of the play different from the truth...?'

Things just became more and more confusing. Carla punched the cabin wall, overcome by an inexplicable sense of restlessness.

'Damn it... There's something terribly wrong about this place.'

'In any event, let's focus on arresting Jean-Pierre for now.'

Carla took deep breaths, and decided to write a letter to her mistress explaining the current situation.

The end of the mission was still out of sight. Carla feared that she would eventually die and be buried in this land.

<=>

'Why are they keeping me alive?' Monica wondered, quietly lost in thought.

But she soon shook her head, concluding that her life or death did not even matter--so there was no use in wondering.

Monica closed her eyes, lying on the bed of her small cell.

She thought of Huey.

'Come to think of it... I wonder why I started liking Huey in the first place.'

When she had first abandoned her noble name and settled in Lotto Valentino, Monica had been lost in despair.

Then she met a certain student in the alchemy school.

He was a lonely boy who built up walls around himself, despite the smiles he faked for others.

But the girl knew that his loneliness stemmed from his hatred of the world.

Perhaps she was just drawn to the boy who had the same eyes as herself at such a young age. But she could not recall when these feelings changed to affection, and when she began to actively try and talk to him.

'Maybe I thought I could change him.'

The despairing girl wore the face of the Mask Maker and searched the hidden side of the city.

Many things happened over time, and the girl began to fight the injustices of the world in her own way. Of course, not everyone would agree that her methods were right.

'Maybe I thought that... I'd found someone like me. That I wasn't alone anymore.'

The recoil of her life as the Mask Maker manifested itself as her love for Huey.

Perhaps her longing for a normal life and a normal relationship had overflowed from beneath her mask.

'So in the end... I wonder if I was just looking to save myself by using Huey...'

Monica stopped. She tightly clutched at her bedsheets.

'That doesn't matter anymore...!'

'I miss you...'

'I want to see you, Huey...'

Monica realized that tears were falling from her eyes. She quietly buried her face in her pillow.

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[Time is always equal.

No man's thoughts or desires can stop the rising sun or the orange light of dusk.

Again and again time repeats itself. Despite the fact that there is no guarantee the sun will rise tomorrow, men still believe that tomorrow will come as it always has.

No matter how much one pleads for eternity, the sun will set and rise again.

This powerful, unstoppable flow drew in the events connected to this incident and drove them into one direction.

Monica Campanella--or rather, Maribel Boronial--continued to live.

She had no freedom, no chance to see the people of the streets, no right to speak to the man she loved.

It must have been a miracle that she managed to retain her sanity in her empty existence.

If memory serves, she had been locked away for about half a year. The black ship never left port, continuing to imposingly look down upon the harbor.

It must have also been a miracle that Huey Laforet--the man who stared at the black ship in defiance of its power--had survived both the desperate desire to see the woman he loved even a second more quickly, and the fear that she would be executed in a second's time.

He had waited all this time, planning and preparing to make his dreams a reality.

He was carefully putting together a plot to rescue his beloved.

In that sense, I suppose the fact that Monica was kept alive was a stroke of great fortune. I only learned of this later, but among the alchemists, this man called Huey was particularly renowned for his work with incendiaries and explosives. If House Dormentaire had made one wrong move, it would not have been strange for him to follow Monica in death by setting the entire city ablaze in an inferno.

This was just a coincidence, but that very ending was the final alteration I had made to the play.

In any event, time passed by mercilessly, swallowing the hearts of many.

I wrote earlier that time passes equally for all, but... Perhaps, at the time, Lotto Valentino was exempt from this equality. Of course, it was ultimately nothing but trick of the mind.

It was as if the fast-moving streets inside the glass box had begun to move in double time.

And the day of fate was upon us.

The day that my sins came upon Lotto Valentino.

Fate comes to all equally. It is just the same as the rising and setting of the sun.

For some, she comes without warning--to others, she gives them ample time to accept all that lies in the future.]

<=>

A certain month in 1710. Inside the Dormentaire ship.

"...It's a windy day." Carla mumbled languidly, watching the rolling waves reach up towards the sky.

It was not raining, but the seas were rough today. The waves were rocking even the ships moored in the harbor.

Carla was doing paperwork aboard the ship, which was one of the delegation's designated headquarters. She read over her subordinates' reports, and glanced over at a stack of letters on the desk.

She then remembered Monica.

'We're still keeping her in custody, but...'

Several months earlier, she had received a message from her mistress.

It was the reply to the question she had sent about the fate of Monica Campanella, also known as Maribel Boronial.

The answer was not what she had expected.

If her mistress had mercilessly ordered her to 'kill Maribel', Carla would have reluctantly followed these orders and killed Monica. She would have been overjoyed if the reply was, 'release Maribel and return for now'.

But her mistress's answer was thus: "Like I told you before, that girl doesn't matter, darling. What you do with her is up to you. But don't forget the mission~". Her mistress did not care about the woman who killed her brother.

'This is going to trouble the girl, too.

'But even if I were to let her go... would she be able to live an ordinary life?

'If not, should I just end her suffering...?'

Carla found herself unwilling to pursue this line of thought any longer.

She had been trained as a bodyguard. Her mission was not to kill, but to take on any hostility that targeted her masters.

According to the story, Gardi Dormentaire was one of her mistress's family, but he was a contemptible man.

If someone had come to assassinate her master, Carla would not hesitate to counter by stabbing the attacker through the neck--but Monica's situation was different.

'...I'm weak.

'I can't kill her or save her.'

In the end, Carla chose to keep Monica in their custody.

She thought that, perhaps once their mission was completed, she might find a way to save her.

Carla had given her men strict orders to maintain secrecy, and made it known that Monica had been imprisoned on *her* orders.

Her terrifyingly obedient subordinates still bothered her somewhat, but she decided to accept them as the elites of Dormentaire's private army.

Even today, Carla felt her chest constrict at the sight of the pile of letters on her desk.

'I have to find the secrets of this city somehow...'

'It seems that a strange individual called the Mask Maker is connected to the counterfeits, but...'

As Carla searched for a way to shatter the glass walls of the box, one of her men barged into the room.

"We have a problem, ma'am."

"? What's going on?"

Carla frowned, but she could tell that something was different about her subordinate's expression.

The subordinate, however, did not seem to have a full grasp of the situation himself. He answered somewhat vaguely.

"The city is under attack!"

"What?!"

'An invasion?'

Carla hurried out to the deck and was greeted by an unbelievable sight.

Plumes of smoke billowed from all corners of the city. Several buildings had gone up in flames.

She could see people escaping the market streets in panic, but the culprits themselves were nowhere to be seen.

'What is going on?!

'Is it the Austrians?!'

Had the war arrived on their doorstep without her even realizing?

But things were somewhat different from what she had experienced on battlefields.

"Is it possible for you to assess the situation with our men in the other headquarters?"

"Ma'am... I believe *our headquarters* are the targets!"

"What?! Who in the world...?"

"We are unsure, ma'am! We have no deaths reported, but reports claim that the arsonist was a mysterious masked man..."

'A mask...?'

Carla was instantly reminded of the phrase 'Mask Maker' that she had just seen in her reports, but she quickly shook off the thought.

"Impossible! This cannot be the work of an individual!" Carla shouted without thinking, and suddenly came to a realization.

"There's... more than one?"

She thought of the possibility of multiple Mask Makers, and concluded that the culprits were not targeting Lotto Valentino, but House Dormентаire.

She turned to head for the office and assume command, but at that very moment, the subordinate at her side fell to the floor.

"?!"

'An arrow?! Or is it a gun?!'

Carla quickly ducked and took cover, shocked at her subordinate's sudden collapse.

'But I didn't hear anything of the sort... ..? ...This is...'

Carla realized that her subordinate was without visible injuries, just as she noticed something strange about her own movements.

Her arms and legs were limp. She could not stand.

Her subordinate was not the only victim. Carla looked up to see that the crewmen on the deck had all fallen as well.

'What... in the world...'

She began to fade in and out of consciousness. Carla finally succumbed to sleep.

Just before she blacked out, Carla saw a well-built masked man appearing from a shadowed corner of the deck, upwind from everyone else.

"Hm... It seems that there are individual differences in the time it takes for the formula to take effect. Or perhaps it is just a matter of gender differences."

The masked man closed the lid over the mysterious substance in his hand and looked over the crewmen and Carla, who were lying unconscious on the deck.

"I suppose it will be an hour or so until you regain your consciousness. My job is done."

The masked man glanced at Carla, sighed, and shook his head.

"Didn't I warn you to not disturb my students' learning, good lady? In any case, this drug has no lasting effects. You will be fine."

The man--Dalton--mumbled to his unconscious audience, and took off his mask. He left the deck.

"Elmer, that troublemaker. I *thought* it was strange that he'd stopped asking me to use the hook...

"But to think he would ask me to **wear a mask!** Mad as ever, I see."

<=>

At the same time, the storehouse district in the harbor area.

A pair of figures observed the chaos on the ship and the streets from the rooftop of one of the storehouses.

"Wow. Looks like Professor Dalton's done it!" Elmer yelled from beneath his mask, looking through a pair of binoculars--a luxury for the 1700s.

Huey stood beside him, also wearing a mask.

"...We could have just borrowed his paralysis formula." He mumbled plainly.

"Hey, what was I supposed to do? He said he didn't want me finding out how to make it for myself, so he'd rather go out and do the job personally. Anyway, that paralysis formula--I guess it's more like sleeping gas--is really something, huh? I guess it all works out in the end, since we got him to put on a mask, too." Elmer nodded, and looked back towards the streets. "But this is pretty big, isn't it? I hope no one gets hurt."

"...Right."

"So, how many members are part of the Mask Makers now?" Elmer asked obliviously.

Huey's response, in contrast, was dark and heavy.

"...Three hundred and seventy-two."

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[Yes.

Huey Laforet had accomplished the unthinkable.

In the span of six months, he had gathered over three hundred members as the foundation of his criminal organization.

It may sound unbelievable, but this is the truth. Initially, even *I* found myself doubting the veracity of the reality before me.

Lotto Valentino had a rather small number of criminal groups for its population to begin with. Maiza's Rotten Eggs were about as vulgar as they came. Now that I think on it, perhaps that was one of the many peculiarities of this city.

In any event, he had done it.

Despite the presence of over a hundred Dormentaire delegates in the city--in a situation where *anyone* could have been in cahoots with the Dormentaires, Huey had built up a single, unified organization. All this by the young man who could not trust others and hated the world!

He had utilized the assets he had earned through his counterfeiting operation and quickly yet carefully gathered people under his command. It seems that on occasion, he had even braved the perils of creating new drugs for aristocratic buyers.

All of this Huey Laforet had done in selfishness. He wanted to see Monica Campanella again. This was the only thought driving him forward.

Monica herself might not wish to be saved. Perhaps Huey knew this, but he would not have hesitated.

After all, everything went according to his own whims.]

<=>

Monica poked her head out from under her blankets and blankly stared at the iron bars that stood in place of a door. She focused her attention on the outside world, having felt something off about the situation.

"...?"

At first, she thought that the commotion outside was just the wind.

She had gotten completely accustomed to the rocking of the ship in the past few months. The sounds coming from outside were the only way she could learn about what was happening in the outside world.

The sounds today were quite different from the usual sea breeze. Monica crawled out of her blankets and got to her feet.

At the same time, a set of footsteps began approaching her from outside the bars. However, it couldn't have been mealtime yet.

Monica was beyond caring for her own life at this point, but she cautiously looked outside the iron bars out of curiosity.

The moment she caught sight of the owner of the footsteps, she froze.

It wasn't fear that paralyzed her. She had been taken by sheer shock and confusion.

The man standing before her was dressed in a black cloak and a white mask--the costume of the Mask Maker. However, his height gave away the fact that he was neither Huey nor Elmer. A sickening smell wafted from the large sack he carried with him.

"Who in the world... are you...?"

"So we finally meet. I'm glad to see you're unhurt." The masked man replied in a calming tone.

"Pardon...?"

She had never heard this voice before. As Monica stood in hesitation, the man removed his mask to reveal an equally unfamiliar face.

"Nice to meet you, I suppose. My name is Jean-Pierre Accardo."

"...? ...?! You're...?"

Monica was overcome by a frenzy of emotions all at once.

If she had been her old self, she might have lost her sanity to rage and immediately stabbed the man's limbs with her stiletto.

But right now, her questions overrode her emotions.

"How... did you get in here?! And why did you... write that... **thing**...?!" Monica asked angrily. Jean scratched his head.

"About that... Well, there were some misunderstandings on my part, too. ...I'm truly sorry for what happened. I know that nothing I do will be enough to atone for my sins, but for now, you *have* to listen to me."

"...?"

Monica frowned, still on edge and suspicious of Jean's motives. However, the man took out a key from his pocket, unlocked the bars, and mentioned a certain name.

"Huey Laforet. *He's* the one who ordered me to come rescue you."

"...?! Huey?!"

Monica's eyes widened in shock. Jean opened the sack he was carrying and continued sheepishly.

"That's why I need you to die **one more time.**"

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[Shamefully enough, I had hidden myself at Lebreau's residence in order to escape the Dormentaires.

I will not deny that I feared for my life. I will not deny that I made excuses like a conceited reporter, claiming 'I cannot die here, or there will be no one left to reveal the truth'.

But never did I imagine that the servant girl called Niki would be a friend of Huey and Elmer. I was discovered by her, and the very next day, kidnapped by Huey Laforet and Elmer C. Albatross. As for what they did to me... I will not mention, for the sake of their reputations. Of course, part of the reason is that I do not wish to remember the events myself.

In any event, my life alone was spared. In exchange, I was forced to join the Mask Makers and assist them in rescuing Monica.

Their plan was to fake Monica's death once more. They would burn down the Dormentaire ship, leaving behind a mess of human bones, pork, and women's clothing in the imprisonment chamber. House Dormentaire would not pry too deeply. Of course, as the plan involved burning and sinking the ship, I wondered if there was even a need to go that far--but I assisted them all the same.

By then I had already become one of them.

I was a member of the Mask Makers, a group that would go on to become a terrifying criminal organization.]

<=>

"We're going to get on different rowboats once we get outside. Huey should be here any minute now... and then, the two of you are going to get out of Lotto Valentino and run away to some faraway place. This time, you'll really be born again into a new life--a life where your past will never be discovered."

"But... I..."

"The second half of that play is a figment of my own imagination. House Dormentaire is *not* after you."

"What...?"

As if to offset Monica's confusion, Jean shook his head and grinned apologetically.

"Well, I guess one thing about the second half came true.

"That kid seriously ended up setting fire to the city."

<=>

"Okay, let's hurry and board the ship. We have to carry out all the unconscious crew members before we get Monica out of there and set fire to the ship..." Said Elmer. Huey, still wearing his mask, nodded slightly.

To be frank, Huey was not interested in anyone but Monica's safety, but he did not want her to shoulder the emotional burden of even more Dormentaire lives.

The Mask Makers were still rampaging through the city, creating distractions or capturing Dormentaire delegates. They did their best to avoid death or injury, but Huey had no concern for any casualties that might result from this mission.

Looking at Huey, Elmer came to a conclusion: Huey was not a fundamentally good person. As such, they had no way of knowing how this organization called the Mask Makers would change over time.

But to Elmer this was a trivial matter.

They had received information that one of the Dormентаire delegates had again purchased women's clothing. This could only mean that Monica was still in their custody.

With this information, Huey finally used the power of the Mask Makers and took action.

If they were to find out that Monica had died, Huey would have likely ended up using his power to annihilate House Dormентаire.

But even that did not matter to Elmer.

"What are you going to tell Monica when you see her again?" Elmer asked suddenly.

"Nothing." Huey replied plainly. "I'm just going to hold her tight."

The Smile Junkie visualized the faces of his friends at the end of the mission.

And as usual, he grinned from underneath his mask despite his frenetic surroundings.

<=>

She could see the sky.

Monica's eyes took in the first sight of the world in a very long time.

She took a deep breath as she climbed the stairs up to the deck, reminding herself that she was awake--that this was not a dream. Each step she climbed brought forth a wave of emotions lapping at her heart.

What should she say when she sees Huey again?

Once again, her existence was to be erased and her crimes concealed.

Should she reject this future? Or should she just be thankful that she was being given a second chance at life? Monica did not know.

But, setting aside her choice of *words*, Monica knew exactly what she would *do*.

'Let's smile.

'I'm going to, at least, show Huey the greatest smile I can muster.'

Monica resolutely took each step, mind scrambling to remember how to smile again.

'Oh! Hahaha... I ended up picturing Elmer's face.

'Huey's going to be jealous.'

Monica simultaneously remembered the faces of both her close friend and her lover, drawing one conclusion.

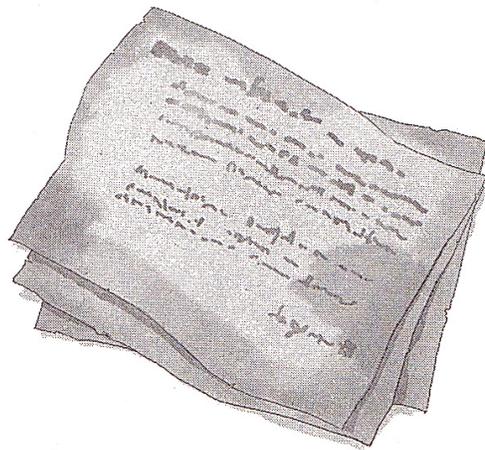
That she had been truly happy.

Monica stepped out of the entrance and onto the deck.

Standing before her was the silhouette of the Mask Maker--a man wearing a nostalgic wooden mask.

With tears welling in her eyes, Monica looked to the blue skies and the rest of the world and smiled radiantly.

Epilogue B



The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[This is the end.

What happened to Huey and Monica afterwards? That is none of my concern, and it would be a tactless thing to reveal the continuation of their story.

The most important thing is the fact that I had committed many sins.

Because I fell to my own desire for glory and wrote these plays on incomplete information, I ended up partially causing the creation of the Mask Makers.

I had also ended up cementing the stubborn beliefs of both House Dormentaire and Lotto Valentino. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the following year was a never-ending battle between the two powers, but this is not the place for such recollections.

However, after all was said and done, I had committed one more sin.

With a renewed sense of self, I altered the play one final time.

It was played in the Lotto Valentino theatre despite the powerful protests of House Dormentaire.

I had made a change to the final scene.

In the end, the character modeled after Monica created an organization called the Mask Makers. But she was stabbed to death by the witch's son and burned to death with the ship. The young man had feared that she would reveal the secrets of their magic to the world.

This was the story of the revised ending.

Anyone who knew Huey Laforet would understand that he had been represented by the witch's son.

By writing this play, I had tricked the world into believing that Monica had died.

I had intentionally added fabrications into my story in order to deceive the world.

This was my final sin, and my own way of repentance.

But this truth must not yet be made known, at least not until my own death. The world must believe that Monica had been killed by Huey, if she is to live a new life in some faraway land.

This is why I would like to make a request of you, the one who has finished reading my letters.

I am not asking you to reveal the truth to the world. I would be thankful if you could clear Huey Laforet's name of the murder, but I will not specifically ask this of you. After all, it is doubtful if his name still remains in your era.

But I ask that you, at least, know this one truth.

I've taken too much time. I will end this letter here.

To you, the one who has managed to read through my selfish confessions: you are free to forget about me, but there is one thing I ask you to remember.

Monica Campanella found salvation in Huey Laforet.

Please, never forget this truth.

You have my deepest gratitude.

-Jean-Pierre Accardo]

<=>

Having gone through the entirety of the accounts, the young man slowly placed the bundle of parchment back onto his desk.

He had no way of knowing whether or not the accounts were authentic.

He did not care about the powers of immortality that had been described earlier in the book. That did not matter to him.

The young man, having gotten a glimpse into the thoughts of his ancestor, was truly moved. He understood that his ancestor's noble character had been passed down all the way to himself.

How was he to react to these letters?

How would this change his heart?

He did not yet know the answer, but the young man decided to offer up a prayer.

Many things in Lotto Valentino must have changed since then, but the young man looked up at the unchanging sun, shining brightly in the sky. He closed his eyes and prayed quietly.

He wanted to believe that, at least, Monica and Huey were able to live out the rest of their lives in peace.

He prayed through the sun, towards the distant past, hoping his wishes would be granted.

Yet the sun promised nothing, silently shining over Lotto Valentino as it always had.

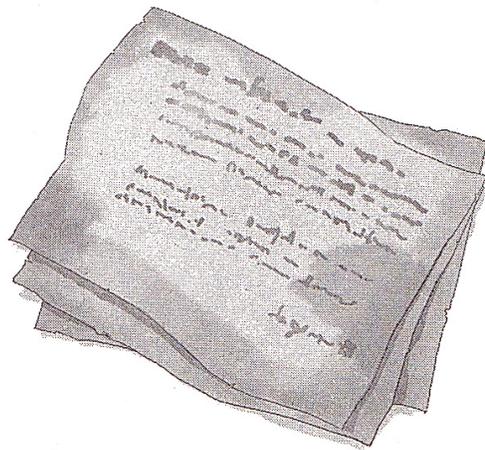
From the distant past to the far-off future it shone, forever and always.

-The end-



[Why did you have to discover this?]

Epilogue C



The young man would not have found it were it not for a nagging sense of incongruity at the back of his mind.

Just as he was about to place the bundle of parchment back inside the box, he realized that the box was slightly more shallow than it appeared on the outside.

The fact bothered him enough to convince him to take the box apart.

And just as the young man expected, the box contained a secret compartment.

Inside it was yet another bundle of parchments.

But to the young man's horror, the words written upon it were utter despair, its pages filled with words that completely shattered his prayers.

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[As an act of repentance, I shall now write down the truth.

This is my *true* act of penitence.

Why? Why did you have to discover these secret accounts?

Why would you not leave the box alone?

If you had just abandoned it, my crimes would not have been revealed.

You, whom I have yet to see. You, whom I shall never meet.

I despise you.

You have discovered the past that I wished I could erase from history.

And I thank you.

Thanks to you, I am no longer a coward who fled to the last.

If you recall from my earlier accounts, I mentioned that I was not intending to take my own life.

That is a lie.

Once these accounts are complete, I will commit suicide.

These accounts will be my last will and testament.

Please do not forget.

This is my will and my hope, and the damnation of my own self.]

<=>

She could see Huey again.

She wanted to talk to Huey again.

Huey was right in front of her--right before her eyes.

Her heart swelling with hope, she ran forward to meet him.

But-

The voice that escaped the mask could not have been further from that of Huey's.

"Did you really expect things to turn out so well?"

Monica was overcome by horror.

What scared her was not the fact that the voice belonged to a stranger. She had been spooked by the overwhelmingly human emotion contained in the man's words.

It wasn't hatred, sadness, or insanity.

The man's short words were full of nothing but pure **enjoyment**.

He sounded just like a child stomping on ants, the audience of a one-sided battle in the coliseum, or men shouting in excitement as they accomplished a gargantuan task.

Joy--Happiness--Delight--Ecstasy--

The man had only spoken briefly, but his voice was filled with so much pleasure that the reality before her paralyzed Monica in inexplicable terror.

That very fear soon took material form and appeared before her.

A silver blade slid through the air, just under her line of sight.

If Monica had been in a normal state of mind, the reflexes she had trained as the Mask Maker might have helped her avoid the strike.

But the joy of being able to see Huey again had dulled her sense of caution.

The long imprisonment had enfeebled her body.

And due to **certain circumstances**, her current constitution was far weaker than it had been at her peak.

A combination of circumstances were all that led to this conclusion.

Because of these trivialities, Monica was unable to evade the attack-

"That was fun. Thanks."

And with the man's plain final statement, the silver blade plunged deep into her body.

Strangely enough, just as she had stabbed a certain man ten years ago.

The knife mercilessly tore at her insides.

<=>

"Anyway, don't you think it's a bit cruel to dig up random bones from the cemetery?"

"...I'll take responsibility. You don't need to worry about that."

"But I think Monica might... but then again, I guess you two are *both* guilty of using someone else's corpse as a decoy." Elmer said nonchalantly, as he entered the ship with a large sack in hand. "I hope the Dormentaire people will settle for a bunch of charred bones."

"It'd be best to sink the ship completely."

Several Mask Makers had boarded the ship after Dalton had left. Carla and her men had been carried outside, so all that was left was to make their way into the aristocrats' quarters, which no one had yet entered.

"Hopefully Monica didn't inhale any of the paralysis formula and faint too... Hey, Huey!"

Huey had already made his way into the ship, leaving Elmer behind.

But the sight that greeted him was-

An empty bedroom that seemed to have been unused for a long time.

"...? Monica...? Where's Monica?!"

Confusion welled up in his mind, followed by vivid images of the worst-case scenario.

Were they too late?

Perhaps the clothes they bought at the tailor were just a decoy, and they had already-

The only thing that pulled Huey back from the brink of despair was Elmer's voice, shouting from above deck.

"This is bad, Huey! The ship's on fire!

"It's not *our* ship... The ship over there is burning... and it's moving!"

<=>

The first person Carla saw when she opened her eyes was a gentle-looking, bespectacled man.

"Are you all right?"

"...Where...?"

Carla suddenly sat up, instantly recalling the moment before she passed out. Her body was still rather sluggish, but there was no time to concern herself with such trivial matters.

But she realized that she was no longer on the ship's wooden deck, but on the stone grounds of the harbor.

She looked around at her surroundings, including the man before her. She then spotted the ship she had been on not too long ago, floating a slight distance from the harbor.

Even more curiously, there was another ship slightly ahead of it, smoke billowing from its hull.

"?! What...?! What in the world is going on here...? Answer me! Answer me, Maiza Avaro!" Carla suddenly yelled, outraged. Maiza slowly replied, trying to calm her down.

"Please, control yourself. I only just arrived here myself."

Carla ignored Maiza's answer and looked back towards the ship, which was moving further and further away from the harbor.

"So this... this is Lotto Valentino's answer..." She muttered, eyes narrowed.

"What is that burning ship out there?" Maiza asked calmly.

"A second-hand ship we purchased here. The only ones who should know of our possession of it are myself, several of my men, and... our spy."

"A spy? Then... what is your true purpose for being here?"

"That's..."

Carla was about to answer, but quickly held herself back. Perhaps the effects of the drug had dulled her thought processes, leaving her vulnerable to spill information to an enemy.

"...You thought I would answer that question?" She asked in a hostile voice, but Maiza did not react.

Even knowing this, Carla's tone harshened, emotion building up in her voice.

"Lotto Valentino is now our enemy. There is no need for words or kindness."

"Miss Carla..." Maiza tried to stop her.

"Remember this... You have turned yourself against House Dormentaire. I do not know if you fully understand the implications, and I do not know if you are truly oblivious to the workings of this incident. ...But the city has clearly made its choice." Carla warned Maiza.

"..."

"Do not be so careless to think that Lotto Valentino will still be standing in a year's time." This was more of a threat than a warning. But in the end, Carla displayed some semblance of mercy.

"So... go and inform the citizens. Warn them to prepare to flee elsewhere."

<=>

'Huh...?'

'What happened to me?'

'I feel... weak.'

As her consciousness began growing faint, Monica detected great heat rising up from within herself.

She was lying flat on the deck of the ship.

'Oh, I see.'

'I'm going to die.'

Having realized her fate, Monica slowly began to think.

'Now I can finally pay for my crimes.'

She had done nothing wrong, yet she continued to seek repentance.

But her guilt was not towards the man she had killed--rather, it was towards the nameless girl who had been sacrificed in her stead.

'I'm sorry.'

'I didn't know what to do with my life.'

'Was I not allowed to be happy?'

'Or did I have to be happy for your sake, too?'

Her consciousness grew dimmer by the second, but the winds carried a voice to her ears, at least slightly bringing her back to reality.

'Oh.'

'That's Huey's voice.'

Monica took hold of the ship's railings and slowly raised her head.

She could see the great black ship coming towards her.

And standing on the deck of the ship was a man dressed like the Mask Maker, face unmasked and calling her name.

'...Huey.

'You came for me.

'I'm so glad.'

It didn't matter to her if this was just a trick of the light. Monica knew she was going to die soon, but she was thankful that her last view of the world would be of Huey.

'Um...

'Huh. What was it again?

'I was supposed to do something...'

Her eyesight grew dark, but she spotted her friend, calling to her from beside Huey.

'Oh, so Elmer came too.

'I'm so happy.'

The sight of Elmer's face finally helped Monica remember.

She knew what she was going to do once she saw Huey again.

And so-

She smiled.

As her consciousness faded into oblivion, Monica looked at Huey and Elmer and smiled for them.

Her eyes were full of strength and overwhelming gratitude.

'See, Huey? I smiled.

'Look, Elmer. I'm not forcing it this time.

'I really can smile.

'I can finally smile for real.

'It's all thanks to you, Huey. I was so happy.'

The black ship drew near, but Monica no longer feared it. What was there to be afraid of, when Huey was on board?

But seeing Huey's face, Monica felt somewhat sad.

'Don't make that face, Huey. Elmer's going to scold you.

'And then I'll end up getting jealous.'

And like a candle flickering in the wind, her heart squeezed out the last of its strength.

'I'm never going to die, Huey.

'I'm just going to disappear for a while.

'So I know that we'll see each other again someday.

'So you have to smile, Huey.

'Thank you, Huey.

'Goodbye, Huey.

*'...**Let's meet again.**'*

These were her final words.

The movement of her lips looked like she had said, "Let's meet again".

Perhaps the only miracle that occurred on that day was the fact that Huey and Elmer managed to understand her last words.

The ships were about to make contact.

Even though she looked as though she would expire any minute, Monica was smiling joyously.

It was the most radiant smile Huey and Elmer had ever seen.

And with that same look-

Monica slowly leaned forward and pushed herself off the railings, throwing herself into the turbulent seas.

Huey never even had a chance to call her name, but the scene unfolded before him in slow motion, like that very moment had been separated from the flow of time.

Her smile persisted until the end, refusing to leave Huey's sight.

And as the blood flowing from her chest dyed her body red, she disappeared into the waves.

"-----"

Huey let out a soundless scream. He tried to jump in after her in an attempt to save her.

If Elmer hadn't been quick to hold him back, Huey would have shared in Monica's fate.

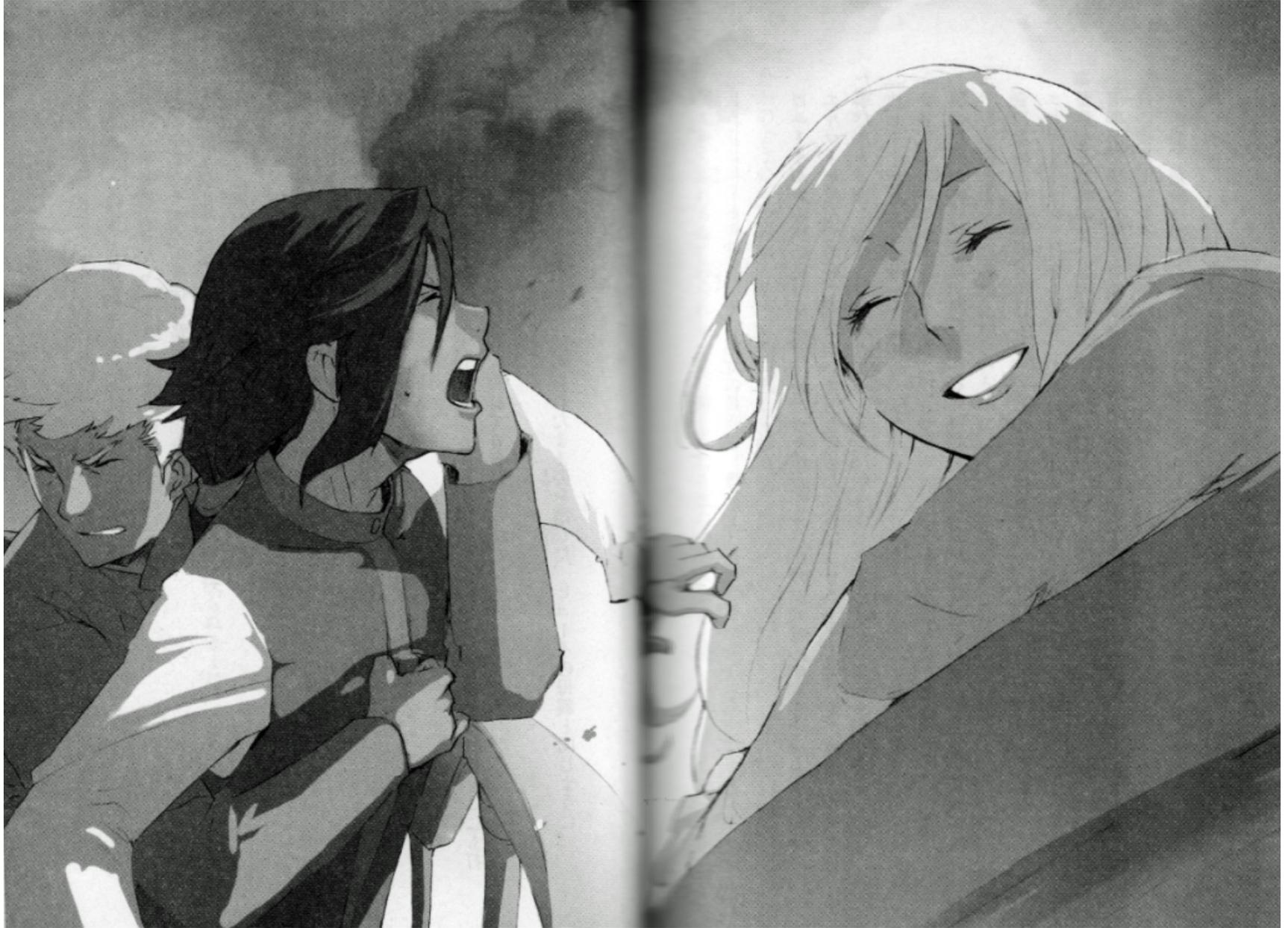
"Let go... **LET ME GO, ELMER!**"

Huey's right hand jabbed into Elmer's stomach. Small flames began erupting from beneath his sleeve.

The smell of burning flesh spread across the deck, but Elmer still would not release Huey.

Huey struck out at Elmer, but he could not get himself free.

Elmer just held him back in silence. He knew that words would mean nothing to Huey.



Elmer silently allowed Huey to strike at him until the other Mask Makers heard the commotion and came to hold Huey back.

And for an instant, when he had been completely restrained, Huey erased both his voice and his emotions--

And the very next moment, he let out an utterly inhuman cry as he dropped his hands onto the deck.

'That scream just now...

'I wonder... was he calling out for Monica?' Elmer thought, and sadly closed his eyes.

In his heart, he made sure to thank her.

'Thank you, Monica.

'This time, I'll make sure that Huey smiles.

'So... if there really is an "other side"... please watch over him with a smile.'

Huey's cry echoed across the deck, even as Elmer disappeared into thought.

This was the only time that Elmer had ever heard Huey Laforet's scream.

It would be the first and final time he had heard such a sound, even during the rest of their eternal lives.

Fortunately--or perhaps unfortunately--in spite of the fact that Monica was taken by the waves near the harbor, her body never resurfaced. It was impossible to even verify her death.

Curiously enough--

She vanished into the waters forever, just as Huey's mother had disappeared into the lake in order to clear her own name.

<=>

The girl had once committed a certain crime.

But her sin was covered up in secrecy, regardless of her own will.

And so the girl lived on in peace.

She never once considered seeking out happiness for herself.

Yet she had not resolved to repent for her crimes.

She was just wandering aimlessly, not knowing what to do.

That is why I reached out a hand towards her, without even knowing what lay in the future--blind even to the steep cliff that awaited before us.

After all, the cliff posed absolutely no danger to me.

Having reached out a hand towards her, I hesitated.

Then I followed my instincts and just gave her a shove on the back.

That was all.

Whether what lay before her was a cliff or the arms of a lover-

Either way, I did not care.

Because either way, I would end up stabbing her in the back.

Well, this has been a rather fun game.

But I'm a bit tired... I suppose I should take a break and look after Czes.

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[Yes.

Several parts of the accounts I initially presented to you were false.

Niki never discovered me.

Of course, I lied about joining the Mask Makers.

I was never tortured by Huey Laforet.

I told Monica that I had been sent on Huey's orders because I believed in Lebreau, who told me that mentioning Huey's name would be the easiest way to earn her trust.

But I ask that you believe at least this: I truly wished to save her.

According to Lebreau, the Mask Makers would soon retaliate and murder me. If I were to avoid such a fate, I would have to personally rescue Monica and make it clear to them that I was not their enemy.

In hindsight it all sounds absurd, but at the time I held no doubt whatsoever.

That was how much the results of my own actions had terrified me--That was how much I trusted Lebreau.

I truly did make the final changes to the play. It was Lebreau's suggestion.

The intention of having the Mask Maker stab her was to portray the Mask Makers as villains--to make sure that the townsfolk would not see them in a positive light.

In my heart I knew that something was strange, but even now I do not understand why I was so quick to trust him.

Yes. The claim that Monica had lived was also a lie.

She is dead. I as good as killed her myself.

Please, hate me and curse me.

I only realized the truth of the matter *years* after the fact.

But I know that this is no excuse for my actions.

No mere excuse could bring her back to life.

But there is one thing I must make known.

She... Monica Campanella did not disappear without a trace that day.

There was a particular reason that she needed a new change of clothes several days before the incident.

The tailor had not only sold women's clothing, but another piece of cloth as well.

...Monica Campanella had been pregnant when she turned herself in.

I'm sure there is no need for me to say who the child's father was.

I do not know if even *she* knew of her own pregnancy when she confessed to her crimes.

But in any event, she *had* left something behind in this world.

She had left behind proof of her own existence--her 'link' to Huey Laforet.]

<=>

It was the day after the ship and the city had been torched.

"...Lebreau... What happened on the deck yesterday...? She looked so happy. So why would she take her own life...?" Jean asked.

"I'm afraid I'm still in shock myself." Lebreau answered despondently.

In the direct aftermath of the incident, the Mask Makers had boarded the smaller ship from the Dormentaire vessel. Jean and Lebreau had made it back to the mainland by sneaking back onto the Dormentaire ship in the confusion.

"This is terrible! She's taken her own life... why?!" Lebreau had yelled. In his confusion, Jean did as he was told and hid himself on the burning ship.

There was a hint of doubt left in his heart, but at the time he did not even suspect Lebreau--not only that, there was a more pressing matter at hand.

"...But... then... **What of Monica's child?**" Jean asked nervously.

"I have spoken to Carla, and we have decided that I will take care of the child." Lebreau answered resolutely.

"I see... Is that all right with you?"

"I will tell Begg that I am taking in the child of a friend who has died of illness. As for Czes... he was overjoyed, saying that we had a new family member. And as for Niki, who will be doing most of the work... I will tell her when the time is right that the child belongs to Monica."

"That's right... Niki and Monica knew each other."

The idea that Monica had left hope behind in this world somewhat consoled the heartbroken Jean. This was the only thing keeping him sane at this point.

'Well, that was an interesting conclusion,' Lebreau thought.

'At first, I just spotted the kid from the village where we conducted a witch hunt and decided to bother him a little, but... I never knew things would get this exciting.'

'Ah... his scream back on that ship was a true work of art. Monica smiling at the end was a bit surprising, but that was fine in its own way. Her powerful will made me feel completely renewed.'

With these placid thoughts, one depraved human being continued to go about his life--but one thing nagged at him.

'But I thought Huey Laforet would be a bit more pessimistic. I never imagined he'd end up taking action like this. It was quite surprising.'

'...Was it because of that Elmer person he was with?'

'...Just looking at his grin creeps me out.'

Perhaps this was the first time he felt a sense of fear from another.

The man pondered this thought for only a single moment, then decided to forget about it.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

Huey and Elmer had yet to learn this man's name.

They would not learn that he was the mastermind who stole Monica's life until a little later.

But the wait would only be a short amount of time in comparison to the eternity that awaited them.

<=>

The Accounts of Jean-Pierre Accardo

[Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

If you have read my accounts up to this point, then I ask you to remember this name.

This is the curse and hope that I leave in my accounts.

Why do you think that I mentioned immortality in the earlier pages of my accounts?

It was not to explain House Dormентаire's goals.

It is because, only several days ago, that man... Lebreau came to visit me.

He was unchanged since ten years ago--he had attained immortality!

Yes. In the ten years since his departure, I was finally able to realize his malice.

It was almost as if I had been released from a spell.

...But he appeared before me as though he had perfectly read my change of heart.

He said that he had come to see me because he was curious to see what kind of impudent life I was living, even after realizing the magnitude of my own crimes.

I tasted true despair--and as a result, I resolved to write out these accounts and take my own life.

You, whom I have yet to meet.

Lebreau has attained immortality.

I will never be able to meet you, because I will take my own life once I finish these writings. My son was born just the other day, but... I do not intend to take him with me. If his line should continue, and if you, my reader, are a descendant of mine...

You must beware of Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

You must never approach him, but you must never take your eyes off him. Please, pray that he does not take an interest in you.

And lastly, I do not presume to think that the act of your reading will absolve me of my sins.

But if these accounts mean that I have not died in vain--that I have rescued someone from Lebreau's clutches, then I will be content.

Thank you. You have my deepest gratitude.

I despise you, but I am thankful to you all the same.

If possible, allow me to wish for one more thing for the future.

It is concerning Huey Laforet and Monica Campanella.

I have written this earlier, but I ask that you, at least, remember that the two of them truly loved each other. I ask that at least one person in this world know this truth.

This is the only regret I leave in this world.

To you, whom I have yet to meet.

-Jean-Pierre Accardo.]

<=>

2003, Lotto Valentino.

As the young man finished reading, he found himself with one question.

Did Jean-Pierre Accardo really take his own life?

The young man was curious.

He did not have a computer at home, so he took his bicycle to the biggest library in the area. He had visited this place several times in the process of deciphering Jean-Pierre's writings.

It was an elegant building. The sign "Lotto Valentino Third Library" hung above it.

Beside the old historic building was a new wing of the library built in more recent times.

The young man entered, found several books on the history of Lotto Valentino, and began to scour the pages for information related to his ancestor.

It took him only three minutes to find his answer.

[Jean-Pierre Accardo died at the age of ninety-eight, surrounded by his many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.]

'Coward.

'Coward! You coward!'

The young man wanted to shout his grievances out loud, but he held himself back.

For one thing, he was in a library--but more importantly, he thought to himself, *'If I were in his shoes, could I really have taken my own life?'*

He no longer thought his ancestor's writings were a work of fiction.

He continued to investigate the city's history. He found out that the Avaro family, the Boronial family, the intercession of House Dormentaire, and the great fire were all historical fact.

And in 1711, there was a conflict against House Dormentaire-

As the young man began reading this passage, an older man suddenly came up to him.

"You've been here quite a few times. Is there anything in particular you're looking for?"

He was an old man with an impressive build, sporting white hair and a white beard.

Over the man's breast was a name tag that identified him as the library's manager.

The young man recalled that this was the Third Library, and wondered if the man before him was Dalton the immortal, but he noticed that the manager's right hand was perfectly intact and dismissed the thought.

"It's almost closing time. Leave the books. I can put them away for you."

The young man thanked the imposing but kind old man and left.

When the young man left, the old man took in hand the books that were on the desk.

It seemed that the young man had been researching Jean-Pierre Accardo and the relationship between House Dormентаire and Lotto Valentino. The old man skimmed the page and **recalled the events of that very time.**

'How nostalgic.

'As I recall, I even put on a hook in place of a prosthetic hand back then.'

The old man stroked his own right hand and thought to himself.

'Prosthetics these days are so well-made.'

He then recalled the death of one of his old students and briefly closed his eyes.

'If there really is an afterlife, than how pitiful Monica would be...

'Huey, the one she loves, will never be able to join her.'

The Third Library's manager wordlessly closed the books and disappeared into a corner of the library.

With its memories locked away in a library, Lotto Valentino continued to live out its history, swallowing the sins of its past.

Baccano! 1710
-End-

Afterword

Hello everyone, it's been a long time. This is Narita. It really has been a long time for my readers who only follow the [Baccano!] series. I'm very sorry about this.

This volume covers the story up to the year 1710, and is a sequel to [1705]. The reading order might be a bit difficult to decipher, but please go by the smaller numbers on the spine of the books! This volume's viewpoints were restricted to Huey and the others. It's a rather different style from the other books, but I'd be thankful if you could just accept this as a quirk of the 1700s arc.

Following are some spoilers, so please watch your step.

This was the first time in the [Baccano!] series that I've had to write an ending like this. And I don't think I'll be doing it again in this series. Even *I* was so surprised to see how hard it was to kill off a major character. Unfortunately, her death has already been set in stone, so I couldn't just omit it from the story.

Of course, I'm a very weak-willed person. I can't guarantee that this won't happen again... even *I* don't know what's going to happen to my own story.

Speaking of which, just as I finished writing the book, a certain character from a popular anime died in a very similar way and left some very similar last words--so please don't tell anyone that I screamed and made frantic changes along the way.

Up next will be [1711]. It's the story of how the alchemists in the 1930s and the 2000s gather and set sail, and the point-of-view of the mastermind of the 1710 incident (his reasons and goals and the like). So please sit back and look forward to it.

As a side note, I get a lot of fan letters asking if the mastermind was behind *everything*. But that's not actually the case. Things like Renee's psyche in the 1930s, Ladd's homicidal personality, Graham's eccentricities, and Firo's naivete have nothing to do with him, so don't think too badly of it! After all, if he really *were* behind everything, he'd be on Ronnie's level of omnipotence...

Readers who are only focusing on [Baccano!], even as the [Durarara!!] anime is being broadcast: I'd be grateful if you could try some of my other series as well! I was so

thankful to hear that people who watched the [Durarara!!] anime also bought the [Baccano!] DVDs!

Special thanks and apologies to my editor Papio, the editorial department, and the printing presses, who put up with me through the hellish schedules!

And I completely forgot to mention this last time, but I'd also like to thank Kawakami Minoru-san, who provided me with much information on the 1930s!

To my illustrator Enami Katsumi, to whom I am greatly indebted! Thank you for all your illustrations and your hard work on the Baccano! artbook!

And lastly, thank you, readers, for reading this book!

February 2010
Writing a tribute novel for [A Certain Scientific Railgun] vol.5.

-Narita Ryogo

Translator's Afterword

1710 is over! To be honest, even / can't believe how quickly I managed to translate this volume--it only came in the mail exactly a month ago! It was just that compelling a story to work on.

I came into the book completely spoiled for everything. I knew that Monica was going to die, that Epilogue B was a fake ending, and that Lebreau (Let's make him the next SAMPLE god☆) was going to adopt Huey and Monica's baby. But I loved reading it anyway. I'm pumped up for 1711, for which I've also been partially spoiled (but do not care)!

As for my next project, I'm... not really sure. I was considering 1931: Another Junk Railroad (vol.14), but it covers some characters who were cut from the anime version of 1931. By that logic I'd have to work on Grand Punk Railroad next, but... orz

I'm still not touching 1934. Ever. Therefore, Grand Punk Railroad it is! I can't guarantee a decent update speed, though, and if 1711 is translated into Korean while I'm in the middle of 1931, well... there's one arc in Baccano that I love more than any other, and it doesn't involve trains. If it comes down to it, I'll finish both, of course! Just expect to see some favouritism towards 1711.

In any event, thank you so much for reading, everyone! I always appreciate your encouragements and support! I couldn't have gotten this far without your help. I hope you enjoyed the tragedy that is 1710!

January 2012

-Untuned Strings