



成田良悟  
Ryohgo Narita

電撃文庫



**BACCANO!**

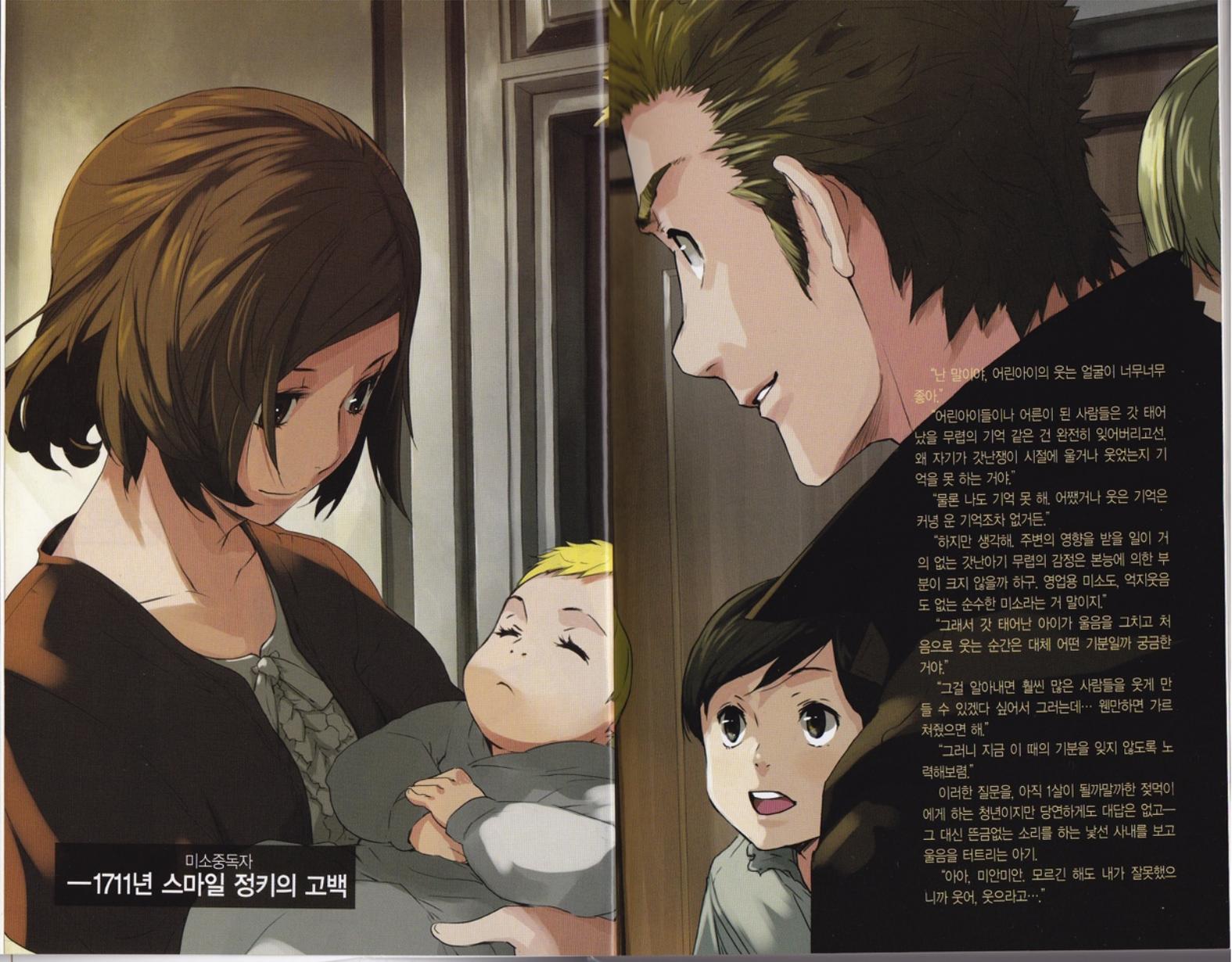
バッカーノ!  
1711  
Whiteemile

**成田良悟**

Ryohgo Narita

イラスト\*エナミカツミ

Illustration : katsumi enami



미소중독자  
—1711년 스마일 정키의 고백

"난 말이야, 어린아이의 웃는 얼굴이 너무너무 좋아."

어린아이들이나 어른이 된 사람들은 갓 태어났을 무렵의 기억 같은 건 완전히 잊어버리고선, 왜 자기가 갓난쟁이 시절에 울거나 웃었는지 기억을 못 하는 거야.

"물론 나도 기억 못 해. 어쨌거나 웃은 기억은 커녕 운 기억조차 없거든."

"하지만 생각해. 주변의 영향을 받을 일이 거의 없는 갓난아기 무렵의 감정은 본능에 의한 부분이 크지 않을까 하구. 영업옹 미소도, 억지웃음도 없는 순수한 미소라는 거 말이지."

"그래서 갓 태어난 아이가 울음을 그치고 처음으로 웃는 순간은 대체 어떤 기분일까 궁금한 거야."

"그걸 알아내면 훨씬 많은 사람들을 웃게 만들 수 있겠다 싶어서 그러는데... 웬만하면 가르쳐줬으면 해."

"그러니 지금 이 때의 기분을 잊지 않도록 노력해보렴."

이러한 질문을 아직 1살이 될까말까한 정키에게 하는 청년이지만 당연하게도 대답은 없고—그 대신 뜬금없는 소리를 하는 낯선 사내를 보고 울음을 터트리는 아기.

"아아, 미안미안. 모르긴 해도 내가 잘못했으니까 웃어, 웃으라고..."

## **1711, Confessions of a Smile Junkie**

"You know, I love the smiles of infants.

"Children and adults don't remember what it's like to be a newborn—or the reasons they laughed and cried when they were still babies.

"I don't remember, either. No memories of laughing. Or crying, for that matter.

"But sometimes I wonder—maybe the smiles of babies, almost completely uninfluenced by the world, are born from some sort of natural instinct. No fake grins or forced laughter. Just pure smiling.

"That's why I wonder what a baby feels like when he stops crying for the first time and smiles.

"I'm saying this because I think knowing might help me make many more people smile. Could you tell me one day?

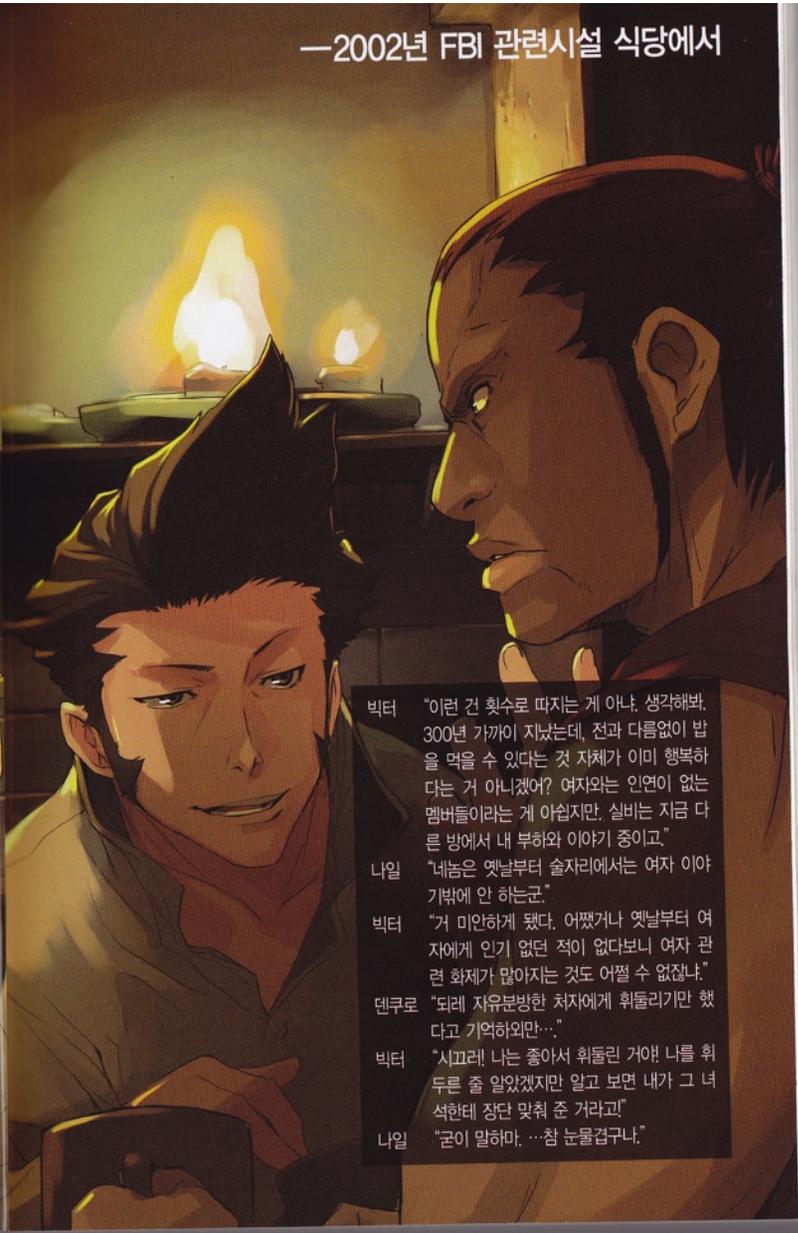
"Try not to forget how you're feeling at this very moment."

The young man was addressing an infant, still perhaps only a year old. Naturally, he received no answer. The baby, suddenly faced with the smiling stranger, burst into tears.

"Oh! Sorry, sorry. I'm not sure what just happened here, but it must've been my fault. So smile, now. Smile!"



빅터 "어때, 여기 밥도 꽤 먹을 만하지?"  
나일 "굳이 말하마. 술을 내놔라."  
빅터 "식사 마치고 취조하려는 놈들에게 술을 대접하는 바보가 어디 있나?"  
나일 "취하면 입이 가벼워질지도 모르는데?"  
빅터 "네놈의 입이 가벼워져봤자 내 욕만 나올 거야."  
나일 "굳이 말하마. 바로 그러하다."  
빅터 "...확 그날, 291년 전의 결판을 이 자리에서 낼까 보다."  
덴쿠로 "그 정도로 해두시게. 주변에 피해가 가면 어찌려고."  
빅터 "건 그렇고 너희들과 이렇게 밥을 먹는 것도 오랜만이군. 참크 녀석이 없는 게 아쉬워."  
덴쿠로 "그대와 이렇게 식사를 함께하는 것도 향해하던 시절을 제외하면 한번인가 두 번밖에 없었다고 생각하오이만..."



빅터 "이런 건 횡수로 따지는 게 아냐. 생각해봐. 300년 가까이 지났는데, 진과 다름없이 밥을 먹을 수 있다는 것 자체가 이미 행복하다는 거 아니겠어? 여자와는 인연이 없는 멤버들이라는 게 아쉽지만, 실버는 지금 다른 방에서 내 부하와 이야기 중이고."  
나일 "네놈은 옛날부터 술자리에서는 여자 이야기밖에 안 하는군."  
빅터 "거 미안하게 됐다. 어쨌거나 옛날부터 여자에게 인기 없던 적이 없다보니 여자 관련 화제가 많아지는 것도 어쩔 수 없잖나."  
덴쿠로 "되레 자유분방한 처자에게 휘둘리기만 했다고 기억하오이만..."  
빅터 "시끄러! 나는 좋아서 휘둘린 거야! 나를 휘두른 줄 알았겠지만 알고 보면 내가 그 녀석한테 장단 맞춰 준 거라고!"  
나일 "굳이 말하마. ...참 눈물꺾구나."

**2002, at a cafeteria in an FBI facility.**

**Victor:** Food here's pretty good, huh?

**Nile:** I say this. I demand liquor.

**Victor:** What kind of idiot would I be to get people drunk before I interrogate them?

**Nile:** What of the possibility that drunkenness will loose our reticence?

**Victor:** I doubt I'd get much further than having to listen to you swear at me.

**Nile:** I say this. You are absolutely correct.

**Victor:** Why, I oughta... Might as well finish that match from 291 years ago, right here and now.

**Denkuro:** This one must ask that you refrain, Master Victor, out of respect for our surroundings.

**Victor:** Ahem. Anyway, it's been a damn long time since I sat down with you people for a meal. Too bad Zank ain't here.

**Denkuro:** This one would like to point out that you only partook in food with us twice, Master Victor, excluding the meals on board the ship.

**Victor:** You can't put *numbers* to things like that. Think about it. It's been damn near three hundred years now—isn't it great to just be able to eat together like before? Though it's pretty sad that no one here's got any luck with women. And that Sylvie just happens to be talking with my subordinate somewhere else.

**Nile:** I see you have not changed in the least, Victor. Women were all you could talk about, even when we went drinking in the past.

**Victor:** Well, excuse me for never *not* being popular with the ladies. Can't help talking about them if you're surrounded by them all the time.

**Denkuro:** To this one's knowledge, Master Victor... were you not merely wrapped around the pinky finger of one particularly uninhibited maiden?

**Victor:** Shut up! I *let* myself get wrapped around, okay? You might think she was playing me, but *I* was the one playing along with *her*!

**Nile:** I say this... You have my condolences.

지금도 한 번씩 꿈을 꾸.  
로트발렌티노에서 있었던 일을.  
벌써 300년 가까이 지났는데도 아직도 잊히지가 않아. 인간의 뇌 용량 같은 건 진즉  
에 넘어설 만큼의 추억을 만들어 온 것 같은데, 역시 그런 부분까지 '괴물'이 되어버린  
걸까.

그런 의미에서 내가 '인간'으로서 지낸 마지막 날이 더욱 깊이 마음에 새겨졌는지도  
몰라.

그레토는 지금 와서 돌이켜보면 특별한 힘이 있었다든가, 능률했다든가, 남들의 배는  
상냥했다든가 등의 인간적인 매력이 뛰어난 사람이었다고 생각해.

하녀였던 당시에는 그런 생각은 떠올리지도 못했고, 떠올렸다 하더라도 입에 담지 못  
했겠지만... 굳이 말하자면 믿음직한 구석이 있는 사람이라기보다는 지켜주고픈 마음이  
드는 사람이었달까.

오만하게 들릴지도 모르지만 내가 붙어 있어줘야겠다는 생각을 하게 만드는 타입이었  
어... 본론만 말하자면 어린아이 같은 사람이었지. 좋은 의미로든 나쁜 의미로든.  
어린아이였기 때문에 나 같은 하녀에게도 아무렇지도 않게 대해 준 것이고... 나 같은  
것을 좋아하게 되었던 건지도 몰라.

그렇기에 나는 그 마음에 보답하고 싶었어.

새장 안의 새가 나왔는지 그레토 쪽이었는데는 이제는 알 수 없게 되었지만... 적우깁  
그 '새장'을 계기로 새장은 불타 없어지고 말았어. 마을째로 불타버렸으니 새장 안에 있  
던 것이 뭐였는지 어떻게 알겠어.

로트발렌티노에서 나왔을 때의 추억은 나와 그레토의 마지막 추억이기도해서 꿈에 나  
올 때마다 난감해.

300년 지난 지금에도 웃어야 하나 울어야 하나... 그것조차 모르겠거든.



## **2002, Sylvie's Reminiscences**

I still dream about it sometimes.

About all the things that happened in Lotto Valentino.

It's been three hundred years now, but it's still fresh in my mind. I feel like I should've created enough memories to overload my brain by now, but maybe even my mind's become inhuman, too.

In that sense, maybe that's why my last days as a 'human being' are so deeply engraved into my heart.

Now that I look back on things, Gretto was never exceptionally amazing, dependable, gentle, or anything outstanding as a person.

None of this occurred to me back when I was still working as a maid, and even if I did, I never would have been able to say it out loud. But I guess I should say he was less dependable than he was someone I wanted to protect.

This might sound arrogant of me, but he was the kind of person who made me want to be by his side. I guess I'm trying to say that he was almost childlike, in a sense. In both the good ways and the bad.

That was why I wanted to repay him for everything.

I don't know anymore if the caged bird was me or Gretto, but in the end... After that incident, the cage burned down and vanished. Even the city was torched. How could I know who was inside the cage now?

The memories of leaving Lotto Valentino are some of the last I shared with Gretto. So I have mixed feelings about dreaming of those days.

It's been three hundred years now, but I still don't know... whether I should laugh or cry.

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- P13 プロローグ 夢の残笑  
P23 第一章 権力者達の失笑  
P85 第二章 来訪者達の談笑  
P157 第三章 恋する者達の微笑  
P237 最終章 笑うな  
P349 エピローグ 笑おうよ

- P77 間章  
ヴィクター・タルボットの報告書  
(一部抜粋)
- P151 間章  
ヴィクター・タルボットの報告書  
(一部抜粋) II
- P233 間章  
ヴィクター・タルボットの報告書  
(一部抜粋) III

And so they left for the sea, towards the New World they had seen only in stories.

With alchemy as their sail, impelled by the winds steering their hearts.

Maiza Avaro, guided by the winds of curiosity.

Szilard Quates, spurred by the winds of ambition.

Victor Talbot, led by the winds of obligation.

Begg Garott, drawn by the winds of research.

Togo Denkuro and Zank Rowan, beckoned by the winds of gallantry.

Gretto Avaro and Sylvie Lumière, chased by the winds of escape.

Nile, driven by the winds of gratitude.

Czeslaw Meyer, pushed by the winds of others.

And many more alchemists took to the sea, each with their own winds pressing behind them.

Along with two men who would never allow their winds to be seen:

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque, enticed by an endlessly unclouded and invisible wind—a wind so clear and malicious that no one could ever lay eyes upon it.

And as for Huey Laforet—



*Prologue:*  
*Fragments of Laughter From a Dream.*

## **Prologue: Fragments of Laughter From a Dream**

### **2003. A maritime museum on the U.S. East Coast.**

"And so, the Advenna Avis finally weighed anchor! Carrying scientists fleeing persecution in Europe, this ship should rightly be known as one of the great heroes of history, bringing seeds of knowledge and reason to the New World!"

The tourists standing before the excited curator turned their attention to the antiquated ship displayed in the museum, a wide assortment of expressions clear on their faces.

"Its role completed, the ship was left to rest at the seaside. And it has been preserved in this state, according to the wishes of the scientists on board. Because we intended for as authentic a preservation as possible, we've left the damage from shipworms and the like as is. This vessel may no longer be seaworthy, but as an academic resource, this is a priceless piece of data, now able to function as a map for researchers who sail the seas of history—"

A young man was looking up at the ship with a complicated expression on his face.

When the curator finally finished his explanation, he asked if anyone had any questions. The young man raised his hand immediately.

"Uh, excuse me. Are there any surviving research notes from the al- I mean, scientists who were on this ship?"

"Ah, yes. They should be in our archives."

"I'd like to have a look at them, if that's all right."

"...I'm terribly sorry, but those papers are currently still being studied, and are not available for public viewing. But I'll talk to someone from the archives later, if you could fill out an official viewing request form and speak to him."

The young man said nothing, accepting the curator's suggestion. He silently looked back up at the biggest exhibit in the museum, the Advenna Avis.

The young man was a traveler.

He had neither accomplished anything of note, nor did he intend to do such a thing.

He had merely been led by something to this faraway place from his hometown in Italy.

That 'something' happened to be the actions of an ancestor in the distant past, and the impact of the incidents that took place hundreds of years ago, still shaking the world of the present.

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"I'm sorry for the wait. These documents are restricted, so it took some effort to sign them out." The archive manager said, carrying in a pile of parchment paper.

At first he outright refused to disclose the contents of the notes, saying that they were still being studied. But when he glanced over at the traveler's name, he suddenly changed his tone.

*"Excuse me if I'm wrong, but are you by any chance a relative of Jean-Pierre Accardo?"*

The name that the manager mentioned was quite familiar to the young man, almost to the point of disgust.

It was the name of his ancestor, a poet from the Italian Peninsula who had led him on this journey which had now left him in debt.

Of course, it had been centuries now since this poet, also known as a playwright, had passed from this world. But his lengthy confessions and repentance, detailed in a great pile of parchment papers, had slightly altered the course of his descendant's life.

"We've actually sent researchers to Lotto Valentino in the past, but we've never been able to gather much information about the Advenna Avis." The manager said, flipping through the notes. "...We've kept this information under wraps because these notes may well bring Lotto Valentino under a great deal of unwanted scrutiny from the world. That is the magnitude of the information recorded here."

Along with sea charts, a sextant, and a compass, they had discovered a book.

It seemed to be a journal of some sort, each page completely filled.

The manager opened up the book to one page in particular and drew the young man's attention to its contents.

"We believe this book contains the logs of one of the crewmen, which began some time before the ship itself had set sail. But I'm afraid there are some... peculiarities in parts of the journal that make it difficult for us to understand what it means. At first we believed it was merely a travelogue, but the pages in this book were made with expensive papers, rather than the fabric-based pages that were most common at the time. From just the foreword, it seems to be some kind of a report."

The manager took a deep breath, and continued.

"...But partway through, the writer begins mentioning immortals, demons, and the like. It seems that these people were not actually scientists, but alchemists. We have heard that even alchemists in relatively modern times practiced forms of exorcism, so the mention of the words in itself does not bother us. But..."

"Do they by any chance say that they've discovered some sort of elixir of immortality, or that they've become immortal?"

The manager was floored.

"So you *do* know something? Maybe some sort of record left by your ancestor?!"

Instead of answering the excited manager's question, the young man responded with a question of his own.

"...Why do you think so?"

"Oh, excuse me. I should have explained myself. Please have a look at this."

The manager pointed at one place in the middle of the book. The young man looked at the phrase and gasped.

[Jean-Pierre Accardo]

It was without a doubt his ancestor's name, written out with clarity. Although he did not read the rest of the sentence, the mention of that name could only mean that his ancestor was involved with these documents somehow.

"Mr. Accardo didn't seem to have boarded the Advenna Avis himself, but it seems that some of his acquaintances were part of the crew. Although we have no idea how they were related. We've confirmed this by matching up logs from the others on the ship."

"Others?"

*'Why were the logs left on the ship?'*

Having noticed the young man's curiosity, the manager cleared his throat and spoke solemnly.

"Yes. It seems that the voyage from Italy to the New World was not as peaceful as they might have wished. Along the way, one of the people on board committed murder, you see."

"Murder?"

"Yes, but our information is terribly incomplete. I'm sorry again for earlier—we're all just very excited at the possibility of learning more from a descendant of someone connected to this ship."

With that apology, the manager finally gave him a proper explanation about the Advenna Avis.

"This was a very unusual voyage. There were no official crewmen—the Advenna Avis was brought across the Atlantic by the alchemists themselves."

"No crew? Is that even possible?" The young man asked. The manager nodded.

"It seems that there were some among the alchemists who were skilled at navigation and seamanship. But in any event, it was a very peculiar voyage. The Advenna Avis originally belonged to the Boroñal Family, who ruled Lotto Valentino at the time. And it was donated to one of the alchemy schools in the city."

"How did those alchemists think they would manage without crewmen?"

"Although many believe that they left alone for the express purpose of keeping their research secret, the truth is that they simply had no time to hire crew."

"?"

"According to the logs, they set sail almost in escape." The manager said plainly. The young man gulped.

"Escape? From what?"

"Well, that would be a very long story. And I can't say we know everything there is to know about this incident, but..."

The manager's tone remained as composed as ever, driving the young man further into anxiety.

"It seems they were fleeing from the city itself—the city of Lotto Valentino."



*Chapter 1:*  
*The Sudden Laughter of Those in Power*

## **Chapter 1: The Sudden Laughter of Those in Power**

There was once a girl named Niki in a city in Italy.

Everyone called her 'Niki'. She had no family name. Perhaps she had one, at one point in the past. But she did not know what it had been, nor would she ever be able to know.

She had been sold to a certain city as a slave, and was once almost murdered by its inhabitants.

She had no idea what lay in store for her future. She fumbled through the darkness without even a glimmer of hope.

But as she lived on, so very close to the abyss, she found salvation.

First, a killer known as the Mask Maker offered her the hope of death.

Second, a womanizing governor offered her human goodwill.

Third, a group of young alchemists offered her a new way of life, less than righteous though it was.

From the second offer on in particular, she spent her days in what she considered nothing short of a series of miracles.

Before that day, life was nothing but an endless cycle of inescapable pain. But her wish to be freed from it all through death at the Mask Maker's hands had been granted so easily (for the amount of time and turmoil involved, anyway). In other words, her world had been turned upside-down.

Had this change brought light into her life?

Or had it brought her yet another step closer to hell?

Even she did not know the answer yet.

Niki was now working as a maid for a group of alchemists.

Compared to her life as a slave, it was practically paradise. But what she desired above all was not a wholesome life.

She was seeking a place to die.

Before the great changes had swept through Lotto Valentino, countless slave children around her died off one by one.

She had only been spared by a stroke of good fortune.

How was she to live now, she wondered to herself. That was when one boy answered her.

*"You could live on, looking for a place to die. And once you find that place, you'll be able to die with a smile, right?"*

*"That'll make me happy too, you know."*

Such incredibly selfish words.

But the selfishness of his response convinced Niki that the boy was being completely honest. And following the words of the boy, who was one of her rescuers, she lived cautiously in search of a place where she could die with a smile.

Time passed, and news came to her.

She received word that one of the young alchemists who had rescued her from darkness and given her a reason to live had died. But even then, Niki did not despair.

The death of her rescuer, whom she had always considered more worthy of life than herself, left her even more lost as to where her place to die really was.

In other words, this was all she felt.

She was ashamed of herself for being unable to cry loudly for her rescuer's death—even though no one blamed her, she continued to despise herself in her heart.

Time continued to pass in peace.

And the girl who had not yet found a place to die was being left behind in its wake.

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### **1711. The city of Lotto Valentino, on the Italian Peninsula.**

"Looks like it's just up ahead, old man."

The plains were covered in grey clouds, just about ready to pour rain upon the earth.

Two horses slowly trotted along the road. On either side, tall grass swayed in the wind.

"I'm looking forward to seeing what's gonna happen to us."

A man approaching thirty grinned at the old man riding beside him to his left.

The old man's grimace did not so much as budge.

"We will have no problems. After all, it has all been arranged for us from the beginning, was it not?"

"I wonder 'bout that. I hear our destination's a pretty unusual place, in a lot of ways."

The younger man continued excitedly.

"Lotto Valentino. Officially, the city's under the jurisdiction of the Viceroy of Naples, but it's actually completely cut off from everywhere else. No glory from the Church, no war at the gates—even though it's a ready-made trading port, with enough room to moor a few gigantic warships. Incredible, isn't it?"

"...I do not need you to tell me what I already know. Or do you place so little trust in your memory that you need me to confirm this for you?"

"Don't be like that. It just means I have a lot of interest in the place. Like an overexcited kid looking forward to seeing new places."

The younger man lowered his voice and snickered.

"Besides, how could anyone *not* get excited, going to a creepy town full of serial killers, drugs, and counterfeit gold? Don't you think so too, Szilard?"

The old man called Szilard, still frowning, shook his head.

"I've told you once, before we departed. We are here to *work*, Victor. I suggest you do not let your curiosity hinder our mission."

"You've got no dreams, do you, old man?"

The man called Victor tried to shrug, but it was difficult to do so while grasping the reins.

"Clinging to immaterial concepts like dreams will leave you nothing but an ignorant child of an alchemist, Victor. And a third-rate messenger of House Dormентаire, at best."

Victor clicked his tongue at the mention of the name 'Dormentaire'.

Victor and Szilard were alchemists being sponsored by House Dormентаire, a powerful noble family from Spain. There seemed to be something about the family's whims that came to Victor like an epiphany just now, but he smiled as he did before and addressed Szilard again.

"Sure, I guess a greenhorn like me'll always look like a third-rate alchemist to you. But I don't think we'll get anything good out of underestimating a city we've never seen before. At least, I'm not letting my guard down. Whatever kind of organization those 'Mask Makers' are, and whatever secrets this city is hiding, I'll see for myself. And then I'll make sure to expose it all for the world to see." He said confidently, despite the fact that they were soon to enter a city in unrest. Szilard sneered.

"*You* underestimate House Dormентаire."

"What?"

"There it is."

As they climbed over a small hill, they caught sight of their destination.

Lotto Valentino, a small city with a population of about fifty thousand.

Stone buildings looked over the sea from their hilly foundations. The streets were laid in perfect harmony with landscape around it.

The Tyrrhenian Sea—a part of the Mediterranean—sparkled a clear blue, turning every view of the city into a beautiful work of art.

Or at least, that was how things had once been.

“...What?”

Victor grimaced at the element that destroyed the picturesque landscape.

In front of each and every building, especially the more important-looking shops and workshops, and more prominently in front of every aristocratic manor, hung flags and signs bearing the same crest.

The designs of the flags were not what concerned Victor.

But the crest, bearing the motif of the yellow hourglass, was greatly familiar to him. It was also reason enough for him to abandon all fantasies about the city.

“Did I not warn you? There is no need for useless curiosity.” The old man said, looking down at the streets overrun with the crest.

“Anything and everything *will* fall under the possession of House Dormentaire.”

Lotto Valentino was already under the control of the Dormentaires.

Instead of stating the truth implied by the scenery, Szilard belittled his younger companion.

“Do you still wonder why you are called a foolish dreamer?”

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### **At the same time, the special archives of the Third Library, Lotto Valentino.**

“You’ll have no regrets, then, Maiza?”

An elderly man asked slowly, under the lamplight.

“The Advenna Avis is due to make port this month. It was procured at a great debt to the Mars Family, but it should be free from the influence of House Dormentaire. Until it sets sail, at any rate.”

“Thank you, Professor. This is more than enough.”

“In other words, once you set sail... You will not be able to return to this city. For *years*, if you are *lucky*. *Decades*, if things go badly. You must already understand this, Maiza. You will naturally lose your aristocratic status. You will not even be able to watch over your father’s death and funeral.”

Though it was still daytime, the room was dim. Without the lamplight it would be impossible to recognize anyone. The young man called Maiza pensively considered the old man's question, and nodded.

"I am ready. I have no attachment to the aristocracy, and even should something happen to Father, I trust that my brother and cousins will take care of matters. I have never had any intention of reconciling with Father in the first place."

"You're being rather talkative. Clearly you've still some regrets about your family." The old man said, provoking the bespectacled man.

"...I'm still human, after all. I can't separate myself from these sentiments so easily."

Acknowledging the old man, Maiza smiled somewhat sadly.

On the door of the room in which they were conversing was a sign that read 'Special Archives'.

Just as the name implied, the archive was filled with fossils, ancient tools, original or rare copies of old books, plants that did not exist in this country, and all sorts of objects that lent the room an exotic air.

In the middle of the room was a chair set up for a guest, and in a corner was an extravagant wooden desk. From the looks of the man sitting there, the room looked less like an archive than the office of the manager of a museum.

The old man was, in fact, a manager of sorts. But this room itself had nothing to do with the functions of the library. It was a place where he could show himself as something other than a simple library manager.

He was Dalton Strauss, an alchemist.

His wooden right arm creaked as he looked directly into the face of the younger man, with eyes that might have belonged to an all-seeing mage.

"Because you are human, you say? And once you've achieved your goal, would you still be able to call yourself as such, I wonder?"

"..."

It would take some effort to come up with a response to Dalton's question. Maiza went silent.

"It seems you've yet to arrive at an answer."

With a faint smile, Dalton got up and picked up a fossilized clam as he continued.

"But that is nothing to be concerned about. If I were to be asked to describe the thoughts of this clam, I would be unable to answer. If this fossilized creature could still possess consciousness, what would it feel? I would have no way of understanding. In other words, the transfiguration you face may be even more jarring than that of a man turning into a fossilized sea creature. You must understand this, Maiza."



Dalton looked straight into his student's eyes in confirmation.

"That... is what it means to become immortal."

Immortality.

It was a word straight out of ancient myth, but it was a familiar term to those who studied alchemy.

Many alchemists considered immortality or the creation of life to be a benchmark, or even the ultimate goal, of the art.

Maiza also knew that Dalton was once one such man—a man who pursued immortality.

And one who had attained it in the flesh.

"But seeing you, Professor Dalton, I can't see it as such a fruitless goal as you claim."

"Perhaps. Yet you have no way of knowing if I am actually a monster who speaks in an approximation of the human tongue."

"That's quite funny, Professor."

"I'm being quite serious. Would a truly 'normal' human being allow himself to so easily disclose the path to immortality? Any sane man would come to the conclusion that 'there is little of merit in immortality' after a hundred years of life, and seal away that knowledge forever. And he would strive to hide his immortality for fear of discovery by prying eyes."

Dalton sighed and took a seat, still holding the fossil.

"And yet I do not make any effort to hide my immortality, and I find myself revealing its secrets to you."

"Why, Professor?"

"Curiosity. I have prioritized my interests as a researcher—no, as an immortal—over human morality."

Dalton revealed everything to Maiza, intending to hide nothing.

"There is a good chance that immortality will bring you nothing but misfortune. I believe I have repeated myself many times now, but my mind is so irreparably broken that I cannot tell you to cease your pursuit of eternal life. I've even lost any sort of greed that would have compelled me to sell my knowledge to the rich for money. ...But I do wish, as an alchemist, that talented men like yourself would be able to live for a very long time."

"You overestimate me, Professor."

"That is not for you to judge." Dalton turned down Maiza's show of humility. He wearily looked down upon the fossil.

"I am always regretful."

"Regretful, Professor?"

"Yes. To be long-lived is to live with a proportionate amount of guilt from the mistakes of one's past. And more recently, one regret of mine was that I did not confer immortality to someone before it was too late."

Dalton, who had once slit his own throat before Maiza in a display of his own immortality, looked into the air.

"I'm sure you know of Elmer, Huey, and Monica."

"Yes."

The three names Dalton mentioned belonged to three young people who had been learning alchemy under his instruction at this library.

The young man named Elmer spoke often with Maiza. As for the others, Maiza knew little more than their names.

Dalton often mentioned Huey Laforet and referred to him as a genius, so the name naturally stuck with Maiza. But he was not one to be jealous of others, so he never really paid his fellow student any mind.

And as for Monica Campanella—

He had heard that she died in a so-called accident in relation to House Dormentaire last year.

Of course, Maiza knew that her death could not have been an accident. But he never delved into the specifics, merely worrying for the hometown that the incident had begun to change.

"It's already been a year now..."

"Yes. If only I had conferred immortality to Monica... no, all three of them, we would never have lost that vast potential and talent known as Huey Laforet."

It was a clumsy way to put things, but Dalton's sentiments were clear. This was because Maiza also knew something else about the three students.

Not long after Monica's death, Huey Laforet had disappeared without a trace.

Some time after he went missing, the alchemy students at the library began to speculate that perhaps Huey had followed Monica in death. Even Maiza was beginning to have doubts about Huey's survival.

"There's no doubt that Lotto Valentino turned itself against House Dormentaire that day. I've been reasonably certain that the three of them were also somehow involved with the incident, but..."

"You will not hear the truth from me. It would be best to ask Elmer yourself."

"I have no intention of inquiring unnecessarily. It must be a difficult memory to relive, even for Elmer."

With that, Maiza returned to the topic at hand.

"In any event, I'm certain that I will not miss this city."

"You mean to say that Lotto Valentino has no future?"

"It *will* have a future, even under the control of House Dormentaire. And in that sense, the lives of the people will improve—they will become better than the time when slaves were forced to concoct drugs. But..."

"You mean to say that you are not interested?" Dalton taunted.

Maiza neither acknowledged nor denied Dalton's observation. He put on a smile filled with all kinds of emotions.

"...Should I succeed in attaining immortality on this journey, I will return someday."

"Oh?"

"Unlike Father, my brother Gretto is an upstanding human being. He can be fainthearted sometimes, but I have faith that he will be able to change the air of this city. And if I could quietly visit the new city he has created one day and take in its changed winds, that will be enough for me."

With that, Maiza left the room.

Dalton spent a moment in silence, dusting the clam fossil.

Then, he sighed and mumbled to himself.

"A difficult memory to relive, even for Elmer', you say?"

His thoughts were not with the topic of Maiza's determination or the future, but the brief tangent they had gone off on earlier.

"I see you still have much to learn about that eccentric of a man."

With his left hand he picked up a piece of parchment from his desk.

"Now... how many more will board the ship?"

Dalton glanced at his prosthetic right arm and remembered the past.

He recalled the words that only those who took hold of the Grand Panacea in the same way would know.

"I hope at least one of them will be able to entertain that devil."

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**At the same time, the Avaro manor.**

"Cease this foolishness, Gretto! Do you intend to bring shame to our family?!"

A man with a short beard roared at a nervous, somewhat baby-faced young man.

"Not at all, Father."

They were inside a certain room in an aristocrat's manor.

It was the office of the family head, filled with opulent furniture.

The shelves were lined with an assortment of imported curios, all clearly of the highest quality. The ornaments, which were almost bordering on decadence, made it seem as though the family head was trying too hard to display his majesty.

The aristocrat, his stature befitting the atmosphere of the room, steadily began to apply pressure to the young man.

The head of the Avaro Family, looking less like a strict parent than an outraged master, raised his voice at his second son, Gretto Avaro.

"What you *intend* means *nothing* if it will lead to the same conclusion! I am already occupied with House Dormentaire's threat to seize this city. You would give them an even greater excuse to impose their control over us?!"

Currently, Lotto Valentino was under the control of House Dormentaire, an aristocratic family from Spain.

Their power had soaked into every last corner of the city, exercising influence over its economy as it pleased by means both legal and criminal.

Because Lotto Valentino was not a very religious city, House Dormentaire had not attempted to use the Church to take over it. Instead, it used money to hold sway over everything from small businesses to the pockets of some of the aristocrats.

The reason for this show of power was the incident in which one of their delegations had been assaulted by the Mask Makers, a criminal organization with its roots in Lotto Valentino.

The term 'Mask Maker' originally referred to a mysterious serial killer who had thrown the city into confusion some time ago, but over time it came to be used as a name for the criminal organization itself.

They set fire to House Dormentaire's headquarters in the city, and their ship that was moored in the harbor. Not only that, the Mask Makers had also looted their supplies and attacked a certain 'criminal' who was being held on their ship.

It was said that the criminal was killed during the attack, but the Avaro head did not know the details. Assuming that the criminal had been silenced by her allies, he passed over the matter.

What scared him, however, was the possibility that House Dormentaire, a formidable force in all of Europe, would use the Mask Makers' attack as an excuse to retaliate against the city.

His fears soon came true with shocking accuracy.

Although the Dormentaires did not bombard the city with cannon fire, they had dispatched shiploads of men to Lotto Valentino under the pretext of investigating the Mask Makers. At this point, it was difficult to tell who the majority was in town—the citizens, or the Dormentaire associates.

The aristocrats trembled at the changes that swept across the city in the span of a single year. But they could do little but spend their days shaking in terror.

Averting his eyes from one such aristocrat, Gretto responded,

"Turning down one or two arranged marriages isn't going to disgrace your name, Father. And I don't think House Dormentaire will care, either."

"No. No, they would not. But what bothers me is your *reason* for turning them down."

"I... I *am* sorry for turning them down, but I didn't think it would work out. And it wasn't as though those marriages would have strengthened our family very much, right?"

Gretto was looking away awkwardly.

His father snorted and rejected his explanation.

"You 'didn't think it would work out'? Laughable. You never had any interest in their families, appearances, or characters in the first place!"

"What are you talking about, Father?"

"Did you think that I would know nothing about you?"

"...?"

A flash of doubt passed by Gretto's eyes. His father was wearing a sneer equal parts anger and condescension.

"Gretto. Did you honestly believe that I would not know? About your witless fascination with a seductress of a maid?!"

"...!"

Gretto blanched.

It was not as though he was lying when he told his father that he turned down the marriage proposals because he was not interested in those women. This was because his heart had already been entranced by another.

In fact, it would be most accurate to say that they were already in mutual love.

However, the problem lay in the fact that his beloved was not the daughter of a nobleman or merchant. She was a simple maid working at the Avaro manor. Some aristocrats in Lotto Valentino were like Gretto in that they did not concern themselves with the matter of class differences. The Avaro head, however, despite the fact that Gretto was only his second son, was of the opinion that the boy should never be allowed to be joined with someone of such low standing.

Gretto knew this about his father well. This was why he had kept his love for the maid a secret. He was shocked at the revelation that his father knew of their relationship, but he made one objection.

"Don't call her a seductress, Father. *I'm* the one who fell in love with her. *I'm* the one who talked to her first!"

*'Maybe he still doesn't know which one of the maids she is.'*

With that hope in mind, Gretto made a point of neglecting to mention her name. However—

"You can do nothing for Sylvie Lumière now, Gretto."

His hopes were dashed by his father's statement.

"In your youthful wanderings you were tempted by the whisperings of a maid. Whatever *you* might say, *this* is the truth that I have decided upon. I could even claim that she had you imbibe that drug so you would lose your mind."

"What... are you saying...?"

The drug his father spoke of was a narcotic that the latter had commissioned from an alchemist some time ago.

Gretto had long been disillusioned with his father, who had exerted power over the city with this product. But unlike his brother Maiza, he did not have the courage to openly rebel against their father. He had been left with no clear solution, spending his days simply in love with a girl named Sylvie Lumière.

Gretto had known from the start that the only family member who would give him and Sylvie their blessings was his older brother.

Perhaps things would have been different if his father's parents—flexible and open-minded by aristocrat standards—were still alive. But they had passed away long ago. His mother's parents were still alive, but they had no say in his father's affairs. The former Avaro head's liberal practices were what weakened the family in the first place, so Gretto had to remind himself that his father was doing everything he could to go against his predecessor for the ultimate goal of bringing honor and glory back to the family.

In the end, all Gretto ever did was wait.

*'Maybe Father's character will change overnight.*

*'Maybe things will change, little by little, as Sylvie and I keep our relationship secret.*

*'Maybe Maiza will convince Father.*

*'Maybe Father will pass away of illness.*

*'If Father passes away, I might be able to persuade Mother somehow.*

*'If Maiza succeeds Father as the head, I could leave this place.*

*'Maybe there will be a revolution, and nobility will come to mean nothing.*

*'Maybe, all of a sudden, this world will belong to me and Sylvie.*

*'Maybe these absurd ideas will one day become a reality.*

*'If I keep waiting, something will happen.*

*'So I have to bide my time.*

*'Until something, anything changes.*

*'But... what if nothing does?*

*'No, that can't be.*

*'So many things have changed already.*

*'The drugs disappeared from the streets.*

*'The people of the city stopped dealing in slaves.*

*'Maiza started to speak politely.*

*'That's right. Things are going to change.*

*'It's all right. As long as I keep waiting... Something is bound to change!'*

Thoughts like this filled Gretto's mind.

So he remained stationary. He justified his escapism with the excuse of biding his time.

The first step he had ever taken for himself had gotten him Sylvie's love.

Despite knowing that their relationship could never be, he truly came to love the maid. Perhaps this was the only step he had ever taken forward in his life.

His courage at the time was only possible because he had nothing to lose.

But now, faced with the fear of losing Sylvie, Gretto was frozen in horror.

His trysts with Sylvie were, perhaps, as addictive as the drugs that had been circulating the streets.

And now that it had all been exposed by his father, Gretto could do nothing but hold his breath in fear of what was to come.

Gretto's reaction gave the Avaro head not a sense of condescension, but one of satisfaction. Letting some of his rage subside, he smiled.

"Hah. You will never see Sylvie again, Gretto. Even if you wish to meet her, you would find it a rather difficult task to reach the girl."

"Wha-"

"Didn't you think it strange, Gretto, that you did not see her all morning?"

Realizing what his father was driving at, Gretto raised his voice.

"Father! What have you done with Sylvie?!"

"I sold her to another aristocrat. One who cannot be swayed by any noble's influence."

"You don't mean... That philanderer on the hilltop?!"

"How insolent, Gretto. No matter his character, he is still the governor of this city."

The mention of the word 'governor' was enough to make Gretto's vision grow hazy.

Esperanza Boroñal.

He was an aristocrat upon whom was bestowed the title of 'count', who ruled this small city as its governor. Lotto Valentino was officially under the jurisdiction of the Viceroy of Naples, but special circumstances had left this city under the count's authority.

His peculiar manner of dress made him the butt of many jokes among the aristocrats and earned him the nickname 'The Clown Count'. But more than that, he was the object of scorn in the city for his love of women.

There were almost no men in his employ at the Boroñal manor, and it was said that his many maids also served as a harem for him. Even Maiza had always called Esperanza a skirt-chaser, so Gretto naturally grew up praising the count on the outside, and thinking of him as a despicable man who would buy women with money on the inside.

The thought of Sylvie being sold into that man's employ left Gretto terrified and outraged. Just the idea that she might be taken advantage of by that clown of a man made him nauseous.

"How could you...? How could you be so cruel, Father?!"

"'Cruel'? 'Cruel'?! You are out of your mind, Gretto! I have shown that vixen *mercy* she did not *deserve*! Be thankful that I spared her life! But if you continue to defy me, I will see to it that she loses even that. All I would have to do is have her taken care of on the way to the governor's estate and blame it on the Mask Maker."

"You wouldn't! There's no way you could... You wouldn't do something like this to *Maiza* because you're too scared, so why *me*?!"

Gretto had brought up his brother because he saw no other way or retaliating against his father. He despaired at his own cowardice, but that was overshadowed by his outrage at what his father had done to Sylvie.

But his father, incensed by the mention of the name, slammed his hands on his desk and shouted back.

"Silence! Do not speak of *Maiza*! Just when I thought he had put his barbaric behaviour behind him, he goes and spends his days worthlessly pursuing alchemy... Do you not understand?! It was because I intended for *you* to inherit my estate that I washed my hands of that fool!"

"How could you say that when *you're* the one who destroyed this city with those drugs from the alchemists?!"

"Hold your tongue! Alchemists are *tools*! A man of the Avaro family, become one of *them*? Preposterous! I will not waste my time with pointless arguments! You are forbidden from leaving this manor. Do not think of taking a single step outside!"

"Wait, Father! I love Sylvie! This isn't some passing infatuation!"

"Your feelings matter nothing! My answer will always be the same, you half-wit of a boy!"

With that, the Avaro head called in his servants and had them drag the struggling Gretto out of the room.

*'Gretto. Still a child who calls for love when he can't even differentiate between satisfying his lust and entering a marriage.'*

The Avaro head vented his fury by jabbing the surface of the desk with the back of his pen.

*'For one who despises me, Maiza underestimates the wall between aristocrats and common rabble, just like Father once did. I can't hand over this family to someone like him.'*

*'But Gretto is only mad with lust. As long as I set him straight now, our name will remain unsullied... But what if Maiza intervenes?'*

*'Maiza... he may be my own son, but he is a nuisance.'*

Eventually ceasing his abuse of the desk, the Avaro head mumbled to himself, very much unlike a parent:

"If only he'd leave this place and never return."

## **The harbor area.**

"My god, what is all this?"

Victor's face twisted in the sea breeze. The scene before him was beyond astounding, pushing the limits of rationality.

"Nothing deserving shock." Szilard replied nonchalantly. "You already know that our employers are more than meticulous enough to do something like this."

"Old man, this isn't just incredible. It's completely mad."

"Anything in excess can at first bear the appearance of insanity."

The cause of their disagreement stood before them.

Ships.

Gigantic vessels that were, in a word, warships.

That in itself was nothing to be surprised at, but the problem was with their formation.

The biggest ships in all of Spain were gathered by the dozen, occupying over half the harbor and all of Victor's line of sight.

Not only that, yet more ships were moored directly behind the ones moored on the piers. They filled the bay area, each specially made vessel connected to the other. Atop this foundation made of ships, a new structure entirely had been erected.

Many years later, Victor would look back on this sight:

[Something like the Kowloon Walled City, I guess. What do you call it, well... It was like one annex built after another after another. No, it wasn't *that* messy. Surprisingly orderly. I'd call it something like an unthinkably huge ship, or some sort of seaborne fortress. Yeah, the Kowloon Walled City was *just* a fortress, but...]

Naturally, at this point in time Victor could not make such a comparison. All he could do was stand in awe at the indescribable sight.

"Wait a second, that's, uh... water, right? What about all the waves?!"

Upon closer inspection he found that there were indeed waves rolling under the ships. However, the ships themselves were unaffected. But the entirety of the fortress looked rather like it was swaying slowly, so Victor had to call the sight something like a single colossal ship comprised of dozens more.

But before he could voice that final conclusion, Victor quickly shook his head.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. This doesn't make sense! How does something that massive stay afloat?! What about the tides? Wouldn't a storm scatter all of this? I've got too many objections to this brand of logic here!"

The structure before him looked like a house of cards that could topple over at the slightest touch, becoming nothing but flotsam and jetsam in the sea. For a moment, he thought that he might prefer it to break apart now for the sake of his mental health, when a woman suddenly addressed him.

"My apologies, Mr. Talbot. Even we, who occupy this structure, have no understanding of its mechanical workings."

The owner of the voice was a woman who could easily be mistaken for a man. This was not because of her physical appearance, but her short hair and masculine clothing.

Her name was Carla Alvarez Santonia. She was the leader of the delegation dispatched by House Dormentaire, a powerful noble family from Spain. She was currently in charge of all Dormentaire personnel in Lotto Valentino, and was acquainted with Victor and Szilard.

"Right. So you don't know either, Carla? Anyway, who the hell designed this crazy fortress in the first place?"

Victor already knew that Carla was a woman, and was thus unaffected by her manner of dress. However, bitter memories of having been humiliated after snorting at her at their first meeting left him somewhat awkward in Carla's presence.

"An engineer from the Strassburg family, I've been told. We were ordered to follow his plans to the letter, but not even the local workmen we hired for the construction could comprehend its workings completely."

"Oh, I remember. The machinist living on that island up north. I've heard his name before."

Victor shrugged at the mention of the man, who worked in a field somewhat different from alchemy, and turned his gaze back to the colossus.

"He must be even crazier than the rumors make him out to be, creating something like this. What do you think, old guy?"

"Nothing in particular. More than the engineer's talent, I believe we should be in awe of House Dormentaire for bringing those plans to life." Szilard said, tapping his cane against the ground. He turned to Carla.

"And what of these 'Mask Makers'? Have you not yet arrested them?"

"...We've captured several men we believe may be affiliated with the organization, but they were nothing but thugs; they knew nothing of the identity of their leaders."

"...Thugs, you say. You mean to say that someone who employs such worthless creatures could create something like *this*?"

Szilard took out a gold piece from his pocket.

To be specific, it was a counterfeit made of an alloy extremely similar to gold.

The Mask Makers, an organization lurking in the shadows of Lotto Valentino; Szilard and Victor would decipher the means by which one in the group's midst had created his counterfeit gold, and claim it for House Dormентаire.

"Yes, we are absolutely certain. The drugs were originally commissioned to local alchemists by some of the aristocrats, and it is essentially no longer being circulated. The influx of counterfeit gold has been decreasing since last year, as well."

Victor shrugged at Carla's report.

"In other words, the alchemist behind the counterfeits is either dead, or he's skipped town."

"Or perhaps he is merely in hiding. In any event, we cannot act until you and your men find clues for us to decipher. I shall take matters into my own hands for now."

With that, Szilard left Victor and stepped onto the ship.

"Sure, but it's not like things're any different in this town, with all the Dormентаire flags hanging left and right."

Looking around, Victor noticed men dressed in anachronistic suits of full armor among the Dormентаire personnel keeping watch in the harbor.

"It's like this whole area's gone back in time a couple hundred years. What is this, a stage play?"

"...Your assessment may not be all that inaccurate, Mr. Talbot."

"Huh?"

"Theatre is just about the only source of entertainment in this city." Carla said grimly, as though the word brought back unpleasant memories.

Victor decided not to pursue this line of thought. He grimaced slightly and threw out a question.

"Anyway, I'm gonna take a look around this place. Anything I should keep an eye out for? I don't wanna make trouble if I can help it."

"There seem to be some matters with which residents do not wish to involve us, but from our perspective, there is really only one thing that may trouble our operations. And it should be of little concern to you, Mr. Talbot."

"?"

Carla paused for a moment, then spoke with eyes averted.

"One must not look down on women while in the presence of the governor. That is all."

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## **Lotto Valentino. The Boroñal manor.**

The elevation of Lotto Valentino rose dramatically as the land grew further from the shore.

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

Of course, things had changed in the past year.

In recent days, it looked more and more as though they were trembling in fear of the power of House Dormentaire, which was rapidly immersing Lotto Valentino.

However, there was one manor in particular that seemed to be refusing to bow to their show of strength. It was the home of Governor Esperanza Boroñal.

The manor was primarily white in color, and was surrounded by a garden that harmoniously blended in with the sights of the city. Inside was a space that could have almost plausibly been inhabited by fey creatures.

But working themselves to the bone inside the manor were not fairies or elves, but the employees that had been entrusted to care for the building. Despite the expression, the employees were mostly female, and even the sight of their earnest work became part of the beautiful atmosphere of the manor.

In stark contrast to the image of the manor interior, a girl stood outside it with a look as grim as death.

From her manner of dress she was clearly not one to belong in the aristocratic quarter, but she wore a clearly expensive pair of spectacles over her eyes.

The girl's name was Sylvie Lumière.

Until yesterday, she was a maid working in the far-off Avaro manor.

Today, she would start working here as a live-in maid.

Normally, one would be happy to find oneself in the employ of a more eminent man.

But swirling through Sylvie's heart was a whirlpool of terror and trepidation.

Half of it was her fear at facing the master of this estate, known by all to be a philanderer beyond cure.

The other half was her fear for the position in which she had left Gretto Avaro.

Sylvie and Gretto were not merely a young master and a maid—they were inextricably linked by great affection. To be specific, they were lovers.

It was a love beyond her station.

Perhaps that guilt for transcending the boundaries of class had given birth to a sense of unease between them both. In any case, they had bonded so deeply that they were now practically co-dependent.

But Gretto's father had severed that connection so easily.

Once he discovered their relationship, the Avaro head placed all of the blame on Sylvie and used his connections to sell her to the Boroñal manor.

It was essentially an act of human trafficking, but it was nothing anyone would make a fuss over. It was not a matter of the age, but the location—until just a few years ago in Lotto Valentino, the slave trade was a fact of life even amongst the commoners. No one would be incensed over the fact that a hired hand was sold from one aristocrat to another.

Being a servant, she could not bring herself to argue with her master. And once he roared, "*What do you think you can do for Gretto?! You will only serve to eat away at him and hinder him!*", she could no longer even reply.

Sylvie herself had wondered on occasion—wasn't she just getting in Gretto's way?

He had always told her, "*We just have to keep waiting, and we'll find a way*". But Sylvie was not so optimistic a person, nor was she the type to indulge in the moment while knowing that they could never be together.

This was an opportunity, she told herself.

Gretto had addressed her with gentleness, despite her low standing.

From that point on, life had been like a wonderful but excruciating dream.

Sylvie was terrified that Gretto would be punished by his father. That fear still remained like shards of her dreams, but there was no way to know for sure now.

And even if there was a way to know, she would have no way to help him.

"..."

Once more, Sylvie looked up at the manor nervously.

Behind her was a horse-drawn carriage from the Avaro manor, and several rugged servants. They were here to make sure that she did not escape.

Although Sylvie was not physically restrained, one of the servants had said, "Apparently we can do whatever we want with her if she tries to run off. Let's hope she's up for a little chase." with a disturbing grin. Sylvie, ever fearful and timid, found herself restrained by her mind.

The Boroñal manor, where it was said that the governor housed countless mistresses and lovers.

Its high walls and sturdy door, though meant to keep strangers out, looked to Sylvie almost like the exterior of a prison.

Soon, someone would step outside and open the door.

And once she walked in, she would no longer be able to leave as she pleased.

*'And even if I could leave, I... I won't be able to meet Gretto again...'*

Perhaps seeing Gretto again would only complicate their situation further.

Wouldn't such a reckless meeting only worsen his position?

All kinds of thoughts passed through her mind and vanished.

*'It was all a dream. I'll pretend I was having a wonderful dream.'* Sylvie tried to tell herself, frozen before the doors.

Now that she thought about it, the fact that someone like Gretto had treated her as an equal was absurd to begin with.

She would forget everything. She would start life anew. There had never been any hope for their relationship in the first place.

But things like that were easier said than done.

The moment Sylvie tried to put her resolve into action, or tried to believe in what she was telling herself, her memories of Gretto stopped her.

Just as she tried to empty her heart, yet another wave of regrets flooded in.

*'I... I still haven't...'*

*'I still haven't even said goodbye to Gretto...'*

If she were to see him again, her pain would probably only worsen.

Though her mind understood this fact, her body would not stop trembling.

As she stood shaking with her head bowed, the servants spoke to her.

"You already know this, but don't even think about running away, you hear?"

"You're not the only one who's going to be punished. Who knows what the Master might do to Young Master Gretto?"

"...I, I know..."

Even her voice was shaking. She couldn't pronounce anything clearly.

She attempted to force a smile onto her face so no one would think of her as strange, but her throat tightened. The dull pain prevented her from making any other face.

*'Gretto.'*

*Forget him.*

*'I'm so sorry. I... I...'*

*Forget him.*

*'I can't do a thing for you...'*

*Forget.*

*'No.'*

*Forget it all.*

*'No. I could never.'*

*Forgetting everything will be best for Gretto, too.*

*'...'*

She must forget. She told herself countless times to forget. But the impulse of denial pressured her each time, leaving Sylvie rooted to the spot as though she had been chained.

The friction between the two conflicting feelings slowly strangled her heart.

Feeling her heart go numb, Sylvie found tears welling in her eyes and her composure breaking.

It seemed that the sight of her choking down sobs was clearly visible to the Avaro servants. One of the men watching her spoke to her, though not in a tone that indicated any sort of sympathy.

"Hey, cut that out. You know how much trouble there might be if anyone finds out we sold a girl to the governor against her will? And what if the governor gets angry? Can't even imagine what the Master might do to Young Master Gretto if anything like that happened." The man said, leaning against the carriage with a self-deprecating grin.

His words gave birth to a new emotion in Sylvie.

It was nothing so fiery as anger, but something dark and thorny, like directionless hatred.

Why had Gretto's father sold her to the governor? It could not have been simply for the purpose of splitting them apart physically. Kicking her out of the manor might not have deterred Gretto or Sylvie.

But what if a man of an even higher standing than the Avaro Family—a governor, for instance—were to take advantage of her?

When Sylvie realized that this was a plot to split them apart not only physically, but also psychologically, ripples of silent fury disturbed her heart. At this point, she could not even figure out a potential target for her hatred.

Not even herself, unable to defy her fate and left standing in self-loathing and despair.

"Hey, look over here a second."

Another voice suddenly addressed her.

*'Stop it. Stop breaking my heart.'*

"C'mon, look at me."

In the midst of her silent screaming, Sylvie realized that the voice that was talking to her did not belong to any of the Avaro servants.

Perhaps he was one of the governor's servants, she thought, and turned around without even thinking to wipe her tears.

She found herself looking at a young man who was slightly older than herself.

"That face doesn't suit you at all. Here, try showing me a smile."

"...Pardon?"

Sylvie stared blankly at the man, shocked at the sudden request.

The young man was entirely nondescript in appearance, neither handsome nor ugly. But his smile, even in the face of her attempts at choking back her sobs, left Sylvie feeling somewhat disturbed by him.

Instead of Sylvie, who remained frozen, one of the Avaro servants addressed the young man.

"You. Are you affiliated with this manor?"

"I guess you could say that. I was called here by Spera—I mean, the governor today, too."

"Perfect. Take this servant inside. She's the new maid that's starting work here today."

"Oh, I see. The governor loves women, so I'm sure he'll be happy."

His cruel words, accompanied by his smile, cut Sylvie to the bone. The Avaro servants boarded the carriage with a look of relief.

And once they took note of the smiling man opening the door—

"We'll leave this to you."

And with that, the carriage departed.

*'I haven't even gone inside yet.'*

Shocked at the servants leaving her with a total stranger, Sylvie mused that this might be her final chance.

*'Maybe I could fool this man somehow and escape. And... and... and then...?'*



But in the end, she could only reach the same conclusion. She came to the realization that, no matter what opportunity appeared before her, she would never be able to take it.

As Sylvie remained rooted to the ground, the young man addressed her.

"What's wrong? Don't you want to go inside?"

The directness of his question left her dumbstruck.

"Oh, I... um... I..."

"Right, I haven't introduced myself yet. I guess it really must be suspicious for someone like me to be at some nobleman's house. It's no wonder you're doubting me."

"N-not at all!"

Cutting off Sylvie's hurried denial, the man introduced himself.

"The name's Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross. It's nice to meet you."

His sincere smile compelled Sylvie to answer without even thinking.

"M-my name is... Sylvie Lumière." She squeaked. The young man's grin widened.

"That's a great name you have there! So, now what?"

"Pardon?"

*'What does he mean by that?'*

Sylvie's sobs stopped for the moment at the unusual question.

"Well, first I'd like to start by asking why you were looking so down, but I won't ask if you don't feel up to answering. But I think I might at least be able to help you with what you're planning to do now."

*'?'*

Although her mind had been filled with grief, regret, and hatred up until a split second ago, they had been replaced with confusion. Elmer's suggestion had come out of nowhere, and Sylvie could not keep up with his line of thinking.

"Um... What does that mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"No, well... Um... we've never... met before, have we?"

"We haven't, right? But that doesn't really matter now, does it? Let's start with the basics, then. Do you want to work at this manor or not?" He asked, and waited for Sylvie's reply.

"I... don't want to work here."

Sylvie had been lost for answers, but she found herself speaking for her true intentions without even thinking.

"...Oh! I... I don't mean that I dislike this manor. It's only that there's someone I won't be able to see again once I start working—"

Sylvie cut herself off.

Although she was well aware that mentioning Gretto would bring him nothing but trouble, Sylvie also knew that her personality would not let her worm her way out of inquiring conversations so easily. But as the tears began welling in her eyes again, Elmer grinned and addressed her.

"All right, then. Let's go."

"Pardon?"

The young man had taken her hand all of a sudden, and Sylvie caught herself on the verge of trying to shake him off.

"You want to see this person, right? Don't worry! I'll make up a good excuse for Speran later, and I won't tell a soul about whoever it is you're going to meet."

"...!"

Elmer looked around and suddenly called towards a maid working in the front yard.

"Excuse me! Hello! I just wanted to let you know, I'll be borrowing the new maid for a bit!"

The maid turned towards Elmer with a snicker and shouted back.

"It's so nice being young, isn't it? I'll make sure to tell the governor for you, so go on and have fun!"

"Thank you!"

Waving at the maid, Elmer turned back to Sylvie and grinned.

"Problem solved! It's my fault that you're going outside now, okay?"

"..."

Sylvie could not follow the fast-advancing series of events, able to do nothing but blink rapidly. Elmer's nonchalant decisiveness and strength made her realize that he was an entirely different type of person from Gretto. She found herself staring at him curiously.

But she would never go so far as to think along the lines of, 'So this man will be my soulmate in Gretto's place'. That was because, just like the smile he first showed her, his decisiveness felt somehow inhuman and eerie.

"So who *is* this person you wanted to see, anyway? Oh, if you don't wanna tell me, I can just help you get to the right place." Elmer said. Sylvie didn't feel very much inclined to reveal Gretto's name to such an unusual man—nor did she have the courage to ask him to leave her alone. So she decided to go about things in an indirect fashion.

"Um... Do you know where the Avaro manor is? I was employed there until just yesterday..."

Sylvie frantically searched for a cover story to finish off her sentence. But—

"Oh, Maiza's place! 'Course I know where that is." Elmer answered plainly.

Sylvie blinked.

"You know Master Maiza?!"

Maiza Avaro was the elder brother of her beloved Gretto. Just the mention of the name was enough to rattle Sylvie further.

Elmer was dressed like an ordinary commoner, but perhaps he was actually an aristocrat wandering incognito, Sylvie mused. But the mysterious man continued innocently, despite her clear surprise.

"I guess you could say we know each other. ...Huh? Is *Maiza* the one you're looking for?"

Elmer spoke of Maiza as though they were close friends. Sylvie could practically feel a ray of light from the heavens shining down upon herself. Of course, the unease she felt at Elmer's attitude did not allow her to drop her guard for even a moment.

"N-no... Not Master Maiza, but... His brother Gretto." Sylvie whispered hesitantly. She stiffened when she found herself mentioning Gretto by name, but there was no turning back now. Sylvie steeled her heart.

"I owe so much to Gretto... I wanted to express my thanks and say goodbye to him properly."

*'But that's not true at all. I don't want to say goodbye. I'm not interested in farewells.*

*'I just want to escape somewhere, by his side.'*

Sylvie was considering an even more drastic course of action than Gretto.

*'No! I don't care about running away, or worrying about the future. I... I just want to see him again. I just want to see Gretto!'*

Although she could not bring herself to voice her thoughts, Sylvie let her emotions show clearly in her tone.

"I want to see him, no matter what it takes. Please, if only once before I begin working for the governor. I beg of you!"

Elmer turned the matter over in his thoughts for a moment.

"Just once is enough for you?"

"Pardon?"

"Is that going to be enough to make you satisfied? To make you smile? Oh, sorry. I know you might be thinking, 'That's none of your business', or 'Stop being so nosy'. But how do I put this? Well, it's an important question that's going to decide how much I'll be motivated."

Sylvie tilted her head at Elmer's unusual question.

"I... I don't think I could say for sure until I've seen him again. I'm sorry." She apologized, despite having nothing to be sorry for.

"Ah! Sorry. You're right. You wouldn't know until you've seen him, would you? Then I'll do whatever it takes to make sure that it'll be the greatest rendezvous in history! So cheer up now. Smile!"

Elmer laughed, pulling Sylvie along by hand. He stopped at a slight distance from the manor gates and thought for a moment with his eyes on the road.

"Let's see, now. Maiza looks like he's busy doing something with Headmaster Dalton these days, so... Of course! I think I know someone who can go in and out of Maiza's house!"

Elmer ran along jovially, dragging Sylvie along through the unfamiliar streets.

There was something rather comical about their gait, so out of place in the city ruled by House Dormentaire.

But the most important thing for Lotto Valentino now was the fact that these two people had encountered one another.

The moment the name of their mutual acquaintance, Maiza Avaro, was mentioned, their cogs met and fit together, spinning to a start.

This was the first meeting of Elmer C. Albatross and Sylvie Lumière.

But it was only the first of many more encounters that took place on this day.

No one could tell if these meetings and reunions would bring about fortune or misfortune, but with this moment as the starting point, Lotto Valentino slowly began to stir.

### **Interlude: Excerpt from the reports of Victor Talbot**

[This report is a copy of some of the letters I sent earlier.

I do not know who will be reading these notes, but there is something I would like to make clear ahead of time.

After polishing and revising my reports, I have simplified my observations into exceedingly straightforward phrases.

In order to prevent any possible misunderstandings, I would like to note that I am not the kind of person who normally uses such crude language when drawing up a report.

These particular reports, however, are a special exception, as they also serve as personal letters to a recipient who knows me very well. They are written in a very informal style.

In other words, should these reports be exposed to the world after my death, I would like to make it clear that the views expressed in these letters are personal in nature, and that I have no intention whatsoever of disgracing House Dormентаire or defaming my employer's family.

Please keep this in mind as you read on.]

[Hey. How've you been?

Feel any lonely 'cause I haven't written to you in so long?

I'm doing this 'cause you keep making a fuss about getting your reports, but old man Szilard's probably gonna give you all the tiny details in *his* letters. So I'll just write whatever like usual.

Bet you'd be happier that way, too. It'll be just like I'm right next to you.

This letter had better keep you up all night, thinking about me.

So.

We got to Lotto Valentino just fine, but about that crazy thing you built in the harbor—that Strassburg guy must be even smarter and crazier than I heard about.

And you Dormentaires are no slouches, either—actually building a monster like that.]

(Omission)

[About Lotto Valentino? What can I say? It was more than I expected, for one.

I've only been here for a day, but let's start with the facts:

This city is out of its fucking mind.

That's both my report and my personal opinion.

You know, when I first saw the city on horseback, I almost felt sorry for it.

A tiny group of bad guys hiding behind the powerless aristocrats, making drugs and counterfeit gold, who end up turning House Dormентаire against the entire city.

So when I thought about it that way, I felt bad for all the people that lost their city to a little band of criminals.

But after sunset, our spy \_\_\_\_\_ (Translator's note: The spy's name was not copied onto this duplicate) told me all the details. I thought I was gonna be sick.

Who knew? The ones who made the drugs were the *people living here*.

Apparently the drug trade started when some aristocrat named 'Avaro' commissioned it from an alchemist. I don't know what happened, but after that, the *commoners* started producing the drugs.

Everyone in town, from seamen to grannies selling vegetables, bought little kids from slave traders and forced them to work in those godawful drug-laden workshops. They fed the drugs to those kids and worked them until they lost their minds and died!

I asked him how many kids the city killed that way. \_\_\_\_\_ just bit his lip with this really bitter look. Said something about how he might've been able to save a lot of them if he'd started spying on this city earlier. Talk about dedication, huh? If we'd known about this ahead of time, you'd have snapped up control over the drugs before anyone could even blink, right? And if you'd left that work to me, I'd never have used little kids. That's just messed up. I bet old man Szilard might, but I'd have beaten the idea outta him if he tried. Probably.

And about that—I'm just talking hypotheticals. You already know, right? I'm completely opposed to drugs like that. What the hell's fun about getting high on stuff like opium and losing your mind? I guess I'd make an exception for medication, but still.

Come to think of it, this alchemist I met today—Begg—apparently only works with narcotics like that. I think he's the one who made the first of the drugs for that aristocrat. I don't think we'll get along.

I couldn't say anything to his face, though, seeing as he's a friend of \_\_\_\_\_.

But hey, did you know?

\_\_\_\_\_ might've already told you this, but...

This entire city's full of villains. The *aristocrats* are the ones living moral lives.

And if you expected me to go nuts about keeping the peace or something, you're dead wrong.

Sure, all the stuff that went on in this city leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

And if I'd known about all this before I got here, I might not even have wanted to come.

I felt like selling off all the Lotto Valentino bastards to slave traders when I first heard about the disgusting things that went on.

That's how revolting it all was.

Sickening.

And I don't know if you already know this, but there's this girl named Niki who's working as a maid for the Meyer family—that's where \_\_\_\_\_ works—and wait 'til you read this. She used to be one of those slave kids.

The young lady told me everything with a straight face. She didn't hold back a thing.

I mean, she was calm. But you could tell it was the kind of story you couldn't *not* tell with a straight face. She's even younger than I am, but man. That's some incredible strength of will.

Don't get me wrong, though. I'm not gonna cheat on you—you're still the best.

Although you're probably going through men *and* women every night in bed.

Sorry, I got off topic.

Actually, that was on purpose.

All the stuff Niki told me about was so repulsive that I just had to think about something a little more lighthearted.

So let me write this again, for emphasis.

Every last adult in Lotto Valentino is rotten to the core.

But they're all wearing these faces, as if they think they're doing all this in order to survive. As if they're not at fault. It's nauseating just looking at them.

Though I guess I can't say *everyone* is guilty. \_\_\_\_\_ says that some people never got involved.

According to him, this lady who runs the patisserie halfway up the hill was just way too stubborn to join up with those bastards. So I'm thinking I might go get some treats there tomorrow. I doubt they'll go stale that quickly, so I'll send some over to you later.

Back on topic. I'm saying that the people here are all anonymous commoners who're trying really hard not to think that they're the villains. Sickening.

And here I was, half-hoping to find some evil secret society to uncover and destroy.

I told old man Szilard about it, and he just laughed at me.

What's wrong with an alchemist having a few dreams, right?

Anyway, you're not here just to read my travelogues, huh? Carla's reports are probably gonna overlap with mine, so let me give you a bit of subjectivity.

Something interesting happened today.

Turns out it's been exactly a year since the Dormentaire ship burned down in the harbor.

I'm still investigating to see if that's relevant to any of the stuff I talked about, so just wait for next week's report for more info.

So all I can tell you today is the fact that there was a bit of an incident today.

I split off from Carla and ran into a bunch of weirdos in the harbor district.

Not 'weird' in terms of their skin color or their nationality. I'm talking about the kind of people they were.]



*Chapter 2:*  
*The Chortling Chatter of the Visitors*

## **Chapter 2: The Chortling Chatter of the Visitors**

### **The Lotto Valentino harbor marketplace.**

Just as Elmer set off with Sylvie in tow, an incident was about to occur in the harbor.

A loud noise shook the air.

Something resembling the sound of falling stones rocked the afternoon marketplace.

Though the passersby and merchants turned towards the sound, which had caught them off guard, those who had already been looking at its source screamed softly and turned their backs upon the scene.

The source of the noise was a man.

A knight in heavy metal armor had smashed into a storage shelf like a falcon in flight.

The wooden shelf collapsed with a crash, leaving destruction in its wake.

Naturally, the armored man had not collided with the shelf of his own will. He had been thrown into it by someone else.

"..."

The one responsible for tossing a grown man decked out in full armor was standing in the middle of the marketplace in silence. He had brown skin, and was obviously alien to Lotto Valentino. He seemed to be in his mid-twenties to early thirties, but because all three men were foreigners, the locals could not pinpoint their exact ages.

Of course, the people elected to rush out of the area rather than pay the foreigners any more attention.

They were not necessarily scared of the man's strength and actions. What worried the people was the fact that the knight's armor was adorned with House Dormentaire's crest.

The armored knights carrying swords, walking the streets in an age when musketeers were the norm, was a demonstration of sorts from House Dormentaire. The people of Lotto Valentino, well aware of this, did not try to approach the armored men for purposes other than business.

But the reason no one had fled the scene until they had caught a glimpse of the crest was that no one had expected to see someone picking a fight with one of House Dormentaire's men.

But the foreigner had indeed provoked Dormentaire's hired knight, completely defying the city's sense of reason.

Almost no one chose to remain at the scene. Most people were afraid to become involved.

"Ugh... Argh..."

The knight got to his feet and glared at the brown-skinned man.

"You bastard... Do you have any idea what you've just done?!" He spat in Spanish. The brown-skinned man tilted his head blankly.

Although there was clearly a language barrier between them, the knight continued undeterred.

"You've just as good as spat on the Dormentaire name! I don't know what ship you're crewing, but I'll make sure even your master pays for this!" The knight cried in spite of the pain, as though trying to overwhelm the foreigner through fear.

Many more men gathered on the scene, drawn by his voice. There were all sorts of people, from armored knights to guards armed with pistols, but each and every one of them was wearing the hourglass symbol on their shoulders and collars.

"You don't need to know what I'm *saying* at this point, eh?"

The injured knight smirked, sure of his superiority.

"Who the hell is this? What's going on here?" One of his fellow knights asked. The injured knight glared at the brown-skinned man.

"How should I know anything? This insane bastard just kicked me!"

"What?"

"What're we doing, now?"

"Could he be one of the Mask Makers?"

The knights all tossed out comments of their own, but the offending foreigner did not answer.

Instead of trying to run, he was standing boldly as though daring the Dormentaire musketeers to confront him.

"You're gonna have to come with us."

One of the knights cautiously approached him and grabbed on to his arm. However—

"...? ...?!"

*'He... he won't even budge...'*

The knight felt as though he had just taken hold of a deeply rooted tree. If he wanted to move this man, he would have to lift him clear off the ground.

"Don't even think about resisting, you piece of scum!" One of the knights threatened anxiously, swinging his fist at the foreigner's face.

But the foreigner parried the strike with a headbutt. The attacker found himself flying through the air and rolling across the ground.

At that very moment, the most lightly armored man of the group drew a stiletto and lunged at the foreigner.

The locals, watching from afar, were now certain of the foreigner's death.

The lightly-armored man was a member of Carla's personal team, much more skilled than any of the knights. The people also knew that no one would raise a fuss over a Dormentaire associate murdering a mere sailor.

But the man defied their beliefs and narrowly avoided the stiletto.

As the blade passed by his throat, missing by a hair's breadth, the foreigner finally allowed his emotions to show.

"...(Not bad)."

He muttered in a foreign language, and smiled.

The brown-skinned man instantly swiveled and attempted to strike the guardsman backhand, but the guardsman evaded the attack in the blink of an eye and exchanged glances with another guardsman on the scene.

The second guardsman drew his stiletto without a word, and leapt towards the brown-skinned man.

After avoiding the second blade, which had come from the opposite direction as the first, the mysterious man took the arm of one of the guardsmen. He twisted his body around and tossed the man aside with raw strength.

In that very direction stood the second guardsman.

But these men were on a different level altogether from the armored knights. The man on his feet easily avoided his friend, and the thrown man rolled to a stop and got to his feet without harm.

For a moment, they were at a stalemate.

The knights and musketeers at the scene looked around at one another, wondering what they should do. But as they stood around helplessly, the fight resumed. The guardsmen and the foreigner rapidly closed the distance between one another.

But their fists and blades would never hit their marks.

Two interlopers interrupted the battle, parrying both sides' attacks.

One was a black-haired man, likely of East Asian descent. He had caught hold of the guardsmen's wrists in one hand each, stopping them before their stilettos could pierce his chest.

Meanwhile, the man who stopped the brown-skinned foreigner's punch was a man of even darker skin, who had held back the fist with his entire body.

"...It seem to this one that you've failed to heed our advice, Master Nile." The Asian man said, in slightly stilted English.

"Calm yourself. We are not here to commit murder." The dark-skinned newcomer added.

With a click of the tongue, the man called Nile replied in English.

"Though I see no necessity to these words, I say this. Do not get in my way."

"This one must ask that you do the same for yourself, Master Nile."

The Asian man let go of the guardsmen's wrists and bowed his head.

"This one's companion has done you a great disservice."

Realizing that this newcomer would listen to reason, the guardsmen quietly sheathed their stilettos.

"Hah. How boring." Nile complained, noting that the two guardsmen were no longer showing any signs of hostility. Although the guardsmen made no sign of having heard or otherwise, they remained silent.

And as though in their place, Nile's first targets—the knights—raised an angry cry.

"What country are you coming from?! Don't think you'll get away with this!"

It sounded as though they were at least attempting to keep diplomacy in mind, questioning the foreigners as to their affiliations.

The Asian man, who was armed with a katana, frowned and spoke.

"A difficult question to answer, this one must say. This one is called Togo Denkuro, a man under the protection of no country in particular."

Togo Denkuro was an alchemist studying under a master in western Europe.

Having been cast away in a sea to the distant east, he had been rescued by a merchant ship. And many twists of fate later, he had come to learn alchemy in Europe.

He had come to Lotto Valentino as his master's messenger, in an attempt to get into contact with an alchemist named Dalton.

During his previous visit to this city, he had only been accompanied by Zank. But Nile, who had joined their company this time, was known to be a man possessed of a particularly wild temper. He had been outraged at a certain incident that had taken place in this city some time ago, but Denkuro had determined that Nile's anger had subsided at the end of that incident. And so he brought the man along with them. However—

The result of his judgement was the commotion that had broken out in the harbor immediately upon their arrival.

He was ashamed for having taken his eyes off Nile for even a single moment, but Denkuro did not place undue blame on him.

Violent a man as Nile was, he was not one to lash out unprovoked.

After introducing himself, Denkuro quietly surveyed the situation and continued.

"Would you care to explain what has happened here, Master Nile?"

Instead of shrinking back, Nile scowled at the Dormentaire men.

"Though there is no such need, I will take the trouble to speak. I happened to witness an arrogant fool in the midst of kicking a child and attempting to trample his head. So I kicked him in much the same way, though I have yet to crush his skull."

Denkuro looked around and spotted a frightened child looking in their direction from a corner of the marketplace.

But all the knights would have to do was deny Nile's claim and their responsibility. Although Denkuro had only just arrived at Lotto Valentino, it was clear to him that the citizens feared the men bearing the hourglass crest. If the people and the child were to remain silent out of terror, Nile would be to the city little more than a violent ruffian.

Fearing such a misunderstanding, but judging that there was no lie in Nile's claim, Denkuro fell into worry for a moment. But his anxiety was proven unfounded in a matter of seconds.

"Shut up! What's so wrong about kicking a brat that gets in my way?!"

Denkuro was somewhat relieved at the knight's candid admission, but another thought surfaced in his mind.

*'Are these men perchance aristocracy?'*

*'We were involved in a scuffle with aristocrats last time, as well. If only 'twere possible to settle this matter amicably...'*

In Denkuro's homeland, there was a tradition: Anyone who crossed the path of a *daimyo's* procession only had himself to blame if he were to be cut down for his impudence. He thought perhaps that this place was also home to a similar custom.

But the knights standing in the harbor did not look nearly as powerful as any *daimyo*, nor did they carry themselves like members of the aristocracy. The two guardsmen who had fought Nile to a draw, perhaps, were the only ones possessed of such grace.

"It is clear, then. Denkuro. These fools deserve my wrath."

Hearing Nile's proud declaration, Denkuro thought to himself that this companion of his might leap into a *daimyo's* procession on the whims of his anger, and prayed that Nile would never set foot on his homeland of Japan.

Nile had, several times in the past, boasted that he would attack anyone who irritated him, be it members of the aristocracy or royalty. He had also carried out this threat several

times. The fact that his head still remained attached to his body was partly thanks to his incredible skill, but it was mostly due to the connections possessed by Denkuro and Zank's master.

And in this case, even if the outraged knight here were a prince, Nile would not have hesitated to kick him for assaulting the child.

*'Ah, 'twould be most preferable to avoid a commotion, but...'*

Recalling that he had gotten into a fight in the harbor six years ago as well, Denkuro thought to accept this situation as a destiny of sorts.

"Master Nile. We have been in this land for but a short time—though our sensibilities may not allow us to stand idly by as a knight kicks a child, if our judgement goes against the sensibilities of this *land*, we must apologize. This one wishes to bring this situation to as peaceful an end as possible."

"What is this, Denkuro? These wretches deserve-mmph!"

Nile found his mouth being covered by Zank, who was even larger than himself.

Denkuro ignored them and attempted to come to a compromise. However—

"Unacceptable! I'll have your head for humiliating me!"

Hearing the belligerence in the knight's tone, Zank released Nile.

"What now, Denkuro? I have no qualms about loosing violence here."

"This one will be greatly distressed if you choose to behave in the same way as Master Nile, Master Zank."

Denkuro thought carefully about his next course of action.

In the scuffle six years ago, the commotion had been ended by the intercession of a man called Aile, who was the leader of the delinquents on the streets.

But the men they faced today were not such petty youths.

Denkuro was ill-versed in the matters of aristocracy, but even he had heard of House Dormентаire. He knew enough to understand that a confrontation would not end in simple victory or defeat.

*'Hm... To resist, or surrender ourselves for capture...'*

The Dormентаire men seemed to be watching Denkuro and the others, unwilling to make a sudden move.

The longer this stalemate continued, the more Dormентаire men would arrive on the scene. A drawn-out confrontation would only worsen Denkuro's situation.

But a sound suddenly interrupted the heavy silence, as though diffusing the situation.

*Clap. Clap.*

The sound of hands clapping rhythmically.

"All right, that's enough."

The applauding newcomer was a stranger to Denkuro and the others. However, the knights paled upon catching sight of the man and panicked.

"Mr. Talbot! We had no idea you'd be arriving so soon!"

"Enough with the politeness. What's a bunch of knights like you bowing to an alchemist for?" The man said, but the knights did not withdraw their humility.

*'An alchemist?'*

Denkuro and the others exchanged glances at the mention of the word. Why would these knights bow to a man of the same profession as themselves?

But before they could even ask, the man called Victor addressed them first.

"Hey. You people sailors or merchants or something? Looks like you speak English. Perfect. I mean, I speak Spanish and Italian too, but English is the easiest for me." Victor said casually, as though trying to dampen the explosive air.

Denkuro remained cautious, but he was relieved at Victor's lack of hostility.

"Hm. What, pray tell, do you intend with us, sir?"

Even if they were to be taken into custody, this man might listen to reason, Denkuro mused.

*'He is quite reminiscent of Master Aile, who ended that battle six years in the past.'* He thought. Setting aside the choice of resisting, he decided to hear what Victor had to say.

[It seems that our fights in this city are destined to be stopped by another. If only such a thing could be a constant in our lives.] Zank said in Japanese. Denkuro replied quietly, also in Japanese.

[Though this one would prefer that we avoided conflict altogether...]

Victor waited for them to finish and spoke.

"What do I *intend*? Nothing. Just get back to whatever it is you were doing."

The knights and musketeers began to murmur, but one look from the guardsmen was enough to silence them.

"Oh? Does the Good Sir mean to release us?"

"Before any of that releasing stuff, there's no law in this city that allows people to kick anyone. Your friend there kicked this knight, and this knight here kicked a child. So both of you can pretend nothing happened. Everyone's happy, right?" Victor laughed.



Nile's anger had yet to abate. He glanced over at the knight several times, resisting the flow of events.

"I say this. Is there a law, then, that states I am forbidden to kick anyone?"

Victor's answer was immediate and relaxed.

"Doubtful, but any decent human being would say that's just morally wrong, right? Kicking children, especially." He shrugged and narrowed his eyes at the knight.

The knight quickly averted his gaze. There was a look of terror in his eyes.

"'Twould seem that you have the respects of these men."

"Nah, it's not *me* they're scared of—it's old man Szilard."

"Szilard'?"

"Yeah. We're from the same school of alchemy. He's an adaptable old geezer, but he's got this creepy air to him. I hear there are rumors that opposing a Dormентаire alchemist nets you a spot at the top of their list of guinea pigs." Victor said harmlessly, but the knights were not smiling.

Perhaps they truly believed in the rumors.

Or perhaps there was more to the rumors than gossip and hearsay.

Understanding that they could not verify such claims without meeting this man called Szilard in person, Denkuero and the others decided to drop the matter.

"You have our utmost gratitude, sir, for your intervention."

"Don't worry about it. I hate stupid conflicts as much as the next guy. Go on. Get outta here."

"Thank you."

With that, Denkuero made to leave the marketplace with his companions.

But when he glanced over at the child who had been kicked by the knight, he noticed that the child looked like he wanted to say something.

But a second later, a woman who looked to be the boy's mother appeared and dragged him into the crowds by hand. She probably did not wish to get involved with House Dormентаire or the foreigners.

Denkuero looked back at Nile. The man blankly watched mother and child depart, but smiled faintly when he noticed his friend, and began walking.

*'Perhaps Master Nile merely wished to run amok, instead of looking for gratitude.'*

Nile had been the one to intervene in the first place, and there was nothing strange about a woman wanting to protect her child. Denkuero accepted this and began to walk away.

But—

“Hey, lady and kid walking away. Hold it right there.”

Victor stopped the woman and her child as they departed.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“I-I’m so sorry, sir! I apologize for my son’s rudeness earlier!”

The woman fell to her knees, trembling. She tried to force her child to do the same.

Denkuro and the others stopped in their tracks, wondering if the Dormentaire men were at it again so soon. But Victor immediately spoke up.

“No, no. What’re you apologizing to us for? And by ‘earlier’, you mean you’ve been watching the whole mess from the beginning, right? I’ve got no business with someone who lets her kid get kicked around without so much as getting angry or stepping in to help.” Victor said coldly. He then crouched down before the boy and looked him in the eye.

“Kid. You got anything to say to that scary-looking guy over there?” He asked, shifting his gaze towards Nile. The boy looked at him nervously.

“I’ll give you permission. Go on, tell him what you want to say.”

Victor smiled kindly. The boy walked over towards Nile and said, “Thank you!”.

Though he spoke in Italian, his meaning was clear.

Nile, looking quite surprised, raised an eyebrow.

“You’re welcome.” He mumbled in English, and turned around.

Though Nile’s response was crude and awkward, Denkuro and Zank had known him long enough to understand that he was just embarrassed. They exchanged glances and smiled.

*‘So even among the people of Dormentaire there are those like this man.’*

Denkuro bowed towards Victor.

“This one thanks you for your consideration, sir.”

“I was doing this for the kid. If he didn’t get to say what he wanted, he’d be worrying himself sick over it, right?”

Victor waved amicably at Denkuro and the others, and glanced over at his lodgings at the end of the harbor. The Dormentaires had rented the building and converted it into a residence for their associates.

“That’s where I’m staying. If you need anything, just drop by and I’ll be happy to listen—”

But just as he was about to end the exchange—

A loud noise shook the air.

It was the second time today that the marketplace was shaken by a noise, but this time, the sound was not restricted to the marketplace alone.

A powerful explosion shook the air and the streets.

The explosion had originated from the residence Victor had been pointing to just moments earlier. Part of the stone wall on the second floor had collapsed, and black smoke and flames were rising from the rubble.

"...Sorry 'bout that. Looks like I'm not gonna be staying there after all."

This was the first meeting between Denkuuro and the others and Victor.

It was also the beginning of a series of incidents that would shake the streets of Lotto Valentino.

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**At the same time, in front of the Meyer manor, in the central district of Lotto Valentino.**

"Huh? What was that?"

"Cannon fire...?"

Elmer and Sylvie stopped in front of the wooden doors and turned towards the sound of the explosion.

But they heard nothing more afterwards. From this particular street, they could not even see the smoke.

Because they had no idea about the explosion that had taken place in the harbor marketplace, they stood in confusion for a moment. But they did not think to go off to find out more about the noise.

This was because they had already knocked on the door a split second earlier.

And as they stood there indecisively, a woman who looked to be a maid opened the door.

"...Oh, it's just you, Elmer."

The young woman, perhaps around the same age as Sylvie, looked at some point in the air between the two of them, and narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Is this your girlfriend?"

"Pardon?!"

Sylvie, shocked at the question, followed the maid's gaze and finally realized that Elmer was still holding her hand. She had been intending to shake it off when they arrived at their supposed destination, but the sudden noise in the distance cleared that thought from her mind entirely.

"N-no!" She cried, hurriedly freeing her hand from Elmer's. A moment later, she was overcome by guilt.

She felt guilty about the fact that she had been holding hands with someone other than Gretto. She also felt guilty about the fact that she had so harshly shaken off the young man who had brought her all the way here out of the kindness in his heart.

But the young man did not seem to care one bit, merely smiling at the maid.

"Afraid not, it looks like! I'm going to need a bit of cheering up, Niki."

"But you're not feeling sad at all, are you? Are you asking me to baby you?"

"Now that just feels like a back-to-back rejection." Elmer said, not withdrawing his smile, and changed the subject. "Right. I actually have to ask you for something, Niki."

"What is it?"

"The alchemist who goes to Maiza's house lives here, right? I needed to talk to him. I think his name was... Uh... something something something?"

Elmer did not know even a part of the name of the person he was supposedly here to see. But Niki sighed quietly, as though she was more than used to this, and replied.

"I've told you before. He's Mr. Begg. Mr. Begg Garott."

Without meaning to, Sylvie screamed softly at the mention of the name.

"Oh! Was this Mr. Garott's workshop?"

Begg Garott.

Sylvie, who had worked in the Avaro manor until yesterday, had several times led this alchemist to her master's office. He was a man who spoke very quickly, and Sylvie remembered well the way he could recite one play's worth of words in the amount of time she led him to his destination.

Having been dragged here without a single clue as to what was going on, Sylvie finally came to understand what Elmer meant by 'someone who could go in and out of the Avaro manor'.

"It's actually not Begg's workshop, but the Meyer family's." Elmer grinned.

The Meyer family was renowned for their work as alchemists. They were a famous line of practitioners with many students under their instruction, but after the deaths of the family head and his wife several years ago, a young child was all that remained of the bloodline.

The Meyer family's students and the child had moved to this manor in the city of Lotto Valentino.

Because they had only recently moved in, the furniture was still not fully at home in the manor. But that was not the only incongruity in the house. Its owner, Czeslaw Meyer, had yet to adjust to city life. He was normally wary of strangers, and that wariness had been extended to the entire city.

In this manor, there were essentially no boundaries between living spaces and work stations. Because many alchemists were continuing their master's research, unusual odors lingered on the stairwells.

Other than Niki the maid, Elmer did not have any connections to the people here. But despite her low standing, Niki held a decent amount of influence in the house. She was able to call Begg upstairs from the basement for a meeting with Elmer and Sylvie.

Because Czeslaw, the technical family head, had gone outside with another alchemist, the manor had temporarily become a masterless place of discussion for the planning of a rendezvous with a young nobleman.

Of course, the timid Sylvie could not possibly raise an objection to this situation.

"Ah I understand everything. Before you suspect anything, I had known of Young Master Gretto and the young lady's relationship, but Maiza remained silent so I did the same. Please believe me. So what are you asking of me?"

Speaking without so much as taking a breath, Begg Garott was a man in his thirties with a messy beard.

His face was haggard and gaunt, perhaps due to the effects of the drugs he was creating, and there was something rather glassy about his gaze.

"So what I'm asking is that you pass on a message to Gretto the next time you go to their place. Or actually, you might want to consider kidnapping him outright."

Elmer's tone was exceedingly friendly, despite the fact that the two of them had only just met. But Begg did not seem to be a man who cared for formalities. He replied rapidly.

"Hey, hey, I'd tell you to ask Maiza instead, but now that I think about it they must be so busy with the Advenna Avistha that he almost never goes home. Then it looks like, I'll, have, to, step, in..."

His voice suddenly staggered like a wind-up toy at the end of its strength.

As Sylvie looked on in shock, Begg resumed speaking at his usual pace.

"Ah, sorry about that. Recently my tongue's been freezing up for some reason. It must be because I'm experimenting on myself with my drugs, but it's a cheap price to pay for my research. So tell me what you'd like to tell Young Master Gretto, young lady. Think of something that will make it easy for him to leave the manor."

"Oh, um, yes! I-I will!" Sylvie stumbled. Elmer also wracked his brains for ideas.

"Hm... How 'bout referencing 'Romeo and Juliet' or something?"

"Please don't be so ominous."

"Didn't you know? There's actually an afterlife in the world of that play. So after they die, they can meet up again—'Were you just pretending to be dead all along, Juliet?' 'Romeo, darling, you're so oblivious.' They could laugh together afterwards!"

Niki honestly wondered how she should react to Elmer's implausible take on the play, but—

"Waaaaaaah! Waaaaaaah!"

She suddenly raised her head at the sound of crying coming from upstairs, which sounded vaguely like a cat's mewling.

"Sorry, excuse me."

With that, she quietly climbed up the stairs.

Watching her leave, Sylvie turned to Begg.

"Is there a baby here?"

"Hm? Ah, yes. He must be a year old by now, but his crying won't stop. I hear he's the child of a relative of one of our alchemists, but we're relooking after him because his parents are gone. In that sense, he's, just, like, Czes."

Begg's voice slowed to a crawl again. Sylvie was taken aback for a moment, but the contents of Begg's explanation served to dampen her shock.

"My goodness... An orphan?"

"But, you, see. That alchemist is a good man. That child will grow up well. Niki may act standoffish but she's positively motherly to that child."

Begg seemed to have reminded himself of something. He turned his gaze to the front doors.

"Speaking of parenting, our little family head and the good-hearted alchemist should be coming back any time now..."

As Sylvie continued to speak with Begg, Elmer—the man who had brought her here in the first place—was heading upstairs after Niki, who had already disappeared.

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### **The second floor of the Meyer manor.**

"Is that your baby?"

"That's not even funny, Elmer." Niki said frigidly.

She was holding in her arms a baby who seemed to have only just stopped crying.

Of course, he was already just over a year old. He looked quite big in Niki's small embrace.

"I've told you before. He's the son of a relative of an alchemist who works here. We're taking care of him because his parents passed away."

"Yeah, I know." Elmer nodded.

Niki, who was under the impression that Elmer had forgotten the fact, just as he had forgotten Begg's name, narrowed her eyes.

"...And you still thought that would be funny?"

"Actually, yeah." Elmer grinned sheepishly. Niki sighed loudly.

"You haven't changed a bit, have you? You still can't figure out how to make a joke without completely ignoring how a girl might feel."

"Really? If you say so, I guess you must be right." Elmer replied, waving his hands back and forth before the baby. "But you know, Niki, you've changed."

"You think so?"

"Definitely. You've brightened up a lot since five years ago. I know you were upset after Monica died, but you look a lot better now."

Monica.

A shadow passed by Niki's eyes at the mention of that name.

Monica was one of her rescuers and a friend.

When Niki heard that she had died in an accident one year ago, she was terribly shaken.

Niki had always lived on in search of a place to die, but she had never in her wildest dreams expected that someone who had given her hope to live would die before her. The fact of Monica's death ate away at her heart in all sorts of ways, but the baby she was looking after had helped heal some of those wounds.

Instead of chiding Elmer for so casually mentioning their friend's death, Niki gingerly placed the sleeping baby in his crib.

Once she had made sure of the baby's quiet, steady breathing, she turned back to Elmer.

"...And you're still just as good at bringing up uncomfortable subjects so nonchalantly, Elmer."

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings."

"It's all right. I can't just sit here and be depressed forever. That would just make Monica sad, wouldn't it?"

In fact, Elmer had spent even more time alongside Monica than Niki. Most people would have been incensed at such a blasé mention of the dead, but for some reason Niki couldn't feel this way towards Elmer.

To be specific, perhaps she knew Elmer well enough that at this point, she had given up on him in many ways.

"...Still no word from Huey?"

"Nope. He's probably still alive, though."

Elmer's answer about his missing friend was as nonchalant as ever.

Niki cast down her eyes.

"I see..."

"He saw her die right in front of his eyes, so I guess it shouldn't be a surprise. I wonder if he's gotten that smile back on his face by now."

"It's not that simple. I think Huey and Monica loved each other very much. The shock must have been on a completely different level for Huey than it was for you and me, Elmer."

"Right. I honestly don't know a thing about romance."

Elmer shrugged. He then put on an impish grin.

"So is that it, then? That's why you've brightened up so much?"

"What are you getting at, Elmer?"

"L-O-V-E."

Elmer leaned against the windowsill and continued, his tone very much like that of a young person his own age.

"I just had a thought: maybe the reason you could bring up other people's love lives is that maybe you've found someone, too."

"You're astounding, Elmer. Making fun of someone *and* talking about Monica and Huey at the same time."

"Am I?"

"And I bet you didn't even think twice about telling Huey to smile when Monica died, too." Niki muttered coldly.

"That's right. But it looked like he couldn't even hear me."

"If he heard you, he might have hit you. Stabbed you, even."

"I think so too."

There was a hint of sadness in his smile, but Elmer did not try to defend his actions.

"But if me getting hit or stabbed is enough to make him smile, I'd have been happy to be his punching bag."

"Just to let you know, no one would smile at something like that."

"Really?" Elmer responded lightheartedly. "My parents smiled and laughed when they stabbed and burned me."

"..."

*'I feel like I've just heard something awful. ...Was Elmer abused?'*

Niki remained silent. Elmer continued.

"And it wasn't just them. Everyone else looked so happy whenever I was in pain or when I was screaming. They thanked me and praised me. So I never thought it was strange, but the soldiers who came and killed those people said that it was an evil thing to do."

Niki felt a chill running down her spine. As if on cue, the baby in the crib began fussing.

"I don't know if Huey's like the people that raised me, but it's not completely impossible, right?"

"...You shouldn't tell things like that to people so easily. Right now it's only fine because you're talking to me."

Thought Niki could feel cold sweat running down her back, she was not terribly shocked, nor was she feeling much differently about Elmer.

They had met several times in the past two years, but they almost never spoke about their respective pasts. But over time, Niki could slowly see that Elmer had—in a different way from herself—an unusual childhood.

But the fact that he mentioned it so casually caught her off guard.

Elmer, looking as though he had even read her internal reaction to all this, began to make faces at the baby as he replied to Niki.

"I know. I said it because I was pretty sure you'd forgive me with a smile even if I told you. Although it's a shame you didn't end up smiling."

"How am I supposed to smile at something like that?"

"That's too bad. Anyway, let's get back on topic. Is there someone you have an eye on?" Elmer asked nosily. Niki smiled faintly.

And before Elmer could figure out if she was forcing her smile, she whispered quietly.

"What would you say if I said it was you, Elmer?"

"Really?"

"Nope."

Niki responded lightheartedly, and continued.

"I don't dislike you. I'm thankful to you, too. But I don't like you in that way, Elmer."

"Aha! That hurts, Niki. It's a good thing you're talking to me, because otherwise you'd have broken some poor guy's heart. And then people'll start calling you a witch who toys with men's feelings."

Elmer looked entirely unfazed. Niki responded as though paying him back for his earlier comment.

"Don't worry. I'd never say something like that to anyone else, Elmer. But sorry."

"Actually, I'd be worried if you *were* being serious. I'm probably the type of person who should never get married."

Niki could see where Elmer was coming from.

Even if Elmer were to marry someone, the moment he saw someone crying, he would probably prioritize that person's happiness over that of his own wife. On the outside he might seem to be little more than well-intentioned, but Elmer was the kind of person who might sacrifice a wife and children, or even himself, for the sake of other people's smiles.

Elmer's greatest priority was the smiles of humanity as a whole, not any one individual.

Because Niki understood all this, she could agree with Elmer's self-deprecating comment.

"...Yeah." She replied plainly.

There was no need for words.

There was no need to feel anything.

Elmer had not changed since she had first met him.

The only people who could possibly wish to marry Elmer would be those who could agree with his insanity completely, madwomen who would enjoy being sacrificed for his goals, or those who had given up on everything the world had to offer. Perhaps Elmer could spend his entire life trying to bring back a smile to the face of someone who could not stop despairing. Of course, this was still only limited to the *logistics* of marriage alone.

Niki continued to think.

Perhaps, the way she was five years ago, she might not have minded living on with Elmer.

In a life where her only purpose was to find a place to die, perhaps she would have been fine with a love that transcended morality—one where she could sacrifice herself and others for the sake of strangers.

But now, things were different.

Niki was no longer the person she used to be.

Just as Elmer had noted, she had changed in the past few years.

As she lived on in search of her place to die, she had encountered a man with whom she wished to find that place.

Simply put, this man was not Elmer.

"So tell me! Who is this person? I'll do whatever I can to help you out. Who is it?"

"It's a secret."

Elmer was certain that Niki's faint smile was completely genuine.

Telling between genuine and forced smiles was a unique ability of his, borne from his obsession with smiles.

Niki seemed to have no intention of continuing the conversation, and Elmer did not seem to mind. After all, his objective was not to figure out the object of her affections, but to see her smile.

"Really? All right, then I won't ask. Peek-a-boo!"

Elmer was now completely occupied with the unhappy baby. He made all sorts of funny faces in an attempt to bring a smile back to the infant.

Surprised at the face of the strange adult, the baby refused to stop fussing.

But—

"We're home!"

The baby suddenly turned his attention to the cheerful voice coming from the first floor. The voice must have been familiar to him, because he quickly stopped fussing, relieved.

It was apparent that the newcomer was a child, but it was difficult to tell if they were a boy or a girl.

"...I guess our little family head is back." Niki smiled.

*'Oh? That's the happiest smile I've ever seen on Niki.'* Elmer thought, *'Could that "special someone" she was talking about be—'*

He wondered for a moment if the owner of the voice was the answer to his question, but that conclusion only brought forth more questions.

*'I thought the family head here was only around ten years old. Does Niki prefer younger men?'*

As Elmer continued to make unlikely assumptions, the sound of conversation carried up to the second floor.

Hearing this, Niki gently scooped up the baby from his crib and slowly made her way down the stairs. Elmer followed behind her, and noticed two people who had not been on the first floor when he first arrived.

One was obviously still a child, so he must be the little family head called Czeslaw Meyer.

And the moment he looked back and forth between Niki and the grown man standing next to Czeslaw, Elmer came to a conclusion:

*'Oh, that must be him. There's no mistaking it—that's the one Niki likes.'*

"Welcome home."

Niki's greeting was directed towards Czes and the man. The moment her gaze went from the boy to his guardian, a peaceful look came to rest in her eyes.

"Thank you. It seems there was an explosion of some sort down at the harbor. Did you hear it from here?"

"What? Now that I think about it, I think I *did* hear something... Are the two of you all right?"

"Yes. We were by the libraries, quite a distance away."

"I see. Thank goodness."

The look of serenity in Niki's eyes grew deeper.

She had neither blushed nor widened her grin. Only a Smile Junkie like Elmer could tell apart such a subtle change in emotion.

Niki's smile could not have been more genuine. It served as proof that the light of relief had been lit in her heart.

Seeing this, Elmer also was relieved. Niki was most definitely in love. There was no other way that a woman seeking death would be able to smile so brightly.

Elmer C. Albatross's reaction to the sight of his old female friend falling for another was neither envy nor a feeling of loss.

It was pure gratitude.

The mere presence of this man made Niki happy and brought a smile to her face. So Elmer was thankful to him. It was only natural to his psyche, and there was not a hint of any ulterior motive to his reaction.

Elmer once again looked at the face of the man with whom Niki seemed to be infatuated.

But for a moment, he found himself feeling troubled.

*'Huh?'*

*'What's this strange feeling?'*

"We're home," The man said to Niki, smiling. It was completely natural and genuine. Elmer knew the man was not faking his smile. And yet the unease in his heart refused to disappear.

*'Oh, I get it.'*

Once he figured out the source of the strange feeling, Elmer sighed in relief.

*'Yeah. He was just happy to see her again.'*

The man was wearing a smile.

A smile identical to the ones worn by Elmer's parents and the people who were once around him.

That was all.

*'Yeah. That's the smile of someone who's like her guardian. I see. He must consider Niki something like a little sister or a daughter.'*

With that thought, Elmer slowly descended to the first floor. The man looked up slightly towards him, and smiled a little differently from before.

"Oh. This is the first time we meet like this, is it not?"

"Hm? Have we met before?" Elmer asked, tilting his head.

"I've seen you speaking to Maiza on occasion. You're also a student of Professor Dalton, correct?"

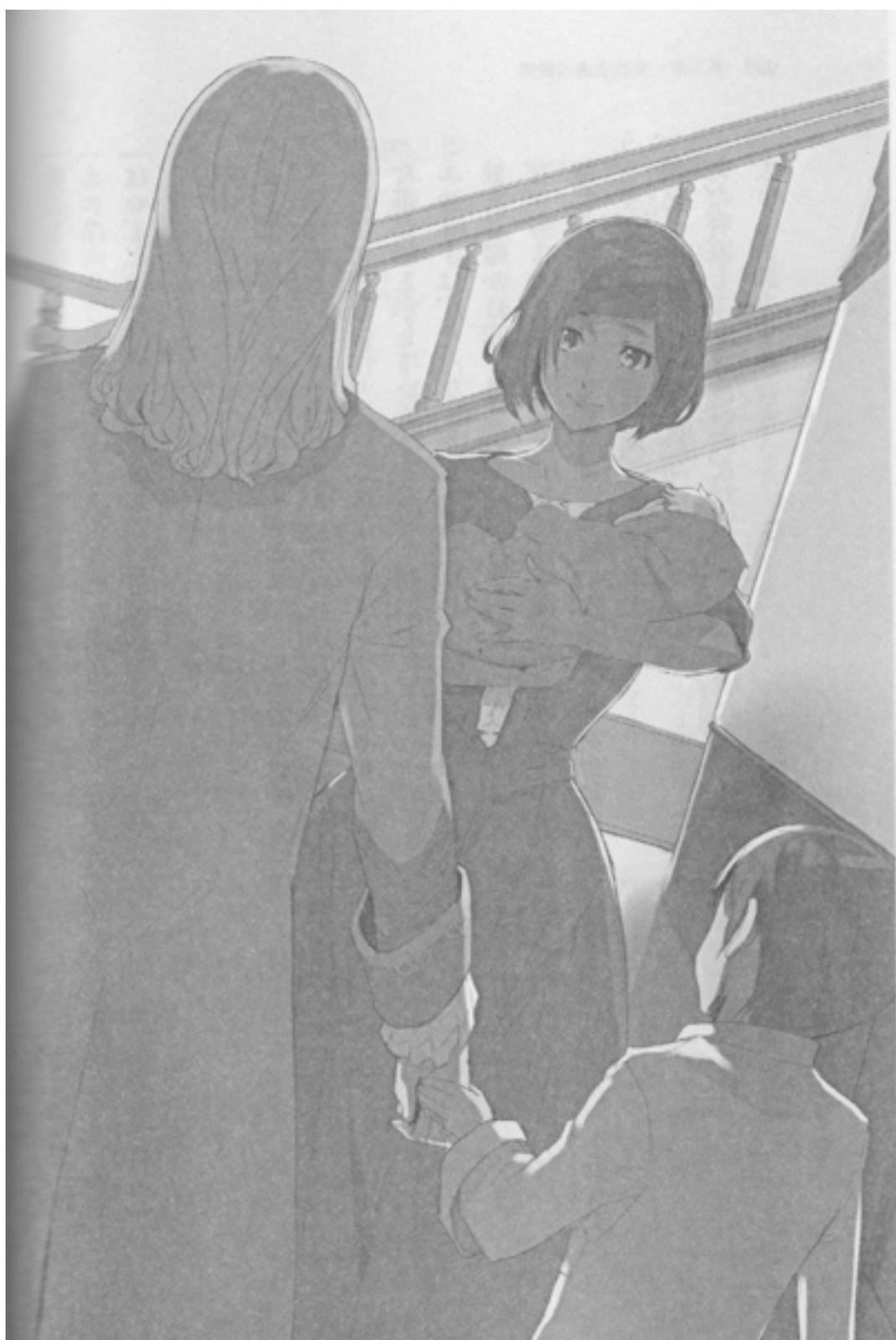
"Yeah, although the headmaster almost never teaches me in person. Oh, I'm Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross."

"Ah, excuse me. Please let me introduce myself as well."

The man, whose bangs were just long enough to conceal his eyes, smiled and revealed his name,

His smile was not at all faked; it looked as though he was deriving indescribable pleasure from the twists of fate being thrown in his path.

"My name is Lebreau Fermet Viralesque. Please, call me as you will."



<=>

## **Sunset, the church.**

There was but a single church in all of Lotto Valentino.

It was also clearly built at the very edges of town. Very few people came to this place to pray or worship, with most using it as little more than a facility for funerals.

It was a sad scene for the devout, but there were rumors that Lotto Valentino, a city built for alchemists, intentionally cast aside the Church to weaken its influence. This served to give rise to tales of demonic rites taking place among the alchemists, further deepening the divide between Lotto Valentino and other cities.

But among the people of this city were a few faithful believers who came to this church to pray for the dead to rest in peace.

The man sitting in prayer quietly raised his head.

The church was ancient and derelict, humble in appearance at best.

But the praying man carried himself in a way that was completely contrary to the air of the old chapel.

He was perhaps in his late twenties or early thirties. He was wearing a light habit à la française, and in spite of its subdued coloring, his overall outlandish appearance set him apart somewhat from the secular world.

The opulence of his clothing made his noble standing obvious, but there was nothing typically aristocratic about the air around him.

Unusually for an aristocrat, he wore neither a wig nor a fake mole, which were both in fashion among nobles at the time. Instead, an extravagant tricorne was pressed down on his head. There were bags under his eyes, though it was not clear if this was makeup or the result of sleep deprivation. Small stars were drawn underneath his eyes.

It was almost convincingly a scene where a runaway clown was taking shelter in a chapel.

But no matter how unconventional his appearance, no one in Lotto Valentino would dare to openly disapprove of him.

This was because the man was Esperanza Boroñal, the aristocrat who governed the city.

His eccentric manner of dress earned him the derogatory moniker of "Clown Count", but he was nonetheless the most powerful man in Lotto Valentino.

Of course, the intervention of House Dormentaire was threatening to usurp his sovereignty.

And yet he had come to this church alone, without a single attendant in tow.

He had left his carriage at a slight distance from the church, but even the coachman wondered why the governor had come to this place.

Revealing to no one his reasons for prayer, Esperanza stepped out of the chapel. Though he had wanted to remain longer, he could not allow himself to relax at the moment.

There had been an explosion at the harbor not too long ago, and it had devastated one of the Dormentaire headquarters. Thankfully, no one had been injured. But it was clear that they had only narrowly avoided a tragedy.

He should put more pressure on the city police to investigate the matter, Esperanza thought. He once again donned the face of the governor and stepped out into the church courtyard.

And at that very moment, he noticed a young man standing there, illuminated by the setting sun.

"..."

Esperanza silently observed the figure.

From his appearance, the stranger did not seem to be affiliated with the church. He was dressed somewhat like a nobleman, but there was a different air around him from that of the local aristocrats.

The young man slowly approached Esperanza, walking along the stone tiles covering the courtyard.

On his face was a soft, gentle smile.

Narrowing his eyes, Esperanza attempted to figure out the identity of the young man who was walking in the sunlight. He was probably around twenty years of age. Similar to Elmer, Boroñal manor's houseguest.

Esperanza did not assume that the stranger was merely passing through, but the young man did not seem to hold any sort of hostility against him. He also could not think of any reason why he might hypothetically be targeted by an assassin who could hide his bloodlust.

Esperanza continued to think. The young man opened his mouth mid-approach.

"Here to mourn your family, sir?"

"...You could say that."

Esperanza, who had no interest in the male half of the world, spoke coldly to the young man.

"I see you must have cared for her very much."

"...Who are you?"

Esperanza once again looked into the young man's face.

The stranger had specifically said 'her', when Esperanza had only stated that he was here for his family. The governor found himself slightly curious about the young man, and recalled something.

Elmer had spoken of a young man before—a young man with sleek black hair and golden eyes.

All kinds of emotions rose up in his heart with the remembrance of that name. Esperanza whispered it before the young man could even speak.

"...Huey. You're Huey Laforet, aren't you."

"My goodness. It is an honor to see that the governor knows my name."

The young man's manner of speech was exceedingly polite.

Now that Huey Laforet's identity was certain, the governor took a moment to clear his face of expression. He looked down at the ground, took several breaths, slowly averted his eyes, and mumbled,

"I see."

That was all.

"...Is that it, sir?"

"What else do you want of me?"

"I had imagined that you would perhaps curse my name, assault me, or even go so far as to shoot me."

Seeing Huey's faint smile, Esperanza was for a moment tempted by the thought of pointing a gun at him. But he denied the possibility in his mind and shook his head.

"One year ago, I might have gone so far. And let me make this clear. I've already heard from Elmer that what happened was no fault of yours. By all rights, *you* should be the one cursing me or beating me for idly standing by."

One year ago, Esperanza's sister, Maribel Boroñal, had died.

She was killed as the criminal Monica Campanella, who had killed a man of House Dormentaire and Esperanza's parents.

Because of complex circumstances, Maribel was treated as dead and brought to Lotto Valentino, wearing the mask of Monica Campanella.

But the arrival of House Dormentaire shattered that mask.

To be specific, the pieces of the shattered mask were forcibly stuck back onto Maribel's face, and Monica Campanella died as a criminal.

[Dead in an accident while under custody. The fact that there was a fire just moments before the accident implicates the Mask Maker as her killer.]

This was House Dormentaire's official report.

But Esperanza did not believe a word of it.

It was not that he disbelieved the fact of his sister's death. Her corpse had never surfaced, but from what he had heard from Elmer, it was difficult to imagine that she could have survived.

What he refused to believe was the idea that she had been murdered by the Mask Maker.

Esperanza knew that over the mask of Monica the alchemy student, Maribel wore yet another mask—that of the serial killer known as the Mask Maker.

He also knew that there were others who donned the mask alongside her.

Huey Laforet, her lover who had shared her identity as the Mask Maker.

Esperanza quietly spoke to the alchemist who had disappeared during the year following Monica's death.

"I know that you're not at fault. But if I were still in the same state as I was one year ago, I would have cursed you. I might have gone so far as to use my political influence to place all of the blame on you. Although things would have been different if you were a woman."

Esperanza sighed.

"But time... she is truly cruel. My resentment towards you and House Dormentaire, and even my pain and hatred at my own powerlessness is slowly fading. Although my sorrow and regret will never heal."

It was an unthinkable sort of conversation for a governor and a mere alchemist, but Esperanza was an odd duck among aristocrats. Not only did he place all women above himself in his actions, he also did not concern himself with class differences.

But Huey, who should have been playing the part of the humble commoner, also spoke to Esperanza without restraint.

"If time will not heal them, perhaps they were never wounds to begin with." He said, and shrugged lightly. "Although Elmer might tell you that smiling will cure everything."

"True."

Recalling Elmer's smile, Esperanza grinned bitterly.

"It's been exactly one year to the day, but I hear Elmer went out into town with a lady who's supposed to be working for me starting today. And he didn't even show his face on All Souls' Day. He couldn't have forgotten..."

"Perhaps there was a shadow cast over the face of this new employee of yours."

"Of course. I wouldn't give it a second thought to do the same for a sorrowful woman."

Not realizing that the cause of the new maid's fears was, in fact, himself, Esperanza turned to Huey again.

Huey averted his gaze with a smile, and whispered nostalgically.

"Elmer... has no interest in the dead. He has always been that way."

"And what about you?" The governor asked.

"Me?"

"I won't ask you why you disappeared. But what are you doing here? I doubt you came just to listen to my complaints." Esperanza asked plainly.

Although he did want to talk more about Monica and listen to stories about her, Huey's smile bothered him. He had to get to the truth. There was nothing in Huey's expression that suggested he was here to mourn his beloved.

"I must apologize in advance for answering your question with another, but..."

Huey turned towards the front doors of the church, his eyes on the distant city streets and the sea, and addressed Esperanza.

"Where do you believe Monica is?"

"...? What do you mean?"

"Of course, I am not naively claiming that she is actually alive. After all, if that were true, I would have departed to be by her side long ago."

Huey's faint smile never left his lips.

"If something like her soul existed, do you think she would have been granted entry through the gates of paradise? Or is she, do you think, burning in the flames of purgatory as a sinner?"

Huey continued, not looking at Esperanza but with his eyes fixed onto the distance.

"Or perhaps, as both a sinner *and* Maribel the innocent victim, is she wandering the night, rejected by both heaven and purgatory?"

"...Stop this. I'm in no mood for such talk." Esperanza said quietly, but Huey continued.

"Churches no longer have room in their graveyards to bury the dead. Some have dug up bones and relocated them underground so often that they now have entire galleries of corpses in their basements. And yet that still leaves behind a physical form of death that can be buried and mourned."

"..."

"But Monica, of whom we do not even have a corpse, is not here. She is not anywhere. Neither her body nor her soul exist. We cannot even confirm her death or survival, leaving her locked away in *nowhere*."

After waiting for Huey to finish, Esperanza sighed loudly. He wearily addressed Huey, whose back was still turned to him.

"Are you trying to anger me? Or are you trying to console yourself by putting Monica's death into cheap poetry? If it's the former, I'm afraid I'll have to let you down. Unpleasant as that was, I don't have the energy to become incensed at this point."

Huey shook his head.

"Neither, sir. I apologize for bothering you, but I merely wished to convey this message to you, at the very least."

"Convey what to me?"

"My plans for this city."

"?"

Esperanza was oblivious. Huey, his cold, faint smile refusing to budge, continued.

"...The moment before Monica plunged into the sea, blood spilling from her chest... she said this to me:"

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and completed his sentence.

"...'Let's meet again', she said. She would say such words to someone like *me*."

Esperanza, listening intently to Huey, could feel cold sweat running down his back.

*'Something is not right.'*

*'This man is somehow different from the Huey Laforet that Elmer was talking about.'*

*'Is this really the same person?'*

*'Does this mean that something about him has changed?'*

One year.

It was a length of time perhaps too short, but just enough, to change a man.

Where had Huey gone during this time, and what had he seen?

Slowly looking around at the confused Esperanza, Huey spoke.

"That is why I intend to find Monica."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"But I fear that perhaps she would not be happy with what I plan to do. That is why, at the very least, I wished to let it be known to you—the one who knows her past better than anyone."

Esperanza finally noticed that Huey was holding something in his right hand.

Huey looked upon the streets, every so often glancing back at the object.

Once Esperanza realized that the object was a pocket watch, much smaller than the ones he had seen before, he thought that Huey was concerned about the time.

*'But why?'*

Esperanza wanted to voice his question, but at the moment, he was more curious to hear what Huey had to say. As he stood, unable to make a decision, Huey tucked the watch back into his breast pocket and turned back towards Esperanza.

And he finally completed his thought.

"That is why, no matter what happens from this point onward... it will be no fault of Monica's."

"What...?"

"And you, sir, should not burden yourself with guilt for what is about to take place. After all, I am searching for her on my own whim."

The very next moment, the streets behind Huey changed.

"...?"

Black fumes began rising from multiple places, from the center of town to the harbor.

And after a several-second delay, a powerful shockwave passed through the church courtyard.

"What?!"

Esperanza hurriedly leapt out into the doorway and looked down upon the city from his vantage point.

Smoke was rising from several points in the city, and he could occasionally see red flames dancing in the blackness.

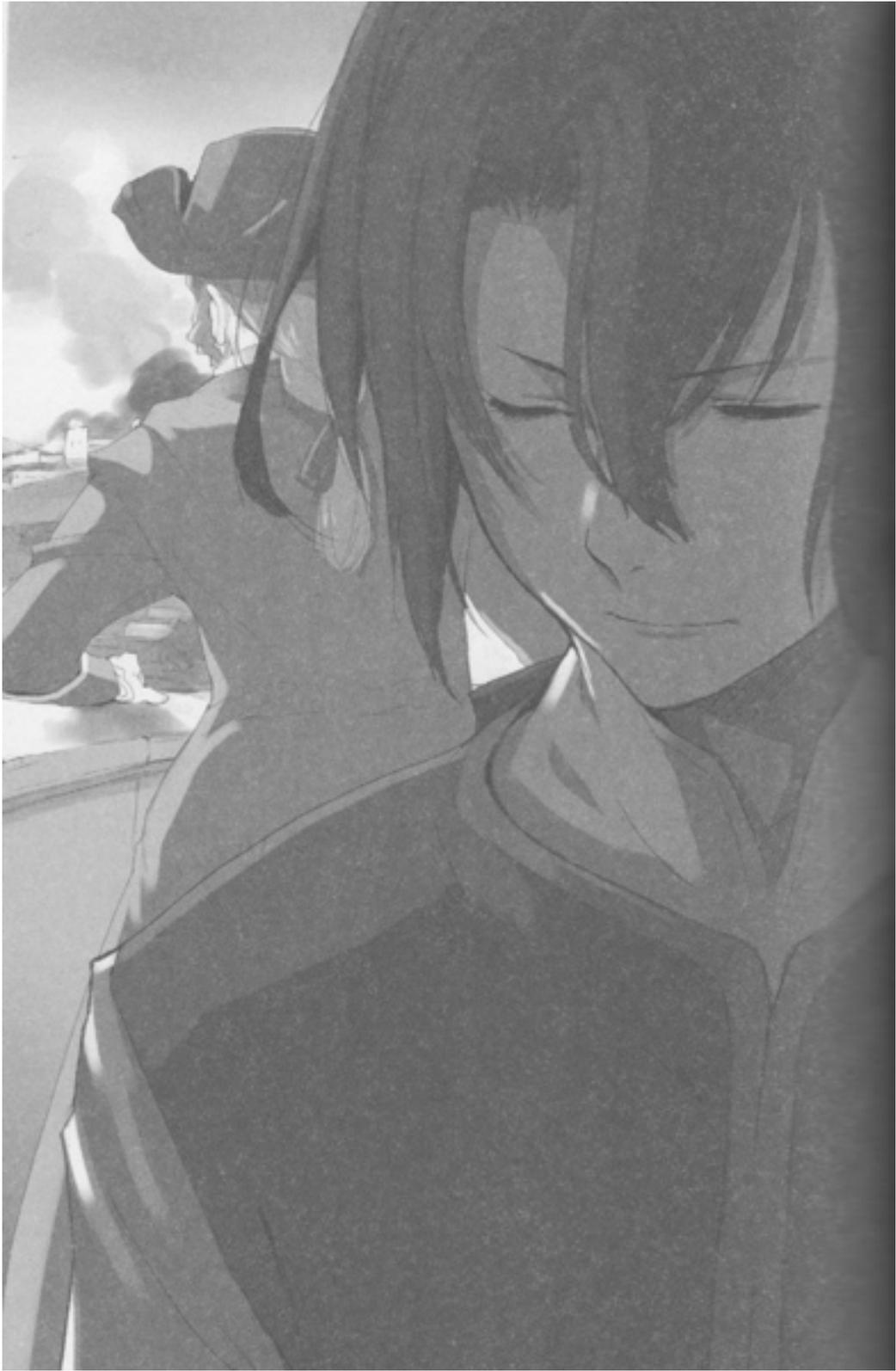
"Huey Laforet! What is the meaning of-"

He quickly turned back, but stopped.

By the time Esperanza had looked around, Huey Laforet had disappeared. Only the clergymen, drawn outside by the commotion of the explosions, were hurrying to and fro in the courtyard.

But Esperanza was now certain—although he had no idea what Huey meant by finding Monica again, he could tell that the man was planning something for Lotto Valentino.

House Dormентаire, responsible for ruining—and eventually stealing away—the life of his beloved, would find itself beset by the vengeance of the Mask Maker—or perhaps the man known as Huey Laforet.



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Many explosions had rocked the city simultaneously.

Naturally, there were many witnesses to the incidents.

One of the blasts had taken place by a Dormentaire transport ship moored in the harbor.

The deserted pier suddenly exploded, and the people on the deck were left with minor injuries.

Although the sailors had all managed to escape, two weeks' worth of Dormentaire supplies were lost to the flames and waves.

"I say this. I care not how many of their ships go up in flames." Nile said coldly.

"Stop this. Have you already forgotten that there are good men even among the Dormentaires?" Zank rebuked him.

They were on a ship moored a slight distance away, watching the burning ship sink into the water. Denkuro, who was listening from beside them, frowned at the sight of the black smoke.

"... 'Twould seem that the earlier explosion was no mere accident."

Turning his eyes towards the distant horizon, he again spoke to himself.

"... Things will become difficult from here on out."

On his mind was the image of the ship that was set to appear from beyond that very horizon.

"This one can only hope that these incidents will not hinder the departure of the Advenna Avis."

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### **The Avaro manor.**

A trembling, wide-eyed Gretto stared at the rising smoke in the distance from the safety of his window. A moment later, he turned his gaze towards the governor's manor, fearing for Sylvie's safety.

Fortunately, he could not see any smoke coming from that direction. Gretto found himself sighing in relief.

Sylvie was, at the time, at the Meyer workshop. But Gretto, who had no way of knowing this, was only glad to see that the governor's manor had been spared from harm.

"What in the world is happening out there...?" Gretto wondered, anxiously looking down at the streets.

But at the same time, something was unfolding in his heart—an urge that had only just begun to emerge.

Was this, perhaps, a sign of change?

Perhaps this was the chance he had longed for all this time, while he waited to be joined with Sylvie.

He burned the image of the streets into his mind.

Little by little, the courage to take action was unfolding in Gretto's heart.

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Another explosion had taken place at the Dormentaire food stores.

The first explosion had taken place in a location that also housed firearms and gunpowder. But in this case, no one could think of a reason why the building would go down in flames.

"What is going on?!"

The first thing that came to Carla's mind as she raced to the scene was last year's arson case involving the Mask Makers. Noting that it had been exactly one year since that day, she could not bring herself to pass off this incident as coincidence.

"Have we been attacked?" She demanded of the guards who were watching the storehouse. The men, lightly burned from the blast, exchanged glances and spoke.

"N-no, ma'am. We didn't see a soul while we were standing guard. And if someone was hiding inside all this time, he'd be charcoal by now."

Carla put on a disgruntled look and fell into thought.

Once the blaze was extinguished, they searched for evidence and found that the explosion had originated from somewhere near the middle of the storehouse.

There were no signs that an explosive had been tossed in through a window.

If someone had snuck in while the guards were changing shifts, perhaps they would have been successful. But she received no reports about sightings of suspicious people fleeing the scene, nor had they found a blackened corpse in the vicinity.

Judging that thinking alone would get her nowhere, she turned to the two alchemists she had brought to the scene.

"What do you think, Mr. Quates? Mr. Talbot? Perhaps some sort of a delayed detonation device?"

Victor thought for a moment before speaking.

"Sure, anyone could make a device that ignites after a period of delay. But what bothers me is that these places all went up in smoke at once. You can't synchronize these devices so perfectly."

In contrast to Victor, who again returned to his musings, Szilard silently observed the scene and poked at parts of the rubble with his cane.

He soon discovered something beneath pieces of a burnt shelf and picked it up emotionlessly.

"What's up, old man? You find something?" Victor asked curiously. Szilard snorted.

"...Most likely a part from a clock of some sort."

"What?"

"We have a fascinating culprit on our hands. I assume that this mastermind has combined explosives and clocks in order to ignite multiple locations at a predetermined time." The old man answered. Victor imagined the kind of device Szilard might be talking about.

"You'd need something pretty huge for something like that."

"It will be clear once we search through all of this rubble. But it must be a rather small device, inconspicuous enough to sneak in through security. Admirable, that such a tiny thing could cause such destruction."

There was a faint smile visible through Szilard's beard as he praised the culprit. Victor felt a chill running down his spine at the sight.

But what bothered him was not Szilard's grin—it was the fact that they were up against a culprit that even the elderly egomaniac would go so far as to commend.

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As a side note—

Years later, Victor would look back on this incident and say this to his subordinates:

"The first time bomb in history was probably made by some inventor called David—something in the late 1770s. But the guy behind this incident was sixty years faster to combine clocks and explosives to perfect that technology."

"Huey really must've been one hell of a genius. Especially when it came to anything related to fire."

<=>

Naturally, back in 1711, Victor had no way of guessing at the identity of the culprit. All he could do was shrug and make sarcastic comments.

"...Well, shit. Of all the days, this just has to happen as soon as we arrive. Don't tell me we're gonna get framed for this." Victor chuckled. Szilard replied stoically.

"It is most natural to assume that this is a warning to alien alchemists like us from the Mask Makers, intent on preventing the theft of their technology."

"...And what happens if we ignore that warning?"

"What else? We may well find the contents of our bags replaced by the offspring of clocks and chemicals. I will not be surprised by any actions of a group that deals in everything from counterfeit gold to arson."

Having earlier borne witness to the commotion caused by the Dormentaire men, Victor muttered to himself.

"Tch. I'm totally fine with going up against some evil secret society. It's nice and simple. 'Cause right now, it's looking like *we're* the bad guys in town."

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm saying that the guy behind all this might be calling himself some sort of defender of justice."

Victor scratched his nose and turned to Carla.

"And that means he's not gonna stop at some half-hearted warnings. I'm saying that this isn't even close to the end."

Victor's prediction came true with frightening accuracy.

From that day forward, Lotto Valentino was constantly enveloped by the flames of terror.

In the span of a single week, thirty-six explosions in all shook the streets.

But the men of House Dormentaire failed to turn up any clues about the culprit.

The people of Lotto Valentino, who had once accepted House Dormentaire's rule, had been driven by fear to distance them. The Dormentaire men, now full of suspicions about the people, began to wield their power even more tyrannically.

And piece by piece, the culprit continued to destroy the city as though making a mockery of them all.

Slowly, but surely—

As though Lotto Valentino itself was his enemy.

## **Interlude: Excerpt from the reports of Victor Talbot (Part 2)**

[Hey. How've you been?

It's been nearly ten days now since I've started writing to you like this. Is everything all right on your end?

Over here? It's like nothing's ever gonna be the same.

Wait, no. *I'm* still the same. Now and before, I'm still the man you love. And I'm still the man who loves you.

But I guess from your point of view, I'm just one of a hundred of your toys, aren't I?

Anyway, this city is changing.

Remember how I told you that the people in Lotto Valentino might as well be lower than dirt?

Well, I went to that one sane patisserie I told you about before. There's something different about the lady who runs that place. She's not like those pieces of shit playing innocent on the streets. I hear she just lost all her energy recently, though. This girl rooming at her house—apparently she was almost like a daughter to her—passed away last year. (If *this* is what she looks like now, just how energetic was she when the girl was *alive*?)

Sorry, I got off topic again.

Anyway, most of the bastards here are worthless pieces of scum.

Though I can't say your people here are much better. Seriously, hire some better soldiers, will ya? I'm starting to feel sorry for Carla. There's only so much she can do on her own; there's not enough of her to train all the newbies one by one.

Sure, Carla's still more than incorruptible. But the problem for us is that this whole city's starting to resent House Dormентаire.

And to be honest, I can't say I blame them. Explosions go off wherever people trying to suck up to us gather together. Now the people here're pissing their pants, taking down the Dormентаire crests from their houses.

And on the other hand, we've got soldiers on our side who're *convinced* that the citizens are behind the explosions. They *say* they're investigating, but they're really just acting like thugs. Which keeps causing even more problems.

I'm starting to think this is what the culprit was planning all along. Turning the citizens and House Dormентаire against one another.

There's even rumors saying that the Mask Makers are back. You should hear this little masterpiece the kids are singing in the back alleys:

*"The demon is coming, lantern in hand.*

*The demon is coming, wearing a mask.  
It's coming to mask your face.  
It's coming to mask everyone's faces."*

...Or something like that.

If songs like this are going around, then public security here's probably just about at the end of its rope.

Maybe the members of the Mask Makers hiding here have heard the songs. We're getting cases of plain old arson, on top of all the timed bombings.

But that's not the main issue—problem is, we're finding people who're talking about how they want to join this bunch, how they're trying to get a hold of one of those masks for themselves.

They're probably thinking that, if the Mask Makers really are behind this, they'll be safe from attack if they join up with them.

Apparently there were hundreds of members in their group during the arson case last year. These Mask Makers are pretty damn eerie.

But the real creeps here are the bastards behind the bombings. I'm using the plural here, but there's still a chance that it's being masterminded by one person.

At first I thought it was some sort of call to resistance among the citizens, but recently, I've started thinking differently.

In the past three days, the culprit's started targeting aristocrats' manors and the libraries, too.

Things are getting pretty dicey. If the commotion here spreads outside the city, not even the Viceroy of Naples is gonna sit back and let things continue. I wouldn't be surprised if he decided to wipe Lotto Valentino off the map.]

(Omission)

[I've been telling you for a while now that Lotto Valentino is nothing but trouble.

And I think the alchemists here are thinking along the same lines. I've seen a lot of them skipping town with all their research material on carriages and carts.

I told our spy \_\_\_\_\_ that his job's finished, and that he can leave now, but he says he's staying behind.

From what I hear, there's a ship that's supposed to be making port here pretty soon.

It's a mid-sized vessel that some Lotto Valentino alchemists scrounged up money for.

`Course, you wouldn't be able to get something that big with just a couple of average alchemists pooling money together. But apparently, some foreign aristocrat's supplying them with funds. It's gonna be a pretty incredible ship.

According to \_\_\_\_\_, a bunch of those alchemists are trying to take that ship to the New World.

The New World, huh? Doesn't that sound great? The Americas!

I think I might want to join them, if I get the chance.

Oh, did I scare you?

Don't worry, I'm not gonna sail off on a whim.

After all, the alchemists here are suspects, too.

It'd be one hell of a discovery if I uncover something related to them, so I'll look into things on my end.

Write back if you find out anything, okay?]

[The ship's called the Advenna Avis.

I'll try and get some details for you before I send you the next report.

Forever Yours,

Victor Talbot]



*Chapter 3:*  
*The Smiles of Those in Love*

### **Chapter 3: The Smiles of Those in Love**

The girl had been searching for a place to die.

She was Niki—just Niki. She had no last name.

She felt little attachment towards her name (that sounded rather reminiscent of a kitten). She never considered names to be all that important. So she had never felt any desire to be buried after her death. Even if a tombstone were to be erected in her memory, she would not have cared if it was left anonymous.

Not only did she think lightly of her name, she also had no interest in the world she would leave behind after her death.

Her purpose for living was to find a place where she could find eternal rest, in full acceptance of her own death.

And if she should die at the very moment she found that place, she would have no regrets. In fact, she had always felt guilty for already having lived so long. Many others who had been sold as slaves alongside her had died. She had only been rescued by a stroke of good fortune.

The thought that she was allowed to enjoy the happiness that the others never had the chance to see drove itself into her heart like a wooden stake. If she had not encountered Elmer and the others, the stake might have broken her a long time ago, driving her to an early demise.

In that sense, Elmer was her rescuer and someone who had dramatically altered the course of her life.

However, although Elmer was indeed the one who gave her a reason to live, the one who gave her hope for that same purpose was neither Elmer nor the Mask Maker.

*"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 times comes is a matter of how you have lived your life thus far."*

These words, spoken by a young alchemist, drew Niki to the Meyer workshop in the midst of her aimless wanderings.

Despite the fact that she was a former slave and a stranger, he had treated her kindly.

Even though Niki had only been hired to look after Czes, the man showed her the same human respect he showed to the other alchemists working alongside him.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

Initially, Niki had thought it was a rather ostentatious name. But as she spent time at the Meyer workshop, she came to see that Fermet lived up to the grandeur of his name, at least in his diligence and ingenuity.

He was in charge of all the alchemy research in the workshop. And being so talented in all aspects of the art, Fermet was essentially the overseer of all the work that went on with the Meyer family alchemists.

Not only that, Fermet was well-versed in economics and culture. This part of him had not changed in the least since the family's move to Lotto Valentino, helping to refresh the atmosphere of their new workshop as he went about socializing in their new city.

Fermet was also in charge of communicating the workshop's research findings and techniques to aristocrats and merchants. He was, simply put, a cornerstone of the Meyer workshop, taking the place of their young family head.

He was brilliant and capable, and friendly to boot.

Why did he treat strangers like her no differently from anyone else, Niki once asked him. Fermet smiled sheepishly.

*"I'm afraid that's my ineptitude rearing its head. I'm not so suave that I can change my attitude depending on the other person's standing or background. All I can do is speak on my own behalf, little more."*

As she watched him over the past few years, Niki came to understand that Fermet's words were entirely truthful.

Unlike her, he probably loved the world.

It was unbelievable to think that they could be in such close proximity, yet have such differing outlooks on life.

Initially, she thought Fermet reminded her of Elmer. But unlike the Smile Junkie, whose only priority was the smiles of others, Fermet embraced the world exactly as it was. He was a different sort of man altogether.

From that point on, Niki came to realize something.

"Niki," he would call her. Each time he spoke her name, her heart felt more and more at ease.

It was only then that she began to finally understand the meaning of having a name.

Whenever the people of Lotto Valentino—who had bought her as a slave—called her by that name, Niki thought it as little more than a number by which she was distinguished from other slaves.

Her meeting with Elmer and the Mask Maker had added slight meaning to her name, but at the time she did not know what it was, nor did she particularly care to know.

But over the past few years, Niki came to love the fact that Fermet, Czes, Begg, and the others at the workshop called her by name.

As she pondered the reason behind her changed attitude, Niki came to a conclusion: The fact that she was being called by name meant that she was a necessary part of the workshop community. The realization brought her incredible gladness.

She could never have imagined such a thing back when she was working as a slave in Lotto Valentino. She had thought that she would prefer to be alone, never needed and never called by name.

Niki finally understood that the world around her had changed.

Although she thought to keep these sentiments locked up inside her, Niki one day found herself confessing it all to Fermet. Perhaps it was his natural affability—she almost felt drawn to disclose everything to him mid-conversation.

Once she had told him everything, she apologized for wasting his time with such a drawn-out story. But Fermet shook his head and smiled gently.

*"There's nothing to apologize for, Niki. You're practically family to us. In fact, I'm overjoyed to see that you accept and are glad for our reliance on you."*

To Niki, who had been searching for a place to die, Fermet's words were a powerfully addictive drug.

*"Whether the intentions are good or malicious, calling someone by name is an act of ensnaring their attention. And now that I understand that we haven't closed off your world by calling your name, I'd like to ask you to do the same for us. I believe that the chains that ensnare us will one day become bonds that strengthen us."*

Slowly but surely, Niki's heart was being inundated with a different sort of happiness from the ones granted by the drugs Fermet was producing.

"Fermet," she would say. And each time, she felt a little awkward and ticklish.

By calling one's name, one was both ensnared and connected.

Ever since she heard this from him, Niki started noticing him in a different way from before.

And once she realized that these emotions of hers were only directed towards Fermet, Niki found something stirring ever so gently in her heart.

She was certain that she knew what these feelings meant, but she desperately tried to ignore them.

This was because there was a tiny splinter of guilt stuck in her heart, which had yet to shake off the misery of her past—the constant reminder that perhaps a person like her had no right to feel such emotions.

In the midst of her wavering, Niki was told that the Meyer family's workshop would be relocating to Lotto Valentino.

*"Does it bring back bad memories?"*

Fermet, to whom she had confessed her past, had asked.

*"I thought I'd already shrugged it all off. But to be honest, I still can't forgive those people. I can't become a good person like you, Fermet."* She had replied with a wry smile.

But Fermet, with an entirely serious look, said:

*"I'm afraid I'm not a good person at all."*

With that, he began to slowly reveal his secret—that he was acting as a spy for House Dormентаire, one of their sponsors, by gathering information on the Lotto Valentino alchemists and reporting on the events taking place in the city.

But Niki was only happy to hear this from him.

Normally, this kind of information was best kept hidden. Fermet had no real need to tell all of this to her.

But Niki was all the happier for the fact that he went out of his way to do so.

*"Let me help."* She had said, shortly before the move.

Fermet tried to convince her otherwise—it was dirty work, he argued. But Niki replied:

*"It's all right. The old me would laugh if I called something like this dirty."*

*'Although I don't know if the old me could even have laughed in the first place...'* Niki thought self-deprecatingly, but she refused to back down.

She knew the back streets of the city better than he did, Niki argued. The people of the city, knowing their guilt, would not try to meddle in her affairs.

*"But some might brazenly target you regardless,"* Fermet said, worrying for her safety.

But Niki ultimately managed to convince him, on the surface assisting Fermet with the innocuous job of a Dormентаire messenger.

After their work, Fermet would express his gratitude—

*"Thank you, Niki."*

Each time she heard those words, Niki could feel her wounded heart slowly mending itself.

In the community of the Meyer workshop, Fermet shared with her alone the commonality of working as a spy for House Dormентаire.

Each time Fermet called her name, Niki could almost physically feel the link between them.

About half a year since this bond had been forged, Niki came to an implicit conclusion.

It was neither a shocking epiphany nor an answer she arrived at after a great deal of consideration.

She had, without knowing, stopped pretending to ignore the truth.

It was not that her guilt had faded. But Niki had begun to think that these two feelings were different matters altogether.



She accepted the small new emotion that rose up from within her.

That was all.

*'I think I must be in love with Fermet.'*

And time passed.

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### **The Boroñal manor.**

It had been about ten days since Sylvie Lumière was booted from the Avaro manor and sold to the governor.

These ten days were long enough to change her viewpoint on life and the world.

The cause of all these changes, of course, was her separation from Gretto. But despite her fears of a future filled with despair and worry, Sylvie found herself almost pleasantly surprised.

It was almost enough for her to wonder if her entire world hadn't been turned upside-down.

The explosions and the arson cases continued.

Initially the incidents were all bombings, but more recently, the culprit had been shooting burning arrows to light roofs on fire, or setting buildings alight directly.

The methods of destruction were not the only things becoming more varied.

At first, the incidents were limited to buildings, ships, and facilities connected to House Dormентаire. But now, ten days later, the culprit's choice of targets was looking to be driven by neither rhyme nor reason.

The past three days had been particularly surprising—libraries, noblemen's manors, and even ships that had nothing to do with House Dormентаire burned to ashes.

The burnings of the unaffiliated ships were an especially unfortunate problem, it seemed, as everyone began to fear that the city would soon fall prey to outside influence.

Although it did not please Sylvie to see that the city was being cornered, much like herself, she found herself realizing that a new world was opening up before her in inverse proportion.

*'Am I really awake, I wonder?'*

Each morning, she went over the events that had taken place until the previous night to make certain that they had indeed taken place. This spoke for the surprise that awaited her each and every day for the past ten days.

A new world was unfolding right before her eyes.

From afar, it was nothing more than a series of incidents taking place within one city. And although this might have been somewhat of an overreaction on Sylvie's part, she realized that until now, she was like a frog thinking that the covered well it lived in was all that comprised the world.

The sight of this new world, being unveiled as she stood lost in such a state, would perhaps normally have been enough for her to begin forgetting Gretto. But her longing to see him again only grew stronger each day.

If the destruction taking place in 'the world outside the well' was what widened her horizons, Gretto had in the past climbed into the well, where she had been sitting, and done the same.

When she first heard that aristocratic manors were now being targeted, Sylvie was frantic. But she sighed in relief when she was told that the flames had only swallowed residences a good distance from the Avaro manor, and that no nobleman or servant had been hurt by the incidents.

So long as Gretto was safe, she still had the ability do whatever was in her power to find a chance to reach him.

The preparations would be undertaken by Begg Garott, the Avaro family alchemist, but it seemed that he had not yet been summoned. For now, all Sylvie could do was wait with her eyes on the city.

Sylvie was not so optimistic as Gretto in her choice to continue waiting. In contrast to his hope that things would get better over time, she was terrified that things would change for the worse as she remained idle.

But in spite of all the chaos, Sylvie was relieved that at least her fears of being taken advantage of by the governor had been entirely unfounded.

The governor, Esperanza Boroñal, was currently eating at the same table as Sylvie and the other maids. But there was nothing resembling the look of a hungry predator in the way he looked at the women.

If anything, he looked more like a sleepy cat contentedly basking in the sunlight known as womankind.

The amicability of the clownish aristocrat was, in fact, the biggest shock that had come to Sylvie in the past ten days.

The Boroñal manor was a bit old-fashioned in comparison to the Avaro manor, but there was an extra layer of majesty to it that outshone any mansion in town. Countless rooms were lined in a row in the interior of the manor. From one end of the long hallway, it looked almost like a linear maze.

The great dining hall was one particularly vast chamber in this manor.

Sylvie sat at the table in this hall and again took in her surroundings.

All kinds of foods were laid out on the table. Governor and maids alike were partaking in the same meal.

*'I can't believe I thought so rudely of the governor.'*

She had imagined from all the rumors that Esperanza was a terrible man who abused women and treated them as objects. So when Elmer introduced them for the first time, Sylvie could not hide her confusion.

The governor's love of women was indeed incredible. But this meant that he would never do anything that might discomfort a woman. And despite Sylvie's position as the new maid, he addressed her with impeccable manners and etiquette.

Although it had initially seemed like the Avaro head had used the governor to split apart Gretto and the maid, Sylvie was told that the Avaro head's request was something closer to *"I'm afraid we can't afford to employ this maid any longer. Would you be interested in taking her in, Milord?"*. It looked like the Avaro head had no idea what kind of a man the governor really was.

*'If I explain the situation to the governor, maybe he will help me speak to Gretto.'* She thought on her first night at the Boroñal manor. But to do so was to essentially claim indirectly that she disliked working for Esperanza and that she wished to return to the Avaro manor. Such insolence was not an option for Sylvie.

As she remained silent, unable to think of what to say, Elmer had whispered to her:

*"Hm... I think it might be best if you didn't tell Speran. If you say what happened, he might get so angry that he challenges Mr. Avaro to a duel. That won't be too great for Gretto, will it?"*

Sylvie had no choice but to give up on this line of thinking.

*'But... I still feel terribly uneasy just sitting by like this. Gretto...'*

Still a mess of conflicting emotions, Sylvie continued her meal.

As she sat sullenly, a voice filled with positive cheer made its way into her ears.

"Hey there, Speran! That's a great smile you've got there, as usual."

Esperanza's expression darkened as Elmer poked his head into the dinner table.

"Excellent work *driving off* my smile, Elmer. If you're so insistent that I laugh for you, you should remember to keep all male presence out of my sight."

"Ahaha! Settle down, Speran. How 'bout this? I'll see one day if we can change people's genders with alchemy. You'd be happier to see me if I was a girl, right?"

"Of all the *revolting*—wait. If all of humanity were to become female, would that not be heaven on earth?" Esperanza muttered to himself, deep in thought.

Elmer quietly brought up his purpose for visiting.

"You say stuff like that often, don't you? So, have you found Huey yet?"

"That's what I'd like to ask. And out of paranoia, let me ask you again—you really haven't seen him yet?"

"Nope. I didn't see him or get any letters or messages from him. I'm not lying."

"I see. Then I'll take your word for it."

Esperanza wore a complicated look for some time. But he quickly opened his eyes wide and looked at Sylvie.

"Ah, I'm afraid I've forgotten to convey this to you, Miss Sylvie. My humblest apologies. This man here—Elmer—is an incurable liar and fraud, but he is as good as telling the truth when he claims so himself. Though there is little to be gained from paying his words any mind, he is completely honest with the most peculiar of subjects."

The past ten days had also been enough for Sylvie to get used to the way Esperanza spoke differently towards men and women. With a quick word of acknowledgement and thanks, she tried to keep out of Esperanza and Elmer's conversation as much as she could.

Whether he knew her intention or not, Elmer continued chattering with Esperanza, whose eyes were still on Sylvie.

"Anyway, there's something I'd like to clear up, too. Was it *really* Huey you met ten days ago? What if it was someone in disguise, or his twin brother? You've never met Huey in person, Speran. You might've mistaken his black-haired, gold-eyed brother for him."

"Huey has a brother?"

"Nope."

"Why, I oughta..."

The corner of Esperanza's mouth twitched as he grabbed Elmer by the collar.

"Please calm yourself, Milord."

"It's nothing unusual for Elmer to say such strange things, Milord."

The maids giggled. Esperanza nodded with solemn dignity.

"Truer words have never been spoken. You are absolutely correct. Elmer, you should be thankful for the lengthening of your life. Prostrate yourself before your saviors."

Elmer grinned brightly and turned to the maids.

"Thanks, everyone! Now I'll get to live even longer! It's all thanks to you!"

*'It's as if he has no worries at all.'* Sylvie thought, watching Elmer.

His almost-eerie optimism made it difficult for her to read his thoughts. But it was also true that Sylvie admired his brightness and positive attitude.

*'That's right. I should try to smile.'*

*'Once I see Gretto again, the two of us will laugh and laugh and laugh.'*

*'And then... then what?'*

*'We can't just stand around waiting. We have to do something.'*

Sylvie knew—the moment of fate was approaching.

And waiting idly as Gretto did was not one of her choices.

But Sylvie did not reject Gretto for his inaction. She believed that his passivity was both his greatest weakness and strength.

*'It's all right if Gretto keeps waiting.'*

*'I should be the one to take him by the arm.'*

Sylvie was indeed timid, and was not a person who possessed a great deal of power.

But this did not mean that she was weak.

Sylvie continued to think as she ate her meal.

Her relationship with Gretto could never come to fruition without causing *someone* pain and misery.

Then to whom should her enmity be directed?

This was what she continued to wonder.

In silence and secrecy, like a wolf sharpening her claws in the shadows, waiting for its prey.

Without even realizing that she had yet to meet her intended target.

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### **Lotto Valentino, the Third Library.**

"I will ask you again: Do you still have no idea as to who might be behind these incidents?" Carla asked, having come without a single guard accompanying her. Maiza responded to her gravely.

"I'm afraid not. If I knew, I would have told you from the very beginning, or attempted to stop the culprit myself."

Although their discussion was taking place in public near the library entrance, they looked nothing like a couple of acquaintances having a lighthearted chat.

Carla, suspecting that alchemists might be behind these incidents, hypothesized that last year's Mask Maker incident was also deeply connected to this case.

And so, she first turned her sights towards the biggest alchemy workshop and school in Lotto Valentino, the Third Library. But now, ten days since the first case, she had still been unable to gather any significant clues.

And despite the fact that his alchemy school was under such deep suspicion, Maiza did not look particularly upset. Like Carla, he was also reasonably certain that more than a few alchemists were behind these incidents.

"I understand that we are under suspicion, but I'd like to assure you that we will do everything in our power to help you stop these incidents."

"...We have no need for your assistance. I've already said this one year ago, but it is not only the alchemists; this entire city—including you—is an enemy of House Dormентаire." Carla muttered coldly, and shrugged as she remembered last year's incident.

"Although I must admit that I might have gone too far when I said we would wipe this city off the map."

"Not at all. Already, the Lotto Valentino I knew is no more."

"...I see. Then you must truly hate us."

Maiza had plenty of cause to attack the Dormентаire-affiliated facilities, Carla wanted to say. But Maiza smiled slightly and shook his head.

"If nothing else, I bear no hatred towards you. I've never had much love for this city, and I have always thought that it needed to be broken, regardless of who was doing the breaking. Perhaps it's for the best that House Dormентаire will take control over it now... Although I never wished these flames upon the streets."

Maiza sighed and looked back at the library.

"I took up the study of alchemy in order to find a way to save this city. But the more I learned, the more I came to see that this city is beyond hope. No, I came to realize that the idea of saving this city was a luxury to begin with."

"I've heard that Lotto Valentino is a city that was originally built for alchemists. It was a bizarre city from the moment of its founding. So do not concern yourself over these matters—if nothing else, all you can curse is your own fate for having been born into this place." Carla said, somewhat gentle and sympathetic in her tone. Maiza's narrow eyes widened slightly.

"I thought I was under suspicion as well."

"You *are* my enemy, but that is only because you are a part of Lotto Valentino. Otherwise, my experience tells me that you are a man I can trust."

"You're being much too kind. I am a man who was powerless to do anything for his hometown."

"And is that why you're running away?"

It sounded as though Carla was referring to a completely different topic, but Maiza seemed to understand what she was hinting at. He looked back into Carla's eyes.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I hear you'll be leaving Lotto Valentino soon."

"...So you knew."

"Only the rumors. They say that several alchemists will be crossing over to the New World on a recently-built ship."

Without waiting for Maiza to answer, Carla continued quietly.

"Let me warn you. As long as you alchemists remain at the top of our list of suspects, we will not allow that ship to set sail. Even should the governor give you permission, House Dormентаire will do whatever it takes to stop you."

She turned her back to Maiza and ended the conversation.

"You could pray that the culprit is discovered before your departure."

She had turned Lotto Valentino upside-down in the process of her work as a delegate from House Dormентаire. Although Carla had no need to feel guilt for her actions, she found herself burying an internal struggle with her own brand of remorse deep within her heart.

"If we should ever meet outside this city, perhaps in the New World... Let me buy you a drink."

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### **A pub in Lotto Valentino.**

It was no surprise that there were many pubs in Lotto Valentino, a city frequented by ships and the sailors crewing them.

Although the pubs (and most of the city, for that matter) had been as good as Dormентаire property for the past year, the combined factors of Carla's order to the Dormентаire personnel to avoid civilian facilities and the pub owners' fear of the bombings seemed to be keeping the Dormentaires away from them.

That is, with the exception of the Dormентаire alchemist on the second level of this particular establishment—Victor Talbot.

"I'm actually from England, see. But I hear they're starting up something called the 'South Sea Company'. Or they already did. Anyway, they've approved this company that sells people from Africa as slaves. And to be perfectly honest, I think that's a damned terrible idea."

Of course, the fact that Victor was the only Dormentaire affiliate in the pub did not mean that he was drinking alone.

He was sitting at a table along with Denkuuro, Zank, and Nile. From just the appearances of this small group of men, it would be difficult to pinpoint where exactly in the world they were currently in.

Victor and Denkuuro had hit it off since their first encounter ten days ago, and spoke on occasion—mostly to exchange information on their own fields of alchemy research. But for some reason, Zank and Nile had been invited to join them today.

And once Zank asked him, "What led you to be in the employ of such prideful aristocrats?", Victor (completely drunk) took the opportunity to tell his lengthy story.

"Well, I'm an alchemist just like you. I'm curious about immortality and homunculi and the sort. So I took the time to study humans this way and that. And according to my research, slave merchants are no better than slaves, at least on an empirical level."

"Not surprising in the least." Nile said plainly. Victor grinned impishly.

"You're still too damn easy to get angry, setting aside all this stuff about race. Anyway, I figured that skin color and language and all that couldn't possibly be a good measuring stick between humans. What's most important is upbringing and education... is what I told 'em a few years back. A few people got upset over that one."

"So you were exiled from your homeland?"

"It's not like I didn't like England. I still respect Her Majesty the Queen. There just happened to be a few influential people around me who wanted every last black person to be a slave and wouldn't have it any other way. Call it my high society social skills. Or lack thereof." Victor chuckled bitterly. Nile's grimace became even more pronounced.

"Give me the names of these men of influence. I will flay them alive and hang their skins on treetops."

"Hey, hey, hey. What's that gonna do other than *prove* that you're a barbarian? They're just gonna end up despising your people even more."

"That is no concern of mine, for this is my personal desire. And it is none of my concern as to what happens to those who become involved."

"Talk about scary." Victor frowned.

"Allow this one to say that Master Nile bears no ill intent. He is merely faithful to his own convictions." Denkuuro said.

"Forget *convictions*, this is just *immature*."

"Continue *rambling*, if you wish." Nile said, digging into his food with a frown.

Victor did not seem to be inclined to letting this line of thought slide, but Zank interrupted him.

"So that is how you came to leave your homeland?"

His deep, heavy tone led Victor to turn back to him without even thinking.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. That's more or less right." Victor said, somewhat reluctantly dropping his previous issue. "Anyhow, after I left England, House Dormентаire picked me up. They're pretty easy to understand—it doesn't matter if your black or white, if you've got blue blood or not, or anything else. What they care about is how much you can help them. In other words, as long as you can make them more money, they'll take you. There's rumors that they sponsor both Satanists *and* the Inquisition."

It was a bone-chilling rumor indeed, but Denkuro and the others had no way of confirming the veracity of such claims. Victor himself was likely equally in the dark.

"This one finds it difficult to agree with the idea that money is everything, but..." Denkuro trailed off, but Victor laughed and took a sip of his drink.

"Can't argue with that. You know what they say. Fatten up an elephant too much, and it'll never be able to walk. House Dormентаire's not gonna be a huge ball of glory forever. Although I couldn't tell you if that end is gonna be in one year or a thousand."

But once he had made this definitive statement, a sad look came over Victor.

"But it's only decent to pay someone back if they help you. And..."

"And?"

"There's a lady involved." Victor chuckled. Denkuro and the others looked around at one another.

"From what this one can see, it is no mere servant girl you speak of, Master Victor. Might this one impudently guess that she is a maiden of noble standing?"

"Hah. She's a bit old to be called a 'maiden' now. What was she now... Late twenties, early thirties?"

Victor smiled like a child, as though he was picturing her in his mind.

"Well, I guess you could say she's got 'I'm stinking rich' written all over her face."

His first description of the woman was not of her virtue, but her vice.

"She's got a pretty nice face and figure. She uses that, along with House Dormентаire's power, to seduce anyone she feels like. Men *and* women. You can't even call this *cheating*. This is practically a *harem*."

Ignoring the fact that he himself was one of the many targets of her seduction, Victor continued to talk about her cheerfully.

"She's the kind of person who can't go without getting a hold of whatever it is she wants, whether it's jewels or money."

"...And this woman would be the reason for your loyalty to House Dormентаire?"

"Hey, even someone like her has all kinds of interests. And she's not *all* bad. If you think about it, the fact that she's courting a lowly alchemist like me and letting me talk to her plainly already makes her different from every other aristocrat out there."

In other words, the other members of House Dormентаire were typical aristocrats who looked down upon others, Denkuro mused. Although he could not outright say that this was wrong, he reminded himself that Nile should never be allowed to come in contact with any of these aristocrats.

He then carefully chose the most neutral answer to Victor's description of the woman.

"Of course. This one could not say much without meeting her in person, it seems."

"Right. Though I don't know if someone as straight-laced as you could ever get along with someone like her." Victor chuckled.

Denkuro was not at all insulted, understanding that Victor meant no offense by his joke. He took a sip of his own drink.

"Although I doubt we would even get the chance to see your maiden in person." Zank said in a low voice. Victor snickered.

"It's more likely than you think."

"?"

As the others looked on in curiosity, Victor sipped his drink with a complicated look on his face.

"I mean, I wanted to tell her to stay away because it's so dangerous here. But what can I do? She set out before I got the chance. But I swear I'll send her right back the second she gets here."

"Yeah. She's coming to Lotto Valentino. That beautiful and greedy aristocrat from House Dormентаire."

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### **The Boroñal manor office.**

"...This will be a bother." Esperanza sighed miserably. Elmer's expression brightened.

"I thought you were *already* being bothered, but from the sounds of things, your biggest headache's still not here yet. Perfect! Why not laugh away the time before your next bother?"

Ignoring Elmer's predictable comment, Esperanza rested his chin on his hands and spoke, sitting at his desk.

"Lucrezia De Dormentaire. A woman of great influence, even among the members of House Dormentaire."

"Hm? It's not like you to sound so sad while you're talking about a woman."

"I'd be elated to hear of any woman's coming to this city, but things are different this time. There are certain... circumstances that surround us both." Esperanza chuckled bitterly, "You know of Maribel's... Monica's connection with House Dormentaire?"

"Yeah, more or less."

"I still don't know all of the facts behind that incident, but one thing's for certain: House Dormentaire was at least partially involved in her death. No... it would be more apt to say that there's nothing more certain than the fact that House Dormentaire stole away her entire life."

With his knuckles still supporting his chin, Esperanza disclosed much of the matter bothering him so.

"Even on a personal level, I still hold a great deal of pent-up emotion towards House Dormentaire. If the visitor were not a woman, I can't say I would be able to remember my position and keep my hatred in check."

"But you'd be honestly grinning ear-to-ear for a woman, even if she's from House Dormentaire."

"Is there a problem?" Esperanza asked brazenly, putting a finger to his lips. "No... Yes, there *is* a problem. Yes. Of course."

"I think you suffer from withdrawal symptoms if you're away from women too long, Speran. Either you start acting overly pompous or overly introverted. It's like you've left all your personality to womankind."

"Is there a problem? No... No, there is no problem. There shouldn't be."

"That's right. As long as women make you smile, that's no problem for me. In other words, there shouldn't be any problems about the Dormentaire woman coming to Lotto Valentino!" Elmer said, spinning round and round around the office.

Esperanza looked at him wearily. He opened his mouth to speak several times, but eventually gave up and sighed heavily.

"Elmer, you truly are... No, never mind."

"?"

"Anyway, despite your indifference, Lucrezia De Dormentaire's coming to Lotto Valentino is a problem. I have no doubt that some will be outraged at the fact that I do nothing on behalf of Ma—Monica, from whom her entire life was stolen. I was almost hoping that you would be one such person, but it looks as though my hopes were in vain."

"I feel like you said something pretty insulting just now, but I guess I must've hurt you with what I said. So I'll apologize." Elmer said with a grin. Esperanza again heaved a sigh, giving up in order to continue the conversation.

He mentioned a certain name.

"Huey Laforet."

"Ah, so we're going back to him after all." Elmer nodded, having half-expected this line of thinking. He was indeed a madman, but he was no fool. He had gone off on his tangent despite knowing that their conversation would eventually get back on track.

Naturally, this mindset of Elmer's was the reason he could not blend in with other people.

"I wonder how he's doing now. If he's still the same person as he was a year ago, I could make a good guess about what he's planning now. But now that Monica's gone... I don't have a clue. Maybe if I could meet him in person."

"Of course."

Esperanza stood up and looked out the window, watching the evening streets.

"If he is causing these explosions using Monica's death as his justification, I will never forgive Huey Laforet. I will reject him, his character, and even Monica's past. But I sensed something when I spoke with him. There was something... different about him. Something that sets him apart from the class of bloodthirsty avengers."

"But he still might be the one planting bombs everywhere for the Dormentaires and the city. What a headache. How about we just keep this conversation going under the assumption that Huey is responsible?" Elmer said nonchalantly.

Esperanza, who had known Elmer for quite some time now, knew that Elmer would not treat Huey any differently whether the latter was the Emperor of Rome or Gilles de Rais, the demented child killer. In other words, Elmer had no interest in whether Huey was the culprit behind the bombings or not. To take this one step further, Elmer had no interests in Huey's motivations. If he were, it would be for but one purpose.

The purpose of drawing out as much of a smile as he could from Huey.

"If Huey would laugh after taking revenge on House Dormentaire, then I would lend him a hand, no question. But either way, I'm going to try and make him smile."

"..."

"After all, it's my goal to make the entire world smile, including Huey."

"Like something out of a dream."

Esperanza did not call Elmer's goal hypocrisy.

He knew full well that Elmer's wish to see people smile did not stem from goodwill of any sort. Elmer operated solely for the sake of his own selfish desires.

"You'd have to turn the entire world upside-down to fulfill that wish of yours. I guess in an alchemist's terms, it would be a journey longer and more difficult than the creation of the Philosopher's Stone."

"As long as there's a way ahead, I'll reach my goal eventually." Elmer said quietly, looking down at his own hands.

"So I'd like to live for a very long time, if I can."

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### **The same day, midnight. Somewhere on the floating fortress.**

"Hmph. Perhaps I should make my way to the Third Library soon."

At the furthest edge of the seaborne Dormentaire fortress was an unusual cabin filled with various kinds of scientific instruments and books.

Because even the slightest of waves were enough to sway the ships, there were no particularly delicate instruments set up in the cabin. But otherwise, the cabin's alchemic facilities were clearly superior to that of most other workshops.

Sitting in this cabin muttering to himself was Szilard Quates.

He had ordered the Dormentaire men to set up this elaborate workshop in the ten short days since his arrival.

*'I'd expected little from this countryside town, but it is indeed surprising that they could procure this equipment with such ease. Truly, a city built for alchemists.'*

Marveling at the instruments available in Lotto Valentino, Szilard glanced over at the letter sitting on his desk.

There was a Dormentaire crest printed upon the envelope that looked to have contained the letter, but the words on the letter were arranged in lines of nonsense. They were likely orders written in code. Szilard read through it without even consulting a key.

"...Hmph."

He snorted and brought the letter to a burning candle.

When it caught fire, the old man tossed it into the ashtray on his desk.

Watching his orders burn, Szilard smirked.

*'What ignorance, House Dormentaire and Lotto Valentino both. How could anyone believe in those fairy tales about the Grand Panacea?'*

Although he was an alchemist, Szilard was very much a man of realism. Even when it came to the transmutation of gold, he would often say to Victor, "*Albert Magnus made a profound statement on the matter five centuries ago, and I am very much inclined to agree*".

For someone who could not consider even the creation of gold to be plausible, the concept of immortality must have truly been a thing of fantasies.

But Szilard seemed to have a great deal of interest in homunculi—artificial humans. He expended all his efforts in delving into this field, believing that the closest humanity could get to immortality was the preservation of one's memories and character—in other words, one's mind—via transplant into a homunculus.

In Ancient Greece, Hippocrates claimed that one's reason and emotions—in other words, the mind—resided not in the heart, but the brain. But it was only after the seventeenth century that this concept began to take hold.

In this perspective, Szilard was from the first generation of people to grow up with this new concept of the mind. He was thus influenced to think that, perhaps, it would be possible to transfer one's mind to another vessel.

But in this age, when humans had yet to discover even bioelectromagnetism or neural transmitters, Szilard's research was something of a pipe dream.

Yet even for Szilard, who undertook such work, the idea of a potion that could grant immortality was nothing more than a fanciful child's tale.

[We have received information claiming that Dalton of the Third Library has conveyed the method of creating the Grand Panacea to Maiza Avaro. Do not turn Dalton against us. Obtain the formula from the young alchemist Maiza.]

[Maiza Avaro is due to set sail on a ship called the 'Advenna Avis' alongside a group of other alchemists. He plans to disappear into the New World with his knowledge. Board the ship alongside him and find the secrets behind the formula.]

This was the gist of the information written on the letter.

*'Not a word about verifying the facts behind this supposed cure-all. So whether it is truth or falsehood, House Dormentaire plans to take possession of it all the same.*

*'I suppose immortality is the next natural step after their immense glory and power.*

*'But a drink that could make one immortal? Preposterous.'*

As his thoughts reached this point, a gust of wind flew into his cabin.

The flame burning on the candle shook, and the smoldering pieces of the burning letter scattered all over the room.

"Hm..."

Realizing that the wind had come from the window, which had not been open before, Szilard narrowed his eyes and scanned the room.

A silhouette was standing in a dark corner of the cabin.

"You..."

Standing before the old man was a hooded man wearing a cloak.

The stranger's only remarkable characteristic was the white mask over his face, straight out of a masquerade or a Venetian carnival.

### **Several minutes later.**

The Dormentaire soldiers and the harbor residents were drawn to the scene by the sound of a powerful explosion.

The sight of the events that took place was carved into their memories.

The ship at the end of the fortress, converted into an alchemy workshop by Szilard Quates, was going up in flames and a cloud of black smoke.

Because it was quickly disconnected from the adjacent ships, the rest of the fortress was spared from damage.

But some of the onlookers witnessed yet one more curiosity.

As those affiliated with the fortress floundered in confusion, a small rowboat detached itself from the fortress, carrying the masked man who had been on the burning ship.

As soon as the boat reached land, the man disappeared into the darkness of the alleyways.

The people were certain. The Mask Makers had returned.

They were now afraid—they feared that House Dormentaire and the Mask Makers would burn their city to the ground.

The commoners, who had once abused young slaves and ruled the city with drugs, could do little but tremble before the flames.

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### **One hour later, the Avaro manor.**

"I knew it. It's not over yet... It's not over."

Gretto's knees knocked as he chewed on his nails without even realizing.

His room was dark, the lights having been extinguished. He sat on the side of his bed, repeating the same words to himself over and over again.

One hour earlier, he had noticed the frenzy in the streets and looked outside through his window.

He could see that the sky near the harbor had been illuminated a faint red.

The fire seemed to have been brought under control now. Peace was returning to the streets.

The commotion that had occurred left Gretto still trembling in shock, but he was not shaking out of fear that he might become involved.

"Right... Yes..."

He was trembling out of excitement—excitement at the sight of Lotto Valentino, which had been all that made up his world, crumbling before his eyes.

At first, the aristocrats intended to sit back and watch the situation unfold. They would have been happy to see the Mask Makers and House Dormentaire destroy each other and fall together.

But things changed once the aristocrats' manors became targets.

Perhaps even the aristocrats who stood by and let House Dormentaire take over the city were the Mask Makers' targets, some wondered. Now the aristocrats were busy hiring men to guard their manors more securely than ever before.

Unfortunately, the only remarkable method of entry into Lotto Valentino was by ship—which meant that there were no real mercenaries in the vicinity of the city. The aristocrats had to resort to hiring thugs off the streets to watch their properties.

This naturally meant that their security was full of gaps.

It also allowed for an intruder to step straight into Gretto's guarded room.

There was a breeze. Gretto looked up in surprise—his window was supposed to be closed.

"...Wh-who are you?!"

He turned around to face the intruder.

Standing there was a figure illuminated by the moonlight outside the window.

Gretto trembled in fear as he looked upon the cloaked stranger, whose mask glowed white in the moonlight.

### **Thirty minutes later, the Boroñal manor.**

Sylvie was roused from sleep by a commotion taking place in the halls.

She could feel fear rising within herself. Sitting up without a moment's hesitation, Sylvie reached for the glasses on her nightstand, put on some light clothing, and stepped out into the hallway.

Esperanza was speaking with a butler, one of the few men in his employ. There were also several maids who seemed to have woken up before Sylvie.

They were all staring out the window. Elmer, standing among them, noticed Sylvie and walked up to her.

"Oh, you're awake. Sorry about all the commotion."

"Um, what's going on here? What in the world...?"

Sylvie looked on fearfully. Elmer thought for a moment, and spoke slowly.

"I want you to stay calm and listen." He said, wearing an unusually grave expression. "Maiza's house is on fire."

"...What?!"

The moment the meaning of Elmer's words became clear, Sylvie felt her vision grow hazy. She felt numb, as though her entire body was being constricted. Her breathing grew labored as she desperately squeezed out her voice.

"Gretto's... manor?"

If she went up to the window, she could probably see the smoke. But Sylvie was rooted to the spot, unable to so much as cast it a glance.

Elmer gave her a word of consolation.

"He's probably all right. The fire didn't spread to the whole house; it was just a small--"

But Elmer never got to finish his sentence.

Sylvie, lips pursed, was already running for the doors.

"Hey, wait!" Elmer cried, but Sylvie did not seem to hear him. "I'm coming too! Hold on!"

He hurriedly followed after her. But Elmer's intention was not to keep Sylvie safe from harm. He thought that, perhaps once Sylvie confirmed Gretto's well-being, she would smile in relief. Elmer wanted more than anything to bear witness to that smile. This is why he chased her.

But if Gretto had been injured or killed in the fire, Sylvie would naturally be sad. She would grow distant from smiling. In that case, Elmer would follow after her to bring a smile back to her face.

This was the nature of Elmer C. Albatross.

But neither of his predicted scenarios came to pass.

The city police and the Avaro guards had gathered around the manor, preventing Sylvie from approaching.

She asked them many times if Gretto was safe, but perhaps the Avaro head had given special orders about her—the men pushed her away from the scene of the fire without so much as a word.

Though Sylvie was never facing him, Elmer still spoke to her.

"I'm sure Gretto is all right. But I doubt he would be happy if he could see you making a face like that, don't you think? So I think it's best for you to smile. That's right. Show me a big smile."

Sylvie glared at Elmer. She almost wanted to slap him. But for some reason, he remained at a slight distance, not looking like he was going to come any closer.

"...?"

As Sylvie stared at him, half-confused, Elmer explained himself.

"Ah, sorry. Wouldn't want to stick too close and risk Gretto looking out the window and mistake you for cheating."

It was a bizarre thing to be worrying about.

On any other day, in any other setting, Elmer's concern would be expected and normal. But the fact that he could so nonchalantly say such a thing in front of a burning manor left Sylvie terrified.

The slight tinge of fear she felt when she first met Elmer reared its head again, this time many times more terrible than before.

Elmer was not evil, she thought, but someone she could not comprehend.

This was what she came to think of Elmer in the ages that were ahead of her.

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### **The next day, the floating fortress.**

"So yesterday's targets were old Szilard's ship and a manor on the hill?"

"Yes, Mr. Talbot. We've received no news of other incidents."

The sun had already passed its peak. It was afternoon in the harbor.

The intense odor of burning chemicals, mixed in with the smell of salt, wafted through the air.

"And you're sure we have no casualties?"

Victor stood on the deck of a part of the fortress, looking down upon the scene of the crime.

Carla, who stood next to him, answered.

"That's correct. Thankfully, we've been spared fatalities last night as well. However, I've been told that Mr. Quates and the second son of the Avaro family have both received minor burns. Mr. Quates insisted on treating himself, and the young man was sent to another alchemist."

"An alchemist? Ah, right. There aren't any churches here, so that means no hospitals."

"Yes, sir. Many alchemists here also offer medical services."

In the Middle Ages, many barbers practiced medical techniques such as bloodletting. But after the Renaissance, many people had taken up purely medical professions. Throughout history, countless doctors also practiced alchemy. In Lotto Valentino, the proportion of such men and women greatly outweighed that of the outside world. When someone was injured, it was almost standard practice in the city to take the person to an alchemy workshop.

"Which workshop?"

"The Meyer family's, which is on good terms with the Avaro family."

"...Huh. The one House Dormentaire's financing."

"Yes. We've had our spy cease activities for the moment, considering the state of the city. But..."

Looking around to make sure that no one was around, Carla continued.

"Because we are still sponsoring their workshop, we have maintained contact with the spy. We usually have the Meyer family maid pass along messages for us here, but sometimes we discuss the matter during our financing meetings."

"In other words, as long as no one figures out what we're talking about, we could theoretically meet up in the middle of the street."

"We'd lost the need for a spy here once we'd taken over Lotto Valentino. But now that the Mask Makers are attacking the city, we need someone to report on the situation in the streets once more."

"...About the people our spy associates with... I mean, I've talked to the young lady, but those bastards just convince me more and more that this city's full of shit. Wish I could've gone somewhere *nice*. Naples, maybe."

Carla had heard about Niki's past from the alchemist who served as their spy.

Because of her past with the city, Niki was not the best person to be spying on House Dormentaire's behalf. But she was a perfect fit for the role of a messenger to the Dormentaires, who were not affiliated with the city to begin with.

"I cannot agree to that entirely, Mr. Talbot."

"The lady at the patisserie was nice, I'll give you that. And I heard that some of the alchemists and aristocrats are pretty pleasant people. Governor Espe-something-or-other, Miss Niki was heaping praises on. Although he doesn't seem that popular with the bastards here."

Carla understood full well that Victor despised the people of Lotto Valentino from the bottom of his heart. He was probably associating with the recently arrived foreign alchemists so much because he was trying to avoid mingling with the people of this city.

As Carla assessed the state of Victor's mind, the man himself suddenly loosened his frown.

"Though that still doesn't mean I don't think he's a crackpot. I might have to go meet him in person one of these days."

"I doubt that he will be very favorably disposed to you, Mr. Talbot. The governor only speaks in sincerity with women."

"Hm? You said that before, didn't you? So does that mean he's opened up to *you*?" Victor asked, shrugging.

Carla shook her head lightly and chuckled wryly.

"Please don't tease me like this, Mr. Talbot. Although it is true that unlike you, the governor greeted me courteously without problematizing my appearance or position."

"...You don't need to remind me, all right? How many times do I have to apologize, now? I'm sorry about what happened when we first met. You trounced me, Lucrezia mocked me, and I learned my lesson. I've seriously got no good memories..."

As he brought up the name 'Lucrezia', Victor's expression softened.

"I bet she'd have one hell of a time mocking me if she could see what was going on here..." He mumbled, looking out into the sea.

There were no particularly eye-catching ships on the water.

But it looked as though Victor was looking beyond the distant horizon.

"You said she was going to arrive today."

"That's correct, sir. We've received a message from the port just before this city."

"Wouldn't it be faster to just come by carriage?"

Lucrezia De Dormentaire.

She was a noblewoman who was both Victor's employer and lover.

And she was to come to Lotto Valentino personally by ship.

Victor had only been informed of this the previous day, just hours before he bought drinks for Denkuro and the others.

He had known that she had been staying at the nearest vacation home to this city for several months now, but Victor had never in his wildest dreams expected that she would personally make an appearance in Lotto Valentino.

"Shit. Now she's not going to get any of my reports."

"No, sir. I'm reasonably certain that she must have received them at the ports along the way."

"...What do you think? What are the chances that she's coming here because I said, 'Feel any lonely 'cause I haven't written to you in so long' in my letter?" Victor grinned. Carla replied stoically.

"Impossible, sir. If Milady was to feel lonesome, she would have to go little further than bed one of her many lovers. To be perfectly honest, sir, setting aside your occupation as an alchemist... Mr. Talbot, you seem to be lower down on the list of Milady's loved ones."

"That's damn honest of you." Victor twitched, and continued. "Shit, we're still in the middle of the War of the Spanish Succession. How the hell can she move around this easily?! The Dormentaire geezers are all supposed to be busy politicking."

"Since the death of Emperor Joseph of the Holy Roman Empire and the coronation of Archduke Charles, House Dormentaire has begun to expect that the war will come to an end within the next several years. Of course, Milady Lucrezia has never cared for matters of war or diplomacy. I am quite certain that she has little interest in political affairs."

"...I guess you're right. Shouldn't expect anything less from someone who'd take an interest in a city of alchemists in the middle of a war. Lotto Valentino really is freaking terrifying. Austria's taken over Naples just a stone's throw away, but everyone here's all 'Oh, a war? What in the world is that all about?'"

Victor must have had something in mind. He narrowed his eyes and mumbled as though to himself.

"*But*, instead of any one country, this city's being jerked around by House Dormentaire. And then there's the Mask Makers or something, running loose trying to rebel against that. And the rest of the city's basically full of shit. Lotto Valentino's one hell of a godforsaken town."

Victor again turned his gaze to the horizon and drew up an image of the ship that had yet to arrive.

"Oh well. When that greedy kitten Lucrezia gets here, I'll keep her safe. Although I'm going to tell her to go back as soon as I see her."

"Mr. Talbot, leave Milady's security to us. I suggest that you fulfill your own duties." Carla said definitively. Victor shrugged.

"Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud. You and me, we're *both* little rats being toys around by that kitten."

"I can just see it now. She must be driving her entourage up the wall on that ship of hers."

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**On the seas, aboard a ship owned by House Dormентаire.**

**En route from a Dormентаire property to Lotto Valentino.**

Atop the humdrum but dazzling sea sailed a ship, ornately decorated around the stern and the bow.

Upon its flags and sails were the crest of House Dormентаire, the symbol with the hourglass motif.

Sailors rushed to and fro on the deck, hard at work, but the salty odor of sweat and the sea had been overpowered entirely by something else.

Just as Cleopatra had once filled her ship with the scent of roses, the sweet scent of peaches permeated this vessel, tinged with a hint of herb to repel insects.

The interior of the ship was lavish and luxurious, making it look like it had been cut straight from a nobleman's manor.

And in one particular cabin on the ship, which stood head and shoulders above the others in terms of sheer decadence, sounded a very small sneeze.

"Oh my, it sounds like *someone's* whispering behind my back." Mumbled Lucrezia De Dormентаire, a noblewoman wearing a lavish dress. She snapped her peacock-feather fan shut.

Although her clothing was a dress by technicality, it was not one worn with a hoop skirt and corset, the likes of which was in fashion among noblewomen at the time. Lucrezia's dress was thin, accentuating her curves and exposing her legs.

This particular design was custom-made for House Dormентаire and was not given a name, for there were no plans to release the design to the public. Perhaps the most apt comparison would be to a Chinese *qipao*, but of a design that would only come into fashion several centuries later, and topped with even more opulent decorations.

Lucrezia's figure, exposed by the tight fit of the dress, was so shapely that she probably did not need a corset. Her skin, revealed between the pieces of cloth, was smooth as silk.

She was perhaps in her mid-twenties. Although her demeanor was quite seductive, her complexion made her look much younger than she actually was.

"Honestly, that felt like no time at all. If my memory serves, we should be there soon. Right, *sweetheart?*"

Without waiting for her servant to reply, Lucrezia slowly raised her arms into the air and stretched with a moan.

"But this is just *so* exciting. I can't *wait* to see the looks on Carla and Victor's faces, facing down those poor, poor rebellious little things in Lotto Valentino."

Her tone was seductive and moist, and the guards hearing her captivating voice were less struck by the emotion of annoyance than they were by sultry playfulness.

The guards and servants around Lucrezia's cabin included all sorts of people—men and women, young and old. Some of the young men among them were still young enough to be called little boys.

Lucrezia took a seat on the magnificent bed installed in the cabin and spoke—not to any individual, but to the entire cabin.

"You know what I love *most* from the reports I read about Lotto Valentino? The *toilets*."

"The... toilets, Milady?"

The servants listened in confusion. Lucrezia giggled and continued impishly.

"Yes, the *toilets*. I've read that Lotto Valentino routed water from a nearby lake to make a sewer system. Aqueducts and running water, just like Ancient Rome. And not just for aristocrats. *Commoners* have toilets with running water in their homes, and so do public facilities like libraries! Isn't that just *wonderful*?"

"Of course, Milady."

"And then we have a certain *neighbor* that's still using *chamber pots* in their *palaces*! Not to mention their awfully *putrid* villages. But how exciting! It's the first time since Strassburg's hometown—Gro-something or other—that I've heard of a backwater town equipped with perfect sewage facilities. Sure, the other place had dear Strassburg working hard on the *specifics*, but it looks like those little alchemists in Lotto Valentino were no slouches, either. Such *clever* little sweethearts, don't you think?"

In a mismatch of topic and setting, Lucrezia went on a long tirade about toilets in her majestic cabin.

Perhaps her manner of dress, with her legs so boldly exposed, was already clashing with the decor and her noble blood, but Lucrezia herself cared little for such things.

She was not ignorant of mainstream ideas of propriety. Lucrezia understood them full well, but still chose to assert her own ways of speech or dress, as though she was flaunting the thought that she was the center around which the world should revolve.

Even after the talk of toilets, Lucrezia went on to hold a one-sided conversation about whatever struck her fancy. But the servants did not look at all bored by her discussion. Perhaps this was testament to Lucrezia's incredible charisma, or perhaps it spoke for the servants' adoration of her, so great that just listening to her speak was enough to give them pleasure. Only the servants themselves knew the answer.

"I suppose it's almost about time."

Lucrezia only finished after taking a look at the time.

A young servant humbly replied:

"Yes, Milady. There is less than an hour left now."

"I see... You have no *idea* how much I'm *dying* to see Carla and Victor's faces."

Upon her face was a smile, equal parts childishly innocent and proudly confident.

She was being neither condescending nor flattering.

Lucrezia laughed as she looked upon the world and its sights, as though she were the world itself.

It was an expression of love, as though she loved the world like a lover of equal standing.

Victor was just one part of the world she called her beloved.

That was all he was to her.

But that was exactly why she could truly say that she gave each and every one of her lovers equal affection.

And the fact that such a thing was permitted to her spoke for her position as a member of House Dormentaire.

Of course, such splendid glory might perhaps serve only to cloud her vision in the city she would soon grace.

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### **Afternoon, Lotto Valentino. The Third Library.**

"Gretto!" Sylvie cried. At the other end of her gaze was a young man sitting on a bed, looking extremely surprised.

"S-Sylvie! How did you...?"

"Gretto! Oh, Gretto, I was so worried about you!" Sylvie cried, not even letting Gretto finish his sentence as she leapt into his arms.

Her glasses slipped from the impact, and her tears began soaking into his bandages.

Having pined for Gretto for nearly two weeks now, Sylvie had never in her wildest dreams expected that they would be reunited in this way.

This was why she did not spare the time to think as she directed her joy into embracing him once more.

But Gretto himself seemed to have been completely unprepared for the reunion, flinching as Sylvie embraced him.

"Oof!"

"O-oh! I'm so sorry!"

It was only when Gretto cried out that Sylvie realized that he was bandaged.

At the same time, she heard a laid-back voice from behind her.

"There, there. Settle down, now! Mr. Gretto here has some burns that still need mending, so don't touch them or they'll... Eeeeeek!"

The woman fell loudly mid-sentence and crashed right into Sylvie.

"Argh!"

Gretto cried out even louder this time.

"G-Gretto! Are you all right?!" Sylvie asked, holding him and looking back at the woman who fell towards her.

Behind Sylvie was a woman wearing glasses much like her own, staggering to her feet with one hand over her forehead.

"Ohh... Ouch... I'm so sorry."

"Um... Who are you?" Sylvie asked tentatively.

"Ah, this here's Professor Renée." Elmer said, stepping inside. "She's our teacher, and she also works as a doctor for people who get themselves hurt here at the library."

"Elmer..."

After what happened last night, Sylvie was still slightly wary of Elmer. But his explanation answered her question.

Initially, Sylvie had made for the Meyer workshop. This was because Elmer had received word that Gretto had been taken to the workshop of an alchemist connected to the Avaro Family. Sylvie had run out of Esperanza's manor as soon as she heard this.

As it turned out, Gretto was not at the Meyer manor. But Begg pointed her to the Third Library—which brought things to the present.

"Gretto... I'm so relieved... You have no idea how worried I was!"

"What about you, Sylvie?! Are you all right? Did the governor try anything—"

"Oh! Gretto... About the governor..."

Realizing that it would be best to clear up any misunderstandings about the governor before they arose, Sylvie decided to slowly explain everything that had happened over the past ten days.

Meanwhile, Elmer addressed one other person who had been in a corner of the room all this time.

"Say, you were... Fermet, right? Could I ask why Gretto's at the Third Library?"

Fermet, who had been leaning against the wall in a particularly dark corner of the room, smiled gently.

"It's good to see you again, Elmer. To answer your question, I had Gretto brought here because our medical facilities are no match for those here at the Third Library. And as for my second reason..."

Hearing the rapidly approaching footsteps from outside the medical room, Fermet continued.

"It's because Maiza is here as well."

As if on cue, Maiza opened the door and ran inside, panting.

"Gretto..."

"Maiza!"

"Are you all right? ...Well, from what I can see, you don't seem to be in any danger at the moment." Maiza smiled, but quickly withdrew it and approached his brother.

"What in the world happened, Gretto? Was it the Mask Maker who did this to you?" He asked, eyes narrowed and voice lowered.

Gretto bowed his head slightly and began to explain the situation.

"Someone wearing a mask suddenly came into my room and tossed some sort of ball into the wall. It looked like ceramic, and as soon as it broke, it started a fire."

"Damn that Mask Maker... What is he planning?!"

"He's been missing for a while now, but only now he decides to make a show of himself... I wonder what he could be after." Elmer said.

Fermet continued where Elmer left off.

"Perhaps the culprit behind this particular incident is an entirely separate person from the one behind the serial bombings. Someone with a grudge against Gretto, perhaps, trying to place the blame on the Mask Maker."

"I suppose that's one possibility, but... Speaking as his brother, I cannot believe that Gretto could earn the grudge of any such hoodlum." Maiza said firmly. Gretto himself also sounded taken aback by Fermet's hypothesis.

"That can't be! I've never done anything to anyone!"

"Please excuse me if I offended you—it was not in my intention to do so. But we cannot ignore the possibility of a culprit who would attack Gretto maliciously at random, disregarding Gretto's moral state..."

Maiza nodded in agreement, seething with anger for the first time in a very long time since he had taken up the study of alchemy.

"Damn it... I won't let them get away with this."

"Neither will I!" Sylvie cried firmly, also much more forceful than she usually was. From the look of her eyes, she seemed ready to inflict the same injuries as those on Gretto—or worse—to the person responsible.

But Gretto quietly shook his head and addressed them almost admonishingly.

"It's all right. I'm actually almost thankful to the culprit. I managed to leave the house, and I'm with Sylvie now... And above all that, I think this is my chance. The fact that I'm here at the Third Library is, I mean."

"...What do you mean, Gretto?" Maiza asked, frowning. Gretto looked at him determinedly.

"Maiza. You're going to leave Lotto Valentino, aren't you? On the Advenna Avis, which is supposed to come today."

"!"

Maiza was shocked. Fermet bowed his head apologetically.

"I'm terribly sorry, Maiza. I was so certain that you'd have told your family about all this..."

"...I see. No, Fermet. It's nothing for you to be apologizing about. The fault is mine alone."

Elmer and Sylvie looked on in confusion, not understanding why Maiza was the one apologizing. Gretto, who knew what was going on, turned to his brother.

"I'm not going to ask you exactly why you weren't going to tell me, or if you were going to tell me later... And I won't ask you why you're leaving, Maiza. But..."

Gretto trailed off, and looked over at Sylvie.

He came to a decision. Tightening his hands into fists, Gretto continued.

"But there's one thing I want to ask of you."

"What is it?"

Gretto's next words, squeezed out after an entire lifetime of standing by idly, was a show of his courage in its truest form.

"Please take me and Sylvie with you on that ship!"



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### **The special archives of the Third Library.**

"It seems that nothing has changed."

Though it was in the middle of the afternoon, the special archives were lit only by the trembling lamplight.

The voice had come, not from Dalton—who was sitting at his desk—but from the young man whose eyes were fixed upon the document in his hands.

"Elmer in particular—he remains exactly as he was before, and so he will remain until the end."

"Elmer, certainly. But what of yourself? Has the past year changed you?"

"The eyes with which I see the world have indeed changed, but I'm afraid I will have to leave the matter of judging my character to *you*, Headmaster Dalton." Said the young man—Huey Laforet—as he smiled faintly, turning over to the next page. "Perhaps one year is too generous a length of time to give a man who wishes to change. A human being can so easily throw away his old self in the blink of an eye, after all."

"There are some who cannot."

"You're right, Headmaster. There are all kinds of humans—some who persist in following their chosen paths with a will of steel. Others are simply too weak to abandon their pasts. Ultimately, the concepts of human goodness or malice are only matters of the *surface*, easily explained away by the fact of individual variation."

"You talk as if this has nothing to do with yourself."

At this, Huey finally closed the book he was reading and turned to his teacher.

"All a man can say about his fellows comes from his observation of others—what he sees with his own two eyes. After all, becoming *involved* in any experiment will ultimately contaminate the results."

"So what is it you're after? The governor tells me that you are searching for a way to see Monica again."

"That is indeed my goal. I merely wish to keep my promise to her. It is a simple dream. A wish I want to grant, even at the cost of this very world."

"I see. Then I will wish you good fortune."

Dalton did not pry further into Huey's unusual intentions, seemingly understanding what he meant by all this. Without attempting to stop him or condemn him, Dalton continued to question Huey nonchalantly.

"So what are you doing here? It seems unlike you to come for the sole purpose of greeting me, without having even shown your face to Elmer."

"There are a few things I would like to confirm with you, Headmaster."

At that point, the archive doors swung open. Renée had returned from the hospital room.

"Eek! I just don't believe this, Headmaster! Mr. Maiza and Mr. Gretto suddenly got very angry and started arguing! It was just so awkward that I *had* to leave... Oh? Is that you, Huey?! When did you come back? You gave your teacher such a fright!"

The female alchemist approached, her eyes wide as dinner plates.

Huey, still wearing a gentle smile, drew a concealed knife from the sleeve of his right hand and swung it at her hand.

"Huh? ...? Eeek! Wh-what is this, Huey?! Is this what they mean by a 'rebellious period'?! Your teacher is terribly heartbroken!"

Despite her devastated tone, Renée did not sound at all concerned with the fact that she had been physically injured. Dalton sighed at the interaction. Huey's gaze was focused on the droplets of blood that had fallen from Renée's hand onto the floor.

Several seconds passed. The drops of blood flowed towards Renée's feet, under her dress.

It then seemed to have climbed up her legs, drawing a red line through her clothes before disappearing and heading straight towards the wound on her hand.

And as soon as the spilled blood had slipped back into the gash, the cut closed up as though nothing had ever happened.

It was a sight far removed from normalcy, but Huey did not seem at all shaken. He put away his knife and bowed at Renée, who was still complaining with a pout on her face.

"I'm terribly sorry, Professor Renée. Perhaps I could make up for this by offering to become a test subject of yours whenever you might ask."

"Oh, really? My goodness! Thank you, Huey! Which experiment should I ask you for, I wonder... Well, please give me some time until I figure something out!"

"Of course. I have all the time in the world."

With the exception of his actions just now, Huey's discussion with Dalton was going as he planned.

"My apologies, Headmaster. I merely wished to confirm the truth with my own eyes."

"Would it not have been satisfactory for you to cut me in Renée's stead?"

"That was my original intention, but you don't so easily lend yourself to an attack, sir." Huey continued with a smile, making it difficult to see where his honesty ended and his lies began. "Now, I would like to make an impudent request of you, Headmaster..."

"What might that be?"

Even after seeing the entirely otherworldly sight of blood flowing back into wounds and cuts being mended in an instant, Huey did not wipe away his smile—to the point that it now looked more cold than gentle.

And with that same smile, he looked down upon the list of names lying on Dalton's desk.

"The Advenna Avis."

"..."

Dalton remained silent, as though he knew what Huey was about to say.

Huey brazenly made his demand of the elderly alchemist.

"I would like to be placed on the passenger list."

<=>

### **Sunset, the Lotto Valentino harbor.**

"Over there. Can you see it? That's the ship. Can't believe it's already stinkin' up the harbor with peaches when it's still over by the horizon."

"Without even a single escort? Will she be safe?"

"That over there's a special ship. A one-of-a-kind vessel built for speed. Forget enemies—*escorts* can't keep up with it, so what's the use, right? She's probably trying to come incognito, but there's really no point at this point, seeing as we can smell the peaches from all the way over here."

With the sweet scent ticking his nose, mixed with the smell of the sea, Victor laughed and spread his arms wide.

Seeing his display of joy, Denkuro, Zank, and Nile each tossed out a comment.

"It appears that the lady's arrival pleases you greatly, Master Victor."

"A childlike reception indeed."

"I say this. I will throw her to the waves if she proves to be a woman of dishonor."

Victor nodded along up until Zank's comment, but hurriedly turned around at Nile's claim.

"Oy, now *that* I can't let slide. What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I am merely curious to see the head *monkey* of this despicable group known as House Dormentaire. From the fact that she would choose a man like you as her lover, I assume that her taste in men, at least, is vulgar."

"We're gonna have to settle this one of these days..." Victor grimaced. Nile smiled proudly.

"Hmph. If it is a clash of fists you seek, I will oblige at any time. Although I have no doubt that your skinny arms would be unable to so much as rattle my eardrums."

"I saw you fight those guardsmen. If that's all you had, then I bet I actually stand a pretty good chance myself."

"I say this. That is a laughable suggestion."

"Then I'll just have to mess you up so much that you can't laugh anymore." Victor retorted, taking a stance like a boxer. Denkuro and Zank whispered amongst themselves.

[Hm... And yet Master Victor does not bring up the matter of having assisted Master Nile on the day we first met. Indeed, he is a man of honor.]

[From the way I see things, Nile does not wish to accept the idea of having been given assistance. So he picks fights with Victor at every turn to alleviate his own contrition.]

Not understanding what Denkuro and Zank were talking about in Japanese, Victor and Nile slowly closed the distance between one another. Denkuro and Zank, however, did not intend to intervene in this particular brawl.

And at the very moment when they were certain the fight would begin—

Something flashed in their line of sight.

A small source of light had expanded somewhere between the horizon and the harbor, somewhat different in quality from the setting sun.

Victor could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand as ominous shadows began to cast themselves in his mind. He was the first to turn around, his whole body trembling as he did so.

It was nearly that exact moment that the sound rang out through the harbor, several seconds after the flash.

The roar of an explosion.

It had become an irritatingly familiar sound over the past two weeks.

And naturally, the sight before them was little different from those that had greeted them often over these days.

The ship, seemingly having been caught up in an explosion, was rapidly going up in flames.

It was the Dormentaire vessel that had only a few moments ago been carrying the scent of peaches along the wind, towards Victor and his conversation with Denkuro and the others.

"...What?"

For a moment, his mind went blank.

A second later, his brain registered what had happened. But his heart refused to accept it.

Yet another second later, Victor leapt forth like a skilled predator, jumping onto the deck of a small ship that had just been getting ready to set sail.

He then bellowed at the crew members, all of whom were standing dumbstruck by the blast.

“Get this ship out there now!”

The ship did not belong to the Dormentaires, but likely to a merchant who was visiting the city.

Even so, Victor had located in the harbor the ship that was likely to be able to set sail the quickest. He had clambered on board without giving it a second thought.

As the sailors looked on in shock, Victor drew a pistol and roared at them again.

“Get this ship over there... Please! There’s still time—we just have to-”

Yelling in a voice half threat and half plea, Victor turned towards the sea for a single moment.

A second later, there was another explosion. The ship was blown to bits in a storm of smoke and fire, scattering debris over the sea.

“-----”

He could not even muster a scream.

Victor’s state of mind seemed to have been shared by others in the employ of House Dormentaire. Carla, who had been hurriedly trying to prepare a Dormentaire ship to sail, paled as she fell to her knees on the deck.

It was a sudden tiding of destruction.

No one was ignorant to the current state of the city of Lotto Valentino.

This was why every precaution was taken to ensure Lucrezia’s safety upon her arrival at the harbor. Carla had even planned countermeasures for an attack on the harbor itself, and forbade any ships from launching until after Lucrezia’s vessel had docked safely.

Once the ship had come a little closer, Carla would have sent out many escort ships to guard against possible cannon fire from land, but the explosions had occurred just moments before preparations were complete.

No one could have expected that the ship would be attacked on the high seas. It seemed to be an ambush, set to occur when everyone had let their guard down because of the absence of all other vessels.

Was it an accident aboard the ship? Or was it a planned attack? The harbor was in such an uproar that not even the cause of the explosion was clear. But there was one fact that all witnesses could agree on.

An explosion of that magnitude could not possibly leave any survivors.

As many people lost themselves to despair in this reality, Zank's eyes widened as he addressed his friends.

"Do you see that? Beyond the smoke..."

Denkuro and Nile were prompted to look, not at the remains of the ship, but at a point on the seas beyond it.

They noticed a very small dot just between the sea and the sky, square on the horizon.

A ship.

From the distance, it was unlikely to have caused the blast on the Dormentaire ship.

In spite of its likely innocence, the second ship's timing could not have been more conspicuous. Thinking this, Denkuro focused his gaze on the ship to try and discern its identity.

But a moment later, as he watched the new ship draw nearer, an ominous feeling began to well up in his stomach.

Several seconds passed. Zank, whose eyesight was much better than Denkuro, confirmed the latter's suspicions.

Zank twisted his face into a scowl, muttering in a low voice.

"...Its features are identical to those I have been told of.

"That is indeed the Advenna Avis."

### **Interlude: Excerpt from the reports of Victor Talbot (Part 3)**

(Translator's note: This report is thought to have been written on the day before the sinking of the Dormентаire ship.)

[I heard your ship's supposed to be making port tomorrow.

I'm excited to see you again. It's been way too long. I guess don't technically *need* to write you letters when you're going to get here tomorrow, but it's obvious you're going to keep me waiting a damn long time to talk to you in person.

I can tell clear as day that you're probably dragging along your whole entourage.

How many months is something like me gonna have to wait until I get invited to bed, anyway?

But at least you always read these reports.

I guess in that sense, it's easier to just talk through letters like this.

So sorry this thing doesn't really read like a proper report.]

(Omission)

[I just got a hold of a list of alchemists who're supposed to be boarding the Advenna Avis. Where does our spy find these things? He's pretty well-connected, I'll give him that much.

I think he's on pretty good terms with the people here, too. But for being friends with everyone and their mother, he's damn good at this spy work. And that kind of bothers me. I just can't get a read on him. So it might be best to be a bit wary about the guy, although maybe I'm just overthinking it.

Anyway, about the names on the list... Maiza Avaro is the eldest son of one of the local aristocrats. I think I might have mentioned this a couple of times in my reports... You remember that poet Jean-Pierre Accardo? Apparently the two of 'em were best friends. Although Accardo's gone and disappeared on us.

Remember? Carla was on his case about how he wrote a play based on House Dormентаire. But he got outta Lotto Valentino before she caught him.

Now that I'm getting all the facts down, I'm starting to think he's a pretty suspicious guy. It's like he knows about everything that happened in this city.

Our spy \_\_\_\_\_ sounds like he was on good terms with Accardo too. He says Accardo always got him confidential information about Lotto Valentino out of somewhere. A real expert. ...And that probably means he had some info on House Dormентаire, too.

He might have something to do with this case, too. This whole schtick is like someone went and multiplied last year's incident exponentially.]

(Omission)

[The people boarding the Advenna Avis? Pretty damn amazing. Those guys I met recently were near the bottom of the list, too. They're pretty decent people, so I'll introduce you. Though the one named Nile's pretty dangerous. I don't feel up to bringing him to see you.

There's people from other workshops on that list, too. Even alchemists from Northern Europe and the Near East. In other words, they're taking a lot of trouble to come all this way from afar.

But there's something that bugs me. I still have no idea what they're planning to do in the New World.

It's almost like boarding the ship is itself their goal.

Are they planning to do something on the Advenna Avis?

If they're planning on conducting a strictly secret experiment, there's no better place than a ship in the middle of the Atlantic. The problem is, I have no idea what kind of an experiment they're trying to pull.

Some kind of meeting to show off the Philosopher's Stone, or something? I doubt that.]

(Omission)

[I'll look forward to seeing your face tomorrow.

Although I guess you'd probably look at this letter before you look at *my* face.

Forever Yours,

Victor Talbot]



*Finale:*  
*Don't Laugh*

## **Finale: Don't Laugh**

### **Somewhere in Lotto Valentino.**

Once upon a time, a girl named Niki had lost part of her life in this very city.

And in that same place, she fell in love with a certain man.

She did not care whether or not her love was returned, because accepting the fact that she was able to love at all meant that she was now capable of change.

*'Have I changed after all?*

*'Have I become stronger?*

*'Have I finally found my place to die?'*

She waited, deep at the end of the alcove.

Many people, filled with bloodlust and rage, were coming for her as she stood cornered.

The girl in the mask quietly asked questions of herself.

But she could not find the answers.

And yet she was satisfied.

Her own identity no longer mattered—for above all else, she was grateful for the fact that she was able to form a link with another.

And so she thought:

*'Monica...*

*'I wonder if you felt your link to Huey.'*

Elmer had already told her the details of Monica's death—the death of her friend and rescuer.

*'I wonder if that's why you died with a smile.'*

*'I wonder... If I could do the same now.'*

<=>

### **One day, at a Mask Maker Hideout.**

Several days before Niki's self-questioning:

It had been nearly five days now since the Dormentaire ship had been turned to flotsam in the waves.

The streets of Lotto Valentino were in an uproar. The city was on the verge of a riot.

The fact that a member of one of the most powerful noble families in Spain had been caught up in the blast, so close to the Lotto Valentino harbor, was shocking, to say the least. The explosion of Lucrezia De Dormentaire's ship shook the city to its foundations in more ways than one.

"I *know* she's gotta be alive somewhere!" Victor cried, and desperately searched the waters by ship. But in the end, they turned up no survivors.

The scale of this incident far overshadowed the attack on the delegation ship one year ago, thanks to the direct assault upon and the resulting death of a central member of House Dormentaire.

It was still unclear as to whether the incident was an accident or a deliberate attack. But who could possibly believe that this was an accident? Outsiders in mainland Spain, especially the members of House Dormentaire, would probably even refuse to consider the possibility.

If word of this incident were to spread to Spain, there was a good chance that Lotto Valentino would be attacked in retaliation.

Because the War of the Spanish Succession was still in full force, there was the possibility that the city would be annihilated with the excuse of eliminating a location that had been bought out by the enemy. After all, despite Lotto Valentino's importance to the alchemists, it was still little more than a sleepy port town in the political scheme of things.

Everyone, from aristocrats to commoners, trembled as they sat in fear of a Dormentaire armada coming to storm the city.

At the same time, fear began to spread among the Dormentaire soldiers in Lotto Valentino, as they began to wonder who would take responsibility for the incident and if they would end up shouldering another's blame.

The commoners, the Dormentaire personnel, and the aristocrats all spent their days in deep suspicion of one another, filled with indescribable anxiety.

And so they thought:

*'Who is the culprit?'*

*'Who was behind the explosions? Who is the Mask Maker?'*

*And, 'If I offer up someone else, will I be spared?'*

Even the delinquents who had become Mask Makers in last year's incident and thought of attacking the Dormentaires again this time went silent.

As the oppressive atmosphere bore down upon them, the people of Lotto Valentino all began to think:

*'We don't necessarily have to find the real mastermind.'*

Their thoughts turned to treachery as they began to seek not the culprit, but a scapegoat.

The Dormentaire men, the aristocrats, and the commoners.

Although they were constantly at each other's throats, they simultaneously turned their sights to one direction.

To an occupation that had been suspicious to them from the very beginning.

The alchemists.

They were a cornerstone of the city, as well as its symbol.

The alchemists themselves did not hold fantasies of their own omnipotence, but most of the people in Lotto Valentino did.

Of course, their suspicions amounted to forcibly redefining their fantasy of the 'omnipotent alchemist' to fit their definition of the culprit, who could go so far as to blow up a ship in the middle of the ocean.

And to add:

The year 1705.

The commoners, who had sold drugs by using slaves, had once attempted to pin the blame for this crime on the alchemists of the Third Library. But their plot was turned against them as their production and distribution system was exposed to the world. This incident was likely the impetus for the commoners' resentment-filled actions.

The commoners began to hint to the Dormentaire personnel:

"The Mask Maker is probably an alchemist."

The Dormentaires accepted the accusation, putting on masks of reluctance.

"Only an alchemist could have caused such an explosion."

The aristocrats, rather than remain silent, went so far as to fan the flames.

"If we use the alchemists as a scapegoat, we may yet have a chance at survival."

Some of the aristocrats, including Esperanza (who supported the Third Library), attempted to stop this flow of events.

But the attack on the alchemists intensified as the influential Avaro family simply cut off all ties to the Meyer workshop.

Perhaps he had sensed the air in the city fill with madness—Huey Laforet, hiding in the basement of an abandoned building, smiled faintly.

“How nostalgic...”

Contrary to his smile, there was a tinge of loneliness in his voice.

However, the room was full of enough light to overpower his look of melancholy.

It was overflowing with gold.

Laid out on the shelves and desk were massive quantities of gold and gemstones, along with clearly expensive sculptures, clocks, and status symbols.

It looked as though the room itself was made valuable by the brilliance, full of splendor like a pirate’s treasure chest.

The problem, however, was the fact that most of the gold was counterfeit.

As Huey sat, surrounded by false riches, he again mumbled to himself.

“The air smells just the same as before.”

Then—

“It sure is nostalgic.”

Someone gave him an answer, though Huey clearly meant to talk to himself.

“I remember how the three of us used to come up with nasty plans here—you, me, and Monimoni.”

But Huey, rather than being surprised, chuckled and responded.

“Elmer. It’s been too long.”

“It’s been a while. ...That’s a strange smile you’ve got there, Huey.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Looks like some sort of a blend between a fake and a real smile. At first I thought you were faking it completely, but I realized that you wouldn’t be faking a smile if there wasn’t anyone to show it to.”

They had been reunited after an entire year.

Not only that, one of them was the most likely suspect behind the explosions.

And yet Elmer treated Huey like a friend he had seen after only several days of absence.

Huey also did not seem to think this strange about Elmer, answering him in a relaxed tone.

"Now that you say so, I feel like you might be right." He said, acknowledging Elmer's point. He then began to speak on his own behalf. "But think of it this way: This is how I show my lack of emotion."

"Ah, gotcha." Elmer nodded, and changed the subject as though he was finished with the topic. "So, where've you been in the past year?"

"All kinds of places. I spent the year traveling everywhere."

"So, any interesting things you want to share with me? Something that can make us smile."

"I wonder. Could we reconcile something between our different outlooks?"

Huey fell into thought. Elmer spoke up again.

"So why *did* you go off to all sorts of places?"

"I wanted to see the possibilities in the world beyond Lotto Valentino. But all I learned was that one year wasn't nearly enough time to understand the world."

"I see. Two years, then."

"Nope."

"Did you get me a souvenir?"

"I have more than enough stories to tell. I'll let you hear them eventually."

"Start off with the fun ones, you hear?"

It was a normal conversation between two friends. An unbelievable sight, considering their respective situations, but Huey and Elmer themselves did not seem to care about such things as they continued chatting.

Soon, Elmer addressed the elephant in the room without so much as dampening his nonchalance.

"Ah, right. I hear you're under suspicion for the bombings. Was that all really your work?"

It was a callous way of putting things. But Huey, rather than showing surprise, asked Elmer a question of his own.

"What do you think? Do you suspect me?"



"Heh, you know I'm asking because I have no idea. Although I honestly couldn't care less either way. If you *are* the culprit, I would try and find a way to make the people here, the Dormentaires, and even you, the arsonist, all smile at once. For example, we could make those explosions and fires a local attraction to pull in sightseers..." Elmer mumbled, honestly believing what he was discussing. "Ah, but hold on. Let's talk about the *assumption* that you're the culprit. There's still the chance that you're being threatened into it, instead of doing it for your own happiness. So let's make things clear—back to the point: Did you do it?"

Huey snickered.

"You really never change, Elmer."

Elmer raised his tone slightly.

"I see that was partly a real laugh. Although I'm not sure *why* you laughed."

"Whether I'm the culprit or not isn't very important at the moment."

"Is that so? Then I'll forget about it for now." Elmer surrendered.

"The people here are trying to get rid of the alchemists, aren't they?" Huey said.

"Yes. They are. Everyone from the Third Library already left the city through the underground waterways or the catacombs under the church. It was hard work, going back and forth through all those dark passages, but it was worth it. Once everyone got to safety, they showed me these huge, relieved smiles."

Elmer paused, then looked down slightly.

"But there were some girls who were crying, saying they didn't want to leave. Some of the guys were angry about being forced to escape. But maybe, by the time they can return to live here again, they'll be smiling again. That's why I don't want to think my efforts were wasted."

As Elmer nodded to himself, Huey asked him a question.

"And you're not escaping?"

Elmer's response was calm and nonchalant.

"We haven't gotten *everyone* out yet. And *you're* still here, too."

"I would have thought that you'd stay here until the city burned to ashes, so you could see the last man smile in spite of it all."

"Are you planning to be that last man?"

"...I once did, but this time..."

Huey plucked a counterfeit gold piece from the shelf and mumbled, as though speaking to himself.

"This time?"

"Right. Before I forget, I want to correct you."

Huey faked another smile and spoke in a gentle tone.

"When I said things were nostalgic, I wasn't talking about the times I shared with you and Monica."

"?"

"My mother died in the witch hunts. But she made an accusation just before she died, and ended up getting the villagers burned at the stake. Remember? It was in Jean-Pierre Accardo's play."

Just like Elmer, Huey nonchalantly referenced the past that his heart had once steadfastly refused to reveal.

Although Elmer noticed this change in his friend, he quietly continued to listen.

"I was feeling nostalgic because the air in Lotto Valentino reminds me of the air of the village that day."

"Are you going to have everyone here burned to death?"

It was a focal question, in some ways. Huey again smiled genuinely.

"Not at all. And even back then, I wasn't the one who executed those people. They brought it all upon themselves."

Coldly analyzing his own past, Huey looked upon the counterfeit coin he was turning over in his hand and mumbled as though addressing himself:

"I no longer hold any grudge against this world."

"That's amazing. Now it'll be a lot easier for you to smile."

"But that doesn't mean I love the world enough that I can smile so easily."

"Shucks. Why don't you give it a try? Don't give up." Elmer said, deflating, but Huey continued to speak on his own behalf.

"When I first met you six years ago, I despised the world with all my heart. But Monica changed me. I came to love the world because she was in it. Although none of that matters anymore."

He tossed the coin into the air, caught it in his hand, then tossed it aside without even checking to see what side it had landed on.

"I neither hate nor love the world. Everything, including myself, is just a guinea pig. A stepping stone that will help me accomplish my goal."

"Would that goal be to keep your promise with Monica?"

Huey did not answer.

Elmer seemed to have taken his silence for a 'yes'. He did not ask any further questions.

Silence fell over the room filled with the brilliance of the counterfeit currency.

Several minutes later, Huey closed his eyes and spoke up.

"Elmer. I have two things I want to ask of you."

Just like before, he wore a strange fake smile on his lips. But hearing Huey's voice, Elmer found himself sure of something:

*'Huh. I thought he'd changed completely. But it looks like there's still a bit of the old Huey left here.'*

No matter who he was interacting with, Elmer would wish for the other party to smile. He did not play favorites.

But at this moment, Elmer was a little happy to realize that Huey had *not* become an entirely different person.

If Huey *had* changed completely, it would be impossible for Elmer to bring a smile to the face of the 'old Huey', who would have disappeared. That would put a slight damper on even Elmer's attitude.

With this in mind, Elmer made to confirm one thing.

"If I do these things for you, then..."

Huey, knowing what it was that Elmer wanted, spoke before the latter could finish.

"I don't know if I could smile right then and there. But once I accomplish my goal... I'll keep the promise we made last year."

Last year's promise.

*"Are you going to be happy if we rescue Monica?"*

*"...Of course."*

*"Are you going to smile once you see her again?"*

After this exchange, Huey and Elmer had agreed upon their promise.

*"I'll show you the greatest smile in the world."*

Remembering all this, Elmer arrived at his conclusion. He knew what Huey was thinking.

Although Elmer did not know the specifics, he realized that Huey was planning to see Monica again.

Was he planning to take up necromancy? Or was he going to wait for technology to develop enough to raise the dead? Or perhaps he would resurrect her with black magic. Elmer had no way of knowing the details.

But there was no doubt that Huey was planning to realize Monica's final words—"Let's meet again". Were her words a farewell, or the half-conscious mutterings of a dying woman? No one knew the truth, but to Huey Laforet, her words were a promise.

Sensing the resolve hewn into Huey's claim, Elmer grinned.

"You know I could never turn down those requests of yours with a condition like *that*, right?"

<=>

### **The same day, the Third Library.**

The library, though ordinarily home to studious silence, was filled with angry voices.

"Did you find them?!"

"Damn it... I don't see them! What the hell is going on here?!"

"Where are those damned alchemists?!"

The men were Dormentaire soldiers, and among them were those who seemed to have sustained recent injuries. They were the ones who had fought Nile two weeks ago.

"Shit... Even those foreign alchemists are gone!"

"Think about it this way—if they've escaped, we can just say that *they're* the culprits."

"You idiot! If we lose them all, *we're* the ones who'll be executed!"

"Maybe the aristocrats are sheltering them. I'm pretty sure the Third Library is connected to the Boroñal Family."

The Dormentaires had planned to take all alchemists into their custody, as good as naming them suspects, but in the several days they spent planning the attack, the alchemists had all vanished from under their noses.

The Dormentaire men had no way of knowing that Lotto Valentino had existed for alchemists from the moment of its founding.

Countless escape routes, all built to provide the alchemists an escape from persecution, had been being prepared in this city. Not in a matter of days or years, but on a grander scale—a matter of historical eras.

"They must be here somewhere... Set this place on fire! We'll drive them out like rats!" Cried a particularly indignant soldier. There was a fresh scar on his face.

The other men looked around at one another, shocked at the proposal, but no one responded—they were all under pressure, having found not a single one of their targets.

But the silence was broken by one person—the leader of the Dormentaire delegation.

“...Stop this.”

“What?! ...Commandant Santonia!”

“Fire will be of no use to us. Do not take any unnecessary actions.” Carla said calmly. The scarred man drew back for a moment, but shot back:

“You’re too soft, Commandant.”

His long-repressed resentment at having to work under a woman’s command finally bubbled to the surface, spurred by the pressure looming overhead.

“...What did you say?”

“This is why you just can’t leave this kind of work to a woman. They’re too sympathetic.”

“...”

As Carla remained silent, the scarred man’s voice took on an even more arrogant tone.

Thanks to this incident, Carla was already guaranteed to lose her position. The man saw no more need to bow his head towards her.

He began to lambaste her.

“We are acting on behalf of House Dormentaire! We are obligated to corner those alchemists, even if it means burning the city to the ground! ...Or *maybe* you’ve found a handsome alchemist for yourself! That’s real—URGH!”

He could speak no longer.

Carla thrust her hand into the man’s mouth, grabbed him by the jaw and cheek, and threw him to the ground with incredible strength.

The corner of his mouth was torn open. Blood spewed from his wound.

The pain was enough to cool the man’s head. He finally realized that he had crossed the line.

“Gah... Ugh... M-my... apolo—urgh!”

As he made a garbled attempt at apologizing, Carla thrust her armored heel into the man’s mouth. Several of his teeth snapped off.

“Let me inform you, in case you are still behaving under some foolish assumptions.” She said coldly, twisting her metal heel deeper into the man’s mouth.

“Argh... Ugh... Gha...”

"Because Lady Lucrezia desires it, this city will soon become a possession of House Dormентаire. At this very moment it is public property. But it will soon belong to Lady Lucrezia. The matter of her life or death has no bearing on this fact."

Detaching herself from her emotions, Carla continued to drive her shoe into the man's mouth.

"*No one* has the right to burn the books and materials that will soon belong to Lady Lucrezia."

Only when she was certain that the scarred man, whose scar had now been marked over with fresh wounds, was unconscious, did she slowly lift her foot and turn to the frozen soldiers behind her.

"...Take him to the medical wing on the fortress."

Carla watched the men carry off their injured friend to the floating fortress.

She looked up at the library building and mumbled to herself, thinking of Maiza.

"Just try and run if you can.

"But I will make certain that the Advenna Avis does not leave this city."

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### **Several days later, in the basement of the Third Library.**

The concept of cemeteries was not yet a common one in this era.

Although it was standard practice to bury bodies in graveyards at churches, there was naturally a limit to how many bodies a graveyard could hold. When a church was filled to capacity, the bones in the ground would be exhumed and interred in catacombs.

In some cities, underground waterways would also be used as mausoleums. Lotto Valentino was one such place.

Although it did not compare to the Paris underground or the waterways that would be built in London in the coming decades, Lotto Valentino was also home to a decently-sized sewage system and the tunnels that serviced it.

The only church in Lotto Valentino sat at the edge of town, and was responsible for all of the city's dead. It had already long overfilled its capacity.

After a great deal of thought, it was decided that the waterways would also be expanded to include a catacomb, creating a new setting under the ground.

For some reason, only the alchemists and those affiliated with the church knew the geography of the waterways—perhaps there had been some sort of secret agreement between them. In any event, no one else knew of the full expanse covered by the passages.

Over twenty men were gathered in a corner of the tunnels.

They were mostly alchemists from workshops around the city, but some, like Denkuro, had come from outside Lotto Valentino.

"How could things have turned out this way?"

The alchemists whispered.

"We've agreed to go to the New World, but at this rate, setting sail will be the least of our problems."

"Would it not be better for us to flee the city now, while we still can?"

As they continued to mutter amongst themselves—

"That is of no concern to me. Flee if you wish, for there is no shame in choosing to prioritize your own safety." Dalton declared, his prosthetic arm clacking. The alchemists all turned to him.

Although Dalton would not himself board the *Advenna Avis*, he was the one who had called these people to Lotto Valentino. The alchemists turned to him anxiously.

"But do we even *have* a choice in the matter? House Dormentaire put the *Advenna Avis* under guard as soon as it made port. Even the men hired to crew the ship were only hired for the trip here, were they not?"

"R-right! No sailor would defy House Dormentaire, no matter how much he is desperate for work."

"How are we supposed to cross the Atlantic ourselves?" "We know nothing about sailing a ship." The alchemists whispered.

Dalton continued, unperturbed.

"Your concerns are indeed justified. But even Columbus had a crew of a hundred for his three ships—in other words, thirty men to a ship." He then turned towards Denkuro and the others, who were in a corner of the room. "And we also have three alchemists sent here from Majeedah Batutah's floating workshop, each man a fully qualified sailor."

The alchemists stirred at the mention of the name.

"Batutah's floating workshop?! So you are an acquaintance of that woman alchemist, Dalton?! Then that Asian man and the black men are her pupils?!"

"I had no idea that she really existed..."

"So the rumor that Majeedah worked with a merchant friend to prevent the drugs and counterfeit gold from spreading to the outside was true..."

Majeedah Batutah was an almost mythical figure amongst the alchemists. Her workshop, which was comprised of the fleet of ships under her command, was said to be wandering the seas as its crew undertook independent research.

Her name likely meant that she was of Arabian descent, but because she had been so seldom seen in person, many people doubted her existence.

All eyes were on Denkuro, Zank, and Nile. They frowned slightly and muttered amongst themselves.

"Ah... It seems that the Honored Master is like to them a legend, akin to sorcerers and dragons."

"She is indeed a heroic master, worthy of our very lives."

"I say this. Though I am indeed in her debt, that claim is an exaggeration of her character."

Denkuro and Zank had been rescued by her fleet in the past, and Nile had been left in Majeedah's care by an old acquaintance of hers—an alchemist and explorer.

And her instruction for the three men had been thus: To assist the alchemists departing for the New World from Lotto Valentino.

Although they were throwing themselves into a rather precarious situation, where it was up to the three of them to keep the ship sailing as they instructed the others in the way of seamanship, they were also scheduled to receive supplies of food and water from the other members of the floating workshop in the ports they visited along the way. And if they received word of any dangerous developments, they would also be joined by escort ships.

In other words, the only times they would truly be on their own were en route from Lotto Valentino to their first stop, then the trip from their final stop to the New World.

Of course, it seemed at the moment that the act of setting sail from Lotto Valentino would be their biggest challenge on this mission.

Maiza stood among the other alchemists and questioned Dalton.

"Professor. What of the possibility that the Advenna Avis itself will be bombarded and sunk?"

"That ship is legally property of the Mars Family. Not even House Dormентаire could open fire upon it so easily. Perhaps in peacetime, yes. But they would not risk sparking yet another conflict while the war still rages over the Spanish throne."

The Mars Family was a noble house in western Europe, a match for House Dormентаire in influence and resources.

"How do you know them, Professor?"

"We're longtime acquaintances, nothing more. The Mars Family deals in the business of financing. Think of that ship as an investment towards the alchemists who are bound for an unusual sort of future."

The alchemists breathed a sigh of relief at the mention of the powerful aristocrat backer, but Dalton would not allow them to lower their guard.

"But House Dormентаire *will* attempt to stop you, make no mistake. They will undoubtedly claim that the alchemists responsible stole the Mars Family's ship in an attempt to escape the city. Expect no help from the Mars Family—sending the ship was the extent of the help they were willing to lend, and they will also wish to avoid any unnecessary conflict."

"I see..." Maiza nodded gravely. Dalton grinned.

"In other words, if you are unable to overcome even this first challenge, you will have no right to conduct the experiment aboard the Advenna Avis."

Ignoring the alchemists, whose eyes and ears were turned to Dalton, a boy struck by fear in a different sort of way—Czeslaw Meyer—pulled on the sleeve of the man beside him.

"How long do we have to be here, Fermet?"

"Don't worry, Czes. We'll be able to go outside soon."

"O-okay..."

Soon after, Maiza left the crowd of alchemists questioning Dalton and came over to them.

"Are you all right, Czes?"

"...I'm scared, Mr. Maiza. What's going to happen to us?"

"There's nothing to be worried about." Maiza said, gently patting the boy's head.

Seeing this, Gretto and Sylvie stepped over to them.

"Don't worry, Czes. I'm scared too, but with everyone here, we're going to be fine."

"Um... Yeah. Big Sis Sylvie."

"There's some fruit over there. Would you like to go get some with me?" Sylvie asked kindly. Czes looked up at Fermet.

"Don't stuff yourself, Czes."

"Okay!" Czes nodded joyfully and followed after Sylvie.

Once they were out of earshot, Gretto looked down with a somber expression.

"...I can't believe even Little Czes has to run away with us, too."

"ThatrottenpieceofmeatisprobablydoingthisbecauseImadethosedrugs." The man standing behind Fermet spat angrily.

It was Begg Garott, the Meyer Family alchemist who had created the prototype of the drugs that circulated the city. By 'rotten piece of meat', he was probably referring to the Avaro head—Maiza and Gretto's father.

Because the Avaro head was the one who brought this entire situation upon them by ordering Begg to create this drug, he was now desperate to silence Begg and the Meyer alchemists.

"Begg! We are in Maiza and Gretto's presence!" Fermet cried.

"...Ofcourse. Iwillapologizeforinsultingyourfather. I, am, sorry." Begg stammered. Maiza shook his head.

"Not at all. In fact, I feel that I owe you an apology on our father's behalf."

This time, Gretto looked away and mumbled:

"That's right. 'Rotten piece of meat' is too good for that bastard."

"...Gretto?"

Noticing the shadow cast over his brother's face, Maiza worriedly looked into his eyes.

Maiza was against Gretto and Sylvie boarding the Advenna Avis for the purpose of elopement. But he was burdened with guilt for being away from home so long that he had no idea what their father had done to Gretto and Sylvie. And so he could not bring himself to strongly oppose his younger brother.

Dalton had come up to them as they argued.

*"It is merely a matter of making Gretto and Sylvie alchemists on the Advenna Avis. I will have them listed as assistants on the passenger list."*

And with this suggestion, all three of them were now waiting to set sail in the underground waterways.

Although Maiza thought to have the two disembark at their first stop, the strange hint of malice he sensed in Gretto's voice bothered him.

But the one who rebuked Gretto was not Maiza, but Fermet.

"You should not speak so badly of your own father in the presence of others."

"Fermet..."

"I understand that you hold some resentment towards your father. I have no doubt that I would feel the same, were I to be torn from my loved one in such a way. But family is one's first 'other'—a chain that links one person to another for eternity. If you continue to hold such anger against him, that malice will one day consume and destroy you." Fermet said gently, as though assuaging Gretto's indignation. "But that does not mean that I am trying to stop you and Sylvie. Sometimes, there needs to be some distance between people for anger to abate."

"..."

"Perhaps one day, once you and Sylvie have started a happy family together, you could send your father a letter. That may well be the seed that eventually goes on to change his mind."

"...Thank you, Fermet. That... makes me feel much better."

Seeing the shadow over Gretto's face draw back slightly, Maiza breathed a sigh of relief. He then expressed his gratitude towards Fermet.

"Thank you, Fermet. I had thought to shoulder the guilt of being an Avaro and prepared myself to be attacked for my father's actions, but you have shown us both kindness."

Fermet glanced over at the Meyer Family head, eating fruit in a corner of the room, and laughed.

"Not at all. I only wished to keep Czes ignorant of such profound anger or sadness in his young age." He said, and turned to head aboveground.

"Well then, I will also go up to finish our preparations. And should the opportunity to board the ship present itself before my return... then I will entrust Czes to you."

"...You'll be evacuating the people from your workshop?"

"That's correct. I've left the baby—my relative's child—to a trustworthy guardian. But we've yet to evacuate the trainees who are known alchemists. I intended to have Czes go with them to the neighboring village, but..."

As Fermet trailed off remorsefully, Begg grinned and spoke.

"Czes will only ever follow after you. If you head to the New World, then, he, will, go, with, you. It's almost as though you were brothers, or father and son."

Fermet smiled warmly at his fellow alchemist's ribbing.

"That makes me quite happy, but I'm afraid I can't agree entirely.

"I'm not so kind a man that I could be like a father or a brother to Czes."

*'How humble of him,'* was the thought that came to Maiza and the others.

But they had no way of knowing that there was no lie in Fermet's words.

The fact was that Fermet was exactly the sort of man he claimed to be.

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### **Two hours later, the Avaro manor office.**

It was dusk. Long shadows cast themselves along the ground, as much at the Avaro manor as anywhere else.

"Damn it! What is going on here?!"

The servant who had brought the news left the room. The moment the servant left, the Avaro head anxiously slammed his hands down on his desk.

"Gretto, that wretched boy... And those Meyer miscreants! How dare they take advantage of my kindness and betray me?!"

Blood was going to his head.

Normally he would have been satisfied with muttering his complaints under his breath. But this time, he shouted and swore at the top of his lungs without a care, not caring that the servants might be listening.

But he was not the only one who was sure to hear these outraged words.

The shadow that had entered the room without the Avaro head's notice responded to the man's cries.

"How repulsive, Master Avaro. Was it not *you* who betrayed us first?"

"?!"

The Avaro head turned around in shock. There was a masked man standing by the window.

But the man was not wearing a cloak or a hood. He did not seem to be particularly inclined to hide his identity.

As proof of this, he soon pulled off the mask and revealed his face to the Avaro head.

"Hah. Did you think that I was the Mask Maker? It's awfully convenient now—all I have to do is wear one of these masks that I can find anywhere on the street, and I can fool others into thinking that I am someone I am not."

There was a hint of a smile resting on the man's lips, but his bangs covered his eyes, making it impossible to read his emotions.

Seeing this man, who was in one sense wearing another mask under the first, the Avaro head bellowed with even more outrage.

"...Lebreau Fermet Viralesque, you degenerate... What do you think you are doing?!"

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**At the same time, somewhere in Lotto Valentino.**

Hearing the *click* of a clock, Szilard slowly raised his head.

"...Perfectly punctual, aren't you?" He said, looking at the silhouette that had appeared as though on cue.

"I have wondered for some time now. What meaning is there for you to dress this way before me?" He said warily to the newcomer, who was wearing a mask and a cloak with a hood over his head.

"Now, then, let us leave—ah."

Szilard stopped himself before he could call the man's name, and turned to the man again.

"...For now, perhaps I should just call you 'Mask Maker'."

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### **The Boroñal manor.**

"So you're leaving." Esperanza said.

"Yeah." The young man replied with a grin.

"I've heard the story from Dalton, but it is true that what you plan to do on the ship is suspicious at best. And taking my position into consideration, I can't assist you alchemists in setting sail."

"Don't worry about that. It's your job to protect this city to the end, even if it falls to House Dormentaire. Speran, you just do whatever makes you smile. And I'm sure your maids will smile along with you."

"Speaking of... I want you to deliver this to Miss Sylvie." Esperanza said, taking out a small cloth pouch containing several gold pieces. "Her wages."

"...How much did you know about Sylvie, Speran?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." The governor said, feigning ignorance. Elmer laughed.

"I'll be going, then. I hope we get to see each other again while you're still alive."

"Laid-back to the end. You sound nothing at all like a man bound for the New World."

"I just hate long goodbyes. It gets so somber that nobody can smile as easily."

It was the kind of response Esperanza would have expected from Elmer. The former paused for a moment, and finally spoke.

"I have one thing to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"I understand that you have no interest in the dead. But if you and Huey Laforet—if only the two of you could—"

"I know." Elmer said with a nod, and spoke on the governor's behalf.

"I'll never forget my memories with Monica, as long as I live. And nor will Huey."

"Of course... Thank you. I am in your debt."

"You don't need to worry about paying me back. Just promise me you'll do your best as the governor to bring a smile to the people here."

The Smile Junkie headed for the door. He gave his old friend the governor a light wave to say goodbye.

"I'm sure today's baccano will be the last of the conflicts here in Lotto Valentino."

Elmer left with these ominous words, wearing a contradictorily lighthearted smile.

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### **The Avaro manor.**

"What is the meaning of this', you ask? I'm afraid that's a difficult question for me to answer. First of all, I have no idea what it is you're asking me." Fermet said, politely and slowly. The Avaro head ground his teeth.

But he did not call for his servants, thinking that Fermet had shown his face here for a purpose. And until he understood why, the Avaro head was not willing to make any rash moves.

Even still, his mind was already wandering to the single-shot pistol he kept in his desk. He would draw it the moment Fermet showed any sign of strange behaviour.

Although the Avaro head was convinced of his superior position, his mind was filled with indignation rather than complacency.

"You bastard... What have you done to Gretto?"

"That's a rather uncomfortable question. I've done nothing to him. I thought he'd run off by himself because you tried to split him from his beloved? Perhaps by now he's decided to imitate 'Romeo and Juliet' and swallowed poison. Romantic, wouldn't you agree?"

"What...?"

"But you truly are a vile man. Not content to merely *separate* the lovers, you would sell off the woman to the infamously lecherous governor. And you still call yourself human?"

The alchemist smiled condescendingly. The Avaro head's face twitched.

"Don't make me laugh! *You're* the one who told me of their relationship in the first place!"

"Yes? And?"

"What...?!"

"And there I was, hoping that a loving father like you would understand his son and encourage him wholeheartedly. But to think you would go so far in the opposite direction... I blame my poor judgement of your character." Fermet said, shaking his head in a blatantly irritating fashion.

"How dare you... We are *aristocrats*..."

"My goodness. It's as though you fancy yourself a spokesman for *all* aristocrats. I'm quite jealous of your gall, boasting so passionately despite the fact that your entire estate amounts to less than one of Dormентаire's vacation homes."

"What?!"

Despite his deferent mannerisms, Fermet was being outright insulting.

The Avaro head finally realized—Fermet was an entirely different man than he was when he visited the manor with Begg.

He also realized that this 'new Fermet' had likely been his true face from the very beginning.

"Bastard..."

"If you think about it, the fact that you pushed your son into such a corner is the very thing that is threatening your aristocratic status as we speak."

"...? What are you talking about?!"

"Your son, the young man who had been denied wholly by you, ended up personally taking part in this incident."

With a look of utter enjoyment on his lips, Fermet revealed to the Avaro head a certain fact.

"Initially, the explosions only targeted facilities that were affiliated with House Dormентаire. But from some point onwards, even aristocratic estates began to be set on fire. Did you ever notice, I wonder? The fires all occurred at manors within a certain distance of this particular location."

"...It can't... be..." The Avaro head stammered. Fermet did not hesitate to pierce him with the cruel truth.

"Your son Gretto attempted to draw the aristocrats into the war between House Dormентаire and the Mask Makers. All to destroy his own world, chained by his noble blood.

"And that is why he took on the guise of the Mask Maker and became an arsonist."

**Several days earlier, Gretto's room.**

Noticing the presence in his room, Gretto flinched and trembled.

"...Wh-who are you?!"

He turned around to face the intruder.

Standing there was a figure illuminated by the moonlight outside the window.

Gretto trembled in fear as he looked upon the cloaked stranger, whose mask glowed white in the moonlight.

"Good evening. I am an ally of Miss Sylvie."

"What...?"

The fact that the voice belonged to a woman surprised Gretto. But the mention of Sylvie's name pushed his scream back into his throat.

"Let me be frank. During the past few days, you have set fire to several nearby manors."

"...! I... I don't know what you're talking about."

"Perhaps you bribed the servants who were guarding you. Or perhaps you snuck out of this manor on your own. But you came out into the streets in the middle of the night and set your neighbors' estates on fire. Because all of your targets have been in the vicinity of your home, some have begun to suspect the Avaro Family and its servants."

"..."

Gretto gaped silently, as though that would be enough to hide the truth. But the shaking of his body and the pallor of his skin clearly spelled out the fact that the woman was right on the mark.

But she continued in a gentle tone, as though to soothe his worries.

"Miss Sylvie knows nothing of this. And I have no intention of telling her. Please do not be afraid."

"What?"

"Like I told you, I am an ally of Miss Sylvie. I pray for your happiness together, and so I cannot allow you to be caught by House Dormентаire."

"Th-then... how do I...?" Gretto stammered with a gulp, cold sweat running down his back.

The masked intruder spoke to him quietly.

"Leave Miss Sylvie to us. But *you* must get into contact with Mr. Maiza. Go to the Third Library and clear yourself of suspicion once and for all."

She produced a strange spherical object made of ceramic, and said in an emotionless tone:

"How much are you willing to risk for the sake of being joined with Miss Sylvie?"

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### **Present time, the Avaro manor.**

"Impossible! You mean to say that Gretto set fire to this very house?!"

"It's quite fortunate for you that the fire was extinguished. Did he not care if you perished in the flames, I wonder. Or perhaps he never gave the action so much thought." Fermet chuckled. The Avaro head slammed his fists down on his desk.

"And why the fire?! If he could escape at all, why would he not choose to meet that servant girl in secret?! And why not set fire to the Boroñal manor, of all places?!"

"It wasn't that he had no courage—he merely wasn't so foolish as to sneak into the manor of a governor he knew nothing about. And if he set fire to the governor's manor, he would have risked harming, or even killing Sylvie."

"What purpose did the arson serve?! Dragging us into war with House Dormentaire wouldn't bring him anywhere *close* to dismantling society!"

"From an objective and rational point of view, you are correct. Ultimately, Gretto's actions were entirely meaningless. But aren't *you* the one who took the ability to reason from him? *Master Avaro*?" Fermet said, polite to the end.

The Avaro head clenched his fists hard enough for his hands to bleed. He remembered his sons and spat:

"God damn it all! Maiza and Gretto both! Why do my sons disappoint me so?!"

Fermet, who had been the picture of courtesy until this point, patently changed his tone.

"Disappointment?! You say they disappoint you?!" He cried, his voice clearly filled with scorn.

Fermet laughed and began to counter the Avaro head's claims.

"That is a laughable claim, in two ways. First of all, Maiza is a greater man that you could ever hope to become. To be more accurate, was it not that *he* was disappointed in *you*, rather than the opposite?"

"What...?"

"And your claim about Gretto is laughable in an entirely different way."

Fermet's twisted lips began to spill his endless malice into the world. Putting on a face he very rarely showed to others, he began to speak unreservedly, with great enjoyment:

"You actually had *expectations* of that pea-brained fool?! So much that you were *sorrowful* in your disappointment?! You have no eye for people. A fool among fools. To say that you were disappointed in that boy is no different from saying, 'I am a buffoon who cannot judge people'. Your son called you a rotten piece of meat, and I see no reason to challenge his claim!"

Fermet laced the statement 'You have no eye for people' with a laugh full of obvious derision.

Perhaps the Avaro head was no longer able to withstand any more mockery. He pulled the pistol from his desk, took aim at Fermet, and cried:

"Don't laugh...! Stop laughing!"

Fermet slowly raised his arms into the air, but not even a shadow of fear crossed his eyes.

"Please excuse me if I have offended you. But let me warn you; if you were to kill me here and now, you'll have nothing but unfavorable evidence stacked against you. I know for a fact that you've done *more* than just manufacture drugs." Fermet said, cautiously stepping towards the window.

"You're not getting away!"

The Avaro head pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, save for the ringing of a dry *click*.

"I removed the gunpowder and bullet from your pistol before you came into the room. You should know that a self-defense weapon is useless unless you carry it on your person at all times."

"Damn you...!"

As the Avaro head made to call in his servants, Fermet drove a wedge into his resolve.

"Oh? Then does it not matter to you if I reveal your son's guilt to the world?"

"...! That was all *your* doing!"

"I never suggested to him that he should commit arson. And as an alchemist of the Meyer Family, which you so callously abandoned, all I need to say is that you are attempting to wrongfully pin the blame on us. It's as simple as claiming that I discovered this mask in your desk."

Fermet continued as though he was deriving great enjoyment from the discussion. The Avaro head desperately attempted to keep up with the conversation.

But Fermet did not stop, not allowing the other man to catch up to retort.

"As for my reasons for being here, I can be excused by claiming that I was here to protest your cruel abandonment of the Meyer Family. Whether you curse my name or write out the

truth in letters, the people will only *pretend* to believe you in order to resolve the situation peacefully. They would never truly give you their trust."

"Then... Then why are you here...? Do you plan to threaten me? Extort money from me? Or ask for my help in escaping this city?! What can I do to keep my position secure?!"

*'Even driven to such a corner, he spares no concern for his sons. What a vile, entertaining man.'* Fermet thought to himself, and spoke honestly.

"I was just dropping by."

"Dropping... by...?"

"I stepped aboveground for some other business, when I suddenly had the thought to entertain myself by seeing the face of an aristocrat who'd just found out that his own son was an arsonist. Nothing more, nothing less."

"...Haaah? Haaaaaaa?"

The Avaro head could do little but vocalize meaninglessly, unable to comprehend Fermet's intentions.

Fermet merely glanced at his face, then mumbled to himself:

"It's certainly entertaining, but there's nothing *exciting* about seeing a filthy old man breaking down. Sweet, adorable things are best for loving and tormenting, after all. Especially the little boys and girls who love me so. Don't you agree?"

"...?"

"From this point on, I ask that you live a vile, aristocratic life worthy of the moniker 'Rotten Piece of Meat'. You won't have much else to do with your time, I'm sure."

Fermet bowed courteously.

At that very moment, a powerful blast rocked the streets.

"?!"

The Avaro head turned to the source of the sound. Explosions began to ring out one by one in the city. Flames rose from places along the roads.

"This is... This is *your* doing, Fermet! You bas--"

He turned around, but there was no one there.

After a moment of silence, the Avaro head weakly collapsed into his chair.

It was as though he had aged a full decade in the past few minutes. There was no energy in his body.

The manor was no longer in any danger of burning or exploding, but he knew—his life was already at an end.

He would likely come out of this with his position intact, as long as he remained silent. He would not be driven onto the streets.

But he would never be able to become anything more than what Fermet had called him.

The moment he realized this, the Avaro head gave up on thought, not bothering with death.

“Bastards... Bastards...”

He merely swore under his breath, over and over again, and put the pistol to his temple. Despite knowing that nothing would be fired, he pulled the hammer and the trigger one after the other, over and over again.

With the empty sound of the gun clicking beside him, the man moaned as though cursing the world in which he lived.

Of course, the aging man’s mindless utterance was so weak and frail that it was easily overpowered by the noise ringing out in the streets.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

The moment he revealed his true face to the Avaro head, the chaos swirling through Lotto Valentino reached its climax.

Flames and explosions burst forth from everywhere in the city. The people of House Dormентаire, the aristocrats on the hill, and the commoners of the city fell equally at the terror before them.

It was as though the flames were intent on erasing the city from existence.

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### **The floating fortress.**

Carla was in the middle of patrolling the city when the explosions began to go off right before her eyes.

She immediately commanded the men around her to assist in firefighting and rescue operations, and herself returned to the floating fortress that served as the headquarters for all of House Dormентаire’s activities in the city.

“Men! Describe the situation!” She commanded, but no one could pinpoint the specifics of the current incident.

However, reports slowly trickled in from parts of the city, illuminating the details.

The explosions seemed to be taking place in the locations had been blown up or set on fire over the past two weeks. In other words, the blasts were coming from burnt-out piles of rubble and ashes.

There were almost no casualties being reported, as the sites had been left the way they were for the purposes of investigation, but people were rather being injured in the frantic stampedes in the aftermaths of the explosions.

Breathing a sigh of relief at the report that there had not yet been any fatalities, Carla dispatched yet more men to the scenes of the fires. But—

“Ma’am! The Mask Maker has been spotted! We’ve been told that he’s fleeing through the streets!”

Carla thought for a moment at the report.

*‘So the Mask Maker has surfaced once more. But there must be a reason for his coming out into the open.*

*‘The most logical choice would be that he’s acting as a decoy to try and draw our attention. Then what is he trying to keep us from seeing?’*

As she thought, another man came up to her with the answer.

“We have trouble, ma’am! The ship—the Advenna Avis is moving!”

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## **The Advenna Avis**

“I say this. What is happening here?” Nile wondered. Denkuro answered him.

“This one cannot say; yet doubtless this is the time for action.”

The number of Dormentaire guards around the Advenna Avis shrank as the explosions began to shake the city to its foundations. Seeing this, Dalton noted: “This will likely be your first and only chance”. So Denkuro, Zank, and Nile climbed aboard to commandeer the ship.

They knocked the remaining guards unconscious, and prepared to set sail with the smallest possible number of sails opened. The Advenna Avis’s sails and helm were greatly simplified, even for ships of the era, making it rather simple for even three people to maneuver the vessel on their own.

As they grew further and further from the floating fortress, they approached a certain location.

Although all ground paths had been sealed off, it was still possible to moor the ship by the entrance to the waterways.

There was debris everywhere from the many explosions, but thankfully enough, the area of the harbor that led into the waterway was entirely unscathed.

However, the longer they took, the greater the ship's chances were of catching fire.

"...There is something suspicious about all this." Nile said. Zank nodded.

"Yes. This fire may be no fault of ours, but it is almost too convenient a situation for us."

There was someone pulling the strings behind everything that was happening today, Denkuro came very close to thinking, but he did not seem inclined to go against today's flow of events.

"But 'tis also true that this is the only path granted us. Should we fail to appear before House Dormentaire, they may very well use the fires as justification for burning this entire city to the ground."

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### **The harbor area.**

"What... in the world...?" Maiza breathed as he stepped outside, seeing the flames and smoke rising from everywhere in the city.

"Never mind that! This is our chance!"

The alchemists spotted the Advenna Avis, maneuvering closer to moor at the docks nearby.

"Quickly now Maiza. There's no sense in leaving without you."

Begg, carrying Czes on his back, called to Maiza as the latter stood before the hidden trapdoor leading into the waterway.

Czes was sound asleep even in the midst of all this, not looking likely to wake anytime soon.

"Oh, of course... What happened to Czes?"

"I put him to sleep with one of my concoctions. Not to worry, this is not one of my usual drugs. It's a sleeping drug with no side effects."

"Will he be all right?" Maiza worried, sending Begg ahead of him. Spotting the smoke rising from the hills, where the nobles' manors stood, he stopped once more.

*'Is this really all right? To flee the city, now of all times...'*

Although he owed no responsibility to Lotto Valentino, Maiza's own character attempted to stop him from escaping his hometown.

But Dalton, who had stepped out of the waterway without Maiza's notice, spoke to his back:

"You should have no need to hesitate."

"Professor..."

"You told me before that you were ready to abandon this place and its people. You are the only one to whom I have passed on my knowledge. There is no point to the Advenna Avis and the other alchemists setting sail if you decide to remain."

"...Yes, Professor. But..."

Maiza clenched his fists. Dalton sighed lightly.

"Naturally, the fact that the brother you wished to leave behind is now following you must be nurturing your hesitation."

He spoke to push Maiza forward.

"We will also do our best, Maiza."

"Pardon?"

"You know very well that I have no reason to fear for my life. If you would become immortal for the sake of helping others, use that to your advantage and become a rescuer, using your immortality as your tool. But the way you are now, you will remain powerless to help. The other alchemists on board the Advenna Avis will only be lost without you."

Maiza fell into deep thought for a moment, then clenched his fists and nodded gravely.

"...It was not a hometown I loved... But I will leave Lotto Valentino in your hands, Professor Dalton."

"There is no need to state the obvious, Maiza—do you really wish to reduce my motivation?" Dalton smiled, quite an unusual sight for him. He handed Maiza the passenger list and a closed envelope.

"Open the envelope once you've set sail safely and calmed yourself down.

"Although I cannot say if the contents of this letter will be a blessing or a curse."

<=>

"Oh? Am I really the last one?" Fermet asked, just as Dalton made to open the trapdoor back into the waterway.

"...Have you finished your business?"

"Yes, thankfully. I still have some regrets about this place, but I am not so foolish as to leave Czes lonely."

"Then I suspect your plans were a success."

"What are you talking about, Professor?" Fermet said, feigning ignorance.

"Up to this point, there was no reason for you to board the Advenna Avis. But now, the only motive you need in order to justify your joining the crew is that you wished to escape Lotto Valentino."

"...If there is something about me that bothers you, then you can still erase my name from the passenger list, sir."

"Not at all. I cannot poke my nose into your affairs. Of course, it would be a different story altogether if you were already an immortal."

Fermet met Dalton's glare head-on and replied:

"I am undoubtedly human... For now."

"But you certainly look nothing like a man desperate for immortality."

"Aha. What I wish for, more than my own immortality, is to make *someone else* immortal."

Fermet smiled softly, but Dalton knew well that the man wearing that smile was nothing short of evil itself.

"...Take care not to be hindered, then. It seems you aren't the only madman who will be boarding the Advenna Avis."

Dalton did not try and stop Fermet from boarding.

Confirming Dalton's decision to remain an observer, Fermet chuckled and bowed politely.

"You truly are a wonderful guide and watcher, Professor Dalton. You are indeed worthy of my respect."

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By the time Maiza arrived at the harbor, the other alchemists were already clambering onto the docked Advenna Avis.

Although the streets were blocked by flames, even those walls would be useless upon the arrival of musketeers and cannons. The ship would be easily sunk. In fact, even a single flaming arrow would be enough to jeopardize the journey altogether.

They had no time to lose.

Maiza looked back anxiously, and found a familiar face running up to him.

"Fermet! You're all right!"

"Yes. I managed to evacuate the others in time."

"I'm relieved to hear that. Hurry on board, now! Czes and Begg have already gone ahead."

"Of course."

With that, Fermet ran past Maiza. Confirming that there was no one else left to board, Maiza turned to himself join the others.

But out of the corner of his eye, he spotted something moving atop a smoking building.

"!"

Just as every cell in his body cried out in warning, the shadow on the rooftop leapt out of the smoke and flew straight towards him.

Realizing that the shadow was carrying a glinting sword, Maiza leapt back just far enough to evade the attack.

The roof, close as it was to the ground, must have been a high place to jump off from. And yet the attacker showed no signs of having been injured in the leap, closing in on Maiza.

Sparing no time to think, Maiza drew a knife from his side and deflected the blade.

Then, two more shadows bore down upon the ship.

They were lightly armored men carrying stiletos. The alchemists instantly realized that they were Dormентаire guardsmen.

Supporting this realization was the fact that the first shadow to attack Maiza was the leader of the Dormентаire delegation, Carla Alvarez Santonia.

"...Not bad."

"Miss Carla..."

Recognizing each other, they first stepped away from one another.

"I've told you before. I will not let this ship set sail."

"Perhaps you could turn a blind eye on us today."

"Silence!"

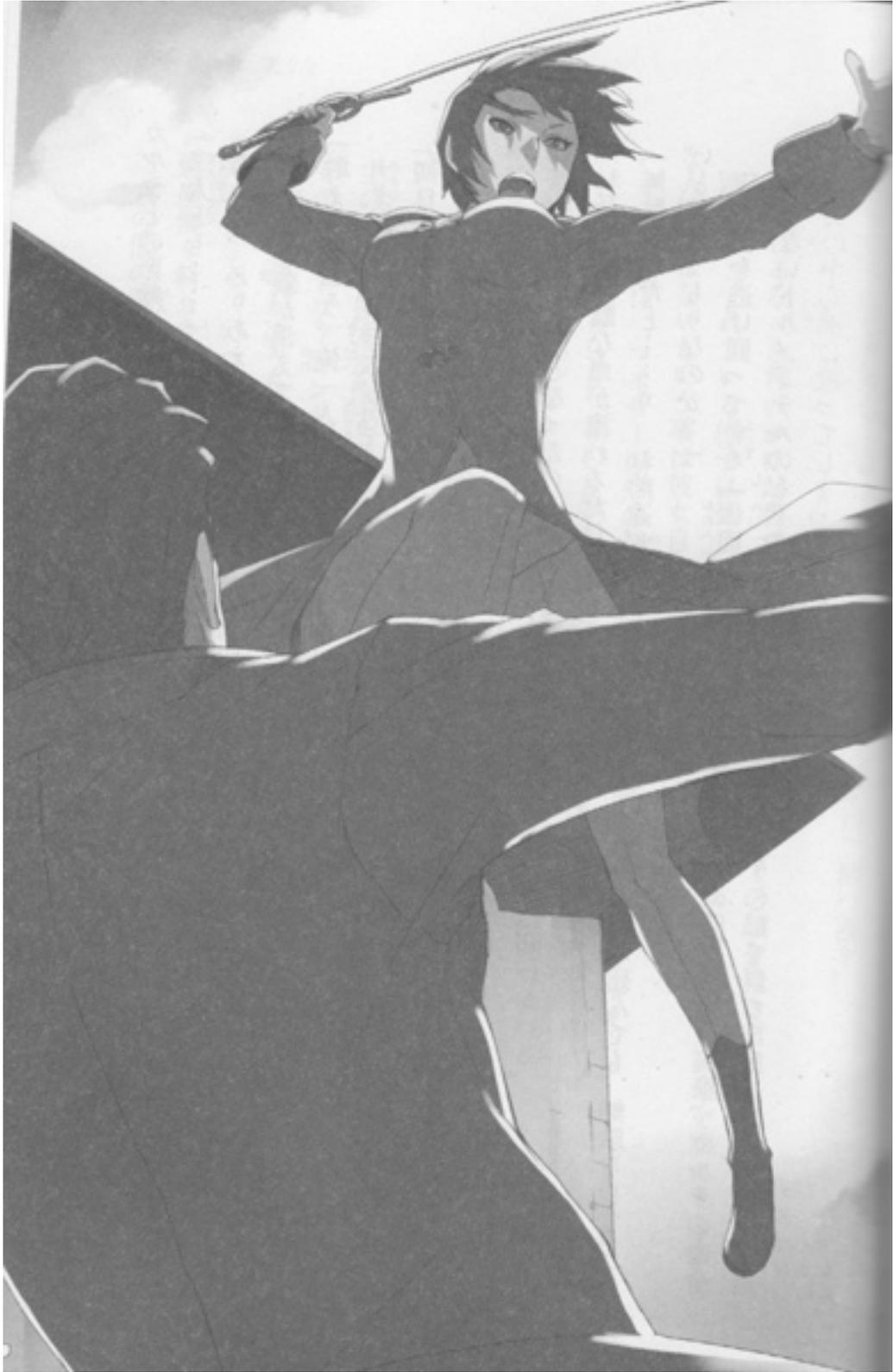
Carla leapt into the air once more and charged at Maiza.

Maiza's knife easily parried the stabbing attack. The harsh ring of metal on metal sounded through the harbor.

Meanwhile, the two guardsmen attempted to board the Advenna Avis, but two people leapt from the ship and kicked them back into the harbor.

"Sir, you have this one's sincerest apologies. Only those named on the passenger list may board this ship."

"I say this. I could have handled them myself."



Maiza looked at Denkuro and Nile, who had leapt onto the docks, and again stepped back from Carla.

"Both of you..."

"Master Zank is at the helm; he alone will suffice for the moment. But there is no reason for this voyage to begin without your presence, Master Maiza."

"I say this. I alone will be enough. You return with Maiza, Denkuro."

Nile hoisted an axe-sized kitchen knife on his shoulder, staring down at the guardsmen. Unlike their first meeting, he was now armed with his weapon of choice.

The stone-faced guardsmen were clearly being cautious; they opted to stay just out of Nile's range, staying back and waiting for the right moment.

Confirming that they were once more at a stalemate, Maiza addressed Carla.

"We will only end up shedding blood needlessly, Miss Carla. Would you please consider stepping back?"

"Needless', you say?! What a thing to say about the decoy you've loosed on the city, acting as bait in your stead!"

The 'Mask Maker' running through the city streets right now was a decoy that would buy the alchemists time to set sail, Carla thought. Even the commoners and Dormentaire men to whom she had not given orders were scattering through the city in pursuit.

But Maiza, knowing nothing of this, furrowed his brow in confusion.

"...? What are you talking about?"

"..."

Carla stopped herself before she could accuse Maiza of playing innocent. She looked into his eyes.

There was nothing in them that suggested he was lying. And before all this, Carla knew full well that Maiza was not one to use someone else's life as bait.

*'Then did another alchemist plan this independently?'*

*'What if the Mask Maker has nothing to do with the alchemists, and I lose the culprit who sunk Lady Lucrezia's ship because I was occupied here?'*

*'But I've come this far... I cannot back out now!'*

"It is indeed a shame, Maiza. I would have preferred to speak with you on different terms."

"I share your sentiments on that matter."

Carla had come to wrest control of this city for her mistress's sake.

Maiza, feeling constrained by Lotto Valentino, was planning to leave this city.

Although they were of completely opposing stances, their repeated meetings over the past year led them to develop a sense of mutual trust towards one another.

This was why they knew full well that things could very well end in this way.

Their relationship was neither so frail that they could fight without restraint, nor so deep that they could cut one another down without regrets.

The places where they stood, only barely in range of one another's attacks, seemed to speak for the state of their connection.

Meanwhile, Denkuro faced down the guardsman with a conflicted expression on his face.

*'Once battle breaks out, Master Nile will not hesitate to kill these guardsmen. Should such a thing happen, we will become wanted men.'*

*'But those guardsmen are not so weak that we can show them mercy.'*

Although their opponents were the same as before, the circumstances and tension surrounding them could not have been any more different.

It was then that Denkuro suddenly recalled what Zank said when Victor stepped in to stop the battle two weeks ago.

*[It seems that our fights in this city are destined to be stopped by another. If only such a thing could be a constant in our lives.]*

*'Destiny...*

*'Relying on such a thing may well disqualify one from alchemist status.'*

He grinned bitterly, and quickly prepared his stance.

*'Then this one shall struggle 'gainst it.'*

He would incapacitate the two guardsmen before Nile could cut them down. He could very well end up fighting Nile in the process, but Denkuro could see no other option.

Even if he were to kill Nile and perish in the process, the ship could set sail as long as Zank remained.

Preparing even for the possibility of his own death, Denkuro prepared himself to attack before anyone else.

But destiny came upon them, a single beat before he could take action.

To Denkuro, of course, it seemed only to be a third coincidence.

And to others, it was no stroke of fate, but part of a carefully designed plan.

There was a *crash* as several spheres shattered against the ground.

Mysterious fluids splashed from the spheres and spread forth instantly, and simultaneously began to burn.

One after another they were thrown to the ground, creating a great wall of flames.

"What is this...?"

Carla, now separated from the Advenna Avis against her will, stepped away from the fire and turned to the source of the spheres. Her eyes widened in shock.

About ten people stood on the rooftop from which she had leapt earlier. Each person was hooded, wearing a cloak and a distinctive mask.

"...! The Mask Makers!" Carla cried. She heard the distant sound of explosions.

"?!"

She turned to the sound. Over the pile of debris that blocked the road, she saw the floating fortress going up in flames.

It was a different situation from the attack on Szilard's ship, where the attack was on a single ship on the edges of the fortress.

This time, the entire fortress was burning. The explosions began near the centre of the structure, setting off one chain reaction after another.

"You... So it was you all along!"

The Mask Makers must have been the ones responsible for sinking Lucrezia's ship, Carla reasoned. She shot them a furious glare, but the Mask Makers did not even spare her a glance, pointing Maiza and the others to the Advenna Avis.

They were probably trying to spur the alchemists forward.

Maiza and Denkuro exchanged glances, then turned on their heels and leapt onto the deck.

"Wait, I still have yet to-"

Denkuro caught Nile by the collar mid-speech and dragged him onto the deck, almost in a throw.

"Denkuro! How dare you-"

"Master Zank! Let us depart!"

Ignoring Nile's angry remarks, Denkuro stepped off the dock and instructed Zank to leave.

"Denkuro!"

"Control yourself, Master Nile! Look!" Denkuro said severely.

The alchemists all turned their gaze to the location Denkuro was pointing at.

A warship that had detached itself from the fortress was sailing directly towards them.

"This ship is completely unarmed! Once they open fire, we will be finished!"

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### **On the rooftops of Lotto Valentino.**

Hearing the latest explosions going off in the harbor, Niki fearfully raised her head.

*'Could the Advenna Avis have been attacked?'*

She stopped running along the rooftops for a moment and turned to the harbor. The explosion, to her great relief, had taken place on the floating fortress, not the Advenna Avis.

But no one could see the way she changed her expression.

One reason was that she was on the rooftops, but the second reason was the she was currently dressed as the Mask Maker.

Approximately one hour ago, Fermet had come to say goodbye to her.

She was ready for this moment. Fermet had elected to board the ship in order to get Czes out of Lotto Valentino. Niki was not an alchemist, nor did she have any particular reason to board as Gretto and Sylvie did.

But Fermet had come to bid her goodbye in a slightly different sense.

"This is the end, Niki. ...If it's all right with you, I'd like for you to board the Advenna Avis in my place. The alchemists will not go out of their way to object, I'm sure."

Seeing the cloak and the mask Fermet was carrying, Niki realized what he was planning to do. He would dress as the Mask Maker and use himself as bait to distract the soldiers and the citizens long enough for the Advenna Avis to set sail.

Niki tried to stop him—it was too dangerous. But Fermet shook his head. *Someone* had to act as a decoy, and it would be him.

"I'll do it."

Niki spoke without a moment's hesitation.

Fermet was astounded, but Niki smiled at him with all her strength.

"It'll be all right. You know my past. I know every alley in this city like the back of my hand. I'll be a much better decoy than you, Fermet."

Fermet tried to stop her, saying it was too dangerous.

It took her several minutes, but in the end Niki stubbornly snatched the mask from Fermet's hands.

"I hate this city. I'm *happy* to throw them into chaos, even if it's only for a short while. And you know, I actually really enjoyed dressing up as the Mask Maker when I snuck into that place—the young master Gretto's manor. I guess I really was born for sneaking around like this."

*'I'm lying.'*

Niki fixed a smile upon her face as she denied her own words.

*'I don't care about the people of this city. I don't care if I'm sneaking around or out in the open. I just don't want you to be in danger, Fermet. I just want to be useful to you.'*

*'Fermet... you must be what I've been looking for all along. My place to die.'*

Niki could not bring herself to tell him the truth, masking her emotions with stubbornness. But it was as though Fermet had read her mind.

He pulled her into an embrace and whispered to her, choking back a sob.

"Thank you, Niki... But please, promise me. Promise me you won't die for someone like me. I'm not worthy of being your place to die. You *will* find that place one day, at the end of the life you live with all your strength."

*'...!'*

*'He knew.'*

*'My feelings got across to him after all...'*

Niki could feel the tears welling up in her eyes.

She donned the mask to hide the tears, and whispered back:

"I'll be all right. After all... I'm a Mask Maker."

And now, at this very moment, she was running through the city streets.

Her heart had, without doubt, reached Fermet.

Losing herself in her heart-pounding memories, Niki kept running.

She ran.

She wondered how Monica must have felt, rescuing her.

How had Elmer felt?

Niki had never realized that working for someone else of her own free will could be so invigorating.

For the first time in her life, she was experiencing the joy of living.

Naturally, she had no idea:

Mere moments after she bade Fermet goodbye and departed as the Mask Maker,

He smiled faintly and mumbled under his breath.

“Thank you.”

Followed by the twisted words of trust—

“I *knew* you’d do this for me.”

<=>

### **The harbor.**

“You bastards... so you were in league with the alchemists all along!” Carla bellowed at the Mask Makers on the rooftop, but they did not answer.

*‘Damn it! Where are the musketeers?!’*

If only they had muskets, they could shoot down the Mask Makers on the rooftop.

But their armories were also among the targets of the explosions in the past two weeks. They had very few usable muskets remaining, and their musketeers were all dispersed around the city.

She had a group of them on standby at the fortress, but she had no way of knowing what happened there since the explosion.

Carla wracked her brains for a way to climb onto the rooftop.

But to her shock, one of the Mask Makers lightly jumped from the roof at that very moment.

Even in the midst of their surprise, Carla and the guardsmen fixed their grips on their weapons.

*‘What are they planning? If they want to attack us, all they have to do is toss those orbs from the rooftop.’*

“I will not repeat myself! Remove your masks and disarm yourselves!”

Carla warned the Mask Makers, not for a second lowering her guard. Although she had earlier launched a sneak attack on Maiza, this time she decided to try and figure out what her opponents were planning.

But she soon came to a realization.

The ocean breeze and the flames hindered her sense for a moment, but the second this particular Mask Maker landed on the ground before her, something about the air had changed.

When the Mask Maker stepped forward with a hand on the ornate mask, the change made itself even more apparent, and convinced Carla of the source of her suspicions.

A moment later, she and the guardsmen dropped their weapons and fell on their knees—

Just as they had fallen a year ago when the Mask Maker released a sleeping compound into the air before them.

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### **Thirty minutes later, on the seas.**

"Oh no, they're catching up!"

"Do something!"

Aboard the Advenna Avis, the alchemists were beginning to panic.

This vessel was incredibly fast for a ship of its caliber, but the fact that they only had three experienced hands manning the ship allowed the pursuing warship to close in on them within firing range.

"Damn it! We can resupply at the first stop. If we lose the heavier cargo, we should—"

One alchemist, in his desperation, reached for the freight hold door.

But the door opened from the inside, and a silver pistol was raised into the air.

"All right, freeze! Nobody move!"

The powerful voice compelled the alchemists on the deck to turn to its owner.

There stood Victor Talbot, his clothes black with soot, carrying a flintlock pistol much like the ones carried by the governor and other aristocrats.

"Master Victor?!" Denkuro cried in shock as he continued to work the sails. "How in the world—"

"I knew you were gonna set sail at some point, so I hid in a crate on board for the past few days." He said, proud of a trick that wasn't quite a trick, and took aim at Maiza.

"Stop this vessel, Maiza Avaro. If we stop here and I wave at that warship, they probably won't open fire right away."

"You would be... Mr. Victor Talbot."

They seemed to know each other—perhaps they had met in passing at the Third Library.

"Enough of this infantile game of tag. I don't care if you're thinking of summoning a demon for knowledge or if you're just heading off to the New World, but you're not *idiots* who'd let a girl and a kid drown with you, right?" Victor warned, glancing at Czes, fast asleep on Begg's back, and Sylvie, who held Gretto's hand with a terrified look.

"But I can't believe you actually fought off Carla and set sail at all. What kinda magic trick did you have to use?"

Because he had been hiding in the hold, Victor probably had no idea of what had happened in the city or the harbor. It was an understandable question.

Despite the fact that the pistol was aimed squarely at him, Maiza answered calmly.

"We're not quite sure ourselves."

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

"I'd like to ask that you first lower your gun. Or do you not care if a stray bullet were to hit a woman or a child?"

"Hah! So that's how you're gonna do things? I like it."

Noting that the warship was closing in on them little by little, Victor lowered the pistol. But he remained cautious, looking around at the other alchemists with a glint in his eye.

"Just to let you know, you're not gonna get much mileage outta taking me hostage."

"Then perhaps you will serve better as fish bait."

Nile had abandoned the helm at some point, and was approaching Victor with a handaxe.

"Master Nile! You are slowing our pace!" Denkuro cried, but Nile snorted.

"What does it matter? They will catch up to us anyway. All I have to do is board that warship and annihilate our pursuers."

"It's a good thing I gave up on fighting you back when we first met. We might've had a dozen funerals on our hands if I let the men go up against a berserker like you." Victor said, astonished. But he did not lower his guard.

But he soon reacted—

When the alchemist watching the approaching warship through a telescope made known an astounding fact.

"Hey... The man standing on deck over there is *waving* at us!"

"Wha...?"

Victor frowned, and finally realized that the other ship had yet to fire even warning shots.

They were already out of sight of land. A small skirmish would go unnoticed, and there would be no trouble between House Dormentaire and the Mars Family.

Victor holstered his pistol, and as though he had forgotten that he was surrounded by enemies, snatched the telescope from the alchemist.

"Lemme see that."

Through it he saw a familiar face.

What drew his attention most, however, was not the waving man, but the bearded man to his right.

"O-old man Szilard?!"

Maiza, who was looking at the warship through another telescope, gasped in shock.

"It... can't be..."

"Wh-what's wrong, Maiza?"

"Please, stop this ship!"

"What?!"

Maiza continued staring through the telescope as though he had not heard Gretto's voice.

Beyond the waters, on the other vessel, were two familiar faces.

The man waving from the deck was Elmer C. Albatross.

And standing to his left was Huey Laforet.

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### **Thirty minutes earlier, the harbor.**

Carla dropped her weapon and fell to her knees.

It was a similar scene from that of the previous year, but she did not lose consciousness this time.

She had fallen for sole the purpose of kneeling.

What she and the guardsmen noticed in the air was the faint scent of peaches.

The Mask Maker who had leapt from the rooftop removed her mask.

The face underneath was a familiar one—the visage of Carla’s mistress.

At the same time, the other Mask Makers on the rooftop also took off their masks one by one. Some of them were bodyguards that Carla recognized.

“Milady... You were safe!” Carla cried, tears welling in her eyes as she looked up at her mistress—Lucrezia De Dormentaire.

“Carla! Your face is so much more adorable than I was *ever* expecting, sweetheart! Oh, and the two of you back there don’t change at all, do you? Stone-faced darlings as usual.” Lucrezia giggled. She then looked around and tilted her head.

“And I was so looking forward to seeing the look on *Victor’s* face, too. Where in the world has that man gone?”

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### **Thirty minutes later, aboard the Advenna Avis.**

The Advenna Avis, chased by the warship, had temporarily weighed anchor in the middle of the sea.

Unfolding on deck was a truly shocking scene.

“Lucrezia... faked her own death?”

Many years later, the look on Victor’s face would be thusly described by Elmer: “If only we had digital cameras back then—that face Victor made was the funniest expression I’d ever seen. I’m sure I could have brought smiles to so many people with a photograph like that.”

Many of the alchemists, taken aback by Victor’s comical expression, were desperately stifling their laughter.

But Maiza did not spare Victor even a glance as he gravely turned to Elmer.

“So is it true that Lucrezia De Dormentaire is alive?!”

“Yeah. She’s been staying in Lotto Valentino for the past few days with different makeup and clothes, but apparently no one recognized her. She was complaining about how she couldn’t get near Carla because she might recognize her, and how she couldn’t find Victor *anywhere*.”

"Right in Lotto Valentino? Then where did she spend the nights? Surely not on the fortress?"

"No, she was at Speran's place." Elmer said plainly. Maiza gaped in shock.

"You know Speran would never turn down a woman's request." Elmer chuckled, and continued his explanation. But he was very difficult to follow, because he constantly failed to put things into context.

Victor (who had finally regained his composure) pushed aside Maiza, who was about to ask for the whole story from the beginning, and grabbed Elmer by the collar.

"Explain yourself, Elmer! You never told me a goddamn thing about this!"

Maiza was the one who reacted with most shock at this.

How in the world did Victor and Elmer know each other?

"Victor... Were you and Elmer acquaintances?"

"Do we *know each other*? We-"

Victor paused, then swore ("Shit, I guess it doesn't matter anymore") and explained their connection.

"This smiling idiot here is one of House Dormentaire's spies."

<=>

Elmer C. Albatross was a Smile Junkie.

No matter who he was dealing with, Elmer would always try to bring a smile to the faces of the unhappy.

One year ago, after Monica's death and Huey's disappearance, Elmer realized that a woman he saw often in the city had lost her smile almost entirely.

He wanted very much to make her laugh, but each time he spoke to her she would only say, "Silence. You alchemists are my... House Dormentaire's enemies". She looked as though she would open her heart to no one.

But Elmer stubbornly persisted in following her. Eventually, the woman—Carla—said:

"If you want to see me smile so much, then give me some information on the alchemists here."

The very next day, with a "Don't tell anyone", Elmer brought to her a large quantity of technical notes from the Third Library.

Carla, feeling a chill at Elmer's dogged determination, forced herself to smile and said, "From this point forth, you will move as directed".

"Hey, don't *force* yourself to smile." Elmer said, "All right. I'll just have to bring you even *more* information!"

With that, he continued following Carla until he eventually became a Dormentaire spy, reporting to her about the rumors circulating the streets.

And time passed, to the present day.

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"Say, Maiza. Did you know that Carla always smiles after she talks to you, when she thinks no one's looking?"

"Pardon? ...Well, let's leave that for another time. Elmer—have you gone mad? House Dormentaire is responsible for what happened to Moni—"

But he caught himself before he could finish, spotting Huey just behind Elmer.

He also recalled that Elmer did not care about sanity or the lack thereof.

But what bothered him then was the presence of Huey Laforet.

"...Huey, what are you doing here? Were you really responsible for those explosions?" He asked.

It was a direct question.

The alchemists held their breath. Huey smiled faintly and responded:

"Yes... but only about half of them."

"Half?"

"That's correct. I don't recall setting fire to the aristocrats' estates. *Those* were most likely the works of a copycat."

The moment he heard this, Gretto, standing in a corner of the deck, blanched.

But only Sylvie and Fermet noticed Gretto's surprised look. The former assumed that Gretto was still reeling from the shock of the attack, and the latter, knowing the truth, laughed in silence.

"Wait. Hold it. Lemme get all this straight. Who the hell are you?" Victor asked. Huey greeted him courteously.

"Please excuse me. My name is Huey Laforet, and I am a former affiliate of the Third Library. It's an honor to make your acquaintance, Victor Talbot."

"You know me?"

"But of course. Lady Lucrezia and Mr. Quates have told me a great deal about you."

"What?!"

In his confusion, Victor turned to Szilard, who was sitting on a crate on the deck.

Szilard responded to Victor's demanding expression with a click of the tongue and explained the situation.

"In all my years, I've seen few men as obtuse as you, Victor. This brat, Huey Laforet, was one of our associates since before we arrived at Lotto Valentino."

"What?!"

"He's bolder than he looks, I will grant him. I've been told that he snuck into Lady Lucrezia's bedchambers and proposed an exchange then and there—his method of counterfeiting gold, in exchange for the support of Dormentaire's alchemy workshop."

"..."

Victor could no longer express his shock through words. He was left gaping at the flow of information.

"It was certainly an interesting formula. And even before all of this, the field of incendiaries and explosives was one of our weaknesses. Lady Lucrezia understood this and accepted his offer for his skill in the field, granting him status as one of our equals."

"Why. Did. I. Not. Hear anything about this?!"

"What reason would I have to reveal this information to a loose-lipped blatherer like you?"

Huey smiled and added even more fuel to the fire.

"My apologies, Victor. Lady Lucrezia specifically instructed me to remain silent, wishing to see your surprised face when the time came."

"Don't make me laugh!"

As Victor lost his temper, Denkuro and Zank held him back and eventually knocked him out. They tossed him into the freight hold.

Maiza pieced together everything he had heard from Huey and came to this conclusion:

Although he had difficulty believing it, Huey Laforet had joined with House Dormentaire—the ones who had stolen Monica's life—and came to acquire a great deal of money and influence.

And, for some reason that continued to elude him, Lucrezia De Dormentaire found a need to make it seem to the public that she had passed away. Chosen for the stage of her fabricated demise was the city of Lotto Valentino, a peculiar setting to House Dormentaire and the rest of Europe.

Szilard and Huey would go around planting explosives throughout the city—planning ahead meticulously to prevent any deaths—and make it seem as though the Mask Makers had returned to the city.

Afterwards, they would equip Lucrezia's vessel with timed explosives and set them off, making it seem to many that the Mask Maker had assassinated her. Lucrezia and her entourage would disembark at the previous harbor, leaving behind the fewest number of men possible to sail the ship to a certain point. There, the crew would transfer over to the Advenna Avis and set the ship afloat towards the harbor, taking the wind direction into account.

They would then let the explosives go off, the sailors boldly making port as crewmen of the Advenna Avis.

In other words, the family that had sent the Advenna Avis to Lotto Valentino was also involved in this plot. Was there bribery involved, or some sort of political motive? Either way, they were on the same side all along.

Finally, with the final barrage of explosions that took place today, the incidents would be wrapped up with the scenario: [Lotto Valentino was greatly damaged by the Mask Makers' final attack, but House Dormentaire successfully annihilated them. Having avenged Lucrezia's death but left exhausted, House Dormentaire would pull out of Lotto Valentino, taking control of the alchemists' research in the shadows].

As for the final explosion at the floating fortress, Szilard had gone around the structure after his self-inflicted injuries, claiming to be searching for a passage used by the culprit, but in actuality planting explosives all over the ships.

Perhaps Dalton had known all of this from the start as well. Perhaps he was also a part of this plan from the very beginning, Maiza mused for a moment, but he soon decided to abandon that line of thought. There was no need to get angry over a fact that he could not confirm.

*'So if I wish to change the world, I must also prepare myself for unbelievable twists of fate like this... I suppose, in that sense, the supernatural power of immortality is perfect for fighting against that incredible power and influence.'*

With that, Maiza recalled the city he had left.

Having lost his hometown, he could not so easily forgive Lucrezia De Dormentaire and her actions. But thanks to them, Gretto and Sylvie were also saved. And Huey's actions had also served to dampen his fury.

*'Huey. What in the world has happened to you?'*

Maiza could not bring himself to believe. How could Huey have cooperated with the Dormentaires, who had taken Monica's life?

Perhaps, Maiza thought, Huey was only pretending to be on their side, planning to destroy the Dormentaires from the inside.

But Maiza could not find even the slightest desire for revenge in Huey's eyes.

*"I've merely come to the realization that revenge will not bring her back."* Huey had said, but could a man truly become so detached from the world around him?

How many times had Huey despaired and hesitated in the past year?

And where in the world had he found his hope?

Maiza tried for a moment to figure out the answers, but soon realized the futility of such an action and stopped.

Immortality would not grant him absolute knowledge. Eternal life was not omnipotence.

Reminding himself of this fact, Maiza let his imagination loose, towards the continent across the sea and the distant future ahead.

"The Grand Panacea? Hah. If such a thing truly existed, I should hope he decides to reveal it soon." The elderly alchemist said, looking at Maiza standing by the railings.

As Szilard spoke condescendingly, one of the alchemists raised his voice.

"Wait! You and Victor are getting off at the next stop. Huey and Elmer as well! Only those whose names are on the passenger list are allowed to take part in the experiment! We need to keep clear records of who has become immortal!"

The other alchemists raised their voices in agreement.

But Huey and the others, who had boarded later, did not seem affected in the slightest. If Victor were here, he might have gladly agreed to a fight; but he was still unconscious in the hold.

"Maiza, did the Headmaster not entrust something to you?"

"Pardon?"

Maiza was prompted to recall the envelope Dalton had handed to him just before setting sail.

He produced the envelope from their luggage and tore it open. Inside was an addendum to the passenger list, containing the names of Huey Laforet, Elmer C. Albatross, Szilard Quates, and even Victor Talbot.

Seeing this, the alchemists could no longer drive them away. They were left wondering, just like Maiza had earlier, just how much Dalton had known.

*'In the end, I'm still merely a pawn in the plots of others.'* Maiza sighed, and chided himself for his foolishness.

*'I'd thought that even I could come to change after a long period of time, but...'*

*'There are people like Huey, who could become an entirely different person in the span of a single year. And there are those like Elmer, who may very well remain the same until the very end.'*

*'So the act of changing has nothing to do with the passage of time, but my own resolve...'*

Maiza steeled himself once more, and moved on to thoughts of the day of the ritual, which would take place at the end of their voyage.

With not a single clue about what would happen afterwards, the ship swayed quietly in the waves, carrying within a hazy mass of wicked malice.

The man full of malice—Fermet—looked down upon a pocket watch as he stood at the stern of the ship.

Czes had awakened, and was now exploring the ship with Begg.

Czes was smiling in a desperate attempt to hide his fears about sailing and the New World that was ahead of them. And although Fermet so wanted to continue looking at that face, he was occupied by the act of holding this watch and letting his imagination run wild.

*'Hm... It should be just about time.'*

*'What kind of a face are you wearing now, I wonder? What are you feeling at this very moment?'*

*'That I cannot be there to see for myself is my greatest regret, Niki.'*



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### **The Lotto Valentino harbor.**

"Oooh, don't get *mad*, Carla! You're going to hurt my feelings, sweetheart!"

"Please don't take things so lightly!" Carla said indignantly as Lucrezia pouted.

Having finally been let in on the secrets surrounding this incident, Carla wiped away her tears of joy and began to furiously berate her mistress.

"What in the world were you thinking, Milady?! Have you any idea how much damage you caused for your purposes?! How many people were injured in all of this?! Today's explosions alone... I don't believe this!"

"But Carla darling! Victor always says in his letters that the people here are all rotten pieces of garbage! So I thought I might give them a little scare. Just a teensy bit of—"

"Get a hold of yourself, Milady! There are more Dormентаire soldiers injured than locals! And what if a child, or an outlander here to see the libraries, happened to wander into one of the explosions?! Have you any idea how anxious the fleeing alchemists were?!"

As Carla laid down her perfectly reasoned arguments one by one, Lucrezia smiled brightly.

"Oh! That was one of House Dormентаire's plans to begin with, sweetie. This city was built for the alchemists, right? Let the family take over all of their research, but before that, we thought we should have the alchemists scatter before *other* nobles or countries got to them. But you *know*, this is *very* tame for something a Dormентаire does~! So why do you look so mad, sweetheart?"

Lucrezia tilted her head.

Carla rebuked her in an even louder voice.

"We are *pillaging* this city! There is nothing 'tame' or otherwise about our actions! Yes, Milady, I *will* do *anything* to get a hold of the objects of your desire. But there was no need to go this far and turn *yourself* into the villain, even deceiving *me* in the process! Have you any *idea* how worried I was..."

As Carla began to honestly disclose her fears—

They heard several low explosions from the city.

"...More bombs?!"

"That's *awfully* strange. The fortress should have been the last one!"

"There you have it, Milady! Things do not *always* go according to your plans!"

Carla continued to lecture the sniffling Lucrezia, the legally dead aristocrat.

They had no way of knowing that, in the shadows of the final explosions, a tragedy had taken place.

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**Ten minutes earlier, somewhere in Lotto Valentino. Two stories underneath an abandoned house.**

"...How nostalgic." Niki found herself mumbling as she stepped inside.

The room was shining brilliantly, filled with counterfeit gold and looking very much like the inside of a pirate's treasure chest.

Niki had visited this place once before.

It was the year 1705. She was rescued by Elmer and the others and led here, once the ship that served as a drug workshop had been set on fire. Here she learned the Mask Maker's identity—Monica.

This place was originally Huey's personal hideout. But Niki heard that Elmer and Monica joined in, and the trio used this place as the Mask Makers' headquarters. Even though the organization had been as large as several hundred at its peak, this place was known only to those three and Niki herself.

As she looked down at her pocket watch, Niki closed her eyes and recalled what Fermet had told her.

*"One last thing, Niki. It's about your hiding place." Fermet said, when she volunteered to act as the decoy. "Elmer told me of this place when I volunteered for this role. He told me that I could use it as a hideout if things went badly."*

The hiding place Fermet had mentioned was all too familiar to Niki.

Having thought that Elmer had always intended to board the Advenna Avis like Fermet, Niki believed in Fermet's words without a moment of doubt.

If she had not been in love with Fermet—if she had thought carefully about his words—she would have noticed his deception.

Elmer would never have allowed Fermet to become bait in his stead. Elmer would forcibly volunteer himself for the role, whether anyone liked it or not. So why did he not stop Fermet?

The question that any friend of Elmer would have asked, in the end, never came to Niki.

This soon came to bring her tragedy.

But even if she *had* noticed Fermet's deception, her love for him was already a tragedy in and of itself.

"...?"

She heard a noise overhead. The sound of multiple men, their footsteps, and voices.

It sounded like people had come down to the floor just above this one.

Niki cautiously extinguished several lights to dim the room, and listened carefully to the voices.

"Did they really come this way?"

Niki felt her heart go cold at the sound.

The sharp, powerful voice was all too familiar to her—one she had heard very often in the past.

It was the voice of her self-proclaimed guardian, the bald man who had been her master.

When the drug workshop caught fire six years ago, she slammed a chair down onto his head and never saw him again. She had heard that the governor had him placed under arrest, but perhaps he had been released in the past few years.

"Yeah, it's just like the informant said."

"Who knew there was a Mask Maker hideout in a place like this?"

"Maybe House Dormентаire'll give us a reward for finding this place."

Their voices were *all* familiar to Niki.

They were all her former masters, who drove her and the other slaves to death in the workshops.

*'How? How did they find this place?'*

Her heart leapt as though she had been snatched out of the blue.

The past she thought she had forgotten instantly sprang back into her present, turning her mind into an echo chamber of screams.

Pushing her further into a corner was the content of the conversation taking place overhead—the men above were loudly searching for something, continuing their discussion about the Mask Maker.

"Lucky for us we kept an eye out, eh? Don't know what we'd have done if we never ended up trusting that info in the first place."

"If this is their headquarters, we might even find those counterfeits they were making money with."

"You're right... A whole lot of it, I bet. They might even have real ingots they bought with the counterfeits."

"That's a big headache. Come on, keep looking."

"The one that just ran in here was obviously a kid. Or a woman."

"A woman? Looks like we're going to have some fun before we kill her."

*'What's going on here?'*

*'Were they keeping an eye out on this place?'*

*'Who told them about the headquarters? Huey? Or Elmer?'*

Who? One more name surfaced in Niki's thoughts, but her heart rejected that answer and compelled her senses to find a way to escape this situation.

*'There must be something I can use here...'*

She only had one lit candle to light the room. Niki was practically forced to rely on her sense of touch.

A large group like the one overhead would find the trapdoor in a matter of minutes.

*'I have to hurry...'*

The first thing that caught her sight was a wooden box that easily stood out against the mounds of gold—and the black orbs inside.

Strangely enough, each orb was equipped with a clock. A stem jutting out of the clockwork was set deep inside the orb.

The moment she saw this, Niki thought: *'These must be the timed explosives the people at the workshop were talking about.'*

The bombs that would go off at a designated time, that were used by the mastermind behind the explosions.

She then noticed—

The hands of the clocks on the orbs were all moving.

Niki could feel cold sweat running down her body.

The girl who had been searching for a place to die was terrified by the mass of death lying before her.

*'It's going to explode...? When? In how long?!'*

*'Was Huey the culprit all along? Why now? Why is he trying to blow up this place?!'*

*'Who put these explosives here? Who told those men about the headquarters?'*

*'Who? Who? Who?'*

*'Huey? Elmer? Or... Fermet...?'*

Questions presented themselves to her, one after another. But she could not pinpoint an answer for any of them.

*'Elmer told Fermet about this place... so was he planning to kill Fermet? Why?'*

*'No, that's impossible. Elmer would never do something like that. And no one would ever hold a grudge against Fermet.'*

*'So who was it? Who?'*

*'No, it was no one! If I have time to suspect someone, I have to try and find a way to escape...'*

If she remained underground, she would be killed in the explosion.

If she tried to flee, she would be caught by the men and murdered.

The more and more she thought, the more and more Niki became certain of her own death.

Her only hope was for the men to leave without finding the trapdoor before the explosives went off, or to break through the barricade of men upstairs and flee.

But she knew well that such ideas were the stuff of dreams.

The word 'despair' began to paint over her heart in shadows, darkness, blackness.

*'Oh, I see.'*

She came to a realization.

*'This is the place.'*

She had been searching for it all this time.

But it was not something she found for herself—it was something that came to her.

*'This... is my place to die.'*

The moment she came to this conclusion, Niki felt her heart purge all anxiety and terror from within.

She slowly picked up the box full of timed explosives, and gently placed it at the top of the steps leading upstairs. The men searching for her would come across the box the moment they opened the trapdoor.

She was not trying to use the bombs as a threat, nor was she trying to distance herself from it as much as possible.

She only wished—if she was going to die anyway—to kill those men as well alongside herself.

*'I thought I was over thinking about them.*

*'I guess I still resented them, somewhere deep down.*

*'Or maybe... I just want to take someone with me.'*

Convincing herself of her worthlessness, Niki slowly walked.

There was a small passageway that led to a dead end.

The walls were rough and carelessly dug, as though someone had given up in the midst of an attempt to build another room. Niki sat in the half-formed corridor, closed her eyes, and began to think in the darkness, where the candlelight did not reach.

*'Have I changed after all?*

*'Have I become stronger?*

*'Have I finally found my place to die?'*

She waited, deep at the end of the alcove.

Many people, filled with bloodlust and rage, were coming for her as she stood cornered.

The girl in the mask quietly asked questions of herself.

But she could not find the answers.

And yet she was satisfied.

Her own identity no longer mattered.

*'This is my place to die.*

*'But in the end, I was able to live for Fermet.*

*'And if that's what led to this end, it must mean that I chose this place of my own will.'*

Above all else, she was grateful for the fact that she was able to form a link with another.

*'It's all right now. It doesn't matter who brought me to this place. Or who it was that set up the explosives.*

*'Whether it was Fermet, Elmer, or Huey.*

*'I don't mind if the three of them secretly hated me all along.*

*'But I wonder why. Little by little... I'm getting less scared of dying.'*

And so she thought:

*'Monica...*

*'I wonder if you felt your link to Huey.'*

Elmer had already told her the details of Monica's death—the death of her friend and rescuer.

*'I wonder if that's why you died with a smile.'*

*'I wonder... If I could do the same now.'*

The girl was wearing a mask.

Her life was nothing particularly significant, but she was proud of the fact that she had, for a time, been a Mask Maker.

This was why, in the face of oncoming death, she thought to die in the most noble manner she could think of.

*'The Mask Maker is my place to die.'* She thought, then realized:

*'Oh, wait.'*

*'I'm back to square one.'*

Niki remembered the way she was six years ago—a member of the Mask Makers, and marked for death at the hands of the Mask Maker. The thought brought her comfort.

Perhaps the shadow of death looming over her in the darkness was reminding her of the past.

*'I see. That's why I'm not scared.'*

*'It's because things have gone back to the way they were before.'*

*'Just like before... I'm alone.'*

Her old self had been constantly ready for death, accepting it as she did now.

*'Oh... I see... I... I never was able to change, after all.'*

*'I couldn't become like you, Monica.'*

*'I can't smile like you did.'*

*'I'm so glad I have this mask... So glad...'*

Her heart was at ease, but she trembled slightly. Niki firmly pressed down on her mask as she thought:

*'I'm so glad no one will see me die crying.'*

*'I wish I could smile.*

*'I've finally found my place to die, so I wish I could die with a smile.*

*'I'm sorry, Elmer.'*

Niki then caught herself—

*'Oh, I'm supposed to think of Fermet, not Elmer.*

*'I have to apologize to Fermet.*

*'I'm such an idiot.*

*'This is why I...*

*'I...'*

The sound of the trapdoor opening.

Followed by the howling of angry men.

A *click*.

And—

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### **Aboard the Advenna Avis.**

"I guess it must have exploded by now."

"...Yeah."

Elmer commented, looking down at a pocket watch. Huey answered him.

"It's a bit of a shame, really. We still had some valuable things left in there."

"It's all right. We're trying to erase all traces of the Mask Makers from the city, after all."

"But did you really have to rig it with explosives?"

"It's better that it all goes up in smoke. And Elmer, you're the one who said 'We can't have Niki accidentally wandering into the hideout one day and being suspected as a member of the Mask Makers'."

"You have a point."

Elmer and Huey spoke quietly. No one could hear their voices.

But watching them from a distance was a man who could figure out exactly the contents of their conversation.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

When Elmer came to the Meyer manor with Sylvie in tow, Fermet felt an indescribable chill. It was nothing particularly significant, but he felt something strangely off about Elmer C. Albatross.

Now that Fermet thought back on it, during last year's incident, it was Elmer's presence that changed Huey's actions from what he had predicted.

One day, as Fermet very cautiously dug up information on Elmer and kept a close eye out on him—never for a second lowering his guard—he saw the man entering an abandoned house.

Fermet followed after him, and listened in to the conversation taking place in the hideout underneath. He overheard the plan to blow up the headquarters on the day they were to set sail on the Advenna Avis.

Luring Niki into the scene was nothing short of effortless.

Likewise for him to convince the citizens about the hideout's location, making sure they kept an eye out on it so they could prevent her from escaping.

*'Oh, Niki. My Niki.'*

Fermet lovingly called the girl's name in his mind, smiling.

*'You were truly wonderful.'*

When he realized that Niki was in love with him, Fermet was happy.

Niki was beautiful, and was possessed of a lovely personality.

As a lover, she was in want for nothing.

So Fermet also came to love Niki.

A girl who had fought through great despair and found hope in life—was it not a heartwarming story?

Fermet resolved to truly love the girl with all his heart.

He wanted to see all of her—from the way her cheeks flushed red with affection, to the moment it all turned to despair—every last moment.

*'I wonder what has happened to you now.'*

*'Have you died in the explosion? Or were you murdered by the men? Or maybe you managed to escape with your life, and now hate me with all your heart.*

*'Or maybe your hatred is directed at Elmer, or Huey.*

*'How can I tell? I don't even know if you're alive or dead.'*

In his head, he drew up dozens—hundreds—of 'endings' for Niki.

In one ending, a series of miracles led her to live happily ever after as the governor's wife. In another, she was left mutilated by the explosion—unable to even die as maggots ate away at her flesh. He continued to imagine every little moment of every last ending, over and over again.

The possibilities were endless.

Fermet calmed his racing heart and slowly thought to himself—about the things that would take place after his 'rebirth' as an immortal, at the end of this voyage.

*'There's no point to me becoming immortal alone, of course.*

*'My loved one has to attain eternity with me.*

*'Then I can break him and love him until the end of time.'*

The possibilities were endless.

Drawing up a great map of the future in his mind, Fermet quietly laughed to himself.

He smiled a smile so very white, tainted by nothing, as he stared at the horizon alone.

Praying that this ship would take them to endless hope.

The ship sailed westward, soon to summon a demon for the Grand Panacea.

The Advenna Avis slowly cut through the waves and set forth, to the land where a centuries-long ruckus would unfold.

Not even realizing that it was carrying a man more vile than any demon.



*Epilogue:*  
*Let's Laugh.*

## **Epilogue: Let's Laugh**

### **Several months later, somewhere on the American East Coast.**

And so, the demon was summoned on board the ship.

The tragedy that took place in the immediate aftermath left many badly scarred, Maiza and Sylvie foremost among the wounded.

But whether they wept or howled in anguish, the ship continued onwards. They soon arrived in the New World, on the east coast of the American continent.

Here they would plant the seeds of their knowledge in order to harvest yet more wisdom.

But there were no hurrahs or shouts of joy to be heard.

They had lost many friends before finally making port in the New World.

Many of the alchemists stopped trusting others altogether. About half the survivors left Maiza's presence without even mentioning their destinations, let alone saying goodbye.

Fermet watched them depart, laughing silently to himself.

And a thought occurred to him.

*'Now that I think about it, Huey and Elmer still have no idea that Niki may have been killed in the explosion they set up themselves.'*

If he said nothing, the two friends may well live on forever without that knowledge.

So Fermet decided to reveal to them the truth.

*'It would be tragic for Niki if her murderers lived on without even knowing their own sin.'*

*'I simply can't let them go without knowing.'*

Setting aside his own part in creating Niki's casket, Fermet stirred.

*'I want to know what kind of faces they'll make once I tell them.'*

With this singular reason, motivated by no other goal, he made his move.

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### **The harbor. At the pier.**

Queen Anne's War was just about drawing to a close. The American East Coast was, at the time, a British colony.

This sleepy port town, however, seemed to have been entirely unaffected by the great wars raging on elsewhere. There was a small commotion when the Advenna Avis made port out of the blue, but the locals' curiosity soon died down, leaving the ship to become just another part of the local scenery.

Two young men sat on the wooden pier, in view of the ship. They were casting fishing lines into the water.

Huey Laforet and Elmer C. Albatross.

Most of the alchemists had left the ship. Very few still remained.

Many feared that Szilard, who had instigated the feeding frenzy aboard the Advenna Avis, would surface out of the ocean. They fled further into the continent.

Maiza, on the other hand, did little but stare out into the sea every day—as though he were waiting for Szilard.

Huey and Elmer, however, seemed entirely unconcerned. They merely spent their days doing their best to adjust to this new environment.

A man approached them from behind without so much as a sound.

"Are they biting?" Asked the man—Fermet—as he slowly squatted beside them without waiting for a response.

"Nope. And here I was, hoping to land an alligator."

"It's unusual to see you without Czes in your company."

Elmer's answer was strange as ever, and Huey essentially responded to Fermet's question with another of his own.

Fermet chuckled and answered Huey.

"I've left him in Begg's care today."

*'Now, how should I go about revealing the truth?'*

Fermet began to devise ways in which he could smoothly convey the fact that Niki was at the Mask Maker hideout that day.

He soon found himself struck by inspiration, and opened his mouth to begin the conversation that would eventually lead to the revelation.

But Huey beat him to the punch.

"Scheming again, Fermet?"

"...What might you be talking about?"

Fermet put on a mask of polite confusion. Huey responded in near-monotone.

"So, this time you've killed Niki, just as you killed Monica?"

"...I'm afraid I don't find your joke very funny, Huey. And who in the world is Monica?"

Fermet would not let his mask falter.

"Oh. A fake smile." Elmer grinned. Fermet shut his mouth and went quiet for a moment.

There was a moment of silence.

Fermet scrutinized Huey and Elmer's backs, and finally broke out into a different sort of laugh altogether.

"Hah."

It spilled from the corner of his lips.

"Hahaha. Hahahahaha! Ahahahahahahaha!"

Laughter overflowed from his mouth.

"Aaaahheehheehheegahahahahahahahaha!"

Fermet clutched his stomach like a madman and laughed, laughed, laughed.

He then stopped as suddenly as he began. Putting on a tenacious grin, he mumbled:

"Unbelievable."

Even his tone was different.

"When did you realize?" He asked Huey.

"Even if I had *never* realized for myself... The span of one year is more than enough time to gather information."

"Hah! Nothing less than what I'd expect. It's no wonder you won Lucrezia's favor so quickly."

"Ah, pardon me, Fermet. I've yet to greet you with a proper 'It has been a long time'." Huey said, slowly turning around with his usual hint of a smile. "I'd completely forgotten that a child near my own age happened to be in the company of those Inquisitors."

The Inquisitors.

They were the ones who had killed Huey's mother. Huey should rightly despise even the mention of them. But there was no change in his faint smile.

"Well, *this* is new. You'd be the first one who's ever dug up dirt from *my* past."

Fermet had even changed his attitude, but Huey's expression refused to budge.

"And so what? You'll rat on me to Maiza and the others? Or are you going to avenge Monica here and now? I don't really give a damn either way. Mm... But could I ask you to keep this a secret from Czes and Begg? If Czes starts to hate me because of something this insignificant, I just might end up devouring him without even thinking." Fermet said threateningly, waving his right hand.

Elmer looked on at Fermet and Huey with a smile and said nonchalantly:

"Then why don't the two of you start by making up?"

For the first time during this conversation, Fermet dropped all expression from his face.

"...What? You're not making any sense."

"You killed Monimoni, right? All you have to do is apologize properly. Then we can all go fishing together. Forgive and forget, you know? Let me tell you, we caught quite the whopper here yesterday."

Elmer spoke as though *fishing* was the priority of the conversation. Fermet looked at him.

There was no sarcasm or dishonesty in Elmer's expression. He was speaking in all seriousness when he made his suggestion.

Fermet felt an incredible chill going down his spine. The cold slowly transformed itself to fear, and a voice of ice fell upon Elmer.

"I don't see myself ever befriending the likes of *you*, Elmer C. Albatross."

"Really? But weren't you a Dormentaire spy like me, Fermet? Spies like us have to stick together."

"I refuse. How could I bring myself to befriend the man who killed my beloved Niki?" Fermet said callously. Elmer looked at him in shock.

"Huh?! Me, kill Niki? What are you talking about?"

Fermet finally regained his original expression and grinned.

He would now engrave the fact of his existence into the hypocrisy of Elmer C. Albatross.

So Fermet spoke—about what he had done to Niki and what end he had driven her to, all with the enthusiasm of a man reciting an epic poem. With the most genuine expression worn on his lips.

*'What is this?'*

*'Why am I reacting this way to this man?'*

Questions like this dogged at the edges of his consciousness, but the words coming from his mouth knew no end.

For the first time in his life, he had encountered someone who managed to strike a chill into his bones.

He was almost beginning to think that the only way to shake off the cold sweat running down his back was to personally toy with the emotions of Elmer C. Albatross.

"...By now, she should be rotting under a pile of rubble. Or maybe she's been apprehended as a Mask Maker and beaten by the citizens until she was a scrap of meat. I wonder if she believed in me to the end, or if she died hating me... And you know, she might even have died blaming you or Huey!"

Fermet took many dozens of minutes laying out the details of his relationship to Niki.

He would then wait for Elmer's response. Would the man fall victim to rage and attempt to attack him? Or would he be dejected, knowing that his proposal to destroy the evidence in hopes of helping her had instead led to her death? Fermet would be happy either way. What mattered to him most, above all else, was to try and steer this man towards any emotion he wanted to see.

But—

"I see. So Niki might be dead... Then I hope she could have passed away with a smile."

Elmer solemnly bowed his head for a single moment. Then,

"Anyway, why don't you and Huey make up? Don't worry about Czes and Begg. I promise I'll keep quiet about everything! So come on, now, let's laugh together! Just like you did a while ago. That was one great laugh. It was so honest I couldn't help but smile!" Elmer said with a jovial grin, as though it had taken him but a few seconds to forget Niki.

Fermet could feel his bones creaking.

"What... the hell are you?"

He stepped backwards and realized:

He had never met anyone like this man in his entire life. And he never would meet anyone like him in the future.

But the goosebumps forming over his skin were telling him the truth.

Elmer C. Albatross was, without a doubt, an irreconcilable foe.

Or rather, his nemesis.

*'Impossible.*

*'Impossible. Impossible. Impossible. Impossible. Impossible. Impossible. Impossible.'*

He refused to believe that such a thing could ever exist in his path.

Fermet shook his head, refusing to acknowledge the being before himself.

Trembling, he reached out his right hand and took hold of Elmer's head.

*'What now, Elmer?*

*'Fear me.'*

Fermet knew that he would normally never behave in this way. But he could not stop himself.

He was certain that he had to destroy this man, here and now.

But the moment he laid his right hand on Elmer's head, the thought that surfaced in his mind was not "I want to eat".

It was absolute rejection.

*'Devour... this man?*

*'His knowledge, his experience, his character... All living on within my psyche?*

*'I refuse.*

*'I REFUSE!'*

His face pale, Fermet hurriedly took his right hand off of Elmer's head. He then leapt away from Elmer as though he had seen a ghost.

"...Your existence *itself* is a world-destroying evil." He said, not caring about himself for once, and staggered backwards with a click of the tongue.

He immediately left the village with Begg and Czes in tow, without so much as a word of goodbye to Maiza.

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Not knowing that Fermet would disappear without a trace within hours, Elmer curiously watched him stagger away.

"What's wrong with Fermet, I wonder? Is he finally getting seasick?"

"You really are oblivious, Elmer. Although I almost respect that." Huey said.

"That so? You're embarrassing me." Elmer chuckled, scratching his head. Huey spoke with a somber look.

"To be honest, I almost blew up at that bastard when he told us about what he did to Niki. I thought I'd abandoned all those emotions already, but I guess I still have a long way to go."

"But you know, she might have made it out alive. So I'm going to see if I can go back to Lotto Valentino one day."

"I expected nothing less from you."

Listening to Elmer speak about life and death with such nonchalance, Huey closed his eyes as though in relief.

"...Remember what I asked you on the day we met up again? A few days before we set sail?"

"Yeah. To board the Advenna Avis with you, and..."

"I want to confirm that second request with you just one more time."

His fishing line cast into the water, Huey fixed his eyes on the waves and quietly continued.

"I'm going to continue to change. And I'll do whatever it takes to keep my promise with Monica. But... when I see her again, if I've become someone completely different... If there's nothing left of me from the time when I loved her, there would be no meaning to seeing her again."

"I don't think Monica would think that way." Elmer said, not at all intending to be falsely kind.

Huey nodded slightly, but then shook his head.

"She might not mind, but I will. This is just one of my selfish whims."

He then turned to Elmer and made his wish known to his friend.

"So no matter how much I change, Elmer... Please, I want you to remain just as you are now. I know I'm asking something very terrible and cruel of you. But if you never change, I think I might be able to rely on you to go back to the old me. The me that loved Monica."

Elmer's answer was simple.

"You'd better keep that promise from last year."

"Yeah."

"Once you see her again, you have to come show me the greatest smile in the world... together."

Huey chuckled bitterly.

"I don't remember proposing such a difficult condition."

"Hey, our lifespans've gone from seventy or so years to eternity. I don't think I'm asking too much of you at all. Do you have any idea how hard it's going to be to try and never change from the way I am?"

"I have faith in you."

Seeing Huey's smile, Elmer nodded satisfactorily.

They continued fishing in silence for some time. Eventually, Huey got to his feet and addressed Elmer matter-of-factly.

"I'll be going, then."

"All right. See you later."

Elmer's answer was equally indifferent.

Their farewells.

They did not know each another's destinations, nor did they know when they would meet again. In months, years, or decades. And considering the existence of those like Szilard, there was also a good chance that they might never see each other again.

But this simple goodbye was enough for them.

Huey knew that Elmer disliked long goodbyes, but above all he had faith that they would see each other again.

There was no difference between one day or a hundred years in the grand scheme of eternity.

Huey lightly waved to his only friend and turned away.

And so, Huey Laforet began to walk.

With his goal set, sensing the solid link that existed between himself, Elmer, and Monica, who lived in the past.

Huey Laforet's long, long journey was about to begin.

Believing that he could find his way by the thread leading him back—

He took his first step into the distant future.

## Afterword

It's been a long time, everyone. This is Narita.

I recently got a chance to listen to Mr. Yoshimori's wonderful tunes at the Baccano! jazz concert. I couldn't shake off the excitement from the concert for a long time. In fact, I'm not sure I've shaken it all off yet. In any case, here is the final book of the 1700s arc of Baccano!, 1711. This volume is mostly centered around the events that took place before the Advenna Avis set sail.

At the same time, 1711 is also a prologue to 1935 and the finale, 2003. Some of the plot threads here will be picked up again centuries later by the immortals, so please bear with me for the rest of Baccano!.

For the moment, I'm planning to work on volume 11 of Durarara!!, part 2 of 5656, volume 6 of Vamp!, and another short story for Hariyama-san, Center of the World, if I have time. There's a lot more time in between releases now, but even Hariyama-san is still ongoing. So please take your time reading and waiting for the next installment.

I've also been asked by Shueisha to write a story for Bleach! I'm anxious about working on such a big project, but I'm taking my time with it so that my regular Dengeki projects won't be slowed down. I hope you can enjoy it alongside my Dengeki series once I've finished writing!

I've also been asked to work on some other amazing projects. I'll do my best to make sure that my personal life doesn't interfere with any of them, so I'd like to ask for your continued support.

It's all thanks to the kindness of many people and the support of you, my readers, that I've been able to take on such interesting projects. I'll give it my all (while trying not to ruin my health) to answer your kindness with even better works!

As usual, the special thanks section:

I'd like to thank my editor Mr. Papio, as well as the Dengeki Bunko editorial team. All of the proofreaders, whom I always end up inconveniencing because of my terribly late drafts. Everyone in the different departments at ASCII Media Works. My family, friends, fellow writers, and illustrators, who always continue to support me.

I'm also grateful to the anime director, Mr. Oomori, as well as Mr. Ginyu Shijin and the crew involved in the various anime, manga, and video game adaptations.

Thank you, Mr. Enami Katsumi, for continuing to create wonderful illustrations for Baccano! despite working non-stop designing video game characters.

And thank you, all my readers.

I'd like to give all of you my sincerest thanks. Thank you so much!

**-November 2011, Ryohgo Narita**

## **Epilogue - The Wealthy Maiden's Bewitching Grin**

### **2003. A maritime museum on the U.S. East Coast.**

The manager finally finished telling the story of the 1711 incident, which involved House Dormentaire and the Mask Makers.

He solemnly turned back to Jean-Pierre Accardo's descendant.

"The reason we asked you for more of the story is not just because Mr. Accardo's name was written on the reports."

"What...?"

"It seems that Jean-Pierre Accardo was away from the city at the time for personal reasons. And yet he wrote the 1711 Lotto Valentino incident into a play."

"...Hm."

Although the revelation came as no great surprise, the young man again frowned at his ancestor's audacity.

"Where in the world did he get his information? According to these files, he seems to have had a connection to the Dormentaire spies as well. Could you perhaps offer us any clues?"

"All I can say about him is—and I usually wouldn't want to insult my ancestors like this—Jean-Pierre Accardo was a real ba..."

Before he could finish his sentence, the door of the museum lounge opened.

"Sir."

"What do you want? Can't you see we have an important guest here?"

The manager's brow furrowed at the receptionist's sudden entrance. But the receptionist's explanation left his face a complete mess of wrinkles.

"The FBI is requesting access to the Advenna Avis research material..."

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"I've successfully collected the written data gathered from the Advenna Avis." Said the blonde, bespectacled inspector—Jessica Sullivan. She stowed the box of materials in the back of the car and sat in the driver's seat.

The man sitting next to her lowered the back of his seat.

"Great. Good work. Any peculiarities to report?"

"Yes, sir. The manager was speaking to someone who was visiting from Lotto Valentino."

"What?"

The man quickly sat up. Jessica reported to him what she saw with all the mechanical precision of a computer.

"Apparently he's a descendant of Jean-Pierre Accardo."

"Jean-Pierre... Oh, oh! That poet! Right. I never ended up getting to meet him. Shit, this guy probably knows something important."

"I've taken down his name and contact information. We can reach him at any time."

"...How the hell did a total stranger like you get all that info? Just warning you, in this day and age, we can't go around interrogating people willy-nilly without getting our own asses in a load of shit."

As her superior complained in a way that made it sound like such a thing was not at all a problem in the past, Jessica again flashed him an icy smile.

"I used my feminine wiles, sir."

Her superior twitched.

"Shit. Your grandfather was one of the best men I knew. So how the hell did *you* happen? ...Never mind. Anything else?"

"...Yes, sir. There was one thing I wanted to confirm with you."

"Yeah?"

Jessica put on a rather serious look. Her superior did the same.

"Would it be acceptable to begin my reports to you with 'Hey. How've you been? Feel any lonely 'cause I haven't written to you in so long'?"

For a moment, her superior—Victor Talbot—listened blankly.

A second later, he turned beet red.

"Y-you... YOU SAW IT?! SHIT! I left those reports on the fortress! What the hell were they doing on the Advenna Avis?!"

"I've been told that they were discovered in the cabin of a man named Elmer."

"Damn you, Smile Junkie! Don't take my stuff without permission, you goddamned bastard!" Victor howled, trembling.

"Maybe he was trying to do you a favor and brought your notes onto the ship for you." Jessica suggested, cool as a cucumber.

"What's the point of bringing my stuff if you're gonna forget to give me the fucking thing?! Shit! This is an order—you're going to forget *everything* you just read!"

"Was this Lady Lucrezia more charming than I am?"

"You bet she was! She was about a hundred times better than you!"

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"What's with the commotion?" The young man wondered as he left the museum with an appointment to see the manager again, glancing over at the car.

*'That lady in the driver's seat was the one from earlier... from the FBI, right?'* He thought as he walked.

He suddenly bumped into a woman.

"..."

The woman lost her balance and staggered.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" The young man said, reaching out to take the woman's arm to catch her before she fell.

It was then that he noticed something.

The woman, who looked to be about twenty years of age, had thick bandages wrapped around her right hand.

He looked up. The bandages extended further. They covered half of the woman's face.

"..."

The woman gaped, her gaze far away and unfocused. The young man wondered what he should do.

At that moment, another woman stepped in with an apology.

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry, darling! This girl here was in a little accident, you know. She's been always so terribly out of it since..."

"N-not at all."

*'Whoa, this lady's another eye-grabber.'*

The second woman's appearance clashed greatly with the heavy air of the museum. She was dressed in revealing clothing that showed off her shoulders and legs. The young man, taken aback at her strangely seductive voice and beautiful appearance, found himself walking away as though in lieu of an apology.

Once the young man had walked off, the gorgeous woman turned towards the FBI car from which angry howls were still erupting.

"I'm so close, you silly thing, but you still don't even *notice* that I'm here! A *teensy* bit too slow as always, Victor darling."

"..."

"But I suppose it's already been three hundred years. Have you just forgotten what I looked like?"

Having anonymously tipped off the FBI that there was information on the immortals in the museum, the woman giggled and addressed her bandaged companion.

"I wonder if *Elmer* and *Fermet* remember your face. What do you think, sweetie?"

"...! ...!"

The bandaged woman was not speaking clearly, but she smiled joyously at the mention of the two names.

But which name had she reacted to? Not even the scantily-dressed woman—Lucrezia De Dormentaire—could tell.

The mention of the two names brought to the girl's mind the scene that unfolded in the aftermath of a certain sound.

The year 1711. The *click* she heard as she remained trapped in the basement.

It was not the sound of the bombs going off.

With the *click*, a trapdoor at the back of the alcove opened up. A voluptuous woman wearing glasses emerged from behind it.

The moment the woman dragged the girl behind the trapdoor, the explosives detonated.

There was heat. The sensation of being smothered as she struggled to breathe. Then came pain. And darkness.

The girl with the broken mind smiled, recalling what was, in one sense, the moment of her own death.

In her memories, she died over and over again. And because she was in her dying moments, she attempted to smile.

For whom was she smiling? Not even she knew the answer.

'Obtain the Grand Panacea'.

This was the order Lucrezia gave to the alchemists in her employ.

Szilard ignored her orders. Victor only sent her a letter saying 'Thanks for nothing, making me worry sick over you. Just you wait. One of these days, I'll make you squirm'. Fermet sent her a sample several years later, but Lucrezia was already immortal at that point.

It was almost as though they had made arrangements together—Huey and Elmer sent her samples of the potion by identical methods.

It was not that they had found the formula for the Panacea.

When they first received their portions of the Elixir, they had each only imbibed half, storing the remainder in containers they had prepared beforehand. They then had the containers sent to Lucrezia.

Realizing that even a single sip granted one the effects of immortality, she took Huey's portion for herself and had others imbibe Elmer's portion.

Putting her arm around the bandaged girl—one of the results of the Panacea—Lucrezia exchanged a lustful glance with the world.

"It looks like Fermet's up to something interesting, too. Finally! Everything is becoming just so *exciting!*" She said enticingly, and took the hand of the bandaged woman.

They began walking, to become absolute observers of the impending ruckus of the immortals.

"Do your best now, Victor darling! I'll even give you a compliment if you manage to make things fun."

The avaricious woman giggled as she walked right past the FBI car.

But Victor, too busy scolding his subordinate, never noticed the presence of his beloved as he was drawn deeper and deeper into the commotion that was about to unfold.

As though this was the fate granted to him from the very beginning.

**-To be continued in Baccano! 2003**



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