

BACCANO!

バッカーン!

1931 鈍行編

The Grand Punk Railroad

成田良悟

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Ryohgo Narita

Illustration Katsumi Enami

込めながら。

視覚以外の神経は全て周囲の黒服達に向けられており、さながら黒服達の監視役といった雰囲気を感じている。

その様子に気付いていながらも、黒服達はなんの不満も見せようとはしない。

男達はただひたすらに、自らのリーダーの言葉を待ち続けていた。その期待に答えるかのように、男が僅かに口の端を歪めて笑う。

「躊躇いも憚れみも必要無い。本来安価なままで死に絶える筈だった乗客どもの命を、我々の手で最高の価値にまで引き上げてやるのだからな。必要とあらば情けをかける必要は無い。無価値な過去に終止符を打ち——」

落ち着いた口調で語る男の声には、どこか愉しげな響きすら含まれていた。

「——誇り高き死を、与えてやれ」



一等客室『黒服』

煌びやかな装飾に彩られた一等客室。優美な内装とは対照的に、その部屋に漂う空気は果てしなく重く感じられる。

「死とは、決して平等なものではない」

高潔な黒服を纏った厳めしい集団。その中心と思しき男が、錆びた声で呟いた。

「命には確かに価値がある。価値があるという事は——即ち、格差も存在するという事だ」

その言葉は誰に向けられているのか、ただ空気の中に溶け込んでいくが、その行為が部屋の空気を更に重いものと変貌させていく。

全てが止まったかの様な空間の中で、列車の窓を過ぎ去る景色だけが、時の流れを脈々と具現化させている。

黒服達の目には暗い熱情の様なものが宿っており、誰もが『作戦』の決行を待ちわびて恍惚とした表情を浮かべていた。ただ二人、重厚なナイフを手にした女を除いて。

黒いドレスの女は、誰とも目を合わせようとはしなかった。周囲の黒服達など、まるで等しく無価値のように、手に持ったナイフの刃に映る己の瞳だけを見つめている。鋭く光るその刃に、激しい殺意を封じ

First Class - Black Suits

In spite of the beautiful ornamentation that decorated the interior, the air in the First Class cabin could not have been heavier.

"Death does not know equality."

Speaking hoarsely to the group dressed in black formalwear was a man who seemed to be their leader.

"It is true that all lives have value. In other words, it also means that each life is of a different worth."

Although the man's words dissipated into the air without a specific target, the very action of his speaking darkened the atmosphere even more.

It was as if time had frozen this place still. Only the fast-moving scenery outside the window reminded them that the world was still moving forward.

The black suits all had a glint of dark passion in their eyes, and they all wore the faces of excited euphoria for the start of this mission. The only exception was a woman holding an imposing knife.

The woman in the black dress did not look anyone in the eye. She merely stared into the reflection of her own eyes in her knife, as if no one around her was even worth looking at. Bloodlust practically radiated from the tip of the blade.

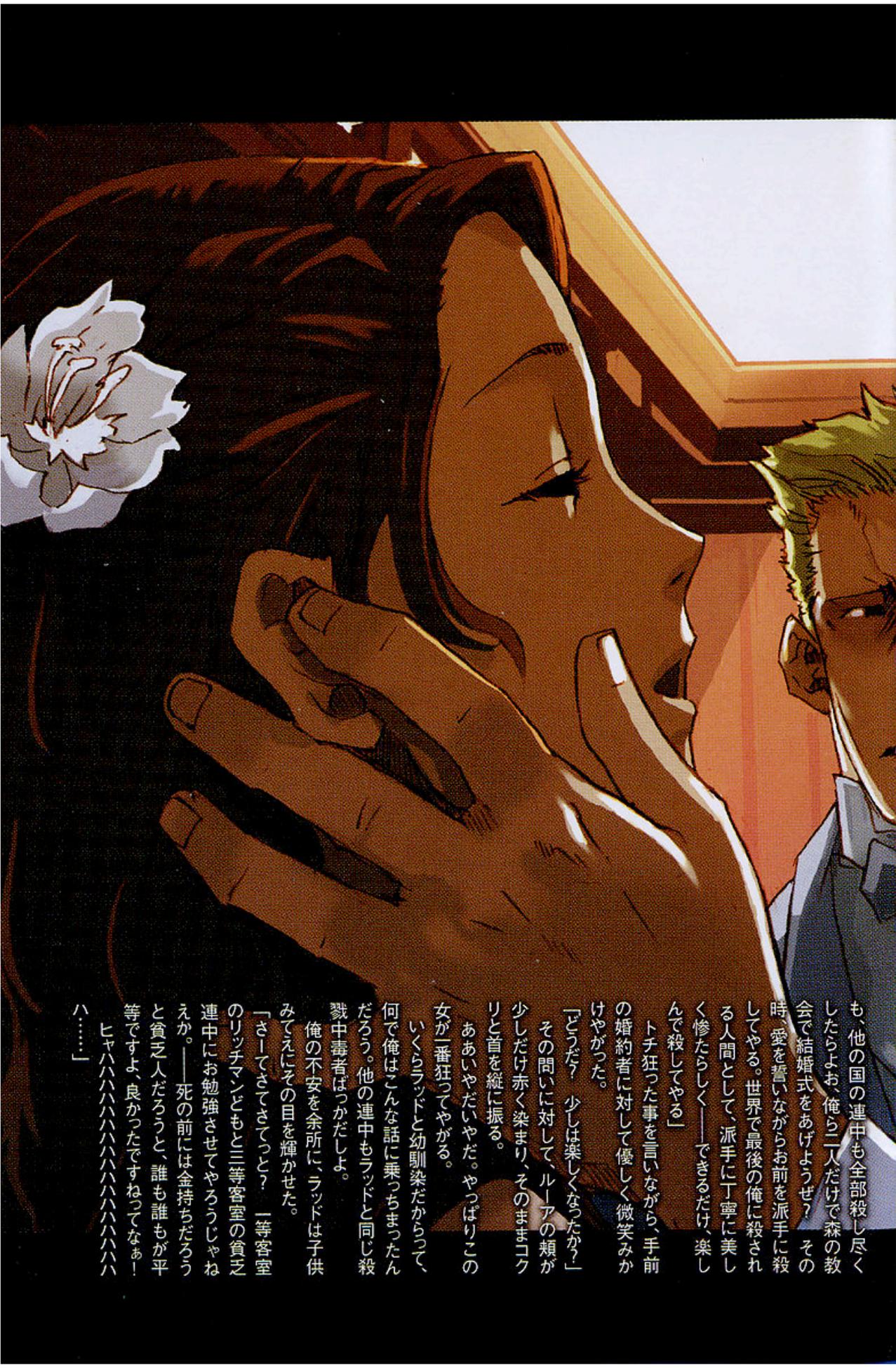
All of her senses, save for her sight, were focused on the black suits around her. It was almost as if she was keeping watch over them.

The black suits knew this well, but they did not show any discontentment at the way they were being treated.

The men were all waiting for their leader to continue. And as if to answer their calls, the leader twisted his lips into a grin.

"There is no need for hesitation or pity. After all, we are lifting up their unworthy lives to bestow upon them the greatest value imaginable. You are not obligated to show them compassion. Let us bring an end to this plebeian past," the man said calmly. There was something like a hint of happiness in his tone.

"Grant unto them the proudest of deaths."



も、他の国の連中も全部殺し尽くしたらよお、俺ら二人だけで森の教会で結婚式をあげようぜ？ その時、愛を誓いながらお前を派手に殺してやる。世界で最後の俺に殺される人間として、派手に丁寧に美しく惨たらしく——できるだけ、楽しんで殺してやる」

トチ狂った事を言いながら、手前の婚約者に対して優しく微笑みかけやがった。

「どうだ？ 少しは楽しくなったか？」
その問いに対して、ルーアの頬が少しだけ赤く染まり、そのままコクリと首を縦に振る。

ああいやだよ。やっぱりこの女が一番狂ってやがる。

いくらラッドと幼馴染だからって、何で俺はこんな話に乗っちゃったんだろう。他の連中もラッドと同じ殺戮中毒者はっかだしよ。

俺の不安を余所に、ラッドは子供みてえにその目を輝かせた。

「さーてさーてさーと？」 「等客室のリッチマンどもと三等客室の貧乏連中にお勉強させてやるっじやねえか。——死の前には金持ちだろうと貧乏人だろうと、誰も誰もが平等ですよ、良かったですわねってなあ！
ヒヤヒヤハハハハハハハハハハハハハハハ……」

『二等客室』『白服』

比較的贅沢な造りになっている部屋で、ラッドがテンション高らかに声を張り上げた。

「いやいやいや楽しんだよなあ？ 何がだ。本当に楽しんだよなあ？ 何が楽しみだ？ これから決行の時までを楽しみながら過ごす事が楽しみで仕方ないねえ。お前もそうだろう？」
ラッドの野郎、本当にイカれてやがる。

こんな方法で金が入ると本気で思ってるのか？ 微塵も疑ってねえ他の連中もどうかしてやがる。止めなかった俺も含めて、この部屋にいるのは馬鹿野郎ばかりだ。

「なあルーア、お前も楽しみか？」
そう言って、目の前にいる女——ルーアの顔に手を添える。ルーアは小さな声で「全然」と言うのと、その目を静かにラッドに向けた。

「ヒヤハハハハハハハ、そうかそうか全然楽しくねえか、じゃあ何か楽しい話をするでしょうか？ この列車に乗ってる奴が皆死んで、ニューヨークの奴らも殺して、この国の奴ら

Second Class - White Suits

Ladd excitedly raised his voice in the somewhat gaudy Second Class cabin.

"Oh man, oh man, I *can't wait!* This is getting exciting... what am I talking about? I'm saying I'm just *dying* 'cause I can't wait to get started. Am I right?"

Ladd's really gone off the deep end.

Does he really think this is gonna get us some dough? Those idiots who actually think this is gonna work are all nuts, too. And since I didn't even try to stop him, I guess *everyone* in here is an idiot.

"Aren't you *excited*, Lua?"

Ladd reached out towards the woman in front of him--Lua--and touched her cheek. Lua just quietly answered, "No", and stared at Ladd.

"Ahahahahaha! I see, so you're *not* looking forward to this, are you, sweetheart? Then let me tell you a funny story. We'll rub out everyone on the train, slaughter all of New York, do in the rest of the country, and *massacre* everyone in the rest of the world! After that, we'll have a cozy little wedding in a church in the forest--just the two of us--and once we swear to love each other for the rest of eternity, I'll kill you beautifully. And since you'll be the last person in the world to get killed, I'll make sure it's bombastic, romantic, and blood-curdling--and I'll make it *fun*."

Ladd smiled softly at his fiancée, talking like a madman.

"Well? Are you excited *now*?"

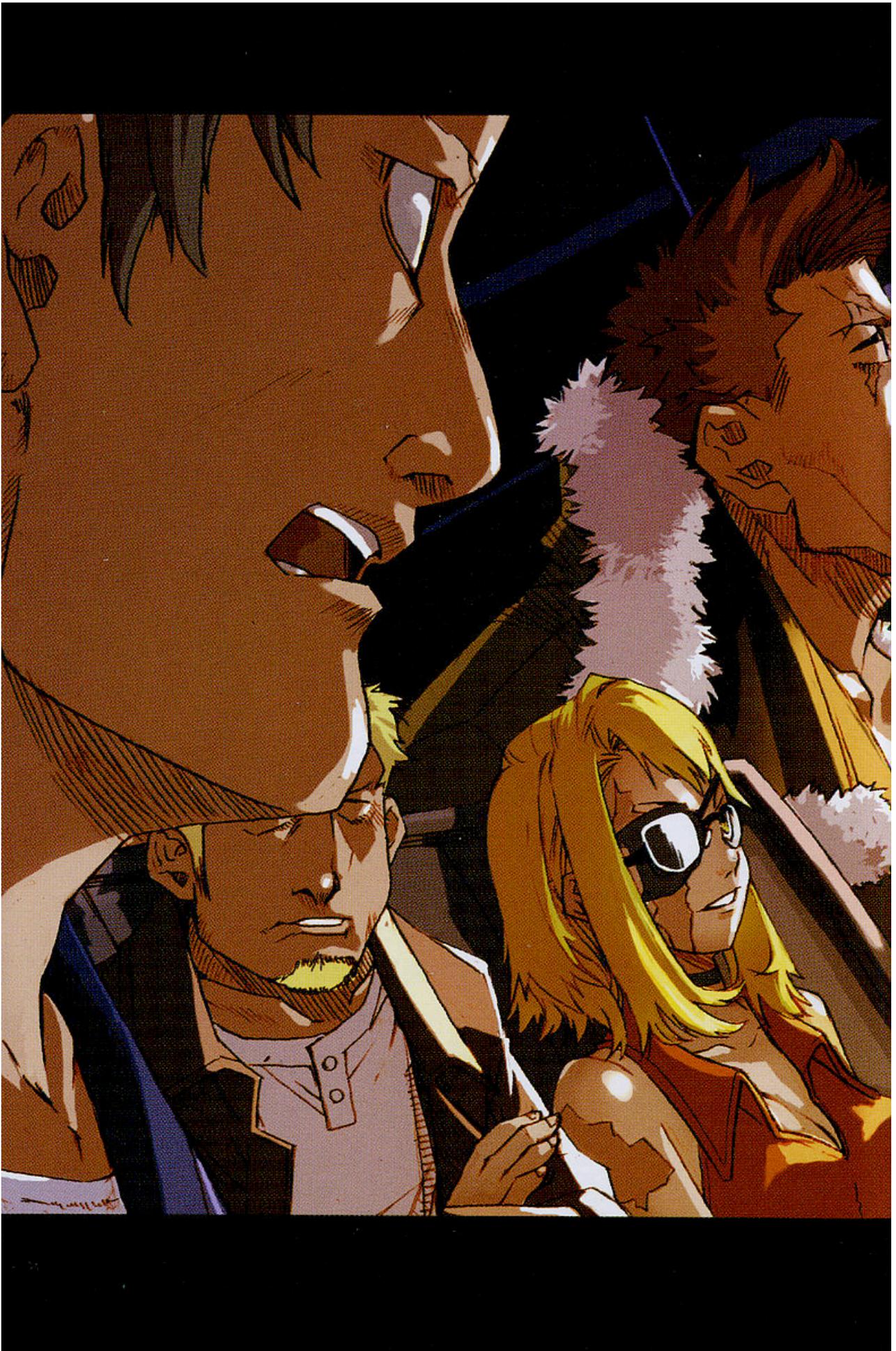
Lua's cheeks turned pink. She nodded.

Dammit, this is creeping me out. *Lua's* the craziest one of us all.

Sure, me and Ladd go way back, but how'd I end up in a place like this? Everyone else here is a homicidal loon, just like Ladd.

Ladd grinned like a little kid, ignoring my anxiety.

"Well, well, well... Looks like it's time we took all the Uncle Pennybagses in First Class and the Scroungers in Third Class out for a little lesson. Whaddaya think? After all, Death loves everyone just the same--he doesn't give a shit if you're rich or poor. Ain't that a relief?! Ahahahahahaha!"



椅子と窓しかない、殺風景な三号客室。

「うわあ、いい景色だね。これなら、三等客室でも充分楽しい旅が出来そうだよ」

「あのよお、ジャグジー」

安服を纏った明らかにチンピラ風の若者が、窓を見てはしゃぐ刺青男に声をかけた。

「お前さ、本気でやるつもりなのか？」

「え？ 何を？」

「何をじゃねえよ！ 貨物強盗に決まってるだろうが！ なに呑気に

景色なんか眺めてんだ！ 本気で

貨物強盗なんかするのかわつて聞いてんだよ俺は！」

「ジャグ、隣に聞こえてしまいますよ？ この部屋、壁が薄いんですから」

眼帯の上に眼鏡をかけた女が、冷静にチンピラを睨める。一方、ジャグジーと呼ばれた刺青男は、今にも泣きそうな顔で呟いた。

「ご、ごめん。突然の話で悪いとは……」
「謝るぐらいなら最初からやんな！」

三等客室『ボロ服』

「じゃ、じゃあ謝らないよ。頑張って貨物を強盗しよう」

「謝るならちゃんと謝れよ！」

「どとど、どうしろって言うのさ？」

「どうもするな！ とりあえず泣くな！」

目に涙を溜め始めた刺青男に対し、チンピラは半分困ったように声を荒げる。

「うたたく、しつかりしてくれよな……」

「お前は二応俺らのボスなんだからよ。つていうか、お前が自分でここに来る事なんかあったんじゃねえか？ こういうことあ、荒事専門の俺らやドニーに任せときゃいいのに」

「ぬが、呼んだか？」
奥にいた褐色の大男が声を上げるが、チンピラはそれを無視したまま言葉を続ける。

「とにかく、お前もボスだったらよ、少しは手前の命の価値ってもんを考えてくれよ」

その言葉に対して、刺青男は静かに呟く。

「僕はただ死にたくないだけだし、皆にも死んで欲しくない。それだけだから——」

涙目を隠り、刺青男はニコリと微笑んだ。

「そんな難しい話、死んだ後に考えるよ」

Third Class - Ragged Suits

Third Class was a drab affair, the cabins housing nothing but seats and a view out the window.

"Wow, look at the view! Travelling Third Class might not be so bad after all."

"Say, Jacuzzi?" asked a young man dressed in cheap clothing, who obviously looked like a delinquent. His question was directed to a tattooed young man looking out the window.

"Hey, are you seriously gonna do this?"

"Huh? What?"

"Whaddaya mean, 'what'?! We're gonna rob this train--there ain't no time to be looking out the window like a sightseer! Are you really gonna do this or what?"

"Jack! Don't make such a commotion. Third Class walls aren't so thick." A woman wearing glasses and sporting an eyepatch scolded him.

Meanwhile, the tattooed young man--Jacuzzi--began to sniffle as tears welled up in his eyes.

"S-sorry. It was just so sudden, so I..."

"Don't do anything in the first place if you're gonna be sorry about it!"

"T-then I won't apologize. Let's do our best."

"If you're gonna apologize, do it right!"

"W-w-what's that mean?"

"Who cares?! Just quit your cryin'!"

The delinquent raised his voice in half-exasperation.

"Jesus Christ... get your act together, Jacuzzi. You're supposed to be our boss, y'know? 'Sides, what are you doin' here in the first place? You coulda left it to us or Donny."

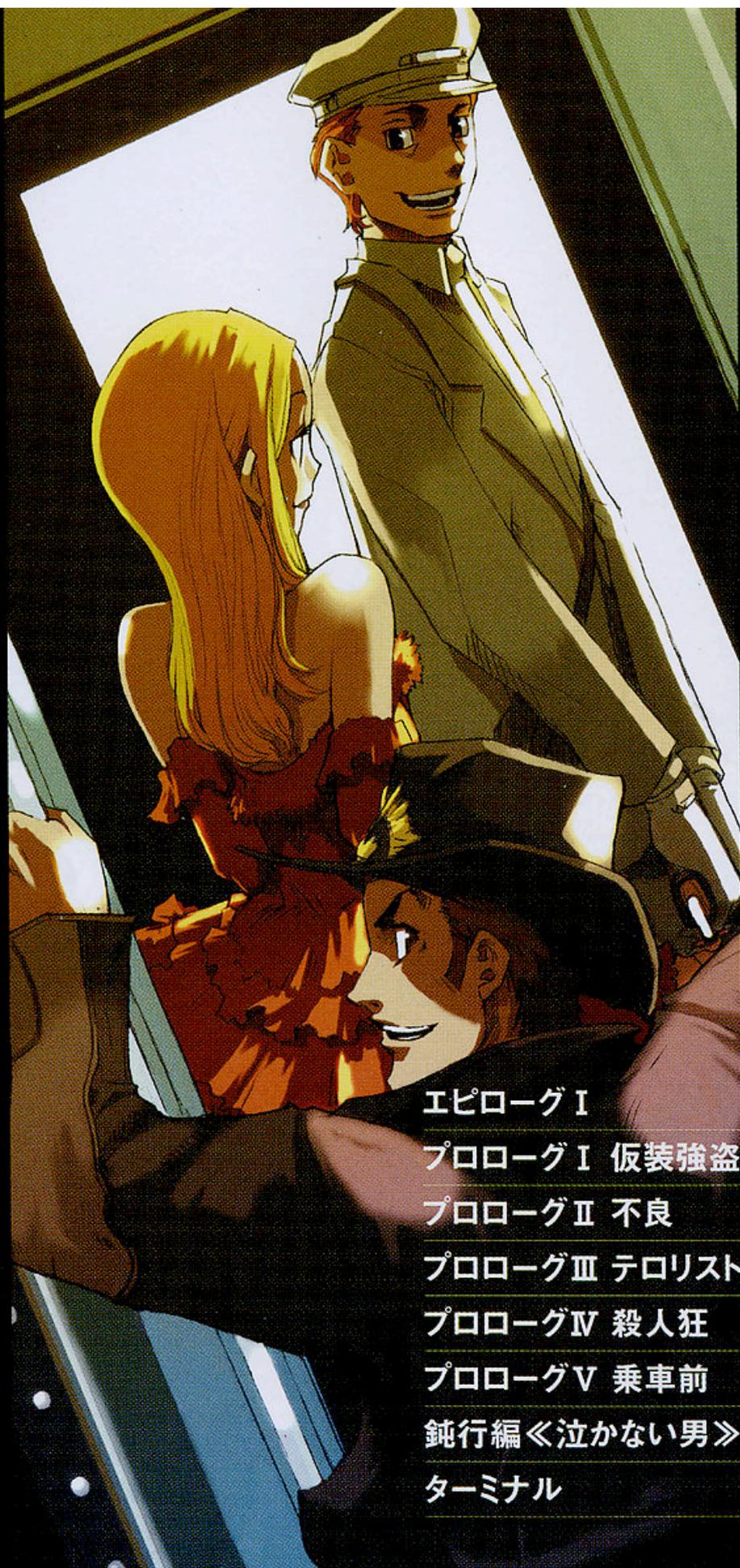
"Uh, you said my name just now?" The brown-skinned giant of a man in the corner asked, but the delinquent ignored him and continued.

"Anyway, you're our boss. You gotta try to value your life a bit more--for our sakes too, y'know?"

"I just don't wanna die, and I don't want any of you to die, either." the tattooed young man said quietly, closing his teary eyes and smiling.

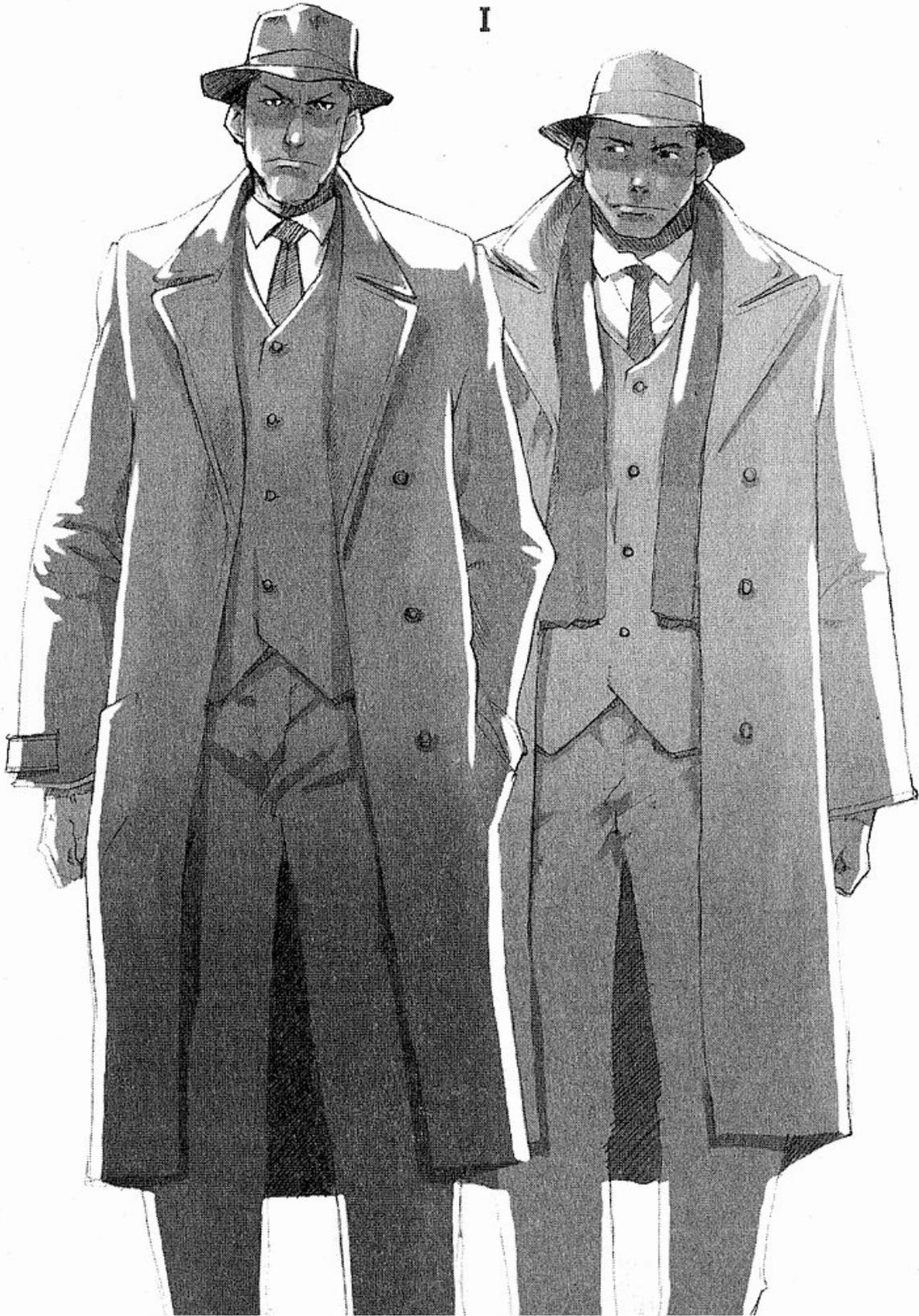
"So I won't think about stuff that complicated until after I die."

Design: Yoshitiko Kamabe



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エピソード I



Epilogue I

December 31, 1931. Evening.

"Hah... they could have at least had the decency to pile them all up in the same place." A man grumbled exasperatedly, looking down at the corpse lying by the railroad track.

"Let's try to be a bit more sensitive about this."

Two men stood in the snow, as flurries descended upon them. They were Inspectors Bill Sullivan and Edward Noah, both part of America's Bureau of Investigation.

They were tasked with cleanup duty for a mysterious incident that had occurred this close to the end of the year.

'Cleanup duty' also included a formal investigation. Police officers were scattered at what could generously be called various intervals along the tracks, each hard at work on his own task.

It was clear that all of the corpses were connected to the same incident. This was because they were all presumed to be passengers from the same train.

"I don't see any need to be so delicate about this issue."

"In any event, I have a question," Edward asked, as Bill scratched his head. "Why have we all been called out here? This normally isn't our jurisdiction."

Edward was part of a special task force of the Bureau of Investigation. The team was not officially its own branch, but it had the unspoken recognition of the Bureau. Members of this task force were people who would take on special duties between their regular work.

Bill and Edward were two such people.

"Well... to dispense with the secrecy, we've found one of **them** on the passenger list at Chicago."

"You mean... immortals?"

There could be fewer words less fit for the corpse-ridden site than the word 'immortal'. It would not have been strange for the other officers around them to have burst into laughter at the mention of the word.

In fact, it would be abnormal for *anyone* to not find this amusing. After all, the almighty Inspector was discussing immortals with a look of utmost seriousness.

But the two men here knew the truth.

Over two hundred years ago, a group of alchemists crossed over to this continent. And in the midst of their journey across the Atlantic, they summoned a demon and attained undying bodies.

Not even fairy tales dealt with such absurd concepts, but this was the truth--no two ways about it. The biggest evidence of all was the fact that their direct superior was one of the aforementioned immortals.

In other words, these men had the duty of overseeing and keeping tabs on the many immortals scattered across the United States. Of course, matters about immortals could never be acknowledged officially, nor were they permitted to let such a thing happen.

"Do you remember the characteristics of immortals?"

"Yes. First, they are ageless and will recover from any injury, with the head serving as the centre of regeneration. Second, the only exception to their immortality is if an immortal is killed by one of his brethren. The immortal must place his right hand on the head of another and think, 'I wish to eat', and the victim will be absorbed into the hand and killed. Third, the immortal who devours another will take on all of the victim's knowledge as his own. Fourth, immortals may not use fake names among one another or in public functions."

"...You didn't necessarily have to rattle off the textbook definitions. In any event, they can't even hope to use pseudonyms on passenger lists and the like... you know what this means, right?"

Edward replied to Bill's question with an incredulous question of his own.

"And what about the immortal? Was he involved with the incident?"

"Donald is looking into that right now. See if he's arrived safely. We were too late in finding him; he may have given us the slip."

Another body bag joined the pile behind the two men. Edward clenched his fists.

'What in the world has happened here?'

The Chicago-to-New York transcontinental express, the Flying Pussyfoot.

Just what kind of disaster had fallen upon this train?

プロローグ I
『仮装強盗』



Prologue I: The Masquerading Thieves

December, 1931. California.

The ruckus began with one idiot's pea-brained statement.

"How about we pull off a train robbery? I hear it pays really well!"

"That's amazing! We could get rich!" Another idiot agreed.

Isaac and Miria were in the middle of pitch-black darkness, enraptured by a topic that was only somewhat terrifying.

They were in a mineshaft somewhere in California. The couple, who were well-known to certain people as "Masquerading Thieves" up until about a year ago, stood before a wall of stone, which was illuminated by a lantern.

This couple's MO was to commit a robbery while dressed in extravagant costumes, run away a little further, then change into different costumes to complete their getaway. Of course, the subjects of their heists were things like watches, chocolate, or museum doors--all too confusing and inexplicable for their crimes to appear on any national papers.

They had washed their hands of robbery after their final heist in New York last November. These days, they were spending their time mining for gold, declaring, "We'll steal treasures from the earth itself!"

Unfortunately, they were about eighty years too late for the gold rush. All they could do now was swing their mattocks in abandoned mine shafts.

It had been just over a year since they started, when Miria, dressed in women's work clothes, asked a question.

"Say, Isaac? Normally people pan for dust in the river, right? So why are we digging a hole in here?"

Isaac's answer was quick and without hesitation.

"Haha! People just don't know that they can *really* find gold in places like this. And, the last time we tried to pan for dust, the men kicked us out because they said it was their turf... and we didn't even know who they were!"

"That was humiliating!"

"But you know what I found in front of this abandoned mine? A centipede! And it had hundreds and hundreds of legs!"

"Creepy!" Miria unconsciously shivered at Isaac's detailed description.

"Hahaha... Listen up, Miria. They say that in the orient, centipedes are the god of gold mining. That's why I'm so certain! We're not too far off from hitting the jackpot!"

"We haven't found any yet, but that's amazing!"

A single set of applause echoed emptily through the mine shaft.

"Come to think of it, if centipedes are the god of the orient, I wonder what their crucifixes look like?"

"Maybe they have a centipede wrapped around a cross?"

"Idolatry!"

Conversations on this level were par for the course for this duo, but one thing was different today.

"Oh, I almost forgot! Look at this, Isaac! We got a letter from Ennis and Firo!"

Miria smiled before the candlelight and took out a letter.

Ennis and Firo were people they had befriended in New York about a year ago.

Firo was an executive in a small crime family, and Ennis was a homunculus created by an alchemist, but Isaac and Miria had little to no understanding about their situations.

As a side note, Isaac and Miria had attained immortality last year when they were caught up in an incident with the Grand Panacea last year. Of course, they had no inkling of the change that had occurred to their bodies.

They were inhuman--they were monstrous "immortals", who occupied a place between fear and admiration in the hearts of humans.

But in any event, none of that mattered in their happy days of life.

Miria read out Ennis and Firo's letter by candlelight. Most of the letter was devoted to asking them to come visit New York sometime.

But there was one part of Ennis's letter that bothered them.

"Isaac and Miria, I think of the two of you as my own brother and sister. I'm saddened when I think of my brothers who were created before me, whom I never got to meet, but thoughts of you bring me cheer--"

As Miria read out this passage in the letter, she turned to Isaac with a teary-eyed look.

"Say, Isaac? About Ennis's brothers... does this letter mean they're all dead?"

Isaac, worried by Miria's expression, was quick to deny her suggestion.

"No, no. I'm sure it means something else. Uh, well... 'created before me'... 'never got to meet'...? Well, this must mean..."

Isaac paused for a moment, then clapped his hands together.

"I got it! It must mean that Ennis wants a younger brother!"

Miria's face brightened instantly.

"So it's just like a happy kid begging her mother to spoil her?!"

"Yes! That's exactly it! That must mean Ennis is very happy!"

"So happy!"

After the initial moment of understanding, however, the duo ran into another problem.

"But we're not Ennis's parents, so we can't give her a baby brother."

"Unfortunately, no. But how about we buy her something expensive and bring it to New York?"

Isaac and Miria finally began making plans to travel to New York.

However, they were currently completely broke. They managed to survive the past year by selling the strange blue rocks they dug up instead of gold, which fetched a surprisingly high price. But at the moment they could not even think of affording a gift of any sort.

Suddenly, Isaac clapped his hands together again.

"How about we pull off a train robbery? I hear it pays off really well!" He yelled, voice ringing through the cavern.

"That's amazing! We could get rich!"

"Let me see if I remember this right. A train robbery's when you take a train to the destination, do the robbery, and then run away on a train again, right?"

"No doubt!"

"All right. Then just like before, we'll steal from the bad guys--the mafia!"

"Wow! We're champions of justice!"

"So, which family should we hit for our heist...?"

Suddenly, the lamplight went out without warning. Isaac and Miria were covered by pitch-black darkness.

"Isaac, I'm scared!"

"W-w-w-w-w-w-wait, Miria! Calm down! We can't make any sudden moves right now! We're going to have to hold out and stay still until a rescue team arrives!"

"Wow, Isaac! You're so smart!"

The next evening, a group of men in work clothes swung their mattocks and pickaxes as they chatted near Isaac and Miria's designated mine shaft.

"Come to think of it, remember those weirdos who were digging in that abandoned mine?"

"Oh! you mean those guys who dug up lapis lazuli sometimes?"

"I saw them getting carried out on stretchers this morning. Something about oxygen deprivation. 'Course, they got back up like nothing happened."

"Huh. So someone rescued them pretty quick, huh? Not so common for folks to survive that."

The miners praised the duo's good fortune, not even considering that they might be immortal.

"I think the man was saying something like, 'We're digging for gold because we saw a centipede with hundreds of legs'."

"What's that all about?"

"Who knows? They were saying something about some eastern religion. Dunno why, but those two know an awful lot about the orient."

An older miner who had been listening in from aside joined in, astonished.

"You mean those live-ins at the mine shaft? And those things with hundreds of legs?"

"You know, old man?"

"Of course I do... That's not a centipede. It's a millipede."

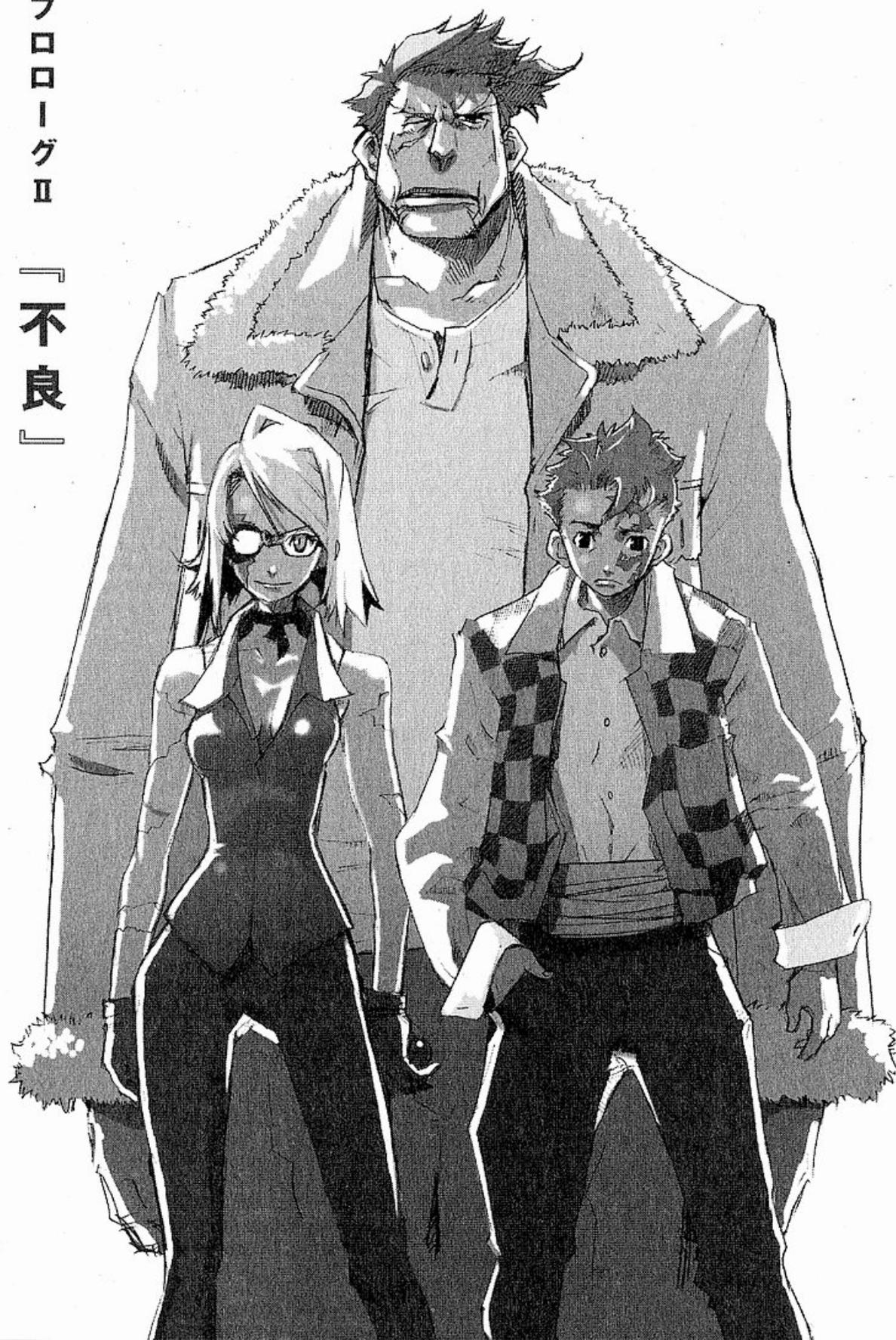
By then, Isaac and Miria were on a train.

They would head to Chicago, the city of the mafia, pull off their heist, then escape by train.

They had already picked out their escape route.

They would take the transcontinental New-York-bound express train, the Flying Pussyfoot.

プロローグⅡ
『不良』



Prologue II - Delinquents

December 29, 1931. Late night.

"No, well, uh. Um. Well, I. You see, you know? Let's, uh, solve this peacefully. Okay? We're all grown adults here, right? Uh. So. Please, stay calm!"

It was in the vicinity of a factory on the outskirts of Chicago. Not even the lights from the street lamps and neon signs reached this pitch-black alleyway. Although this place would be best suited to the sound of silence, a screeching voice shattered the quiet stillness.

Of course, there could be little more fitting in the way of sounds or locations when it came to a terrified man who had suddenly been confronted with a gun.

The moonlight shone down upon one young man, who was surrounded by a group of men armed with guns--likely members of a Chicago-area mafia family, from the looks of their clothing and the way they carried themselves.

One strange thing about the situation, however, was the sword-shaped tattoo on the face of the weeping man.

"So please, please, please, put down your guns. Okay? I'm begging you! I'm so scared I think I'm gonna die! Please, I'm really sorry, but I don't have a penny on me. I'll apologize, so please put down your guuuuuuns!"

Meanwhile, the armed men, dressed in dark trenchcoats, glanced around at one another in confusion. They were surrounding the crying man in the darkness.

"Hey, is this really the guy?"

"How many people do you know who have a sword tattoo on their face?"

"But seriously, an idiot like this?"

"Why don't we just ask the kid himself?"

The man who looked to be the leader of the group grabbed the crying young man by his collar.

"Shut your trap, kid. I'm gonna ask you one simple question. Answer right, and you can go back to your momma. Got it?"

"B-but, I don't have a mom..."

Suddenly, the young man found himself looking directly at the butt of a pistol.

"Eeeek!"

"Who asked you anything about that? Huh? I asked you, 'You get what I'm saying?', you piece of shit."

The mafioso forcibly held up the young man to keep him from collapsing, pointed the gun at his face, and slowly spoke.

"Listen up, you crybaby. If you don't want us to put a hole through your head, tell us your name. Easy does it."

The crying man trembled, but nodded his head and swallowed his tears and slowly revealed his name.

"Sniff... sniff... J-Jacuzzi... Jacuzzi Splot."

The mafiosi looked around at one another again at the mention of the name and burst out into uncontrollable laughter.

"Pffft. Hear that? This sissy shit says he's the boss of the gang that gave us Russos so much trouble! You know something, kid? We just came here to scope out your hideout today. and what do I see? That face on the wanted posters, walking around all alone without anyone guarding him! Isn't this just a blast?"

The man laughed with a sigh, then threw the man called Jacuzzi to the ground.

"This ain't funny, you piece of shit! You're saying *you're* the bastard who kicked up dirt on our turf? Well?!"

The leader kicked Jacuzzi over and over again, veins popping on his forehead.

"W-we didn't mess up your turf... Sniff... We just..."

"Just what?! You sell bootleg booze on our turf, get in the Russo Family's way with your little gang, and you even rob our shops! What the hell did you shits *not* do?!"

Jacuzzi continued to take the brunt of the kicks, but soon stopped crying and loudly shouted back.

"Y-you're right. We're not good people! B-but, when we f-first s-started selling liquor, *you people* were the ones who killed eight of our friends! So we decided then that we'd stand up against the Russo Family!"

The mafiosi, irritated at the young man's tear-and-snot-filled declaration, prepared to punch him again.

"Don't think you're gonna get off easy, you son of a bitch. We'll do everything we can to wipe your little gang off the streets-"

"Sniff... Sniff... B-before that! P-please put down your guns...! P-please, **I-I don't wanna kill you if I can help it!**" Jacuzzi interrupted the mafioso.

"Are you out of your mind, you little brat?!"

"Nononononono! Please! I don't like blood, and I can't stand the sound of bones breaking! Please!"

The mafiosi realized that their respective conversations were not matching up, and lowered their fists.

"S-so please, Donny! Just wait! Please, I'm begging you! I'm sure these men are gonna put down their guns any minutenowsopleasewait!"

""Donny'? Who the hell is that?"

The leader looked at Jacuzzi and realized something.

Jacuzzi's eyes were focused not on him, but at something else over his shoulder.

The atmosphere tensed instantly, and a single sound caught his attention.

Snap.

Jacuzzi immediately screamed and trembled, covering his own ears.

The leader let go of Jacuzzi and began to turn around, straining to tune his senses to his surroundings.

At that very moment, his eyes caught sight of his subordinates, who were frozen in place.

His ears registered, after the unpleasant noise from earlier, the sound of something hard being crushed.

His nose detected the scent of a chill in the air around him.

His tongue sensed the bitterness and sourness of digestive fluids rising up from his throat.

And the moment he completed his turn, his arm experienced the greatest agony he had ever felt.

"Gah... AHHHHHHHHHHH!"

He turned his sights to the source of his sudden pain. A hand twice the size of that of an average man's was gripping onto his pistol hand. His own fingers were twisted into a macabre shape, and dark fluids spewed out of his intermittently torn flesh to the rhythm of his heartbeat. He desperately tried to regain his senses from his pain-induced confusion, and took note of the being before him.

It was a gigantic man whose form was silhouetted against the moon.

He was well over 6 feet tall. With his right hand, the shadowed giant easily crushed the mafioso's hand. With his left hand he held up one of the mafiosi by the throat. The unfortunate mafioso's neck was twisted sideways by the giant's grip, and his limp head hung to one side like a rag doll.

Because the giant's head was directly in front of the moon, it was impossible to see his expression. There was nothing but darkness where his face should have been visible.

"Y-you monster!"

The mafioso's fear overcame his pain. Though he had lost the sensation in his hand, he raised it upwards with all his might. The giant did not resist his movement.

Having been freed from the giant's iron grip, the leader of the mafiosi tried to take a shot at him. However, his finger was in no shape to be able to pull the trigger.

"W-what are you doing?! Shoot this bastard!" The mafioso commanded, but none of his men seemed to be inclined to do so. Their sights were wandering through the darkness, focused on something other than the giant.

The leader finally noticed the multiple silhouettes standing in the moonlit darkness. As the mafiosi stood around Jacuzzi, they realized that they were, in turn, surrounded by a group of young people around twenty years of age, eyes glinting with hostility.

They were not dressed uniformly, but the mafiosi had no trouble figuring out their identities. These young people were the members of the small-time gang led by the crybaby before them--the members of the gang they were ordered to eliminate.

The gang members encircled them from either ends of the alleyway, from under the electrical poles, and from the shadows of the walls. They easily numbered over fifty, and each and every one of them slowly closed in on the mafiosi.

"What the hell... What the hell are you bastards?!"

The leader of the mafiosi turned to his men in order to attempt an escape, but he was soon rendered dumbstruck.

Around him were his fellow mafiosi, all wearing the same looks of shock over their faces.

However, there were two things about them that were different from before. First, they were now pointing their guns at the giant, the people around them, and Jacuzzi.

The second was that their eyes had stopped moving, and that their faces were devoid of life.

Before the leader could even blink, the men fell to the ground one by one. The knives sticking out of the backs of their heads glinted as the blades reflected the moonlight.

The leader gaped at his men's corpses, and realized that a group of men and a lone woman had made their way to his side.

"How do you feel?" The woman standing at their centre asked. She was young, probably around the same age as Jacuzzi. A roughly-made eyepatch covered her right eye, and her face was covered in huge scars. The glasses she wore topped out her eccentric appearance.

Although it was the dead of winter, she was wearing a sleeveless shirt. Her arms were covered in scars as well.

The leader--or rather, the former leader, whose men were now little more than bags of flesh--felt as though it had been decades since he had last heard a human voice. The woman's voice brought him back to reality, and at the same time, he was again aware of the pain searing through his right hand. The warm blood spilled from his hand to the beating of his heart, and his brain was overwhelmed by the sensation of agony.

"Who the hell are you bastards?! When did you all get here--"

The mafioso was interrupted as a man standing beside the scarred woman smacked him upside the head with a metal rod.

"Guh- Ugh... Gaaaahh..."

"Who asked about what you were *doing*? Well?! What did I just ask you? I said, 'How do you feel?'. 'You little shit', was it?" The woman perfectly replicated the words he had spat at Jacuzzi a little while ago.

'Shit, so these bastards were here all along. It was a trap! This fucking bitch!' The mafioso thought, but the blood gushing from his mouth did not allow him to speak his mind.

When he looked around once more, he saw that a smaller group had broken off from the gang and had surrounded him. The bloodworks on display caused some to watch apathetically, others to ramble incoherently, and others to look at him pitifully. The mafioso ultimately came to one conclusion:

There was no escape for him.

The lone mafioso had now been degraded to nothing more than a simple peon. He suddenly remembered Jacuzzi's tearful pleas from earlier and instantly made his move.

He shook off the gun that clung to his twisted right hand and began pleading with Jacuzzi at the top of his lungs.

"Look! I put down the gun! I put it down, see?! I'm unarmed! So tell your buddies to let me go, okay?! You said you didn't like blood or the sound of bones breaking, right? So--"

He then realized that Jacuzzi was dead still.

Jacuzzi was on the ground, hands over his ears, the whites of his eyes showing, and foam escaping his lips.

"Too bad for you. It looks like he's unconscious." The woman with the eyepatch said plainly.

It was over. The mafioso could do little more than force his way through. With his left hand, he reached for the gun he dropped earlier--but his struggles were futile.

The giant's leather boot crushed his left hand, along with the gun.

"Shit! Shit! To hell with you fucking brats! You little shits think you can get away with this?! Fucking bastards!"

The mafioso was cornered. He forcefully pulled out his left hand and the gun from under the giant's foot. His skin ripped apart and his flesh tore in places, sending signals of pain through his arm.

Even in the midst of his suffering, however, the man aimed his gun towards what seemed to be the weakest link among his captors--the woman with the eyepatch. He put everything he had into his left index finger, putting his hopes into the round that he would fire.

But his fate came to an end before he could fire the gun.

He saw the woman throwing something. Smoke rose from a small spherical object.

The next instant, the object loudly bounced onto the ground.

"A bomb?!"

By the time he noticed, it was too late. The explosion was slightly weaker than that of fireworks, but the sound compelled the mafioso to reflexively shut his eyes.

The last thing he saw from behind his bloodied arm were silver glints of light--knives reflecting the glow of the moon. The two men on either side of the woman had thrown them into his direction. Could there have been a more beautiful yet terrifying sight?

This was the last and greatest sight the man had seen.

The woman looked at the knife-riddled man and sighed loudly.

"He should've thought about asking *us* to spare him."

She then turned to Jacuzzi, whom the giant had nudged awake, having lost interest in the mafioso.

"Aaaahh... Sniff... They're dead...? They're all dead... Blood...! Their faces are blue...! I'm so scared..."

Ignoring Jacuzzi's terror at the sight of the corpses, the woman began to console the leader of their gang with a completely different tone of voice.

"Good work, Jacuzzi. Your plan worked like a charm."

"B-but y-you didn't really have to kill them all..."

"Those guys almost killed you. We didn't have much choice. And our surviving guys said that these bastards are the ones who killed Kenny. 'Sides, I couldn't let them just get away with beating you up."

"That's called revenge... but I'm feeling a bit better. Thank you, Nice."

Jacuzzi smiled at Nice, finally ignoring the horrid sight of the corpses. However, he soon turned back to the bodies and began shedding tears again.

"What's wrong? Those guys still scaring you?" Nice asked worriedly. Jacuzzi hid behind her back, trembling in fear.

"N-no, well, I thought, maybe... maybe those bodies might stand up all of a sudden and come after me...! I-I just read in a book somewhere about c-corpse coming back to life and sucking out blood...!"

"You gotta be able to tell apart stuff like that from reality, Jacuzzi. I promise, nothing like that's gonna happen."

"C-corpse... getting up...? Blood? Not good. Scary..." Donny suddenly cried out from behind them.

"Y-you think so too, Donny? I'm so glad you're with me on this..."

"L-leave it to me." Donny gestured towards himself. His tan skin and his stumbling words made it clear that he was a recent immigrant from Mexico. "I-I'll... make sure. They're dead."

Donny immediately stomped down upon the pile of corpses. An ear-piercing noise overcame the area, and the corpses bounced into the air as though they were still alive. The knives that had been buried within them were simultaneously pushed out of their bodies as blood gushed from the newly opened wounds.

"AAAAAAHHHHH! P-please, stop, Donny! We gotta show respect to the dead!"

Jacuzzi hurriedly stopped Donny. However, Nice then stepped up towards the corpses. She took out a long, thin cylinder and began to fiddle with the string that hung from one end of the tube.

"Nice? What are you doing?"

Jacuzzi was getting a bad feeling about this. Nice grinned and took out a zippo lighter.

"N-Nice? D-don't tell me...! Nice... Nice? NICE!"

Nice set the string alight before Jacuzzi could stop her. Sparks quickly began travelling up the string.

Nice gazed upon the sparks with the euphoric look that might usually be reserved for a long-lost lover, then quietly placed the cylinder on top of the corpses.

She then gave the rest of the gang a surprisingly calm smile as she gave her command.

"Let's go everyone, or we'll get caught up in the blast, too!"

A loud boom rattled the alleyway. A bright red explosion lit up the road under the moonlight.

Even after the initial flash had faded, smaller pieces of light continued to shine at multiple points in the alleyway. Pieces of the 'things' that had been scattered by the blast were still burning, faintly illuminating Jacuzzi's gang members, who had ducked onto the ground in the distance.

Nice slowly stood up to console the crying Jacuzzi.

"There, there. No more tears, okay? The corpses are toast, so there's nothing to worry about. I made sure for your sake that they're not gonna come back to life."

Jacuzzi swallowed his sobs and looked at Nice, eyes still full of tears.

"Y-you don't have to hide it. Y-you just w-wanted to t-try out your b-bombs... You wanted t-to see a-an explosion, right, Nice?"

"You caught me." Nice grinned sheepishly, her smile reaching up to her lone eye.

"N-N-N-Nice...! I'm gonna h-hit you!"

"Hahah! You'd never do something that mean, right?"

"Uh..."

"I'm right!"

Jacuzzi ignored Nice's enthusiasm and turned to the only person who did not duck in preparation for the explosion.

"Th-then you can hit her instead, Donny!"

"Right. Hit Nice. If Jacuzzi's happy... I'm happy."

The giant lifted a single fist with a smile.

"Ahaha! Sorry! I won't do it again. Sorry, Jacuzzi. Let me off this time?"

The one-eyes woman held her hands over her head and ran off through the flames.

The other gang members chuckled at the sight, which usually happened once every three days or so.

"O-okay, guys. F-first, we gotta, uh. We gotta g-get away from here!"

Jacuzzi staggered to his feet as his confused friends asked, "Why?".

Jacuzzi quickly stopped mid-flight and called after his friends.

"Y-y-you guys remember why I-I said we couldn't use guns today?"

"I thought you were just scared of the sound of guns." "You didn't want us to waste bullets, right?" "Hyaha!"

As the others began conjecturing, Jacuzzi broke out into tears.

"It's because the Russos or the cops might catch on we if make loud noises! A-and Nice set off a bomb anyway... A-anyway, we gotta get outta here! Hurry!"

No sooner had he finished, Jacuzzi fled into an alleyway.

"Ohhhhhh..." Everyone nodded, understanding the logic behind Jacuzzi's decision.

"So *that's* why!"

"You're amazing, Jacuzzi! You're so smart!"

"That's why you're boss!"

With nothing but praises on their lips, the gang members followed after the most tearful delinquent leader in Chicago.

The scene that unfolded in the light of the fires almost looked like a gang of demons running after a terrified lamb.

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"S-say, Nice? About that train tomorrow. John says we can only fit five people or so in the cheapest cabin. So it's gonna be you, me, and Donny. You can pick out the other two."

"Is five really going to be enough?"

"Y-yeah. We're not gonna do anything to the *train*--we're just taking the goods in the cargo hold. Taking the whole gang's gonna make us look real suspicious. Right? And besides, Fang and John are gonna be onboard, too."

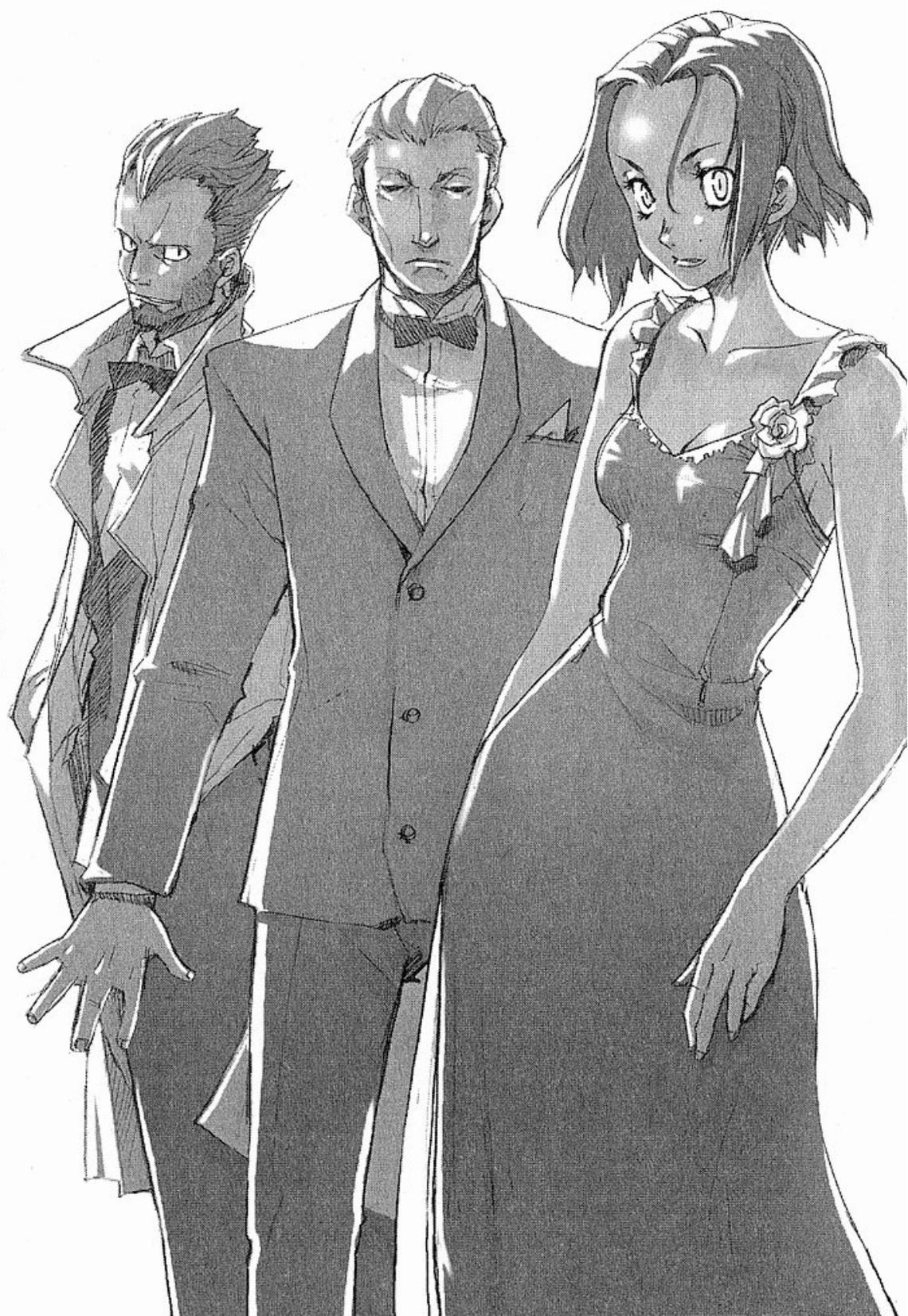
"All right. Then we'll meet up at Union Station at 4PM tomorrow."

Jacuzzi broke off from Nice's group, who were going to make preparations. He found himself feeling both excitement and anxiety for tomorrow's plan.

"I hope this is gonna work out. Is it gonna be okay? But it's so exciting to think I'm gonna get to ride on the Flying Pussyfoot tomorrow. It's been so long since I've seen Fang and John, too. I can't wait to see them."

Jacuzzi looked up at the starry night sky as he began to think about the plan they would put into motion the next evening--their first ever train robbery.

プロローグⅢ 「テロリスト集団」



Prologue III - Terrorists

December 19th, 1931. Afternoon.

An abandoned factory on a plain dozens of kilometres south of Chicago.

A group numbering over fifty stood in organized rows inside the factory's large hall. Something about the way they carried themselves suggested they were not normal civilians. The determined looks in their eyes made them look something more like a cross between soldiers and the mafia. The men, standing in lines in the room of grey floors and slate walls, were almost eerily silent.

One man finally broke the silence. He was the sharp-eyes man standing before the others, dim lights vaguely illuminating his face.

This man--Goose Perkins--started off with a line straight out of the golden age of the mafia, or the Hollywood view of the era.

"Gentlemen. I regret to inform you of the presence of multiple traitors in our midst."

The men remained silent. Goose continued without care, raising his voice.

"Our Master, the great Huey Laforet, was recently arrested by those boorish feds. They are trying to put our exalted Master on trial, according to their uncivilized laws and courts!"

Goose's voice became louder and louder, but the men before him showed absolutely no change in expression.

"But that is of little concern to us! Tomorrow's plan will ensure that Master Huey will walk free! Our main concern is the traitor, who has put our Master in this humiliating situation in the first place!"

There was still no change--in both Goose's eyes and the eyes of the fifty men who stood before him.

"I took it upon myself to seek out these traitors. But I wish to emulate our merciful Master Huey." Goose put his hands behind his back and turned away from the men. His tone had quieted greatly.

"I ask this of the traitors. If you have realized the error of your ways, I ask that you take one step forward. Know that no excuse or plea will save you, should you refuse even this show of grace."

The silence was broken when a man standing at the head of one of the lines stepped forward, face twisting into a grin.

And the moment he completed his action, the rest of the men smiled in turn. All fifty of them took a step forward in unison.

"How does it feel to be betrayed by *everyone*, Goose?"

The young man who stepped forward first smiled condescendingly and pulled out a gun.

"It was certainly a shock to see how you'd resort to such an easy bluff, but I bet you never expected *this*, did you?"

Goose, however, was not taken aback. The dark glint in his eye remained.

"Neider, you fool. I will ask you one last thing."

The young man--Neider--grinned delightedly, taking Goose's statement as a surrender.

"What is it, Goose? I'm going to have to tell you ahead of time--you can't get out of this alive."

"Let us suppose it is a given that you despise both myself and Master Huey. How, then, do you plan to go about this revolution of yours? With what philosophy?"

The traitors laughed, mocking Goose. Neider talked back, his voice now devoid of any respect--he was speaking now as a condescending superior.

"Hah! Revolution?! Don't make me laugh. That's impossible! Listen up, Goose. I can't follow you or Huey anymore. *We're* all gonna go join up with the Russo Family over in Chicago. With our numbers, and with all of us being damn good fighters, it's gonna be a piece of cake to take over! Actually, now that Scarface is gone, we can even take all of Chicago! Who cares about *philosophy* in this day and age? It's all about power, Goose! Don't you think *I'm* the better man to lead? You're just some military dropout, and who the hell knows *anything* about Huey?"

Goose sighed quietly and shook his head.

"I'd half-expected an answer like this from you, Neider, but your foolishness has truly surpassed my expectations. Joining the mafia? Using Capone's fall as an opportunity? It's the complete opposite. The Chicago mafia's *lost* its opportunities for the near future. You think you greenhorns can survive in Chicago's underworld without the leadership of Master Huey or myself?"

"Thanks for the tips. That all?"

"No, I still have more to say. Before, you claimed that I was bluffing. But you see, I am not a liar."

Goose raised his hand into the air.

"?"

"I told you. I looked into *every one of the traitors*. Even the ones who are not so keen about you anymore."

The moment Goose dropped his hand, the factory hall was overcome by a terrifying noise.

It was the sound of dozens of guns being fired at once--after several repetitions of the noise, the factory fell into silence.

"What...?"

When Neider staggered to look around, he noticed that the grey floors had been dyed a bright red. The men standing in the front rows had all been turned into beehives, lying in the pools of their own blood.

The thirty or so men who remained standing were all pointing their smoking guns in Neider's direction.

"B-bastards!"

"Remember what I said earlier, Neider. I told you that there were traitors in our midst--of course, I was talking about those who had betrayed *you*." Goose said expressionlessly. Neider, in comparison, was sweating bullets, lost in confusion.

"These thirty men reported back to me immediately when they caught wind of your betrayal. They just could not bring themselves to side with you, sadly enough."

Neider seemed to have finally realized his position. His jaw shook as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a black handgun.

The next moment, however, his right hand was overcome by pain.

Thud.

The gun he had taken out fell to the floor. By the time Neider realized that his own hand had fallen along with the gun, he saw a woman standing before him.

"Ch-Chane..."

Chane was wearing a military uniform. Known as a 'fanatic', she was the organization's greatest assassin. She was also a devout follower of Huey Laforet. It was said that the assassins of Asia dulled their senses with drugs, but Chane's senses were frozen by her *devotion*. It would not be surprising for her to have even forgotten that she was a woman, or even a human being.

Trying to ignore the pain in his right wrist, Neider desperately attempted to overcome his fear of the woman before him.

"I-I thought you were dead! Didn't you die when Huey was arrested?!"

Chane remained silent. Goose spoke in her place.

"She managed to survive. And she despised this fact above all else. This is probably why she's prioritizing the destruction of anything that stands in the way of tomorrow's plan."

Chane slowly picked up the bloodied knife, neither speaking nor nodding. The knife that had just cut off Neider's hand was large and sharp, made for military use.

"Wait, Chane."

Chane looked confused when Goose stopped her. A glimmer of hope returned to Neider's eyes.

Neider then realized that he never should have held any hope in the first place.

"We shouldn't allow him such a quick death."

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"I'm just saying, Goose. The bastard might actually come out of that alive." One of the men said. They were currently travelling on a military-use truck, with Goose in the driver's seat.

Goose had tied up Neider, welded shut all the factory doors, and left the building. They had stopped the bleeding of his wrist, but they destroyed any vehicles at the factory that they were

not using for themselves. In other words, if Neider were to survive, he would have to escape the building and walk dozens of kilometres to a nearby town.

"It's not too long of a walk to the next town, and there's stuff to eat and drink in there, too."

"I suppose you're right. He's probably already cut the ropes on a pillar or the like and is trying to find a way out."

"Then..."

"Now, Spike. I hope your skills haven't dulled?"

Goose stopped the truck about three hundred metres from the factory, interrupting his subordinate.

"No, sir."

"Aim for that white box at the factory entrance."

"Ohhh... Got it."

Finally understanding the situation, Spike opened up a package that was lying in the back of the truck.

Inside was a black sniper rifle. It was custom-made, with the barrel being longer than the regular models. Spike excitedly set it up at the back of the truck, calmly took aim, and--

"Here goes. Boom!"

He pulled the trigger.

Several seconds later, the wooden box by the entrance caught fire. Goose confirmed that the box was ablaze, and wordlessly started the engine again.

About a minute later, the factory exploded from the inside. A powerful explosion rocked the area as black smoke rose up to the clear blue skies. From the distance it almost looked like a miniature figurine, but the sonic boom that followed was testament to the strength of the blast.

"Is it not a happy thing to die with the hope of escaping alive?"

"I'm floored by your mercy, Goose." Spike joked. Goose grinned, and the other terrorists who sat in the back of the truck broke out into laughter.

The only exception was Chane, sitting in the passenger seat.

"Failure is not an option. We will head for Chicago's Union Station as soon as preparations are complete."

Goose went over tomorrow's plan once more with the thirty or so remaining members.

"This country needs rest. This is why Master Huey's existence is crucial." Goose stated, eyes giving off a ferocious glint. "We shall make sure that the passengers on the transcontinental will become a worthy foundation for our cause... The tombstone of the Lemures."

プロローグⅣ
『殺人狂』



Prologue IV - Homicidal Maniac

December 30th. Afternoon.

Placido Russo, the don of the Russo Family, sat in his manor and reaffirmed the fact that today was the worst day of his life.

It all started when the entirety of their astronomical earnings from the month were stolen en route.

There were two perpetrators: a man and a woman, dressed like Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb respectively. Apparently, the men heard a noise behind them, and were attacked with baseball bats as soon as they turned around. They managed to evade the bats, but they were soon overcome by a powdery mixture of pepper and lime, losing the money bags in the confusion.

It was foolishness. He initially had the transporter tortured out of the suspicion that he was lying, but in the end it seemed he was telling the truth.

That in itself was bearable. But then he began hearing rumours that one of his capos and many of his subordinates were found in charred pieces on the outskirts of town. He had yet to receive any confirmation, but the men who had been on recon in the area last night had yet to return--the stories of their death were likely more than just a rumour.

Not only that, there was still no contact from the ex-terrorists who had agreed to join them today. According to a report, the factory they were using as their headquarters was now nothing more than a pile of rubble and a mess of corpses.

He could not let the matter get out of hand, so Placido sent in a great number of men to take down the rubble and dispose of the bodies.

"Shit! So that bastard Neider failed. I was an idiot for trusting him."

Things were not looking good. If Neider had spilled their plans to join the Russo Family, the terrorists might end up directing their attention in his direction. Placido had no way of knowing their intentions.

The delinquents also posed a problem for him. Killing off their boss and his cronies should have been a cinch, but he had never expected that they would be so powerful.

"But first up is that couple. Pieces of shit... I'll have every couple on the street captured by tomorrow!"

"Don't do that, uncle. You'll just come off looking like a cranky old man."

A voice suddenly called out to Placido. It was his nephew, Ladd Russo.

His hair was neither short nor long, and he wore a dark suit like any self-respecting member of the mafia. He was somewhat tall, but there was nothing particularly eye-catching about Ladd. He was a handsome, if somewhat nondescript, young man. However, his tone was lighthearted and there was nothing resembling respect in his words.

"I don't have time to deal with you, Ladd. Get out of my sight!"

"Ohhhhhh? You're breaking my heart, uncle! What's with you today? Money? Is it money? It's second only to your own life, right? So you lost your second-most important possession to someone else, uncle? So this is what you wanna do, right? Pick out the thieves like lice--find them even if you have to burn down the whole fucking city, then grab them by the neck and squeeze and squeeze and squeeze until they foam at the mouth, and squeeze some more, and keep going until the eyeballs pop out!"

Placido's face flushed with rage as his nephew rambled on condescendingly.

"Don't act like I'm just like you, you homicidal lunatic! You know how much money I pour into cleaning up after your messes?!"

'Homicidal lunatic' was an apt description for Ladd.

His true nature was far removed from both his appearance and tone--he lived only for his own pleasure.

Ladd Russo lived to kill. He was set apart from average hitmen by his utter enjoyment of the act of murder.

Placido only kept Ladd in his organization because he was an extremely efficient counter for any conflict the Russo Family faced. Ultimately, although it was far from an official job, Ladd was the Russo Family's greatest assassin.

Placido was convinced that Ladd was nothing but a crazy, homicidal loon who lived according to his whims.

At least, until today.

"What'sa matter? I got some good new for you, uncle."

"Whaddaya want, Ladd? Get it over with and get outta my face."

Ladd shrugged dramatically and immediately reached for the heart of the matter.

"I'm sayin' this 'cause you're saying you're having money problems, uncle. Thing is, I'm planning a little job for tonight, so can you lend me some dough if I get it done right?"

For a moment, the strange wording of Ladd's question confused Placido. Ladd seemed to have expected his uncle's reaction, as he continued to explain.

"See, you know the Transcontinental Express--the Flying Pussyfoot? The one that's leaving from Union Station tonight? It's a non-stop ride all the way to New York. I was just thinking about taking it for a little ride and crashing it right into Manhattan."

Placido's mind went blank.

"I'm talkin' about giving 'em a scare. Crashing the train should be a pretty good threat, right? And if they still won't hand over the goods, we'll change things up to a kidnapping. I think the railroad company's probably gonna pay up by the time we kill off half the passengers. We'll get to kill people, *and* we'll earn money! Isn't that a great idea, uncle?"

"Get outta my face."

This was all Placido could say once he had managed to scrape together what remained of his wits. He didn't have the time to spare on Ladd anymore. Where were the guards? Where was the hired help?

"Hey! Someone get this guy outta here."

As Placido called out, the half-open door slowly creaked open completely and a group of men and a woman entered the room.

They were all strangers to Placido. Eerily enough, they were all wearing white--the men in white suits or sweaters, and the woman in a white dress. It looked less like a wedding party and more like a group bound for a masquerade.

Anxiety finally set in over Placido's face, and alarm bells started going off in his head. He desperately clung to his sense of authority to question the intruders.

"What are you people?!"

The answer came from Ladd.

"Uncle! I see you've met my close buddies! We've all got the same hobbies, you know. And this here is Lua--my girlfriend, lover, and fiancée. Say hi!"

"Um... It's nice to meet..."

Lua, the pale-faced woman, greeted Placido in a half-whisper.

"You know how some people in this world are just a bit *less* than energetic? Guess you could say that's what works so well with me and Lua. It's like some kinda match made in heaven!"

"Shaddup!" Placido cried angrily. Lua flinched, and Ladd shrugged with even more dramatic flair.

"You've been talking nonsense since you stepped in here! Damn it all! Where'd all those guards get to?!"

Placido slammed his fist into his desk, then stood up and grabbed Ladd by the collar.

"Listen up, you crazy shit. I don't give a damn whether you kidnap or kill someone. But there is no way in hell I'll let you do that in the Russo Family's name. Kill people all you like and get killed yourself, for all I care! Just do all that like some nameless piece of shit!" He threatened, eyes wide open, but Ladd was not at all fazed.

"I know, I know. It's more fun to kill people for the sake of killing them, you know? Using the Family's name just takes all the fun out of it, uncle."

"What do you know?! If you like killin' people so much, why don't you just go become a mercenary in South America or something?!"

"Now you're just being mean to those poor mercenaries, uncle."

"Shut your dirty rotten trap! You can kill however many people you like if you're on a battlefield! Isn't that what you want?! Satisfy yourself with delusions about killing powerful people, for all I care!"

Suddenly, Placido realized that his hand had gone limp. Ladd had an iron grip on his forearm.

It felt as though something had been jammed in between his muscles. As Placido felt the sensation of force leaving his hand, he released his grip on Ladd's collar.

Ladd took the opportunity to move in closer to his uncle--they were face-to-face, close enough for the breaths from his nostrils to reach. Ladd then monstrously widened his eyes and stated plainly:

"Uncle? Don't you think that, maybe, *you're* the one who doesn't know anything? You don't know *anything* about me. Battlefields? You know, even *we* don't have any right to be talking about the guys who fight out there. See? A battlefield is where *warriors* gather. Fighters. They're people who're prepared to die in order to kill others. They're people who fight to the death in order to defend their own lives. And honestly? It ain't fun killing guys like that. You get what I'm saying, uncle?"

Placido could not respond. This was because, in the middle of his long-winded rant, Ladd had taken out a rifle from somewhere and aimed it at his chin.

"We don't care about killing people stronger than ourselves. But that doesn't mean we go after weaklings like women and children, either."

Ladd spouted off his own philosophies, playing at his uncle's chin with the tip of the rifle's barrel.

"You see, the people I like to kill? They're the ones who're relaxed as can be. Get it? They're people who *think* they're completely safe, not even *considering* that they might be next. For example--"

The look in Ladd's eyes had changed. The brightness in his eyes had vanished, leaving behind playful condescension and pity towards the uncle to whom he wished to grant an equal death.

"H-hold on... Wait. Ladd! Stop! No!"

"That's right. For example..."

Ladd's eyes finally rested upon the depths of Placido's eyes, dyed dark by terror. Ladd took note of this glint, twisted his lips into a grin, and put pressure on his trigger finger.

"Just like you, uncle."

"NO! PLEASE!"

There was a *click*.

Nothing more.

The silence in the room was soon broken by Ladd's quiet laughter.

"Ahaha! Hahahahaha! There's no way I'd kill you, uncle! The gun's not even loaded! Even a homicidal lunatic like me has some respect for the man who took care of me all these years, you know?"

There was not a hint of tension in Ladd's expression. Placido's will had already been broken--he had collapsed in a heap on the floor, breathing heavily.

"I'm gonna take off now. I guess we won't be seeing each other again, but take care, uncle!"

Ladd turned around as though his business here was finished.

"Then again, I guess I couldn't come back here, even if I wanted to."

"?"

"You know it's over, uncle. You tried to protest Luciano's reorganization proposal, right? See, I think that got you on their shit list."

Lucky Luciano was one of the most well-known mafiosi of the era, rivalling even Capone. He was pushing for the modernization of the mafia's operations, actively cleaning up the Families that clung to conservative ideals. In other words, those who stuck to old values like 'justice' and 'tradition' were being wiped out.

"What...?"

"You know how Lucky Luciano's taken care of hundreds of mafia bosses just 'cause they're thinking like old people, right? He's so much scarier than a little psychopath like me. I'd never want to turn him against me. Don't you think so, uncle?"

As Ladd's voice grew distant, Placido trembled in fear and desperately held back his nausea.

"I-it can't be..."

"Try not to end up like Salvatore Maranzano, uncle!" Ladd warned, mentioning the name of a New York mafioso who had been killed in his own home several months ago. Was he being kind, or cruel?

"Then again, the guards here are pretty good, so I guess you don't have to worry too much. But see? I think the cops and the tax office put you on their little list too, thanks to what just happened. Who knows? Maybe they're planning to use you as a scapegoat to take Chicago back from the mafia."

'It can't be. This must be some sick joke,' Placido thought, but he came to a realization--he hadn't told anything about the recent incident to Ladd. Not only that, there was no way Ladd could have known about his opposition to Luciano's restructuring plans.

There were several other things that nagged at him as well. The Russo Family had so far covered for Ladd's killings several times, but it was always on the very limits of things that were possible in their power. Ladd only killed people whom they could clean up after.

Not only that, this situation had occurred at the very moment the Russo Family had lost its power to clean up after him. In other words, Ladd was completely deliberate in enjoying his kills. He was not overcome by compulsion. He planned out his kills with rationality.

Although there was nothing so much as resembling a structured plan in Ladd's hijacking proposal, Placido made sense of this with a new conclusion he arrived at:

Ladd wasn't unable to plan things out--he just *chose* not to. He went with his whims when he took action, but the occasional bursts of sane calculation drove him to success.

Ladd had not been lax in keeping an ear out for any information around him, and this was the end result. The Russo Family could no longer guarantee him a safe umbrella under which he could murder people. Ladd no longer had any use for Placido.

"Too bad, uncle. Back in the good ol' days, you would've come up with a nice comeback by now." Ladd said, walking away from Placido. "You didn't even try to fight back when I pointed my rifle at you. Ain't that practically a failing grade for a mafia don like yourself?"

Ladd's eyes were completely different than when he had first entered. Placido stopped him.

"W-wait. What'd you do to all my guards?"

"Them? Don't worry. I didn't kill them, if that's what you're asking. They really *are* great! Those guys were gonna defend you to the death. Remember? About how I don't have any fun killing people like them? I just knocked them out for a bit. 'Course, they probably broke a few bones before they fell asleep." Ladd grinned, and added:

"Isn't it a stroke of luck that your cute little grandkid's still off at school?"

Placido's face again reddened in outrage.

"Get the hell outta here! Why'd you come to see me in the first place if you were just gonna leave?!"

"Oh, right! I almost forgot!"

Ladd's face finally betrayed a look of anxiety. He then asked a question to Placido, whose fists were trembling in anger.

"Uncle? About that white suit of yours? You think you could give it to me? As a wedding gift for me and Lua, y'know? Can't say I know when we're gonna get married, though."

Ladd's question was so uncalled for that Placido momentarily forgot his anger.

"So why're you all dressed in white, like you're going to some fancy party?"

Ladd's simple answer to Placido's simple answer was enough to send chills down the latter's spine.

"If we're gonna destroy dozens of lives in that cramped little space of a train, all that white's gonna make the blood look gorgeous, don't you think, uncle?"

<=>

"See? It's a perfect fit."

Ladd dressed up for the upcoming party inside the black double-decker bus in his possession.

Lua glanced at him and asked him a question.

"Why didn't you kill him?"

"What's that, sweetheart?"

"Normally you would have killed someone like him."

It seemed Lua was talking about Placido.

"I guess you're right." Ladd answered, humming to himself.

"So why?"

"It's best to go to a party on an empty stomach, don't you think?" Ladd answered without hesitation.

Lua looked at the sociable yet homicidal maniac and closed her eyes.

"You're sick, Ladd." She muttered in a whisper.

"And you're in love with that sicko, right?"

Lua merely nodded.

Ladd did not even make sure that Lua was nodding, as he announced the grand opening of their party to the dozens of white-suited men on the bus.

"It's time! We'll treat those poor passengers like they're our very own livestock *and* a bunch of filthy maggots! We'll grind them into bits with love and anger and passion and devotion! Ahahaha! Hahahaha!"

The bus made its way to its last stop--and the first stop--Chicago's Union Station.

プロローグV
『乗車前』



Prologue V - Before Boarding

Ladd and his gang, dressed in fancy, uniform white, descended the stairs that would one day be immortalized in the carriage scene in [The Untouchables].

A man and woman watched this strange group from behind a pillar inside the station.

"Look, Miria! It looks like those people in white are all going to board the same train as us!"

"Pristine white!"

"Maybe they're having a wedding on board the train!"

"A happy marriage!"

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"We're the Chicago Paysage Symphony Orchestra. Our instruments are very delicate, you see, so I ask that you handle them with the utmost care."

A man in a black tuxedo, accompanied by other men in black and a woman in a black dress, explained his situation to a station employee.

"We'd like to have some of our members ride in the freight hold alongside the instruments."

"Sir, I'm afraid that's completely out of my hands..."

The man in black showed the flustered employee a permission slip.

"We've already received permission from the company... but if necessary, we're willing to undergo a strict body search upon arrival in New York."

"I-I suppose it's all right, if you've received permission..."

After a short conversation, the orchestra began hoisting their instruments onto the train one by one. The larger containers were opened and checked, revealing timpanis, brass instruments, and the like.

If it wasn't so close to the departure time--or if the one in charge of this job was a bit more astute, the employees might have conducted a more thorough check and noticed something.

The cushioning in the instrument cases were stuffed with ammunition. All kinds of weapons were concealed in hidden compartments under the instruments. And most glaringly of all, the permission slip the man presented was an obvious fake.

But even if the employee had noticed any of these things, it would not have mattered. The men in black had carefully considered multiple contingency plans should things go awry.

And so, the Lemures successfully smuggled in their equipment onto the trains under the guise of an orchestra.

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"Look at that, Miria! An orchestra! Mozart and Paul Dukas!"

"And Beethoven!"

Isaac and Miria raised an excited fuss as they watched then men in black load their instruments onto the freight hold.

In direct contrast to their optimism was a worried young man who was also watching the orchestra in black.

"W-what do we do?! I think they're gonna send people to guard the freight hold!" Jacuzzi cried, looking as though he would burst into tears at any moment. The plan already looked like a failure.

"It'll be all right, Jacuzzi. I think the goods we're after are on a different hold."

"B-but..."

"No worries. I'll. Take care of 'em." Donny boasted, putting his fist over his chest. Jacuzzi, however, shrieked loudly.

"Oh, nononononono! If you do something to them, they might die, Donny!"

"Leave it. To me. It'll be fine. Probably."

""Probably' doesn't cut it!"

As Jacuzzi flailed needlessly, something suddenly lightly bumped into his back.

He screamed softly and turned around, and saw a boy about ten years of age recoiling from the collision.

The boy quickly straightened up and looked directly at Jacuzzi's tattooed face.

"I-I'm sorry, sir! I wasn't looking where I wasn't going, and..." The boy apologized, bowing his head.

"I-it's okay. I'm fine. I-I'm the one who should be sorry for standing around the the middle of the platform. A-are you okay?" Jacuzzi smiled kindly. The boy grinned.

"I'm all right. Thank you!"

He bowed his head a second time, then ran towards the Second Class boarding area.

"What a cute kid! Did you just see him, guys? He reminds me of Jacuzzi when he was little."

"Y-you're embarrassing me, Nice."

"You're still pretty cute, though."

"Ahaha... thanks, I guess." Jacuzzi bowed his head shyly.

"Whoa. You're grown up, Jacuzzi. Isn't 'cute'. Rude?" Donny remarked. Jacuzzi became teary-eyed again as he boarded the Third Class car with his friends.

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Meanwhile, Ladd and his friends in white boarded the Second Class car with their carry-on luggage.

"Second Class, huh? Not the best *or* the worst. I *like* how it's neither here nor there! It's like some grey bat that can't find a place for itself!"

Of course, the Second Class cars of a luxury train like the Flying Pussyfoot were rather decadent in and of themselves. On most trains, they could easily pass for First Class cars.

"I wonder what kind of filthy rich bastards are taking up the First Class cars? Oh! I guess that orchestra in black's gonna take some of the rooms. Isn't their black a wonderful contrast to our white? Anyone see who else was going on board?"

"I saw a woman and her daughter get on just a bit ago." One of his friends piped up.

"Hm? A woman and a little girl? That doesn't *necessarily* mean they're mother and daughter, right?"

"Nah, I'm pretty sure they are."

"Oh?" Ladd's curiosity was piqued. He stopped in place and waited for his friend to elaborate.

"I saw 'em on the paper. I think that was Senator Beriam's wife and daughter."

Senator Beriam was a powerful man who had been actively involved in the battle against surging post-Depression crime rates. He often made his voice heard on the papers and the radio.

Ladd seemed to have been very satisfied with the answer. He twisted his lips into a grin.

"Oh, a Senator's family? I'm sure they're enjoying life. They'll sit in their First Class seats, not even thinking that something just might happen to them."

He smiled like a mad dog before a feast of flesh, and raised the corners of his mouth.

"Looks like we've got our first victims, boys."

Suddenly, the connecting door in front of them slid open. Ladd and his friends, who were still in the middle of the car, looked over to the door.

Before them stood a man dressed entirely in grey.

He wore a grey coat over his grey clothing. Even his head was covered in grey cloth, and a thick scarf covered the lower half of his face. The shadow cast by the cloth made it difficult to see his eyes, but the area around his eyes were the only parts of his skin that were exposed to the air.

He quietly closed the door behind him with a gloved hand, and walked right past Ladd and the others, who stared at him strangely.

Once the man disappeared through the other door, one of Ladd's friends sighed in relief.

"What the hell was that about?"

"He looked like some magician straight out of a stage show."

The white suits began mumbling amongst themselves about the strange man, setting aside their own unusual uniforms.

Ladd alone was filled with excitement and anxiety for the coming trip.

"This is interesting. This is *very* interesting, isn't it?! An orchestra, a Senator's family, and even a magician! This is perfect. Perfect! *Variety* makes things so much more exciting. It's like having a *salad*! No harm in having every possible dressing on the table, right?"

Ladd, however, had yet to realize something--the fact that he had not yet seen the full extent of varied individuals on this train, and the fact that some of these so-called "dressings" were lethal poison.

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Having disguised themselves as an orchestra, the Lemures split up into three groups of ten, each group taking a different Class. They were planning to maintain constant contact with one another with the radios and telegraphs they concealed in their carry-on luggage. The devices were custom-made, modified from the smallest models available at the time.

Their goal was to retrieve the very man who had customized these devices--their great leader, Huey Laforet.

They would not hesitate to give their lives--or the lives of others--for the sake of their goal.

"Goose. We've confirmed that Senator Beriam's wife and daughter have boarded the train."

"I see."

Upon receiving the report, Goose and Chane headed for the First Class cabins.

Goose had taken all possible situations into account, and made sure to take note of the couplings and the wheels of the train.

As he passed by the coupling between the freight hold and the passenger cabins, he noticed a young woman on the other side of the train. She wore what looked like a work top as well as women's trousers.

'A practical outfit. It's similar to how Chane dresses normally.' Was the first, uninteresting impression she left on Goose.

Suddenly, their eyes met.

The woman quickly stepped away from the coupling as if nothing had happened, and disappeared behind the shadow of the train.

"That woman..."

The look in her eye told Goose enough--she was not one who made her living with honest work. Perhaps she was a pickpocket, or even a murderer. He could not be sure, as he only saw her for a moment, but Goose was quite certain that she was an experienced criminal of some sort.

Chane, standing beside him, must have been of the same opinion. She glared in the direction towards which the woman had disappeared.

Goose carefully inspected the coupling to make sure it had not been sabotaged. He ultimately deemed that nothing had been done to the device.

"I can only hope that was just my imagination."

Goose also left as if nothing had happened.

Chane continued to warily inspect the area, when someone suddenly came up to her from behind.

"The train'll be leaving soon, Miss... Excuse me, but did you lose something?"

Chane turned around to face a custom Flying Pussyfoot conductor's uniform. Just as the train was a special machine for the railway company, the conductor's uniform was a customized, eye-catching white. The young man wearing this suit was looking at Chane with a worried expression.

Chane silently shook her head and quickly disappeared into the cabin.

"That's a cute doll! Now I'm really pumped up for this job!"

Once Chane boarded the train, the young conductor lifted his arms into the air and stretched.

"I guess it's time to depart. The train's ready to go!"

The optimistic young conductor, completely missing the mark, walked over to the back of the train.

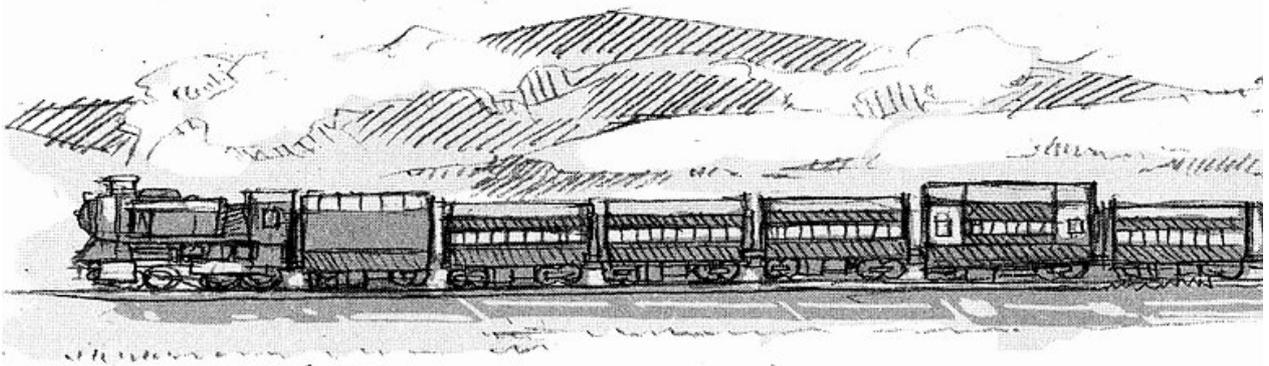
He had no idea what fate had in store for his train.

The sound of the train whistle rang out through the station.

BACC

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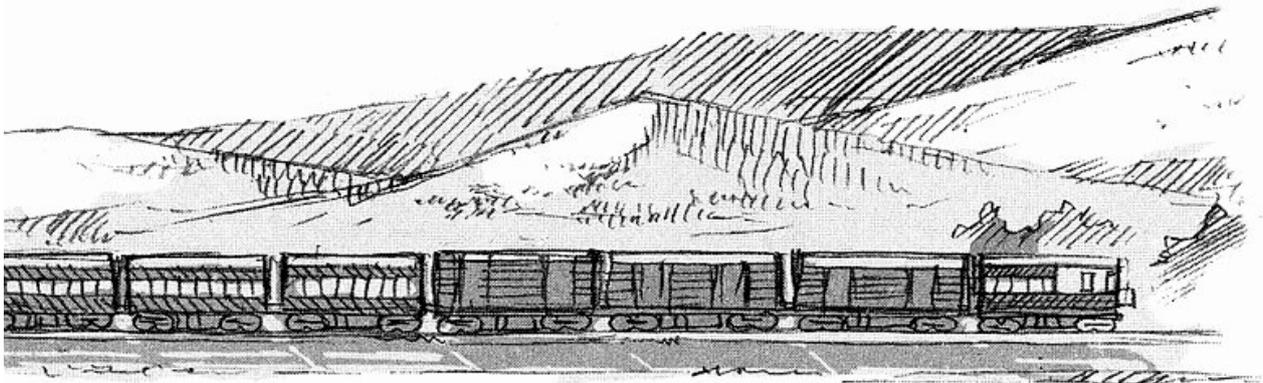
T h e G r a n d P



31 ANNO!

u n k R a i l r o a d

鈍行編
泣かない男



Local Episode - The Man Who Does Not Cry

It could be said that the development of America as a nation went hand-in-hand with the development of transportation and communication technologies.

The pioneers--or to some, invaders--who led the way for the expansion of the American west were the ones most satiated by the development of the rails, and the completion of the transcontinental railway.

The rails continued to evolve long after the end of the age of the pioneers. Its growth knew no obstacle, rendering even the Great Depression practically obsolete at its peak, the 1930s.

The unemployed numbered over eight million in 1931, and a hunger march had made its way to the White House, its food and drinks all transported by train. The golden age of trains would continue until the sudden boom of cars and airplanes took its place decades later.

All paths were connected by rail. The countless, ever-enduring beams of steel laid down by the hopes of pioneers still continued to carry the American Dream upon its shoulders.

At least, that was what the 'haves' believed.

The Flying Pussyfoot was a curiosity of sorts, a train created by one fortunate company that managed to recover from the crash.

Its design was based upon the trains used by British royalty. The interior of the First Class trains were entirely decorated with marble and the like, and Second Class was no slouch, either.

Most trains had First, Second, and Third Class cabins on every car, with each car structured so that Third Class cabins were directly above the badly cushioned areas directly above the wheels.

The Flying Pussyfoot, however, divided its cars between the Classes. In the lead was the locomotive, followed by three First Class cars, a dining car, three Second Class cars, a Third Class car, three cars with freight holds, an overflow freight hold, and the caboose at the very end.

With the exception of the dining car, the hallway was always on the left side of the cars. Passengers would note the cabin numbers mounted on each door and enter their designated rooms. Instead of having specialized freight cars, as most trains had, the Flying Pussyfoot had three cars fitted with freight holds. As with the other cars, the hallways were on the left side.

Choosing form over function, it was a train for the quintessential nouveau riche--the third class car, which was there only as a formality, was almost sad to look at.

On either side of the cars were ornaments that looked like squashed statues, which only compounded the cheap shadow of majesty that was embodied by the *Flying Pussyfoot*.

The strangest thing about this train was the fact that it worked separately from the railway companies' normal operations. It ran on the condition of 'renting' track space, like a modern-day royalty train.

And on December 30, 1931, the curtains would rise on the tragedy that took place on this train.

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It had been several hours since departure. The skies outside had begun to grow dark.

"What do you think, youngster? Used to this job yet?" The middle-aged conductor asked, standing with his back to the window.

"Oh... Yes. Kind of." The young conductor raised his head, answering vaguely.

They were now about halfway through this long journey, but this was the first time the older man had said anything to him at all. The young conductor calmly stared at his coworker, surprised by the sudden question.

'Now that I think about it, I've never really gotten a good look at his face before.'

The young conductor was astonished at his own disinterest. The face reflected against his eyes, however, wore an almost mechanical smile. It was as if the older conductor was forcing his smile, the wrinkles on his face growing deeper and deeper.

"I see... That's good to hear. You see, sometimes when I look at the outside world from here, growing ever more distant, I find myself feeling loneliness... and fear."

"Haha! I kinda get what you're saying."

"All kinds of fear lurk within anxiety. Even more so when you're in the middle of a pitch-black tunnel."

"Yeah! That's exactly it! All the others keep telling me ghost stories; I sometimes get scared when I'm all alone at night!" The young conductor agreed, chirping in with his own opinions. "It's not really nice, you know? Tormenting a newbie with scary stories about hook-handed men made of bees, or rumours about call bells from deserted cabins..."

For someone who was supposedly not fond of scary stories, the young conductor's eyes positively sparkled with excitement. It was easy to tell that he had truly been terrified on some occasions.

"And that other story--the one about the Rail Tracer."

"?"

The older conductor had worked on the rails for many years, but this was the first time he had heard of such a thing.

"Oh, you haven't heard about the Rail Tracer?"

The older conductor was not interested, but it was almost the designated time. He didn't see any harm in hearing out his coworker. He grinned pitifully and slyly, deciding to humour the young conductor.

"It's a pretty simple story. They say that there's a monster that chases after the train in the the dead of night."

"A monster?"

"Yeah. It becomes one with the shadows, changing into all kinds of shapes as it slowly approaches the train. Sometimes it looks like a wolf, or the mist, or even a train shaped just

like the one you're on. Other times it's a giant with no eyes, or thousands of eyeballs clumped together... Anyway, it takes on all kinds of shapes as it follows the rails."

"And what happens if you're caught?"

"The thing is, at first no one notices it's coming. But people *do* notice that something's going strangely."

"How so?"

"People start disappearing--one by one, starting from the back of the train. And in the end, everyone disappears, and it's as if the train never existed to begin with."

The older conductor then voiced a reasonable question.

"Then how does the story get passed on?"

Although he was faced with a kind of question that was normally a taboo in urban legends like this, the young conductor was not at all taken aback.

"Course, it's because some trains managed to survive."

"How?"

"Haha! Don't rush me. There's a bit more to the story." He grinned delightedly, and reached the heart of the matter. "You see, they say that mentioning its name summons it--the Rail Tracer, I mean."

The older conductor was somewhat disappointed..

'So it's just an urban legend. I'm pretty sure I can guess what he's about to say next.'

The young conductor continued just as his older coworker expected.

"But see, there's one way you can stop it from coming!"

"Hold on, it's time."

It was time for their regular report, so the older conductor flipped on the communication switch and turned on the lamp that signalled an all clear.

A bright light leaked into the conductor's compartment from either side of the outside walls. The tail lamps that were fixed to the last car of the train were used to signal the train's passing to the people on either side of the tracks.

The Flying Pussyfoot, however, also had a larger lamp under the normal tail lamps.

Operation regulations on this train dictated that the conductor's car would have to maintain regular contact with the locomotive. This was to make sure that the engineers in the locomotive would know quickly if the following cars were ever to become detached.

It was an unnecessarily old-fashioned system, but it was part of the ostentatious package of the Flying Pussyfoot. The conductors did not complain about this system, faithfully turning on the lamps at the designated times.

But for the older conductor, this signal held a second purpose.

The young conductor waited for his coworker to turn off the lamplight and cheerfully continued to tell his tale.

"Where was I ...Oh, right! So there's one way to stop it from coming--"

"Hold on. Why don't you save the surprise for a bit later? I know a rather similar story myself, so hear me out first."

The young conductor nodded agreeably. "Exchanging survival tactics, huh? That sounds interesting."

The older conductor looked at his cheerful coworker with a mix of pity and condescendence, and began his story--the story about his own identity.

"It's a rather simple, common tale. It's a story about the Lemures--ghosts who feared death so much that they became living phantoms."

"...? Oh."

"You see, the ghosts had a great leader. The leader tried to bring them all back to life by dyeing everything they feared in their own colour. But the damned feds are afraid of this resurrection! And those impudent fools are trying to entomb the leader of the ghosts!"

The young conductor didn't quite understand what his coworker was talking about, but he could tell that the older man's voice was filling with rage. The young conductor felt a chill running down his spine.

"Um, sir?"

"So that's why the other ghosts came up with a plan. They would take over a hundred people hostage, including the family of a Senator, and demand their leader's release. The feds would never accept our conditions if the hostage-taking is revealed to the public. That's why the negotiations must take place in secret. We will not give them time to make a rational decision. They only have until this train reaches New York!"

"A Senator... you mean Senator Beriam? Are you talking about *this* train? What's going on here, sir? Please explain!"

The young conductor seemed to have finally realized his perilous position, and took a step away from his coworker.

"'Explain'? That's exactly what I'm doing. To be honest, I never thought that being a conductor would come in this handy. But in any event, this train is now the Lemures' mobile headquarters! And with the hostages as our human shields, we'll disappear somewhere along the tracks. After all, not even the police can monitor every stretch of the railway."

"A-and what about the leader?" The young conductor asked rationally, taking another step back. But he backed straight into the wall--the conductor's compartment was not a very large space.

"Our leader, Master Huey, will be questioned at the Justice Department in New York tomorrow. That is why we have chosen this train to be his sacrifice!"

The train would arrive in New York tomorrow afternoon. If the negotiations were successful, they would likely take their leader onto the train and escape with the hostages in tow.



The young conductor now knew what his coworker was planning. He looked the older man in the eye and asked an obvious question.

"So... why are you telling me all this...?"

The answer was simple enough to guess.

"Master Huey is a merciful man. I am merely following his example. You are a happy man, you know, seeing as you are going to die knowing why I am going to kill you."

The older conductor then took out a gun.

"Now, about how to escape this disaster... Thing is, there *is* no escape. There is no way to be spared!"

Pointing the gun in the young conductor's face, the older conductor finished his story and pulled the trigger.

A gunshot.

The tracks carried the sharp sound as it echoed across the cabin.

It carried the sound into the endless, pitch-black night.

And the monster was awakened.

Its name--

'Rail Tracer'.

<=>

Some time earlier.

The sun set on the uneventful train ride, as all sorts of passengers took part in dinner in the dining car.

The dining car's design had also been based on that of royal trains. The plain colours of the wooden framework and the extravagant golden ornaments melded together to create a stylish atmosphere.

Any passenger, no matter their class, was permitted to use the dining car. Even those in Third Class could eat like kings, which was one of the reasons this train was so popular.

About half of the dining car was occupied by tables, and the other half showcased a kitchen and a line of seats beside a counter. Several cooks busily moved about the cramped kitchen, using what little space they had for maximum efficiency to create their ambrosial scents and tastes. On top of the dining tables were everything from French cuisine to Chinese food, and even Jambalaya--all kinds of foods made their trademark features known among the diners.

However, there was a certain group of men who were not at all focused on their food like the rest of the patrons.

"I told you, we can't discuss it right now, Jacuzzi. The other passengers might be listening."

"Get it, Jacuzzi? You should."

Jacuzzi was sitting on a seat at the counter, being lectured by two men. The two men were both on the other side of the counter--one of them was dressed like a cook, and the other a bartender.

The cook was East Asian, and the bartender was an Irishman. They were both Jacuzzi's friends, and insiders who had made this train robbery plan possible.

"No, well, um... I know, I know. Fang, John, you're both right. But if I can't even talk about it with you guys at dinnertime, I was wondering when we *could*..."

The Asian man was Fang, and the Irishman was John. A Chinese-American and Irish immigrant duo was rather unusual for this time period, but both of them had been driven out of their respective communities after causing some sorts of trouble.

Jacuzzi accepted people like them into his gang without prejudice, eventually becoming the central pillar of the gang of delinquents. He never particularly wanted to be the leader, but the other gang members, like Fang and John, never objected to his leadership. Of course, that didn't mean they gave Jacuzzi their undying respect.

"We can't help it, you know? We still have customers to serve. And there's these people here who keep ordering nothing but Chinese food. The head chef's gonna kill me if I take off now." Fang sighed.

John sighed in turn. "And I'm the only bartender here. I can't leave as long as people are at the counter. I'm sorry, Jacuzzi."

"Ohh... is the railroad company ignoring the Prohibition?"

"Normally, it does. But today we're completely alcohol-free. The dining car's really tough on the rules today."

"Doesn't that mean you don't have to be here?"

John shook his head. "Those two over there have been ordering nothing but honey green tea this whole time. And they're only asking for alcohol-free stuff... I think it's best that you give up."

"Yeah, that's them over there. The ones who've been sitting there since departure ordering Chinese food."

Fang gestured to the end of the counter.

Jacuzzi turned around, and caught sight of an odd couple.

The man was, simply put, a gunman straight out of the Wild West. He wore a ragged coat and a vest, and there were multiple holsters at his hips and over his chest. Of course, there wasn't a single gun in his possession. The lasso he wore at his shoulder made it difficult to tell if he was trying to be a gunman or a cowboy. On a related note, for some inexplicable reason, he also had three sheriff badges pinned to his lapel.

The woman was dressed to match her companion--she looked like a dancer from a bar from the previous century. She had long straight hair, and she wore a red, Spanish-style dress. She was also wearing a wide-brimmed, bright red hat.

Their appearances were suitable for the location, but temporally anachronistic. The couple was creating a world of their own at their seats at the end of the counter.

"You could try asking them to leave, Jacuzzi."

"B-but I'm scared... what if they're bad people?"

"Says the guy with a tattoo on his face." John said plainly.

"B-but..."

Jacuzzi made a face that made him look as though he was about to cry, when Nice joined the conversation.

"It'll be fine, Jacuzzi. Why don't you go up and talk to them? I bet it'd be pretty interesting."

"N-Nice... you really think so?"

"The way they're dressed, I think they might even be movie stars!"

Jacuzzi glanced at the couple one more time.

"Maybe you're right."

"See? Wouldn't it be pretty cool to be friends with a pair of stars?"

Jacuzzi fell for her words and slowly began to make his way to the couple.

"Maybe you're being a bit too hard on him, Nice." John whispered, watching Jacuzzi walk away.

Nice's tone when she spoke to John was completely different from when she was talking to Jacuzzi earlier.

"I don't think so, John. I just want to see Jacuzzi being a little more outgoing."

"Still as formal as ever... you haven't changed a bit, Nice."

"I suppose it doesn't go very well with my look, does it?" Nice shyly bowed her head, fingering her eyepatch decorated with gold threads.

"W-well, not necessarily."

"To be frank, it doesn't really go with your appearance. But that's still a virtue, you know? In fact, I'm almost concerned about the fact that you don't talk to Jacuzzi like you talk to the rest of us."

"Jacuzzi insists on me talking to him informally. He's stubborn like that sometimes." Nice laughed, and turned to look at Jacuzzi, who had just walked up to the couple in the corner.

John and Fang followed suit, slowly reiterating what Nice had just said.

"Stubborn, huh..."

Suddenly, they noticed that Jacuzzi was tearfully looking in their direction, trying to say something.

"Maybe she actually meant that she spoils him too much."

Jacuzzi sat beside the couple, awkwardly stuttering out a greeting.

"Uh, um... uh... have you eaten already- I, I mean... Good evening...? W-well... I'm sorrypleaseexcuseme-"

Jacuzzi was rambling at a loss for words. The man finally seemed to have noticed him, putting down his cutlery and looking directly at Jacuzzi.

He stared into Jacuzzi's face as he chewed. He spoke as soon as he swallowed.

"What do we do, Miria? This stranger here suddenly started apologizing to us!"

"Then I guess it means we won!" A cheerful woman's voice yelled from behind him.

"A victory, is it? Great! I don't really understand what just went on here, but that was a magnificent battle. Thank you!"

Without warning, the man took hold of Jacuzzi's hand in a firm handshake.

'This person really is weird.' Jacuzzi thought. He tearfully looked towards Nice and John to ask for help, but Nice just waved at him nonchalantly. John and Fang were called back to work by an angry voice from the kitchen yelling, "Quit slacking off, you two!".

"Uh... um..."

"Anyway, that's an amazing tattoo you've got there! I've never seen anyone with one on their face!"

"Culture shock!"

"Are you by any chance a movie star?"

"You're amazing!"

This was the complete opposite of what Jacuzzi had expected. Anxiety quickly began eating away at his senses.

"N-no, I-I'm n-not a m-movie star or anything. I just bootleg liqu-I, I mean! No! No, Iwasjustjokingnow... I'm just a delinquent, um... I'm really a normal person! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Tears welled up in Jacuzzi's as he apologized for no reason at all.

"Hey, Miria. He's apologizing to us again."

"That's two victories in a row!"

"I see... so you let us win twice! You're a really great person!"

"Sniff... Huh?"

"You're a good guy!"

"Now, now, stop those tears. Watching a good man cry makes *us* want to cry, too."

"We'll end up crying with you!"

Jacuzzi looked up. The couple before him was also looking at him, misty-eyed. He took the handkerchief they handed him and realized that things were going a little strangely.

"There, there. Wipe your tears and join us for Chinese food."

"It's all you can eat!"

"No it's not!" Fang yelled from the kitchen. Jacuzzi was somewhat perplexed, when food suddenly entered his mouth.

"Mph...!"

Jacuzzi found himself swallowing the mouthful without even realizing it.

The taste of the steamed chicken spread through his mouth. Now that he thought about it, this was the first time that Jacuzzi ever tasted Fang's cooking.

"It's delicious..."

By the time Jacuzzi came to his senses, his tears had already stopped.

"--So that's when I put my gut into it and said, 'damn it!'"

"Wow! You're amazing, Isaac!"

"Ahahahaha!"

"Wow! It's been a long time since I last heard Jacuzzi laughing out loud like this!"

The counter seats in the dining car had practically turned into a miniature party hall.

Nice had joined them somewhere along the line, brightening up the conversation.

The night grew deeper, but the dining car remained as crowded as ever. But the orchestra in black and the men in white still had yet to set foot into the car.

"Come to think of it, Isaac. You've been ordering nothing but meat for a while now." Jacuzzi noted, with a surprisingly calm voice.

This was the first time Nice had seen Jacuzzi speak to a stranger so easily. It must have meant that Jacuzzi was already so fond of this strange duo. His lack of fear was because of his trust in them.

'I can't believe they managed to get Jacuzzi to warm up to them so easily. Who are these people?'

Nice was a little jealous, but above all else, she was very fond of the couple.

"Oh? Don't worry, Jacuzzi. This is beef."

"All-American beef!"

"What do you mean?"

"Cows eat grass, right? So if you eat beef, it means that you're consuming both meat *and* vegetables!"

"Wow! You're so smart, Isaac!"

"That so...?" Jacuzzi tilted his head. Isaac and Miria ignored his confusion and lost themselves in their own little world.

"Right, right! So this is why eating something that's eaten something else means that you eat whatever it's eaten in the past. It doesn't just apply to food, either--it also goes for things that belong to other people! For example, if you were to take a bag which just happened to be full of money, both the bag *and* the money are yours!"

"Haha! We're rich!"

"Yes! In the Orient they have a saying--um... 'finders'..."

""Keepers'!"

""Finders keepers', huh... I see."

"Good for you Jacuzzi! You learned something new today."

Jacuzzi amusedly committed this faux-Oriental knowledge to memory and took a bite out of his food.

Suddenly, something crashed straight into his back.

"Guh?!"

Jacuzzi was forced to down a piece of beef without even chewing it. He hurriedly drank large gulps of water.

A familiar voice then called to him from behind.

"Oh! Not again... I'm sorry, Mister!"

Jacuzzi turned around in the middle of a coughing fit. He saw the boy who had bumped into him on the platforms before boarding. One thing was different, however--the boy was accompanied by a girl about the same age.

"N-no, it's all right. I'm okay. Are *you* all right?"

The boy nodded his head and smiled as he did before, but the girl hid behind him and nervously glanced over at Jacuzzi's tattoo and Nice's eyepatch.

"Ahaha, I'm glad you're okay. Is this your sister..?"

His throat was still in pain, but Jacuzzi forced himself to smile. The boy seemed to have noticed this and apologized again, then answered.

"No, she's not my sister. We're in the same cabin, so we became friends!"

The girl nodded quietly. Her eyes were still fixated on Jacuzzi's tattoo. It seemed that his appearance was somewhat scary for a young child to look at.

Suddenly, a woman stepped in from behind them.

"I'm so sorry. My daughter can be such a handful sometimes. I hope you'll accept my apologies."

She was perhaps about thirty years old. The woman was dressed in expensive, but pleasant clothing. There was not a hint of condescension or hesitation in her tone--she merely slipped into their thoughts in serenity.

"Now, Mary. It's rude to stare at people like that." She scolded her daughter.

"H-heh... that's very straightforward of you, ma'am." Jacuzzi could not get angry or cry at the woman's kind tone. He smiled apologetically.

"I'm so sorry. I should have been more careful..."

"N-no, not at all! *I* should be the one apologizing!"

"Why?" John and Fang asked Jacuzzi simultaneously, but Jacuzzi ignored them and went back to crybaby mode.

"Miria! They're both apologizing to each other. What do we do?"

"We have to pass judgement!"

"I see! So we're the ones with power over this battle!"

"It's a big responsibility!"

As Isaac and Miria came up with their own conclusions, Nice decided to step in to give Jacuzzi a hand, changing the subject.

"Are you on a family vacation?"

"Yes. My daughter and I are on our way to see my husband. We came to have dinner with the boy in our cabin, but it doesn't seem like there's any room for us at the moment." The woman replied, not at all intimidated or wary of Nice's appearance.

"Then is this boy on his own?" Nice asked curiously.

"Yes. He's- Oh my goodness! Where are my manners? I haven't even asked him."





"My name's Czeslaw Meyer-" The boy said shyly. It was a difficult name to pronounce--the boy quickly shut his mouth, then continued after a moment of silence. "You can call me Czes. I'm on my way to New York to see my family."

The woman and her daughter followed and introduced themselves.

"My name is Natalie Beriam. And this is my daughter... Introduce yourself, Mary."

The girl shyly stepped forward at her mother's prompting. "My name's Mary Beriam."

She continued to occasionally glance over at Jacuzzi and Nice, still somewhat intimidated. She didn't seem to be curious at all about the out-of-fashion gunman at the counter, however.

Jacuzzi, Isaac, and the others followed suit and introduced themselves. The party in the dining hall became a little bigger than before.

"Czes bumped into Jacuzzi a little earlier, too." Nice said, ruffling Czes's hair. Her lone eye was filled with cheer.

"I'm really sorry about that."

"No, it's all right. It wasn't your fault or anything."

As he spoke with Czes, Jacuzzi found himself more at ease. Of course, it was a silly thing in itself that he could not be at ease unless he was talking to a child.

Suddenly, Isaac and Miria spoke up loudly.

"That's right! After all, the Rail Tracer would've gobbled you right up if you were a bad boy!"

"Just like that!"

"That's what my father used to say to scare me when I was younger!"

"Scary!"

"Huh? Wh-what's a R-Rail Tracer?" Jacuzzi instinctively realized that it must have been something terrifying, as his eyes began tearing up again.

"You don't know, Jacuzzi? The Rail Tracer is..."

"...And that's why if you tell the this story on the train... you end up summoning the monster... The Rail Tracer!"

"Eeek!" Miria squealed in an obviously fake tone.

"--!!!!!!!"

Jacuzzi was the only one who was losing himself in a soundless scream. Everyone else seemed to have taken the story as a common urban legend.

"Th-this is terrible! We're gonna disappear! Wh-what are we gonna do?!" Jacuzzi worried, taking the story too seriously.

"Don't worry, Jacuzzi. There's actually a way to stop the Rail Tracer from coming!" Isaac said, trying to calm Jacuzzi down.

"Only one way!"

Jacuzzi's face brightened. "R-really? Th-then tell me! Please, you gotta hurry!"

"All right! Listen up. The only way to survive is... is to... uh... well..."

Jacuzzi's bright hopes began being clouded by doubt.

"The only way to survive... was... What was it again, Miria?"

"I've never heard about it before."

Nice and the others wondered why Miria had enthusiastically agreed with Isaac despite her ignorance.

Of course, Jacuzzi didn't have the peace of mind to be able to worry about things like that.

"O-oh no! This is bad! It's terrible! Quick! You have to remember, or we're allgonnadiewe'regonnadisappear!" Jacuzzi yelled, teeth chattering.

"I've heard that story before." John said calmly.

"R-really? H-how do we stop it?!"

"Well, I ended up forgetting, too."

"Ack! How could you, John?!"

"Calm down, Jacuzzi. I heard the story from the young conductor. Why don't you go ask him?"

Jacuzzi stood from his seat and took off as soon as John finished. He looked back when he reached the middle of the dining car, forced himself to smile, and yelled back towards Isaac and the others.

"D-don't worry, Isaac! I'll be back as soon as I ask the young conductor! L-leave it to me!"

Jacuzzi's intent may have been honourable, but his teary eyes fooled no one. Of course, about the only ones there who believed the Rail Tracer story were Isaac, Miria, and Mary.

Jacuzzi made his way between the tables and made a run for the back of the car.

"I'm sorry about that. Jacuzzi's not a bad person... He's just a little scared is all." Nice said, getting up from her seat and running after Jacuzzi.

"I know. I can tell that Mr. Jacuzzi's a very kind person." Mrs. Beriam replied with a smile. She realized that Jacuzzi was honestly afraid of the Rail Tracer, but she did not blame Isaac for the misunderstanding.

Isaac and the others also understood.

"Say, Miria. Jacuzzi's a really great guy, isn't he?"

"He's such a nice person!"

"We'll have to let him win next time, that's for sure!"

"Of course!"

"So next time, I'll apologize to him like there's no tomorrow! ...About twice!"

"Then I'll apologize once!"

Isaac laughed.

"I see! So Jacuzzi's going to win three times!"

"He's the champion!"

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"Whoa. Jacuzzi rush?"

Jacuzzi ran into Donny and the others outside the dining car, just as they were about to enter. Behind Donny's gigantic form were the two members Nice had picked to bring along on this mission.

"I-it's terrible! This train's gonna disappear! So I'm gonna go see the conductor!"

"Huh?"

Jacuzzi did not even explain himself as he disappeared, heading for the back of the train.

Nice appeared not long afterwards.

"Great timing! Donny and Jack, follow me. Nick, you take care of the dining car!"

Donny and the man called Jack followed after Nice, despite their confusion.

Meanwhile, the man called Nick was utterly lost.

"So... what does Nice want me to do with the dining car?"

Nice had actually meant, "Keep an eye on the situation in the dining car", but Nick was an experienced mugger--as a result, he came to an entirely different conclusion.

"So, what she means is, I have to keep the dining car quiet while they get on with the job... Sounds about right. Can't have anyone finding out about us and stopping the train along the way."

As Nick stood outside the dining car in thought, a man in a white suit passed by him and went through the door. The longer Nick stood there, the more people might end up being in the dining car. He simply worried about the number of people he had to watch out for, took out his favourite knife, and took a careful step towards the dining car.

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"All right! All right! It's gonna start soon! Our little show's about to begin! And *their* lives are gonna start ending soon!"

Ladd rolled around the Second Class cabin, hugging a pillow.

"Oh! So it's time already?! I'm so excited I can't stand it! I'm so happy I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight!"

Lua watched him coldly and the other men laughed as Ladd rolled around in the tiny cabin.

"If you're so excited, why don't you go yourself?" Lua asked in a mumble.

"But I caaaaaan't! I lost the draw! Damn it! Vicky, you lucky bastard! I'm so *jealous* I think I'm gonna die!"

Ladd's gang's first course of action would be to overpower the passengers in the dining car. They had drawn lots to decide who would be the lucky winner, and as a result, the man named Vicky had left to make the first move.

"Oh, there is no God in this cruel world! Vicky must've killed 'em all by now!" Ladd complained, doing handstands despite his formal attire.

"If you're that worried, why don't you go take a look...?" Lua mumbled again.

"That's it!"

Ladd got back on his feet, turned around, and began slapping Lua's face.

"You're right, Lua! I can just go take a look! I'm such an idiot. There's no reason I have to just sit around and wait here! I thought I had to just shut up and stand back 'cause I lost the draw! All right! I'll be right back, sweetheart!" Ladd rambled, and dashed into the hallway.

He then crashed right into someone.

"Hey, watch where you're going, you..."

Ladd trailed off mid-complaint.

"I-I-I-I'm really sorry, sir! I'm so sorry! But the train's in big trouble! S-so I-I have to get to the conductor's compartment quick...! I... I'm so sorry...!"

The young man ran straight towards the back of the car.

"That kid just now..."

There was no mistaking the tattoo on his face. He was the chump on the wanted poster his uncle had given him a few days ago.

"Hm? I wonder what's going on here? Hey, Lua!"

Ladd poked his head into the cabin and made a simple request of his girlfriend.

"Go take someone and check out the conductor's compartment for me, would ya? And if you run into a kid with a tattoo on his face, make sure you catch him, ya hear?"

Lua nodded quietly and headed for the back of the train with one of Ladd's friends.

"Hm...? Things are getting exciting. I hope it just gets even better... or wait! I could *make* it more interesting!"

Ladd grinned and headed for the dining car, armed with nothing but his own two hands. A bespectacled, eyepatch-wearing woman and a 7-foot tall giant passed by him along the way-- they were running quickly, anxiety written over their faces, and overtook Lua in an instant.

"The suspense is killing me! Wonder what that trouble the tattoo kid was talkin' about was all about. This isn't good, I'm getting *excited*... I'd better let go soon, or I'm gonna lose it...!"

Ladd hummed a familiar tune as he slowly stepped forth towards the dining car, which was by now no doubt overcome by chaos.

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"Preparations are complete, Goose. The Beriams are currently in the dining car."

Goose was in the First Class cabin, listening to his subordinate's reports. Currently, they had three members each stationed in Second Class, Third Class, and the freight hold. Everyone else was gathered here.

"Everything is set. Good. Begin the mission in teams of three. I will be on standby here, so do not neglect to maintain regular contact. Anyone who misses his regular reports will be assumed dead." Goose ordered mechanically. It was almost as if his face was using the barest minimum of muscles he needed to speak.

"It's time. The 'conductor' must have begun his mission by now. The train will now continue moving forward, no matter what happens in the cars in the back. Spike. send a message to Second Class and Third Class. Our first priority is to take control over all passengers and cars. We will end this mission by taking control of the locomotive. We must finish things before the trains are switched."

Steam locomotives were legally forbidden from the vicinity of Pennsylvania Station. This was why the Flying Pussyfoot had to be switched out with an electric engine right outside the station. The switching point was to be where they picked up Huey Laforet, and where half of the hostages would lose their lives. They needed to keep the other half alive in order to ensure a safe getaway.

"Men, we shall now commence the operation to rescue Master Huey Laforet."

The orchestra in black stomped their heels onto the floor on command. The sound of the footsteps became a twisted work of art, sharply echoing across the First Class cabin.

"This is a ritual--a ritual to bring Master Huey back into our midst. Do not forget that this train is the altar, and its passengers the sacrifice."

Goose remained expressionless to the end, announcing the advance of the Lemures.

"Pandemonium is upon us. Concepts like Justice or Evil are no longer relevant. We are the ones with power. Once we have rescued Master Huey, this power will finally become justice-- that is what we are fighting for. Now, go forth! We shall devour the passengers, this train, and the entire nation!"

The men in black became a collective shadow, scattering towards each car of the train.

The shadows moved forth, armed with machine guns. Three of them headed for a certain car.

A particularly bright light leaked out from a car filled with the chatter of passengers. The shadows ran, intending to bathe the brightness in blood. Their target: The dining car, where Mrs. Beriam was. The door was now just in front of them.

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Vicky was excited.

He would fill the dining car with screams.

He had never expected that the honour of starting the commotion would be his.

Dressed in white, Vicky calmly and thankfully accepted the stroke of good fortune that had befallen him.

Perhaps he should just kill someone to reward himself and make a show of what was to come. The couple in the Wild West costume, or the children beside them, maybe? Or the beautiful woman sitting next to them--he then remembered that Ladd had a bit of a fondness for the mother and daughter. But perhaps Ladd wouldn't really mind if he offed the girl? It would be quick and sneaky--Vicky was *sure* Ladd wouldn't mind.

He looked around the dining car, lost in his mad fantasies. Several people--no doubt curious about his white suit--glanced at him, but it seemed like he was being treated as a normal person in comparison to the likes of Isaac and Miria. They soon returned to their meals as though nothing was wrong.

Speaking of strange people, Vicky remembered the magician they had seen earlier--his absence likely meant that he was in one of the Third Class cabins.

However, there was one person that concerned Vicky. It was the woman in fatigues that sat by the window.

'She's no amateur.'

There was nothing resembling weakness in her expression. When he glanced at her for a moment, the look of wariness in her eyes visibly intensified. In fact, the woman was looking very intently at *everyone* in the car, not just himself. The moment their eyes met, Vicky felt as though her gaze was piercing right through him.

'Who is this girl? She's being really cautious about something...'

Although Vicky was worried at first, he assured himself that the woman's wariness had nothing to do with them.

Of course, she would soon be involved in the chaos, whether she liked it or not.

Losing interest, Vicky made his way to the middle of the dining car.

'Let's get this started.'

He silently drew a gun from his coat pocket.

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"All right. Let's begin."

The men in black opened the door, guns at the ready.

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"Let's do this!"

Nick took out a knife from his pocket and opened the door to the dining car.

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Three sets of voices rang out loudly through the dining car. There was no room for error in understanding.

"All of you, on the floor now!" The men in black who barged in through the front door yelled. They were all armed with machine guns.

"Hands in the air, right now!" Yelled the man in white, who stood in the middle of the dining car. In his right hand was a bronze-coloured pistol.

"Everybody freeze!" Yelled the man in ragged clothes, who had entered through the back door. He was holding a single fruit knife.

"Wh-what are we supposed to do...?" One of the passengers asked, covered in cold sweat.

Surprisingly, the first ones to react were Isaac and Miria.

They had the children beside them get onto the floor, then ducked with their hands in the air and froze.

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As Ladd walked through the hallways, he heard gunshots coming from the dining car.

"They've already started without me! Ahaha! I hear gunshots, this is great! I can't wait!"

Ladd was so thrilled that he began skipping towards the dining car. Suddenly, he stopped in place.

He heard a series of short, individual shots, followed by a veritable storm of gunfire.

"Hm? Machine guns?"

Ladd's expression hardened for a moment, but he soon smiled and began skipping again. He seemed to be even more excited than before, his movements practically oozing with anticipation.

"That sounds even *better!*"

When he arrived at the car before the dining car, a young man dressed in ragged clothing ran over. He glanced back at the dining car several times, before running right past Ladd without so much as looking at him.

"What the hell just happened there?! Nice! You never said things would end up like this!" The man yelled, disappearing down the corridor.

"Is it danger? Danger... It's *danger!* What's going *on* in the dining car? Am I gonna get to *kill* people? Are people *dying*?! Which one is it?! Hey, I'm getting excited! Yesyesyesyesyes!"

Ladd was so enraptured that he found himself running forward without even thinking.

The closer he got to the dining car, the louder the sounds of sobbing and screaming became. Was it heaven or hell that awaited him beyond the door?

He loudly opened the sliding door. Most of the people in the dining car naturally focused their attention on him. Some looked at him with desperation, others with hope, and yet others with eyes full of despair.

In the middle of the dining car was Vicky, lying face-down on the floor. His white suit was dyed red with his own blood.

On the other side of the car were three men holding machine guns. Their outfits told Ladd that they were members of the orchestra.

It seemed that one of them had been shot by Vicky--he was crouched down on the floor, holding his shoulder. The other two were waving around their guns, scaring the screaming passengers so they would not try to escape.

The trio focused their attention on the man in white who had just entered the car.

It seemed that the doorway had led Ladd to hell.

But for some reason, he grinned.

"Looks like I've got no choice."

Ladd strode forward into the car.

"I'll take a sec and change it into heaven..." He mumbled, and raised his arms into the air. "Hold on a minute! As you can see, I am *completely* unarmed! I'm not your *enemy!*"

Of course, the men in black did not let their guard down. Judging from their outfits, the newcomer was a friend of the corpse lying in the middle of the car.

This was why Ladd had a chance.

One of the men in black approached him, pointing a gun in his direction.

"Who are you... who are you people?"

"I won't deny being a suspicious fella, but we're *not* your enemies."

Another one of the men in black approached Ladd. He was probably planning to restrain him while the other man held Ladd at gunpoint.

The only one at the other end of the dining car was the injured man in black. He held down his shoulder as he carefully watched the passengers, holding his gun in one hand.

The moment the two black suits lined up in front of him, Ladd raised his voice to complain.

"How many times do I have to *tell* ya? I'm *not* your enemy!"

By the time he finished his sentence, the black suit's machine gun had been kicked into the air, the barrel pointed at the ceiling.

"Wha-"

Ladd's kick had taken the first black suit completely by surprise, not even giving him time to pull the trigger. Ladd then easily took hold of the barrel of the machine gun, and pushed it back over the shoulder of the black suit in front of him--right towards the second black suit, who stood behind his anxious ally.

Naturally, the black suit resisted--but the gun was pushed onto him despite his efforts. The thin barrel pressed down heavily on his shoulder.

With his free hand, Ladd took hold of the stock, having used the black suit's shoulder as a fulcrum to pull it towards him in an instant.

"What the?!"

The black suit's finger was pulled away from the trigger. The spot was soon filled by Ladd's finger, which had been holding the stock until just a moment ago.

There was an ear-splitting noise as the upside-down gun began spewing out lead.

The bullets hit the second black suit. His throat, lungs, heart, and his entire upper body was dyed black by the fountain of blood, as his form collapsed into a heap on the floor. At the same time, the volume of the screams in the dining car increased exponentially.

"You bastard!"

The injured black suit held up his gun, but his ally was standing between him and Ladd. Not only that, Ladd was holding the ally by the throat. The man's feet lifted off the floor little by little. His face began to turn red, his neck being squeezed by the kind of strength that should not have logically come from someone of Ladd's build.

The black suit kicked and tried to break himself free, but he knew of no techniques to aid him in such close quarters. He tried to stab at Ladd's eyes with his free hand, but Ladd noticed it quickly and countered with his teeth.

Ladd spat out pieces of flesh and blood, and spoke to the injured black suit in the corner.

"What are you gonna do *now*? Run? Get shot with your buddy here? *Kill* yourself? Or wanna *chat* for a bit? How 'bout tea? Or dinner? How's the economy doing? I guess it can't be good, huh? Then what? Reforms? Wanna run for office? How about a *war*? Kill and *be killed*? Are you *scared*? Are you *nervous*? Or are you *angry*?" Ladd asked meaninglessly, and giggled. He suddenly stopped, then aimed the gun from behind the man he held up as a human shield,

"At least try and answer *one*!"

Instead of answering, the injured black suit turned away from Ladd and his ally, leaving the dining car. Ladd did not give chase; instead he threw his human shield to the floor.

"Well, this is getting fun!"

The lone black suit hacked and coughed, then glared at Ladd.

"You were a fool to let my friend get away. I don't know who you bastards are, but you're not gonna get away with turning us against you!"

"You know? The mafiosi I killed *always* said the *same thing*. 'Course, none of that matters."

Ladd threw the machine gun to the floor without a care. The passengers sitting nearby screamed softly.

"Don't get cocky!" The black suit got to his feet, taking out a knife hidden in his boot and slashing horizontally. He expected to kill the man in white with this attack, but things were not so easy.

"What...?"

Ladd's head was no longer where he had seen it before attacking.

By the time he noticed that Ladd's hair was just *beneath* his line of sight, it was too late. A powerful impact struck him in the gut.

"*You* don't even get a consolation prize!"

The dull pain spread through his stomach as nausea assaulted his senses.

Ladd snickered, having landed an uppercut on the black suit's side. In contrast, the black suit was sweating bullets and moaning.

"B-bastard... that was a... boxing... move..."

The moment he was about to fall to the floor, however, a lightly clenched fist propelled him upwards again.

"Gah!"

"Hm? Nothing to worry about. I'm not *quite* as strong as Pete Herman!"

Just as the black suit began to fall backwards, Ladd grabbed him by the collar and forced him back up.

"I'm no Jack Johnson, and I don't have Jack Dempsey's punches or skills!"

A right hook. The unnatural sound of breaking bone rang out through the dining car.

"Maybe 'Jack' is a good name for boxers, don't ya think?! Well?!"

Several light punches made their way in one direction.

"I just mentioned Herman and Dempsey, but do you even *know* any of these people I'm talkin' about?! *Anyone* who calls himself an American should *know*, am I *right*?!"

Smack.

"I *dare* you to tell me you don't! I'll kill ya!"

Smack.

"You!" *Smack.* **"Ain't!"** *Smack.* **"Getting!"** *Smack.* **"Away!"** *Smack.* **"With!"** *Smack.* **"That!"** *Smack.* **"And!"** *Smack.* **"Even!"** *Smack.* **"If!"** *Smack.* **"You!"** *Smack.* **"Did!"** *Smack.* **"I'd!"** *Smack.* **"Still!"** *Smack.* **"Kill!"** *Smack.* **"You!"**

Ladd finished his flurry of punches with an uppercut, knocking his opponent backwards. Although the black suit would have fallen long ago, Ladd had purposely been beating him to keep him standing.

The black suit's head tilted behind him and hit the wall. Right beside him was the door. The continued beatings had driven him all the way to the end of the car.

"Whew! Finally got him to drop that knife. That wasn't nice of ya, pulling a weapon on me like that! I was so *scared* I ended up beating you to a pulp!"

The black suit had dropped the knife when Ladd *first* punched him, but Ladd exaggerated his gestures and played innocent.

"Ugh..."

"Oh? You're still conscious? I guess I really *do* need some practice. What a shock! What now? Hey! Take responsibility!"

Ladd took the black suit's neck with his hands and pushed him against the wall.

"I *knew* you wouldn't shoot me on sight. You wanted to see what us white suits were up to, right? That's why you came up to try and *capture* me, right?"

He then hugged the black suit with all his might.

"Thank you! I love ya, buddy! You did *exactly* what I expected you to do!"

He rubbed his cheeks against the black suit's face and thanked him, eyes filling with tears.

"You people are so *great*, you know that?! That's why I told you, I'm not your *enemy*! I don't care about allies or enemies or anything like that, as long as there's *love*! See? We're on the same side! I really love you people! But just go ahead and *die*!"

He then slammed the black suit against the wall.

The black suit, bleeding profusely from the mouth and nose and his eyes rolling back, was still conscious.

"You... stupid... bastard... turning... us... againsguh..."

A fist slammed into his mouth. He could feel something under his skin--likely his teeth--snapping.

"You keep yapping on about this 'we' stuff. Stop fucking around, you shit! I'm gonna kill you!"

"You barbarians... think.... you can stop... Master Huey..."

A fist smashed into his right eye, then his left. His eyes, which had already rolled back into his head before the punches, would never see the light of day again. Of course, he wouldn't even have a chance to confirm the state of his own eyes unless he could get out of this alive.

Ladd suddenly put on a very calm face, then whispered something into the black suit's ear.

"I don't know about you people or this Huey guy, and I don't give a rat's ass about it."

And as the black suit's consciousness faded, Ladd accentuated his words with a punch to his stomach.

"But there *is* one thing I know. First, the orchestra in black is our enemy. Second, they have a bunch of *scary* little guns."

Ladd's fists pounded away in rhythm. The strength behind his punches increased with his tone. The targets of his punches slowly rose, going from stomach to chest, and from chest to face.

"And lastly! I bet you're all thinking, 'As long as we're all armed to the teeth, no one can beat us! We're unstoppable and unbeatable! You think you're all *safe*!'"

The black suit's consciousness and life disappeared as he sensed the white suit's voice echoing through the dining car.

Ladd's fists, whether he knew of the victim's death or not, would not stop.

"Well?! Isn't this fun?! Killing people! Jerking out their insides! AND SQUASHING THEM ALL UNTIL THEY SQUELCH AND BURST LIKE GODDAMN SAUSAGES!"

Ladd's *fists* were what were making the squelching sounds. His punches, becoming ever stronger, smashed apart the black suit's face.

Ladd's face as he bathed himself in the blood shone like that of a man who had just achieved some gargantuan task. To a normal person, however, it was just the insane laughter of a homicidal lunatic. And both were true.

Ladd turned around with a refreshing smile. The entire car gave him their attention. He was sure that they would have all escaped by now, but a quick look at the opposite entrance told him why they remained.

His friends--the men in white--stood at the door, armed with guns and glaring at the passengers.

"Ladd? What's goin' on here?"

"We came running 'cause we heard machine guns. So, what's the fuss?"

There wasn't a hint of seriousness to the men's voices. Ladd waved at his friends and confidently strode through the middle of the dining car. As he passed by the counter, he noticed a woman who was crouched on the floor with her arms wrapped protectively around a pair of children.

"So you're Mrs. Beriam?" Ladd asked.

The woman glared at Ladd defiantly, and slowly nodded.

Ladd's face turned into a grinning mess of an atrocity.

"That's good to hear, but thing is, some of our scheduling got a little messed up. We'll take care of the orchestra first. Then it'll be *your* turn. See you around."

Ladd rejoined his friends, not forgetting to take the guns dropped by Vicky and the black suits.

"Let's go."

"But what about *them*?" One of his friends asked, gesturing at the passengers.

"Leave 'em. We've got more interesting things to discuss. Let's meet up in the cabin first."

"If you say so, Ladd. But how 'bout your hand? You gonna be all right?"

Blood dripped to the floor from Ladd's hand. The passengers thought it had come from the black suit, but the skin on Ladd's knuckles was torn in places. It was only natural, considering the amount of punching he did without even the most basic of taping. It was practically a miracle that he had come out of it with such minimal injuries.

"Hm? No problem. A coupla dislocated bones, but nothing's broken. I'm still good for now. I feel like I can still beat down at least *five* more of 'em with my bare hands."

"Just make sure to tape 'em, okay?"

Ladd and his friends quietly left the dining car as if nothing had happened, not even wiping the blood that continued to fall from Ladd's hands.

Silence came upon the dining car. Even the sounds of crying and screaming stopped, the stillness only broken by a pair of oblivious voices.

"How long do you suppose we should stay here like this, Miria? All that gunfire I've been hearing from above us is scaring me!"

"It's a horror show!"

"And you know, I'm getting a bit tired, trying to hold still like this."

"Frankly, it's really tiring!"

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Initially, the remaining passengers were silent. As they began to get a grasp of the situation, however, they slowly began to murmur amongst themselves. No one had yet left the dining car, as they had no idea if the black suits or white suits were standing watch outside the doors.

Their anxiety swelled, and the passengers began to direct their fear at the cook and the bartender, who were employees of the railroad company.

"What's going on here?" "Is this supposed to be some sick joke?" "Where's the conductor?!"
"Let us off!" "Stop the train!"

Fang and John, unable to counter the passengers, locked themselves in the kitchen. They knew that, as immigrants, it would do them more harm than good to try and defend themselves or talk back.

But there was one person who stubbornly persisted in making unreasonable demands.

"Who is in charge of this dining car?! How *dare* that yellow ape and filthy Irishman hole up in the kitchens?!"

One of the men, seemingly out of things to complain about, began to direct his verbal attacks at John and Fang. He was a rotund, moustached man who was too vulgar to be flatteringly called "grand" or "plump".

"I paid good money to get on this train! What is the meaning of all this?! I demand a refund!"
The man yelled at the hapless young cook. He slammed his fist on the counter.

Suddenly, something was placed on top of his fist. It was a wad of cash made up of exactly a hundred bills.

"What...?"

"Is that good enough for you, you... you bad person?!"

"You're terrible!"

The moustached man looked around. The cowboy and the dancer were staring a hole through him.

"Wh-what are you freaks?"

"If you want a refund, I'll *give* you a refund! So don't even *consider* yourself a customer anymore! Right, Miria?"

"Now you're as good as riding without even paying!"

Isaac and Miria complained to the moustached man at the top of their lungs. John and Fang, somewhat surprised by their outburst, poked their heads out from the kitchen.

"Who do you lowlives think I am-"

The moustached man continued to complain as he reached out to grab the wad of bills.

"Be quiet! *You're* the one who's talking about 'apes' and 'filth' in a *dining car*, where everyone's trying to enjoy their meal! I bet you were trying to complain a free meal off these people!"

"The worst!"

"You're blinded by money!"

"And if you're blind, go see a doctor!"

The couple persisted with stubbornness rivalling that of the moustached man, throwing another wad of bills in his face.

"Just go disappear somewhere! If you don't, my hundred... no, my *billion guns* are going to go off at once!"

"We're gonna turn you into a beehive!"

All of a sudden, a voice came out from a corner of the kitchen that was a blind spot to any passengers sitting outside. It was a deep and powerful voice, reminiscent of a gigantic bear.

"John! Fang! You two hear that? That swine's not a passenger or a customer anymore! Get him outta here!"

The moustached man's conceit evaporated the moment he heard the beastly voice from the kitchen.

"All right, boss."

"What a bother..."

Despite his complaints, John assisted Fang in lifting the moustached man by the arms and quickly disappeared through the rear door of the car.

Then, the beastly voice changed to that of a veritable gentleman and made an announcement to the dining car.

"I humbly apologize for the terrible inconvenience that's befallen this car! The head office will not only reimburse you for the cost of the tickets, it will pay you back double. I understand it may not be a sufficient apology, but..."

The voice then went on to reveal the most important point.

"As long as we have lost contact with the conductor's compartment, I advise you to take charge of your own safety until this train arrives at New York. That is all!"

The head chef's final statement was eerily irresponsible, but no one was brave enough to complain. Silence returned to the dining car.

"You filthy immigrants! Let go of me! You'll get your grime all over my clothes!" The moustached man yelled, as he was dragged out into the hallway.

Before leaving the man, however, John crouched down and glared at him. At some point he had obtained an ice pick, which he was now holding in his right hand.

That one look was enough to silence the condescending man. John had once made his living in the seedy underbelly of Chicago society--he was not so easily intimidated.

"Listen up, you moustached pig. Half these rails were made by us Irishmen, working like slaves--we practically *were* slaves. You know that?"

"And the other half was us Chinese people."

"In other words, half of everything that runs on these tracks belongs to us Irishmen."

"Add in the Chinese, and that makes it *all* ours."

John's logic was even less sound than that of the moustached man. After all, *he* hadn't been the one to lay down these tracks, and it was the countrymen who did the work that kicked him out in the first place, leaving him to join Jacuzzi's gang.

"So listen up, you swine. As long as you're here, your life is in our hands."

The duo slapped the moustached man and turned to return to the dining room. The moustached man, getting nervous, pathetically tried to plead with John.

"W-w-w-wait! Stop! The white suits are gonna come this way! Please! Let me back inside!"

"I don't think you'll be that bad off. After all, none of *them* are filthy apes. But try to come back inside, and you *will* die."

The door shut mercilessly.

When John and Fang returned, the dining car had regained some semblance of calm. The three corpses were gone, likely moved somewhere by the other cooks. They were all now hard at work wiping the bloodstains from the floors and walls.

As they returned to the counter, John's eyes met those of Isaac and Miria.

"Thank you." He said quietly, but the duo didn't seem to have heard him.

"Oh! Welcome back! Anyway, I guess the head chef here is really really strong!"

"A Legend among Legends!"

Isaac and Miria began to inflate their image of the head chef.

The head chef of the Flying Pussyfoot prioritized his cooking above all else, and refused to leave his station while he was still cooking. There was a rumour that he had once remained at the stove and nursed his food even as a gas explosion occurred right next to him. Of course, the gunfight that had occurred earlier was not nearly enough to distract him from his stew.

"Anyway, that man just now was really horrible! How could he just blame people like that?!"

"He was horrendous!"

"This place isn't filthy at all, and I don't see any monkeys anywhere! How could he be so insulting?"

"He shouldn't insult our intelligence like that!"

John had a thought--was it actually that this couple wasn't defending them, but that they merely didn't understand the moustached man's use of slang?

John broke out into sweat and decided to forget that he had considered the possibility.

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"Who *are* those white suits?" Goose grimaced.

He had heard earlier that a group of men in white suits were in the Second Class cabins, but never had he expected that his men, armed with machine guns, would lose. All he knew about these men in white was the fact that they were a force to be reckoned with.

"Call in anyone who is not currently occupied."

Upon Goose's order, several men left the cabin, and one turned on the telegraph to try and contact the cars in the back.

"Damn it. First Neider, and now this--could this be a test?"

"I don't think this mission's gonna be that easy, Goose." Spike said.

Goose shot a glance at the corner of the cabin, where Chane sat silently with her arms crossed, and said, "You're right. We cannot reach the same heights as Mater Huey by any normal means, after all."

Goose turned his back to Chane and smirked.

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"So Ladd, who are those orchestra guys?" One of the men in white asked Ladd.

"A feast. That's all I know, and that's all that matters. Am I right?" Ladd answered, face overflowing with excitement. His friends were confused by this statement.

"Anyway, just kill off anyone you see who's with the orchestra."

Excited murmurs spread through his crowd of friends. Now that Vicky was dead, there were only ten of them left. The Second Class cabin, which was rather large in its own right, was packed to the brim.

In terms of numbers, they were clearly outmatched. But the difference did not matter to them.

"All right! Now we can each take two or three! And they'll all be bastards who seriously think they've got the upper hand!"

The excitement soon gave way to cheer, charging the cabin with restless energy.

"But this isn't even a joke. Other than the ones in the dining car, the only ones in Second Class are us and those black suits."

Inside the cabin next to Ladd's were three corpses. Ladd's friends had taken care of them while Ladd was in the dining car.

The three black suits were Lemures who had come to take over the Second Class cars. They were all killed in different ways, the only common thread linking their deaths being the fact that none of them were killed instantly.

"Anyway, it's dangerous to all gather like this. Let's split up. I'm gonna go tell Lua about the whole plan."

Ladd slammed open the door, armed with a single rifle.

"Meet back here whenever! Come back whenever you feel like you've done your fill!"

There was no dissent. The white suits scattered throughout the train, planning to destroy the black shadows and eat away at the train.

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Neither Goose nor Ladd had yet to realized the fact that a monster that outmatched them all was aboard this train.

And the one who knew of this was the most cowardly man on the train.

"What... is this...?"

Jacuzzi's face was white as a sheet. He stood rooted to the floor, unable to so much as twitch.

He had run to the conductor's compartment, gasping for breath. And there, he was greeted by a horrific sight.

"No! No! It can't be! They're... dead? Huh? Please wake up! Please let this all be some horrible joke! Please, Mr. Conductor! You gotta wake up!"

The last car had been dyed red with blood.

Before Jacuzzi lay the mangled corpse of a conductor.

And there was a second corpse lying beside the first.

One of the conductors had been simply murdered.

The other had been badly mutilated. His neck was twisted at an unnatural angle, and his face and right arm were completely gone.

Perhaps they were smashed or bitten off--whatever the case, the mess left behind assured Jacuzzi that this was not the work of a bladed weapon. If it *was* a blade, it could not have been anything but a serrated saw.

The incandescent light shed an eerie glow on the grotesque scene. Jacuzzi glanced at a puddle of blood in the corner of the cabin.

"It's here. I'm too late. It's already caught up to us...!" Jacuzzi muttered to himself. There were no tears in his tone--was it despair eating away at him, or defeat?

The nauseatingly clear blood shone in the light, looking almost like wine.

Jacuzzi then mumbled the name of the monster--

"'Rail Tracer'..."

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Back in the dining car, Mrs. Beriam was speaking to her daughter.

"Listen well, Mary. You have to go hide somewhere with Czeslaw. Just stay hidden until tomorrow morning, and your father will save us. Everything will be just fine."

The dining car was surprisingly quiet. The passengers all remained in their seats, a range of expressions on their faces, from despair to hope. Other than the occasional wail, the car was nearly silent.

Of course, no one was in the mood to order any food.

"Now, Czes. You must take care of Mary."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The boy nodded energetically, and left the dining car with the girl's hand in his. He opened the door and carefully looked around.

"Aren't you going to hide?" John asked from behind the counter.

"No, it's better this way. I don't know why, but it looks as though both sides are after me... And if I were to hide, it would cause trouble for everyone else on board." Mrs. Beriam smiled softly.

"I see. then I suppose it might be the safest for you to stay here. And I doubt that even people like *them* would kill a couple of children."

'Of course, I can't speak for the boxer in the white suit.' John thought to himself, but did not voice his opinion. He was sure that Mrs. Beriam also knew this, which was all the more reason for her to have the children hide away somewhere.

Suddenly, Isaac and Miria raised their voices.

"All right, we're off!"

"We're on our way!"

They simultaneously got off their bar stools.

"Where are you guys going?" Fang asked. Isaac answered without missing a beat.

"We're going to find Jacuzzi, of course!"

"And Nice!"

"It's dangerous out there!" Fang tried to stop them, but they were undeterred.

"That's *exactly* why we're going to find them!"

"We're going to rescue them!"

"I don't know what's going on with those black suits, the white suits, and the man with the knife, but I'll fend them off with my guns and run away!"

"Amazing!"

Isaac thumbed his empty holster and whistled dramatically.

"I-I see..."

John also backed down. Not only that, the fact that he was acquainted with the man with the knife made it somewhat awkward for him to try and stop the couple.

'Anyway, what in the world was Nick thinking?'

As John tilted his head, Isaac and Miria left through the back door.

At the same time, the front door opened. The passengers screamed simultaneously and fell to the floor.

From beyond the door stepped in the men in black, armed with machine guns.

"Good evening. You're Mrs. Beriam, I take it?" The leader of the men asked Mrs. Beriam. The other men in black were glaring at the other passengers, brandishing their guns.

"My name is Goose. I hope you will understand that we have some business for which we need your husband's cooperation. Please, come this way."

Mrs. Beriam harshly glared at the man called Goose.

"Promise me that you won't hurt any of the other passengers."

"Haha! I'm afraid you're in no position to bargain. Of course, I suppose it's true that the fate of the passengers rides solely on the decision made by your husband and the government."

Goose began to lead away Mrs. Beriam at gunpoint, then realized that someone was missing.

"Where might your daughter be?" He asked with the faintest hints of a frown. Mrs. Beriam looked down and bit her lip. Her hands were tightly clenched into fists.

"Where is she?"

Mrs. Beriam raised her head. There were tears in her eyes, and her lips and palms were bleeding.

"The men in the white suits... they took my daughter away...!"

'Oh, so that's what she's planning.' John thought, and marvelled at Mrs. Beriam's acting skills. She had completely transformed herself from the dignified image she gave off earlier.

"The men in white, you say? Who are they?" The way Goose said 'men in white' was rather contemptuous, but he soon concealed his discontentment.

"I'm not sure. They were also after me, but they took away my daughter first... oh... oh, Mary..."

"You have my sympathies." Goose said, not shaken by Mrs. Beriam's extraordinary acting as he gestured to his subordinate. "But I'm afraid you're going to have to come with us."

Mrs. Beriam left the dining car, held at gunpoint by Goose's men.

"All right. Get into teams of two and take shifts watching this car." Goose ordered.

He turned to leave, but suddenly noticed the sound of wind blowing through the car. He followed the sound to an open window beside one of the tables. It was nothing unusual, but something about it nagged at Goose's intuition. He pointed a gun at the man who sat by the window.

"You. Who opened this window?"

"Aah!" Surprised by the sudden threat, the man made a noise rather like Jacuzzi and yelled. "N-n-no! It wasn't me! I-it was the woman in fatigues!"

"A woman in fatigues?"

"Y-y-yes! When the shootout started, she suddenly opened the window and climbed outside! Really! I'm telling you the truth, please don't shoot me!"

Goose asked no more of the man and looked out the window. Right above him he could see part of the ornamentation on the outer wall, within an arm's reach from the window. There was a line of uneven surfaces along the wall, and it would be possible to climb onto the roof with some effort.

'A woman in fatigues.'

Goose had seen her before, near the freight holds. Who in the world was she?

Goose added her to a mental list of dangerous elements, and left the dining car without a fuss.

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At the same time, an underground casino in New York.

"C'mon, Firo! Can't you make the roulettes here a little easier to win?"

"Sorry, but you shouldn't be saying that on another Family's turf, Berga."

Two men were talking in the luxurious and lively casino. One of them was a rugged giant, and the other was a young man.

The giant called Berga was one of the bosses of a tiny New York mafia family, the Gandors. He and his two brothers were the leaders, and the three of them were at once the bosses of the organization.

The young man called Firo was the youngest executive of the Martillo Family, an organization called the Camorra. He was also a friend of Isaac and Miria.

On a related note, because Firo was the manager of this underground casino, it was normally unthinkable for Berga, the boss of another organization, to be here. But Firo and the Gandor brothers had grown up like family in the same apartment. Of course, business was still business and individual loyalties had to be respected.

"Besides, do you even have time to be hanging out here? I heard you guys were nearly at all-out war with the Runoratas." Firo mentioned the name of a mafia family that had recently begun to expand into New York.

"Like you don't know already. I'm here 'cause someone might get attacked on our turf. And I know for a fact that the Runoratas won't touch the Martillo Family."

"Don't get us involved, Berga. Just go home." Firo said, and suddenly raised his right hand and gave a signal.

The very next moment, a group of men surrounded one man who had been on a huge winning streak at the poker table in the corner. One of the men pulled up the lone man's arm.

Several cards fluttered to the floor from his sleeve.

The man was soon dragged away into a small room, despair written all over his face.

"I have to get home soon. I gotta pick up someone at Pennsylvania Station tomorrow, so I really wanna get some rest, you know? Go back before the Runoratas find you here, Berga."

Berga tilted his head.

"What, you too?"

"Huh?"

"We're going to Pennsylvania Station tomorrow too. I thought pick-up duty was *our* job."

"Who're you talking about?"

"Who're *you* talking about? You said you were going *tomorrow!*" Berga started getting angry.

"Calm down, Berga. I'm going to pick up Isaac and Miria tomorrow. You saw them at my promotion party last year, remember?" Firo said.

"Huh? Oh. Ohhhhh! What, those idiots?"

"Speak for yourself... anyway, don't make such a scary face. Who're *you* going to pick up? Gimme a name."

Berga grinned.

"Claire."

Firo's eyes widened.

"Claire? Claire's coming in?"

"The one and only!"

"I see... This is gonna be good. So Claire's gonna help you out... Then I guess Runorata's gonna be history." Firo mused, driven to predict the Runoratas' defeat at the mere mention of the name.

"Course, we can't say for sure that we're gonna win."

"What do you mean you're not sure? Who around here doesn't know the name 'Vino'? If you lose with that freelance killer on your side, you don't deserve to call yourselves competent." Firo whispered. It wasn't in good sense to loudly refer to an active assassin by name.

"If there's one thing you can count on Claire for, it's skill. Not even a genius could appear out of nowhere and kill anyone, anytime!"

"Quiet down, you big lug. Then again, Claire's really at the top when it comes to a sense of judgement in fights and athletic skills. You gotta wonder how arms that thin can pull off so much."

It seemed that the name 'Claire' was equated with some concept of 'absolute power' between these two.

"Hey, don't tell me Claire's coming on the Flying Pussyfoot?" Firo asked suddenly.

"Yeah! That's the one! What, so they're on the same train?"

Firo suddenly went silent. He paused for a moment, then raised his head.

"Actually, Maiza says he's going come tomorrow, too." He said hesitantly, mentioning his superior.

"Huh? *Maiza's* going to pick up those idiots personally?"

"No, not *them*. Actually, he has another acquaintance who's coming to see him on that train..."

Firo hesitated, then mumbled in a quiet voice.

"An old friend of his. One of the alchemists who became immortal two hundred years ago."

<=>

Ladd headed to the conductor's compartment to find Lua. He had to pass through the Third Class car and the freight holds if he wanted to get there, and he was certain that the black suits had taken over Third Class.

He amused himself with fantasies of killing the black suits, when he noticed someone loitering around at the coupling.

Ladd aimed his rifle at the figure and spoke to the man.

"Whoa there! Don't move, buddy. You scared? What're you doing, fiddling around here?"

He then realized that the silhouette was not one of the black suits, but the grey 'magician' he had passed by when he boarded the train.

The magician turned to look at Ladd, and spoke without a hint of fear of the weapon he was faced with.

"Are you not allies of the men in black?"

It was definitely a man's voice.

"Nope." Ladd answered, not lowering the rifle. Was this man an enemy, or an ally?

"I was just on the roof to get some fresh air. But now it seems my cabin's been taken over."



From his voice Ladd surmised that the man was about forty to fifty years old. He wasn't young, but he didn't sound very old, either.

The couplings on this train had no walls or roofs, only railings to prevent falls. There were steel ladders built into the walls beside the coupling doors, so anyone could climb onto the roofs if they wanted to.

The magician looked up at the night sky with a melancholy expression. Seeing his face, Ladd lowered his rifle.

"Hey. Mister magician. The Second Class cabins are all free. Use any of 'em you like."

The magician then laughed from behind the cloth over his mouth.

"Thank you, my good man. 'Magician', you say? Wonderful. Of course, I suppose that's not too far removed from my real profession." He said, as he passed by Ladd with a black bag in hand.

"Hm? What's in the bag?"

"Would you like to take a look? I don't believe it will interest you much." The magician turned around and opened it.

Inside were all kinds of medicine bottles, strange apparatuses, and books written in a language Ladd had never seen before.

"You're right. Go ahead... Oh, right! If one of the guys dressed the same as me tries to stop you, tell 'em that Ladd gave you permission. They'll let ya through."

The magician nodded, closed his bag, and entered one of the Second Class cabins.

"Tch." Ladd watched him disappear. "Agh, damn it! What's with that look?! It's like he doesn't care *when* he dies! It's like he's already *dead*! I can't deal with guys like that." He complained, then remembered Lua and began heading for the conductor's compartment.

"Course, if he were a woman, he'd be my type exactly."

He recalled Lua's eyes--dull like those of a dead fish--and looked up at the sky from the coupling.

"The roof, eh? This is gonna get *fun*."

<=>

A First Class cabin.

When Goose and the others returned to their cabin with Mrs. Beriam in tow, they found Spike in front of the telegraph, looking some flavour of uneasy. Goose swallowed the urge to ask him about it immediately, worried that Mrs. Beriam might notice that they were having problems. It was only after she was escorted to another First Class cabin that he spoke to Spike.

"What's going on?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with the telegraph, but we lost contact with the guys in the freight hold."

Three men had been stationed to keep watch over their remaining equipment in the freight hold.

Goose sent out an order to the freight hold, but no matter how long he waited, there was no response.

"Maybe the bastards in the white suits got 'em." Spike suggested, scratching his head.

"We have no time for guesses, Spike. What we need now is a clear picture of the situation."

Goose gathered together a new group of three to investigate the freight hold, and sent them off.

All of a sudden he realized that Chane was no longer in her corner of the cabin.

"Spike. Where has Chane gone?"

"Oh, looks like she's gone to hunt down some of the white suits. I saw her pick up a couple of weapons on the way out."

Chane the fanatic may have been a member of the Lemures, but she only followed Huey's orders--nothing else. She was only giving her silent cooperation to this mission for the sake of Huey's freedom. Perhaps she even considered Goose and the others as nothing but pawns to achieve her goal.

Goose looked around, making sure that Chane was nowhere within earshot, and revealed the truth to Spike.

"We need to have her do as much of our work as possible. After all, she won't live to see tomorrow afternoon."

<=>

A couple walked through the Second Class car. The lights were on, but they were little comfort from the overwhelming darkness of the world outside.

"It's so dark here. I'm getting nervous." Isaac noted feebly.

"It's cold! And scary!" Miria agreed quietly but energetically.

"What? It's all right! I'm not cold *or* scared! So don't worry and follow me, Miria!" Isaac boasted, doing an about-face.

"Wow! You're so dependable, Isaac!"

No one reacted to their conversation. Only silence enveloped the corridor.

"It's so quiet. It's as if no one's around. I wonder where all the men in white from Second Class went off to?"

"There's only one path all the way down the train!"

"Maybe the Rail Tracer's gotten to them already."

"Eek!"

"We'd better hurry... I may be armed, but not even a prizefighter can defeat the Rail Tracer!"

"It's an unbeatable monster! Like Frankenstein and Count Dracula!"

"Miria, Frankenstein is the name of the *scientist*, not the monster."

"Really? So what's the monster's name?"

"Huh... I think it was... Mary Shelley? I think his full name was Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley."

"You're so smart, Isaac! But isn't 'Mary' a girl's name?"

"There are plenty of men out there with feminine names! Besides, there's no telling what kind of name a *monster* might have!" Isaac declared triumphantly.

His declaration was answered by the distant sounds of machine gun fire.

"Was that from Third Class?"

"No, it must have been further away! I think it might be the freight hold!"

<=>

Suddenly, a man's voice came over the radio in Goose's cabin.

Crackle... [-lp! This is-] *crackle...*[freight hold-] *crackle...* [This is the freight hold! Someone please answer!]

There was so much static that Spike scrambled to turn the dials. They normally communicated by telegraph, so the fact that they received a radio transmission could only mean that this was a dire emergency.

"This is Spike. What's the situation?"

[Help! Help! Send backup immediately! The other two are dead! Well, they just disappeared so I can't say for sure, but they're gone! They just disappeared!]

"What?! Who are you going up against?! The white suits?!"

[White suit? N-no! That's not it! That *thing* can't be human! I-I didn't get a good look at it, but... that thing's a monster! You can't beat... that... thing...]

"Hey! What's going on?! Answer me!"

The voice over the radio grew more and more distant. It seemed that their ally was facing down his foe with his back to the radio.

[No... stay back... no, no, no, no... NOOOOOOOOOO!]

The sound of machine gun fire carried through the radio. The sounds came out of the speaker as a jumbled mess of noises, tearing apart the atmosphere of the First Class cabin.

Spike unconsciously put his hands over his ears, but by then the gunshots had ended.

Then, they heard the sound of something being thrown onto the floor, followed by a quiet groan. The groan faded within seconds.

The silence on both ends of the radio weighed heavily on the men in black suits.

The silence was occasionally broken by the sound of something like footsteps walking across a puddle.

Spike and the others were certain that it was no pool of water--it was the blood that had been spilled from the ally they had just been speaking with.

Something was walking over this pool--the thing that had just killed one of them. The being on the other side of the radio, which made its powerful presence known through nothing but sound, became a very real fear in the minds of the terrorists.

"Someone go and call back the men who just left for the freight hold." Goose said gravely, offsetting the stillness.

There was someone other than the men in white who was getting in their way. Goose punched the wall with a scowl.

However, there was something that nagged at Goose--something about the possible identity of the 'monster' on the other end of the radio. Of course, he had no way to be certain.

'That woman in fatigues who disappeared from the dining car...'

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Mary Beriam was inside a broom closet in the Second Class washroom, quiet as a mouse.

"I'll go check out the other cars, so hide in here until I get back, Mary. You have to stay here, okay? Don't worry, I'll be right back." Czes had said as he departed. Mary felt as though her heart would burst from terror.

After a while, she suddenly heard a voice from the direction of the corridor--a bright and cheerful voice that did not fit in with the situation at hand. It was Isaac. Having ascertained the identity of the voice, Mary wondered for a moment if she should leave the broom closet.

Suddenly, she heard the distant sounds of machine gun fire. Mary flinched, covered her ears, and crouched down. She was too scared to move. She was so terrified that she couldn't even cry for help.

Isaac's voice soon faded away.

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"What in the world happened here?"

"Whoa. Jacuzzi. What's... going on?"

The conductor's compartment had been turned into a veritable slaughterhouse. A pair of familiar voices spoke to the stunned Jacuzzi.

Relief entered Jacuzzi's eyes as he recognized his friends.

"You're all right... I'm so glad you're safe... I was so scared... sniff... What a relief..."

"Me and Donny, anyway."

"Huh? Then what about Nick and Jack?"

Nice worriedly bowed her head.

"They got caught. Remember the orchestra in black? They're probably train robbers too."

"Wh-what?"

"Jack got caught... The people in white got caught... Nick got caught, too."

"Uh... huh?"

Nice explained the situation: First, Jack had gone into the freight hold, saying that he would tie up the watchmen.

The orchestra was using the first of the three freight cars, which meant that the loot that Jacuzzi's gang was after would be in either the second or third car.

Nice and Donny waited for Jack in the second freight car, but Jack did not return.

They left to see what had happened, when they suddenly saw a bound Jack leaving the freight hold. Men in black appeared from behind him, armed with machine guns.

"Jack and the man were coming in our direction, so we hid in the corner. They threw Jack into the hold in the second freight car."

"Two guys. With machine guns. Came out into hall. A man and woman in white came... and got caught. Nick came at the end, and got caught. That's all."

"D-don't end it like that! So what happened?! Are Jack and Nick all right?"

"Calm down. One of the three men are watching all the hostages right now. That means they're still alive, so they should still be safe."

At first, Nice and Donny worried that Jacuzzi had also been caught. They stayed put for a while to see what they could do, then determined that the men in black had no intention of budging from their stations. They then decided to check the conductor's compartment.

"And that's how we got here to find you in this mess. What happened here, Jacuzzi? Don't worry. We know you didn't do it."

"Th-thank you, Nice... B-but, this is terrible! The Rail Tracer! The Rail Tracer is here! We have to get away from here or it's gonna get us, too! Quick! We gotta save Nick and Jack and make a run-"

Suddenly, they heard the distant sounds of machine gun fire.

"Gunshots...?"

Nice's lone eye widened from under her glasses.

"Wh-what's happening? What was that gunfire just now? What were they shooting?! Who died? Huh?!"

What could these sounds have meant? All kinds of possibilities made themselves known to Jacuzzi's imagination, compelling him to draw all kinds of conclusions.

"Sniff... aaah... Niiice... Donny..."

His brain was urging him to get away--to leave this train as soon as possible. But his heart was racing towards a different conclusion.

Jacuzzi could picture the faces of John and Fang. He remembered Isaac, Miria, Czes, the Beriam family, and the faces of the people he had seen in passing in the dining car. Overlapping with these images he saw the corpses of the conductors lying on the floor before him.

Before he knew it, Jacuzzi had swallowed his thoughts of escape and come to a different decision.

"We'll do everything we can to get those black suits and the Rail Tracer off this train... Sniff... Huh? Wh-what am I saying? No, no, we should be running away, but... but..."

They were a group of incurable delinquents. They bootlegged liquor and killed people--which was not excused by the fact that the men they killed were mafiosi. They were already irredeemable criminals, and all of this was his own fault.

But Jacuzzi had always acted out of what he thought to be the best of intentions. He believed that the Prohibition against liquor was wrong, and he did not like the fact that the mafia abused this system in order to make fortunes and commit murders left and right. This was why he had determined to personally make delicious, affordable liquor to sell to people.

Before he knew it, he was surrounded by a group of delinquents who called him their leader.

When his friends were killed, he fiercely fought back against the Russo Family. And the other night, though he did not intend to do so, he ended up avenging the deaths of his friends.

Jacuzzi was aboard this train in order to steal a certain cargo from the Flying Pussyfoot. This cargo, which Nice also wanted, was safe to sell as long as the insides were discarded. Not only that, it was dangerous to let the cargo arrive in New York.

If it were to reach its destination, the cargo would likely cause the deaths of many people. Jacuzzi could not stand by and let this happen. He knew that he was being a hopeless hypocrite, but he was afraid that allowing this to happen would make him a worthless human being.

And now he planned on dragging his friends into an even greater act of hypocrisy.

He wanted to save the passengers. It was a childishly foolish thought for the leader of a group, who should be looking out for his subordinates above all else.

But he knew very well that Nice and Donny would agree with a smile. The idea of abusing their trust made him nauseous, but Jacuzzi did not hesitate.

He was already a criminal who had broken the law and killed people. What more would he have to lose through a few more acts of hypocrisy?

He was done making excuses. Jacuzzi knew better than anyone that no one would accept such flimsy pretences, so this was why the excuse was directed towards himself. He knew it was a selfish thought, but he didn't care.

In the end, he was still a criminal.

After a moment of silence, he made his decision known. How much courage had it taken him to express in words something that a so-called "Warrior of Justice" would be able to say without even a blink of the eye? Tears were flowing down his face, but there wasn't so much as a hint of fear in Jacuzzi's eyes.

"We'll beat them ourselves. Both the black suits *and* the Rail Tracer."

The reluctance disappeared from Jacuzzi's expression. His sharp eyes became a perfect match for the tattoo on his face.

He waited for Nice and Donny to nod, then left the blood-covered cabin.

His demonic, tattoo-covered face was covered in warm tears.

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Mary was frozen still in the broom closet.

Some time had passed, but there was still no sign of Czes's return.

Perhaps he had already been caught.

Her fear ballooned in the pitch-black darkness as tears ran down her cheeks.

Soon, she heard the sounds of footsteps approaching from the hallways. Could it be Czes, or Isaac?

Mary tried to put her ear against the wall to listen more closely, but accidentally knocked over a mop in the process.

The small but distinctive noise rang out through the closet.

The sound was so clear that Mary thought her heart would burst.

'Please don't let that person have heard the noise...'

Her wish, however, went unheard. The footsteps stopped.

Soon, she heard the washroom door open. The person likely couldn't tell exactly where the noise had come from. This ruled out the possibility that it was Czes.

Fear welled up in her heart. Tears overflowed from her eyes, and Mary wanted nothing more than to be able to run away screaming.

She buried such thoughts and desperately put everything she had into keeping herself quiet. She remembered her mother's face and waited for time to pass.

But time eventually brought her to a cruel fate.

The footsteps in front of the washroom slowly approached in her direction, and stopped right in front of the closet.

There was no locking mechanism of any sort on the closet door. A simple turn of the doorknob would deprive Mary of her shield.

But the door had yet to open.

'I'm all right. I'm all right. Besides, it might be Mr. Isaac. It might be Mr. Jacuzzi. Or it could be mama... maybe it's mama. It just has to be. mama's here to pick me up. please, mama... mama...'

In Mary's mind, the person on the other side of the door could be no one but her own mother. Despair gave way to hope, and she could no longer picture any other situation.

The door slowly opened.

Mary wanted to cry for her mother and leap out of the broom closet, but she could not do so.

The hand that appeared between the door and the frame belonged to a man. Following the large hand Mary could see a snow-white sleeve.

Mary's constructed fantasies began to collapse. The sound of destruction gave way to her screaming.

But her mouth was then covered by the hand of a man in white.

"Found you~!"

The droopy-eyed man grinned maniacally as he threw open the door.

"Don't scream now, haha! I feel a bit bad for Ladd, but I guess I'll be taking the girl!"

Mary resisted with all her might, but the man in white was stronger than most other adults. Mary desperately tried to break free regardless.

"Stop struggling! Ahaha! I'll drop you out the window before Ladd catches me!"

He tried to drag her out of the broom closet.

"I'm not like Ladd! I only like picking off people who're *weaker* than me! Hehehehe...Hee-!"

The man's laughter suddenly stopped. He froze still for a moment, and Mary felt his grip loosen. She took the chance to push him forward--the man fell to the floor without resistance.

A pool of red spread over the corridor as the body lay spread-eagle before Mary. She slowly looked up, oblivious to what had just happened.

There was a woman standing there.

"Eek!" Mary screamed softly.

The woman was wearing a black dress. She held a knife, blood dripping from the blade.

But that was not what Mary was afraid of. she had caught sight of an inexplicable, terrifying glint in the woman's eyes.

Mary ended up looking directly into the deep, pristine eyes of Chane, the woman in the black dress.

Unfortunately, Mary found herself calling out a completely different name. In her current state, she could not see Chane's appearance as anything but that of a certain monster.

"The... The Rail Tracer.."

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"Okay. First, we'll take care of the guards. I'll lure `em out, so you two have to jump him as soon as he walks out the door."

"Yeah. Leave. To us."

They were in the corridor outside the freight hold where Jack and Nick were being held. Jacuzzi knocked on the door.

If Nice and Donny had seen correctly, there should only be one man guarding the hold. Jacuzzi took two steps back from the door and waited, leaning against the window.

But no matter how long he waited, there was no response. Perhaps they needed a password of some sort? Jacuzzi walked up to the door and knocked again. There was still no answer.

Jacuzzi then took a deep breath and took hold of the doorknob. The door squeaked open rather easily.

The cargo hold was dimly lit. There were two silhouettes in the corner. One of them was crouched down as if in pain, and the other was glaring in the direction of the door, bound in ropes.

"Huh? Jacuzzi, 'that you?"

"Nick? I'm so glad you're safe-"

Jacuzzi's joy soon turned to worry. He noticed that Jack, crouched down beside Nick, was sporting a bloodied face.

"Jack!"

"Don't worry. It's not gonna kill him." Nick bowed his head angrily.

"How could I *not* worry?! What happened to you guys?"

"That's what I wanna know. Setting aside those black suits, what's up with that lunatic in the white suit?"

Nick explained what had happened to him after he was caught by the black suits.

When he was dragged into the freight hold, he noticed that several people had been brought there before him.

"Jack!"

"Whoa, they got you too, Nick?"

One of the three restrained people was his friend Jack. The other two were a man and a woman, both dressed in white.

The people in white would not speak, no matter how much he tried to talk to them. Nick gave up on them and tried to talk to Jack, but relented when he noticed that the guard, armed with a machine gun, was keeping a close eye on them.

When some time had passed, the guard opened the door and went outside. He had probably gone to switch shifts with one of his allies.

Quite some time had passed, but no one came inside. Nick and Jack struggled to untie themselves in the meantime, when the door suddenly slammed open.

When they looked up in confusion, they saw a man dressed in white. Or rather, he was dressed in a white suit with red speckles all over his clothing.

"Thank you! Fuck you! The star is here!" The man yelled unashamedly. He struck a strange pose as he stepped into the room and did a pirouette.

"Hm? What's this? What's this? There's no guards, no nothin'! What a bore! But anyway, I'm so *glad* you're all right, Luaaaaa!"

"You weren't worried about me at all?" The bound white suit spoke for the first time. Meanwhile, the woman mumbled, "Thank you" almost inaudibly.

Nick and Jack grinned to each other, relieved at this stroke of good fortune. However, the man in white only untied the other white suit and the woman and tried to leave.

"H-hey! Aren't you gonna untie us, too, buddy?"

The man turned towards Nick and Jack with a look of confusion.

"Hm? Why should I do that? What good is it for me if I untie you? You gonna do something for me? If you were a woman, I'd ask for a kiss! But you're a couple of guys! Why don't you just *die* like this? Maybe if you died, a couple of women are gonna be born into the world instead! So just die, all right? Because that's your *fate*. And if you try to cross destiny, you die!"

The man spun around in place and poked them mercilessly. Jack, red-faced with anger, was provoked into raising his voice.

"Shut your trap, you son-of-a-bitch! Untie us now!"

The excited men didn't even try to retort, as he giddily stepped towards the exit with his friends.

"Hold up there, you piece of shit! I'm not done talkin' to ya!"

"Stop it, Jack, let's just try and untie ourselves."

It was at that very moment--the moment Nick called Jack's name--that a face poked in through the freight hold door. It was the strange man who had stepped out just now.

"Hm? What's this? Did I just hear the name 'Jack'?"

He skipped over and quickly untied Jack.

"What're you up to?" Nick asked, but the man was only looking at Jack.

"So your name's Jack, huh? This is interesting! It's finally time to see if everyone named Jack is good at boxing or not! Start!"

Just as the man verbally announced the beginning of the match, he thrust his fist deep into Jack's face.

"It was real bad afterwards. He just kept beatin' on Jack the whole time... then we heard gunshots from the car in front of this one, and he finally stopped."

Upon hearing the gunfire, the man in the speckled white suit twisted his face into a grin and ran off towards the sound of gunshots.

"Jack might've died if he hadn't stopped." Nick mumbled. Jacuzzi checked on Jack's face again.

He was breathing with some difficulty, and his his face was so swollen that it was impossible to even tell what colour his eyes were.

Jacuzzi narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists. Nick took a step away from him and whispered to Nice and Donny, "Hey. Don't tell me Jacuzzi's gettin' serious?"

Nice nodded. "Yes. I haven't seen him like this since the Russo family killed eight of our guys." She whispered.

"That was a pretty big ruckus."

"He knocked over eighteen Russo speakos in one day. And he was crying the whole way through."

This was what made Jacuzzi's face known, leading to the spread of his wanted posters among the Russo Family. He had only returned to his cowardly old self after the funerals of their murdered friends.

They had been unable to find proper graves for them, so they dug up an empty plot of land in a graveyard. It was a better end, at least, than having to bury them under the floorboards as people did in the slums. Several days later, they dragged over a priest they were acquainted with to hold a simple funeral for their friends. It was only afterwards that Jacuzzi finally seemed to have regained his fear, apologizing to his friends with his head bowed.

"He doesn't look as angry as before, but did something happen?"

"Well... I'll explain later."

Jacuzzi had already stepped outside, so there was no time to chitchat. Nick was supporting Jack on his shoulders, not caring that his clothes were getting soaked with blood.

"Whoa. I'll. Carry Jack."

Donny took Jack instead, and the delinquents left the freight hold.

Jacuzzi then noticed that the width of the freight hold was much too narrow to match the length of the car. He also noticed that the colour of the back wall was slightly different from that of the floor and ceilings.

He was now certain that their target was hidden within these walls.

"What's up, Jacuzzi?"

"I-it's nothing, Nice. Let's go."

Jacuzzi did not make his realization known--after all, they still had time left, and they had another job to do right now.

But he also knew that, depending on the circumstances, he might eventually have to come back for this secret cargo--the large quantity of a new model of explosives, and the bombs that were refined from them.

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"How 'bout this? What do you think? Isn't it *gorgeous*? Exciting, isn't it? Oh, what the hell? Damn it! I shoulda just walked in normally instead of walking across the roof!"

Ladd was dancing in the corridor in front of the door of the first of the three freight cars.

"What happened...?"

Lua's dark eyes dimmed even more. She was looking directly into the freight hold, beyond the open door.

Suddenly, they heard a yell from the end of the corridor.

"There! I see 'em!"

Nice and Jacuzzi tried to stop Nick from shouting, but it was too late. Nice and Jacuzzi braced themselves, but the white suits were merely looking in their direction, nothing more.

"What about the black suits?"

Jacuzzi and the others cautiously walked up towards the men in white. He was planning to ask them why they hurt Jack, and depending on the answer, he would even resort to violence.

But Ladd's words stopped their plans in their tracks.

"Hey there! So lil' Jack was with *you guys*? Is that *loser* who tried to fight a machine gun with a towel still alive, **Jacuzzi Splot**?" He asked as soon as he caught sight of Jacuzzi.

"?!" Jacuzzi was shocked. How did this man know his name?

"Hm? Where are my manners? My name's Ladd Russo. And that should tell you exactly how I know your name. And if that doesn't tip you off, you're a total idiot, but I guess that's pretty fun in its own way, too!"

"Russo...!"

Jacuzzi and the others tensed. They didn't know how this man was connected to the don, Placido, but there was no doubt about his affiliation to their enemy.

"What, so you recognize me? That's too bad. I was hoping for some excitement. Ah, well. So why're you on this train, anyway? What makes you think you're *good* enough for this place? We're gonna take over the damn thing, y'know? We're gonna kill 'bout half of the passengers-- or maybe all of 'em! If you don't wanna get killed by us, just jump off and die! Don't get in our way!" Ladd argued, gesturing as if shooing away a dog.

Splash.

Jacuzzi was interrupted before he could even speak by a sudden, clear sound.

"...?"

The sound had happened just as Ladd gesticulated to shoo Jacuzzi away.

The waves spreading under Ladd's foot explained everything about the sound.

A pool of red liquid oozed out from inside the freight hold. It was identical to the scene from inside the conductor's compartment.

"You curious 'bout this room? Why don't ya come take a look? If you've got the guts to do it, anyway." Ladd snickered, trying to provoke Jacuzzi. But Jacuzzi's gang stayed put.

"Cautious, aren't ya? They say that being cautious and cowardly are two different things, but doesn't being cautious mean that you're a coward, too? Which one are you?" Ladd laughed. Jacuzzi glared back coldly.

"We don't have time to face you guys right now. But I'll make sure you pay for this later."

"Pretty daring, ain't ya, Little Crybaby? You're completely different from before. The conductor bully you around before you got here?"

"The conductors are both dead. It wasn't you guys, was it?" Jacuzzi asked.

Ladd and the others visibly reacted.

"They're dead? *Both* of 'em?"

"Yeah."

"Both? There wasn't anyone else there?"

"?"

Jacuzzi frowned. Why was Ladd being so particular about this point?

"Let's go... we're off to the conductor's compartment." Ladd said to his two friends, and walked over in Jacuzzi's direction.

Jacuzzi and the others tensed. Nick took out his knife, and Nice took out a small bomb and a zippo lighter. But Ladd put his hands in his pockets and passed right by them with disinterest plastered over his eyes.

"You're in luck. I don't have time for you right now."

Ladd's excitement had faded. His tone almost sounded anxious.

The moment Ladd's gang passed them by completely, Nick spoke up.

"Hey, Jacuzzi. Can we just let 'em go like that?"

"Yeah. It's all right. We have other business to take care of first."

Jacuzzi had trouble believing that Ladd would really follow up with his threat to kill all the passengers, and decided to prioritize the defeat of the orchestra in black and the Rail Tracer.

The bloody freight hold in front of them also concerned Jacuzzi.

Just as he stepped in front of the door, however, Ladd yelled at them from the other end of the car, just about to step out onto the coupling.

"And just to let you know, *we're* not the ones responsible for *that* mess!"

Jacuzzi wordlessly turned around and stepped onto the bloodstained carpet. He turned to look upon the sight.

Initially, Nick thought that a cask of wine had been spilled in the freight hold.

Jacuzzi and the others, meanwhile, had seen a very similar sight in the conductor's compartment. They had no such trouble in recognizing the scene.

The room was drenched in blood. The incandescent light reflecting off the pools of red gave off an eerie gleam, making the blood on the floor seem almost *warm*. But the warmth instantly turned to fear as they looked upon the object in the middle of the room.

The thing lying in the middle of the room was wearing a black tuxedo.

It was easy to tell that it was no longer a person, but an object--something other than the massive amounts of blood was enough to tell them so.

The black suit's corpse was missing its entire lower body.

The incision could by no means be called clean. In fact, it looked more like the man had literally been torn in two. Nick remained silent for a moment, then made a dash for the corridor window.

They heard the window opening and the sound of intense vomiting. Jacuzzi and Donny looked upon the corpse, and Nice's lone eye carefully assessed their surroundings. The orchestra's cargo was stacked up in huge piles on either side of the room, and several of the containers were open. A strange machine was placed atop one of the boxes, but it was impossible to tell what it was used for.

The moment Nice looked up, however, her eye stopped in place.

"Jacuzzi..."

Jacuzzi, with Nice's prodding looked around. Nice's eye was fixated on the ceiling.

Jacuzzi looked up in turn, and flinched.

On the ceiling was a bloodstain that was nothing in comparison to the terror on the floor. The problem was, however, the fact that such a large amount of blood got onto the ceiling in the first place.

It would not have been possible for a corpse to spurt out that kind of blood from the floor.

Tears were running down Jacuzzi's face, but he no longer feared the Rail Tracer. Even still, he found himself even more on edge by the sight of the things this monster was capable of.

The bloodstained ceiling was not the only curiosity about this room.

There was a large sliding door on the other side of the room, used to hoist cargo onto the train directly from the platforms. It was currently half-open.

The scenery outside the door was bathed in darkness, looking as if there was a great gaping hole in the wall.

The train was currently passing through a forest, and the dim moonlight lent an eerie glow to the trees they passed, giving them the look of hands gesturing towards the hole.

Even more strangely, they found footprints on the floor.

Not the entire floor had been covered in blood. There were parts of the floor that retained their original colour, upon part of which were a set of red footprints.

Initially Jacuzzi thought that Ladd and the others might have wandered around the room, but soon discarded the thought.

The footprints clearly led in one direction.

After wandering all over the room, the owner of the footprints left this room without a care, through the door that led to the dark outside world.

Nick had finally regained some sense of calm, having thrown up the contents of his stomach.

The moment he was about to turn to his friends, however, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. He had spotted something red beyond the door that led to the coupling at the front of the car.

"Hey, guys? C'mere for a sec."

Jacuzzi and the others could tell from Nick's anxious tone and his pale face that something was wrong.

They carefully stepped out into the hallway and found Nick covered in cold sweat.

"I think there's something over there, near the coupling up ahead."

Jacuzzi and the others were suddenly overcome by an eerie sensation. They had felt as though they were being watched by something from the very coupling that Nick had pointed towards.

"We'll look out on the count of three... One, two, three!"

Everyone but Jack, who was on Donny's shoulder, looked over at the coupling.

And they caught sight of it--the sight of a red creature moving from the coupling to the side of the train.

The thing had moved out of their sight. It was too quick for Jacuzzi's gang to make out its shape, but they were now sure that a red 'something' was wandering the train.

Jacuzzi and the others cautiously stepped out into the coupling, but they could no longer see anything.

They still did not see it, even in the car right before the Third Class car.

"Maybe it climbed onto the roof."

Jacuzzi's gang looked at one another and nodded, then climbed onto the roof of the car.

"You can't climb up here with Jack, so go through the hallway, Donny. Watch out for those black suits, all right?"

"Right. Leave. To me."

Donny nodded, then stepped towards the corridor.

"Wait for us at the next coupling, okay, Donny?" Jacuzzi said from the roof, as he began to move forward against the powerful winds.

<=>

What could those gunshots have been?

Isaac and Miria carefully made their way through the corridors.

There was only one Third Class car on this train. And a huge silhouette stood before the duo, who had opened the door to enter the car.

It was a brown-skinned giant of a man, with a bloodied young man slung over his shoulder.

Donny strode along the hallway of the Third Class car. Things had been fine so far, but he could not let his guard down.

The moment he arrived at the door to the coupling, however, the door opened.

Before him appeared a man dressed like a gunman and a woman dressed like a dancer.

The woman's dress was bright red, almost as if it had been dyed in blood.

An uncomfortable silence enveloped the man and the duo as they faced one another.

"...Excuse us."

Isaac slowly shut the door.

"Wh-wh-wh-what was that?! C-could he have been the Rail Tracer?!"

"Eeeek! We're gonna disappear!"

"Whoa. A r-red dress. That woman... Rail Tracer?"

Three people, separated by a single door, broke out into cold sweat. Silence enveloped them the moment they heard one another's voices. Only the sound of the moving train and the whistling of the wind made its way to the rattling door.

Isaac finally took a deep breath and spoke tentatively.

"Um... Hello?"

"Please answer us!"

"Uh."

They heard a very deep voice responding to Miria's call. It must have come from the giant they had just run into.

"Um... The Rail-! I, uh, mean, are you, by any chance, the Rail Tracer?"

"A monster! ...I mean, are you a monster?"

"Gah... Aren't *you*... Rail Tracer?"

Silence.

"Hey, Miria, are you the Rail Tracer?"

"Nope! Probably not!"

"All right then! I trust you, Miria! Hey there, I asked her, and I don't think she is!"

"Yay! Isaac believes in me!"

"Oh. Glad."

They heard a sigh of relief from the other side of the door.

"Um, so, you're *not* the Rail Tracer?"

"You're not?"

"Uh. No."

"Then what about the man on your shoulder?"

"Are you going to eat him?"

"No. This guy... My friend. Hurt. I carrying... helping him."

Isaac and Miria finally opened the door, their tone doing a 180.

"So you *weren't* a monster after all! I almost ended up paying homage to you! I'm sorry!"

"You *weren't* a monster!"

"You're a *good* guy who's thinking of his friend!"

"Uh... You... Who?"

Donny finally seemed to have lowered his guard as well, speaking to Isaac and Miria in an embarrassed tone.

"Me and Miria? Hm. We may just look like Miria and an ordinary gunman, but in reality, we're *Isaac and Miria!*"

"Amazing, Isaac!"

"Hm...?" Donny was confused. "Wh-what... you doing?"

"We're looking for our friends."

"See, we have to find our friends before they get gobbled up by the Rail Tracer!"

Donny was now convinced that these two were not his enemies. He also realized that the story of the Rail Tracer was more ubiquitous than he initially believed.

Of course, he had no way of knowing that the duo was the cause of the whole Rail Tracer fiasco. Not only that, he had no idea that the friend they were looking for happened to be his leader.

"I get. You. Good people."

A shadow was cast over Isaac's face.

"A good person, huh? I'm afraid that's a *huge* misunderstanding. But I hope that we'll be able to earn that title properly one day."

"That's why we're trying to do good things! Even if the rest of the world doesn't acknowledge us, we'll keep doing good things until *we're* satisfied! We've done bad things before, but we're going to make up for it!"

"Hm?"

Donny found himself inexplicable embarrassed by Miria's smile, which starkly contrasted Isaac's expression. He didn't understand what they were talking about, but Donny was certain that they were good people.

"I hope... you find. Friend. Soon."

"Thank you! I hope that friend of yours on your shoulder gets better soon!"

"A bowl of grandma's chicken soup should do the trick!"

With that, the duo set off for the cars further back.

"Uh. White suits. Dangerous! Stay away." Donny yelled after them. The couple waved and thanked him,

Donny waved back and said goodbye to them, then stepped out onto the coupling and quietly waited for Jacuzzi and the others.

<=>

Meanwhile, in a cabin just one door away from the hallway where Donny ran into Isaac and Miria--

"Hey. You hear something?" A man in white--one of Ladd's friends--asked.

The game of murder had already come to end in this Third Class cabin.

Five people were in the room, with three of them on the floor. One person was kneeling before the men on the floor, and the last man was standing by the door.

The kneeling man looked down at the three still silhouettes and began laughing hysterically.

The ones that still moved were dressed in white.

The ones that lay on the floor were dressed in black.

"Hey, you listenin' to me?"

"Hyaahahahaha! Ahahahahaha! Hahahaha!"

"Hey, you and boss Ladd might get a kick outta killing people, but *I'm* in it for the cash. I need my pay, so *please* try and watch out..."

"Gyahahahahaha!"

The two had eliminated the black suits, and were now taking a breather in the cabin. Perhaps they were still reeling from the excitement of the kill.

The man by the door, sick of his ally's endless guffawing, put his ear to the door.

"Hyahahahaha! Ahahahahaha!"

He could vaguely hear a cheerful woman's voice and a couple of male voices.

"Eeeeeheheheheheh! Waaaaahahahaha!"

"Hey, shut the hell up!" He yelled, without even looking at the other man.

"Hahahahaha! Ahahaha! Aha-!"

The laughter suddenly stopped.

'Finally.'

The white suit did not give the silence much thought as he did his best to concentrate on the voices outside the door.

The male and female voices grew distant. They were likely headed for the cars further back.

"Hey. Let's get goin'."

He put his hand on the doorknob, but heard no response.

"Hey...?!"

He turned around, and went silent.

His ally was no longer there.

The Third Class cabin was by no means small, but it was a very empty space. There was no place for anyone to hide anywhere.

"Hey! Where the hell are you?"

He looked around for his ally, but received no answers or responses.

One thing, however, nagged at him--the wide-open window. He was certain that, up until just a little while ago, the window had been shut.

The uselessly large window was wide enough that a grown man could enter and exit through it with ease.

"Huh... did he fall off the train?"

The white suite tentatively stepped towards the window.

But the moment he raised his leg to step over one of the corpses, 'it' appeared from the window.

A dark red silhouette lunged through the darkness and entered the cabin.

And some time passed.

No silhouettes remained in this cabin.

White suits and black suits alike had been erased completely.

<=>

"Sorry we're late, Donny. The roof was harder to walk across than I thought. We almost even ended up *crawling* across."

Jacuzzi and the others climbed down onto the coupling.

"Jacuzzi. All right?" Donny asked.

"Yeah. The roof was totally clear. No Rail Tracer, no nothing. It was a bit scary, since we had to see by moonlight, but we didn't see any red shadow anywhere."

<=>

"Oh no!"

"Eeek! What is it, Isaac!"

Miria nervously clung to Isaac, scared by his sudden outburst.

"This is terrible! We've forgotten something of the utmost importance!"

"Wh-what could it be?"

Isaac anxiously opened his mouth with utmost seriousness.

"We forgot to buy a gift for Ennis..."

Silence. Miria bowed her head long enough to take a breath, then looked up.

"Wh-whatever will we do? We can't just go visit Ennis empty-handed! No! That's not right! We can't!"

As tears welled in Miria's eyes, Isaac instantly tried to cheer her up.

"Don't cry, Miria. I have a plan."

"What is it, Isaac?"

"We can buy her a gift in New York! After all, they say that *everyone* loves New York gifts."

Cheer returned to Miria's face.

"That's perfect! You're so smart, Isaac!"

"Of course, of course! Ahahaha!"

As the duo laughed, they reached the entrance to the second of the freight cars.

They initially panicked when they came across the corpses and blood in the first of the freight holds, but when they realized that it wasn't Jacuzzi, they suddenly regained their calm.

Isaac drew a crucifix over his chest and sang a hymn with his hands over his heart.

Miria, in turn, mourned the dead through a ceremony from a different denomination.

They remained cool and collected even in the presence of a violently mutilated corpse, as if they were very much used to such sights. But they honestly wished for the dead to rest in peace.

Isaac and Miria then left the room as if nothing had happened.

And they had lost themselves in this irrelevant discussion on their way to the next car.

They were at the entrance to the second freight car. Isaac slowly opened the door, and saw that the corridor was empty.

He sighed in relief and prepared to step forward, when a single gunshot rang out across the car.

"!"

The duo curled up in terror and hurriedly shut the coupling door.

"Wh-wh-what was that?"

"I'm scared!"

When they looked into the next car through the window on the door, they saw people exiting from the freight hold door. There were three of them in total--all were dressed in white, but one of them had his suit covered in red speckles. In his hand was a smoking rifle.

Isaac anxiously tried to see what was going on, then noticed that the trio was walking right towards him and Miria.

"This is bad, Miria! We have to hide!"

"Like the secret service!"

They rushed back into the first freight car, ducked beside the door, and stilled their breaths.

Of course, even though their breaths were stilled, they continued to chatter.

"Listen up, Miria... I think those guys must be the 'dangerous people' the big guy told us about earlier."

"Eeek!"

"It's all right, Miria. They're no match for my billion guns!"

"Really?"

"Of course! Have I ever left you behind, Miria?"

"Nope! Never! I'm still alive, after all!"

"See? So just leave everything to me!"

"All right!"

Isaac and Miria finally stopped chattering and focused their attention on the situation outside.

They soon heard a door opening. It was probably the door of the second freight car. It was less than six feet away from the door that Isaac and Miria were hiding beside. The sound of footsteps, accompanied by voices, drew near.

"Why'd you have to kill 'im, Ladd? That was a pretty good deal."

"True, it *was* a pretty nice offer. But did you see the look in his eye? Acting like there was *no way* he was gonna be killed by me! He was seriously thinking that I wouldn't kill him! He was looking *down* on *me*! Ladd Russo! Well, to be perfectly honest, I just offed him 'cause he was annoying and infuriating."

"But still--"

"Did you see that annoying look on his face? Even when I blew his *face* off he acted like nothing was wrong! ...Damn, this is annoying..."

The sounds came to a stop at the door, but the door itself did not open.

Isaac and Miria then heard the voices growing distant--going *upwards*.

"???"

After a short amount of time, Isaac looked outside through the window on the door, but the coupling was empty of people.

"There's no one there..."

"A locked room disappearance!"

They opened the door and found that there really was no one there. Only the freezing winter air kept them company.

The air cooled their heads, and Isaac remembered that one of the names he had just heard was familiar to them.

"He was looking down on me! Ladd Russo!"

"Ladd Russo!"

"Ladd Russo!"

"Russo?"

He was sure they had heard the name before.

Isaac and Miria were thieves. Only that very morning, they had stolen a large amount of cash from a mafia transporter.

"Miria... about the money we stole today. Which Family did we steal from again?"

"It was the Russo Family!"

Isaac's ill premonition became a reality.

And his brain came to a completely unexpected conclusion.

"I see... Then, surprising as it may be, I deduce that the men in white suits must be after *us*!"

"Eek! Chasers?" Miria trembled dramatically. Isaac embraced her tightly and nodded.

"Don't worry, Miria. We'll make it out of here safely. We'll escape the clutches of the white suits *and* the Rail Tracer!"

"So we'd better hurry and find Jacuzzi and the conductor!"

"Yes, yes! We'll make it happen soon! After all, there shouldn't be anyone further ahead in our way-"

Isaac had a thought.

The path ahead of them should logically be empty of people.

Then who was on the receiving end of Ladd's shot just now?

"AAAAHHHHH! Jacuzzi! Please wake up! Your injuries aren't that serious! You have to live!"

"There's nothing wrong with your injuries!"

The duo began spouting off unconfirmed information as they dashed through the corridors and arrived at the freight hold entrance.

However, a surprise awaited them.

"Huh? There's nobody here."

"It's empty!"

There was no one in the freight hold--no people, no injured, not even corpses.

"That's strange. I could have sworn I heard them talking about having shot and killed someone here."

"They said they got an offer from someone, but they turned it down and killed the person!"

Isaac and Miria voiced their questions aloud as they carefully inspected the room, but they could not find so much as a drop of blood.

Their anxiety snowballed as they continued their search.

There was something on this train, clothed in neither black nor white.

As their imaginations slowly became a reality, they quickened their pace in their search for Jacuzzi.

<=>

Meanwhile, Jacuzzi was going in the opposite direction from where Isaac and Miria were headed. He had been moving towards the front of the train, and was now nearly back at the dining car.

They stopped just short of exiting the Second Class car. Nice went out into the coupling to assess the situation.

They had discovered the corpse of one of the white suits along the way, but did not linger very long.

The corpse had been cut down with a sharp object, so they had determined that it was likely the work of one of the black suits.

The black suits and Ladd's gang were both significant threats at this point, but most terrifying of all was the Rail Tracer--the monster that lurked somewhere on this train.

"How's the dining car?"

"Not good. They're got two guys on guard, and they've both got machine guns. They're looking real serious about this." Nice reported back. Jacuzzi was at a loss.

"Is everyone from before still back in the dining car?"

"Well..."

Nice hesitated for a moment, then reluctantly spoke.

"I don't know about the people at the tables, but there's no one left on the counter seats."

"Wh-what? What do you mean?"

Nice told them that Isaac, Miria, Czes, and the Beriam family had all disappeared from the counter seats. Perhaps they had moved to a spot that wasn't visible from their angle, but what was for certain was the fact that they were no longer at the counter.

"Maybe they've all been taken away somewhere..."

"People you know? Maybe they're just sittin' under the tables or somethin'?" Nick asked a dark-eyed Jacuzzi.

"I admit my eyesight isn't that great, but setting aside the Beriams, I would *never* miss Isaac and Miria." Nice argued, her tone formal in Nick's presence. She pushed up her glasses. "I could never miss Isaac's costume or Miria's bright red dress."

Nick looked lost. Donny nodded.

"Whoa. Strange."

Suddenly, Jacuzzi and the others heard a low moan. They tensed for a moment, but then realized it was coming from the vicinity of Donny's shoulder.

"Jack!"

It seemed that the blood on his face had dried. He slowly opened his mouth to speak, flecks of blood falling from his face.

"Donny... you idiot... we... ran into... those two..."

It seemed that his consciousness and eyesight had recovered somewhat, seeing as Jack remembered the little fiasco between Donny and Isaac.

"What do you mean? You met them, Donny?"

"Uh."

Donny concentrated and looked through his memories, finally calling up a vivid recollection of their earlier encounter.

"Uh. Yeah, yeah! Two good guys. You were on roof. I met gunman. Woman in red dress. Thought I was Rail Tracer."

"...! That must have been Isaac and Miria! S-so which way did they go?"

"Uh. Find friends. Save from Rail Tracer... To see conductor."

Jacuzzi could feel his face go pale.

'They're going around this scary train... to save me?'

It was unbelievable. He had boasted that he would save everyone, and fight the black suits and the monsters, but in the end Jacuzzi had ended up endangering his new friends.

And the fact that they headed for the conductor's compartment just as he was climbing onto the roof meant that they would have run straight into Ladd and his gang.

"Uh. No worry, Jacuzzi. I warn about. White suits. Calm down. I think."

"We can't just *think* they're okay! What do I do...? We have to go back and save `em!"

Jacuzzi decided to again go straight through this perilous train, and gave orders to his team.

"Nice, you and Nick climb onto the roof and see how things are on the other side of the dining car. Don't bit off more than you can chew, all right? Donny, you're with me--but first we gotta do something for Jack..."

"D-don't worry 'bout me... Jus' toss me in one of the cabins... Easier for me that way."

It pained Jacuzzi, but he had no choice but to go with Jack's suggestion.

All right. Then I'll be going, Nice. I'm gonna come back, so don't overdo it, okay?"

Jacuzzi lightly kissed Nice on the lips and ran back to the rear cars with Donny in tow.

Nick decided to tease Nice a little.

"Whoa, gettin' pretty hot in here, huh?"

"That was our first kiss..."

"Wha-?!"

Nice pretended not to notice Nick's confusion and stepped out into the coupling, climbing onto the roof.

Nick followed her. "That was the first time he kissed you?! You two've been an item for ten years, and you've never even *kissed*?! Jacuzzi's understandable, but you're almost up there with him, boss!"

Despite calling Nice 'boss', Nick spoke to Jacuzzi as an equal. Nice ignored him and stepped onto the roof.

The wind pressure made it difficult to breathe. The train had left the forest from earlier, now coming out into an empty, moonlit plain. The ground faintly reflected the moonlight, giving off a strange atmosphere.

There were no obstacles in their way, but they could not stumble and make sounds when they hit a curve in the way, lest they alert those inside the car.

Nice and Nick decided to carefully crawl across the dining car roof.

<=>

A girl whose hands had been bound behind her back was pushed into the frontmost cabin in First Class, where Mrs. Beriam was being kept.

"Mary!" Mrs. Beriam screamed. Goose grinned as if being thanked.

"There's no need to worry, ma'am. We've managed to rescue your daughter from those sickening white suits."

Mrs. Beriam glared at him with a look sharp enough to kill. Goose seemed unaffected as he began to tell her of their upcoming plans.

"If a flare goes up above the bridge we're scheduled to pass by tomorrow, the passengers of this train will live. For the time being."

"...?"

"I'm talking about the negotiations. It is impossible to carry them out from here on the train, so my subordinate is currently negotiating with your husband." Goose put his hands behind his back and looked at the Beriams as if criticizing them.

"Should your husband refuse to agree to our terms, we have decided that we will *force* him to understand our determination by throwing your daughter's corpse onto the tracks."

"Please, no!"

"Please don't even think about asking to be killed in her stead. We're telling you this now so that we will not have to bother with making you accept this at a later time. And your daughter will also be killed if we happen to spot the police along the tracks. For your information, we will be shooting her, so prepare yourselves..."

Having finished saying his part, Goose left the cabin. Mrs. Beriam didn't try to talk back as he left--she already knew from his attitude that resistance was useless, and she knew that one wrong move on her part would endanger the other passengers.



Watching this, Chane silently looked away.

She looked into empty space with eyes filled with worry--or disdain.

<=>

Jacuzzi and Donny laid Jack down in a nearby Second Class cabin and left, heading for the cars further back.

Left alone, Jack looked up at the ceiling and sighed, his face still aching. He had said to his friends that he was all right, but in reality, he felt like his face was going to break at any moment. His eyelid was so swollen that it hurt his eyeball.

'Am I just gonna die like this?'

His life didn't quite flash by before his eyes, but his mind began to relive some of his memories.

He remembered his childhood, when he buried the bodies of his parents--dead of malnutrition--under the floorboards. The people in the slums, none of whom could afford proper graves, had always done so. The foundations under the old apartments in immigrant districts were probably filled with hundreds of thousands of corpses.

He and his fellow delinquent Nick, who lived nearby, had frequently gone around making nuisances of themselves.

'Kinda feels stupid to say this, but we were pretty bad back then. Wouldn't be strange to want to beat up kids like that. Wonder what I'd do if I could go back in time and see my old self? Would I beat him to death? Or would I just hug the kid and cry like an idiot?'

'It's been half a year already since we met Jacuzzi in Chicago. Used to think he was just a stupid crybaby. Said something about making liquor and gathering friends, so I thought maybe I'd become leader and turn 'em into my very own mafia. I was an idiot.'

Jack had not yet noticed the fact that a grey shadow was stirring on the second floor of the bunk bed in the corner of the cabin.

'He said this and that, but in the end he was the smartest one of us all, and he never turned a blind eye on any of us rotten bastards. Too nice of a guy, that Jacuzzi.'

'He's always crying, but in the end he always worried about other people before himself. He's gonna live a pretty hard life, from the looks of things. I guarantee it. And idiots like us who stick by that kid's side are probably in for a lifetime of this stuff.'

'Am I really just gonna die here? Damn that John and Fang. They just had to bring up this stupid mission. I'd understand if it was gold, or cash, but why would they be interested in something that crazy? ...I guess Nice, that bomb freak, was the one that wanted it in the first place. And Jacuzzi went on about stealing those new bombs so it wouldn't hurt any of those total strangers in New York. Tch. Everyone in this damn little gang's incurable. And that goes for me, too. Shit!'

Suddenly, the memories he had been recalling were interrupted.

Jack's line of sight had been halved by his swollen eyelids. And his narrow view of the ceiling was suddenly covered by a huge grey mass.

The mass had the form of an outlandishly dressed person who was completely covered in grey clothing, with the exception of a small part of his face.

Strangely enough, Jack was not scared at all. He did his best to move his aching jaw to speak to the man.

"Ohh... The reaper, eh? You the grim reaper? Just wait a while, okay? I'm still good. I can keep goin'. I can keep at it... Just need to rest for a while, then I'll go help Jacuzzi. Those two are an idiot-crybaby team, so they can't do a thing without me. Don't take me away, y'hear?"

Jack grinned.

The man whose pale face was covered in blood--almost like a corpse--had smiled.

Seeing this, the man he had called the reaper also smiled.

"I see. So you wish to live, young man?"

The man in grey opened the bag beside him.

"It's nothing strange for a man in his prime to want to live. To be frank, I'm quite jealous."

There was someone watching them in silence.

'It' watched them from outside the window. Its figure, illuminated by the moonlight, was red--a portentous figure covered in crimson.

The creature looked almost like red wine, contained in a human-shaped bottle.

<=>

Nice and Nick carefully crossed the dining car roof to make their way to the next car.

Though they could have easily jumped the distance between the cars, they decided to climb down to the coupling and climb back up to the next car for fear of making a commotion.

The smoke coming from the locomotive began to block out the moonlight, and soon they were covered in darkness.

Nice put a hand on the rooftop and came away with soot-covered fingers. But she nonetheless continued to move forward in the darkness.

Some time had passed. They could now see a very faint light. It was coming from the next coupling, likely from the window on the car's door.

However, Nice suddenly froze.

'No. That's not it.'

She was overwhelmed by a sense of fear. Her mind kept shouting, *'Something's wrong! There's something dangerous here!'*

She pushed up her glasses and concentrated on her left eye in order to find the source of her anxiety.

"Boss..."

Nick, with his good eyes, was first to spot the source of this air of danger.

The wind blew sideways, momentarily blowing aside the smoke above the cars.

They could finally see.

Across the faint glow of light, at the other end of the next car, stood a woman.

A killing machine in a black dress, holding a knife and looking as though she would draw in all darkness into herself.

Chane's form, standing in the smoke, had perfectly blended into the darkness--it almost gave her a sense of ethereal beauty.

"This is bad..."

Cold sweat ran down Nice's face, but the droplets were wiped away instantly by the wind.

She could theoretically take out a bomb from her pocket, but she would likely be killed by Chane's knife before she could light the fuse. Nice could tell by Chane's silent form that she was no amateur when it came to battle.

If Nice hadn't seen her with the orchestra earlier, she would have had little trouble mistaking Chane for the Rail Tracer. She exuded just that much of a sense of power as she stood on the rooftop.

Nice almost wanted to place her hopes on the off chance that Chane would hit something as she stood there and fall off the train.

But unfortunately, there was nothing but flat plains all around them. Not a single tree or tunnel stood in their way.

'Wish she'd just show a weakness somewhere...' Nice thought. she then looked at Chane and realized that she was not looking back at herself.

'Behind me... is she looking at Nick?'

'No... She's looking further ahead.'

Being careful not to raise her upper body, Nice hesitantly looked back.

The very next moment, her eye widened in shock.

The white suit reflected the moonlight, making its wearer stand out greatly.

And the hand that stuck out of the suit's white sleeve was holding a rifle.

Ladd Russo, the man in white, began shouting loudly enough to overpower the train itself.

"Hey there! Aren't you cold, standing out here in a dress like that?!"

Ladd was trying to provoke the woman in black standing in the distance, not even sparing a glance at Nice and Nick.

"The fact that you're dressed like an orchestra means that you're here to play me a song, right?! A *lovely, refreshing, sad* little song for little old me? Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Although it would have made sense for him to attack in the middle of his rant, Ladd's rifle, even as Ladd danced in glee, did not budge from its aim on Chane's chest.

"Just when I thought the first movement ended and things got boring, you came all the way up to the roof for me! How am I supposed to express this kinda happiness? You came all this way here to play me a song of tearful and hilarious screaming! Is this love? Is it *love* now?! Unfortunately for you, I'm already engaged, but I will *accept* your love, young lady! And that means, I'm gonna have to kill you!"

Ladd suddenly stopped, and put pressure on his trigger finger.

"I love you! Now you die!"

With a twisted whisper of love, he slowly pulled the trigger.

There was a gunshot.

It was followed by a metallic clang.

Ladd, covered in gunsmoke, found himself letting out a rather undignified "Huh?".

The image of the moment burned itself into Nice's eye. The second before the gunshot, Chane had spun around to dodge the shot. The bullet had hit her knife by pure coincidence. All of this was believable, but what shocked Nice was the aftermath.

Chane neither dropped the knife nor staggered.

The force of the impact of the bullet against the knife should have been enormous. The angle and speed of the bullet were variable factors, but Chane had merely fixed her grip on the knife as if nothing had happened.

"Seriously? Are you serious?! You blocked my shot? You *blocked* my shot, darlin'?!"

Ladd seemed to be under the impression that Chane had consciously deflected his shot. He began to ramble, his eyes shining like that of a child who had gone to see a talkie for the first time.

"What the hell is this, sweetheart?! How does this happen?! Not even Tarzan can do that! I thought you were just a girl, but don't tell me you're actually Popeye on spinach?!"

Ladd began stomping his feet on the floor, flatteringly comparing Chane to a comic strip character.



Chane, who had so far shown no emotion whatsoever, twitched ever so slightly.

At the same time Ladd raised one foot into the air.

The next moment, Chane launched a knife from her hand. A glint of light made its way straight towards Ladd's throat.

"HAAAAH!" Ladd yelled, as he stomped his foot down with all his might.

The silver glint disappeared into the arc of his kick as if it had been absorbed into his foot.

Chane's icy expression finally changed. Her brow furrowed slightly, and it looked like she had pursed her lips. Of course, it was impossible to tell for sure, as they were illuminated by nothing but moonlight.

Ladd excitedly took hold of the knife at his foot.

"AHAHAHAHAHAHA! HAHHAHAHAHA! We're even now, you stupid bitch! Whaddaya think? I stomped right down on your knife, just like that! You angry? You wanna die? Though I'd kill you *anyway*, even if you didn't want to!"

"He was *planning* to do that... what a monster."

Nick could feel the cold sweat running down his back. He also fought with a knife, but to be perfectly honest, he had not been able to get a good look at the way Chane threw her knife. And this lunatic called Ladd had simply ground it into the floor with a single kick.

Unlike Chane, who had blocked the bullet by accident, Ladd's action was completely deliberate.

Ladd swung the knife around in ecstasy, but Chane regained her calm and reached behind her.

"Hahahahah...hah?"

Ladd's laughter trailed off. Chane's hands came forward again, this time holding a pair of even larger knives.

"You've gotta be *kidding* me! Right, sweetheart?! Tell me this is a joke!"

Ladd turned around suddenly, carrying the rifle at his side, and ran away as fast as he could.

He rhythmically ran over the shaking rooftops and jumped over the couplings without a moment's hesitation. He looked like he was truly enjoying his run to the back of the train.

Chane gave chase, propelling herself from the roof.

It seemed that her new knives were not for throwing, as she did not launch them at Ladd. She dashed forward, the heavy blades in her hands weighing down her arms.

Chane passed right by Nice and Nick, who were lying on their stomachs on the roof, and went straight for Ladd. Eventually, their disappearing forms were both completely obscured by the smoke and the darkness of the night.

Nice and Nick, however, did not move. They had been paralyzed by something like a sensation of impending doom as Chane passed them by. Nice tightly clenched her fist, realizing that her sweaty palms had rendered her bomb unusable.

'What kind of people were those two?'

'And if those two are humans, then what in the world could the Rail Tracer be?'

Nice clenched her fists and remembered a certain tattoo-covered face.

She then looked up, preparing to move forward.

She then found herself facing down the barrel of a long sniper rifle, and the face of a villainous-looking man.

"Looks like you two've been lying here for a while now." A man in black who only had his upper body on the roof--Spike--snickered from the coupling. "Why don't ya just come on down with your hands in the air? You've had a pretty tiring trip, I'd bet."

<=>

"What in the world could have happened here, Miria?"

"It's a mystery!"

"You think this was the work of a monster?"

"It's just like a horror show!"

Isaac calmly looked around the conductor's compartment, having discovered the two bloodied corpses.

Miria was answering Isaac's questions as she usually did, but she was standing back-to-back with him, not even looking in the direction of the corpses.

"I wonder where Jacuzzi could have gone."

"What do we do? What if he was already eaten?"

Unusually for her, Miria's tone became serious. Isaac, determined to keep her spirits up, replied in as bright a voice as he could muster.

"Don't think like that, Miria! Not to worry! The fact that his body isn't here means that he must have been swallowed whole! He still lives on in the monster's belly!"

"B-b-but we don't even know where the monster is!"

"Don't worry! The Rail Tracer always goes for the *entire* train! That means, that as long as we're on this train, we'll run into it eventually!"

"Yeah... I hope Jacuzzi's going to be safe until then."

"Don't worry, Miria. Jacuzzi's a good guy! There's no way that someone nicer than us could die before us!"

"You're right. ...Jacuzzi!" Miria yelled suddenly.

Isaac shook his head and spoke coolly. "He won't come back just because we yell out his name, Miria."

Jacuzzi's confusion reached its limit as he began to bow his head in apology over and over again.

"Uh... What. You guys do?"

The exchange of apologies continued in the eerie conductor's compartment until Donny finally managed to bring them all back to reality.

"L-let's get out of here for now and get to one of the freight holds. I'll explain everything then." Jacuzzi said, and everyone left the cabin.

A strange noise began to sound in the cabin of corpses.

The door at the rear end of the conductor's compartment--the door leading outside--began to open to the rhythm of the shaking of the train.

And when the noise stopped and the door had opened completely--

'It' emerged from the darkness--a crimson silhouette of blood.

<=>

"A red monster? Don't make me laugh." Goose said in the First Class cabin, astonished.

"I'm tellin' ya, it's true! There really *is* a monster on this train!" Nick yelled, trying to lunge at Goose. Of course, the fact that his hands and feet were bound and he was lying on the floor made it quite difficult for him.

"Hm. Then let me ask you another question."

Goose turned to Nice, who was bound just like Nick, and asked her about their connection to the men in white.

"You say you have nothing to do with the white suits. Then what is your purpose on this train?"

"We're on our way to see some friends in New York."

"Still trying to worm your way out of this? If what you're saying is the truth, then why did your ally here threaten the dining car?"

"You threatened the dining car?"

Nice was confused, but she could see that Nick had suddenly gone pale.

"Is this really the man?"

"Yes, Goose. I only saw him from afar, but there's no mistaking his clothes or his voice." A man in the corner of the cabin answered. His shoulder was injured--he must have been the survivor from the trio that first attacked the dining car.

"Care to explain, then?"

Nice knew that Goose's subordinate was telling the truth and understood why Nick had done such a thing from the moment she looked at Nick's face.

She realized that *she* was partially to blame for this predicament, as she had been the one to give out the vague order to take care of the dining car. She then desperately tried to find a way to trick Goose.

"This guy here's a marijuana addict. He must have been hallucinating when he threatened the dining car."

"Then I suppose we can assume that the red monster he saw was also a hallucination. Then there's no longer any need for this scum of society, is there?"

Goose was smiling, but his eyes made it clear that he trusted no one.

Nice could tell from her one lie that this man would not be so easy to trick. Determining that any more fabrications would worsen their situation, she decided to tell him the truth.

"Hm... So you were nothing but a bunch of train robbers. I don't know how many of your friends are aboard this train, but know that anyone who resists will be killed without mercy."

Goose left the room with a look of complete disinterest.

Nice, however, had not told Goose the whole truth. She conveniently neglected to mention Jacuzzi, and the contents of the cargo they were after. Goose seemed to think that they were merely after the entire cargo of the luxury train, and did not pry any further.

In reality, Jacuzzi's gang was only after a certain type of cargo--the things hidden in the secret compartment in the freight hold. If Goose were to find out about it, no doubt he would try to use it for his own ends. Nice had no way of knowing the black suits' goals, but if they were to take control of the cargo, they would become nigh unstoppable. She had to avoid such a situation at all costs.

Nice let out a sigh of relief and whispered to Nick.

"I'm sorry, Nick. I should have been more specific about my orders..."

"Don't worry 'bout it, boss." Nick forced a grin, trying to cheer up his friend. "'Sides, no one'd be stupid enough to think you weren't one of us, considering how you look."

"That's not much consolation, is it?"

Nice remembered her own appearance, and began to try and think of a way to escape this situation, despite her budding self-hatred.

Suddenly, the door opened again. Goose stepped in with a troubled expression.

"You two told me earlier that you saw a corpse in the freight hold on the way back from the conductor's compartment, correct?"

Nice and Nick nodded.

"What of the conductor's compartment? Did you see anything strange there?"

Something was troubling Goose. One of their members was supposed to be in the conductor's compartment, and he was to kill his fellow conductor. So why wasn't this woman also taken care of when she went to the conductor's compartment?

This reminded Nice that she hadn't yet told Goose about what she saw in the conductor's compartment.

"Yes, *that* was where we came to believe in the Rail Trace's existence."

"Tell me the truth. And make it quick."

"We found two corpses in a sea of blood. They were both conductors--one had been shot, and the other looked as though he had been half-eaten. That was all we saw."

The new information he received led Goose to wonder about something else.

The conductor's compartment was scheduled to send an 'all clear' signal to the locomotive not long ago, but the train was still going. How could this be, when they had yet to take over the locomotive?

Goose poked his head out the window and looked towards the locomotive.

At the very front of the train was the locomotive, giving off a faint light, and the smoke coming from the front showed no signs of weakening.

"What's going on here?"

Goose quickly stepped out of the cabin and sent five men to check on the conductor's compartment.

If the woman was telling the truth, who had killed their ally in the conductor's compartment?

He then recalled the bloodbath in the freight hold that he had heard over the radio.

Nick's description of the scene came back to mind.

"One of your men was in the freight hold with his whole lower body missing! It's a monster! The red monster--the Rail Tracer's on this train!"

Goose tried to ignore the thought as best he could, but his heart slowly gave way to the fear of the Rail Tracer.

The terror slowly but surely ate away at him, moving just like the train itself.

<=>

"I see...! This train is now like the 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms'!"

"The biggest love triangle in the Orient!"

Jacuzzi and the others were currently going over the situation in the freight hold at the very end of the train. Isaac had suddenly made this declaration just as they were clearing up all of their respective situations.

"The Romance...?" Jacuzzi tilted his head, confused by the completely unfamiliar name.

"Yes! You see, the Romance of the Three Kingdoms is a famous historical record! The tale of three great samurai who divided the kingdom and battled each other! Uh, let's see. Their names were 'Cao Cao', 'Liu Bei', and 'Yuan Shao'..."

"They're often compared to the snake, the snail, and the toad!"

Isaac and Miria built up suspense as they continued to spout off their dubious information about the Orient.

"This train's like a big platter where the black suits, white suits, and the Rail Tracer are all at each other's throats, right? Jacuzzi! You have to upset the balance! Upturn the situation, platter and all!"

"Then you'll take over the entire train! You'll be a lord! A king! An emperor! A tyrant!"

"H, huh?"

The sudden turn of events turned Jacuzzi's eyes into dinner plates. He was, of course, planning to defeat the black suits and the Rail Tracer, but he never imagined that such an act could be interpreted as taking over the train.

"B-but... you really think I could do that?"

"Of course! Even in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, one great man united the Orient in the end!"

"The champion!"

"Jacuzzi! That's why you have to become Yoshitsune!"

"Of Minamoto!"

"Yo-Yoshitsune?"

"That's right! He's a great man who crossed over from Japan to China, defeated the three kingdoms, and founded a country called 'Genghis Khan'!"

"He's amazing!"

Isaac's account of the history of East Asia was wildly anachronistic and inaccurate, but his energetic voice became a glimmer of hope for Jacuzzi.

"You really think I can be that great?" He asked quietly.

Isaac silently looked into Jacuzzi's eyes and nodded.

"Of course! You're the defending champion, who's defeated us countless times!"

"Isaac's an amazing person, you know? And since you beat Isaac, you're a *really* amazing person, Jacuzzi!"

Despite the boundless energy headed in his direction, Jacuzzi shook his head.

'I wonder why? I feel like I can tell these two everything that I can't tell other people.'

Jacuzzi nodded and began to explain himself to Isaac and Miria--to confess about the kind of person he really was.

"I *do* want to save the passengers and get rid of the black suits. But I'm honestly not that good of a person. I broke the law and bootlegged liquor, and yesterday I ended up killing five people."

Donny, who had been silent the whole time, finally spoke up to interrupt Jacuzzi.

"Uh. No, no. *We* killed 'em. Jacuzzi didn't kill. And. They killed friends, too."

"What's the difference? If I hadn't bootlegged liquor, our friends *and* the mafia guys all could have lived."

Hearing this, Isaac grabbed Jacuzzi by the collar and pulled him up to his own face, eyes wide open.

Jacuzzi initially flinched, thinking that Isaac was going to hit him for being an idiot, but there was a confident smile on Isaac's face.

"Don't worry about things like that! If everyone around you calls you a good guy, that means you're going to become a great guy! In other words, the only thing that decides whether you're a good guy or a bad guy is the feel of the moment! That's what decides everything!"

"The feel of the moment!"

Jacuzzi's mind marvelled at the illogical line of thought Isaac and Miria had reached, but his heart had already been swept up in their cheer.

"That's why! You have to be confident, because we think you're a great guy! Don't worry if anyone says otherwise! You just have to sweep them along in this wave!"

"Stand tall with your head held high and believe in yourself! But see? If you want to start this wave, you have to make sure that at least one person around you thinks you're a good person! That's why it means that you're a good guy, Jacuzzi! We'll make these waves *for* you!"

Watching the optimistic duo, Jacuzzi realized that his own fingers, hands, arms, and body were trembling. Could this be fear? Or something less sinister?

"Thank you." Jacuzzi said. Perhaps there was more for him to tell them, but that was all he could work up at the moment.

Normally, Jacuzzi might have said something like 'sorry', but he felt like it would be insulting to both himself and the couple to say such a thing.

"But if you think I'm such a great person, what does that make you two?"

Isaac and Miria were somewhat taken aback by the question.

"We're not quite sure ourselves. But you know what the man who told us about the Romance of the Three Kingdoms said to us?"

"He said, 'You two have to become the southeaster!'"

"The southeaster...? But that's not a person."

"Right? But I think it's a wind that gathers a bunch of things, like happiness or despair, and blows it towards someone all at once!"

"What's why we're going to send a whole lot of happiness along with this train!"

Isaac nodded.

"That's a wonderful idea, Miria! Then shall we go and blow away the Rail Tracer and the Russo Family?"

"Faster than this train, forever and ever!"

Isaac and Miria got up and began to leave with a smile.

"W-wait! Where are you going?" Jacuzzi hurriedly tried to stop them. Isaac and Miria responded with confident looks on their faces.

"Where else but to find the Rail Tracer?"

"We're going to ask it to go home! If not, we'll fight it off! And if that doesn't work, we'll run away and hide! After all, it'll *have* to go home when the sun rises while it's still looking for us!"

"Whoa. Monster strong. Gonna kill you. Don't."

Even Donny looked worried by their course of action, but the duo was undeterred.

"If the Rail Tracer finds us, I'll fight it off with my hundred guns!"

"You're so cool, Isaac!"

Isaac tapped on the holsters he wore all over his body. There was not a single firearm in his possession.

"But you don't even have one gun, let alone a hundred." Jacuzzi noted, his eyes wide open.

"Hm." Isaac nodded. "You're right. To be honest, I never expected things would turn out this way." He acknowledged.

But he continued to step towards the door. Isaac looked up, his face deadly serious.

"It'll be all right. A famous old gunman once told me this."

He looked straight into Jacuzzi's eyes and nodded.

"You know where a real man keeps his guns? His heart."

"Amazing, Isaac!"

"I don't think any famous gunman said anything like that!"

"That so? Then *I'll* become that famous gunman!"

"Amazing, Isaac! Just like Billy the Kid!"

The duo quietly opened the freight hold door, completely ignoring the astonished Jacuzzi.



"Don't worry about us! If anything happens, we'll make a run for it! Jacuzzi, you have to rescue Mrs. Beriam while we distract the Rail Tracer!"

"We'll be just fine! Running and hiding is our specialty, you know?"

Isaac and Miria's confident smiles made Jacuzzi feel like everything really would be fine. He also realized that nothing could stop them from leaving.

So he decided to send them off with a smile.

"Please promise me you won't die."

"All right. We promise you! And if we break our promise, we'll cut off our fingers or slit our bellies!"

"You have to come back alive, too. Okay, Jacuzzi? Donny?"

With this, Isaac and Miria stepped outside and headed for the conductor's compartment in search of the Rail Tracer.

Jacuzzi watched them leave as he decided to finish what he had set out to do.

"Have you ever seen anyone that stubborn, Donny? I don't know who they are, but they're so much more like villains than people like us." He said quietly to Donny, looking upwards.

"Huh?"

"Yeah. This train's full of bad guys and small fry. That includes us, too."

Jacuzzi stopped and once again glanced back towards Isaac and Miria's direction.

"Those two are bad guys who're so much worse than me, but I just know that they're dozens of times *nicer* than someone like me."

"Uh. Jacuzzi. Lonely?"

Jacuzzi did not answer. He continued walking.

"Let's go. We're gonna go do our own thing. We'll become the biggest bad guys on this entire train. Right, Donny?"

Seeing him nod confidently, Donny realized that he had never seen Jacuzzi this way before.

"Jacuzzi look like. Enjoying yourself."

<=>

Mary buried herself in her mother's arms, trembling as though she had run out of tears.

How much time had passed since she was captured? The terrifying woman had left the cabin a little while ago, but a guard armed with a gun was still watching them.

She wondered what had happened to Czes. Was he safe? Perhaps he had returned to the broom closet to find her missing, and was worrying about her. Perhaps he had already been captured and killed.

Terrified by her own imagination, Mary leaned against her mother.

Her eyes filled with tears again.

<=>

The quintet of Lemures passed through the dining car and the Second Class cars, and were running through the Third Class car. They were heading for the conductor's compartment.

"Careful. It sounds like Chane and one of the white suits were headed for the back, too." The leader of the team said, just as they heard the sound of a window breaking.

"What the?!"

"It came from the cabin!"

It sounded like it had come from one of the Third Class cabins.

"Where's the Third Class team?"

"We lost contact with 'em, just like Second Class."

The black suits took a deep breath. Two of them would search the car, and the other three would go ahead to check out the conductor's compartment.

Once the team of three had departed, the remaining two quietly approached the cabin door.

Some time passed in silence, and as one man gave a wordless signal, the two of them simultaneously kicked down the door.

"There's nothing here."

The cabin was empty. Only the sound of wind blowing in through the broken window occupied this space.

One of the men cautiously approached the window, cleared some of the debris from the frame with the butt of his gun, and poked his head out the window to get a clear look.

He stared downward for some time, then hurriedly looked around.

"What's the matter?"

"C'mere for a sec. ...Look at that."

The second man followed his ally to the window and looked out and down the frame.

"Ugh..."

What they saw illuminated in the lamplight and the dim moonlight was a grotesquely twisted human body.

The body looked like it had been stuck to the metal ornaments at the base of the car. It was impossible to see all of it from their position at the window.

But the black suits were quite sure that the body was a corpse.

It was missing its right arm and both its legs. Perhaps they were torn, or even eaten off. The right arm was missing everything from the shoulder down, and the cut was very messy.

It was probably secured to the train at a place they could not see from their angle--likely by the clothing or its left arm.

The black suits were quite used to the sight of corpses, but that itself was not what shocked them.

The shock stemmed from the fact that the corpse was that of a young child.

No one could expect to see such a thing--they were not in a war-torn land, but on a train in the United States.

Chane and Goose likely would not have blinked at the sight, and perhaps Ladd would have ended up laughing. And if Jacuzzi could see this, he would have started wailing like a madman.

The corpse of the child had a rather difficult name to pronounce--Czeslaw Meyer.

<=>

"I hope Czes is all right." Mary said to herself, her tears finally gone.

"Of course he is. I'm sure Czes, Mr. Isaac, Miss Miria, Mr. Jacuzzi and Miss Nice are all just fine. So don't worry. Mama's going to make sure you don't have any bad dreams, so go to sleep, Mary." Mrs. Beriam reassured her.

Mrs. Beriam gently stroked her daughter's hair.

Tap Tap Tap Tap

"!"

The noise was coming from the window.

It was the sound of something hard hitting glass.

The lone guardsman opened the window, gun in hand.

"...?"

He looked around outside, but there was nothing there.

He then leaned out of the window and sat on the frame to get a good look at the roof, when his view of the night sky was suddenly covered by darkness.

"GAAAH!"



A pair of sturdy work boots landed right on his head.

The owner of the boots held on to the window frame and stomped over the man's face.

"W-wait! AHH! AAAAAHHH!"

The man's body was dragged out the window, and finally fell out of the train. He rolled across the gravel by the tracks and was soon swallowed by the night.

The Beriam family, shocked by the sudden development, looked upon the person who entered through the window.

It was a young woman wearing fatigues.

Mrs. Beriam vaguely remembered seeing her sitting by the window seat back in the dining car. As she searched for more memories of her, the young woman spoke.

"Are you all right?" She asked stoically. She was perhaps in her early twenties. Her already messy outfit was covered in black smears, making her look even dirtier than she was back in the dining car.

"If you're not hurt, let's get out of here."

<=>

New York, morning. Somewhere in Little Italy.

"Oh no... I woke up too early."

When Firo looked at the clock, it was still 5:00AM. It was pitch-black outside. Perhaps things would be different in the summer, but at this time of year, he could still see the starry night sky.

"Oh well."

He sleepily rubbed his eyes and headed for the bathroom.

"What's wrong, Firo? You're up early." A young woman said from behind him. It was Ennis, Firo's housemate.

"Sorry, Ennis. Did I wake you?"

"No, I was already awake to begin with."

"That's a relief. Well, I guess I'm just excited for today."

"I'm looking forward to seeing Isaac and Miria again, myself!" Ennis said cheerfully. Firo smiled.

"Me too. And you know, Claire's coming on the same train tomorrow."

"The childhood friend you told me about last night? What kind of a person is Claire?" Ennis asked curiously.

Firo thought for a moment and picked out a few descriptors.

"Huh... I guess, personality-wise, you'll find out today. Anyway, Claire's real quick. And strong, too. Just goes to show you can't judge a book by its cover."

"An athlete?"

"An athlete...? Well, Claire used to be in the circus, y'know? I guess a better word would be... an acrobat."

Firo remembered his old friend and grinned.

"Maybe the train's getting treated to a little acrobatics show right about now."

<=>

The woman in fatigues climbed onto the roof like an acrobat.

"I'm going to lower a rope, so tie it around yourselves and hold on tight."

Mrs. Beriam did as she was told and tied the rope around her daughter first. By the time she began to wonder where the woman could have found the rope, Mary was already being pulled onto the rooftop.

Mrs. Beriam pulled up her skirt partway and tied it tightly, then tied the rope that had been lowered again around herself.

"Ugh..."

The train hit a curve in the tracks. She lightly bumped into the train. But she did not lose her step, climbing along the side of the train with all her might.

After a short time, the Beriam family was reunited again. It was pitch black outside and the smoke didn't help the visibility, but mother and daughter held on to one another tightly.

"It's too early to celebrate." The woman said. She began to lead the mother and daughter along the roof. "Be careful. It's better to make a sprint than try to walk cautiously!"

"Yes!"

They ran to the end of the car, and jumped across to the next. Mary almost lost her balance, but the woman in fatigues caught her by the arm and helped her to her feet.

Perhaps it was a good thing that their vision was obscured so much. They might have been too scared to even stand if they could see how high off the ground they were and how fast the train was moving.

After a while, however, they heard the sound of gunshots mixed in with the train's rumbling.

"Head for the dining car! It should be safe to climb down once you get there!" The woman in fatigues yelled softly. She then stopped.

Mary and Mrs. Beriam turned around. The woman's pant leg was slightly torn at the thigh, and a red stain was growing around the hole. Mrs. Beriam unconsciously tried to turn back for her, but the woman seemed to have noticed.

"It's all right! Go ahead without me!"

Their eyes met. That was more than enough for the woman in fatigues to convey her message.

Mrs. Beriam nodded her head in acknowledgement, took her daughter's hand, and ran. Mary initially tried to go back for the woman, but she soon relented to her mother's strong grip and followed along.

The woman in fatigues watched them leave. She stood in place, only turning on her heels. She had wanted to escape as well, but her injury was deeper than she expected. She knew that trying to run now would make her easy prey, and had decided to become a shield for the Beriams against the sniper.

A nefarious-looking man had climbed partially onto the roof of the car. In front of him was a sniper rifle.

"Hey there. Care to get outta the way for me? I can't hit the kid's leg with you standing there." Spike grinned bitterly.

"Someone climb onto the roof and drag that woman down. Spike, don't lose sight of her."

"Right, sir. Anyway, looks like camping out in the coupling in the damn cold wasn't for nothing after all. I looked up just as they were jumping, and that lady's underwear was right there above me--"

It was probably too late to capture the Beriams on the rooftop by now. Spike joked around, in spite of the agitated look on Goose's face.

"Watch your mouth."

"Whoops. Sorry 'bout that. But y'know, I guess life really *does* have its share of surprises."

Goose ignored Spike and asked him another question.

"So was that hoodlum in the white suit really a match for Chane?"

"Probably."

"I see..."

Goose paused for a moment, then finally spoke.

"We may have to work out an escape scenario into our plans now. But there is one phase of the plan that we must accomplish before that."

He lowered his voice and gave Spike an order.

"Finish off Chane when you get the chance."

<=>

'Help me. Help me!

How did things end up like this?

I thought it would be okay because there were five of us going together... I didn't think there would actually be a monster!

We split up into two teams in the Third Class car. I was with the team that went ahead to the conductor's compartment. I was already getting a bad feeling about it back then.

When I saw our buddy's corpse in the freight hold, I was so scared I thought I was going to go crazy.

And right after that... that monster in white, who was in that room... he slit the other guy's throat!

My other teammate got caught. He's probably dead by now.

I ran off alone. So what? I never agreed with this plan in the first place.

Master Huey never takes hostages, and he would never kill a kid just to use her as a warning. I think Chane knows that too, but she's just going along with this because she wants to rescue Master Huey.

And I know the truth--there's a big difference between Chane and Goose. Chane worships everything about Master Huey, but all Goose wants is Master Huey's so-called "blessing". 'Course, I guess that goes for the rest of us, too. And that includes me.

Neider and the guys who got killed yesterday only betrayed us because they didn't know about Master Huey's physical ability. I kinda understand why they did what they did.

But I give up. Setting Master Huey aside, I can't go as far as Goose.

How could he think about getting rid of Chane, just because she's in the way? She's the most loyal of all of us.

Damn it, damn it, damn it! I'm gonna make a run for it. I'll open the door in the conductor's compartment, and then jump off as soon as I see a big river or something.

If I stay here, I'm gonna get killed.

Oh! This is the last freight car. After this is the conductor's compartment.'

But the moment the black suit stepped through the door, he realized that the door was already half-open.

By the time he registered the huge brown hand coming out of the door, it was too late. His face was already covered by it.

'No! No! I don't wanna die yet!'

He was dragged into the freight hold. It was over. He would be killed by the giant before him. This was probably that monster--the Rail Tracer.

'I don't wanna die! I don't wanna die! Please, please don't kill me!'

"Don't worry. We're not gonna kill you." Said the young man beside the giant. The tattoo on his face made him look like a demon, but the black suit could only visualize him as an angelic saviour.

"But there's some things I wanna know. Could you answer a few questions for me?"

<=>

The woman in fatigues lay on the floor of the First Class cabin that the Lemures were using as their headquarters, accompanied by Nice and Nick. Around them stood five or six men in black, and in the middle of them was Goose.

"I'm overjoyed to see you again, young lady." Goose said, eyes full of rage despite his polite words. "We'd heard that there was a freelance killer named 'Vino' who was famed for his exceedingly messy kills. The descriptions of the corpses here tipped me off, but to think... That the legendary assassin would be a woman."

Goose sighed and lifted the woman's chin. But her soot-covered face remained expressionless. She maintained her silence.

"Amazing. Our plans are falling apart because of you and the white suits. How many of our men are you responsible for killing? Why take action when you have nothing to gain from this, Vino? Or perhaps I should call you... Rail Tracer?"

The sudden mention of the monster's name snapped Nice and Nick back to reality. But the woman in fatigues did nothing but chuckle quietly. Her voice grew louder and louder, eventually giving way to all-out laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"Ahahahaha! How is this *not* funny? Hahahaha! Haha! Ahaha...! I *thought* it was weird I didn't get what you were taking about the whole time. You're wrong. You've got things *completely* wrong. You've made a *huge* mistake!"

"What?" Goose raised an eyebrow.

"Hey. I bet you got me confused with *him*, right? The **Red Monster**! Too bad for you, but that wasn't me! I bet that monster's going around right now devouring all you black suits and the white suits! No, at this rate, I guess we're *all* going to be killed! Just like that poor kid who was murdered!"

Goose was about to speak, but was interrupted by the door opening suddenly.

"Goose! We have a problem."

"What's going on?"

"W-well... our men in the dining car have vanished!"

"What? Tch. Explain yourself." Goose left the room with his subordinate.

Left in the cabin were the three bound hostages. Perhaps the Lemures were running low on personnel, or perhaps they had merely forgotten, but they had left their prisoners unguarded.

The moment she confirmed this, the ropes around the wrists of the woman in fatigues fell to the floor.

"Huh?"

Nice and Nick stared in awe as the woman used her own fingernails to cut through the ropes around her ankles.

Nick's eyesight was good enough to see that the woman's nails had been sculpted strangely. They were long and sharp like blades, and some of them were serrated like the edge of a saw.

It was almost as if she had been *expecting* to escape from being bound in ropes.

"Let me untie you. You have to get out of here." She said, freeing Nice and Nick.

"Th-thank you!" Nice said, then remembered something as she stood up.

"Um... you said you saw a child... being killed..."

The woman in fatigues paused uncomfortably, then told Nice the truth.

"That boy who was at the counter with you and your friends--it was him."

Nice had half-expected this answer, but she was badly shocked all the same.

She was pained by the idea of having to break the news to Jacuzzi.

Of course, that was still only if they could escape this train alive.

<=>

Several minutes ago, an incident had taken place in the dining car.

"Time to switch shifts."

A pair of men in black approached their allies, who were standing guard.

"Thanks."

The men who had been on duty so far handed their guns to their allies and left for the First Class car.

They stepped out of the dining car and onto the coupling, and were about to open the door into the First Class car when they suddenly heard what they assumed to be the screams of the passengers in the dining car.

"What?!"

The two men knew instantly that something had happened in the dining car, because the lights had all gone off.

They quickly turned around and slammed open the dining car door. Moonlight dimly illuminated the interior, but it was difficult to see much in the darkness. All they could see was that two windows--one closest to the front and the other closes to the back--were wide open.

"What's going on here?!"

But they received no reply from the allies who should have been there.

As the black suits stood with their guards up and cold sweat running down their backs, the dining car's incandescent lights finally flickered back to life.

There was nothing wrong with the lightbulbs. It must have been a temporary blackout in the dining car.

That was not a problem, but the two black suits were concerned with something else.

Their two replacements had disappeared into thin air.

They could feel themselves sweating bullets. The wind blowing in from the open windows cooled their sweat-covered bodies instantly.

"What the hell?! What the hell is going on here, damn it?!"

He grabbed the collar of the passenger sitting closest to the doors.

The answer was simple and to the point. The man's trembling made it clear that he was telling the truth.

"A-a-a-a-a r-red m-m-monster! A r-red monster! I-it just flew in through the w-window and! It dragged out the men!"

"A monster?! What did it look like?!"

"I-it was too dark! I don't know! All I could see was th-that it was all red!" The man seemed to have been too shocked to speak properly.

The black suit reluctantly stepped out into the coupling and reported back to his waiting ally.

"Hey. I'm gonna go report to Goose. You have a handgun, right? Just watch over the dining car for now."

"With just one handgun?"

"Don't worry about it. They can't do anything." He turned around and looked through the window. The passengers didn't seem to be armed.

"Should be no prob-"

The moment he turned back to his friend, however, the man was faced with a great problem.

There was no one there.

His mind could not keep up. What had happened? All he knew was that, the moment he turned around, he had seen something out of the corner of his eye.

It was a red shadow, illuminated by the sky, which had begun to grow brighter.

A beat. He finally understood.

He realized that the passengers were the least of his worries--a mere handgun would not be of any use against the red monster.

Before he knew it, he was running into the First Class car in flight.

He had run away.

<=>

The dining car was enveloped in an uncomfortable silence.

The black suits did not return after the earlier fiasco. It was now possible to leave the car with ease.

But how would they escape this place? No one knew what had happened to the white suits afterwards, and they had no idea where the red monster would strike next. Then perhaps it was best to stay where there were many people.

Not only that, no one who had left the car so far--the strange gunman and the dancer, and the children--had returned. The thought paralyzed the other passengers, gluing them to their seats.

Several minutes had passed, when the silence was broken by the sound of the door opening.

It came from the opposite direction as the First Class cars. Was it the five men in black again, or someone else?

The answer was the latter. They also happened to be the worst possible outcome out of the latter category.

"All right! Nobody move!"

"You so much as twitch, and we shoot you!"

The two men armed with guns yelled as soon as they appeared at the door.

None of the passengers recognized them, but they could tell at a glance that the men were dangerous. This was because, even before the guns, they had seen the white suits the men were wearing.

"Who knew the black suits would just up and leave on us? Lucky for us, huh?"

"Good thing we've been hiding by the dining car this whole time."

"All of you! Hand over your goods!"

"You think maybe we should take hostages?"

"Sure, why not? The hijacking failed, and we never stood a chance to begin with. I just wanna get the cash and get outta here."

"Right. And Ladd's disappeared somewhere, too."

The men in black chattered loudly as they stepped forward.

Wham.

Something like the sound of an axe chopping into a tree rang across the dining car.

"Ugh..."

"...! ...?"

The white suits fell to the floor with their eyes rolling into the backs of their heads.

The passengers looked at the space behind the men in white. There stood a giant who looked as though his head would reach the ceiling. His tightly clenched fist was stopped where the white suits' head had been only moments ago.

Was this man a monster, or a saviour?

The passengers anxiously watched the giant.

But the first one to speak was not the giant, but the young man who appeared from behind him. The tattoo on his face made it clear that he was not a man who made an honest living. He was smiling like a child as he aimed his Tommy gun.

Several of the passengers realized that he was the very same man who had been crying at the counter before the incident began.

John and Fang, wide-eyed, watched the situation.

Jacuzzi's next words then threw the passengers back into despair.

"This car is now under our control! Please do as we say if you don't want to die!"

<=>

Meanwhile, Spike was on standby on the rooftop. He hunched down low, and was looking through the scope of a strangely long sniper rifle. His aim was fixed on a pair of silhouettes on top of the freight cars. It was a rather long distance from here.

But now that was no longer a problem. The sky had begun to grow brighter, and the two silhouettes could not be any easier to tell apart.

One of them was wearing a black dress. The other was covered entirely in red.

Spike initially thought that Chane might have still been fighting the man in white, but she must have found a different opponent in the past few hours.

'Can't believe she can hold up for so long.' Spike marvelled at Chane's amazing endurance, but the red shadow she was facing down was amazing in its own right.

For some reason, neither of the silhouettes were moving. It looked like they were looking at each other. In any case, the fact that Chane was still meant that this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

"So *that's* the infamous monster? From here it doesn't look much different from a normal human."

From the shaking of the train Spike determined the angle of the curve it was running along. He calculated the trajectory of the bullet, and quickly pulled the trigger.

"Here goes. Bang!"

There was a gunshot. One of the silhouettes fell.

It was the one in the black dress--Chane. despite being on top of a speeding train, Spike's bullet had found its mark.

"Too bad for you, darling. But you're only going to get in our way when we **force** Master Huey's blessing off of him."

Spike whistled, then aimed for the red shadow.

"Now hurry up and finish her off, Mr. Monster!"

Spike was watching the monster from afar, but he was not particularly scared. In the daylight it was obvious that he was no beast or dragon of some sort. Spike was a skeptic at its finest--he was certain that the red monster was a human being.

And there was nothing to be scared of when facing down a person.

He would snipe the person's torso before he could get here, and once the target had stopped moving, he would end things with a shot to the head. It was simple.

He believed that, as long as he didn't mess up his timing, his skills guaranteed him certain victory.

But the red silhouette did not move. It felt as though its eyes were staring right at Spike.

"Hey, hey. The hell? Hurry up and kill Chane..."

His words trailed off as his heart began beating ferociously.

The red silhouette was moving. It was running along the roof at an unbelievable pace, straight towards Spike.

"The hell?! This is crazy! He's too fast!"

Although Spike's words were panicked, his eyes and trigger finger were deadly calm. The red silhouette was running straight, without moving to the side. It almost looked like a red bullet flying over the roofs.

Spike took aim and pulled the trigger.

"Die."

But the moment he pulled the trigger, the red silhouette turned for the first time and evaded the bullet.

"What?! The hell is this?!"

He aimed again and fired.

But the silhouette again evaded the bullet's trajectory just as Spike pulled the trigger.

He fired two, three times. The same events repeated themselves.

"Can that bastard see my finger?!" Spike asked in shock, and pulled the trigger again. But there was nothing but a quiet *click*.

He was out of ammo. Spike finally began to wonder if he really was facing a human being, and began to experience true fear.

"Damn it! How about this?!"

He pushed aside his gun and took out his contingency weapon.

It was a large and rugged gun, completely different from a sniper rifle--the Lewis Automatic Machine Gun, created by Americans and used by the British.

"A red monster like you should just turn into red meat!" Spike yelled, as the gun spewed out bullets at a rate of five hundred rounds per minute.

Even the red monster was forced to stop. It looked like it rolled across the roof, then it fell over the edge. It was likely near the middle of the dining car, two cars away from where Spike was.

Spike found himself trying to whistle, but failed because of his chattering teeth.

The monster could try to come up to the roof again. He remained vigilant as he carefully took aim at the vicinity of the roof from which the monster had fallen.

But he saw no sign of the monster coming back up.

He let out a sigh of relief, and felt his heart slowly return to its regular rhythm. He looked up at the freight car rooftop again, and saw Chane still sitting where he had shot her before. It looked as though she hadn't managed to die.

"What an annoying bitch. Sometimes the best-trained dogs are the worst."

Spike tried to aim his scope in order to land the killing shot, but naturally no such thing existed on a Lewis Gun.

"Damn. I'm really off today." He said, as he took hold of his sniper rifle. "Right, gotta reload."

He could not find his reloader. He had probably left it back at the coupling.

Spike climbed down and found when he was looking for.

"Shit, seriously..."

But the moment he reached out to the box on the platform by the coupling, a dark red arm reached out from under the train and took hold of his right hand.

"!"



A powerful force dragged Spike under. He could not even scream as he was pulled under the coupling.

The moment before he hit the ground, Spike came to a realization.

'No wonder we never ran into this guy on the train--'

Spike could see a surprisingly wide space under the cars, filled with all kinds of machinery. He could see the red silhouette skillfully clinging to the metal ornamentations.

'This bastard... he hasn't been travelling over or through the train... he's been going under them!'

Soon there was an impact on his head, followed by eternal darkness.

<=>

The Lemures, who initially numbered at nearly thirty, were now down to the six who had gathered in Goose's cabin. There was no contact from the five men who had gone to the conductor's compartment. They had probably been killed by the Rail Tracer or the white suits-- or perhaps Chane had killed them in retaliation.

It had been some time now since they last heard Spike's gunshots. Goose had gone to check for himself, but Spike was nowhere to be found.

Goose was now sure of two things: That Spike was already gone, and that his only chance of winning this game was not to take over the train, but to escape it alive.

Finding himself thinking this way, Goose remembered why he was not a soldier. No real soldier would, after all, compare situations like this to a game.

Perhaps things had come to this because he was no soldier--because he still had some semblance of naivete remaining in him.

He had no way of knowing how many white suits were still alive. All he could see was the fact that the chances were stacked against them.

"We have no choice. We will abort this mission and retreat. We'll detach the freight cars and break off."

Thinking of what he was going to say next, Goose found himself truly convinced that he was a terrorist, not a soldier. And he felt absolutely no remorse about the order he was about to give.

"We cannot let our faces be known to them. We will go ahead with the original plan to eliminate all the passengers."

Suddenly, the door creaked open slightly.

And as everyone focused their attention on the door, something came rolling inside.

It was a small cylinder that rolled in innocently enough, save for the sound of sputtering and the small amount of smoke it was emitting.

Goose recognized the object for what it was and quickly took hold of it.

He smashed the window open with the butt of his gun, not even bothering to waste time opening it, and threw the object out the window with all his might.

Several seconds later, the train was rocked by a powerful impact.

The bomb wasn't quite as strong as a dynamite, but it would be enough to disable every man who was standing in this cabin.

"They're in the halls! Destroy the enemies!" Goose ordered, as the men ran out of the cabin.

Rolling around the corridors was yet another bomb, hissing as the fuse burned down.

"Shut the door!"

They hurriedly closed the door and ducked.

Not a moment too soon. The door flew off the frame.

Goose bit his lip, looking at the debris with a look of utter contempt.

"I'd forgotten that those hostages were rather difficult to deal with by normal means."

Goose then laughed self-deprecatingly, and put his hand on the windowsill. The window had been completely destroyed by the force of the blast.

"I'll take care of them. The rest of you can go prepare our equipment in the back room."

<=>

The sound of the explosion carried all the way to the dining car.

"Huh?"

Jacuzzi suddenly stopped and turned towards the direction of the sound. He then turned to Fang and John beside him.

"Sorry, but could you take care of the rest?"

"Hey, where are you going?"

"That sound just now... You think it was Nice?"

The sound of the explosion automatically led Fang to assume it was the one-eyed girl in glasses. Then it was obvious what Jacuzzi would do next.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure it was her. I'm gonna go and help her."

"Are you crazy? Donny's already gone to the freight hold. If you want, we could..."

"You can't do that. You two have to take care of the dining car. We're going according to that plan I told you about earlier. And I think, to be honest, you'd be a better leader here than me, John."

"Point taken. You do kind of get in the way in times like this."

"You're terrible, John..."

Jacuzzi's answer was so uncharacteristically calm that John was confused.

"Come to think of it, you're not crying anymore. Aren't you scared?"

"I am." Jacuzzi replied instantly. "I'm so, so scared. I feel like my legs are gonna start shaking any minute now. There's probably a bunch of black suits in First Class right now, and they all probably have guns."

"So don't go. You're just gonna end up crying and running for your life." John tried to stop Jacuzzi, but Jacuzzi just grinned embarrassedly.

"I promised that I'd come back alive. And if Nice dies, I can't come back to her again. So I'm gonna have to get her while she's still alive."

Jacuzzi slung a machine gun over his shoulder and walked towards the door to the coupling.

"Besides, I decided that I wouldn't cry. I'm ready to face anything, no matter how painful it is."

Hearing this, John and Fang gave up on trying to stop Jacuzzi. As they watched him walk away, Fang quipped in.

"Isn't he worried about Nick at all...?"

"Maybe it's because Nick doesn't have much in the way of presence."

<=>

"You all right, boss?" Yelled the man without presence.

Nice nodded jovially. "No worries, Nick. I'm having a blast! It's not every day I get to use so many bombs at once!" Her lone eye was already lost her own euphoric world.

"Whaddaya mean, 'no worries'?" Nick asked nervously as he sat on the floor.

He knew that she was a little crazy about explosives, but Nick never expected that she would go this far.

It was only because of Jacuzzi's calming presence that Nick had never known this side of Nice. This went beyond the level of mere interest--she was an all-out bomb freak. He was astonished by the fact that she *adjusted* the amount of explosives she used just moments before detonation so as to not damage the train's structure or hinder its movement. He had to hand it to her--Nice was making adjustments with nothing but visual estimation.

Though she had blown apart the corpses of the mafiosi last night, Nice could not have had the opportunity to blow up living humans... except of course, for herself.

"Let's get goin', boss. We gotta meet up with the others!"

"Oh, that's too bad. But I suppose you're right."

Nice took out another bomb that was hidden under her clothing, removed some of the blasting powder inside, and set the fuse on fire.

The moment the fuse began to sputter and smoke, Nice opened the door and hurled it into the hallway.

There was an explosion. The impact rattled their bodies.

And on cue, Nick put his hand on the windowsill. He would climb onto the roof first and pull up Nice, as the woman in fatigues had quickly left through the window upon untying them.

Nick looked up out the window to take hold of the ornamentation.

"Guh!"

However, he was quickly pushed back into the cabin by a pair of boots coming in through the window.

"Wha..."

Nick had been kicked down by someone from the roof. It was a miracle that he hadn't fallen out of the train.

"Y-you're...!"

Before them appeared a man with sharp, dark eyes.

Having easily leapt into the cabin, Goose, armed with a pistol in each hand, aimed at Nice and Nick.

"Checkmate, you hoodlums." He slowly stepped towards them. "To think you would have dynamite stashed under your clothes... I suppose it was a mistake to treat you as a gentleman."

Goose's lips were twisted into a grin, but his eyes were glaring at Nice with a look that could kill.

"If you could hand over the rest of your explosives..."

Nice silently returned the look, but the arm holding the gun aimed at Nick tensed. She changed her attitude at once.

"Wait...! I'll hand 'em over."

Nice bowed her head angrily and took out every remaining bomb she had, laying them out on the floor.

There were about a dozen explosives set out before her.

"I suppose it's a good thing I didn't shoot you recklessly. With this many bombs, I might have ended up accidentally detonating them."

Goose smacked Nice with his gun-hand.

"Ugh!"

"Bastard!" Nick roared, and took out his knife.

Bang!

At the sound of the gunshot, blood splattered from Nick's raised arm.

"Argh... Agh!"

"Silence, you piece of shit."

Goose mercilessly put the gun to Nick's head.

Just as he prepared to pull the trigger, however, the door opened with a loud crash. Goose's head, along with his gun, turned around.

Standing at the door was a man holding a machine gun. The tattoo on his face made him appear particularly villainous.

When he realized that the man's finger was on the trigger, Goose ran sideways and pulled the triggers of his own guns.

The two bullets grazed past the tattooed young man's arm and side. But at the same time, his machine gun began to spew out a storm of bullets.

"HAAAAAAAA!"

Goose yelled as he ran further to the side. As the roar of the bullets came closer and closer to his feet, he slid behind the luxurious bed, a furnishing only present in First Class.

Nick took the chance to get Nice to her feet and escape out into the hallway, behind Jacuzzi.

Jacuzzi continued to fire upon the bed as he backed away. He then stepped out of the cabin and shut the door as loudly as he had opened it.

Goose crawled out from behind the bed and smirked maniacally. It was almost as if he was *enjoying* the series of obstacles that were presented in his path. But the glint of hatred in his eye had become brighter than ever.

"Interesting. So this is a test... A test to become one just like Huey! Then that is all the more reason for me to survive! I cannot run now! I will devour all who stand in my path, just like Chane!"

<=>

Once Jacuzzi and the others had left, Goose's men came out into the hallway. They initially thought that the gunfire was Goose's doing, but remembered that Goose did not have a machine gun.

Suddenly, Goose walked up to them from the front of the hallway. His eyes were bloodshot--inhuman, in a different sense from Chane.

"Have you prepared the equipment?"

"Y-yes sir!" The men answered stiffly, unnerved by Goose's expression. Goose walked past them and walked under his gear.

And with the heavy object upon his back, he gave Jacuzzi's gang chase with a look that was stuck halfway between rage and amusement.

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Meanwhile, Jacuzzi gave Nice and Nick their orders at the coupling between First Class and the dining car.

To their side they could see a great body of water between the iron bars of the bridge. The train was now crossing a large river. It was almost sunrise, and the surface of the water illuminated the brightening sky. Several small boats were floating on the river.

The sight reminded Nice that this was the rendezvous point she had discussed with the rest of the gang.

As a side note, she had already long forgotten the fact that they had originally boarded the train to steal its cargo.

Yes--the plan was to drop the cargo into the river. Jacuzzi never abandoned this goal, yet at the same time he had also come to rescue Nice and Nick. It was foolishly reckless in comparison to his normal attitude. Although Nice was somewhat taken aback, Jacuzzi's actions assured her that he was truly fit to be their leader.

Most organizations would not have put up with someone like him in charge, but in some ways, Jacuzzi's actions were perfectly suited to the kind of people their gang was.

The imperfect and hopelessly uncertain delinquent leader trembled as he gave his orders.

"Donny's unloading the goods back in the freight hold! I told him to leave one box, so you have to take that one, Nice!" He yelled. Jacuzzi then took hold of the ladder up to the roof. "I'm going to distract him. You two cut straight through the dining car! You can leave anyone who's passing below to Fang!"

Jacuzzi nodded with a determined look. There was no time to question him--all they could do now was to trust in his confidence.

Nice pushed up her glasses and flipped open the eyepatch that covered her right socket.

She expertly took out the object in her right eye socket and pushed it into Jacuzzi's hand.

It was a black sphere about the size of an eye. A long fuse was wrapped around it.

"It's the last bomb I've got. It's not that strong, but take it just in case!"

Jacuzzi nodded firmly.

"Thank you, Nice. I'll think of it like you and let it blow with love!"

"That's pretty creepy, y'know?" Nice smiled. Jacuzzi began to climb.

"Boss! They're here!" Nick yelled, having been looking through the window on the door into First Class. Nice nodded and opened the door to the dining car, and the two of them began to run.

<=>

When Goose opened the door, the tattooed young man had just climbed all the way onto the roof.

"I'll take care of this one! You men go through the car!"

Though his expression was the least of his dreadfulness, Goose still held on to a thread of sanity. He followed Jacuzzi up the ladder as soon as he had barked out his order.

Jacuzzi stood on the middle of the roof and waited for Goose and his men to climb up.

He didn't know how many would come, but the narrow width of the ladder would force them to climb one by one.

Jacuzzi almost even wished that they *wouldn't* climb up to the roof. Even now, it was painful to kill people. He had seen many corpses, and he had seen his friends kill the mafiosi who tried to attack them. Ultimately, all of that was his own fault. The conversation with Isaac had lessened his guilt somewhat, but the thought of murder still hurt him.

But he had to do this.

He swallowed and waited, trying to maintain his balance despite the shaking of the train.

Finally, something rose up over the edge of the roof.

But as Jacuzzi put his finger over the trigger, he noticed something strange. The object was too thin and long to be a human head--it was almost like some sort of nozzle--

And just as the thought occurred to him, the nozzle turned towards him. It was tilted upwards at a slight angle, balanced on the edge of the roof, but it was unmistakably pointed in Jacuzzi's direction.

He had a bad feeling about this.

The ominous thought instantly became reality as a powerful burst of flame blew out of the nozzle.

"Huh?!"

Jacuzzi was taken completely by surprise as the red-hot flames lit up over his face.

Because of the angle of the nozzle, the burst of fire passed clear over Jacuzzi's head--but the wave of heat that assaulted him was almost enough to burn his face.

"Wh-whoa!"

Jacuzzi fell on his rear and quickly scurried backwards.

The fire scared him to be sure, but what surprised him even more was the range it covered. The nozzle was positioned at the end of the car, but the terrifying burst of flame had reached all the way to the other end of the car. And that was even with the angle of the fire taken into consideration. If the nozzle had been positioned parallel to the ground, the fire burst would have more than covered the length of the car.

Jacuzzi needed to get some distance between himself and the nozzle. He quickly leapt to his feet and sprinted for his life, trying desperately to get out of range.

When he spared a glance back, Jacuzzi saw the nozzle's owner climbing upwards. The man re-adjusted the nozzle, not even bothering to chase Jacuzzi down.

By the time Jacuzzi jumped over the next coupling, he was assaulted by another burst of flames.

Jacuzzi made an unsteady landing just as the fire passed by his side. He was a bit of a distance away from it, but the heatwave that accompanied the flames was unbelievable. Jacuzzi worried that his clothes would burst into flame, but it felt as though his face would burn off first.

He was able to avoid a direct hit because the train was moving along a curved section of the tracks, but one quick adjustment of the nozzle would spell his end.

And just as expected, the angle of the fire began to shift. Jacuzzi ran as fast as he could to get out of range.

He could feel the edge of the flames licking at his back. It felt as though he had been thrown into an incinerator. Even if he didn't catch on fire, the heat alone would be enough to kill a man.

When he got enough of a distance away that the heat didn't feel as intense, Jacuzzi looked back.

"Please let it hit..."

He then aimed his machine gun at the man with the flamethrower and pulled the trigger. It was a hopeless distance for an inexperienced newbie like him, but Jacuzzi had no other choice but to make a stand.

Click click click click click click

"Huh?"

But the situation was already *beyond* hopeless.

Newbie or not, no one could solve the problem of a machine gun that had long since run out of ammunition.

The young man aimed a machine gun in Goose's direction, but he quickly tossed it aside. It seemed that he was out of bullets.

"A foolish end for a troublesome hooligan. I'll burn your bones to dust." Goose grinned maliciously, slowly making his way further down to the back of the train.

He was carrying a 1918 German flamethrower. It was an antique acquired by illegal means, and it had been partially modified to fit modern standards. Goose never imagined that he would end up using it in a place like this. The flamethrower was originally Master Huey's weapon, but they had been right to bring it along just in case.

'Damn. I should've brought a protective suit. At this rate I'll end up roasting myself to death.'

Goose's head had begun to clear as he chased down the young man along the roof.

'Where the hell are the others? Tch. I guess I could take care of this whelp on my own.'

<=>

Goose's men ran through the dining car and made their way to the door to the next coupling. The passengers trembled like scared rabbits at the sight. The black suits, however, did not even look at them as they reached for the door to head outside.

Clunk.

The sliding door shook, but would not budge. By the time they made repeated attempts, all of the black suits were gathered at the end of the car.

"Hey, hurry and open it up."

"Wait a sec. The door's not working..."

Click.

The sound instantly paralyzed the black suits. It reminded them of the sound of a gun being cocked.

Click.

The second time, it sounded like a machine gun being aimed.

click clatter click click click clack click

clatter click click click

clack click clatter click click

clatter click

clack clack click clatter

clatter click click clack clack click clatter

One sound gave way to another, and in the midst of the growing wave of terrifying clicks the men began to understand what was going on.

If they had begun to fire away with their machine guns when they had heard the first *click*, they would have emerged victorious.

But they had been working under the assumption that the passengers would not resist, and had thus let down their guard. Another reason for their failure was their lack of experience in comparison to the likes of Goose or Spike.

It would be useless to try and resist at this point. The black suits could do little but slowly raise their heads.

"We'd appreciate it if you could drop the guns before you turn around." John warned them sternly.

"We're all rookies here, see? All we taught 'em was how to pull the trigger. Turn around with your guns, and *someone's* bound to shoot. I guarantee it."

The black suits put their guns onto the floor in defeat. They were inexperienced men, and in terms of loyalty they were not even half the fanatics that Chane was.

When they finally turned around, they found themselves looking upon the dining car, no different than it had been before.

The one crucial distinction, however, was the fact that the passengers were all pointing guns in their directions, eyes filled with terror.

John and Fang spoke, their voices filled with joking tones.

"How's it feel to get the train hijacked back? And by the hostages with your own weapons, to boot."

"Shouldn't you take responsibility and watch over the hostages 'til the end? Haha!"

When Jacuzzi captured one of the black suits earlier, he had been able to get some information out of him. He found out that the Lemures planned to turn the train to a moving fortress.

In other words, the black suits must have brought on board a great deal of weaponry. Jacuzzi's guess turned out to be correct; the freight hold was filled with a veritable treasure trove of extra firearms and ammunition.

After taking over the dining car, he had asked for John and Fang's support. As a side note, only the two of them were in possession of loaded weapons.

In any event, Jacuzzi's gamble paid off.

John restrained the black suits with ripped tablecloths as he fell into a slight worry.

'They say that spending time with hostages creates a bond of sorts between hostage and captor, but that Jacuzzi... he even ended up taking control over that bond.'

Once he was finished tying up the men, he turned to Fang.

"What do they call this in the Orient, again?"

"Oh, you mean the thing the gunman at the counter said? Y'know, I've never heard it before, myself."

They paused for a moment to remember what Isaac had said.

"Let's see... it was 'Finders'..."

""Keepers'."

<=>

Jacuzzi was finally cornered.

He was now just above the last coupling. Should he climb back down, or should he cross over to the last car?

But it was clear that Goose would only follow him should he choose to climb down. Jacuzzi could try to wait for Goose to come over to the second last car, and then go back into the car, but such a plan was meaningless before the flamethrower, which boasted a range greater than the length of the car. Goose could burn him to ashes without even crossing over.

'And I can't let him do that. Nice and the others are still in the freight hold...'

If burning to death was all that remained, he would do everything in his power to protect the others.

Jacuzzi took a deep breath and turned on his heels to face Goose.

"So that fool's finally given up." Goose grinned, his eyes still bloodshot, and slowly closed the distance between himself and Jacuzzi.

First he would burn this hoodlum to a crisp. He would then burn the eyepatch woman. He would burn them all--the woman in fatigues, the men in white, even the hostages.

But his fuel supply worried him. Although the flamethrower was modified to carry a larger quantity of fuel, each burst of fire would not last more than ten seconds at full power. Although he had some extra fuel prepared, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Goose slightly tightened the valve. This would halve his range, but it would save him some fuel in the long run.

The man was slowly approaching. He crossed over onto the first freight car.

Jacuzzi would soon be within range of his fire blasts. It was an all-or-nothing gamble now. Jacuzzi took hold of the bomb Nice gave him.

'There should be ignition fuel in that weird thing he's carrying on his back. If I can just light it...'

Jacuzzi then realized the foolishness of his line of thought.

'I've got nothing to light it with!'

It was over. What use was a bomb when there was no fire to light it with?

Technically, there *was* fire--his enemy was giving him fire by the truckload. At this rate Jacuzzi would either burn to death, or the bomb would go off and blow off his arm. In the end, of course, *both* would end up happening.

At this point, he even considered jumping off the train. With luck he might survive the fall.

But that would ensure the deaths of Nice and the other passengers.

Jacuzzi even thought about just running headlong into his opponent.

'Oh, I just wish someone would come and fight him--I don't care if it's the white suits, or even the Rail Tracer. And I hope they'll just take each other down while they're at it...'

But Jacuzzi firmly swallowed the urge to rely on others, and finally decided to face his enemy.

That was the precise moment that his saviours arrived.

Someone he hadn't even asked for had appeared completely out of left field to rescue him.

"AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

A terrifying scream. It came from somewhere under the train--right in the vicinity of where Goose was standing.

"What the?!"

Foolishly enough, Goose ended up approaching the direction of the sound in order to see what it was.

Perhaps it was arrogance at the belief that he had the ultimate weapon, or perhaps he had assured himself of his own victory. Or perhaps he was just the kind of man who could not rest until he had solved every mystery in his path.

He might have been able to avoid the catastrophe that befell him if only he had not approached the source of the sound.

The very moment Goose carefully looked down towards the ground, nozzle at the ready--

They came down from below.

"AAAAAAaaaaaaaAAAAaaaaaaHHHHHHHHhhhhhHHHHHH!"

The moment Goose looked down, the sound of the scream became nearer and louder.

And suddenly, a huge mass appeared from behind Goose.

The mass was attached to a thick rope that stuck out from the side of the train, and it flew through the air like a pendulum. It almost looked like a gigantic yo-yo.

Jacuzzi, who was watching from a slight distance, realized what the mass at the end of the rope was.

It was a gunman who was holding something in his arm, and a woman in a red dress who was holding onto his legs.

"I-Isaac?!"

Jacuzzi's eyes widened at the sudden intrusion.

"What are they doing over there?!"

A gust of wind arrived to meet Jacuzzi.

It was the southeaster, here to bring him victory.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHhhhhhh!"

The scream disappeared towards the other side of the train in the blink of an eye. The gigantic human yo-yo had crossed over the top of the train at an arc much like the movement of the winter sun.

Goose was standing right in the middle of the circle of the arc. Just as Isaac and Miria fell over to the other side of the train, the rope wrapped itself across Goose's leg.

"What?!"

A powerful impact smashed into Goose's achilles tendon. He spun and fell to the roof, tripped over by a gigantic yo-yo string.

He landed squarely on his back. The shape of the cylinder on his back painfully pressed itself into his torso.

Goose was suddenly struck by the fear that the impact had broken the cylinder. But he did not feel any escaping air, nor did he smell any hydrogen gas. It seemed everything was holding up well.

"What the hell was that?!"

Goose slowly got to his feet and began to make his way to the tattooed young man again. The mass at the end of the rope bothered him, but first he had to burn down this man on the roof. It was difficult to run with a sixty-pound weight on his back, but he managed to jump over the next coupling with a running start.

Goose had finally arrived at the last car, where the tattooed young man waited.

"Ready to die, tattoo boy? Why don't you at least tell me your name before I turn you to ash?"

"No."

The conversation finally began when Goose made his way about halfway across the car.

"Oh? And why's that?"

"Because I'm going to get you off this train, and if you survive... You're going to try and get back at me. So I'm not going to tell you my name. I don't want you finding out my address and stuff."

Jacuzzi tried to come off as cold as he could, but seeing Goose's bloodshot eyes sent his answer slightly off-kilter.

Goose was almost driven to laughter at Jacuzzi's sloppy explanation. He hadn't expected something so half-baked at a time like this.

Was this man really the person who was firing his machine gun at them earlier?

"How unfortunate, then. Are you prepared to die?"

"I don't want to die if I can help it."

"I'll try to remember that when I incinerate you to charcoal." Goose said, closely inspecting Jacuzzi's face.

'What a disgusting look. It's like he's about to cry any second now, but there's some semblance of determination in his eye. But once I burn him to a crisp, it'll all be over.'

Goose grinned and pulled the nozzle's trigger with all his might.

'He'll end up roasting himself if he tries to come at me. Just try it, kid.'

However--

"What?!"

The nozzle produced flames, but the fire was nowhere near as powerful as it was before. Four to five feet was as far as it got.

"It can't be!"

Had he tightened the valve too much? Goose hurriedly reached behind himself, but the valve was bent at an odd angle and would not budge. The force of the earlier impact *had* left a lasting hindrance.

"Damn it!"

He turned and pointed the nozzle forward, but Jacuzzi had already closed the distance between them, leaping forward and avoiding the nozzle.

Jacuzzi had neither great physical strength nor extraordinary abilities. His course of action upon leaping towards Goose was exceedingly simple; standing just under the other man's chin, Jacuzzi jumped up with all his might.

As Jacuzzi propelled himself upwards, his forehead mercilessly crushed Goose's nose. As Goose recoiled from the shock--both physical and mental--Jacuzzi made for another headbutt. Goose's incisors broke and blood splattered over Jacuzzi's face. But Jacuzzi would not stop. He held on to the flamethrower's nozzle as he continued to slam his forehead into his opponent's face--twice, three times. *Bam. Crack. Crunch. Gruck.*

The sensation of the impact on his forehead weakened each time. Initially Jacuzzi thought that he might have broken his own skull, but it seemed that it was *Goose's nose* that had been broken.

'All right!'

Assured of the impact he was making, Jacuzzi leaned back one more time in preparation for another strike. But he was interrupted by a series of clear sounds.

Bang Bang Bang

"Huh?"

He felt intense pain in his side and his leg. It felt as though he had been jabbed in the stomach with the end of an umbrella.

Jacuzzi looked down and saw Goose's left hand, curled into a fist. A strange device was fixed to the back of his hand.

"It's a hand-firing mechanism. 'Course, it's all that bastard Huey's work." Something like a small firearm was affixed to the end of the device on Goose's fist, and white smoke trailed off from the barrel. "Isn't it convenient? It fires a shot every time I make a fist and punch it into someone."

Goose, bleeding profusely from the mouth and nose, smirked and explained the mechanism of the weapon. It was normally only able to shoot once, but Huey's custom design had made it possible for the weapon to hold three shots.

One of them had grazed Jacuzzi's side, and the other two had lodged themselves in his thigh.

"Hmph! Looks like the tides are turrrrrgghh!"

Jacuzzi headbutted Goose in the mouth once more.

"Y-you little bastard!"

Goose jammed the fingers on his left hand into Jacuzzi's wound. Despite the unbelievable pain, however, Jacuzzi would not stop.

"Give up, damn it! Scream! Suffer and weep!"

But Jacuzzi could not do such a thing.

He was already prepared for this kind of pain, from the moment he had determined to defeat these people. That was why he would never cry. Ever.

<=>

Some time earlier.

"About Jacuzzi, y'know?" Nice whispered to Nick as she walked through the hallways of the freight hold. "He's normally a big crybaby, but once he's made up his mind about something, he'll never cry."

"Huh. Seriously?" Nick asked dubiously. Nice smiled.

"Yes. Getting that tattoo must've been terribly painful, but he didn't cry once."

"So what's with the waterworks the rest of the time?"

"I asked him about it too. And he told me, 'Because it's natural for people to cry'."

Nice remembered Jacuzzi's fourteen-year old face, a hint of childishness still lingering on him. It had not been long after he had gotten the tattoo, and he was smiling.

"But the times I'd wanna cry the most are probably gonna be the times when I have to try my hardest. That's why I'm gonna cry whenever I feel like. I won't stop myself from crying, and I'll cry all the tears that I would've shed when I feel like crying the most. So when I really have to take a stand, my tears will have already dried up."

It was a childish resolve for a fourteen-year old, but Jacuzzi had kept this vow for over five years. Nice loved him for it.

Suddenly, they heard three gunshots in succession.

"Boss! That was...!"

The sound had come from the last car in the train. Nice was running before she knew it, the many bombs from the last box of their loot hanging around her waist.

<=>

"Die!"

Goose kicked Jacuzzi, breaking his stance. Jacuzzi lost his balance and fell on his rear.

"Your luck's finally run out. Any last words?" Goose asked, spitting out a mixture of saliva and blood. He re-adjusted the nozzle of the flamethrower and pushed it towards Jacuzzi.

The pain and anger prevented Goose from thinking clearly. If he had been in his right state of mind, he would have burned Jacuzzi's legs to prevent him from moving outright. Just as the Neider incident showed, Goose was not the kind of man who would allow his enemies a quick death, even when he was thinking clearly. He had an inferiority complex from his failure to become a soldier--this tendency of his was probably what set him apart from true professionals.

For a moment, Jacuzzi braced himself for death. He then remembered Nice's bomb, which was stowed away his pocket.

At this range, it might be possible to get Goose caught up in the blast. Then the cylinder on his back would also explode, engulfing Goose in lethal flames.

Of course, this would kill Jacuzzi as well.

He only had one option left. Even if he were to escape by jumping off the train, he would either die of the force of the impact or the blood loss. And if he was going to die anyway, he had to do everything in his power to take Goose down with him.

Jacuzzi prepared himself and reached into his pocket.

Goose noticed Jacuzzi's movement, and expecting him to drawing a weapon, put pressure on his trigger finger.

Suddenly, he stopped.

Jacuzzi looked up at Goose in confusion. Goose's eyes were fixed on some point behind Jacuzzi, at the edge of the last car.

Jacuzzi didn't know what was going on, but this was his big chance. He ignored the pain and tried to get to his feet, but he also froze.

"???"

Something was moving below Jacuzzi's feet.

A red mass was emerging from behind his feet. It was a chunky, wet mass that looked almost like ground meat. It was moving from Jacuzzi's feet, towards Goose.

Jacuzzi stepped back, terrified. But Goose was still looking at some point behind him. And another red mass passed by to Jacuzzi's left.

Jacuzzi finally turned around, and was struck dumb by the sight.

There were dozens of similar-looking masses of red, and the way they slid and rolled forward almost looked like a marching army of red ants. When one pice collided with another, the two became one larger mass and continued to move forward.

Jacuzzi finally understood. It was finally showing itself, and at the worst possible timing, too.

He slowly called the monster's name.

"...Rail Tracer..."

"What the hell is this?! Some kind of monster?!"

Goose had an idea of what this mass might be. It was the red monster that the hostages had been rambling about--the creature that had killed many of his men.

"Die! Die, dammit! Diediediedie! Burn!"

Goose forgot Jacuzzi for a moment as he set alight the pieces of flesh that approached his feet. The powerful waves of heat forced Jacuzzi to quickly move back.

The red mass caught on fire, but strangely enough, it emitted no smoke. The scorched surfaces cracked open, and the mass underneath regained its fleshy colour.

The mass of flesh continued to move forward, undeterred. Goose let out a howl of obscenities as he swung around the nozzle of the flamethrower.

The fuel that the nozzle sprayed everywhere burned right in front of Jacuzzi. The roof of the cars seemed to be made of metal, which meant that the train would not catch on fire.

The realization snapped Jacuzzi back into reality.

"A fire source!"

"Damn it! Get away from me! BURN!"

Goose madly swung around the flamethrower. He would have long since run out of fuel had he not been forced to adjust the valve.

"Burn, burn, burn, burn...?!"

Clang.

It felt like something had flown over his head and landed on the roof. He turned around without thinking and saw an eyeball-sized metal orb rolling on the roof.

The sparks on the fuse were quickly drawn into the orb.

There was a sudden, explosive roar, and an impact.

"GAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

The force of the blast launched Goose towards the back of the car. It wasn't a very powerful explosion, but the weight of the flamethrower made it difficult for him to stop, especially as they were currently atop a moving train.

And standing in Goose's way was the tattooed young man.

"You fool! You can't do *anything* unarmed!"

Having ended up losing hold of the nozzle, Goose took out a knife from his pocket despite the force behind his movement and raised it to strike Jacuzzi.

Jacuzzi remembered the words of the greatest gunman in the world--the man who had given his courage--and yelled with all his strength.

"I've got a gun in my heart!"

Goose's knife pierced deep into his arm. Jacuzzi did not try to resist, but instead fell to the floor.



"What?!"

As Goose lost his balance and fell forward, Jacuzzi kicked Goose in the stomach and forced him into the air, lifting the 60-pound extra weight of the flamethrower with sheer willpower.

His leg was overcome by pain and blood spurted from his injured thigh, but Jacuzzi did not lower his foot. This single moment seemed to last forever.

And soon, Goose's form did a half-turn in midair as he was thrown behind Jacuzzi.

The greatest stroke of misfortune for Goose was the fact that that was where the roof of the car ended.

As his body felt the sensation of falling through the air, a powerful impact that put the one earlier to shame assaulted his back.

His body was soon engulfed by a bright red light.

Jacuzzi lay flat on the roof of the train as a wave of heat passed by overhead. When he raised his head, he could see flames blossoming over the dimly lit landscape.

Was it over? The sounds of the explosion and the train both sounded very empty. But breaking through them was one very clear voice.

"Jacuzzi! Jacuzzi!"

Nice's voice compelled him to get up. His side and thigh began to ache again.

"Oh, Nice... I'm so glad you're all right."

"I'm fine! First, we gotta stop your bleeding!"

"Huh, that stuff around your waist... Oh, so those are the bombs. Isn't it amazing, Nice? We found some amazing treasures, didn't we?" Jacuzzi tried to force himself to smile. Nice hugged him tightly.

But he gently pushed himself away.

"Jacuzzi?"

"Y'know, Nice?" Jacuzzi smiled somewhat sadly as he spoke to her. "Y'know, I think, maybe I've cried a bit *too* much."

"?"

"So let's say that all the extra tears I shed were tears I shed for you."

Nice realized that Jacuzzi was looking at something else, towards front of the train.

The train was currently moving towards the rising sun.

And that 'something' stood in the middle of the sunlight. The brightness prevented Nice from seeing clearly, but there was one thing she could tell for certain.

The silhouette was completely covered in red.

It stood with its back to the sun, and there were a pair of eyes on its head, just like any other human. The monster's eyes were like dark, clear gemstones that overpowered even the shadows, but they were also reminiscent of a gaping hole leading into some sort of purgatory.

An anti-colour between the boundaries of life and death--a glint that looked as though it would draw everything reflected in those eyes into itself.

Seeing this, Jacuzzi was no certain that the red silhouette was the Rail Tracer. The red mass from earlier must have coagulated into human form, he thought.

As he looked at the silhouette, Jacuzzi quietly whispered to Nice.

"No matter what happens in life, no matter how painful things might be, don't ever cry, Nice, 'Cause I've already cried for you. I can't stand watching you cry."

He then ran forward before Nice could stop him. She instantly realized that he had taken two of the new grenades that she was carrying.

"Jacuzzi!"

But she was too late. By the time she made to go after him, Jacuzzi had already collided with the red silhouette.

He and the silhouette then rolled off the side of the train.

Nice desperately called Jacuzzi's name at the top of her lungs.

And as soon as her scream ended, a red flash went off near the back of the train.

A terrifying explosion rocked the cars. The shock--unbelievably powerful for a mere pair of grenades--was enough to blow away Nice's glasses. As they dropped helplessly to the roof, Nice fell to her knees.

The sound of the explosion could be heard throughout the entire train, but silence soon returned as though nothing had happened.

<=>

Nice remembered her past.

She had been horrifically injured by her own explosives. She had lost her right eye, and her body was covered with scars. Her left eye was badly damaged by the shrapnel, leaving her with little in the way of eyesight.

She could just barely make out people's faces. Fearing that she would never be able to recognize anyone ever again, Nice locked herself in her room and spent her days crying.

But one day, Jacuzzi snuck into her house to speak to her, with a tattoo on his face that even Nice's lone eye could see.

"Look, Nice! Now you'll be able to tell my face apart from everyone else! So as long as we're together, you're going to be just fine!" He smiled.

Hearing his voice, Nice began to cry tears of joy this time. Jacuzzi worried that he had made her cry, and ended up bursting into tears himself.

The recollection just brought Nice to tears.

Her vision was murky because she had dropped her glasses, and now the tears were obscuring her sight even more. She couldn't tell anyone apart now. Of the people left in her life, she could perhaps recognize Donny thanks to his size. Nice felt that she had to keep her mind occupied with such trivial thoughts, or she would end up crying even harder. She remembered what Jacuzzi had said to her before leaving and did her best to stop her tears, but it was no use.

But she did not cry out loud. She desperately locked away her sobs in her throat, feeling like she would suffocate to death.

Suddenly, someone appeared before her.

Was it Nick? One of the white suits? Or perhaps a survivor from the black suits? Nice looked up, resigned to her fate.

Half of the figure's face was covered in a dark shape.

"You're terrible, Nice. I told you not to cry." The faint shape of the tattoo on his face contorted. "If you cry, Nice, I end up wanting to cry, too. So please, Nice. Don't cry."

Nice gave up on holding back her sobs as she tightly embraced him, crying out his name.

Soon, Nick and the others came onto the roof. By then Nice had stopped crying, and Jacuzzi was smiling joyously.

"Say, Jacuzzi. How'd you beat the red monster? Didn't you fall of the train? How're you still alive?"

"Uh... I'll explain later. I don't really get it myself, see? It's just... that red monster was--"

Jacuzzi then finally caught sight of Nick and Donny, and greeted them with a grin.

"Guys! I-I'm so glad you're here." His voice was trembling. "Sorry, but... D-Donny, could you take me to cabin #3 in Second Class? I-I hear there's a doctor there." Jacuzzi suddenly reported, but his face soon twisted into a mess. "My side and my arm and my leg hurt so much... It's bleeding, too, and I think I'm gonna end up crying... uh..."

Jacuzzi then caught sight of his own blood, screamed, and fainted.

He was back to his normal self. Nice and the others quickly carried him away, knowing that the incident on the train was finally over.

The morning sun slowly rose into the sky and lit up the endless tracks, as if to bless their journey to New York.

-Local Episode End-

ターミナル



Terminal

December 31st, 2:00PM. Pennsylvania Station, New York.

The Gandor Family's three bosses sat side-by-side in the waiting area.

The Flying Pussyfoot was scheduled to arrive two hours ago. Berga Gandor, the second of the brothers, spoke up.

"It's late."

"Calm down, Berga. It's normal for transcontinental trains to be late by a couple of hours."

"..."

Luck, the youngest, pacified his brother, as Keith, the eldest, maintained his silence.

Right beside them was another group waiting for their friends Isaac and Miria, and an alchemist friend. Specifically, this group consisted of Firo Prochainezo, an executive in the Martillo Family, his housemate Ennis, and Maiza Avaro, the accountant of the Martillo Family. Maiza was also an immortal alchemist over two centuries old.

Firo looked over at the Gandors and spoke in a quiet tone, making sure no one was listening.

"Aren't you fightin' the Runoratas right now? Is it all right for all of you be sitting out here?"

"We can come outside because we are who we are, Firo."

"Right."

Firo understood immediately. An incident last year had transformed them all, as well as Isaac and Miria, into immortals just like Maiza. Of course, not even the Bureau of Investigation knew about this yet.

"So who's this alchemist friend of yours, Maiza?" Luck asked.

"How should I put it? He's a bit of a loner, but he always tries to take everything upon himself." Answered a gentle-looking, bespectacled man.

"The type that wouldn't last long if he was a normal person?" Luck asked. Berga continued where his bother left off, describing the one *they* were waiting for.

"Claire's kind of like that, but in completely the opposite way. There's such a thing as being too stubborn, y'know? I guess being cheerful kinda makes up for it, though."

Ennis decided to join in on the conversation, asking about the stranger.

"From what you're saying, I suppose Miss Claire must be a strong-willed, outgoing person."

Firo and Luck glanced at one another.

"Firo? Looks like you forgot to tell the lady something important."

"Now that you mention it, I did, didn't I? Well, I did kinda describe Claire's *personality*, but..."

"?"

Ennis listened in confusion, just as the Flying Pussyfoot's arrival was announced throughout the station.

"Let's go, Ennis. I think it'd be best for you to meet Claire in person."

They made their way to the platform to see their old friends, approaching the train that had yet to shake off the air of the excitement that accompanied a long journey.

"Huh? Something's not right here."

The train before them was not the Flying Pussyfoot. It was a very normal train, completely unlike the famous luxury express.

"It seems they ran into some trouble along the way, so they ended up switching out all the cars." Maiza said. Everyone waited for the doors to open.

"Come to think of it, did you hear that they arrested that guy--Huey Laforet, Maiza?" Firo asked. Maiza nodded with a slight shadow cast over his eyes. Keith silently looked at Maiza.

"I suppose it's best to tell you all." Maiza smiled resignedly. "The recently arrested self-proclaimed revolutionary, Huey Laforet--"

Everyone's eyes were on Maiza.

"He is one of us immortals."

The doors then opened, and passengers spilled out of the doorways. For some reason, they were all either wearing expressions of great relief or extreme fatigue.

Once the flow of passengers began to dwindle, a woman wearing fatigues stepped out of the train. The air around her led Ennis to wonder if she was the 'Claire' the others had talked so much about.

But the woman passed right by Keith and the others. Her left leg seemed to be injured, as there were bandages around it and she walked with a slight limp.

After the woman stepped out a man dressed like a magician. Nothing about his appearance said otherwise. The Gandors looked upon this strange man, convinced that he was the alchemist Maiza was waiting for, but even Firo and the others mumbled, "What a strange outfit."

A man who looked to be the magician's assistant soon followed him off the train, carrying his luggage. The cries of the foolish young man who stepped off afterwards began to ring out across the station.

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Although he was crying because of the pain in his leg, Jacuzzi's mind was racing through the questions he still had remaining.

Where had Ladd Russo gone?

Why had Isaac and Miria turned into a flying pendulum?

What had happened to Czes? He had asked Nice, but she would just look away and say she didn't know.

And speaking of Nice, why had the train continued to run, even with all of the explosions that had taken place?

And above all else, what was that red monster--no, the **person in red clothing**?

What had happened in the train in places he had not been present? Although he knew that just thinking about it would not produce an answer, Jacuzzi couldn't help himself. He wanted to go see Isaac and Miria, but his leg wouldn't let him go look for them.

He decided to go ask the local information brokers. Jacuzzi had heard before that New York was home to a company that had every piece of information imaginable.

'That's all fine and all, but my leg really hurts! I'd better get it fixed up before anything else...'

Jacuzzi decided to set his questions aside for now and resumed sobbing.

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"Oh! Ouch! Ouch! Please slow down, Nice! This is killing me!" A heavily bandaged man cried out. Half his face was covered by a large tattoo. With him stepped out a woman who wore glasses and an eyepatch, a man with his entire face bandaged, a man of little presence, and a brown-skinned 7-foot tall giant.

"Y'think maybe they're from the circus?"

Firo and the others watched the curious group walk away as they continued to wait for their friends.

The crowd of passengers soon turned into a trickle, and the platform was enveloped by a lonely air.

But they continued to wait, believing that their friends would soon disembark.

And as the station workers began to close the doors of each train, the last of the passengers stepped out.



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