

BACCANO!

バツカーノ!

1931 特急編

The Grand Punk Railroad

成田良悟

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Ryohgo Narita

Illustration Katsumi Enami

でも、今なら解る気がする。解らなくても、自分から解るようになるようにしようって思えるんだ。

あの列車には、ボクが忘れてた物が全部詰まっていた気がする。

ボクにとつて、あの列車は「分岐点」だったのかもしれない。もしもあの列車に乗らなかつたら——もしも、アイザックさんやミリアさんに会わなかつたら——。その先は、考えたくないや。

怪物？ 「線路の影をなぞる者」のこと？

……あの赤い怪物は……うん、遇つたよ。あの怪物も、アイザックさんと同じように、ボクの運命を変えてくれたんだ。……でも、怖いんだ、思い出すのも怖いよ！ それだけで頭が変になりそうなんだ……。

あれは、まるで力と恐怖が具現化したような存在だった。武力も権力も、神や悪魔の意思、運命や因果と呼ばれるものでさえ力で捻じ伏せる。そんな恐怖をあいっは纏つて——

——今、ボク、何か子供らしくない事でも言った？ 気のせいだよ。うん、気のせいだったってば。ね？ あはは。





楽しかったよ。

メリーと一緒に列車の中を駆け回ってた時。あの時はとっても楽しかった。

何で楽しかったのかは覚えてないけど、メリーもメリーのお母さんも笑ってたんだ。

だからきつと、ボクも笑ってたんだと思う。

みんなみんな、いい人達だった。アイザックさんもミリアさんも、ジャグジーさん達もナタリーおばさんもあの食堂車にいた人達は、みんなとっても優しくかった。

でも、あの時はそんな事は解らなかつたし、ボクはそれに気付くこともしなかつたんだ。

回想録「少年」

Reminiscence - The Boy

It was fun.

It was so fun, running around the train with Mary.

I don't remember *why* I was having fun, but maybe I laughed along because Mary and her mom were both laughing.

They were all such nice people. Mr. Isaac and Miss Miria, Mr. Jacuzzi and his friends, and Mrs. Beriam--everyone in the dining car was so nice.

But back then the thought didn't even occur to me, and I didn't even try to think about it. But now I think I understand. And even if I *can't* understand, I think I'd like to try. I think that train was full of all the things I'd lost.

Maybe, for me, that train was a turning point. If I hadn't boarded it, and I never met Mr. Isaac and Miss Miria... I don't even want to think about what might have happened.

A monster? You mean, the Rail Tracer? ...Yeah, I *did* meet that red monster. It changed my fate, just like Mr. Isaac and Miss Miria did. But I'm scared... I'm scared to even think about him! I feel like I'm going to lose my mind just remembering about it...

It was like some coagulated mass of power and danger. It was something so terrifying that it could overpower any strength, influence, God, the Devil, fate, and or even karma...

Did I just say something strange for a kid? It's just your imagination. You were hearing things, right? Ahaha!



回想録 『作業着の女』

私は、今でも時々不安に思う。

特別急行「フライング・ブッシュ」で起こった事件。あれは全て嘘つばちで、私が見た夢だったので、なかるうか。それ程までに、あの事件は現実味が存在しなかった。

危険な目にはそれまでも何度も会って来た。そして、その全てを無事に潜り抜けても来た。それは確実に現実だったと信じる事が出来る。

なのにあの事件だけが未だに幻の様に感じるのは、きつと自ら選んで踏み込んだ危機ではなく、偶発的に巻き込まれたものだったからかもしれない。

しかし、それを踏まえたとしても、あれは異常過ぎる事態だった。

列車の下にぶら下がっている時。背中には高速で過ぎ去る地面という、明確な形で「死」が存在した。シカゴでマシンガンを持ったマフィアに接触した時も、そこにハッキリと「死」を感じる事が出来る。死の具体的な形が解るからこそ、死を恐怖ごと回避する事が出来る。

だが——あの場所にいた赤い怪物。あいつだけは話が別だ。

ただでさえ異様な状況に包まれていたあの列車。まるで、列車だけが世界から切り離されてしまったような感覚があった。

あの怪物は、その中から更に切り離された存在に思えた。まるで、世界の外側に立って私達を覗き込んでいる悪魔か何かのように。

怪物は、純粹に恐怖の塊だった。あいつの存在自体が「死」に満ちていた。回避しようの無い、まるで悪夢に捉えられたような恐怖。

だが、結局あの怪物は私を殺さなかった。

あいつの事は未だに良く解らない。善人なのか、悪人なのか。そもそも、あいつが本当にあの列車の……

Reminiscence - The Woman in Fatigues

Even now the thought scares me.

I find myself thinking that, maybe, everything that happened on the Flying Pussyfoot was a hallucination. That's just how unbelievable the incident was.

I've been in danger plenty of times before, but I made it through them all without much problems. Because I could believe that things like that were real.

But maybe the reason the incident still feels so unreal to me is that I was caught up in it unintentionally, instead of being given the chance to consciously step into it.

But even still, it was a bizarre incident.

When I hung on to the undersides of the cars, the ground passed by under me so quickly that I could tell instinctively that death was dogging my footsteps. I could feel the same death at my heels when I came into contact with the Chicago mafia and their machine guns. I think I can avoid both death and terror completely because I know what they look like.

But that red monster... It was on another level altogether.

The train itself was full of all kinds of strange situations. It was almost as if it'd been cut off from the rest of the world. And even then, the monster was the stuff of another realm. Like some kind of demon looking into our world from outside.

That monster was nothing but pure terror. It was death itself. The kind of unavoidable fear you feel in nightmares you can't wake from.

But in the end, the monster didn't kill me.

I still don't understand. Was it good or evil? And most importantly, was the monster really the train's...

列車？ 何の話かね？ ……あ
あ、あの切符が馬鹿高い特急の事か。
私にとつて列車とは移動手段に過
ぎんよ。それ以上でもそれ以下で
もない。

事件？ そう言えば、あの夜は
少し騒がしかったな。だが、私にとつ
てはそれだけの話だ。特に心に強い
影響を受けた事も無ければ、大し
た感想も無い。

すまんね、私は俗世の事にはとん
と疎いし、特に興味も抱かないもの
でな。だからこんな格好をしている。
— そうだな。確かにこの姿は良く
目立つ。だからこそ、人も世間も私
に近づこうとはしない。気楽でもあ
り、孤独でもある。

回想録『灰色魔術師』

あの列車の中でも同じだった。私
に声をかけるなんて物好きは、ほん
の数人しかいなかったよ。その内の一
人は、私を死神と勘違いしていたよ
うだったが。

あの列車には、死にたがる人間と
生きたがる人間が混在していたよ。
大抵の人間はそのどちらでも無い
んだがな。

生きようとする人間を手助けす
る事が私の義務だ。たとえどんな
悪人だろうとな。さっきも言ったが、
私は俗世に疎いのでね。もしかした
ら、善悪の概念すら既に無くなって
いるのかもしれない。

……赤い怪物？ 残念ながら、
私はその怪物とやらにはお目にか
かれなかったな。

話を聞く限りでは、テロリストか
ら列車と乗客を救った英雄のよう
にも受け取れるが？

その「線路の影をなぞる者」こそ、
ある種の死神のような存在なのか
もしれんな。会えるものならば会っ
てみたかったよ。

死神に会えなかったという事は、
まだ私は死ぬ時ではないのだろう。
ならば生き続けるまでだ。——不本
意ではあるがね。



Reminiscence - The Grey Magician

A train? What might you be talking about...? Oh, yes. That overpriced express train, you mean? You see, trains are nothing but a mode of transport for me. No more, no less.

An incident? Come to think of it, it *was* a rather noisy night. But that was all it was. Nothing particularly stuck out at me, and I have little more to say about it.

Apologies. I'm rather out of sorts when it comes to current events, and I'm not very curious to know. That is why I dress this way. Yes... I don't need to tell you that this is a very eye-catching appearance. That is why neither other people nor the world approach me. It puts my heart at ease, though I suppose it's also true that it can be lonely at times.

Things were no different on the train. Only a few were odd enough to approach me--one of them even thought I was the grim reaper.

That train carried both people who wished to kill and people who wished to live. Of course, most people didn't squarely fall into either category.

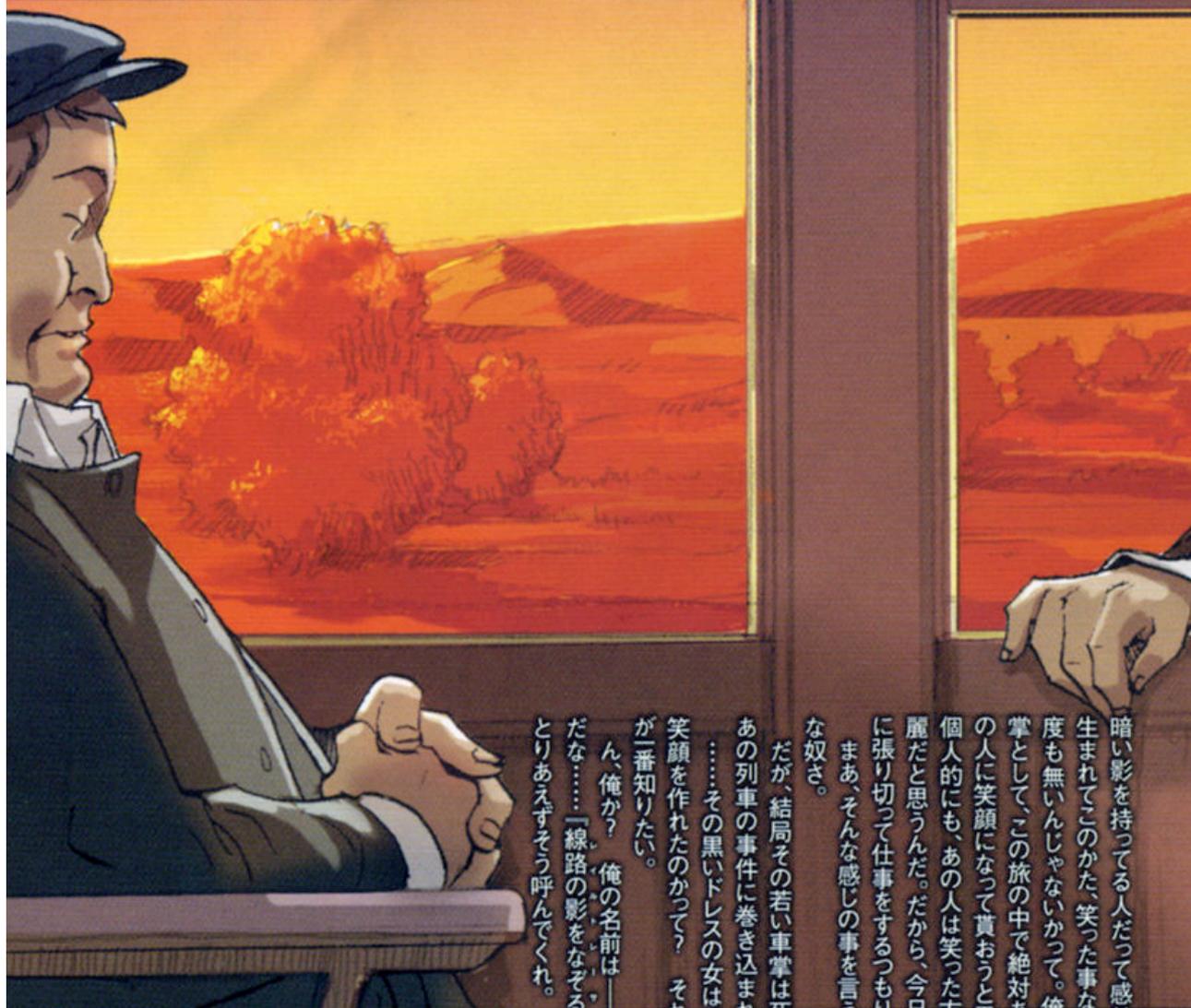
It's my job to save people who wish to live, no matter how evil they may be. Like I said earlier, I am completely clueless as to the way things are going in the world. Perhaps I've already lost any sense of morality along the way.

The red monster...? Unfortunately, I never witnessed that creature, or whatever it might have been. But from what I've been hearing, it sounds almost like it was a hero that rescued the train and its passengers from the terrorists.

Perhaps this Rail Tracer, then, was the *true* grim reaper aboard this train. I only wish I had the chance to meet him.

But the fact that I could not meet the reaper must mean that my time is not yet over. Then I have no choice but to keep living, against my will as it may be...

回想録『若い車掌のこと』



暗い影を持つてる人だっけ感じた。生まれてこのかた、笑った事なんて一度も無いんじゃないかって。俺は車掌として、この旅の中で絶対あの女の人に笑顔になって貰おうと思った。個人的にも、あの人は笑った方が綺麗だと思っただ。だから、今日は特に張り切って仕事をするつもりさ」

まあ、そんな感じの事を言うような奴さ。

だが、結局その若い車掌は死んだ。あの列車の事件に巻き込まれてな。

……その黒いドレスの女は、結局笑顔を作れたのかって？ それは俺が一番知りたい。

ん、俺か？ 俺の名前は——そうだな……「線路の影をなぞる者」とりあえずそう呼んでくれ。



ああ、あの列車に乗ってた車掌は死んだよ。二人ともな。え？ 若い方の車掌はどんな奴だったかって？
そうだな……。

「車掌をやつて何が楽しいかって？
そりゃ、人に会える事さ。二期一会の客もいれば、週に二度は顔を合わせる客もいる。この『フライング・ブツシーフト』って列車は、金持ちから貧乏人まで客層が幅広くてね。

貧富の差に限らず、列車には色々な過去を持つ人が乗ってくる。その人達が皆同じ様に笑う。そんな列車を指して仕事してる。俺は、ただ単純に人を見るのが好きなんだ。車掌になる前の仕事の仕事だからね、人が楽しそうに笑ってくれた時が一番嬉しいよ」

そんな事を臆面も無く言える奴だったよ。

列車が発車する時は……いつも以上に張り切ってたな。何でかって？ いや、出発前にさ、その車掌は貨物車両の横で凄い美人を見かけたんだよ。

「一言で表すんなら、そりゃもう『綺麗だ』で済むよ。黒いドレスを着て、なんていったらいいのが、ミステリアスな雰囲気を感じてるっていうのかな。ただ、俺が今まで見た中で、一番

Reminiscence - About the Young Conductor

Yeah, the conductor's dead. Both of 'em. Hm? You wanna know about the young conductor? Let's see...

"What do I like about being a conductor? It's all the people I get to meet. Some passengers I see once and never again, and other people are regulars I meet every week. The Flying Pussyfoot carries all sorts--both the rich and the poor. And even setting aside your financial status, people with all kinds of pasts ride this train. And I work to make this train the kind that brings the same smiles to everyone's faces. I love watching people. Considering what I did before I got this job, I really do just like seeing people smiling and enjoying themselves."

That's what he always used to say. With a straight face, no less.

I think he was particularly excited when the train departed. You wanna know why?

Oh, it's 'cause he saw a really beautiful girl by the freight hold before departure.

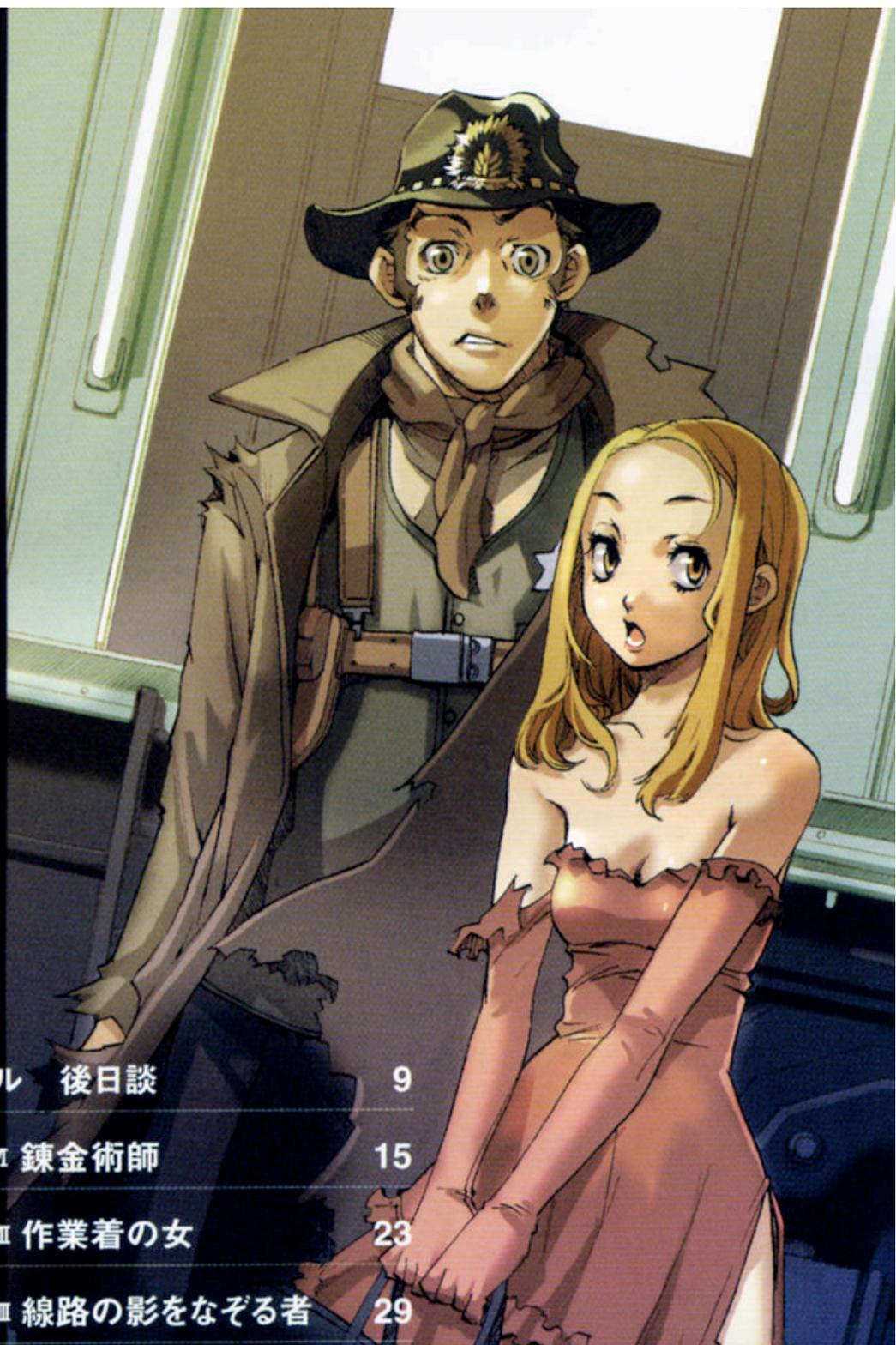
"I guess, in a word, she's... 'beautiful'? She was wearing this black dress. I'd have to say, there was something mysterious about her. But the thing is, I've never seen anyone with such a shadow cast over her face. It almost looked like she hadn't smiled once in her entire life. So as the conductor, I'd like to see her smile at least once before we arrive at New York. Personally, I think she'd look gorgeous when she smiles. That's why I'm going to work twice as hard today!"

I think that's the gist of what he said.

But you know, the young conductor got caught up in the whole incident and died.

Did the woman in the black dress end up smiling? That's what I wanna know.

Hm? Who, me? My name is... right. You can call me "Rail Tracer".



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Design Yoshihiko Kamabe

Terminal - Aftermath

January 1932. Somewhere in New York.

The room was dimly illuminated by candlelight.

"Thank you for coming all this way to our information agency." A man dressed like a banker said with a grin.

At first glance he was of unassuming appearance, but there was something very unsettling about his tone and smile.

They were in a small building--inconspicuous even by Manhattan standards. Officially, they were a newspaper company. They *did* publish newspapers, but they were less than a fraction of a percent the size of the New York Times.

But the company had no worries about having to pay the bills.

Their publishing work was merely a side business--a front for their true work as information brokers.

Logically, it would be impossible for an information broker to hold control over the entirety of one area. After all, it was most common to think of information brokers as those in novels and films, where they would do business by discreetly handing slips of paper to their clients. It would also not be unusual for a broker exposed to the world to be quickly eliminated.

Yet this building advertised itself not only as a newspaper company, but also as an information broker. It openly defied the defined role of the information broker with a stylized headquarters to call its own.

The company must have had its own reasons for surviving as long as it did, but today's customer was not curious about such matters. He had come only to talk about the information he was seeking.

The man who greeted him nodded, and led the customer to a private room in the basement.

"You said you wished to talk about the 'incident' that took place several days ago, correct? Sir, might I ask how much of an understanding you have of the incident at present?" The man asked in an overly polite tone.

"The transcontinental express, the Flying Pussyfoot. Everything began in the dining car. Three teams of robbers had simultaneously boarded the train headed for New York. One of them was a group of terrorists clad in black, called the Lemures. Their goal was to take the passengers hostage in order to demand the release of their leader, Huey Laforet." The man said with a gesture, effortlessly explaining the events that occurred on the train to the client.

"The men in white were a group of mafia trash. Their leader: Ladd Russo. A professional killer and a blood relative of Placido Russo, the don of the Russo Family, one of the Chicago mafia. Their goal was money, and to murder passengers for pleasure." He continued jovially, perhaps as a show for his customer.

"And last of all, although they were officially labelled as members of the passengers, we've confirmed the existence of a group of young people who planned a train robbery. Just to add to that, it seems that they hadn't even touched the other cargo. In any event, there was a three-way battle between the factions. And in the end, the young people emerged victorious. Can you follow all of this so far?" The man asked. The customer nodded.

"I'm very glad to see that you're quick to understand. Of course, I suppose none of this would be much of a surprise to anyone who was involved in the incident. Then let me ask, sir. What information might you be after?" The man asked politely.

The customer slowly told him what he wanted to know. The man nodded satisfactorily, as if he had been expecting this answer from the beginning.

"Oh, I understand. Quite. You wish to know what had happened on the 'other side' of this incident, correct?"

The man got up from his chair and slowly stepped towards the customer.

"Of course, I suppose an innocent bystander would wish nothing more than to forget all of this... but I understand that someone so deeply involved as you would never be satisfied until the whole truth is revealed to you."

The man nodded energetically, but there was a hint of sadness in his eye.

"How terribly unfortunate for our President. He'd be the one most excited to explain this information to you personally, but I'm afraid he happens to be busy at the moment. Ahaha! I suppose nothing ever really works out as planned. I will thank God for this reality, in which I am given the privilege of disclosing this information." The man grinned, one of his eyebrows arched.

"Then let me begin--the story of what happened on the other side of the incident that night." The man suddenly put on a serious look as he began his work.

"Sir, you are forbidden to note down any information that I will be disclosing to you. Not a word. You may only record it in your memory. It is all right for you to note it down from your memory once I have finished revealing everything--after all, by that point the information will have already been tainted by your own subjectivity and no longer entirely accurate. Please... think of it as a ritual of sorts. After all, even on the surface level, only the original seller and the broker are permitted to know the original information." The man said in one breath, then narrowed his eyes at his customer.

"To dispense with the formalities, I would advise you to refrain from delving into the source of this information. It won't do your lifespan any favours."

Once the customer swallowed and nodded, the man grinned and returned to his seat.

"Those who boarded the trains were thugs--'villains' in the truest sense. Of course, many of the passengers were unrelated, but the pure ratio of the incident was unbelievable. However, those three groups I explained to you earlier were not the only ne'er-do-wells aboard the Flying Pussyfoot. Some of them are positively inhuman--not even qualifying to be 'thugs'. One was a freelance killer called 'Vino'. Claire Stanfield, a monster who is practically an urban legend these days. And another..."

The man paused.

"Sir, I wonder if you are aware of the existence of beings known as 'immortals'?" He asked as if testing his customer. He grinned jovially and continued, not even waiting for a response.

"A group of alchemists surpassed humanity by attaining the secret to escaping death... Though I suppose that's a rather misleading way to put it. According to some of the more accurate reports, there is indeed a way for them to die--in other words, to be killed. An immortal most put his right hand on the head of another and strongly wish, 'I want to eat'. That is all. This simple ritual makes it possible to steal away *everything* from the victim. Their life, their flesh, their experiences, knowledge, and sometimes even their emotions. They can harvest--devour--everything through their right hand. Whether you believe it or not is up to you, sir, but I am telling you the truth."

Once he confirmed that the customer wasn't trying to argue with his claim, the man twisted his lips into a smile.

"And of them, the one who was riding aboard that train is named..."

「相手が反論も嘲笑も行わない事を確認すると、受付の男は口の両端を更に歪めて行く。
「そして、その列車に乗っていた者の名は——」



Prologue VI - The Alchemist

It's almost scary how things always work out so well.

After two hundred years of laying low, I finally found a chance to devour them. And at the same time, I managed to make a deal that's going to pay me enough to live on without worries for a long time.

I couldn't believe it when I first received Maiza's letter. To think that Szilard would have been devoured... I immediately wrote back, telling him that I would go visit him this winter. I was planning to go to New York anyway, so it was like killing two birds with one stone.

The products... or rather, the by-products of my research--the explosives--had found a buyer for me in the form of a certain organization in New York.

Initially I considered making a deal with the military, but I don't want to make my name known. America's military isn't what it used to be. I can't just make deals with it under a fake identity.

That struck a critical blow to me, since the rules forbade me from using a pseudonym.

In the end I relented and decided to sell them to an organization overseas, and secretly began negotiations.

That was when I suddenly received two letters. They were both from some old friends of mine, and both were from New York.

I was taken aback at first, wondering how they found where I was, but according to the letters they both found me by asking an information broker in New York.

Damn it. If an information agency in another city managed to find me, then there's no telling when someone's going to barge in to devour me.

I thought about packing up and leaving right there and then, but I read over the letters again and convinced myself otherwise.

One letter was from Maiza, one of my alchemist friends. He says he's the bookkeeper of an organization in New York, but he didn't elaborate. His letter basically said, "Szilard is no more, so rest easy".

Szilard. That's the name of the damn geezer who betrayed us all by devouring our friends two hundred years ago, when we became immortal. As a result, we alchemists all split up, and most of us are lying low in fear. Including myself.

Szilard really shouldn't have done what he did.

After all, if he hadn't been so impatient two hundred years ago...

I would have devoured them all myself.

Back then I didn't think that way at all. But the painful days that I endured afterwards began to change my mind.

I was living with another alchemist who had escaped with me. I can't put into words what life with him was like. Poverty wasn't the problem. After all, immortals like us didn't have to worry about starving to death.

The problem was the friend with whom I lived.

He was kind at first, but over time he began to show his true, sinister nature.

We'd just gotten used to hiding from Szilard. That bastard began to abuse me whenever he felt like it. Whenever he was angry, whenever he was happy, whenever he was sad. His actions took root in our daily routine, almost like breathing or eating regular meals.

Over time his actions became worse and worse. It was as if he was playing around with my ever-healing body. He abused me endlessly, sometimes as though in an experiment.

Even though we could still feel pain despite our immortality.

Even though he knew this very well.

He pulled all sorts of reasons to justify himself. And each time I fell for his words. Maybe I subconsciously knew that if I were to refuse, I would feel even worse pain than if I were to agree. After all, even if I wanted to escape, back then I didn't have the kind of knowledge or courage I needed to live on my own.

And during these twisted days, we received unexpected news: A fellow alchemist that the bastard was in contact with was devoured by Szilard.

His abuse only got worse after that. At first he used scientific tools, but afterwards he began to simply beat me. And it had gotten more violent than back in the days when he used tools.

I asked him why he was doing all this. He got scared--more than he should have been--and began spouting off more excuses that he'd done before. I remember that even his attempts at flattery were disgusting. He noticed the way I was looking at him, grimaced even more, and beat me again.

And one night, he tried to devour me.

Maybe it was fortunate that I was actually awake. Maybe I knew that something like this might happen in the near future. I desperately pushed away his right hand and fought back as hard as I could.

Maybe it was thanks to putting all of my suspicions and hatred into my struggle. I barely managed to touch his forehead with my right hand. Before I knew it, everything about him was being drawn into me. His body, his memories, and even his emotions.

That's when hell really began. All I saw in his knowledge was his twisted feelings for me and the fear of being devoured by me. In the end, I was nothing but a tool for him to satisfy himself with. There wasn't so much as a hint of trust in his mind.

Everything I never wanted to see--the most nauseating things--pierced into my mind. Now I have no choice but to live on with his cursed memories and knowledge as my own.

I lived on in pain, with the memories of being betrayed and the memories of the one who betrayed me. I matured in mind only, as per the rules of immortality.

And I finally realized just how low, dirty-handed, and petty humans were.

At some point I even began to respect old Szilard for living for his pleasure and nothing else, but that damn geezer probably wouldn't see me as anything but prey.

That's all right. After all, I've decided that everyone other than myself will be *my* prey. If I couldn't trust anyone else in this world, then I would live my life by manipulating them all. And in the end I decided that I would turn all of humanity into beings like myself, and devour them all.

In order to do that, I first have to devour all of the others who were on the ship with me.

I expected that someone would kill Szilard in retaliation one of these days, but I know that *I* could probably go around doing the same thing without getting caught. I have confidence in myself.

After all, they're all nice to me, and I doubt they could see me as anything but the same person I was before. And unlike Szilard, they won't know what I'm thinking until *after* I've devoured them. They won't be able to warn the other alchemists about me.

I'm scared that the others might attack me first, but I have confidence in striking first.

I wrote back to Maiza. Of course, all I wrote was that I wanted to see him again.

I've picked out the date we're going to meet, thanks to the other letter I received.

It was also from an old friend in New York. I thought that maybe he was working with Maiza, but it looks like he wrote for another business altogether. He told me that he wanted to buy the explosives I created during my work.

I think this friend is taking shelter with the Runorata Family. Excellent. I'll get my hands on a huge amount of money, and I'll be able to devour this one along with Maiza. And once I devour Maiza, I'll naturally receive Szilard's knowledge as well.

As I fantasized about my ambitions becoming a reality, I realized that I was smiling.

The train that will transport the explosives has been decided.

The Flying Pussyfoot. A special train that's run by a corporation rather than the railroad company, which is often used to smuggle liquor.

I scraped together all the money I could find and managed to stow the huge amount of explosives onto the train.

And finally, it was the day I was due to board. I tried to pass by the conductor, who was checking the passenger list at the platform, but he quickly stopped me.

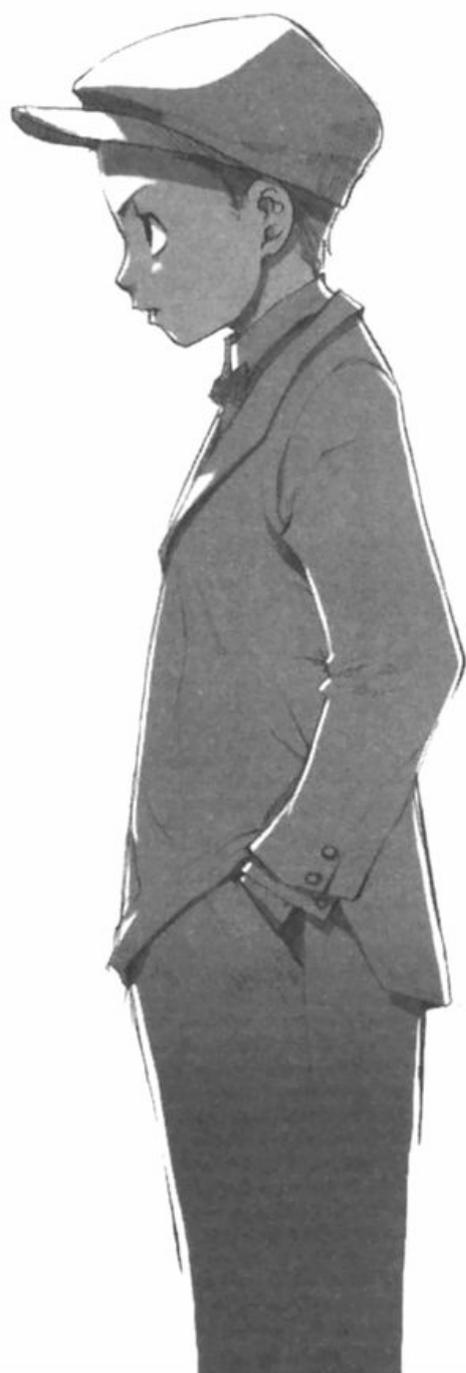
"Are you boarding alone? Could I have your name?"

One of the double-edged swords about looking like I do is the fact that people try to take care of me. So I decided to use my appearance to my advantage as much as I could.

Even the man I bumped into earlier didn't suspect a thing. Piece of cake.

It's too bad I can't use fake names for things like this. I put on as childish a face and tone as possible and told the conductor my real name.

"My name's Czeslaw Meyer. Please, call me Czes!"



Prologue VII - The Woman in Fatigues

On that day, Rachel put on her fatigues and prepared for a long trip.

Her target today was the privately-owned luxury express train, the Flying Pussyfoot. It was a direct trip to New York, so as long as she managed to make it on board, she would be safe from being discovered during a routine ticket check. All she had to do was keep out of sight of the conductors.

In other words, she was a serial stowaway. She'd boarded without a ticket over a thousand times now, with a perfect track record.

She did not feel at all guilty. This was both part of her work and a personal vendetta.

She was an agent working for an information agency. She made a living by collecting all kinds of information from across America and selling it to the brokers.

The broker in New York valued 'living information' above all else. He also preferred to hear information in person instead of by phone. Apparently it was because it was easier to tell if a person was lying by looking them in the eye. He was a strange man, but Rachel did not dislike him. She didn't at all care for the pretentious man who ran the desk, but she had a friendly relationship with the others at the agency. Of course, the fact that the President ran his business in an organization despite his profession may have had something to do with his eccentricities. Rachel never thought too hard about it, maintaining a good rapport with the others.

The President would often ask Rachel all kinds of questions. Some of these questions about the city were completely out of the blue, but he explained to her that he was asking in order to analyze the kind of information that was difficult to identify at first glance. Rachel had a hard time understanding what he meant, but she was happy as long as he continued to buy her information.

Rachel was always on the move, from one city to the next. Most information brokers never took the trouble. After all, few would ever need to know information from other cities.

Not only that, the transportation costs were staggering. If she could not find useful information even at this price, she wouldn't have a business to run, let alone profits for herself.

But Rachel had no such worries. After all, she always stowed away on the trains she had to take.

"This is revenge." She had once told the President.

Rachel's father once worked as a mechanic for a certain railroad company.

It was not an unusual case. One day, there was an accident caused by a faulty component. The company put the blame entirely on Rachel's father, even though it was actually the fault of the management, who ignored the workers' repeated requests to change out the old part.

How ironic was it that her father, the man who claimed that it would be dangerous to continue using the faulty component, would be held responsible? There was no evidence to support his appeal, and his fellow mechanics had been scared into silence.

It was a common sort of story in any era. Rachel grew up watching her father endure one hardship after another.

Her hatred for the railroad company eventually spread to the railroads themselves. But she was also well aware that her father loved the rails more than anyone. As she struggled between her vendetta against the railroad company and her father's love, Rachel finally reached the conclusion of stowing away. This would not harm the trains or the passengers, but it would definitely inconvenience the railroad company in some small way. Of course, the damage she was causing was minimal and she was only doing this for her self-satisfaction. But taking into account the legal dangers posed by her actions, Rachel's acts of self-satisfaction were also acts of self-harm.

Yet she continued to travel as a stowaway in order to suppress her anger. Perhaps she was trying to find her reason for living in her actions.

Hearing this, the President told her, "Interesting. If you ever manage to find your purpose, I suggest that you buy tickets. Buy the tickets that you would have bought were it not for your stowing away. Think of it as paying your own father, as opposed to paying the railroad company." He chuckled.

She would buy tickets for her father. Would such a day ever come? The question nagged at her each time the train shook.

All kinds of information made its way to her from Chicago today. The troubles surrounding the Russo Family, and story about the factory explosion--information like this swirled through the criminal underworld like a turbulent storm.

She told the President about this by phone. He told her that he wanted to hear about all of this from her in person.

As it happened, the Flying Pussyfoot would be departing for New York today. It was the pet project of some rich man somewhere--the type of train Rachel hated the most.

It wasn't as though she was strapped for cash, but Rachel headed to the station with her stubborn, misplaced determination to board without buying a ticket.

She cautiously looked around the area of the freight cars of the Flying Pussyfoot. This was because the freight cars were her usual haunt when it came to her trips.

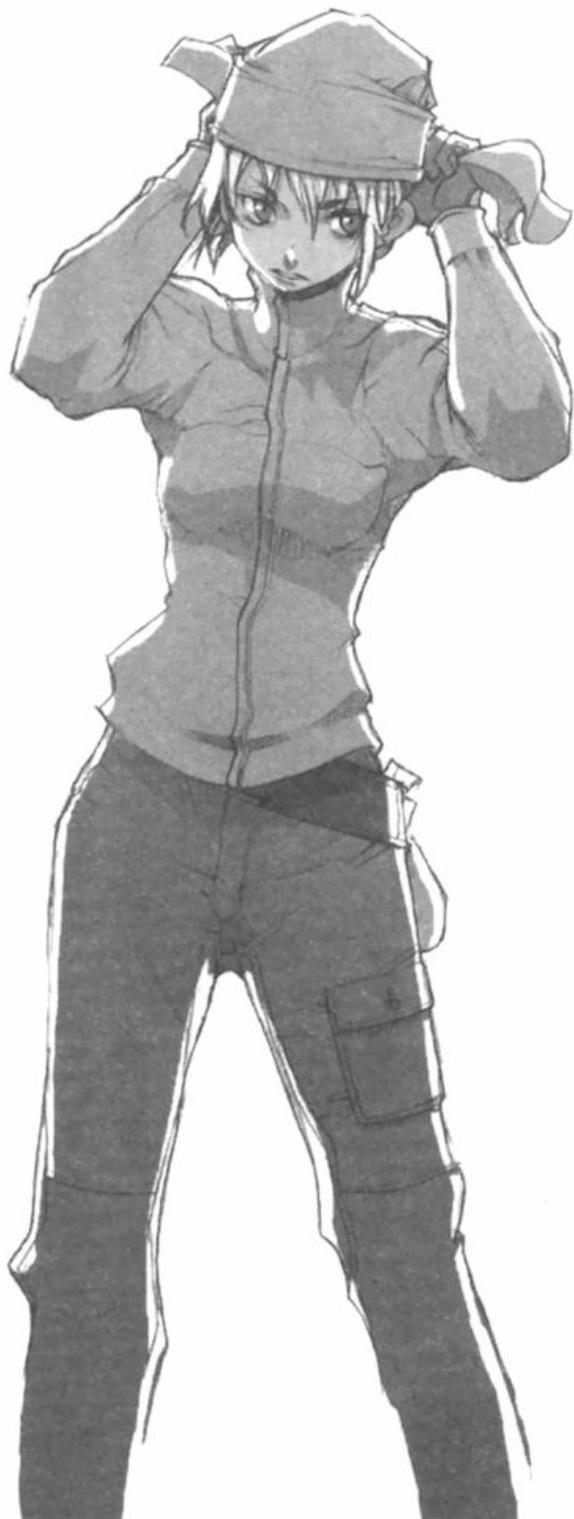
There she heard some bad news.

An orchestra would be stationing men to watch over the freight holds. Rachel checked the couplings as she wondered how she would counter this problem--if she found herself in danger, the structure of this train would allow her to either climb onto the roof or crawl along the bottom of the train. The bottom of the Flying Pussyfoot's cars were a little wider than those of regular trains. Rachel sighed, relieved at the prospect of having a safe hiding place--the kind of thing no normal human could ever find relief in.

That was when Rachel found herself facing a strange man and woman, both wearing black. They were dressed like members of an orchestra, but their sharp eyes told her that there was a more sinister motivation in their actions. She decided to walk away, but Rachel could feel the woman's eyes on her for some time afterwards.

'I'd better stay away from those guys.' She thought, waiting for the train's departure time. Once she made sure that the conductors had boarded the train, she approached the train from the station employees' blind spot. She then expertly jumped onto the train and hid herself under the couplings.

The departure bell finally sounded.



Prologue VIII - Rail Tracer

As the night grew dark, the two conductors lost themselves in idle chatter in the caboose.

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

This story was a particular favourite of the young conductor. He wasn't very good at telling scary stories, but this legend was the sort that could leave a lasting impression of lingering terror on the listener, no matter what the skill of the storyteller.

Last time, he told the story to John the bartender. His reaction was "Not very interesting". What would his coworker think of the legend of the Rail Tracer?

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

The young conductor had expected a question like this. "'Course, it's because some trains managed to survive." He said without missing a beat.

"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's expression almost instantly turned to one of incredulity.

'Huh. Maybe I was being a bit too cheerful.' The young conductor thought, but he couldn't stop now.

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

"Hold on, it's time."

The older conductor turned on the lamps to signal the engine room.

'I was just getting to the good part...'

The young conductor anxiously waited for his coworker to finish, excited to continue his story.

The Flying Pussyfoot was quite a hefty investment on the part of the corporation that made it. The young conductor wished that they could have spared some of those funds to install a communication device between the conductor's compartment and the engine room, but the bloom of light on either side of the cars changed his mind. The train was built to emphasize form over function--to an outsider, even a practical device such as these signals served the purpose of highlighting the ornamentation on either side of the train. It was the sort of idea only a nouveau riche corporation could come up with. And what could the young conductor do, when he was an employee of said company? He chuckled bitterly and sighed.

The older conductor finished his job. The young conductor smiled and decided to continue his story,

"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."

That sounded interesting. His interest was piqued--the young man had a soft spot for stories like this.

"Exchanging survival tactics, huh? That sounds interesting."

The older conductor looked at him with a strange look--a mix of condescension and pity. The look somewhat bothered the young conductor, but he was more curious than anything to hear his coworker's story.

"It's a rather simple, common tale. It's the 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!"

Though the young conductor didn't understand what all this meant, he could see his coworker's face and tone slowly filling with indignation. 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!"

As his fears became reality, the young conductor slowly stepped 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 young conductor decided to continue his line of questioning. He had heard the name 'Lemures' before--that was the name of the terrorist group whose leader had recently been arrested.

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

The young conductor was initially only planning to make small talk and share some lighthearted stories, but now he seemed to have been faced with fear more real than that of urban legends.

The middle-aged conductor, a subordinate of Goose, looked at his coworker and continued.

"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."

He then took out a gun to finish his story.

"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.

But **the bullet was not fired.**

"What...?"

The older conductor felt as though his hand had been paralyzed by pain. The finger that should have pulled the trigger clutched at thin air. The gun flew into the air and simply fell into the young conductor's hand.

The young conductor had kicked the gun upwards with nothing but leg movement at the very moment the older conductor was about to pull the trigger. As the young man's upper body didn't so much as twitch, the older conductor had no warning when the strike came.

The young conductor, gun in hand, put the barrel to the forehead of his coworker--the terrorist.

"There *is* one way to escape... You just have to kill *it* before it kills you."

Standing before him was a man who carried himself like a different human being altogether.

The older conductor shuddered. It wasn't the gun that scared him--it was the eyes of the young man pointing it at his face. They were no longer the eyes of the lighthearted young man telling stories. They were destruction incarnate, dark and deep yet luminous.

It was like hatred and sorrow and pity all mixed into one, directed towards himself. The young conductor's eyes were like a black flame burning bright, the glow directed entirely into his eyes. What kind of a life had he led to gain such a look?

In the midst of his terror, the older conductor realized that his coworker's eyes were rather similar to those of their ally, Chane the fanatic.

But that didn't matter at this point. He understood that, like it or not, he would die here and now.

"W-wait! **Claire!**"

"No."

The young conductor--Claire Stanfield--slowly put pressure into his trigger finger. It was as if he was trying to enjoy the time he took to bring death upon the older conductor.

Of course, the older conductor had ample time to try and escape or fight back. But the look in Claire's eye stopped him. It felt as though his feeble attempts at resistance would earn him a fate worse than death.

Suddenly, Claire stopped his trigger finger.

"Oh, right! About that story earlier. The only way to stop the Rail Tracer is to believe the story when someone tells it to you. And if it's already here, all you can do is turn tail and run away 'til the sun rises. 'Course, it's already too late for you."

The young conductor's tone had done a 180 from that of his normal, carefree self. His voice was icy and hostile.

"Your Rail Tracer *will* appear. This gunshot will awaken it. Your death is going to summon it."

Claire resumed the act of slowly pulling the trigger. The older conductor finally opened his mouth to scream. He raised his hands in resistance.

But it was all too late.

"Die, sacrifice."

A gunshot.

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

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

A fountain of dark pink splattered blood across the walls of the cramped conductor's cabin.

At that very moment, the door to the conductor's cabin opened.

"What the...?"

The voice spurred Claire to turn around. Before him stood a conductor, eyes wide as dinner plates.

The conductor was dressed in the Flying Pussyfoot custom uniform.

"Who are you?" Claire asked, face without expression. Only two conductors were scheduled to be on the train today, and they were himself and the man he had just killed. Now that he thought about it, he didn't even remember the older conductor's name.

As Claire began to wonder, the man in white began to relaxedly wave his arms in front of his face.

"C'mon, could ya put that scary thing away? I'm not your enemy." He smiled.

Claire quietly pointed his gun at the eerily cheerful man.

"I'm supposed to trust a guy who walked into this and still has a grin on his face? Who are you? What are you doing here? Answer me." He asked, preparing to pull the trigger.

"Hm? So you figured me out already, huh..."

The fake conductor suddenly changed his tone and put on a twisted grin.

For some reason, however, Claire dropped his gun.

The fake conductor was taken aback. It seemed that he hadn't met Claire's eyes yet--his eyes were relaxed as can be.

"What're you doing?"

"I don't think you're the type to spill everything just because he's got a gun pointed in his face. I think I'm gonna have to use a bit more force." Claire answered. He wasn't just relaxed--he sounded like he was having an everyday conversation.

The fake conductor burst out into laughter.

"What?! Torture? What century are you from?"

Claire ignored the laughing man and unlocked the door that led outside. The cold winter air chilled them both to the bone.

"H-hey, what're you up to? But thanks for dropping the gun, anyway." The fake conductor laughed, reaching into his jacket. "Don't think I'll let you off easy just because you're unarmed... huh?"

Claire was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps the fake conductor was seeing things, but it almost looked as if he had walked out the open door and fallen off the train.

The fake conductor drew his gun and slowly approached the door.

He took a small step outside and pointed his gun left and right, but around him was nothing but the side of the compartment and the dark scenery growing ever distant from the train.

Then was Claire still in the cabin? The fake conductor quickly looked around. At that moment, he was grabbed by the pant leg and dragged back by a powerful force.

"!"

He found himself falling forward, but the force would not let him even take a breath. The fake conductor's body was dragged outside.

"A, AAAAAHHHHHH!"

He somehow managed to turn his head as he fell, and found himself faced with an unbelievable sight.

An arm wearing the sleeve of a conductor's uniform was pulling his leg from under the open door.

'The conductor?! Impossible! How did he get under-?!'

The fake conductor was dragged out in one smooth motion before he could complete his thought. He felt a cold breeze passing by him then felt himself falling from a slight distance.

The moment he realized that he was falling, his body suddenly stopped in midair.

When he opened his eyes, the fake conductor realized that Claire was holding him from behind in restraint.

"?!"

The fake conductor fell into confusion. He couldn't even imagine what had just happened to him.

Claire was holding on to the metal parts under the car with his legs, and was holding up the fake conductor with his upper body.

Maintaining his impossible position, Claire slowly pushed the fake conductor towards the tracks.

He whispered into the fake conductor's ear, his voice mixed in with the sounds of the moving train and the howling of the wind.

"I'm gonna ask you one more time... Who are you?"

The fake conductor's psyche had managed to recover enough to answer. But he instead began to struggle, desperately trying to aim the gun in his right hand towards the man behind him.

"Too bad."

The fake conductor's body swung forward as his right hand was pushed onto the ground.

"GAAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

Unimaginable pain and shock assaulted his senses. The fake conductor tried to raise his arm, but Claire was steadfastly holding him down.

"Who are you?" Claire asked again, but the fake conductor could only scream.

Claire again shoved the man's arm onto the tracks.

By the time the fake conductor's right arm had been shaved off from the shoulder down, Claire had all the information he wanted.

The fake conductor's name was Dune, a member of the Russo Family. More specifically, he was a direct subordinate of Ladd Russo, and part of a group that had split from the Russo Family earlier today.

Ladd's gang was planning to take over the Flying Pussyfoot, kill half the passengers, and as if that was not enough, they were going to crash the train into the station.

For a moment Claire wondered if Ladd's gang was insane, but it sounded like what counted as sanity to this man called Ladd was equivalent to what most people counted madness.

First, his gang would throw the corpses of the dead passengers onto the tracks. Their friend who hadn't boarded the train would convey their demands to the railroad company, squeezing out as much cash as they could in the hours before the train arrived at New York.

Afterwards, they would stop the train at a predetermined location, meet up with the collection team, who would come by car, and escape together. Ladd would probably kill any passenger who had seen his face.

Dune confessed that he had dressed up like a conductor in order to take over the conductor's compartment.

"Why go so far? If you just wanted to take over the train, you coulda just shot us both. Why'd you have to put on the uniform?"

Dune began snickering, almost as if the intense bursts of pain had destroyed his nervous system.

But the most loathsome thing of all was in the words he spoke.

"Hah! Hah... haha... Because I felt like it! Ladd really likes playing around like this. Putting on the uniform makes things a lot more fun, and when I start walking around the train dressed like this, the passengers are gonna look at me with hope, like I'm gonna be some hero there to rescue 'em, right? I hear you can get a real high when you kill people like that. I like that, y'know? Hehehe... heeheehe..."

The man's answer prompted Claire to suddenly break his momentary silence. The glint of ferocity in his eyes thinned and slowly turned back to normal. But there was something resembling a hint of fear in his eyes. Claire darkly continued to question the man.

"So you got it just for shits and giggles?! This is a Flying Pussyfoot custom uniform! You can't just get it off the streets!"

"Heeheehee... I got it at the station this mornin'! From that conductor who switched out with you at Chicago! Some old man with short white hair!"

The face of his fellow conductor flashed by before Claire's eyes. It was Tony, a lively Italian-American man who taught Claire all kinds of things about the work of a conductor.

"What did you do to him?"

"Hahaha! I bet the rats in the Chicago sewers are having a feast by now!"

Dune realized too late that he should not have rambled so carelessly. The overwhelming pain had shocked his psyche so much that he had forgotten for a moment that he was within a hair's breadth of losing his life or worse.

"W, wait! I was joking! Wait!"

It was too late. Claire's right hand was on the back of Dune's head. His eyes were filled with even greater insanity than before--he was no longer the friendly young conductor from before.

Dune's body was pushed to the ground by Claire's incredible power.

"W, wait! *You* just killed a conductor, too! What the hell are you?!"

Claire did not ease up at Dune's complaint. He continued to push him towards the ground. The moving afterimage of the gravel on the ground almost made it look like they were moving over a river. However, Dune's right hand had already proven that, at this speed, the gravel would work as a powerful grater.

Just before Dune's nose hit the ground, Claire gave Dune a long monologue.

"Who am I? I'm Claire Stanfield. I guess you mafia goons might know me better as Vino."

'Vino! I've heard of this guy! He's a freelance assassin who goes all over the country. They call him Vino because he leaves such a messy kill that the pools of blood look like wine(Vino). He was the conductor all along?! No wonder he was everywhere! ...But I don't care... just let me go! Please! No, no, no, no, no, no...!'

"But things are different now."

'Who gives a shit? Just let me go, please, lerrrgggrrrhghghrrl...'

Dune's face hit the ground. He lost his eyesight, consciousness, and life in rapid succession.



Claire pulled the body into the conductor's compartment and threw it into the middle of the room. The fountain of blood dyed Claire's clothing red.

The corpse's neck was twisted at a macabre angle. Its face and right arm had been shaven off completely. Its profile was so messy and grotesque that anyone who laid eyes upon it would likely assume that the face and arm had been bitten off by a savage, abominable beast.

Instead of wiping off the blood that ran down half his face, Claire drew lines under his eyes in blood.

Perhaps it was a ritual that signalled the start of his work.

Claire quietly continued his monologue--the end that Dune never got to hear.

"I'm a monster. The monster that's going to devour you all."

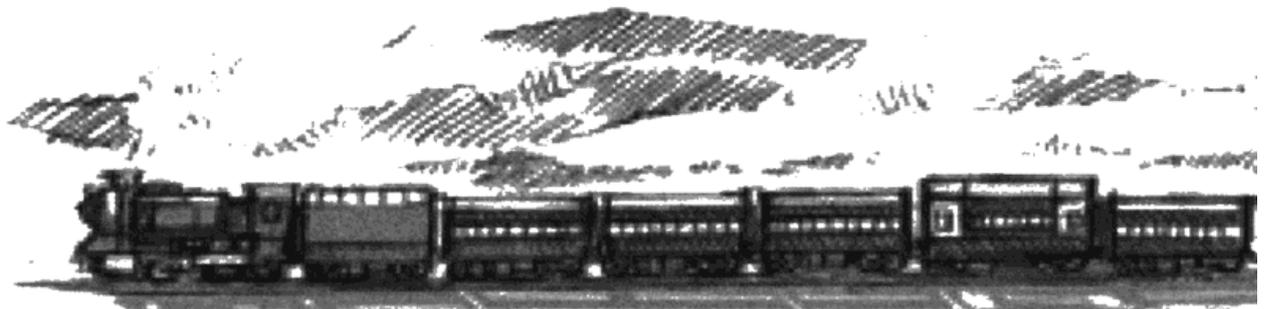
He looked up into the air and smirked.

"I have become your Rail Tracer."

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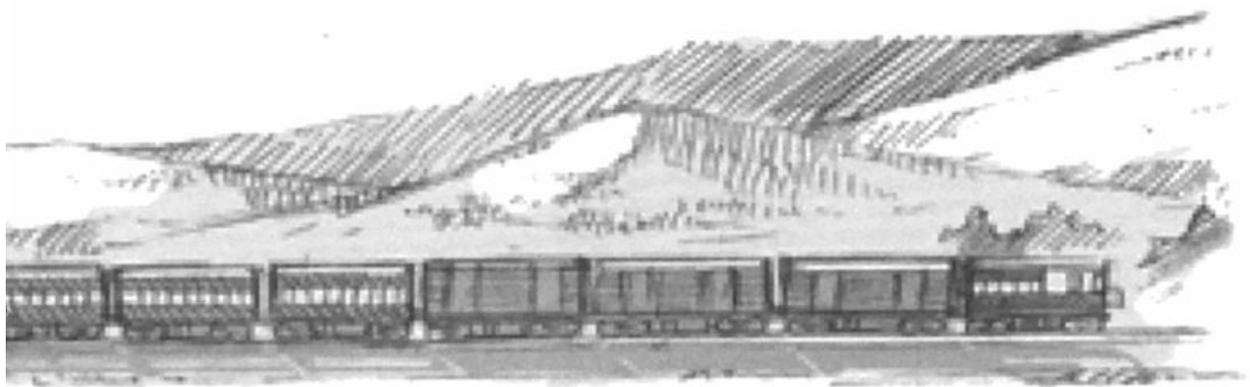
T h e G r a n d P



31 ANO!

u n k R a i l r o a d

特急編
死なない男



Express Episode - The Man Who Will Not Die

The dining car was filled with soft ambient chatter.

Czes ran between the tables, chasing after a girl of a similar physical age.

They had been assigned to the same First Class cabin. Innocently enough, the girl asked Czes, "Wanna explore the train together?". Czes was not very interested in such things, but he determined that it would be best to play along in order to maintain the facade of a lovable young boy.

It was not difficult at all for Czes to present himself as a child. After all, he had worked this way for over two hundred years now.

He ran through the dining car, chasing after the girl whose name he didn't even know.

'Come to think of it, something like this happened during the crossing from Europe to the New World. I was the only child there. I remember saying, "Let's explore the ship!", but I can't recall who it was that came along with me. But that doesn't matter now. Once I devour them all, I'll have the answer rolling around in my head.'

Czes focused too hard on thinking that he ended up crashing shoulder-first into the back of a man sitting at the counter.

"Guh?!"

The man had been in the middle of chewing a particularly large mouthful of food. He made a huge commotion as he tried to swallow it all with huge gulps of water.

Czes realized that he had bumped into the same man from earlier--the one with the tattoo on his face. He cursed the misfortune of having to bump into him again. And though he didn't feel very sorry, he decided to apologize.

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

The man got teary-eyed, but he managed to force himself into grinning.

"N-no, don't worry about it. I'm okay. Are *you* all right?"

Czes nodded and beamed, just like before.

'For a man with a tattoo on his face, he's quite the pushover. People who rely on their looks like this won't end up making anything out of their lives, I bet.' He thought, but he made sure to let none of his disdain show in his expression.

Soon the girl's mother joined them as they began chatting.

Suddenly, the bespectacled woman with the eyepatch looked at Czes.

"Then is this boy on his own?"

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

'I'd forgotten about it, myself.'

Czes decided to introduce himself under a fake name. He had no choice but to use his real name when it came to reserving a ticket and putting his name on the passenger list, but it was possible to use a pseudonym among normal people. He wanted to, wherever possible, avoid making his name known to others.

With this, Czes decided to use the name 'Thomas'. It was the same name as the famous inventor who died earlier this year. He chose it so that he wouldn't end up forgetting it during the ride to New York.

But things didn't go as planned.

"My name's Czeslaw Meyer-"

It was a difficult name to pronounce, but Czes put the name to his lips and stopped. For one long, grueling instant, countless thoughts went by in his head.

'What just happened?! I was trying to say "Thomas" just now, but it's like my body wouldn't let me...'

He wasn't unfamiliar with this sensation. Back when 'he' was still alive, someone asked Czes for his name at the market. Czes tried to make up a fake name to use, but his mouth automatically said his real name. Back then, of course, Czes knew that this was because 'he' had been only a slight distance away at the time.

It was one of the restrictions the demon had applied to them--a terribly cheap cost for the reward of immortality.

"Immortals may not converse with one another using false names."

The restriction told Czes one important fact.

'There's an immortal somewhere around me.'

Czes excused his sudden stutter, but there was no use in panicking. If the other immortal hadn't yet noticed his presence, there was no need to go out of his way to make himself more noticeable.

He calmed himself down and began to make up believable excuses. The immortals' restriction only applied to names, so he had no problem lying about everything else.

"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.

But Czes committed nothing but their names to memory as he began to focus on looking around at the other patrons in the dining car.

If he were to assume that the immortal was within earshot, he would likely be in the dining car as well. But Czes saw no familiar faces. No one seemed to be wearing a disguise, and the gunman and the eyepatch woman sitting with him looked more like they were wearing costumes, not disguises.

'Who is it? Maybe they're in the kitchen where I can't see them. If not...'

If possible, Czes wanted to dismiss the second possibility.

'If not, then... are there immortals besides the ones from the ship...?'

It was a frightening thought. If there really were other immortals, then it would mean that Czes had no way of knowing how many of them there were.

One day, a stranger could approach him with a smile and put his right hand on Czes's head.

That simple action would end in his life being devoured.

That alone was something Czes could never allow. He didn't really care about dying. After all, he'd lived a very long life. However, he was afraid of another person discovering the twisted horror that existed between Czes and 'him'. Czes considered this the greatest humiliation and terror that could ever occur to him.

This was why he had elected to live as he did. Even if he had to make others his prey and devour them all, Czes had to make sure that he was the last immortal in the world.

If the other immortal here really was a stranger, Czes would have to figure out how he became immortal and how many others existed today. And the easiest solution would be to find and devour them.

And to do that, he would first have to find the other immortal. He could quietly injure someone lightly, or just put his right hand on their heads--but this way, the other immortal would know instantly.

'I have to dispatch the other immortal immediately. No matter what it takes.'

Suddenly, the gunman looked at Czes and raised his voice.

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

"Just like that!"

It was the gunman and the woman in the red dress--the couple in the unusual costumes. Czes vaguely recalled that their names were something like Isaac and Miria.

Isaac's voice snapped Czes back into reality. He decided to hear Isaac out for now in order to temporarily ease his anxiety.

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

"Scary!"

"Huh? Wh-what's a R-Rail tracer?" The tattooed man asked nervously. His feet began shaking.

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

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

"Eeek!"

"'Rail Tracer'?" Sounds pretty stupid. But then again, I guess it's not too far removed from stuff like my immortality or demons. Maybe it really does exist after all.'

Czes continued to be wary of his surroundings, even as he listened to Isaac's story.

'So the monster eats bad children, huh. If it really existed, I guess it'll come after me first. After all, by the world's standards, I'm nothing but evil. Even now I'm on my way to sell a huge load of explosives to the mafia like it's nothing.'

If the explosives were to be used in the mafia's disputes, they would undoubtedly cause harm to innocents.

The word 'harm' was too abstract. It was obvious that using explosives on the streets would kill people in masses. Czes had agreed to the deal, even though he knew all this.

That wasn't all. Czes had thus far used his appearance to trick and ensnare all kinds of people. Sometimes he did it for his own convenience. Other times he did it out of sheer misanthropy.

'So what? It's not like I care.'

The most important thing to Czes was not the well-being of others or his own moral standing, but the matter of finding a way to devour the other immortals.

He would not care if it meant the deaths of everyone but himself. Czes preferred eternal solitude to having another person absorb his cursed memories.

Czes thought of all this and smiled bitterly.

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Although she had boarded without a ticket, Rachel was surprisingly sitting with little reservation about her status.

She was at a table seat in the dining car. Rachel ordered her food without hesitation.

She had money, and she had nothing against the train's chef. Therefore she had no qualms against paying for her food. Her reasoning was even more justified by the fact that the dining car's operations were run by a company completely separate from the railroad company.

Of course, she hadn't just waltzed into the car defencelessly. She had only taken her seat after the conductor had completed the first round of ticket checks, so she would not have to worry about being caught for some time.

Not only that, the dining car was shared between all cars. Its patrons were dressed in a wide range of styles, which allowed the fatigue-clad Rachel to blend in seamlessly.

As a side note, Rachel made it a personal rule to always sit by the window. Because it was self-enforced, there was no penalty for breaking it. But allowing this rule to get her caught would end in consequences more dire than a mere lecture.

'That aside, I can't believe that damn bastard was on this train, too.'

Rachel was looking towards a moustached man who was currently partaking in a particularly luxurious dinner. He was a man too unsightly to be called 'grand'--'fat' was all that could describe him. The man had been repulsively snorting in laughter for some time now, spit flying from his mouth as he rambled on in self-praise.

"Bwahaha! You know, yours truly practically *invented* the ability to ride one's competition's train with so much dignity."

But that wasn't what bothered Rachel. What got on her nerves was the fact that the man was familiar to her.

There was no mistaking it. That man was an executive at the railroad company for which her father worked. He was also the man who shamelessly framed her father to save his own neck. From the looks of things, he had managed to retain his position all this time. The sight of the man cast a dark shadow over Rachel's thoughts.

She considered giving the man a merciless beatdown, but Rachel knew that to do so was meaningless. Not only that, she could not cause reckless trouble as long as she was stowing away on the train.

As she continued to listen, hands tightly clenched into fists, the moustached man continued laughing.

"Of course, I suppose I owe all this luxury to the fact that I worked my back off for the company and our customers all these years. Bwahahahaha!"

"'Bwahahahaha'? Damn you to hell. Damn you. I hope you rot and sink and get eaten alive by lice down to your bones. You're not even worth being fish food. I hope you kick the bucket and disappear forever.'

Rachel calmed her anger as she mumbled curses under her breath, and finally decided to stop looking in the direction of the man.

Her food was delivered from the counter. Rachel began to half-unwillingly scoop it into her mouth, when a young man ran past her in tears.

There was a sword-shaped tattoo on his face, making him look at first glance like some pirate straight out of the Caribbean. But his face was awkwardly twisted, tears running down his cheeks like waterfalls.

As the man passed her by, Rachel could hear him mumble, "I gotta find the conductor...!".

'Damn. Is he going to call over the conductor?'

Rachel became somewhat anxious, but she decided to remain in her seat and continue her meal as she kept an eye out on the situation.

Soon, the door that the tattooed man had run out of opened again. A man in a white suit stepped in. The fact that everything he wore--from his tie to his shoes--was a uniform white made him look almost like a hick going to attend a wedding in the city.

In a huge contrast to the tattooed young man, the man in white walked between the tables with absolute confidence.

For a second, Rachel met his eyes.

She averted her gaze immediately, but her heart began to race out of some unknown fear. She could tell instinctively that this man was setting off alarm bells in her head, different from the kind of warning given off by the two orchestra members she saw prior to boarding.

She focused her attention on the man, but at the same time kept an eye out on her surroundings.

She was getting a bad feeling about this. Something was going wrong. This wasn't her stowaway experience speaking to her. The experience she had built up as an information broker doing all kinds of business in the underworld was trying to tell her something.

Just in case, Rachel quietly began to open the window.

Soon the time was upon her.

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

"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...?" The man next to Rachel asked, covered in cold sweat.

The men all looked at one another, looks of incredulity written on their faces.

The knife-wielding man made the first move.

"Uh." He mumbled quietly, taking a step backwards. "Sorry for the confusion."

He quietly shut the door and ran off loudly.

The single knife was not nearly enough to maintain a balance of power, but in the end the three-way hijacking attempt had been altered.

It was a signal of the beginning of a tragedy.

The man in white instantly drew his gun and fired three consecutive shots. The passengers all curled up and covered their heads as they screamed.

One of the white suit's shots made a direct hit on one of the black suits. The bullet hit his shoulder, throwing him into a spin as he fell to the floor.

And as if in reaction, the black suits' machine guns began to pump out lead.

Their shots hit their mark, and the white suit's chest was instantly dyed a deep scarlet.

As the chorus of screams continued, Rachel opened the window and slowly got to her feet.

The white suit fell backwards, firing several times into the ceiling. He didn't have a target in particular--his arm and finger had been spurred into action by the impact of the hit.

There was a second burst of machine gun fire.

This time, they hit the white suit's stomach. His body twisted into a right angle.

Soon the life faded from his eyes as he fell to the floor.

By that point Rachel was already slipping out of the car. She expertly climbed down the ornamentation along the walls and hid herself between the wheels of the dining car.

The passengers and the black suits' attention was focused entirely on the shootout. Only the man who sat beside her witnessed Rachel's disappearance.

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Afterwards, a pointlessly excited friend of the first white suit stepped in, instantly turning around the situation.

And in the midst of the confusion, one passenger coldly began to calculate the situation.

'I could use these guys...'

Curled up under the counter, Czes began to plan out a way to use the white-suited man who had entered the car.

"Now, Czes. You must take care of Mary."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Czes nodded energetically and left the dining car, holding Mary's hand. He opened the door and carefully made his way forward. It seemed that, at least, the white suits were not in the hallways.

He passed through the quiet hallway, Mary in tow, as he headed for the cars further back. This was a golden opportunity for Czes.

After the shootout, Mrs. Beriam had told Czes, "You have to go hide somewhere with Mary". He would have preferred to set out to see the white suits immediately, but the other passengers would obviously object to his leaving alone.

But Mrs. Beriam's concern for her daughter's safety had provided him with the perfect excuse to leave. He would be a fool not to take advantage of this situation.

Of course, Mary's presence was an annoyance. Czes could hand her over to the white suits, or he could even kill her on the spot.

But Czes didn't feel like taking either option. It wasn't that he had sympathy for her, however. He was merely repulsed by the idea of doing to a girl of his physical age what had been done to himself by the man he trusted. To trick and betray her would make Czes no different from 'him'.

Czes had no qualms about killing a child. If necessary, he would not hesitate to use children's livers for his own research. But betrayal was another story. Self-hatred seethed through him at the thought of doing to another what his loathsome guardian had done to him.

He didn't mind deceiving adults. But this didn't mean that Czes had a soft spot for children. Two hundred years had shown him the kind of cruelty and malice that children were capable of. But his aversion to destroying them probably stemmed from the fact that he saw himself reflected in them.

The eyes of the girl Czes was leading by the hand were full of fear. But she didn't hold the slightest bit of mistrust in him. Czes would have rather found it easier if she did, as he would then be able to get rid of her immediately.

'Damn it! How long are these foolish memories going to keep haunting me?'

Despite his anger, however, Czes did not let go of Mary's hand.

Just as they were about to leave the Second Class car and move on to the next, Czes noticed the broom closet by the washroom.

He carefully opened the door and saw a neat arrangement of mops and buckets. If he set the mop against the wall, the closet could probably fit a single child.

"There. This should be enough to fit you."

"But... what about you, Czes?" Mary looked at him worriedly.

"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."

Mary nodded, trembling.

Czes really was intending to come back for her after his negotiations with the white suits. Depending on how things went, the outcome of the negotiation could end up placing Mary's life in jeopardy. But Czes wanted to avoid betraying her at all costs.

'Damn it! Why am I hesitating? Humans are all supposed to be like livestock that exist to be devoured. Calm down. I'm being swayed by my emotions. After all, it's possible to feel guilty about slaughtering and eating a lamb, right? That's just how it is.'

The thought that negotiating with the white suits might already constitute a betrayal did not occur to Czes. He had promised to protect Mary, but he didn't care about the others.

'That's right. If I want to remind myself that I am special--If I want to seal away these cursed memories--and if I want to survive, this train has to become a sacrifice.'

Czes smiled as best he could and quietly closed the door over Mary's frightened face.

His facial muscles would not budge from their position of a forced smile, even though Czes was long used to grinning like an innocent child.

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"Hey, can we switch shifts now?" One of the black suits in the freight hold asked his two teammates.

"Don't just abandon your post like that."

"Who gives a damn? You can't just cut through ropes like that. 'Sides, we weren't supposed to be babysitting hostages in the first place."

"What are we supposed to do, then? Can't just ignore the intruders."

The men were originally in charge of keeping watch on the Lemures' weapons. Things had suddenly become complicated while they were killing time.

They heard someone running past outside them, so the men grabbed their guns and prepared to step out.

But the thug opened the door before they could even reach it.

The men kept the intruding small fry at gunpoint, when a man and a woman in white suddenly appeared. The black suits ended up capturing these two as well, when yet another small fry came into the picture. Confused, the black suits decided to tie them all up and toss them into the freight hold next door.

"It's part of our orders. We have to capture anyone who sees us. So get back to your post."

"C'mon, let's switch!"

"Fine. First, let's see how they're doing."

One of the black suits was dragged out into the hallway by another.

"I'll telegraph Goose about those guys." The remaining man said as his teammates left.

But he heard no response.

"Hey, you could at least answer..."

He was about to poke his head out the door of the hold when he noticed something strange.

Two people had left for the next freight hold, but only one man was standing in the hall.

"Huh? Where's Jon?"

The bespectacled black suit asked, but there was still no answer.

"Hey! What the hell happened?!"

The black suit in the hallway was trembling. His voice came out in a strained whisper, barely audible.

"He's... he's gone..."

"Wha?"

The man was still shaking, his back against the window.

"He's gone. I turned around, and he just dis-"

"Hey! Behind you!" The bespectacled one suddenly yelled.

Of the windows lined up along the wall of the freight car's corridors, one of them was wide open. It was the one directly behind his ally.

A red shadow passed by behind it. It couldn't have been a reflection--after all, the window was gaping open to begin with.

The red 'thing' was definitely standing outside the train.

And it reached out a hand towards his ally's back.

"Huh...?"

The man at the window had no time to look back or scream.

His body levitated into the air. It was then sucked out into the darkness outside, like water flowing down a bathtub drain.

"What?"

The bespectacled black suit was confused.

'It hasn't even been thirty seconds since the two of them left. How the hell did they both disappear that quick?! And one of them got snatched right in front of me. What the hell?! What's going on? Am I really that stupid?'

He stood rooted to the ground. The red thing again appeared out of the corner of his eye.

The bright red shape in the pitch-black darkness was at once terrifying and beautiful.

The red shadow slowly disappeared outside the wall, and soon there was nothing outside the window but pure darkness.

The bespectacled black suit was finally able to muster a scream.

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Claire disliked his own name.

He had no intention of changing it, but he felt a vague sense of repulsion at being called by a women's name.

Apparently he had been named after his grandfather--'Claire' was a masculine name until the first half of the nineteenth century. But these days, it was the kind of name that got him mistaken for a lady wherever he went.

Even so, he did not hold it against his parents. After all, there was no use holding a grudge against the dead.

If they were still alive, he might have shot them an affectionate complaint once in a while. But by the time he was old enough to understand anything, they had already passed away.

Claire was then raised by his next-door neighbours, the Gandors.

Mr. Gandor was the don of a tiny mafia family, which was fragile enough to be blown away by a breeze. Among the New York families, the Gandors were essentially the dogs that belonged to the peons.

When Mr. Gandor passed away, Claire joined the circus. He had always thought that feats like touching his head to his rear or doing handstands on one arm was easy for anyone, but apparently it was something quite special. The people at the circus always went on about how he was born with great musculature and build, but Claire himself couldn't care less.

The one thing he never liked was the fact that, no matter how much effort he put into learning new tricks and techniques, the others all explained it away with one word: 'talent'. It felt like an insult that invalidated all of his hard work, but eventually Claire came to accept it. Perhaps 'effort' wasn't enough for normal people to obtain these skills. So he decided to try and reach for things beyond his innate talents.

As a result, Claire's hard work went without ever gaining recognition. Though it was true that he had expended twice as much effort as anyone, but at this point his abilities were no longer on the level of being achievable through mere human efforts.

Claire intended to earn money at the circus to send back home to his brothers, who were practically his own flesh and blood. But the world wasn't so easy.

It wasn't that Claire didn't earn much--it was the fact that, by the time he had begun to make a decent sum, the Gandor brothers had already greatly expended their territory.

From the perspective of other organizations, their income was still pitiful--but the Gandors were still earning a great deal more than Claire.

The circus disbanded, and Claire was thrust into the world at large. After a great deal of grief, he finally became a freelance killer. It wasn't an easy job, but he was able to make his way through.

There was a certain reason that Claire had become a conductor after leaving the circus. It was a job that allowed him to move more quickly than the circus, and through even more major cities. It was perfect for his work as a killer.

Claire was well aware of the fact that his kills were messy. It was a habit of his--Claire was not relieved until his victim's body had been mutilated to a certain degree. It wasn't that he was afraid--he just worried that, perhaps, the victim's heart was still beating. It was an action that had its roots in his philosophy of 'Honour the contract fully by making sure of the kill'.

His habit, which normally should have been seen as a flaw in his technique, actually became the means by which his name became known. Claire's methods of creating absurdly grotesque pools of blood struck fear in the hearts of his enemies.

Although he always went by pseudonyms when he was working, somewhere down the line he gained the nickname 'Vino'(Wine). Soon that name began to make its way into the cities. The rumours of the monster that appeared all over the United States quietly but surely carved the knowledge of his name into the criminal underworld.

'What do they expect? I go everywhere 'cause I'm a conductor on a transcontinental. 'Sides, if they're calling a scrawny guy like me a monster, what are they gonna call Berga? The grim reaper?'

Claire thought of his 'family', who he would see tomorrow, and relaxed himself.

Even after he became an infamous celebrity of sorts, the Gandors did not bring Claire into their organization. This didn't mean, however, that they distanced themselves from him. They didn't try to talk him out of being a freelance killer, either.

It wasn't a morally just attitude to take, but Claire was happy with the way they treated him and took on jobs for his brothers for a discounted price. He had no qualms about working for them for free, but the Gandors would not allow it.

And now, Claire was on his way to make good on his relationship with them. The Gandor Family was currently in a conflict with the Runorata Family, one of the giants of New York.

He probably wouldn't be able to return to being a conductor for some time after this. Claire had already informed the head office that he would be taking a short leave once he arrived at New York.

Now the problem was getting this train to New York safely.

He must not stop the train.

Claire had to avoid hurting the Gandors through his own tardiness, no matter what the cost.

If the black suits or the white suits took control of the train, the chances of the train arriving safely would decrease dramatically. And even if they were to make it to New York, it was obvious that there would be a confrontation with the police. And if the confrontation led to a shootout, there was no doubt that some of the passengers would be killed.

He could not hand over this train to people like them. He would not allow them to kill the passengers or take them hostage.

Claire realized that, somewhere down the line, he had set aside thoughts of the Gandors and was now worried purely for the passengers' safety.

'Huh.' He mused to himself, looking back on his thoughts. *'I guess I really did fall in love with being a conductor.'*

He smiled abashedly under the moonlight.

All of this as he held onto the wall of the cargo hold with one hand, clutching at his side the corpse of a black suit with a broken neck.

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Rachel moved along the bottom of the cars, climbing between the metal parts like a monkey. She made her way towards the back of the train at an abnormally quick pace.

She was headed for the freight hold. Rachel didn't know what was happening on this train, but she knew for certain that the men who barged into the dining car with machine guns were members of the orchestra.

Then what of the orchestra members stationed at the freight hold? If the men in black were disguised as an orchestra for some unknown purpose, then the men in the freight hold were most likely with of them. Rachel took action, intending to find out more about the situation on the train as quickly as possible. She could have remained still and quiet, but Rachel threw herself into peril regardless.

Perhaps it was a holdover from her job as an information broker. She was merely an agent, but this was the excuse she used to sate her curiosity.

As soon as she reached the belly of the freight hold, Rachel pulled herself up between the wheels and looked around at the door on the side of the car. There probably wasn't anything wrong inside, but Rachel wanted to make sure.

Her expectations were betrayed by the sight that greeted her.

The side door was open.

Normally, this door was only opened when the train was stopped. It was used to bring in larger pieces of cargo.

'If that door's open, then there's no way this is just a little problem...'

The next moment, Rachel's thoughts froze. She realized that there was a red silhouette twitching by the door.

Rachel did not notice it at first because it was dark, and she was focusing on the open door. But once she caught sight of the creature by the door, she understood everything.

The door wasn't *open*--it was *currently in the process of being opened*. And the red silhouette was opening it at this very moment.

It seemed that the silhouette hadn't noticed her yet. It clung to a protruding point on the side of the train with surprising stability.

Soon, the door opened again as the silhouette entered the freight hold again.

Rachel was dumbstruck for a moment, but the sounds of screams mixed in with the sound of the moving train snapped her back to reality.

"No... stay back... no, no, no, no... NOOOOOOOOOO!"

A chilling, terrified scream. It was soon followed by the fierce sounds of gunfire. The uneasy atmosphere compelled Rachel to try and hide under the car again.

Unfortunately, she was too late.

The red shadow had suddenly come down right beside her. It looked like it had practically dropped from the side door, as opposed to having climbed down.

Things only got worse.

Rachel's eyes met those of the red monster.

Claire was somewhat taken aback.

He had already taken care of two of the black suits who were guarding the freight hold.

But the third man ended up catching sight of him dragging out the second. Naturally, the man immediately contacted his allies up ahead.

When he realized that the key to the freight hold door was broken, Claire decided to barge right in and finish the job.

The man screamed, but he was too late. It seemed that he had only managed to pull the trigger of his machine gun after Claire pushed his arm upwards.

The barrel was pointed towards the ceiling. Obviously, Claire was unharmed. He twisted the black suit's arm, and the machine gun fell to the floor surprisingly quickly.

All he had to do now was drag the black suit outside and grind him against the tracks as he had before. Claire firmly restrained the man from behind and jumped out the door with the attitude of a man who was walking down a flight of stairs.

He would keep himself off the ground by holding onto the metal ornamentation on the train with his feet. If a normal person were to attempt such a thing, either his legs would give out and break or he would get caught up in the wheels and be torn to pieces.

But Claire had no such concerns. Everything had gone well, at least up until he took these routine actions with confidence.

Shockingly, however, his self-assured look turned into one of confusion.

'Who is that?'

A woman's head was poking out from between the metal parts of the train beside himself. He had never seen her before. Was she an ally of the black suits or the white suits?

Claire was snapped out of his thoughts by the sensation of the black suit's body becoming heavier. Then it became lighter again.

When Claire looked down, he saw that the black suit was now missing his legs. He had probably struggled and gotten his feet caught in the wheels.

The force of his legs being ripped off must have been immense, but Claire was holding the man's body with ease, resulting in this messy tear. The man seemed to have lost consciousness before he could even scream. The shock of the pain might have already killed him.

Even if he were still alive, of course, this much blood loss was a death sentence already.

'Oh well.'

Claire propelled his body upwards by putting force into his legs and stomach. He used the momentum to powerfully throw the black suit's upper body into the hold.

The throw was too powerful--the black suit's body hit the ceiling before falling to the floor.

Claire, however, did not give it a second thought as he looked around at the woman again.

From what he could see between the pipes of her clothing, the woman was affiliated with neither the black suits nor the white suits. Claire was sure that he hadn't seen a woman dressed like this when he was checking the passenger list, which left only one possibility.

His habits as a conductor led Claire to unintentionally ask the woman an obvious question.

The bloodlust in his eyes faded for a moment, as he temporarily became the conductor from before the fiasco.

But Rachel had no time to take in this change.

'What was that?! What's going on?!'

Rachel was overcome by confusion. The red shadow tore off the legs of the black suit with inhuman strength and agility. By mercilessly pushing him into the wheels of the train, no less. The car shook horribly when the black suits's legs were ripped away, but the red shadow didn't even flinch at the impact--even though it was hanging from the train by its legs alone.

It then tossed the corpse back into the hold with superhuman power and turned its sights towards Rachel.

Rachel looked the creature in the eye, too terrified to move. On the outside she appeared calm, but she felt as though her heart would burst from terror. The eyes of the red silhouette couldn't be human. Looking at them made her sick to her stomach, as though she were looking down at--and being sucked into--a bottomless pit.

The bloodlust slowly began to fade from the monster's eyes, but it soon brought to its lips words that, in some sense, were Rachel's greatest fear.

"Your ticket, please."

"AAAAHHHHH!"

Rachel clambered away like a frightened animal. Her limbs moved wildly, as though they were all separate lifeforms, quickly transporting Rachel towards the front of the train.

'What?! Was that the conductor?! It can't be! Whats that supposed to be?! But that's the only possibility! Why? Why is that thing talking like a conductor?! It's going to kill me. If that thing finds out I'm stowing away, it's going to murder me!'

Rachel, who had even collected information by sneaking into mafia hideouts, found herself overwhelmed by an unknown fear. And that fear compelled her limbs to get her as far away from that monster as possible.

For that moment, Rachel even considered jumping off the train.

As Claire's eyes regained their original shade, he began to feel indignant as a conductor.

'Damn. So she's a stowaway, huh? What to do about her... Should I toss her off the train? Or should I stop her from moving altogether, put a sign saying "I' am a stowaway" around her neck, and hang her at the station?'

He considered going after her for a moment, but his rationality as an assassin stopped him.

'Whoops. I'm supposed to be a monster now, not the conductor.'

Claire rethought his plan and again put on the monstrous face of an assassin.

He reentered the freight hold with ease and began pacing around, carefully looking around the room.

He then caught sight of a device sitting atop a large box.

It looked like a radio of some sort, but it looked a lot smaller than the kind that was normally in use at the time. Claire was now relatively certain that the black suits weren't just a simple group of ne'er-do-wells.

But that didn't matter to Claire. No matter who his enemies were, no matter how many of them there were, and no matter what kinds of traps they set for him, Claire had both the skill and the confidence to destroy them all.

He took hold of several bundles of ropes that were lying in the hold. They probably belonged to the black suits, and perhaps they would come in useful later. Claire wrapped the longer rope around his waist and pocketed the smaller bundle of rope.

He then began his attack, leaving in search of his next victim.

The living mass of violence set out to defend the well-being of the train.

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After their initial run-in with Jacuzzi's gang, Ladd and Lua, who made up the core of the gang of white suits, set foot into the conductor's compartment with their friend.

Of course, Ladd was the only one who actually stepped into the room.

"Interesting. This is unbelievable. Really! Why is this place covered in blood? Ain't it strange? Or maybe I should call it amazing! How the hell does anyone make such a mess when they kill people?"

Lua and the other white suit held their ground at the doorway. Half the floor was covered in a sea of red, and rolling around in it was a corpse that was missing its arm and its face. Splayed out in a corner of the compartment was a middle-aged conductor with the back of his head blown off. He had probably been shot.

"Hmmmmm?! Could this faceless friend here be our buddy Dune? This is a pretty bang-up job! Is this what they call a lost messenger? Who the hell did this to you, buddy? We can't even get revenge unless we figure out who did it. Oh, the *tragedy!* We can't even do something so simple as avenging a friend!"

Unlike his friend, who looked away ashen-faced, Ladd spilled his emotions in their entirety.

The keywords that Czes had heard earlier resurfaced in his mind.

'The Rail Tracer...'

"It can't be." Czes said, subconsciously denying the possibility altogether. Perhaps he had felt an air of danger about it somewhere deep down and was trying to suppress it.

'If not, the only thing I can think of is a direct hit from my explosives.'

Czes immediately thought of the cargo he had hidden in the car behind this one. It was going to be sold to the Runorata Family, with half of it in a special container in powder form, and the other half processed into dynamite and ceramic grenades. They were practically handicrafts he had made as a hobby, but Czes had heard before that ceramic grenades were actually used in Japan.

The Runorata Family was currently involved in a struggle, and as such urgently needed powerful, simple explosives.

The new explosives Czes created as a byproduct were more powerful and stable than any other before them. But in the end they were nothing but byproducts. He was just about to dispose of them for peanuts when the Runorata Family's offer came in.

One hit from these new products would easily rend limbs from torsos. It wouldn't be strange for bodies themselves to be shredded in one of their blasts. Of course, this possibility was ruled out by the fact that, other than his missing legs, the corpse was unharmed.

'Could it really have been the white suits?'

He would find out eventually. Czes lost interest in the corpse and began to walk towards the conductor's cabin. He had nearly run into the white suits several times on his way here, but he avoided them by diving into cabins and washrooms. He had to negotiate with their crazed leader and no one else, or the conversation probably wouldn't last very long.

'That man's not the type to just sit around in one place. I'm sure I'll bump into him eventually if I keep heading for the conductor's compartment.' Czes thought to himself, and headed for the back of the train.

And soon, he ran into Ladd in the second freight car, just as he had expected.

"Hm?"

Ladd and the others had decided to head back to the front of the train when they ran into a tiny silhouette in the second freight car.

He had seen the boy before in the dining car.

"You want somethin', kid?" Ladd spat disinterestedly, but his mind was already filling with bloodlust.

'Whaddaya want, you little brat? You saw me slaughter the black suit back in the dining car. Don't fuck with me. Wipe that smug look off your face. You think you're safe just 'cause you're a kid? I'll kill you!'

As the black fires of anger licked at Ladd from within, the boy grinned brightly and spoke.

"You were so strong back there, mister! I was so surprised!"

Bloodlust levels: [-]

"Oh? You think so, kid?"

"Yeah! If you were on the ring, I bet you'd have won the champion's belt by now!"

Bloodlust levels: [-]

"Hmm... I don't really mind brown-nosers. So what do you want from me?"

"I want to ask you to do something."

Bloodlust levels: [+]

"I can't really say it out here, so let's talk about it in the hold." The boy stepped inside and gestured to Ladd.

Bloodlust levels: [+]

"Heyheyhey, you damn brat. Don't act all cute with me."

"Mister? Please don't look so angry."

There were crates of all sizes stacked around the room. Czes picked one of them and took a seat.

"Shut it. You better remember that I'm letting you live even though you called me--and I'm only twenty-five this year--'mister'. And do you realize that depending on whether or not it bothers me, this request of yours might kill you, kid?"

Ladd's mouth was twisted into a grin, but his eyes were full of bloodlust.

The boy, however, was not at all deterred. He put on an innocent look as he made his request.

"Could you kill all the people in the dining car for me, sir?"

Ladd's mental bloodlust gauge shook violently. Czes noticed Ladd's startled expression and continued.

But his voice and attitude had done a 180.

"Of course, I'm willing to compensate you accordingly. By accepting my request, you will get to kill all the people you want, and I'm guaranteed my safety. Although I must ask that you refrain from prying any deeper into my definition of safety."

Ladd frowned at Czes's words, but his companions' eyes widened.

'Did a kid like this just say all that?'

Ladd was the first to see through Czes's true nature.



"You... you're no kid, are ya?"

"I'm glad you're quick to understand."

Czes smiled amicably, nodded, and began his negotiations proper.

"If you'll kill all the passengers for me, I'll pay you two hundred thousand dollars."

Czes would make a profit of five hundred thousand dollars through his negotiations with the Runorata Family. Not only was two hundred thousand completely affordable, it was also practically nothing in comparison to the value of finding out the identity of the other immortal. Czes could take his time and devour whichever one of the passengers began to regenerate.

Czes's profits were enormous, considering the fact that the average bootlegger at the bottom of the scrap heap earned about two hundred dollars a week. Of course, that was about as much as a bootlegger under Capone earned in a day.

"I don't think so."

Ladd was no pushover. As soon as the idea that he was facing an adult in a child's body got through to him, Ladd began to put his efforts into negotiating a better reward.

"How many people do you think I'd have to kill just to get through the dining car? 'course, we could kill 'em easily, and we were planning to slaughter half of 'em anyway, but there's no way I'm doing tricks for your pocket change. 'Sides, we've already got our own plan going. One of our buddies is talking to the railroad company about now. He's probably asking for ten million, at least. I told 'im to do whatever, so maybe he's even asking for a billion dollars!"

"You think such a thoughtless plan will work?"

"Whether they pay up or not doesn't matter. It's all about attitude. Besides, how do I know you're even going to pay up?"

Czes's childlike face twisted into a bitter smile.

"Now that you mention it, you're right. Now, from what I can see, you are a homicidal lunatic who nonetheless is capable of blending into society. And interestingly enough, you even have followers. It seems like you're the type who never thinks things through or makes plans beforehand. I suppose up until now you've gone with the flow and made rational decisions based on the situation at hand."

"Stop narrating like you know everything about my life."

However, in contrast to Ladd's fading tone, Czes's words became stronger.

"Perhaps I can be of some help. I'm currently undergoing negotiations with the Runorata Family in New York. If you want, I could put in a good word with them for you."

The white suit behind Ladd spoke up.

"Runorata? That's one of New York's big shots. No way they'd just take in and hide a mass murderer."

"Then the solution is simple. All we have to do is get rid of any need to hide."

"What?"

"I've stowed a large quantity of explosives onboard this train. I'm planning to use them to negotiate with the Runoratas, but I will set off some of it once you've taken care of the rabble in the dining car. I loaded on some extra as contingency, so there should be no problem."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We'll cause an explosion and stop the train. That's when we make our getaway. Of course, you'll have to assist me in transporting the remainder of the explosives. In any event, things will be simple. I can just see tomorrow's headlines: 'Mysterious Group in Black Cause Explosion on Train'." Czes snickered. Madness slowly crept into his eyes. Czes never realized it, and if he had, he would have denied it, but his eyes had come to resemble those of the man whom he had devoured.

The twisted and corrupted eyes of his torturer.

"But..."

"There's no need to worry. The employees back at Union Station have witnessed the 'orchestra' loading a great quantity of cargo onto the train. And their baggage really is filled to the brim with weaponry. This will be the conclusion: Anyone who's seen your faces will die, and you were not found with the other passengers on the passenger list because you were all blown to smithereens by the explosion."

Czes then clapped his hands together in epiphany.

"Or, we could have one of your men stay behind and act the part of a survivor. He could come up with false testimony to cover for you."

Czes went quiet, waiting for Ladd's response. After a brief moment of silence, Ladd replied.

"I don't understand."

"Hm?"

"If you've got all those explosives at your disposal, why not do it all yourself? All you gotta do is set the thing on fire."

"That would inconvenience me greatly. There's a certain corpse I need to retrieve in the aftermath, and I'd prefer not to have to pick up the pieces, if you know what I mean."

Immortals normally regenerated with the head as their centre. If the explosion were to blow the immortal's head out of the train, it would be difficult for Czes in the aftermath. And if the destroyed corpses were to be jumbled up together, the immortal might regain consciousness before Czes could find him. His greatest priority was to find the immortal before anything else.

Czes finally changed his tone and attitude to that of a child again and made his request.

"You'll do it for me, right, mister?"

Bloodlust levels: [MAX]

Ladd's eyes instantly regained their fire as he cheerfully pointed his gun at Czes's forehead.

"You said that I go with the flow and only make rational decisions on the spot. You're wrong, you rotten little brat. I've *never* tried to live by calculating my own actions."

A flash of light escaped the barrel of the gun as the boy's head was blown clear off his neck.

"Course, I *do* kill people by calculating *their* actions."

<=>

"Why'd you have to kill 'im, Ladd? That was a pretty sweet 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 get killed by me! He was seriously thinking that I wouldn't kill him! He was looking his nose down at *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 right before I blew his face off he acted like nothing was wrong! ...Damn, this is annoying..."

By the time Czes opened his eyes, Ladd and his friends were no longer in sight.

'What a useless thug. How long was I out for? It shouldn't have been any longer than twenty seconds, on average.'

Czes was quite accustomed to having his head destroyed. After all, he had regained consciousness at the very moment of regeneration.

'Hmph. "He" always used to blow off my head. Threw it to the floors and walls with bludgeons and knives. Come to think of it, this is the first time I was shot. But maybe it's a good thing it was quick and painless.'

Making sure that his head had healed completely, Czes made to step out of the cargo hold.

At that moment--

"AAAAAHHHHH! Jacuzzi! Please wake up! Your injuries aren't that serious! You have to live!"

"There's nothing wrong with your injuries!"

Czes recognized the voices of the outlandish duo--Isaac and Miria--wailing in the hallway. He didn't want to risk meeting them, and decided to hide behind the cargo.

"Huh? There's nobody here."

"It's empty!"

Isaac and Miria began to patrol the cargo hold. Czes quietly walked around to the hidden sides of the crates, carefully listening for their movements.

"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!"

'How do they know?' Czes wondered, but he did not let his curiosity distract him from escaping into the hallway while the duo was shuffling through the back of the cargo hold.

'Oh well. For now, I'll see what all of this is leading up to. Maybe the black suits will get a chance to massacre the people in the dining car.'

<=>

Czes never realized that there was yet another figure hiding in the shadows of the cargo hold.

The shadow happened to be covered in red as dark as wine.

'Who'd have guessed little Czes was such a bad kid? No, I guess he's not a kid to begin with, huh?'

As Claire had been overseeing the passenger list, he was able to put a name to most of the faces aboard the train. Of course, the black suits and white suits seemed to have both stylishly opted for pseudonyms.

Each car of the Flying Pussyfoot was equipped with a hatch on the floor for use in emergency checkups. When he saw the white suits enter, Claire snuck in from under the car and opened the hatch in the corner of the cargo hold. He never would have imagined the kind of conversation he would end up overhearing. When he heard Isaac and Miria's voices, Claire went back to the underside of the train and quietly shut the hatch.

'So now what? Little Czes is dead, so I don't have to worry about him. Guess I should go check out Second Class and all the white suits.'

Claire had already taken care of two white suits in Third Class along his way. He couldn't be bothered to do much other than throw their corpses off the train along with those of the black suits from the same room.

There was a specific reason that he had gone back to the rear cars. One of the conductor's duties was to send out regular signals to the locomotive, lest the engineers stop the train for fear of an accident. If Claire were to neglect this duty and allow the train to stop, the black suits or the white suits might be provoked into killing the passengers. Even discounting the possibility of passenger fatalities, it would inconvenience Claire if the train were to stop.

There was a chance that the black suits had already taken over the locomotive. But Claire was fairly sure that the black suits were planning to ensure as smooth a journey as possible, judging from the presence of the fake conductor. Perhaps the black suits weren't yet aware that their costumed ally had already been killed.

With this, Claire made up his mind to keep the regular signals going during the course of this trip. This meant that he had to return to the conductor's compartment at regular intervals.

This was when he noticed Czes and the white suits, followed them, and come to this point.

'Whoa, that was a close call. I have to signal the locomotive first.'

Claire made a sharp turn in the underside of the car, remembering his priorities.

'Looks like I still have some time left. Guess I'll see if I can pick off some more black suits on the way.'

<=>

"Ain't it great, walking on the rooftop like this? Stupendous, even?" Ladd asked.

"I'm cold..." Lua whispered, teeth chattering.

Having heard about the rooftops from the grey magician, Ladd decided to climb up immediately. To his pleasant surprise, the rooftop offered a stellar view of the night sky--and a wonderful, black suit-free path across the train. It was two birds with one stone.

In his joy, Ladd had called up his companions--but they did not seem to share in his enthusiasm.

"Can't believe you're yapping like that on top of a speeding train."

Ladd was hopping around as though he were on solid ground, but his two companions could barely stand on their feet.

"That so? You two have no sense of balance. That's why you gotta eat a balanced diet. Or something." Ladd spat condescendingly, stepping forward.

They soon noticed an unfamiliar figure several cars ahead. The figure was crawling across the roof.

Ladd's eye glinted like that of a child who had just found a new toy. He was determined to find out who that figure was.

"Hey'm I'm gonna go check out First Class for a bit. You two just, whaddaya call it, go back to our cabin and take a break."

Ladd dashed along the roof, not even giving his companions a chance to respond. Though they had to hand it to him for being able to run so quickly without making much of a racket.

Ladd's two companions looked at one another and climbed down at the coupling closest to their cabin.

They had not a shred of fear for Ladd's safety, being entirely unable to imagine Ladd being defeated by a lowly black suit.

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Chane was standing on the roof of the First Class car, the freezing winter gale assaulting her back.

Having hunted down one of the white suits, she had decided to stand guard on the rooftops of the car.

They had stationed guards in the dining car, where there were no compartments. This meant that the white suits--with their inferior numbers--would likely launch an attack from the rooftops.

Chane planned to annihilate them all on her own.

She would not ask for Goose's help. She already knew that he--and the others--were traitors, just like Neider.

Goose had but one goal, and it was to gain Huey's abilities. The only thing that set him apart from Neider was the fact that he was on the side of Huey's revolution.

But to Goose, Huey was not the *centre* of the revolution. Should the revolution be successful, Huey would only be a nuisance to him. The only reason he clung on to this feigned loyalty was the fact of the blessing Huey promised them. The blessing of Huey's abilities.

Once their bodies had become like that of Huey's, Goose and the others would likely expel him from their midst. Yes--Goose was under the impression that they were deceiving and manipulating Huey. And they were foolish to do so.

After all, none of them realized that *Huey* was the deceiver, not Goose.

Huey told the truth to none but Chane. He knew full well that she would be loyal to him to the end.

Chane knew that Huey Laforet had an immortal body.

She knew that he gathered these revolutionaries with the bait of immortality.

She knew that not even Huey could grant such abilities to others.

She knew that, in reality, Huey had no interest in a world upturned by the revolution.

She knew that Huey's goal was to find out the limits of immortality in society.

She knew that all Huey wanted was to see if an immortal could defeat an entire nation.

She knew--Huey told her that he loved her.

She knew--that he did not love her as a woman.

She knew--Huey was her father.

That immortality was not passed on to an immortal's offspring.

That one day, her body would grow older than that of her father.

And Chane knew that, one day, she would inevitably die before Huey.

If the rescue efforts were successful, Goose would probably try to force the secret of immortality from Huey. But it would be even more dangerous to leave him in the hands of the government. Chane had heard that there was another immortal working as an official in the Bureau of Investigation. Her father was in danger of being devoured.

Only one person knew of her past.

She only had one person to call family.

There was only one person who loved her.

There was only one person she loved.

Huey Laforet.

She could not lose him. She could not hand him over to anyone.

Chane was planning to rescue Huey. She knew that Huey was not fond of taking hostages, but that did not matter. She was merely using the excuse of securing his safety in order to fulfill her selfish desire to rescue him.

She would not allow anything to get in her way--even if she had to face down a legendary monster.

She spotted two people crawling across the dining car. They were not white suits, but Chane would not let them get in her way. Perhaps they were fleeing passengers, which shook her determination to kill. As she wavered between her opposing choices, she thought back only to Huey's face and words.

She was suddenly struck by an unpleasant sensation. It was as if a terrifying creature was spying on her, sending chills down her spine.

The source of her unease soon made itself known, emerging from behind the crawling people.

It was a man in a blood-splattered white suit.

Chane could tell instantly that this was the man who had killed two of Goose's men in the dining car.

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"That's a pretty interesting dame."

Ladd stood at the back of the roof of the dining car, staring at the woman who steadfastly stood one car ahead of him.

To think that a pair of crawling figures would lead him to such a gem--Ladd thanked his own intuition. It was a good thing that he *had* come after the would-be escapees.

The force of her gaze, piercing through the smoke, was enough to send down a pleasant chill down his spine. At the same time, Ladd knew that it would be more than worthwhile to kill this woman. He wanted nothing more at this moment than to fill those eyes of hers with desire and terror.

Ladd, the leader of the white suits, was a so-called everyman. Although his uncle Placido was quite well known in the criminal underworld, Ladd and his family lived in practically normal circumstances. There was no trigger that turned him to the path of darkness. He was raised in a very average Chicago family.



His homicidal tendencies were not borne of a particular incident. Thoughts about the differences between life and death--the difference between humans that would and would not die--just surfaced one day, just like he was deciding what to eat for dinner.

Part of Ladd's mind eroded as he slowly came to grips with these thoughts and reached a conclusion. By the time this process ended, his mind was broken beyond cure. His twisted philosophies matured firmly, knowing neither defeat nor compromise.

There was no traumatic event, no pain, or twisted past in his life. Nothing in his history was relevant to his becoming a crazed killer. If there was one extraordinary aspect of him, it was that Ladd was able to quickly integrate the act of murder into his being.

He had his own convictions, but they were little more than an excuse for his sense of aesthetics. And as the train plunged into chaos, Ladd was wandering with nothing but his own bloodlust as a guide.

And he had finally located the most interesting toy of all.

A gust of wind blew away the smoke and exposed the woman's full form.

Ladd unconsciously took this as a signal to make his presence known.

"Hey there! Aren't you cold, standing out here in a dress like that?!"

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Claire was at a loss.

He had successfully managed to return to the conductor's cabin in order to signal the locomotive. The presence of the strange gunman stopped him from entering at first, but the tattooed young man and the giant dragged him away, giving Claire a chance to signal the locomotive before it was too late. He had managed to buy some time with this.

Claire's indecision came afterwards.

He had made his way to Second Class by crawling along the underside of the cars. He saw nothing out of place when he looked in through the windows as he hung to the protruding ornamentation on the side of the train. The problem was that there were a pair of Third Class passengers in one of the cabins that should have belonged to the white suits.

One of them was a man covered entirely in grey cloth. He was probably the doctor named Fred. The other man, however, was impossible to recognize because of his bloodied face. Claire only recognized him as a Third Class passenger because he was obviously dressed like a delinquent. Claire wasn't going on stereotypes--the only passengers who dressed like that today were in Third Class.

It looked like the doctor dressed like a magician--Fred--was treating the bloodied man.

This in itself was not unusual, but why were they in Second Class? And in one of the white suits' cabins, no less?

Claire had nothing but questions.

At that very moment, the cabin door opened and a man and woman, both dressed in white, entered. Claire had seen them before--they were two of the three people who were in the cargo hold where Czes was shot.

"Oh..." Lua breathed as she opened the door, so quiet that no one could hear.

"What the hell are you bastards?!" The man in white roared. Why was the magician they had met earlier here, treating the punk Ladd had trounced earlier?

"So this was your room?" the Grey Magician said quietly. "Your friend Ladd was kind enough to let me use this cabin. Thank you."

He then returned to treating the bloodied man.

Ladd's companions looked at one another, surprised that Ladd would do such a thing. The grey magician bowed his head slightly towards them, his hands still at work on his patient.

"I'm terribly sorry to ask, but I'd like your help getting this patient of mine onto the bed."

'What's going on here? At this point I can't tell if this "Fred" is a friend or foe.'

As Claire went over the possibilities from outside the window, he suddenly realized that the woman in white was looking at him.

Claire stared right back. Their eyes met. Claire was sure that she would break out into a scream, but the woman just looked at him in silence, without so much as blinking.

'What a strange dame. Oh well, I'll have to save this cabin for later.' Claire thought, slowly pushing himself away from the window.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of someone charging across the roof of the train--and another similar sound soon followed suit.

Claire held off on climbing down and pushed his upper body onto the roof. He looked in the direction of the disappearing footsteps and saw two people heading for the back of the train. Under the dim light of the moon he could make out the scene of a woman in a black dress chasing after a man in white.

Claire lowered himself onto the underside of the car again. In contrast to the stowaway woman's monkey-like movements, Claire was mechanical and steady, yet moving at an even faster speed. He looked almost like a gigantic red spider.

Claire climbed up at the Third Class coupling. He was intending to see where the woman in black and the white suit were now, but he couldn't even be certain that they were still on the rooftop.

First, Claire peered into the window on the door, checking the hallways before he went to climb onto the roof. But something stopped him, as a frown creased his brow.

There was a small figure quietly walking through the Third Class hallway. The figure's height quickly gave away his identity, but this raised another question.

'Little Czes? Wasn't he dead just a minute ago?'

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Czes entered one of the Third Class cabins and sat on one of the uncushioned seats. Only First and Second classes had beds--passengers in Third Class had to make do with their chairs if they wanted to sleep.

All the other Third Class cabins Czes passed on the way here from the cargo hold were occupied by bound passengers. He had peered in through each door and finally found one empty cabin.

Setting this aside, there was a conspicuous absence of black suits in the halls. Czes expected that some of them would be stationed here to keep watch over the passengers, but he guessed that the white suits must have taken care of them by now.

'I'll lay low in this cabin for now and see how things go. It'll be easier to make my move after one of the factions wipes out the other.'

Czes closed his eyes to take a break, making sure that he remained conscious and awake.

That was when he heard the door creak open.

"?!"

Czes got up instantly and focused his attention on the door. It opened little by little, revealing that the one who was blocking off the light from the hallway was a mysterious man in red, whose face was covered in blood.

The bright red scared Czes for a moment, but he caught sight of part of the man's clothes that were not red. He realized that the man's clothes weren't red to begin with, but that they were covered in blood.

What little patches of clean clothing remained were white. Czes mistook him for one of the white suits.

"Who are you, mister? Are you one of Mr. Ladd's friends?" He asked in a childlike tone, but the man did not respond.

"What is it...? Who are you, mister?"

A seed of fear took root in Czes.

The man in red shut the door with a slam, not listening to what Czes had to say. It was now just the two of them in this cabin, and the seed of fear in Czes only continued to grow.

Perhaps this man was the immortal. Czes did not recall seeing him in the dining car, but the way the man carried himself was enough to plague him with uncertainty.

"Please, mister. My name's Thomas. Maybe you were looking for someone else?"

He felt no resistance at calling himself by a pseudonym. In other words, this mysterious man was not the immortal. Czes sighed in relief--there was nothing to fear when he was facing a mere human being.

But the first words out of the man's mouth plunged Czes back into confusion.

"You're being such a naughty boy, Czes. Or should I say, Czeslaw Meyer."

"H-how do you know my name?"

The man in red did not answer. Czes desperately searched his memories, trying to see if he had met the man somewhere before. His voice sounded vaguely familiar, but Czes could not remember. He supposed that it must have been nothing more than a passing resemblance.

In the end, Czes was unable to recall that the man was the conductor who had been looking over the passenger list when he boarded.

'Who is this? What's wrong with his eyes? There's something worse about them... even more than that lunatic Ladd. It's like he's not even human. No... it can't be. But if demons are real, then this guy just might be...'

The stories he heard in the dining car suddenly flashed by in his mind, as Czes unconsciously called a name.

"The... Rail Tracer...?"

The monster looked pleasantly surprised by Czes's utterance.

"So you know, huh?"

Czes remembered what Isaac had said. The Rail Tracer would gobble up bad children.

As Czes's heartbeat began to grow nearly audible, the monster took a single step towards him.

"I'm the Rail Tracer." Claire said confidently, despite the fact that this series of words sounded like little more than a bad joke.

But Czes looked into his eyes, changing his perception of the statement. The man's eyes were dark enough to swallow up its surroundings, completely at odds to his tone of voice.

"I know that you're not a kid. And I also know what you're up to. So I'll just do the world a favour and get rid of you."

Since his target was no child, Claire had no intention of showing him mercy. Czes was both an enemy to the train and an ally to the Runorata Family. These two factors were enough to warrant killing him.

"A... AAAAAAAHHHH!"

Czes pulled up his sleeve before the man revealed to be a monster. A leather band was around Czes's arm, and a long, thin object covered in cloth was strapped to it.

Czes clumsily drew the object and violently threw off the cloth that covered it, revealing a sharpened blade. It was a scalpel--the kind used in surgical operations--but about twice the length of its conventional brethren.

Czes ducked low and quickly lunged at the man.

He leaned upwards as he closed in on the monster, reaching up to slit his throat. A stunning silver glint traced an arc in midair as it reached the monster's throat.

Thump.

The monster had not taken a single step. He had snatched Czes's arm as though he had just been bitten by a mosquito. Czes's attack had been ended before he could even try to resist.

The monster took hold of the blade with his right hand. It was nearly simultaneously that his left hand grabbed Czes by the neck and ripped off part of his flesh in one smooth motion.

"Uhh..." Czes moaned. Blood ran down the monster's right hand as it fell onto the floor, drop by drop. The monster snatched away Czes's knife and kicked away his tiny form.

Czes staggered backwards and reached a corner of the room, collapsing under the window. His carotid artery had been severed. There was no logical way for him to have survived.

'It's over.' Claire thought, glancing at the collapsed boy once more as he made to leave the cabin. But he was stopped by a strange feeling crawling over his right hand. The blood on his hand was trembling--not his hand itself, but just the blood.

'What is this?'

Czes's blood, coating Claire's hand, fell to the floor in an instant. His hands were now completely clean.

The blood on the ground squirmed as though it had a will of its own and returned to its rightful place--Czes's body.

The splattered drops of blood gathered together and crawled back into Czes's flesh.

"What was that for?" Czes whined as his wound healed. "Was that all? You scared me for a second there. I thought I was really going to be swallowed whole."

Czes snickered like nothing was wrong.

"Surprised? I'm actually immortal."

The man in red was frozen in place. Czes was no longer so terrified by him. Initially he thought the man might be a monster, but his methods made it quite certain that he was human. Which meant that there was nothing to be afraid of.

'That's right. I'll use this one. I bet he won't have any trouble wiping out the people in the dining car if I just bait him along with promises about immortality.'

Czes grinned and decided to make the man in red an offer.

"Hey mister, there's something I want to ask you..."

"I refuse."

'Huh?'

Czes's thoughts froze. He hadn't even gotten a chance to make his offer.

"You want me to kill the passengers in the dining car, right? 'Fraid I can't do that."

For the third time, Czes's heart swelled with fear.

'How did he know?'

It was as though Czes's lost smile had transferred to the man in red, who twisted his lips into a grin.

"An immortal, huh? Interesting."

Claire's hand flashed for an instant, and there was a sound like something was being stabbed.

It was the sound of the scalpel being buried into Czes's forehead.

Czes felt excruciating pain emanating from his head, but he managed to retain his consciousness. His eyes had gone foggy and agonizing pain shot through his head. But he desperately forced his trembling hands to pull out the scalpel.

The pain stopped. His senses began returning to normal.

"That was quite painful, but it's not enough to kill me. Though I suppose *nothing* is."

There was no longer any need for him to play the part of a child. Czes took on a mature tone as he began to ponder ways to counter this monster.

He had managed to retrieve his weapon, but it would be extremely difficult to defeat this man in red.

Not only that, he hadn't imagined in his wildest dreams that the monster's reaction to his demonstration of immortality would be a mere "Interesting".

The red monster took several steps towards Czes, cracking his own neck along the way.

"So what should I do for you? If you're really immortal, does that mean I can skin you alive, gouge out your eyes, crush your heart in my hands as you watch, and you'll still be fine?" Claire asked plainly. Czes's answer was equally frank.

"Whatever you want. I'm more than used to that level of pain."

"Oh?"

Czes recalled the countless instances of pain that 'he' had inflicted upon him in the past. The likes of the monster's examples were all things he had experienced ad nauseum.

Czes glared at Claire, his small voice filled with strength. "Have you ever been stabbed in the eyes with red-hot tongs? Have you ever taken a nice acid bath? Have you ever been thrown into a furnace alive? I experienced that kind of pain every day at the hands of someone I trusted. What would you know? I'm not going to bow to your barbaric levels of violence. You don't have what it takes to reach the kind of pain I'm prepared for!"

Claire, who had been listening quietly all this time, took another step forward.

"Is that all? Is that really all?"

"Wh...What?"

"No, no. this won't do at all, Czes. That's practically baby stuff. Only a sick *kid* would play like that. Though I can't say I understand why anyone would enjoy this kind of thing..."

He took another step forward, slapping Czes's face again and again.

"Have you ever had the meat off your arm carefully stripped away? Have you ever had the bones in your arm shattered in that state? Do you know of Chinese methods of execution? How about Japanese torture? Do you know the kinds of things some sick European aristocrats did to keep people alive?"

Claire stopped hitting Czes. There was a monstrous glint in his eyes, making it look as though he could snatch away Czes's very soul.

"It's an occupational hazard, if you could call it that. I know all kinds of way to inflict pain--even methods that preclude killing."

Czes met Claire's eyes and let out a silent scream. He then desperately swung the scalpel in his hand.

Crunch.

The very next moment, the scalpel was tightly fixed in the vice-like grip of Claire's teeth. He had used only his mouth to block Czes's attack and bite off his skinny fingers.

"Ah... Ahhhhhh..."

Blood gushed from Czes's right hand as he let out a gurgling scream. Claire spat lumps of flesh and the scalpel onto the floor and took hold of Czes's head with his hands.

"Listen up, Czeslaw Meyer." He whispered gently. "It's true that you might be prepared for a certain level of pain. But what was that look in you eye? The look you saw when you came face-to-face with the Rail Tracer?"

Claire's eyes were fixed on those of Czes. Czes's face was frozen, as though his nervous system had been debilitated. Claire's gaze was so powerful that Czes could neither blink nor turn away.

'My body's shaking from the feet up. What is this...? Am I... scared? Scared of this monster? The Rail Tracer... it shouldn't be anything more than something out of a bad movie!'

"What you fear is the unknown. Maybe somewhere in this world is a kind of pain you've never experienced before. And that's why you fear the unknown so much more than other people do. Am I right? Since you're so used to pain, you're that much more scared of it."

Czes's face reflected off of Claire's eyes. Displayed in the mirror image were eyes filled with terror--no different when it came to an adult or a child. Sometimes, as he pretended to be a child and an adult at separate time, Czes wondered--which one was he really? In that sense, perhaps the terrified person reflected in Claire's eyes was Czeslaw Meyer's true identity.

Czes unconsciously began to shed tears, paralyzed by fear.

"I will grant you a kind of pain you have never known." Claire said gently, wiping Czes's tears. "Until you forget how to come back to life."

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Rachel was laying low under the car, her breath stilled for fear of discovery.

She found a small space, enough to let her lie down, and took a quick break. She looked around, craning her neck, but the red monster was nowhere in sight.

Though she had some time to rest, Rachel's fear of the red monster persisted. She desperately tried to calm her heart, beating like a drum in her chest, and slowly regained her sense.

With the passing of time, she finally managed to calm herself down.

'Right. I'll pretend for now that I was seeing things.'

Rachel knew full well that the monster she saw was real, but she forced herself into this mindset. The most important thing for her at this point was to see what happened in the dining car in the aftermath of her departure.

The moment she made up her mind to return to the dining car to assess the situation, she heard a window shattering, mixed in with the ear-splitting sound of the running train.

It was right after she took a breath that something clung on to a metal bar right beside her.

What greeted her was a familiar sight.

A red silhouette was balancing itself parallel to the ground, holding on with only its legs. It was holding something in its arms.

The monster then lowered his right hand towards the fast-moving gravel underneath them.

Rachel felt sick to her stomach, but she could not look away. It felt as though the red monster would set its sights on her the moment she averted her gaze. Another reason for her nausea was the fact that the red monster's current victim was a young boy. The boy was also familiar to her--she had seen him among the lively people gathered around the strange gunman.

The boy's right arm and legs were missing. He must be long dead by now, but why would the monster go so far?

As Rachel trembled in her morbid curiosity, a metal ornament on her sleeve bumped into the metal parts under the train and began to make a rattling noise.

The tiny rattles should have been completely overpowered by the howl of the moving train--not even Rachel could hear it.

Yet the red monster was able to pick up this tiny noise.

His neck swivelled around towards her. The light reflecting off the ground made it difficult to see his face, but the monster looked at Rachel and mumbled--

"You're that stowaway..."

"AAAAAAHHHHH!"

Rachel screamed as though her life was on the line, and fled for the front of the train. Her movements were unsteady and it looked as though her back might touch the ground, but she was quick. Rachel disappeared into the darkness with movements resembling a sloth moving at a hundred times its natural speed.

Claire was in the midst of inflicting pain onto Czes when the boy tried to throw himself out of the window, unable to withstand any more.

Claire barely managed to take hold of Czes as he leapt, and fell down the side of the train. He managed to secure himself off the ground by taking hold of the pipes between the wheels in an instant.

That was when Claire wondered, *'If I rip off pieces of him from the train, would they come follow his body?'*. He then began to push Czes's limbs into the ground.

Claire had only Czes's left arm remaining when his sharp hearing caught wind of a certain sound.

He turned his upper body and neck, and noticed the stowaway he had seen earlier.

When he spoke to her, she screamed loudly enough to overpower the train, and escaped fast enough to impress Claire.

Claire suddenly stopped. Still holding Czes's body in his right arm, he took out a thin rope from his pockets with his left hand. He had picked it up earlier in the cargo hold--it had likely been used by the orchestra to tie their belongings.

Claire used this rope to expertly tie Czes into the space between the wheels, and left him behind as he crawled along the bottom of the train.

'That wasn't good. I should be focusing on the black suits and the white suits about now. I'd better thank that stowaway for snapping me back to reality. I guess I'll spare her and just hand her over to the cops.'

As he departed, he left Czes--whether he was conscious nor not--with some final words.

"I'll come back for you later. And next time, I'll make sure to drive you to insanity..."

As Czes hung from the underside of the train, his consciousness growing faint, he could vaguely hear voices from right above him.

"What's the matter?"

"C'mere for a sec. ...Look at that."

It was in the immediate aftermath of Claire's departure that two of the black suits poked out their heads from the Third Class cabin.

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The quintet of black suits split up into two groups in front of the Third Class car. Three of them had arrived at the cargo hold.

Before them was the sight of a severed upper body floating in a sea of its own blood.

"This is crazy..."

They were terrified by the sight of their ally's mutilated corpse, but managed to regain their calm. They then used the still-functioning radio beside the corpse to quickly contact Goose.

"...That's our situation... The radio is fine. Yes. Yes. That's right. There is only one body. We'll be heading to the conductor's cabin shortly- Sir? Yes. Yes. Understood."

The man who contacted Goose turned off the radio and turned around to face his allies. He then cautiously looked around and calmly conveyed to his allies a certain order.

"Code Beta is in effect. But only under the condition that we find a blind spot in her battle against the white suit."

The other two black suits visibly tensed.

"Are we really going to do this...? We're going to... Chane..."

"Do not speak of the contents of our mission." The leader among them ordered, again carefully taking note of his surroundings.

But the very moment that he assured himself that there was no one in the hold, an excited voice carried down from the ceiling.

"So about that plan of yours... Could ya maybe gimme an itsy bitsy hint?"

A white shadow descended from the ceiling in the blink of an eye and slashed across the throat of the man beside the leader. The white shadow--Ladd--was holding in his right hand the throwing knife he had taken from Chane.

"This is exciting! Could you believe this? I gotta say, it's pretty damn hard clinging to the ceiling, y'know, buddy?"

Ladd attacked the leader of the trio before he had a chance to even raise his gun. He made his way behind the leader's back in an instant and put the knife to his throat.

"Yes, yes, yes! Now drop your gun, would ya? And you too, bright boy. You ain't gonna hit anyone but your funny pal here anyway."

The leader ground his teeth and dropped his gun. His frail-looking ally, meanwhile, dropped his gun and turned tail.

"Oh, shucks. He ran away. Pretty cruel of him, huh?" Ladd said to himself, watching the black suit flee. "But you can't really call him a coward, though. It's a pretty normal reaction to seeing me, if I do say so myself. Besides, I *just* came to hide in the ceiling."

Ladd laughed heartily and began to steer the black suit, the knife still pointed at his throat. He shut the cargo hold door, and led the black suit to a corner of the cabin.

"That was really something! I've *never* had to run away before! That little lady back there was one thrilling catch! A round of applause, everyone! You know what? I'll join in! And afterwards, I'll kill her!"

The knife slid past the black suit's throat in time with Ladd's laughter. A chill ran down his spine as he waited for Ladd to continue talking.

Ladd suddenly lowered his tone as he jabbed the tip of the knife into the black suit's throat.

"You're all just a bunch of rookies with some very nice toys, aren't ya? At first I thought you were soldiers, y'know? I seriously thought I was going to finally get to fight a bunch of laid-back soldiers and got excited! But then I opened the lid and it was a complete letdown. 'Cept for the girl, I mean. Haha!"

Ladd grinned and pushed the blade a single millimetre deeper into the black suit's throat.

"So the dame's called Chane, and that 'White Suit' you were talking about would be me, right? Why don't ya gimme a little explanation? Why're you going to kill one of your friends?"

The tip of the knife slowly drove deeper into the black suit's throat.

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Rachel was trembling as she hung on under the First Class car, completely alone.

How had things turned out this way? Why? What in the world was that monster? Was a monster truly put in charge of being a conductor on this train?

The monster appeared human, but its true nature could be anything but. At first she thought that the monster was only killing the black suits, but seeing it mutilate such a young child convinced her otherwise. The red monster was empty of humanity after all.

How long had she been shaking, lost in the same chain of thoughts? She had not even blinked at the shootout in the dining car, but Rachel was now overcome by fear in both body and mind.

She had thrown herself into danger as an agent of an information agency. She had faced death several times. But not even the most perilous of her past experiences could hope to compare with the state she found herself in now.

Things like the mafia and their storms of bullets were tangible fears. They were perfectly understandable dangers that Rachel could prepare herself for before stepping into the fray. Of course, her resolve had nearly been shaken several times in the past, but things had never been too much for her psyche to handle.

The red monster was a different story altogether. Its very existence was impossible to comprehend--how as she to counter it? For what exactly was she to prepare herself?

The one thing she knew was that, as a stowaway, she could not allow herself to be caught. Though the same would hold true even if she had properly purchased a ticket for herself.

Just ahead of Rachel was the locomotive. It would be much more dangerous for her to hide away there, where moving parts like the boiler were all potentially lethal traps. Having lost a way to go, Rachel got down on the metal parts by the coupling. Of course, since there was little room under the cars, she was forced to lay down flat, parallel to the ground.

In the pitch-black night, her only source of light was the moonlight that bounced off the gravel that carpeted the rails. Obviously, it wasn't much help.

Rachel determined that staying here would get her no closer to any solution. She decided to first take a look at First Class--she would much rather face the black suits, armed with machine guns, than the red monster. Rather than staying put and waiting, Rachel opted to actively seek a way to escape. She had no intention of getting involved in trouble. All she wanted to do was get away.

She cautiously poked her head out from between the cars and looked at the side of the First Class cars. Like the others, they were adorned with decorations that Rachel could use to climb up the sides. She took hold of one of them and pushed herself close to the car, as though she were scaling a sheer cliff face. Anyone less experienced would have probably lost their grip, fallen off the train, and lost their lives.

Rachel had attempted all sorts of such simulations on stationary trains since her childhood. Compared to more flat cars, climbing a car covered in gaudy ornamentation was a cakewalk.

Perhaps she could manage to stay hidden if she climbed atop the locomotive. The smoke would cover her from sight, and no one would come looking in a place like that.

But Rachel quickly dismissed the thought. At that proximity, the smoke would easily suffocate her. And there was no telling how hot the vicinity of the smokestack would be.

Rachel decided for now that she would climb onto the roof of the First Class car and quietly approached the window. She intended to begin by assessing the situation inside the car.

A quick glance later, Rachel regretted her actions.

'I shouldn't have looked.'

A mother of a young child was there, her arms and legs tightly bound. Keeping watch beside her was a black suit armed with a machine gun.

'No, no, no, no! I can't get involved! If I go in there, I'll get myself killed! I could take the risk if it was for information, but I can't expose my life to danger when there's nothing in it for me!'

Rachel desperately scolded herself in her mind as she climbed onto the roof.

But she soon began to think back to her father. The father who was thrown out by his employers--the father who died after a life of hardship. The railroad company had abandoned her father for its own safety.

'Damn it! What am I thinking?! That's got nothing to do with this! My life is at stake here! Forget deep meanings--putting my life on the line for cheap sentimentality is exactly what goes against my life!'

Rachel mentally screamed at herself, trying to convince herself otherwise. But it was too late. The image of her father had been burned into her mind.

'What am I doing? No! I'm just a stowaway! What good is anything I do? So please, me! Please stop...'

Before she knew it, her body was balanced right above the window. All she had to do now was lower her legs ever-so-slightly...

'No, no, no! Stop! Stop! Don't do it!'



The tip of her feet tapped at the window.

'Now I've done it.'

The window opened, and the black suit poked his upper body out the window.

Rachel took in this sight from above and steeled her resolve.

'I've come this far... I can't back out now.'

She took her hands off the wall and allowed gravity to pull her down. The soles of her feet detected something soft under them as she stopped momentarily mid-fall. At the same time, she took hold of the window frame as though she were doing pull-ups, and put all of her weight into the black suit's upper body.

The man lost his balance and began falling backwards in a stumble. Rachel instantly moved her legs forward and slipped into the cabin, moving as though she were walking on the black suit's stomach. As the man fell out of the train and rolled out of sight, Rachel stepped onto the floor of the cabin.

'I don't want to become a murderer, so you'd better stay alive.'

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The first thing Claire did upon arriving at the dining car was clarify the situation inside.

The car was being guarded by two men, both holding machine guns.

"Looks like I don't have much of a choice." Claire mumbled, closing one eye. He crawled into the underbelly of the car and reached for a box in the middle of the car, which adorned with a yellow mark.

There were several small levers on the box. Claire went for one of them in particular.

"If they had money to waste on stuff like this, they could have at least had the decency to put in a radio between the conductor's compartment and the locomotive. And who puts the switch for the generator on the *underside* of a train? Talk about one hell of a design flaw."

The box was a core component of the system that generated electricity for the lights on the train through the wheels. It was a characteristic aspect of the Flying Pussyfoot.

In the past, the electricity for the lights in each car was supplied by a turbine behind the safety valve of the boiler in the locomotive. After a while, the energy generated by the turbine stopped reaching the cars further in the back, and the lights were put onto a dedicated system.

On this train, the wheels were used to generate electricity, and each car had a closed system. As a result of this resourceful application of technology, the Flying Pussyfoot was able to generate a great deal more energy than other trains, thereby allowing the interior of each car to be illuminated as though it were daytime.

The control panel for these systems were under the cars, and Claire was reaching for the main switch for this particular car.

"Didn't they even consider? Anyone can get in under the car and turn out the lights. Just like that."

He pulled the switch and immediately climbed away.

"Looks like it's time for a little adventure." He muttered, and began to put on a show from the side of the speeding train.

Screams erupted from the pitch-black dining car. At the same time, Claire opened the window at the back of the car from outside.

"Who's there?!"

One of the black suits approached the window, holding a gun. Claire took his hands off the window and waited for the man to poke the barrel of the gun outside the window.

And just as he expected, the barrel appeared from the inside. The black suit--the foolish thing--must have been disoriented by the sudden confusion.

Claire took hold of the barrel and pulled it towards himself.

"Whoa..."

As the black suit stumbled out, Claire took him by the arm and destroyed his balance, pulling him down with alarming force.

The black suit, having lost his balance, was thrown out of the train. Claire couldn't be sure that he was dead, but he had no time to kill the man properly before dropping him.

Then, he began to run along the ornamentation on the side of the train.

Though there were few prominent protrusions along the side of the cars, Claire headed for the front of the train with his upper body bowed low. Each time he fell too close to the ground, he took hold of a window frame with his left arm and forced himself back upright.

He ran, ran, ran. By forcibly accomplishing his fantasies, Claire made his nightmares real. And the target of this particular nightmare was the lone black suit.

Claire ran down the side of the car without a sound. From afar, he looked almost as though he were walking on this air beside the train.

The passengers in the dining car caught sight of him--the red shadow--as he ran under the moonlight, causing a veritable explosion of screams and cries from inside the car.

By the time the black suit opened the window beside him, between the tables, it was all too late.

Claire had already arrived there, grabbing the black suit by the arm before he could even point his gun.

He pulled the black suit close to himself and whispered into his ear. "Can I have some applause, here? This was my first try and I got it right.... Do you know *anything* about all the effort I put into my work?"

The next moment, Claire tossed the trembling black suit off the train without hesitation.

He then returned to the underside of the car and turned the power back on. But when he went back to the window, yet another black suit had arrived.

"They just don't stop coming..."

Claire, astounded by the black suits' tenacity, took care of one of them at the coupling. The other black suit escaped into the First Class car, having noticed his presence.

'Guess that's not too much of a problem. They won't hurt the passengers so long as they're worried about me.'

He nodded slightly and headed back to the rear cars. It was nearly time to signal the locomotive again.

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'Where has that man gone?'

Chane was standing atop the conductor's compartment, completely focused on the task at hand.

She had lost sight of Ladd somewhere around the freight cars, so she was looking around for him from the rooftops.

'That man is too dangerous. I have to take care of him at once. If I let him go now... he will become my greatest hindrance. And he may become one for father, as well.'

She had no proof to back up her predictions, but Chane was assured of herself as she continued to search for the blood-splattered white suit. She had determined earlier that it would do her little good to seek him out blindly, so she had come up to the rooftop to look over at the entire train.

But the target revealed himself on his own as if he were greeting a friend off the street.

"Hey there!"

Ladd's meaninglessly giddy smile made Chane even more certain of herself--she had to dispatch this man, if no one else.

Even though she had not even an inkling of the identity of the man she was facing, Chane felt something akin to a delusion of victimization that wasn't necessarily a delusion.

"Doin' well, pussycat? Weren't you lonely without me?" Ladd laughed repulsively. Chane silently drew her knife.

Her opponent was no longer carrying a rifle. As soon as she noted this fact, Chane leaned low and prepared to charge.

"Aww, that's awful cold of you, Chane!"

"?!"

Chane froze.

'How does he know my name?'

Ladd nodded satisfactorily at her confusion.

"Lemme tell you something, Chane! I know *everything* about you! I hear all of your little buddies back there hate you, and you hate 'em all back! And you're the personal pet of some guy called Huey Laforet, and you treat him like he's some sorta god!" Ladd rambled. Chane, no longer willing to listen, prepared to attack again.

"So I hear that Master Huey of yours is actually immortal! Am I right?"

Chane froze again. Ladd seemed to be enjoying this situation. All the cards were in his hand--all he had to do was toss one out to hit her hard before she could attack.

Chane convinced herself that she should no longer listen to her opponent. She readied herself for the third time and began to rush towards Ladd. It didn't matter what he knew--she had to kill him, *now*. She crouched impossibly low and reached for Ladd's legs.

But for some odd reason, Ladd also began to charge at her with a stance low enough to rival her. Not only that, his mouth was still firing off distractions like no tomorrow.

"But you know somethin'? I'm pretty damn disappointed!"

Ladd's surprising behaviour caused Chane to hesitate, slowing the speed at which she reached forward with her knife.

"Ya know~?"

Ladd's voice suddenly began to grow distant. From Chane's viewpoint, it looked as though Ladd's body had suddenly been thrown backwards.

At the same time, a powerful impact struck her jaw.

Ladd had stopped just short of Chane's attacking range and hit her with a somersault kick in an instant. He did a backflip from his lowered stance at once and used the momentum to kick upwards at Chane's jaw with the tip of his foot.

Chane, who had even had her sights set low, flew backwards and rolled towards the back of the car. Her last roll was a deliberate action that she took in order to get back on her feet.

"Y'know somethin'? At first I thought you were so nuts 'cause you were controlled by Martians or something! But you're just that fucking crazy 'cause you're in *love*?! What are ya, twelve?! Or are you just comin' out of puberty? Don't you think this Huey guy's just stringing ya along? Huh?"

Ladd's provocations finally took their toll on Chane, tipping her over the edge. She had never once considered Huey as a lover. Though perhaps that might have been preferable to the alternative, Chane was Huey's daughter. She would not permit herself to consider him as such, and she loved him as her father, nothing more. But from the perspective of a third party, they were a man and a woman of similar ages. Anyone who had a daughter of his own would know at a glance that Huey and Chane were father and daughter, but unfortunately, the black suit who had told everything to Ladd was without even a lover.

Chane fiercely glared at Ladd, lowered her stance even more, and charged at him like a bullet.

"Ahahaha! You mad? Are you getting angry? Hm?"

Chane's expression told Ladd that things might not have been so simple as he had assumed, but he had no intention of finding out the truth of the matter. In fact, Chane's blind rage only made it much easier for him to predict her movements.

Ladd gave a hearty laugh, this time not even moving a single step. But Chane was not deterred. She made to slit Ladd's throat in the angle she had drawn in her mind earlier. As she came within an inch of Ladd, Chane raised her stance with all her might.

Chane's knife sliced through the air at an angle like an airplane taking a sudden turn upwards.

Ladd, having already seen this attack coming, dodged it at an inhuman speed. At the same time, he bent his knees and lowered himself vertically. He was planning to punch into her unprotected torso.

He then realized that Chane's body was twisting at a great angle, and quickly dodged sideways.

Chane's leg rose into the air with lethal force. She had been trying to kick Ladd with a somersault, just as he had done to her earlier.

"Too easy."

Ladd read her movements instantly and kicked Chane in the side while she was still in midair.

Chane rolled backwards, finally falling off the side of the train.

"Ohh? Finished so soon? For real? Ain't it boring? Don't leave me hanging here, dollface!"

Suddenly, there was a loud *clang*, mixed in with what sounded like metal being ripped apart.

"Hm?"

Ladd looked down and found himself facing an unbelievable sight.

Chane was hanging on to the side of the train, the knives in her hands thrust into the sides of the car. She withdrew one and thrust it in again, taking turns with each side. She climbed up the side of the train like a woman driven mad.

Clang. Clang. Clang. Clangcrk. Krack.

The speed of the knives grew faster and faster as Chane began to climb as though she were walking up the wall.

"Whoa!"

Chane propelled herself back up like a bullet, passing by Ladd's side without even giving him time to react. The moment he let out a sigh of relief, a small cut opened on Ladd's right ear and began to bleed.

"Sorry, sweetheart. Maybe you really *are* a Martian after all. I bet you actually got eight legs or something, am I right?!"

Ladd, breaking out into cold sweat for the first time, clenched his fists and began to shuffle around on light feet. Chane also righted her grip on her knives and began to gauge her distance from Ladd.

Suddenly, something unthinkable occurred.

Chane and Ladd were currently battling atop the last car--the car that housed the conductor's compartment and the overflow freight hold. The conductor's compartment should be occupied by a pair of corpses, nothing else.

And in an act of defiance against logic, the lamp on the side of the conductor's compartment flared to life several times.

The light was used to signal that everything was running smoothly on the train, but who could be behind it?

The lamps went out again, leaving Chane and Ladd to face each other in silence.

It seemed that the lamps had heralded nothing. Putting the strange occurrence from his mind, Ladd began to provoke Chane into attacking blindly again.

"So Chane... you know that your black suit buddies are after you, right? From what I hear, they're gonna kill you in the middle of all this hullabaloo!"

Chane did not even blink. She had already known all this--in fact, Chane was also planning to dispatch Goose and the others in the end.

"So I hear you were against this plan from the start! Said you didn't wanna take hostages or kill little brats? The fuck's wrong with you? And I hear this Huey of yours thinks the same, too. Must be outta his goddamn mind! I almost *get* why your buddies are gonna betray him!"

Chane quietly listened to what Ladd was saying. It seemed she had learned her lesson from before--she was trying desperately to hold back her emotions and keep them hidden.

"You're planning some sorta revolution? Trying to overturn this country? But you act like you're some shit-faced hero, not doing anything underhanded or killing bystanders... Or is this Huey Laforet so strong he can afford to worry about other people in the middle of a goddamn war?! That, I'd understand, but that's the kind of fucker I hate the most! The only bastards who do that are people who think they're perfectly safe! Shit! I'm not letting him get away with that!" Ladd howled.

He then grinned and lowered his voice.

"You know what's the first thing I'm gonna do when I get off this train?"

He twisted his lips into a freakish smile and glared sickeningly at his opponent.

"I'm gonna kill Huey Laforet."

This simple threat was enough to momentarily paralyze Chane's thoughts.

"I *thought* it was weird. Y'know, I always thought terrorists threw away their lives like pieces of kindling, but your buddies all had the same look, like they were never gonna die. And now I get it! They're all like that 'cause after this job, they might become immortal."

Ladd continued to shuffle on his feet, building up his tone.

"To be honest, I don't really feel like killin' you. I don't get what you're thinking, but you're putting your life on the line. So that's why I had a thought! Maybe it'll be even more fun if I kill the guy you worship! Maybe it'll be fun to watch you while *you* watch me killing Huey Laforet!" Ladd suddenly stopped moving and shouted at Chane. His voice was filled with overwhelming enjoyment, as though playing with Chane's emotions like putty in his hands was pure ecstasy.

"I'm gonna kill him. Doesn't matter if he's immortal or something. If he still doesn't die, I'll saw his head off his neck and sink 'em in the north and south pole. And you're gonna watch it all. I'll show that cocky piece of shit how dangerous and hard and sickening life is! And I won't stop even if you beg me to. So whatcha gonna do now, Chane?! Ahahaha!"

There was little in terms of originality to be gleaned from Ladd's threat, but he knew well that cliched warnings like this were best for provoking someone like Chane.

The impact of the threats hit Chane both physically and mentally. If the previous provocation was like turning on an engine, this was like hitting an ignition switch. Chane put all of her strength into the tips of her knives as she made to charge at Ladd.

But the her knives would not move.

The tips of the knives in her hands were being held steadfast by someone's fingers. Chane did not realize this fact until this moment.

She had not realized that before her stood a man dressed in red. But this could not be possible--after all, there was no one there the moment she was blinded by rage.

It was as if he had materialized out of thin air.

The monster had finally appeared before them.

It was the red demon--the Rail Tracer.

Holding Chane's knives with his thumbs and index fingers, the red shadow quietly spoke.

"Don't stab the conductor's compartment. You almost lopped my ear off."

At first Ladd and Chane did not understand what the man was talking about, but a moment's thought cleared it up--the man was probably in the car when Chane was climbing up the side of the train with her knives.

"If you got it, the least you could do is apologize."

Chane nodded without thinking. She dropped her hands, her anger at Ladd all but forgotten, as she lightly bowed her head. If the black suits could see her, they would doubt their senses. Even Ladd was having trouble believing this.

"How about an 'I'm sorry'?"

Chane pointed at her throat and shook her head. It seemed that she was physically unable to speak, for whatever reason.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize." The red shadow apologized, walked along the rooftop, and turned on his heels at the coupling. "By all means, continue."

The red monster had now forced his way into the fight between Ladd and Chane.

"And I'll kill whichever one of you survives."

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Lua wanted to be murdered. So much so that she had even forgotten why. Suicide was a foolish option to her, so she searched for someone who would kill her. She searched for someone who would delight in killing her. She wanted to at least make someone happy in her death.

That was when she met Ladd. Perhaps he would delight in murdering her more than anyone in the world.

"I'll slaughter anyone who wants to live more than you do. Then, I'll lovingly kill you at the end for the rest of our lives. So 'til then, follow me and don't even think of dying, all right, sweetheart?"

That was his proposal. Lua knew well that he was not making excuses to extend her life--he truly meant what he said.

And Lua had faith that Ladd would make his proposal a reality. True, he had never failed to kill anyone, but above all else Lua could not imagine Ladd being killed by someone else.

At least, not until she saw the red shadow.

The moment her eyes met those of the red shadow, who was looking in through the window not too long ago, Lua's heart was violently shaken. It wasn't terror or love--it was unease. Ladd was going to die. The monster with the terrifying eyes would kill Ladd. Ladd could not defeat him.

She knew this because she saw the source of the terrifying glint in the monster's eyes.

It was bloodlust--bloodlust given physical form. Lua recognized it instantly, for she had seen the same expression in Ladd's eyes whenever he killed someone. The one difference was the fact that the will behind the monster's eyes were incomparably powerful in comparison to those of Ladd.

Lua could tell at a glance that the monster was a being from another world altogether. The willpower in his eyes could no longer even be called human. And to make things worse, the red monster departed without killing the occupants of this cabin. Although Lua did not understand why, she knew that the monster was filled with both bloodlust *and* the power to control it.

Ladd could not be beaten by humans, but things were different if he were to go up against a monster. He would die. *Ladd would die.*

"Are you all right, young lady?"

A deep voice snapped her back to reality. They were in Ladd's cabin in Second Class.

The grey magician had just wrapped up on treating the injured man.

"Your eyes are different now. They're full of life."

"Pardon...?" Lua asked in a frail half-whisper. As she looked into the magician's eyes, she realized something.

'He's just like me. He wants to die.'

It seemed that the magician had understood what Lua's eyes were telling him. He quietly continued speaking.

"I was dispatched to Verdun as a doctor during the Great War. So many people died--both enemies and allies. One day, I woke up, and found that as far as I could see, I was the only one still breathing."

He stoically recalled his past, not losing himself in an emotional abyss of tragedy.

"I thought, 'Ah, so this must be my punishment'. Perhaps I would not have been faced with such a sight if I had been able to treat more people. Strangely enough, afterwards, no matter which battlefield I went to next, I never died--I survived until the end of the Great War. I never even tried to protect myself or run. No matter how badly I was wounded, I always made it out with my life."

The magician's reminiscence sounded like a far-off tale to Lua. The cloth over his face came slightly loose, and the wind blowing in exposed charred flesh under the grey. No doubt the rest of his body was in much the same state.

"If this was divine punishment, then I suppose escaping it through suicide would earn me something even worse in the afterlife. That is why I treat people out of a sense of duty. As long as I can save even one more person who wishes to live--until God will finally allow me to die."

He looked directly at Lua.

"Looks like you've found yourself a purpose. Your eyes are different now, so full of life. Although I can't say for certain if it's fear, or anger, or sadness."

Hearing the magician's words, Lua slowly got to her feet.

"Oi, Lua. Where're you goin'?"

"Just a while... I'll be back soon..."

As Lua stepped towards the door, the grey magician tossed out some final words to her in a lifeless voice.

"Once you've accomplished what you've set out to do, perhaps you could consider rejoining us dead men once more... No, forget it. I am merely somewhat sad to see that someone like myself might disappear from before my eyes."

With the doctor's words making less than a vague impression in her mind, Lua set out to find Ladd. The doctor's words were not at all encouraging--in fact, it felt as though they were driving her further and further into unease. All this, when the man had done nothing but speak of his own past. Why were his words haunting her so? It was as if he was the reaper himself.

Lua's intuitive feeling that Ladd was the strongest man in the world had not been incorrect. However, this was only more reason for her to trust her intuition again. Ladd must not fight. He must not cross him. He must not meet the red monster, who would only bring misfortune upon him.

Lua quietly ran through the train, the glint in the red man's eyes still lingering in her thoughts.

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The sudden intervention of a third party rendered Ladd and Chane immobile. It was difficult to discern the newcomer's expression under the still-faint light of dawn, but one thing was clear. He was wearing clothes covered in red. Ladd's clothing was simply 'speckled with red' in comparison to the newcomer's 'drenched'.

Ladd was first to break the long silence.

"Who the hell are you?"

Unusually for Ladd, his tone was filled with a surprising degree of caution. His body was slowly turning to face the red man.

"Don't mind me."

The red man replied simply. But there was one thing about this man that was certain in Ladd's mind.

'No doubt about it. This is the bastard who killed Dune.'

Ladd's certainty stemmed from the newcomer's clothing. Although it was completely dyed in red, the design was unmistakably that of a Flying Pussyfoot conductor. The fact that the man was soaked head to toe in blood meant that he had to kill someone rather messily. These factors enforced Ladd's suspicions about the identity of his friend's killer.

He had no idea about the identity of this conductor, but it was obvious that the man in red was not a man who lived on the straight-and-narrow.

And from the lips of this supposed ne'er-do-well came words that were equally freakish.

"You can think of me as the talking air."

"That so?"

Ladd decided to counter the newcomer's pride with self-confidence of his own. But his thirst for the blood of the man who killed his friend had already reached its zenith.

Naturally, he was going to take revenge. He took out a bloodstained throwing knife from his suit pocket and lobbed it at the red man without a second's hesitation. The blood-dulled silver knife made its way directly towards the red man's throat.

"If you're the air, then don't bother talkin'!"

"That's not very nice of ya."

The red man--Claire--smiled, easily snatching the knife out of the air.

There was a moment of silence.

"Hold on, buddy. Didn'tcha just do something freaking nuts?"

"Can't say I did. See? I even caught it by the handle so I wouldn't get hurt. Perfectly sane."

Claire chuckled, provoking Ladd.

Ladd's bloodlust levels went through the roof and reached stratospheric levels--what his opponent did didn't matter.

'This bastard's eyes are ticking me off. They're almost scary to look at--anyone who wasn't me woulda pissed his pants by now. But I don't care about any of that! This johnny-come-lately is infuriating! It was like he didn't care when he blocked the doll's knives or when he caught the knife I lobbed at 'im. There's nothing I hate more in this world than people like this shit. He's like one of 'em wannabe pacifists who go on about stuff about war they hear of the papers or radio. Like some mafia don who sends off his flunkies to do the dirty work and takes all the dough for himself. Just like that bastard who was acting like a little brat... no, this son of a bitch is even worse!'

Ladd opened his eyes wide as he began to charge towards Claire.

He lowered his stance, ran right into Claire's face, and tried to land a direct hit.

But the moment Ladd expected to feel the impact of the first hit, Claire evaded the attack at a normally unthinkable angle.

"The hell?"

Claire's figure suddenly grew distant from Ladd. He had opened his arms wide and leaned backwards--no, fell. The roof of the train disappeared from underneath his feet.

Ladd initially thought that his opponent had thrown himself onto the tracks. With nothing to support him, Claire obviously disappeared over the edge of the roof.

But that thought lasted but a moment as his upper body immediately leapt up from the side of the train.

Claire had gripped the edge of the roof of the train with his legs as he lay against the wall of the car upside-down. He had come back up by propelling himself against one of the ornamentations on the wall.

Like a Jack-in-the-box, Claire returned to standing upright. He used that same momentum to land a headbutt on Ladd's forehead.

Ladd staggered backwards without intending to, and quickly made to counterattack.

But he suddenly saw a glint of metal out of the corner of his eye and hurriedly knelt on the spot. Not a moment later, a knife whipped overhead, taking with it several strands of his hair.

"What was that for, you shit?!"

Ladd took several steps backwards, glaring at his attacker--Chane. She had ignored the red shadow outright and was concentrating solely on taking Ladd's life.

But her concentration was all too simply broken by Claire's laid-back yet overwhelmingly powerful voice.

"Your name's Chane, right? Is the stuff this guy just said all true?" He asked quietly, showing no one emotion in particular. "So, what I'm tryin' to ask is, were you against the whole plan from the start? And about that stuff about you not really wanting to kill people, and about how that Huey guy doesn't want to, either. Was it all true?"

Chane hesitated at the red shadow's sudden questions, unsure of whether or not she should answer. Although she could have just as easily ignored him, it felt as though she was denying herself and Huey both to do such a thing. Chane nodded clearly.

"I see. Good to hear. So how about I help you out a bit?"

"Huh?" Ladd asked absentmindedly at the sudden proposal. Chane blinked.

"Hold up, you red bastard! The hell's wrong with you?! Weren't you the one who was goin' around picking off my buddies *and* the black suits?!"

"You got a problem with that, pal?"

Rather understandably, Ladd complained. "The shit?! So why're you suddenly getting all buddy-buddy with little-miss-dollface here?! After doin' in my friends, to boot!"

"Hm? But from what I just got, the lady here comes off lookin' like a pretty nice dame." Claire replied simply.

Even Ladd had no words to counter this.

"I heard you shouting a while ago. She's doing this 'cause she's got no other choice, or she can't save someone she cares about. I can sympathize with her pretty easily, unlike a certain nut with a couple dozen screws loose."

Ladd's outrage finally came to a boil.

"Shut your face, you freak. You sayin' you actually *sympathize* with this broad?! What're you playing at? Is your brain *expired*?! Hah! I thought you were a pretty tough bastard, but this is just a disappointment! You're just some disgusting hypocrite! I bet you're one of those guys who'd let a kid on the battlefield live even if he tried to kill you with a gun! Is that what you're trying to say, you son of a bitch?!"

Ladd's words and tone came to a climactic point. But Claire didn't even bat an eye.

"So what if I'd let him live?"

"What?"

"Course, I'd probably make an exception for a *really* bratty kid, but..." Claire spoke matter-of-factly, despite saying things that could not be further removed from normalcy. "I can afford to be sympathetic because I have confidence in my own abilities. If this lady here--Chane--were to swing her knife at me, I could catch it without breaking a sweat. And if those kids fired their machine guns at me while I was busy sympathizing with them, I'd dodge 'em all. Though I guess they might get angry and tell me to stop pitying 'em, but that's not my problem." Claire said proudly, arms wide open and facing Ladd. "I don't believe in 'Kill or be killed'. I don't need it--after all, I'm never gonna be killed! Remember..." He paused dramatically, then twisted up the corners of his mouth and continued. "Things like sympathy and compassion are privileges only the strong are allowed to possess. And I... am strong."

This man infuriated Ladd to the point that Ladd himself was not aware that he was capable of so much bloodlust. His good mood had already plummeted to its lowest point. Ladd squeezed out every drop of his outrage into his voice as he hissed at the red shadow.

"So what are you...? You tellin' me you're one of those bastards who think they're never gonna die?"

Claire's answer was completely in line with the incredulity of the situation.

"Course. After all, the world is mine."

Ladd and Chane were struck dumb by Claire's words, but he continued nonetheless.

"This world is mine. I think this world might even be a long dream I'm having. Don't ya think? Maybe you're all just figments of my imagination, since I can't prove for certain that you exist. In other words, this world revolves around *me*. Whatever I think I can do, I'll be able to do. And once I grow old enough to die, I'll find some sort of immortality potion. Or maybe I'll just wake up from *this* dream and end up in another one. In other words, I am never going to die."

"The hell? What makes you so sure 'bout that, genius?"

"I'm not a very creative guy. I honestly can't imagine what it's going to be like once I die, see? I just can't figure out this thing called 'oblivion'. People say after death is eternal darkness, but oblivion means you can't even feel the dark, am I right? I can't even picture that. I can't imagine a world without me. In other words, there is no such thing as complete oblivion. But everyone other than me disappears completely once they die. In other words, I am the only one in this world who will never fade away, meaning that the world is completely mine. Everyone else is just part of this dream I'm living in."

Ladd didn't even feel like snapping back at this point. His opponent was not right in the head--he was sure of it.

"To put it simply, I can do anything I believe I can, and therefore nothing is impossible for me."

Claire's simple statement began to draw Ladd's emotions back into full swing. Ladd laughed guffawed.

"Now I get it. So that's why you're trying to help the broad here? Someone like you're just gonna get in her way. What do you say, dollface?" He asked Chane, but she merely looked at Claire in silence.

Claire sighed quietly.

"There's another reason I'm siding with the lady. After all, I don't have any reason to kill her so long as she agrees to not hurt the passengers, but you... you white suits are different. I am going to take revenge for Tony's death."

"Tony'...?"

Ladd was lost for a moment, but he quickly found himself again. 'Tony' was the name of the conductor that Dune offered to steal the uniform. Ladd remembered seeing the name on the uniform's nametag.

"Hey, tough guy. Ain't ya going back on what you said just now? If this Tony guy's just a dream of yours, then what's it to you what happens to him?!"

"I don't see anything wrong with feeling grateful to a friend, even if he's a figment of my imagination. And I plan to destroy the little nightmares that break my dreams piece by piece."

"You think gettin' on my case about every goddamned word I say is gonna help you win? Why don'tcha just take a short walk off a long cliff?! You killed off my friend Dune just 'cause you got your feelings hurt when some ghost in your head got whacked?!"

Ladd, having lost any semblance of certainty in himself, charged at the red monster like a madman, jumping and attacking at a rate that no amateur would be able to catch with his eyes.

"Whoa there, *you're* the ones who killed Tony first." Claire pointed out, evading each strike in normally unthinkable ways.

"The shit?!"

Shock spread over Ladd's face. Claire had thrown himself towards Ladd in counter to Ladd's bullet-speed hits. Claire launched himself off the roof of the train, flew through the air, took hold of Ladd's arms, and balanced himself upside-down atop Ladd.

Ladd struggled to maintain his footing, and Claire used this opportunity to land behind Ladd's back.

"Goddamn it!"

Ladd tried to punch Claire's face in just as he turned around, but with a single, explosive noise, part of Ladd's right ear was blown off.

"?!"

Ladd could not even let out a cry of pain. Claire entered his line of sight, holding a handgun. The barrel was pointed at Ladd's forehead.

"How's that?" Claire did not even wait for Ladd to respond. "Now, I'm not *quite* so confident in hand-to-hand that I'd say I'm best as fighting barehanded. After all, knives are better than fists, and guns are better than knives. Though I guess it could depend on the situation, too."

As Claire often used firearms as part of his job description, he considered himself above average at worst in his skill with guns. In other words, he felt that he had no use for the gun all this time, even though he had been armed with it.

"Surprised? Now, I could just finish you off here and now, but where's the sport in that? I'm pretty sure I could take you with my bare hands." For some reason, Claire put the handgun back into his pocket. "I shot your ear off on purpose. Humiliated?"

Ladd had no idea what Claire was up to, but he certainly was feeling humiliated.

"I want you to suffer and die like a dog. That's my revenge for Tony--no, that's my revenge for *me*, and *my world* that has lost Tony."

There could be no greater humiliation. Ladd's desire to kill this man did not stem from his base urges or calculations--he just wanted to murder this man. He didn't care about getting pleasure or profit, as long as he could send this twisted tyrant into oblivion.

The thought gave way to laughter.

"Haha... Heeheehaha...! So tell me, Mr. Oh-So-Mighty-Ruler-of-the-World. How're you planning to kill me? I'll show you that the world doesn't actually work the way you think it does! I'll punch in your goddamn arrogant trap and show you what oblivion really means!"

Claire fell into thought for a moment, then glanced over towards the coupling. He smirked, then spoke to Ladd.



"Now before you go sending me to oblivion, there's something I wanna ask you about. The doll in the white dress--is she your girl?"

The sudden question took Ladd off his guard, but he grimaced and answered.

"She's my fiancee, you bastard. Now hold on just a damn minute! Whaddaya want with my girl?!"

"Nah, I was just wondering how a piece of trash like you could even find a girl of your own."

"What, is a mass murderer not allowed to fall in love like a regular person?"

Although Ladd and Lua's relationship was far from what was normally called 'regular', Ladd did not hesitate to call it so. And even in the midst of such a topic of conversation, Ladd's bloodlust was steadily growing worse and worse. It looked as though he could even overtake Claire at some point. Still, Claire did not even blink as he answered Ladd's question.

"I get it. Now I know for certain what's gonna happen to you."

The smug grin on Claire's face was full of a kind of brutality that anyone who knew him as the conductor would be utterly unable to recognize. There was pure evil written on his lips.

"You're going to throw yourself off this train." He said, lightly looking aside. Ladd unconsciously followed his gaze.

When his eyes had completed their journey, Ladd caught sight of a woman's upper body at the coupling rooftop. His expression did a 180 as he looked upon the woman in white--the woman Ladd knew well and loved above all--the woman he wanted to kill over everything else.

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Back in the Second Class cabin, the grey magician continued to treat Jack.

The man in white assisted him bit by bit, asking him questions.

"Hey, what're those books in your bag? I can't even read that cover--some sorta magic book?"

It seemed that the white suit still considered the doctor to be a magician.

"It's a medical text. Of course, I suppose it's not too far removed from a book of magics in that sense. And it's only natural you can't read it--it's written in German."

Though it sounded as though the doctor was making light of his intelligence, the white suit continued to question him.

"So I get that you're dressed like that to cover your scars. But why grey? Ain't doctors supposed to wear white?"

"White tends to reflect light too much, so it's not a good choice for surgical operations. But I suppose it's mostly because I have a personal preference for grey. It's the best colour for blending into the world--rather, it's the best colour for going into hiding from the world."

"Come to think of it, I think Lua said something like that a while back. The girl who just left, I mean."

Slowly and quietly, the grey magician began to tell the white suit about what he thought of Lua.

"That girl and I have something in common--we both wish to die. But there's one fundamental difference between us. I often saw men with eyes like hers, back on the battlefield--the eyes of those who wish to die themselves, but have someone they care for greatly. Those eyes belong to people that can *help* other. Compared to me, a man who treats people out of nothing but a sense of duty... she is someone many times more valuable to the world."

The white suit did not understand what the magician was trying to say, but he still gave a reply.

"Hey now, if a doctor like you says you're worthless, what does that make us? Though I guess we really are a bunch of worthless idiots." He mumbled.

'Damn. Why did I even join this stupid hijacking plot in the first place? If Ladd really loves Lua, he shouldn't have dragged her into this.' He thought, a little too late.

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Lua had finally found Ladd as she climbed up onto the roof from the coupling. But Ladd was already facing down the red monster.

'I finally found him. I have to hurry. I have to tell him. Before the red monster kills him. To get away from this train--at least one step further from that monster. We have to escape--no, I have to at least make sure Ladd gets away.'

Ladd was someone essential to Lua. It wasn't only so because he was pledged to kill her--even discounting this fact, Lua could not imagine a world without Ladd. Life and death were as one, and through the act of killing her Ladd would find joy in his life. For Lua, who had nursed fantasies of this one-way cycle all this time, Ladd's death would mean the destruction of her world. She was a fanatical believer and martyr of her own world, in a somewhat different sense from Claire--after all, her world was part of the larger whole of Ladd.

"LUA! I told you to stay put in the cabin, stupid!"

Cold sweat ran down Ladd's face.

'Shit! Fuck! Why the hell did that monster have to be closer to her?! Goddamn it!'

Claire read Ladd's expression instantly. He took from his pocket something he had been pondering about for some time, and began to look around the train's surroundings with a look of amusement. The object he took out looked at first glance like a simple rope, but each end was tied in a loop--it was like a double-ended lasso.

"Now, like I told you, you're going to throw yourself off this train."

"Lua! Get away from there!"

"...! ...!"

Lua was desperately shouting something at him, but Ladd couldn't hear her clearly. With a *tch*, he charged towards the red monster.

Although Ladd was charging at him like a rampaging bull, the red shadow did not even flinch, let alone dodge. He was concentrating on uncoiling the long length of rope in his hands. This was the perfect opportunity--Ladd didn't care if the world really revolved around the him, because he was going to kill Claire and send the world crashing with him.

Just one step and he would be within punching range. It was only then that Lua's voice came into hearing distance.

"No, Ladd! You can't fight him! Please! You have to get away before he kills--"

'You're too late, Lua. Forget about me and just get away from here, you idiot.'

Lua's intuition--or rather, insight--was often accurate. Her great foresight had saved Ladd many times in the past, so Ladd trusted her insight more than he trusted his own intuition.

But that didn't matter now. It was obvious to all that the red monster was made of pure danger. Ladd knew that he might die fighting him.

'Who the hell gives a shit?! I'm gonna kill this bastard. I'm gonna murder him, whether he kills me back or not!'

The moment Ladd's fist reached him, the shadow grinned and threw the rope. One end flew towards Lua's neck, and the other end flew off the side of the train... and was quickly caught on part of the fast-moving scenery around them. It was a hooked pillar at the side of the rails, used to collect mail. Claire had been looking at his surroundings in order to catch this one moment.

The rope twisted and writhed between the two loops like an uncoiling serpent. As each end was pulled away from the other, the rope grew taut.

"You crazy bastard!"

Ladd let his fist slide by the red monster at the last moment.

If he hit the monster, it would be too late.

He had to run for her now, or it would be too late.

He had to catch Lua now, or it would be too late.

Ladd's right hand took hold of the bottom of the looped rope, and his left hand steadfastly held on to Lua.

The next moment, the rope ran out, sending Ladd and Lua flying into the air. Ladd's right hand was assaulted by incredible friction and force, but he could not let go now. The second he succumbed to the pain was the second that Lua would be strangled like a helpless bird, if her neck didn't dislocate first. The skin off his hand was peeling away rapidly, but Ladd did not let go.

In the force of the movement Ladd saw his left ring finger flying off. Even as they fell he desperately tried to pull the ropes off Lua's neck, but it was no use. The knot was too difficult.

'Damn it. Some engagement ring I'll need after this.' Ladd thought, as his right hand, glistening with his own blood, began slipping. The rope instantly grew taut and threatened to tighten its coil around Lua's neck.



Ladd let out a silent scream. At that very moment, the loop around her neck simply came undone.

'Huh?'

The knot around her neck had been tied so that a strong pull would undo it instantly. It was a simple knot used in magic tricks that even a child could do. At that moment, Ladd realized that he had fallen into a trap.

"BASTAAAAAARD!"

Ladd widened his eyes enough for his eyeballs to pop out, but the ship had already sailed. Because he had taken hold of the rope, Ladd and Lua both were now being thrown off the train.

They flew through the air in each other's arms, slowly falling to the ground as the rope came undone. Although they were in freefall, the impact of the landing would not leave them unscathed.

Lua struggled to get under Ladd, in order to try and protect him from the incoming impact.

'Stop acting like someone else, Lua. Don't look at me with eyes so full of life. You're making me want to kill you now, dammit.' Ladd thought, his consciousness growing dimmer by the second.

The moment before he fell completely into darkness Ladd caught sight of something closing in on them over Lua's shoulder.

It was one of the countless pillars standing along the railroad, different from the one that the rope had been tied to. It was obvious that, at this rate, Lua's shoulder would directly hit the pillar.

'So you sayin' this is a part of your you-centred world, you damn conductor? Then I'll show you... I'll show you that the world doesn't work the way you think it does!'

Ladd instantly opened his nearly-closed eyes. Any strength he had left to scream he put into his fist. He passionately and silently, without even getting into a proper stance, punched out with a straight left jab--towards the pillar closing in over Lua's shoulder.

It didn't matter to him that he was missing his ring finger. This tightly clenched fist was drawn into the pillar.

And there was a powerful impact.

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Watching all of this, the red shadow quietly narrowed his eyes and spoke to Chane, standing beside him.

"Can't say about the guy, but the girl seems to be fine. Looks like he managed to save her. I thought he was just another small fry, but he was something else, don'tcha think?"

Chane could not answer. She did not understand the man standing before her. He was too eerie to turn against, but he didn't seem at all like any sort of ally. Chane drew a breath. Her heart told her over and over again that fighting this man would result in her death.

"So..."

The man looked at her.

"I said that I'd kill whichever one of you survived, but I can't tell if the guy's dead or alive. What do you think I should do?"

Claire looked directly into Chane's eyes, as though all knowledge in the world belonged to him. The terrible light in his eyes that drew in all his surroundings made Chane feel as though she would be drawn into them herself.

"Oh, just to let you know, don't think too badly of me about that. If he didn't go to save her, the rope woulda come undone, just like that. No, seriously."

Claire began to wonder what he would do next, throwing out a completely irrelevant topic of conversation.

Now that the leader of Tony's killers--the white suits--was gone, it was time to take care of the black suits. First, he would have to do something about the young woman here.

"So that Huey guy he was talking about earlier.. He someone special to you?"

It was an unexpected question, but Chane nodded.

"Is he your boyfriend?"

A shake of the head.

"Is he family?"

A nod.

"He's your father, am I right?"

A nod.

"So is this Huey guy your boss?"

A nod.

"So what do you wanna do now? Finish things off against me, or.."

Claire was about to say 'run away', but he suddenly said something else.

"Or do you want me to kill the guy who wants to kill your family--that white suit back there?"

Chane's eyes widened.

"Since I told the guy I'd be teaming up with ya, I'd feel kinda iffy about killing you or ignoring you. I'm a freelance assassin. You can hire me for a job right here, or you can fight me. Just to add to that, if you don't kill me now, I might end up getting a hit request for Huey. You never know!"

Chane's determination wavered. She did not understand this man at all. Could she trust him? All she was sure of was the fact that he was stronger than anyone.

How much did he know? How long had he been listening to the white suit's ramblings?

But Claire's second question rocked her will even further.

"Oh, also... is it true that Huey is an immortal?"

"!"

'So he's also after immortality after all.'

Why did I hesitate? I'd made up my mind a long time ago. I was the only one who had protected my father all this time, and it will continue to be this way.

I must not trust others. They are, in the end, nothing but outsiders.

I must kill my enemies. I must kill only my enemies. Father needs only me, no one else. I will not let anyone touch him. It does not matter how strong or dangerous they are.

After all, in the end, I am his only family...'

Chane's eyes began to give off a cold glint.

Claire must have noticed that something was amiss. He tilted his head.

"What's with the scary face? Don't tell me... you think I'm gonna threaten Huey to get at the secret of immortality?"

He hit the nail on the head. The icy look in Chane's eyes wavered. Even as she tried to suppress her faltering emotions, she ended up honestly nodding in response.

Claire grinned and excitedly tossed out another question.

"He's the only family you've got, isn't he?"

It was the same question from before, but Chane decided to answer honestly. She determined that, for now, it would be best to try and catch this man off guard.

"I get it. So you think that, as family, you're the only one you can trust to protect Huey... And that's why you can't trust me, am I right?"

That was not necessarily the reason she didn't trust others, but Claire wasn't incorrect, either. Chane nodded again.

"But in the end, you want to protect Huey, no matter what?"

Chane didn't need to give this question any thought. But Claire's next words left her with nothing but a blank.

"So I just had an idea. If I marry you, then I'll be Huey's son-in-law. Then, as a member of the family, wouldn't I be able to solve all your problems?"

For a moment, Chane could not comprehend what Claire was saying. The more she thought the more her mind filled with questions and shock.

Claire did not even wait for Chane to reply as he continued.

"So here we have three choices. You can fight me here and now, or you can hire me and make me your ally with a bit of suspicion, or you could marry me and we can protect Huey together. You got all that?"

'Not a word. What is this man thinking?'

She could not make sense of him. His skills and personality were all completely different from any human being Chane had met before--or perhaps he wasn't human to begin with.

"I mean, I could probably narrow down the choices to fighting you or getting married, but that just sounds like a threat. Nothing an upstanding man should be saying to a lady. If I did, Keith'd cut me outta the family for good."

Chane staggered to her feet, but she was at a loss. She just blankly listened to what Claire had to say.

"Oh, or maybe you're not interested in a loveless marriage? That's not a problem--I love you. And if you're still not keen on that, I don't mind becoming Huey's adoptive son. Then I guess we'd be siblings. Dunno how old you are, so wonder who'd be the older sibling?"

Even as she thought to herself that that wasn't even the biggest problem, Chane hesitated in thinking about how to respond to his man. Right now, her greatest priority was to rescue Huey. And this man was partially in her way. But she probably--no, definitely--would not be able to defeat him.

Just before Chane's brain underwent a meltdown, Claire pushed his face towards hers.

"You can take the proposal to be a joke if you want. But I'll say this. My intentions towards you are completely serious."

He looked straight into Chane's eyes. It was as if there were dark holes where his eyes should have been, and a demon was lying in wait inside, beckoning towards Chane's soul.

A strange sensation ran down Chane's spine, but she could do little but continue to listen to Claire.

"Unlike your friends back there, I will never betray you."

He quietly, quietly continued.

"I have no need to betray anyone. The strong never turn against their friends, because there's no point to betraying others. And I am strong. Do you understand?"

Even amidst the howling of the wind and the wheels of the train, Claire's words echoed through Chane very clearly.

"I will never do as you fear and take Huey's secrets of immortality. If he offered it to me, sure. But I will never take it by force."

And he repeated himself again.

"Immortality doesn't matter to me, because I am never going to die. It's because I believe in myself. So I'm asking you to believe in me, too."

His eyes were still dark and ferocious as before, but his lips seemed to be twisted into a vague smile.



"I am a man who will never die."

After listening to Claire for some time, Chane seemed to have come to a conclusion.

But just as she made to move, a sharp pain stopped her in her tracks. A dark bullet hole appeared in her shoulder as she stumbled.

"Hm?"

At the same time, Claire heard the sound of a gunshot.

'A sniper, huh? Interesting.'

He checked to make sure that Chane's wound was not serious, and turned back towards the direction from which the shot came.

It was a close enough distance that Claire could 'see' properly. Once he was sure of this, Claire decided to take care of the sniper first.

"There's a river coming up just ahead. If you don't wanna get caught by the cops, you should jump off the train there. You can carve your answer for me on the rooftop. After all, if you stay here, the black suits are just gonna kill you, right? There's no reason for you to hold your ground."

Claire then took interest in the skills of the sniper in the distance. In his heart Claire believed that he could see. Claire's pride as the centre of the world concentrated his senses into his eyes. Claire then watched Spike's work with the gun. A conductor naturally needed very good eyesight. And whether or not it was an official job, making accurate gunshots needed perfect vision. Claire had to labour meticulously in order to achieve this level of skill, but even then people ended it with the word 'talent'.

"You and I have similar eyes. You don't know where you should release your emotions, so you pile it all up inside yourself."

He laughed abashedly.

"The only thing in this world I can't do anything about is this idiot called 'me'."

This was why Claire had turned all of the bloodlust borne of tragedies and hypocrisies towards himself. He had sealed the bloodlust emanating from his eyes within himself throughout the course of his life.

"You managed to nick my ear. Even though it was just a coincidence, you left proof of your existence to me, the centre of the world. So I want you to join me on the side of the dreamer... on the side of the ruler of the world. I'll welcome you with open arms."

He fingered the injury inflicted upon him through the wall, and prepared to sprint at full speed towards the front of the train.

"You can throw the knife at me if you want to, but you won't hit me."

With this, the man began to dart across the rooftop, soon disappearing over the side of the train.

Chane watched the tiny silhouette advance, evading Spike's bullets. She thought for some time, then nodded determinedly.

She took out a small knife she had hidden on her leg and began to carve words onto the roof of the train--her reply to the red monster.

Once the train reached the river, Chane quietly threw herself into the water.

<=>

Jacuzzi and his friends had boarded the train with the intent to steal the secret cargo of explosives Czes had stowed on the train.

Of them, Donny the Mexican giant, upon confirming that the train had reached the river, began to throw the boxes of explosives into the water. The river was deep, but the boxes were tightly sealed and cushioned. They wouldn't have gone after this cargo in the first place if it was that easy to detonate accidentally. The simple gang made their simple conclusions and had the explosives simply flung into the river.

Donny had gone through almost all of the cargo when he saw something bizarre. He thought for a moment that he saw a woman in a black dress jump from the rooftop, right above the freight door.

"Uh... girl? No. Probably mistake."

Donny did not dwell on the matter too much, continuing to focus his efforts on throwing out the crates.

<=>

With Rachel's assistance, the train robbers Nice and Nick had managed to escape the black suits' custody. The employees in the locomotive only realized that something was amiss in the train when Nice began to set off warning explosions in First Class.

"Hey... What was that explosion just now?!"

"The train's shaking...!"

Manning the locomotive as engineers was a pair of elderly brothers. Their ears were too weak to hear the gunshots so far, but Nice's explosions were loud enough to reach them.

Another series of explosions.

"Go check it out!"

"Me? Are you kidding?!"

The younger of the brothers was just about to step out when they heard something from outside the door.

"Hey old-timers. It's me."

It was the voice of the young conductor. Claire was using a face completely different from when he had been facing Ladd--his eyes and tone were gentle and friendly.

"What? Is that you, Claire? You came all the way over the tender?"

"What are you doing here? And what were all those explosions just now? Should we stop the train?"

The explosions continued in the background.

"No, guys. It's the opposite. You *can't stop the train.*"

"What? What's this all about?"

After dropping Spike, Claire had come to check out the engine room out of a nagging worry, only to find the engineers in this state. He thanked himself for this stroke of good fortune.

The sheer volume of the sound of explosions would probably override any signals he sent from the conductor's compartment. The engineers would have probably ended up stopping the train. So Claire decided, with the door as a wall between them, to put on a little show.

"There's train robbers coming after us! They're shooting at us from on horseback!"

"What?!"

"Where?"

"They're trying to lay low! We can't see 'em that well from here, but they probably won't be able to cross the river up ahead. Don't worry, just keep the train going until we cross the bridge, at least."

This still did not account for the explosions, but Claire decided to at least make sure everything was running smoothly. He could not let the train stop here.

"All right, my boy! We'll speed up as much as we can! Leave it to us!"

"What about you, Claire? What are you going to do?"

"The passengers are fine, so I'm gonna go direct them somewhere safer."

"Take care, you hear?"

"Thank you, sir."

Claire left the locomotive without showing his face once to the engineers. Truth be told, he wanted to tell them 'Thank you for everything', but that was not an option at this point. He said a silent goodbye to the two men he might never see again.

'I might be the centre of the world, but even I have people I can't look in the face. Damn. If I'm late for New York, I'm never gonna be able to face the Gandors.'

So the train continued moving.

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Isaac and Miria seemed to have gotten lost along the way. They found themselves wandering through Third class.

"Hm... There aren't any white suits around, and neither is the Rail Tracer."

"It's a disappearance! Just like a mystery novel!"

The duo had come down the hallway just as Jacuzzi was interrogating one of the black suits and Ladd was torturing another, so they had never run into any of the black suits along the way.

"Say, Isaac? Shouldn't we check the cargo holds?"

"Not to worry, Miria. The Rail Tracer begins his feast from the back of the train. In other words, he won't be further back than the cargo hold, which is where we found the corpses!"

"But, but, why did we search the conductor's cabin?"

"Hahaha! That's because criminal always returns to the scene of the crime, Miria!"

"Wow! You're so smart, Isaac! Just like Sherlock Holmes!"

They stepped into the Third Class car, laying out one non sequitur after another.

They carefully searched each cabin, untying the people in the rooms along the way.

"Thank you! Do you know what's happening right now?"

The people they rescued all asked the same questions, so Isaac always gave them the same answer.

"There's a monster going around eating people in the middle of a shootout."

The passengers all got very confused looks on their faces, but no one tried to leave their cabins.

Isaac got the feeling he knew why the passengers were loath to leave. The passengers told them that, for some time, they heard the terrible screaming of a child from a nearby cabin. Then they heard something like a window shattering, at which point the screaming stopped. After this, the passengers could not bring themselves to blindly step out of their rooms, whether the enemy was a monster, the black suits, or a gang of robbers.

"But what if it's Mary and Czes?" Miria asked nervously.

As they continued going down Third Class, Isaac and Miria noticed that the next door beside them was wide open.

Could the monster be inside? They held their breaths, swallowed, and dramatically tiptoed towards the door.

They peeked into the cabin and saw a pair of black suits, looking out the window and whispering something to among themselves. Isaac and Miria also began to whisper to each other.

"Aha! Those two must be the scoundrels who hurt the innocent child!"

"Scoundrels and villains!"

"As a gunman, I cannot let them get away unpunished! Right, Miria?"

"You're an amazing outlaw, Isaac!"

During a certain incident about a year ago, the duo had KO'd a trio of men armed with machine guns. Isaac and Miria's simple mindsets had allowed them to rather easily bypass the fear of firearms.

Of course, their method of victory last year had been to run over their foes with a car.

"I will challenge them to a duel!"

"No, Isaac! You're going to be killed!"

This time, even Miria tried to stop him. Unfortunately, Isaac's determination was much too resolute.

"Miria, there are some things in life that a man must do, even knowing that he will die. That's the way of the Samurai!"

"I-Isaac! Then I'm going to challenge them, too!"

"How'd anyone even get down there?"

"You'd have to walk on the outside of the train..."

The two black suits looked down upon Czes's corpse as they pondered the hows and whys. Suddenly, something hit them on the backs of their heads.

"What the- guh... koff... ugh... koff... argh..."

They ended up inhaling the white powder that had spread all around them. It was a special formula that Isaac and Miria always used during their heists, made with a combination of lime and black pepper. As this was supposed to be a duel, they had put the mixture into pouches and thrown it at their opponents.

The black suits had taken a direct hit and inhaled a great deal of the powder. They were blinded, unable to even breathe. They didn't have time to think about firing their guns--right now they needed their hands to cover their faces. Though their brains told them otherwise, the men could not take the pain and dropped their weapons.

The air blowing in through the window cleared away the lime, finally bringing the men relief. And greeting their returning vision was the sight of two outlaws, holding their machine guns.

"We officially challenge you two to a duel!"

"We start as soon as the coin drops!"

The outlaws, armed with machine guns, challenged the unarmed men.

"Wait, Miria! We don't have a single coin on us!"

"Oh no! You're right, Isaac! Um, do you by any chance have a coin on you?" Miria asked the black suits, but Isaac hurriedly stopped her.

"No, Miria! We can't ask to use their coin! After all, if we win the duel, it means we're going to be running off with borrowed money! No upstanding gunman should do something like that!"

"You're right, Isaac! Then I guess we'll have to use something else as a signal."

"I got it! How about we use the sound of machine gun fire?"

"Amazing!"

The black suits realized that the duo really was as foolish as they appeared and began to beg for their lives with tears in their eyes.

Having tied up the black suits and left them in the cabin next door, Isaac and Miria returned to this cabin.

"So, where is that child?"

"They were whispering beside the window before..."

"I see! So they hung the child upside-"

"That's terrible!"

The duo rushed to the window, and was soon lost for words. Hanging outside was their friend-- or rather, the boy they had met not too long ago and one-sidedly deemed a friend. The little corpse tied up by the wheels was that of Czeslaw Meyer, his right arm and legs missing.

<=>

'Damn it. I guess you never know when something's going to help you out. I can't believe my contingency plans for getting arrested by cops or getting caught by the mafia helped me out on a train, of all places.'

Rachel looked at the coarse tips of her fingernails, glad for the good fortune that kept her alive. She climbed down into the coupling between Second and Third Class and looked up into the sky from between the wheels.

Having been caught by the black suits, Rachel cut herself free while the guards left them unwatched, and escaped through the window into the underside of the train. She had also freed the bespectacled eyepatch woman and her friend. Were they still all right? Unfortunately, Rachel currently could not act on her worries.

"Ugh..."

Pain shot through her leg from the wound she sustained as she rescued Mrs. Beriam and Mary. The bullet had grazed her thigh, hindering her ability to move freely. She had stopped the bleeding and performed basic treatment, but the unbearable pain continued to eat away at her.

As long as she couldn't have it treated by a doctor, it would be best for Rachel to stay put. She took a deep breath, then opened the coupling door and stepping into the Third Class car. She had to find a safe room where she could rest.

It was with unwelcome surprise that the voice suddenly called out to her from behind.

"D, don't move, you lowlife!"

Rachel turned around and found herself facing a familiar face.

It was the porcine-faced, moustached man from the dining car--a man who, to Rachel, was practically a mortal enemy.

Annoyingly enough, the moustached pig had a rifle in his hands.

"Wh, what...? A woman?"

There was a look of scorn in the man's eyes, but he did not point the rifle at Rachel.

Though Rachel had no way of knowing this, the rifle originally belonged to the white suits--specifically, the sicko who had been killed by Chane. The moustached man had procured this gun from the corpse of the white suit lying in front of the broom closet. Chane wasn't the type to go around disarming corpses, leaving the weapon to go into the hands of the moustached pig.

"Hmph! You must be one of the white suits, am I right?! I know everything! Anyone who can walk around this train with a straight face is one of those scoundrels!" The man slowly approached Rachel, his words not quite inaccurate.

After being kicked out of the dining car, the man had wandered in hopeless fear. His sanity had just about reached its breaking point when he happened to get his hands on the rifle. Though his actual personality contributed to the problem, the man began to be consumed by a twisted idea--he became obsessed with the idea of killing the 'someone' who was trying to kill him. He had hidden himself in this car for some time, seeking out someone even he could kill with ease. He ignored the terrifying man in white and the brown giant, and the woman in white ran off before he could even speak to her.

The man had finally found the sacrifice for his peace of mind. Even if he knew that Rachel was not one of the white suits, he could not just lower his gun so easily at this point.

"I *know*. I've never been wrong. My success thus far was built on my certainty. You think I'm going to let a piece of garbage like you destroy all that?!"

Rachel sadly looked into the air.

'Why now? I finally have a good reason to beat this guy to a pulp, but he's got a gun and all I have is an injured leg.'

Though common sense dictated that she should be doing the opposite in this situation, Rachel could not bring herself to do anything but irritate the man further.

"You've 'never been wrong'? Then you're saying that the accident back then wasn't one of your mistakes?"

"...?"

"You're saying that the train accident ten years ago was all part of some plan of yours? You ignored all the engineers' advice, but when the accident happened, you put the blame on *them*! You're saying you were *right* to do that? You honestly think so?!"

The colour of madness in the man's eyes began thinning, but growing more prominent was the colour of calculated bloodlust.

"How do you know about that, you piece of shit? Who the hell are you?"

Normally, the man could dismiss Rachel's words as the desperate, final struggles of a loser. After all, one mouth speaking the truth was not enough to make everything known to the world at large. But at this point in time, where no one was in their right state of mind, Rachel's revelation could not have sounded more dangerous.

"Who would have known that someone'd finally bring up our--my--dirty secrets? I don't know who you are, but you really *are* with the white suits, aren't you? Yes, I suppose that will do."

The barrel of the rifle moved towards Rachel's forehead.

But even in this desperate situation, a bitter smile crept up on Rachel's face.

"I guess this must be my punishment... my punishment for dirtying the trains' pride by stowing away."

"Stowing away? Hmph. A fittingly petty crime for a petty thug."

"So I don't care if it's the train that does me in in the end. If it means I'll be killed by the one who's staked everything on this train, acting as the train's representative..."

"Begging for your life? Well, I suppose I *am* a man dedicated to the rails, so as long as you've given me that right..."

The moustached man took aim and slowly hooked his finger onto the trigger.

But Rachel ignored the man and shouted at the top of her lungs.

"So--so kill me, okay?! Kill me before this bastard does! Kill me, you red monster--no--
CONDUCTOR!"

The confused pig hesitated for a moment.

Then, his shoulders began to creak with a terrifying groan. At the same time, an intense pain--the likes of which he had never experienced before--jolted his senses. He didn't have to turn around to see what had happened. Someone had pulled up his shoulders from behind. He screeched in pain as he painfully looked at his shoulder, and saw a set of fingers, dug in deeper than they logically should have been able to.

The shock of the pain forced the man to drop his gun. It would not have been surprising for him to have accidentally pulled the trigger, but thankfully the rifle rolled onto the floor without going off.

"Gaaaah... Guh... AAAAAAAHHHHH!"

It seemed that he was overcome with enough pain to cause him nausea. Tears dripped from his eyes, and something that looked suspiciously like gastric juice began to well up in his mouth and nose.

His shoulders heaved with a deep, low sound. They had been forcibly dislocated.

"!!!!!!!"

Without even a chance to scream, the moustached man lost consciousness immediately. It was as though he was a machine whose fuse had blown. Rachel could practically hear the circuits short out.

As the moustached man lay on the floor face-down, a man stepped in beside him.

The conductor, covered in blood, was quietly looking down at the moustached man.

'It's bastards like this who make things hard for low-level conductors like us.'

After deceiving the engineers, Claire had headed back to the rear cars. He looked into the dining car through the windows and saw the passengers tying up the surviving black suits. Seeing as there were several white suits tied up in the hallways as well, the situation was probably heading to a conclusion.

'Anyway, are all the normal passengers safe?'

Claire was heading back to the conductor's cabin to confirm this, when he happened across the suspicious moustached man with a rifle, facing down the stowaway woman from earlier.

At first he was watching from the coupling, but the moustached pig's twittering annoyed him so much that he decided to save the stowaway for now.

He seemed to have made it right before the moustached pig pulled the trigger. Claire whistled at his own sense of timing and pondered what to do with the pig.

'Maybe I should just drop him. If he's lucky, he might survive.'

Terrifying thoughts in mind, Claire stepped forward to lift up the pig, when a shaky but powerful voice stopped him.

"N-no!"

The ear-splitting yell had come from the stowaway woman, who was holding the pig's rifle.

"Get away from him! Don't kill him, okay?"

Claire shrugged, perplexed. "What's wrong with that? 'Sides, didn't this bastard just try to kill ya?"

'Is this broad just like me? She thinks she's never gonna die? Then I'd understand why she'd try to save her enemy.' Claire thought, but Rachel's face, covered in cold sweat, told him otherwise.

"You're a funny girl. First you tell me to kill you, then you tell me to *not* kill someone else?"



"It's not just him. Please, don't kill anyone on this train anymore! If you want to kill someone, just take my life and end everything!" She cried defiantly.

"Why? Why would you want to go so far?" Claire asked with a somewhat serious look. He stared into Rachel's eyes with his own, superhuman eyes. Rachel was scared, but she answered him without fear.

"My father was a train engineer. My father and I both love trains. We love them so much! Maybe even more than we love people!"

'Is her father the engineer the pig was talking about before?' Claire thought, but continued to listen to Rachel silently.

"So, so, please! Stop it! Stop dirtying the pride of the train--and the pride of the people who made this train! Stop staining this train--these rails--the people--with blood!"

Rachel was crying. Claire quietly watched her, then quietly spoke.

"'Stop dirtying their pride', huh? Pretty big request, coming from a stowaway."

"You're right. That's why we're both guilty of the same thing."

Claire broke out into a huge grin. With a look of great amusement, he turned away from the stowaway.

"You're saying that murder and stowing away are the same crimes? You're a pretty funny lady."

Rachel finally realized that the man standing before her, whom she had always thought a monster, was a human--little different from herself. She should have realized this earlier, when she found that they could hold a proper conversation, but at the time she was incapable of noticing. She had only calmed down enough to understand now, when she saw the man smiling.

"Damn it. You just have to keep reminding me--I'm a conductor, huh." Claire said to himself. He then put his hand into his pocket and took out a small, half-bloodstained piece of paper. "It's a ticket. Take it. Your name's not on the passenger list, but just tell 'em the conductor musta made a mistake. No one's gonna rag at you about it. Also, keep quiet about me being the conductor, capische? See ya."

He tossed the scrap of paper onto the floor and left for a corner of the car.

"You're a pretty impressive dame, too. If I hadn't met the knife lady just now, I mighta fallen for you. Though I guess we might meet again one day." He said, walking away from Rachel.

"W-wait!"

"I told you, don't worry. I don't think I need to kill anyone here anymore. I only killed the black suits and white suits, anyway. I'd have to have it all backwards to kill the passengers."

"You're lying! That boy from earlier.."

Rachel realized at that moment that this very car was where the boy had been tied up.

It was just as Rachel stopped that Claire spoke up, as if he had just remembered.

"Oh, right, right. I completely forgot about him. Well, he's a bit hard to explain. I don't feel like talking, so you should ask the kid personally."

"What are you talking about?! That boy's already--"

Claire ignored Rachel and slid open a nearby door. It was the door to the cabin where he had tortured Czes earlier. And inside, he found--

"Waaaah! Isaac! Are you all right?!"

He found a woman in a red dress, leaning her upper body out the window.

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Beside the wheels, Czes was lost in a daze as the cold wind nipped at his body.

How had things turned out like this?

The pain the red monster had inflicted on him were on a scale that he had never experienced before. In several instances he felt terror rather than agony. His eye was chiseled away with the scalpel. His artery was sliced open, and the monster blew air into it as hard as he could. The monster repeated the action with his veins. That was only the beginning. Czes had simply forgotten the rest. He only recalled that he suffered terribly, unable to remember the contents of the experience. He wasn't willingly suppressing it--the memory had been blacked out completely.

'Maybe I've really gone insane. Then it means that things really did go as the monster wanted. Is this my punishment? Is this retribution for trying to kill the people in the dining car? Or is it for all the bad things I've done in the past? It doesn't matter anymore. I just want to be at peace.'

'But I guess that's not possible. Oh, I get it. This must be my punishment for living as long as I have. For opposing the laws of nature and attaining immortality. I only pursued it so I could be happy, but to think it would end like this... First I tasted despair, then loneliness, then fear. This must be retribution... my punishment for devouring one of our friends.'

Things began to get noisy above him again. Who in the world could it be this time? Had the red monster come back? Was he to taste that agony again?

*'No, no...
nonononopleaseanythingbutthatdon'tdoitnononosomeonehelpmepleaseanyonehelpme...'*

The pain never came. Czes felt a bit calmer, so he left himself to silence again. *'I don't care what kind of bastards are up there. I don't care who it is, as long as they don't hurt me.'*

'I don't feel like opening my eyes. Wouldn't it be great, if I woke up and everything was just a dream? Right. This has to be a dream. I'll open my eyes and we'll still be back on the ship.'

'Everything 'he' did to me was a dream, and Szilard devouring our friends was just another nightmare...'

Something that felt like droplets of water splashed onto his cheek.

'Yeah, this must be a dream. I can feel the sea water on my face. Now, let's wake up. I'm still a little kid. If I don't wake up early everyone's going to tease me about it...'

But when he opened his eyes, Czes found himself back in reality. But he didn't even have time to despair, as he heard a voice from above him.

"Oh! Miria! He opened his eyes! Czes is alive! He's still with us!"

Czes found himself facing the strange gunman from the dining car. He had practically climbed out the window and was looking down at Czes upside-down. Blood dripped from his hands, likely from a scratch he sustained on the window. Some of the drops must have splashed onto Czes's face.

'What's he up to?'

"Hold on, partner! I'll save you!"

'What? Is he talking about... me?'

'Why? Why would you do something like that? Why would you go so far for someone you just met? I just don't understand. You'd go so far for someone who's not a friend, family, or lover-- nothing but a stranger...'

'Wait. His blood on my face is... moving?'

'What's going on? No, it's not moving because of the wind or the train shaking. The blood is moving like each drop is a conscious being. No, no, it can't be! How could this be? No, no, it's impossible! These two nutcases? I don't believe it! Why here? Why now?!'

'The blood is ignoring me. It's flowing backwards into his hands. That cut on his hand is healing! Now I know for certain--this man's not here to save me.'

'This man--this immortal--'

'He's here to devour me.'

Isaac leaned further out the window, finally exiting the cabin altogether. Miria held on to his legs with all her might, but she wasn't strong enough to support him. Isaac held on along the ornamentation on the walls, lessening the burden on Miria little by little. He then finally succeeded in getting a hold of the metal piping between the wheels.

Being careful not to step on Czes or get caught in the wheels, Isaac cautiously slipped under the car.

"What's this? His arm's tied up! Hold on, Czes. I'm going to get you out of here."

'What an idiot. He should have devoured me before untying me. That's it... undoing these ropes will be your end. I'll just reach out to him with my right hand...'

Czes then came to a realization and found himself falling into a pit of despair. His right arm had been torn off by the red monster, and was no longer on his person.

"All right! I got the ropes off you!"

Isaac supported himself on his feet and left arm, then supported Czes's body with his torso. He then reached out to take hold of Czes with his right hand.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!"

Czes used his left hand to slap away Isaac's outstretched right arm. The force of his movement led Czes to slip out of Isaac's hold and fall under the train.

'Serves you right. Now you won't be able to devour me.' Czes grinned, but his eyes soon turned to dinner plates.

The scene unfolded before him as though in slow motion.

When Isaac realized that Czes had slipped out of his grasp, he had no time to think. If he were in a calm state of mind, he would have at least hesitated before throwing himself into this situation.

But Isaac's brain was not crafted so well as to prioritize self-preservation in this situation.

In the blink of an eye, Isaac threw himself into the air to save Czes without a second thought.

'Impossible! Does he really want my knowledge that much?'

Isaac's right hand slowly reached Czes, falling to the ground.

'It's over now. He's going to devour me. Now someone else is going to glimpse that cursed memory! No, please, somebody save me! Please! Nonononoplease-'

Czes shrieked like a child and tightly shut his eyes.

But no matter how long he waited, Isaac's right hand never touched his head.

When he realized that the impact of hitting the ground wasn't as hard as he thought, Czes hesitantly opened his eyes.

"Eeeeeek! Isaac!"

From the vicinity of the window he could hear Miria screaming. In front of him Czes could see something resembling a wall.

Czes realized that the wall was, in fact, Isaac's clothing, and finally noticed that he was being held in Isaac's arms.

Isaac was hanging on to the train with his left hand, and his body was being dragged by the train.

"Gugugugugugugugugu..."

With a strange vocalization, he desperately tried to resist the vibrations coming up from his feet. The spurs at the heels of his cowboy boots bounced off the ground with howls and shrieks. Unable to even spin properly on the gravel, the spurs became little more than protrusions that further worsened the shaking.

Though the spurs were there to slow a horse's galloping, the ground underneath them passed by like surging waves, showing no signs of slowing.

But thankfully, Isaac's limbs themselves did not touch the ground. He could perhaps climb back onto the train if he used both his hands, but Isaac refused to let go of Czes.

His left hand had reached its limit. His fingers began to slip away.

"Isaac!"

Miria took his hand. She had also climbed out the window and down to the wheels, even more skillfully than Isaac had.

But Miria lacked the strength to support them. She slipped away as soon as she took hold of Isaac's hand.

But rather than lose her grip, Miria tightly embraced Isaac as if to shield Czes between them. Isaac took the moment to take his right hand off Czes, and like a cowboy, threw the rope that was on his back as hard as he could.

But in the end, he failed at playing the cowboy--the rope reached nothing but thin air.

They fell to the ground and bounced back up again, rattled by a powerful impact. Even still, Miria did not let go of Isaac, and Isaac held fast to Miria and the rope. As for Czes, protected by the duo, he had shaken surprisingly little from the impact.

The moment they thought that everything had ended, something caught on to the end of the rope--or to be specific, someone had taken hold of the rope.

At the other end was a hand sticking out from under the train.

It had happened all at once.

Having climbed under the train, Rachel found Isaac and the others hanging to the train by a single hand. She reached out to take his hand, but Isaac and the others fell out of the train. At that very moment, something had come flying at her from Isaac's direction. Rachel took it without even thinking.

It was the other end of the rope Isaac had been holding on to. Isaac's end was fastened to his belt.

Not a second later, a tremendous weight caught itself on Rachel's arm. Isaac and the others had hit the ground, and were now being dragged along the gravel.

"Ugh!"

Though there was a child among the trio, Rachel was supporting three people on her one arm. She desperately tried to pull them in, to no avail.

She considered that it might cause them less harm if she let go, but with bad luck on their side the rope could easily get caught in the wheels of the train, turning the trio into mincemeat, and in the worst case scenario, send the entire train careening off the tracks. She could not allow herself to let go now.

Unfortunately, her leg injury sent out another signal of pain, causing Rachel to lose her grip on the rope.

"AAAAHHH!"

Rachel screamed without meaning to.

Suddenly, a red shadow passed by overhead. Claire ran along the ornamentation on the side of the car with ease, just as he had at the dining car--no, faster.

Claire reached for the end of the rope before Rachel could make a sound.

Unfortunately, he could not reach it. The moment Rachel thought it was over, however, Claire quickly launched himself off the wall. He leapt off the train entirely, and managed to take a hold of the rope.

Before Rachel could even process the sight, Claire swivelled in midair.

His legs reached away from the train, as a pillar by the railroad approached them.

The moment Rachel thought he would hit the pillar, Claire's feet landed on the side of the pillar.

In a moment's notice, Claire's body began to teeter with gravity. He soon kicked off the pillar and flew into the air again.

The red silhouette cut a striking contrast to the brightening sky, looking almost like a beautiful work of art.

Claire then found a steady footing on the side of the train, slightly further back from where he had started. He looked as though he hadn't broken a sweat--which he hadn't. From his perspective, he had done little more than accomplish what he believed he could do. He hadn't felt even a single drop of fear at the prospect of falling to his death.

He would not have gone this far if it were only for Czes, but the strange gunman and the woman were passengers. There was a chance that they were Czes's co-conspirators, but Claire would think about that later. He had merely leapt into the air in order to ensure the safety of the passengers.

With the rope in hand, he ran along the wall again headed for the side door on the freight hold.

For some reason, it was wide open. A gigantic brown silhouette stood in the doorway.

<=>

Donny was bored.

They had passed the river, and he had tossed out ever piece of cargo they were after. He had left a small case of grenades, as Jacuzzi had instructed, but Nice had just come to take it an left. She and Nick had gone to find Jacuzzi, so Donny was left alone in the hold.



He was looking out the open door, lost in boredom.

"Hey, big guy! Gimme a hand here!"

Someone just spoke to him out of the blue. The voice was coming from outside the train.

A red silhouette was clinging to the side of the train, right beside the door.

"Whoa. R-Rail Tracer?"

Claire never expected that the giant would know the name, but quickly set aside his surprise and returned to the matter at hand.

Claire had just been thinking that it would take some time for him to bring the trio back up on his own when he spotted the giant. He had eagerly grasped this stroke of good fortune and spoken to him.

"Never mind, I just want you to pull on this rope as hard as you can! I'm counting on ya!"

Donny was utterly confused, but he suddenly realized that he could hear screaming coming from further back, at the other end of the rope.

When he looked outside, he could see someone being dragged along the side of the train.

"Whoa. Not good."

He took hold of the rope without thinking. A powerful impact rocked his body as he was pulled towards the door. Donny managed to take hold of the doorway, when he noticed the identity of the people on the other end of the rope.

The gunman costume and the red dress obviously belonged to Isaac and Miria.

"Whoa. Not good. Hold on! GAAHH!"

Donny quickly pulled on the rope with all his might. As a result...

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Isaac and the others lifted off into the air, passed over the roof, and fell on the other side of the car.

They had no idea that the tightly pulled rope would grant Jacuzzi victory during his fight on the rooftop.

<=>

"Look, we're past the river. I hope we've lost those train robbers..."

"All right, we're dropping speed! Can't overwork the train, after all!"

The engineers raised their voices, and the train began to slow.

With this, certain pieces of flesh began to catch up to the train--the fleshy red pieces that constituted Czes's right arm and legs.

<=>

Isaac and Miria barely managed to climb onto the roof of the freight car, collapsing on their backs.

"Thank god, we're alive!"

"We made it!"

They had wanted to lie there forever in relief, but Isaac and Miria could not allow themselves to do so. Lying between the two of them was a boy missing his limbs, in obviously terrible pain.

"Are you still with us, Czes?"

"Please wake up!"

The duo began to violently shake the wounded child. Thanks to the blood loss, Czes could feel the shaking slowly draining his ability to remain conscious. Isaac and Miria attempted CPR and heart massages, but they could not help him.

Suddenly, they heard an explosion from a car further back.

"What was that? An enemy?!"

"Look, Isaac! There's someone standing over there!"

A pair of silhouettes on the roof of the last car tangled into one. One of them soon fell off the roof, and a different explosion sounded. A great inferno erupted behind the train.

Normally Isaac and Miria would have lost their heads at this point, but now was not the time. They were worried for Czes's condition, but they had just noticed a mass of red flesh approaching them along the roof.

"Eeek! Something's coming this way! It's all red!"

"I-it must be the Rail Tracer! That must be its true form!"

Even as they panicked, the pieces of flesh crawled across the roof, crossed the coupling, and slowly but surely approached them. The masses, looking rather like red jelly, marched forward like a swarm of insects.

"Look, Miria! They're coming for Czes!"

They tried to carry Czes and run for it, but the pieces of flesh were being drawn back to their source.

"This is terrible! It's come back to finish off poor Czes!"

"Not if I can help it!"

Isaac threw himself over Czes in order to defend him from the mass of flesh. Miria joined him to fortify their defences.

The mass of flesh did not stop for even a moment, seeping in between them. Isaac, Miria, and Czes, covered in the mass of flesh, made for a bizarre sight under the rising sun.

After a long period of silence, the sound of a terrifying explosion brought them to their senses. Ironically enough, it was Czes's explosives going off that snapped them back into reality.

"Huh...? The red stuff's all gone."

"It disappeared... What about Czes?"

Isaac and Miria hesitantly looked down at Czes. He was still there.

Complete with all of his limbs intact.

Czes was still barely conscious. His heart was feeling a kind of emotion he had thought long lost.

He knew now that Isaac and Miria knew nothing about immortality. Seeing as they were both free of wounds even after hitting the ground, Czes supposed that Miria was also an immortal. They must have attained it by some coincidence.

Right now, they were both completely defenceless. It would be simple to put his right hand on their heads. But Czes could not bring himself to do so. Isaac and Miria had tears in their eyes, and were truly happy for him. Czes could only hesitate at the idea of devouring them.

He wasn't trying to turn over a new leaf at this point. He merely thought that, if he were to devour them and look into their thoughts, and compare and share them with his own heart, then he would truly be unable to forgive himself. He would have to spend eternity with that painful burden upon his shoulders.

Czes supposed that that burden would be more agonizing than any pain the red monster could inflict upon him.

Isaac and Miria tearfully expressed their joy at Czes's safety.

"Thank goodness! What a relief!"

"I'm so glad! But I wonder how your arm and legs came back?"

"It's simple, Miria."

"Really, Isaac?"

Isaac, back to his usual self, told Miria his self-assured answer.

"You see, the Rail tracer only gobbles up the naughty children. I'm sure that after it ate Czes, it realized that Czes was a good boy after all and came to give everything back!"

"I see! That makes sense!"

"No."

Rebutting the duo's argument was none other than Czes. But he wasn't talking about how he was restored.

"I'm not a good boy... I lied to everyone."

"What do you mean?"

"I said I was going to see my family in New York, but the truth is... I'm just going to see someone I know."

Czes paused, then started again.

"I've never had a family, and..."

He was about to finish with "And I never will", but the duo suddenly interrupted him.

"I see!"

"You *are* a good boy after all, Czes!"

"What...?"

Isaac and Miria continued, ignoring Czes's confusion.

"You lied to us so we wouldn't worry about you... but all this time you were the one who was suffering the most!"

"You're such a strong, sweet boy, Czes!"

Isaac did not even give Czes time to respond. He tapped his own chest.

"All right! Just leave everything to your Uncle Isaac!"

"Isn't that wonderful, Czes? Isaac's going to make everything better!" Miria nodded energetically, stroking Czes's face. "So now you can smile!"

<=>

Claire was quietly standing on the roof of the train. He looked upon the young man and woman before him, the morning sun to his back.

The young man with the tattooed face was holding what must have been the new explosives that Czes had mentioned.

Claire realized that the giant in the cargo hold must have been tossing the hidden cargo into the river. He considered capturing them, when he suddenly remembered what Czes had said earlier.

"I'm currently undergoing negotiations with the Runorata Family..."

In other words, the contents of the cargo were bound to enter the Runoratas' possession. It would be advantageous for the Gandors for it to be out of the picture.

With that, Claire decided to turn a blind eye towards Donny and the gang. Of course, part of the reason was that he couldn't allow the train run with such a dangerous cargo on board.

And now, the leader of this gang of robbers was standing before his eyes. The tattooed young man charged straight at him, eyes filled with pure determination.

Claire knew exactly what his opponent was planning to do.

He was there to slay the monster--the Rail Tracer--and save the train. It was easy to see.

The young man looked Claire in the eye. There was not a hint of fear in his eyes, even though he was facing down a monster like Claire.

'Oh. Those eyes... They're gentle, but they're a warrior's eyes. He's got a tattoo like a demon, but his eyes are kinder and stronger than anyone else in this hell of a train.'

Claire found himself captured by sudden admiration for the young man's eyes. If his own eyes were like mirrors, trapping light within, the young man's eyes were like a calm, quiet sea.

Suddenly, the morning sun began to rise from behind Claire. The sunlight shone into the young man's eyes, and Claire felt as though he were being drawn into them.

'Hate to say it, but this guy's eyes are way stronger than mine. Like some kinda hero in a fairytale. Like a knight who's killed a dragon. Feels like my eyes are gonna shatter if I don't look away.'

With this, Claire decided to allow himself to fall at the young man's attack. He was the Rail Tracer, who disappeared at sunrise. That was part of his duty as the storyteller who drew others into this tale.

The young man tackled him head-on, and the two of them rolled off the side of the train.

As they fell, the tattooed young man pulled the pins on the grenades he was holding. Claire then spoke to him for the first time.

"A double suicide? Can't say I agree with that."

"Huh?!"

Claire stopped beside the train, holding the surprised young man. He didn't even remember how many times he had hung between the wheels of the train tonight, but he was getting sick of it. He'd have to come up with something new soon.

"Get rid of those, or you're gonna hurt the lady up there." He said to the young man.

The young man flinched and hurriedly tossed the grenades onto the tracks. The shock-resistant ceramic grenade rolled across the gravel.

There was an explosion, followed by a shockwave.

Claire, still supporting the young man, had no trouble withstanding the impact. Once things had subsided, he climbed the side of the train, still holding the young man, and entered the conductor's compartment through the side door.

He exited the bloodied compartment and put the tattooed young man down in the hallway. Claire then continued from where he left off.

"Only an idiot tries to die with his enemy before he even tries to fight. You know, when you've tried your best and it seems like nothing else is gonna work."

Claire complained, and checked to see if the young man was injured. The young man had been shot in the leg, but seeing as he was still on his feet, it likely wasn't anything too critical. With this irresponsible judgement, Claire gave him a surprisingly sound piece of advice.

"There's a guy in grey dressed like a magician in cabin #3 in Second Class. He's a doctor, so ask him to take a look at you."

"B-but..."

"You can stop worrying. That sick white suit and the scary lady in black are both gone. You just finished off the last of 'em, so relax."

Claire was fiddling with the object in his right hand. It was one of the grenades made with the new explosives. He had quickly snatched one of the grenades the young man had thrown--one that still had the pin fastened to it.

"Go on, now. Don't forget the dame upstairs."

The young man's tattoo twisted in confusion, but he bowed his head and headed back towards the coupling. It seemed like he was going to climb back onto the roof.

As the young man left, Claire said one thing.

"You shouldn't make a woman wait. There's nothing harder than trying to find one that's gone away someplace."

Half of those words had been directed at himself.

Claire saw the young man leave, then twisted the cap of the grenade and took out the fuse.

"Going by that explosion just now, I guess this much'll do."

Claire scattered some of the explosives over the faceless corpse. There was no need to blow it to bits--all he had to do was make sure that this corpse would be taken as that of Claire Stanfield. To be perfectly honest, he was a bit uneasy, leaving that critical decision on the fact of the corpse's missing face. Now all Claire had to do was hope that the investigation team was gullible enough.

Claire Stanfield would have died today. That would make it easier for his work now, too. With plans in mind, Claire drew the older conductor's gun.

"Also, I'm not dirtying the train this time. Just call it... a farewell ceremony or something."

He excused himself to someone who wasn't there, then fired a bullet towards the explosives scattered across the floor.

<=>

"Czes!"

When Isaac, Miria, and Czes returned to the dining car, they found the Beriams waiting for them.

"You're all right! Thank you for taking care of him, Mr. Isaac, Miss Miria."

"I'm so glad you're all right, Czes!"

As Mary innocently embraced him, Czes found himself lost.

Why were children so quick to open their hearts to others? Of course, this didn't apply to all children, but the difference was just too great.

'I see... Maybe Isaac and Miria are just like children, too.'

Looking at Mary's smile, Czes let out a sigh of relief without thinking.

'I'm so glad I didn't kill these people. I'm so glad I didn't betray Mary.'

At this point, Czes had no way of knowing why he was so glad about these things.

His expression had not quite returned to his face, but Czes managed to say, "I'm sorry."

<=>

There was a lone, inhuman creature known as the Rail Tracer, standing on the deserted rooftop.

He had returned to the roof in order to mutilate the two corpses in conductor's uniforms with an explosion.

The carved note was left in the vicinity of where Chane had been crouched down.

It had been carved directly into the roof of the car with a knife.

[I will be waiting for you in Manhattan. I will wait for you forever. Please, come find me. I will also try to find you.]

The red monster sighed.

"Manhattan, huh? That's an awfully big place. And considering my schedule... And I didn't even tell her my name, let alone ask for hers... I think the white suit called her 'Chane', but I wonder if that's her real name? Damn it, this is really gonna be a lot of work."

Claire laughed embarrassedly, looking at the smoke rising from the conductor's compartment.

"And how am I supposed to know from this if she wants to hire me, marry me, or kill me?"

He stared a hole into the carving, then shrugged.

'That aside, I'm pretty surprised how polite this letter is. Maybe she's actually a pretty calm person. Or maybe she fell in love with me at first sight? Man, this is a problem. Does this mean this is my first love letter? If it is, I might have to take off the roof so I can keep it.'

Harbouring great expectations of a woman he had just met, Claire climbed down to the coupling.

"I'll have to take care of my business with the Gandors first, but I'll find you."

This time, he wasn't thinking to himself--his words were directed to Chane, somewhere far away.

"I promise."

The monster disappeared.

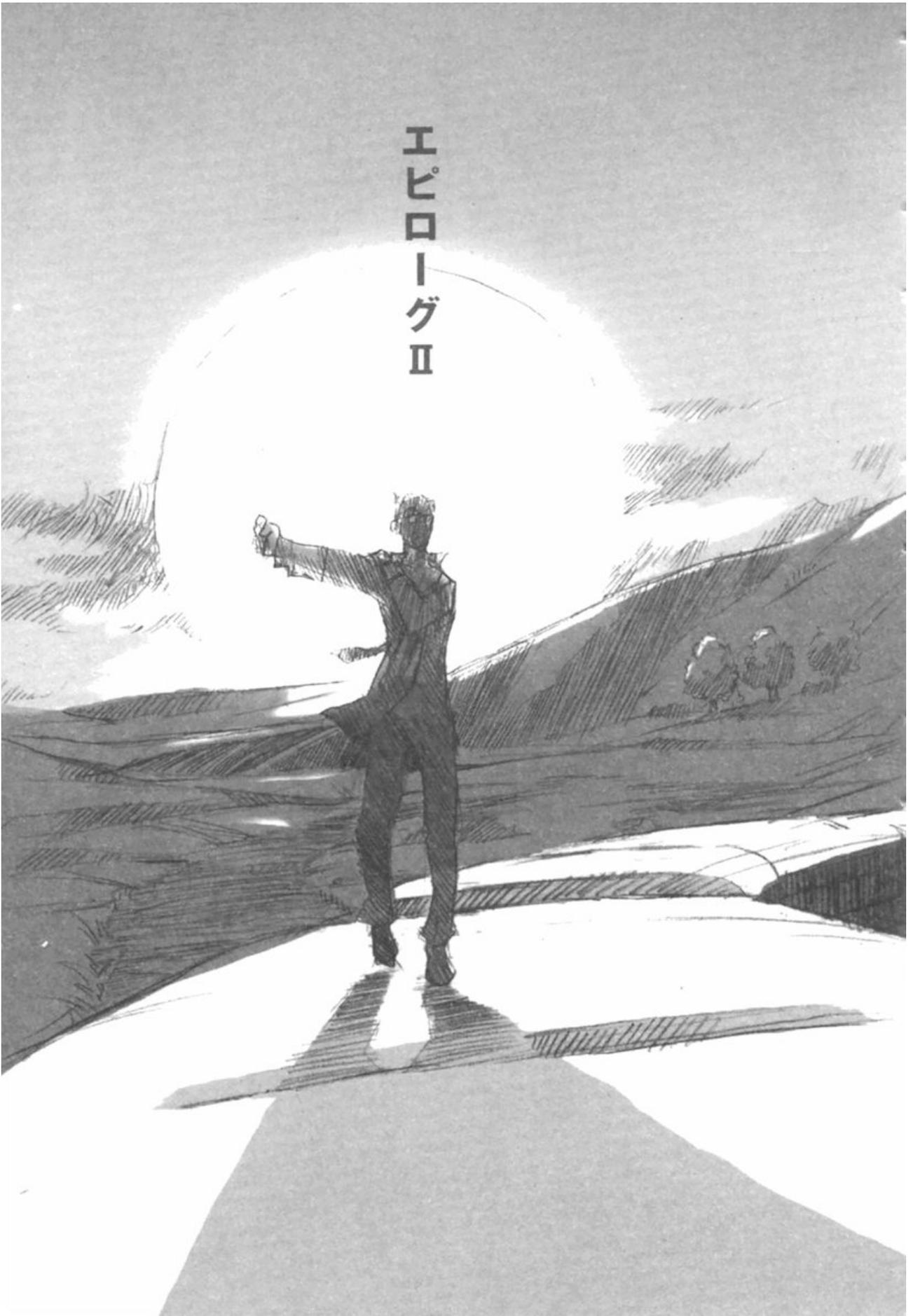
The Rail Tracer was no more.

In the end, everyone believed in its existence, and just like the legends said, he disappeared with the sunrise.

With no one to see, it was as though he had dissolved into the light of the morning sun.

-Express Episode End-

エピソードⅡ



Epilogue II

Epilogue - The Woman in Fatigues

Afterwards, the Flying Pussyfoot safely entered the No-Locomotives zone.

The lead car would be switched out with a smokeless electric engine so the train could head to Pennsylvania Station, but...

Waiting for the train at the exchange site was a veritable army of police officers.

The train was quickly taken under police control. Sadly enough, their takeover was much more efficient and controlled than that of either the black suits or the white suits.

The surviving black suits and white suits were apprehended, and the passengers were all released after a two-hour investigation. Then, they were each given a huge sum of money from the train's sponsor--Nebula Corporation--under the condition that they never speak of this incident. For some reason, it seemed that the government and this corporation wanted to keep this incident completely under wraps.

Rachel's ticket was half covered in blood, but the police officers and the station workers accepted it as her own. Sadly, this was only possible due to her leg injury.

Her leg had been given some basic treatment, so Rachel sat on her chair with nothing to do. Suddenly, a dignified-looking man approached her.

"I've been told that my wife and daughter owe you a great deal. You have my thanks."

At first Rachel was confused, but it seemed that this man was Mrs. Beriam's husband, Senator Beriam. As Rachel listened, chastising herself for being so clueless, he handed her a thick paper envelope.

There was a wad of hundred-dollar bills inside.

"Take it."

"But...!"

Senator Beriam turned around and left without even asking Rachel for her name.

Although the cash was appreciated, this was just too rude a way to hand it to her. Rachel felt as though he was treating her like she had helped his family for the money, and raised her arm into the air to throw it at his back.

Suddenly, someone softly took hold of her arm. It was Mrs. Beriam herself.

"Please, let me apologize on my husband's behalf. But I'd like you to take the money."

"You don't have to apologize."

"No, please allow me. You see, my husband is just not very good at expressing himself in any other way. People sometimes end up taking it the wrong way, but..."

Rachel couldn't throw the money back now. She wanted to ask Mrs. Beriam why in the world she ended up marrying her husband, but she kept this sentiment to herself.

"I was supposed to say this first, but... You have our deepest gratitude. We could never repay you for everything you've done for us."

Mary poked her head out from behind her mother to thank Rachel. The normally shy little girl looked right at her with a sparkle in her eye.

"Thank you, Rachel! I want to grow up to be a great person, just like you!"

Rachel was taken aback by Mary's surprisingly mature declaration. The fact that she was a stowaway poked at her conscience, as Rachel felt almost like she was deceiving the little girl.

In the end, Rachel took the money. When she arrived at Pennsylvania Station, she headed straight to the ticketing booth and bought as many tickets as she could with about half the money she received. She then left the station with the mass of tickets.

She already knew what she was going to do with the rest of her money. First, Rachel headed for a local doctor's office to get her injuries treated. The pain lingered, but there was a refreshing spring to her step, as though she was free of something that had haunted her for a long time.

Epilogue - The Masquerading Thieves

New York. Pennsylvania Station.

The doors of the train opened, finally releasing the passengers from their nightmarish journey.

As they couldn't just send the train--the scene of the incident--running to New York, the passengers were transferred to another train for the journey to Pennsylvania Station.

Several figures stood waiting on the bustling station platform.

Firo and Ennis, waiting for their friends Isaac and Miria.

Maiza, waiting for his old friend Czes.

The Gandor brothers, waiting for their brother and hired assassin, Claire Stanfield.

The people they were waiting for failed to step out of the train. The flow of people exiting the cars had nearly trickled to a stop.

Soon a woman in fatigues with an injured leg exited the train.

Following her was a man covered entirely in grey, and a man who looked to be his assistant. After them came people like a man with a tattoo on his face, a bespectacled woman with an eyepatch, and a giant of a man.

Though they were momentarily distracted by the strange procession of people, Firo and the others waited patiently.

Finally, the last of the passengers stepped out of the train.

It was a gunman straight out of the wild west and a dancer girl, both of their clothes ragged.

"Ennis, Firo, and Maiza! Long time no see, my fine fellows!"

"You all look wonderful!"

Though Isaac and Miria's energetic tone brought them relief, they couldn't help but point out some things.

"What's with the rags?"

"Haha! I'm a gunman, straight out of the west! Just call me the Belle Starr of the east."

"Westerns, in this day and age?"

"Wasn't Belle Starr a woman?"

Ignoring Firo and Berga's quips, Miria also brought up a random outlaw.

"In that case, you can call me the Edgar Watson of the north!"

"Wait, but that's the guy who shot and killed Myre Belle Shirley--Belle Starr."

"What?! Does that mean I'm going to kill Isaac? Nooooooo!"

"Not to worry, Miria! For you, I'd be glad to give my life!"

Firo and Ennis smiled, glad to see that their friends hadn't changed a bit.

"Hahaha! You two are just as stupid as ever!" Berga roared. Isaac and Miria raised their arms into the air like spring-loaded toys in complaint.

"Whaaat?! You can make fun of me, scoundrel, but I'll never allow you to insult Miria!"

"You can make fun of me, but I'll never let you insult Isaac!"

"In other words, you're gonna get two servings of rage directed at you, mister!"

"And since there's two of us, that's *four* servings in total!"

"And by majority rule, we win!"

"It's one to four!"

"H, hold on a sec..."

Berga was forced to start counting with his fingers at the duo's unrelenting outpouring of faulty logic.

"Stop that, Berga. You're embarrassing us." Luck said.

Suddenly, Isaac spoke up in epiphany.

"Oh, right! I almost forgot! We brought you a gift, Ennis!"

"It's our secret weapon!"

"Oh? I'm so grateful! Thank you!" Ennis smiled. Isaac and Miria turned around and went back into the train. As everyone watched in bemusement, Isaac stepped out, present in tow.

Standing at his right side was a certain boy, who had changed into a different set of clothes.

Firo and the others watched, wide-eyed, as Isaac and Miria delightedly introduced him to them. It seemed that they had never forgotten the contents of the letter they received from Ennis back in California.

"Ennis, this boy's name is Czes."

"You should take him as your younger brother, Ennis, so you can both have someone!"

Epilogue - The Alchemist

'Maiza's right here in front of my eyes. Maiza, the man who summoned the demon and found the secrets of immortality. I came to this city in order to devour this man. What a fool. He probably won't suspect a thing about how much I've changed. That will be your undoing. He's finally coming closer. It's time. All I have to do is call him an idiot and reach out my right hand towards him.'

"Maiza..."

'Huh? What's going on? No, no, why am I calling his name?'

'No, Maiza. Don't pat me on the head like that. I'm over two hundred years old now, damn it. Maiza, weren't you supposed to be right-handed? Why are you patting me on the head with your left hand? I don't need your sympathy. Damn it! Come on, Czes! Just call him an idiot! I have to reach out my hand and devour him!'

"I missed you."

'No! I'm supposed to call him a fool! Damn it! I have to get a hold of myself! I have to remember that I've tricked adults so many times in the past, and that they've deceived me, too! I can't trust anyone! Maiza's obviously trying to devour me, too. He'll start tormenting me, just like "he" used to! Damn it! Damn it! It's all their fault! The red monster and the weird gunman are making me act like this! No! I've always been alone. I've always been lonely. No, I wanted to be lonely. Come on, Czes! Call him an idiot!--I wanted to see someone, anyone, from back then--No! I have to reach out with my right hand-

'I just wanted to see someone, anyone, who knew me as I was in the past. I just wanted to lose myself in the dream of the past--back when I was still just a naive kid on that ship.'

"Maiza... I missed you, Maiza!"

'By tomorrow, I know I'll have awakened from this dream and gone back to my selfish, evil self. But I'm never going to even think about devouring Maiza again. I know that if I did, I'll have nothing but nightmares for the rest of eternity. I just want to stay in this dream a little longer. I want to cry in the arms of someone who knew the old me.'

Please, if only for a little while...'

On the station platform, the immortal in the body of a child cried into the arms of his old friend.

On and on...



Epilogue - Rail Tracer

"Excuse me, are you by any chance Mr. Gandor?"

"That would be correct."

The station employee handed Luck an envelope. Keith read the contents and left the station with his younger brothers. Berga excused themselves to Firo.

"Sorry, Firo. Looks like Claire's waitin' outside. We'll be back."

The man was standing in a corner of the alleyway.

"How's it goin', Claire? Shouldn't all you conductors be working inside or something?"

Claire ignored Berga's question and got straight to the point.

"Let's go. Who d'you need me to kill? Last night was a walk in the park. I want some real exercise, so I don't get out of shape."

Claire, having changed out of his conductor's uniform, began to walk ahead. The brothers, though taken aback, began to follow after him.

"Let's hurry up and get this over with. I gotta go find someone after this, y'know? And if you're lucky, you guys just might be invited to my wedding sometime soon."

The brothers looked at one another.

"Don't tell me you proposed to a complete stranger again."

"Kind of."

"Whaddaya mean, 'kind of'?! How many times is this now?"

Berga was astonished, but Claire continued matter-of-factly.

"Hold up. I wasn't acting like a flake. I was totally serious, so that shouldn't be a problem. And besides, I've only been rejected so far because I'm obviously going to meet someone better. After all, this world-

"Revolves around me', correct?" Luck finished his sentence, having heard the phrase hundreds of times so far.

"Right. Anyway, I might get a good answer this time. And if this one doesn't work out, there's this other girl--if the first one turns me down, I'll see what the next lady has to say."

"Still a master of fidelity, I see." Luck said dryly.

"Don't say that, now. I've never cheated on a woman, if that's what you mean. And that's cause I've never dated a woman before. I ask a girl out, and if she says no, I move on to someone else. And if she says yes, I'll spend the rest of eternity in love with her. I don't see a problem with that."

In some twisted way, Claire was right. Luck sighed in half-resignation.

"If only Firo would be a bit more like you..."

Claire looked nostalgic at the sudden mention of his old friend.

"Firo, huh? I missed him. So what about me does he need to take after?"

"For the past year, he's been living with a girl he's smitten with. I don't think he's asked her out properly, let alone kissed her."

"Geez... Is he even human?" Claire said, surprised. However, he did not slow his pace.

"Anyway, Claire, I can't say it's a good idea to trust a woman who'd accept your proposal so suddenly." Luck advised.

"Claire's dead. Legally, anyway."

Though Claire thought he was being cool by dodging the point, Luck brought him back to the ground.

"If you're legally dead, how are you supposed to get married?"

Claire stopped in his tracks and turned on his heels.

"Wait. That ain't good. How much d'you think I can buy a name for?"

"What are you talking about anyway? What d'you want us to call you?"

Claire began walking again and answered plainly.

"You can call me 'Vino', or if you like, the Rail Tracer."

"Pretty stupid, if ya ask me." Berga spat.

A one-on-one battle between Berga and Claire broke out in a back alley in New York. Keith watched them, quietly pondering about the conflict that would no doubt begin to escalate.

Keith stood silently, knowing that it would be quite some time until things became peaceful again.

Epilogue - Homicidal Maniac

An officer from the district gave a report to Inspector Edward Noah.

"So I hear you've found survivors."

"Yes, a man and a woman. We believe they were members of the train robber gang."

"What's their condition?"

"The woman's injured her neck, but her injuries are non-life threatening. The man is in critical condition, and Inspector Sullivan is questioning him at the hospital as we speak."

The police officers were standing around something, beside the place where the survivors had been located.

"So why is this pillar broken again?"

"Maybe the survivor crashed into it?"

"Or maybe he punched it...?"

"That's impossible!"

"But... you saw his arm, too!"

"And that's why I can't deny it outright. What is he, a monster?"

"They're probably gonna have to amputate that arm."

The men recalled the survivor's mutilated left arm, and several of them found themselves feeling very queasy again.

The left arm of the surviving man in white had been stripped clear to the bone all the way up to his elbow. The flesh had literally been torn from his body. This in itself was unbelievable, but something even more shocking soon occurred.

That very man was now cooperating with the investigation as if nothing was wrong.

Bill Sullivan was questioning Ladd in a hospital a short distance away.

"So, you're admitting your guilt?"

"Who knows? Oh, lemme just mention, I only killed people in self-defence. I'll concede to the attempted hijacking, but just remember that other part, capische?"

"Uh, well... That's really for your lawyer to know."

Bill got up to leave, when Ladd suddenly threw out a question.

"You ever heard of Huey Laforet?"

"Um, sure. He's quite the celebrity, in one sense."

"You know what prison they're sending 'im to?"

"It's not decided yet, but if I'd wager a guess, I say they'll probably ship him off to Alcatraz."

"That so? Thanks."

"Of course... Take care of yourself. We'll introduce you to a prosthetics technician before the trial."

With this, Bill Sullivan left the room.

'Alcatraz, huh? Not bad, not bad at all. Wonder what I'd hafta do to get in there. Heh.'

Imagining the pleasure he would feel at killing an immortal, Ladd fell asleep with a look of ecstasy.

Epilogue - Armed Terrorists

The new assistant of Fred the grey magician was quietly talking to himself.

"Damn it. So Ladd and Lua... both of 'em never came back. Though knowing them, I doubt they'd have died."

He was one of the white suits, but he had asked Fred to pass him off as an assistant when the police had boarded the train, managing to evade capture. The delinquents around him glared at him, but they could not turn him over to the cops, being criminals themselves.

Afterwards, he tried contacting their friends who were in charge of negotiating with the railroad company. The company had flat-out rejected their offer. It seemed that the black suits had threatened the government, which ended up somehow pressuring the railroad company. He never really expected this plan to succeed, but it was infuriating to know that the black suits were behind the failure. Of course, he was still alive, and a free man to boot--more than can be said for the rest of his white suit gang.

He had nowhere to go, so he ended up at Fred's clinic, doing odd jobs for him.

Hearing the former white suit's mumblings, Fred smiled.

"If they're still alive, you'll see them again. As long as you're alive, that is... Come to think of it, 'he' was looking for someone, too."

"Who?"

"A patient I treated. I missed my train because I was busy saving him... which cost me quite a fortune. The treatment took quite some time, and even the police got involved."

"The cops?"

"Yes. I was on my way to Chicago by car, when I happened to spot a terrible explosion in the distance..."

<=>

Goose was still alive.

He had somehow managed to make it out of the inferno with his life intact.

'I refuse to die like this! I must survive, and find out Huey's secrets...'

He crawled along the tracks, clinging to life by the thread of his obsession.

'My men must be somewhere around here. Ten of them were scheduled to negotiate with the government elsewhere. I saw the signal flare go off when we approached the river. The government must have agreed to our deal. Shit! I only had to hold out a little longer! No, it's not over yet. With ten men, I can still rebuild...'

Suddenly, a shadow was cast over him.

"I've been looking for ya, Goose."

'Finally, it must be one of my men...'

Goose looked up. Spit flew into his face.

"What...?!"

Goose was stunned. Standing before him was a man whose face had been badly burned. He could see burn scars all over his neck and hands, and the man was also missing an arm. He was also a man Goose knew quite well.

"Neider...!"

It was the man who had tried to betray Goose before the operation, only to have been disposed of instead. He should have been caught in the explosion and killed.

"Heh. I managed to stay alive by using a corpse as a shield, but I *really* would have died if a doctor wasn't passing by... Though standing on my feet's about all I can do at this point."

There were handcuffs on his wrists. When Goose looked around, he finally noticed several police officers in the vicinity. They were blindly searching through the bushes, as if they still hadn't noticed Goose's presence.

"They're inspecting the scene of the crime. I made a little deal with them, see? I'd tell 'em about our plan and where our negotiators were gonna be, and they'd let me off on probation. 'Course, it wouldn't do for people to know about this. I think they're just gonna cover up this whole incident altogether."

"You bastard..."

"Right! They just arrested those negotiators you were waiting for. Too bad for you."

The burned man knelt on the spot and leaned into Goose's despairing face.

"You shoulda killed me quick when you had the chance. And that's why you're not cut out to be a soldier." Neider spat, with all his hatred and pity in his voice. "You poor drop-out of a bastard."

Neider looked down at him coldly. Goose's head dropped silently.

"Don't go off on your own like that, Neider! We will take it as an escape attempt! Hm...? A survivor?!"

As the officer hurried over, Neider sighed.

"I think he died just now."

Goose was lying face-down, bits of flesh and a great deal of blood spilling from his mouth.

Neider turned his back on the unmoving black suit, walking away disinterestedly.

"Ah, dammit. I'm sick of this. How am I supposed to follow someone who's practically asking to be killed like that? I'm not cut out for this. Maybe I'll go back down to the countryside and help my old man with his cornfields..."

The young terrorist did not even remember Goose's face anymore.

That was, in the end, all that Goose had managed to become.

The pitiful corpse, exposed to the bone-chilling winter breeze, quickly grew cold.

Epilogue - Delinquents

The investigation had concluded for now, leaving the Flying Pussyfoot to be put into storage temporarily.

At this point, when even the police had left for the time being, several figures quietly remained in the cars.

"This isn't good."

"No good at all..."

John the bartender and Fang the assistant chef were the men responsible for bringing Jacuzzi and friends onto the train. If things had gone according to plan, they would have arrived safely in New York. But now they found themselves facing an ugly situation.

"You think they'll give us the boot?"

"Maybe..."

They had as good as revealed their identities when Jacuzzi took the dining car back from the black suits. Their expert handling of firearms and their alliance with the young man who had declared possession of the train was known to every passenger in the car.

They managed to avoid being arrested because no one had found out about the robbery, but in the end they would have to face the wrath of the head chef. At least, that's what they thought.

"What if he sacks us?"

"Maybe we could get jobs in the honeybee place my older sister waitresses at."

"What's this about honeybees? And didn't you say you made some trouble and got yourself kicked out of Chinatown?"

"My sister got kicked out too because we're family. So the Italians picked her up. I heard she's working at a speako in a honeybee store they run." Fang said matter-of-factly. John looked into the air.

"A speakeasy, huh. Maybe they'll be willing to take a bartender, too."

With John's languid question, an uneasy silence came over them.

A powerful aroma was permeating the area of the counter seats, enough to give make the duo's empty stomachs lurch in excitement. All they could hear from the kitchen was the sound of the head chef stirring a pot of stew. In the quiet, the sound of ladle against pot only served to exponentially intensify both their hunger and fear.

Suddenly, the sound stopped, only to be followed by the deep, roaring voice of the head chef.

"You two won't have to come back here from tomorrow on."

John and Fang sighed in half-relief.

"We're getting the boot?"

They had been expecting something like this, and all of the mental preparation had helped the duo withstand the impact of their sacking. But...

"Boot, shmoot. This whole dining car's goin' under."

"What?"

"Sir?"

John and Fang were taken aback. The chef, however, was undeterred as he plainly laid out the facts before them.

"I've been told that the corporation we're paying rent to is going to pretend this train never even existed. You're losing your jobs so they can pretend this whole mess never happened. Same goes for me."

John and Fang looked at one another in surprise. If even their boss was being fired, why were the two of them specifically singled out?

"So here's my point. Ever heard of the Genoards? A filthy rich family from New Jersey. I hear they're looking for a cook and a bartender. I'm gonna go bug the head office for a job, so you two go work for the Genoard master for now. Since they're rich enough to hire a bartender, I don't think you'll have any complaints."

John and Fang's eyes had turned into dinner plates. The head chef ignored their shock and continued.

"I don't give a damn who you're involved with, and I sure as hell don't care if they're criminals. But I will personally vouch for your skills as a cook and a bartender. You two were the only ones that came to mind when they asked me for a cook-bartender team. I think your employer should be in New York right now, so go drop in for a visit tomorrow. You got all that?"

John and Fang were compelled to nod by the chef's heavy tone. But deep down, the two of them were very glad to see that they were thought of so highly.

"Stew's done. Finish it before you go." The chef said from the kitchen.

"Thank you for the food!" John and Fang said simultaneously. However, their smiles were soon frozen still by the chef's next words.

"Glad to hear that. I thought for a second there I was going to end up having to throw out all one hundred servings of stew. Since you've so generously accepted, I expect you to finish it all. If I see even one drop left on the plates, I'll make my next broth out of your hands."

<=>

"And that's how we managed to bring you a get-well gift. Dig in!"

"I promise, it tastes delicious! If you don't eat it, we're gonna have to curse you from beyond the grave!"

John and Fang made obviously fake smiles, standing behind a gigantic cooking pot that looked like it could easily weigh a hundred kilograms.

"H, help."

On the other side of the gigantic pot of stew was Jacuzzi, lying in a bed looking as though he would burst into tears any second.

They were currently in Fred's medical clinic. Jacuzzi would be hospitalized for a few more days yet, but he would be released soon.

In the bed beside Jacuzzi's bed was Jack, and further beyond was Donny, sleeping on the floor and snoring loudly. He had been the one to carry the pot all the way here upon hearing of John and Fang's plight, and he had eaten about twenty servings along the way.

But it didn't seem like they would run out of stew anytime soon. Perhaps there was actually more than a hundred servings there to begin with.

The only other people in the room were Nice and Nick. In other words, the gang members who had been on the train were all assembled here. As they discussed what they should do with the excess stew, they suddenly began to hear voices from outside the room.

"What's that? Smells pretty good."

"Hey! Don't hog the grub! Give us some!"

Jacuzzi's friends began spilling in through the door one by one.

"Guys!"

Jacuzzi brightened instantly. Several of the gang members were part of the recovery team that had picked up the cargo from the river onto their boats.

"Hey, Jacuzzi! You know those bombs you got? We did a little under-the-table bargain for them with a miner guy I know and a filmmaker from Hollywood! And guess what? We made a fortune! A hundred thousand bucks! Can you believe it?!"

"We gutted the ceramic grenades and sold them for two hundred dollars each, too."

Instead of worrying about his injuries, Jacuzzi's friends focused on their finances. And Jacuzzi loved them for it.

"I'm so glad to hear that!"

"But Jacuzzi? You can't go back to Chicago anymore." One of his friends said matter-of-factly, downing his stew.

"Huh?"

"I hear the mafia found your place. They'll ventilate you as soon as you get near it."

"W, what?!"

Jacuzzi's face turned a bright red.

"Why don't we just move to New York while we're at it? I heard the others are gonna come follow us here soon."

"Ah, y-you're making it sound so easy..."

Jacuzzi's friends ignored his teary eyes and moved on to a more cheerful subject.

"Oh right, Jacuzzi! Would you believe me if I told you that a beautiful dame just fell outta the sky?"

"Was she trying to commit suicide?"

"Don't be stupid! We were out picking up the cargo you dropped off! When we saw her coming out of the water, clinging to one of the crates! This gorgeous broad who hurt her shoulder! We told her we'd be in New York, so she said she'd join us! She's this really quiet, smart type of girl. The doc here just treated her, too."



"Huh, really? Maybe she was one of the passengers on the train."

Jacuzzi thought for a moment, then widened his mouth into a grin.

"I'd like to say hi to her, if that's all right."

"Sure. Come on in Chane!"

When the beautiful woman in the black dress stepped into the room, Jacuzzi welcomed his new friend with a smile as Nice and Nick dropped their plates of stew.

Epilogue - Flying Pussyfoot

Several days later, somewhere in New York.

"And what did you gain from buying all those tickets with half of your money?"

It was somewhere in Chinatown that this question was posed to Rachel, mixed in with the sounds of telephone bells.

Rachel's answer was loud enough to rise above the cacophonous background.

"I'm not very sure. I was just... tired."

Unusually for Rachel, she was using a rather formal tone of voice. She was currently speaking to her buyer, the President of the information agency.

Although the President's face was obscured by stacks of paper, Rachel could not shake the uneasy feeling that he was smiling.

"Well, I suppose it's really up to you whether you make use of this experience or not."

"To be honest, I'm just regretting not beating down that swine with my own two hands." Rachel spat bitterly.

"I have a small bit of information about the aftermath of that incident. Care to hear it? This one's on the house." Said the faceless information broker.

"I refuse to accept this! I will sue the everliving daylights out of them all, you hear me?! I will receive compensation for my tickets, and I will bring *justice* to that cursed ape and the filthy Irishman!"

The rotund, moustached man snorted, his nostrils positively flaring. Once he regained consciousness after having his shoulders dislocated by Claire, he had holed up in one of the washrooms, trembling in fear. He was finally found by police once everything had subsided. His cries of pain upon getting his shoulders popped back in brought forth a great roar of laughter from the passengers in the dining car.

To this man, an executive at a huge railroad company, this humiliation was unbearable. He was just about to sue Nebula, the corporation that owned the Flying Pussyfoot, when he was interrupted.

Facing down the moustached man in Nebula's reception room was a middle-aged executive wearing the oxymoron of an expressionless smile on his face.

"This is most unfortunate, Mr. Turner. As you can see, we have already provided ample compensation for this incident. And I'm sure that the damage this incident might cause to the railroads' image will harm you, as well."

"That is of no concern to me! It's not about money--this is a matter of pride!"

Suddenly, the phone rang.

"I'm very sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Turner, but I believe this phone call is for you."

The moustached pig snatched the receiver from the expressionless executive.

"It's me! What do you wa-..."

Turner's face did a 180 as his complexion grew pale and cold sweat began running down his face as he continued the conversation. He soon put down the receiver and powerlessly glared at the executive.

"You'd stoop so low as to get a politician involved..."

"Senator Beriam also wishes to keep the incident secret, you see. It's impossible to completely erase all traces an event in this day and age, but it *is* possible to conceal it. There were no passenger fatalities in this incident, so we do not wish to worsen the situation."

"Yes, but..."

"Mr. Turner. I see that you have, in the past, framed a train engineer for an accident. It is perfectly possible for us to have that engineer's co-workers testify on his behalf. I'm sure they will find the courage to speak the truth once we present them with the right conditions."

Turner, the moustached man, blanched and walked out of the room.

As Turner stepped through the door, the executive shot some parting words at him.

"Have you ever heard of something called karma, Mr. Turner? You've become a thorn in the senator's side. If you're not careful, your company may end up abandoning you..."

"This is what I've been told had happened. Do you feel a little better, Rachel?"

"How did you get a hold of that information, sir?"

"I'm the one who sold information about Mr. Turner's past to the executive. We agreed to a small exchange, you see." Though the phones in the background threatened to overpower his voice, it reached Rachel completely intact. "Information, you see, will sit there and rot if it isn't used. It's just like the skills of a master artisan. Although I must apologize for using the information relating to your past without permission."

Rachel was silent for a moment, before finally addressing the man behind the stacks of papers.

"Could I... charge the company for my transportation fees from now on? I don't have a particular reason for it, but I've decided to stop stowing away."

"I have no problem with that. To do something without having a specific reason is something quite important, you know. I believe it's a wonderful thing to trust one's own feelings."

For a moment, the voice behind the papers sounded awfully unlike that of an information broker. He then added:

"Of course, please don't forget your receipts."

<=>

The political influence of Senator Beriam and the financial power of Nebula was enough to make it so that the Flying Pussyfoot incident had never officially happened. There was one civilian casualty--a conductor who was discovered in the Chicago sewers. The criminal had yet to be apprehended. Even the police did not put the effort into the investigation, so in the end the murder was judged to have had nothing to do with the incident on the train.

The perpetrator was already no more.

The faceless corpse discovered in the conductor's cabin was deemed to be that of Claire Stanfield.

With the exception of the locomotive, the train was abandoned. The cars were silently placed in a park on the outskirts of the city.

Oddly enough, one part of the train was missing. A part of the roof of the last car had been torn away by someone.

Finally, it was December 5th, 1933.

On this day, when the decision to abolish Prohibition was announced, the train was wrecked by overjoyed crowds, disappearing into a scrap heap the next day.

The Flying Pussyfoot was a train that had crisscrossed all of America during the era of Prohibition.

In stark contrast to the end of Prohibition, the train had met a rather lonely end.

The stage of the incident was buried in darkness, and none would know where it had been taken.

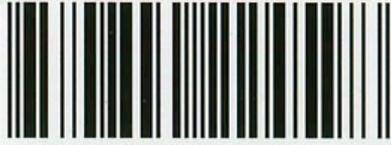
That is, with the exception of the letter that had been cut out from its roof.





——ただ一つ、屋根から切り取られた手紙を除いては。

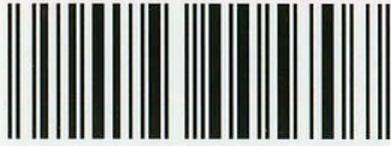
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