

BACCANO!

バツカーノ!

1931 臨時急行編

Another Junk Railroad

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

電撃文庫

Written by Narita Ryohgo
Illustrated by Enami Katsumi

Translated by Untuned Strings on <http://untuned-strings.blogspot.com/>

BACCANO!

バツカーン!
1931 臨時急行編
Another Junk Railroad



成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

イラスト*エナミカツミ
Illustration : katsumi enami

まあ、そんな状況でもニースの面さえ見りゃニコニコできるってのがジャグジーらしいっちゃらしいんだが。

そんな事を考えていると、回収班の連中が呆れたように首を振りながら口を開いた。

「つたく、お前らが豪華な列車の上で楽しんでる間、俺らは大変だったんだぜ？ 誘拐犯だったのでっけー怪物だの軍人だの出てきてよ」

「あと、ギャングの人達も来ましたしねー。緊迫した時間が723秒続きましたよー」

「……ああ？」

何かわけの解らん事を言う回収班の連中に、俺は眉を顰めたんだが――。

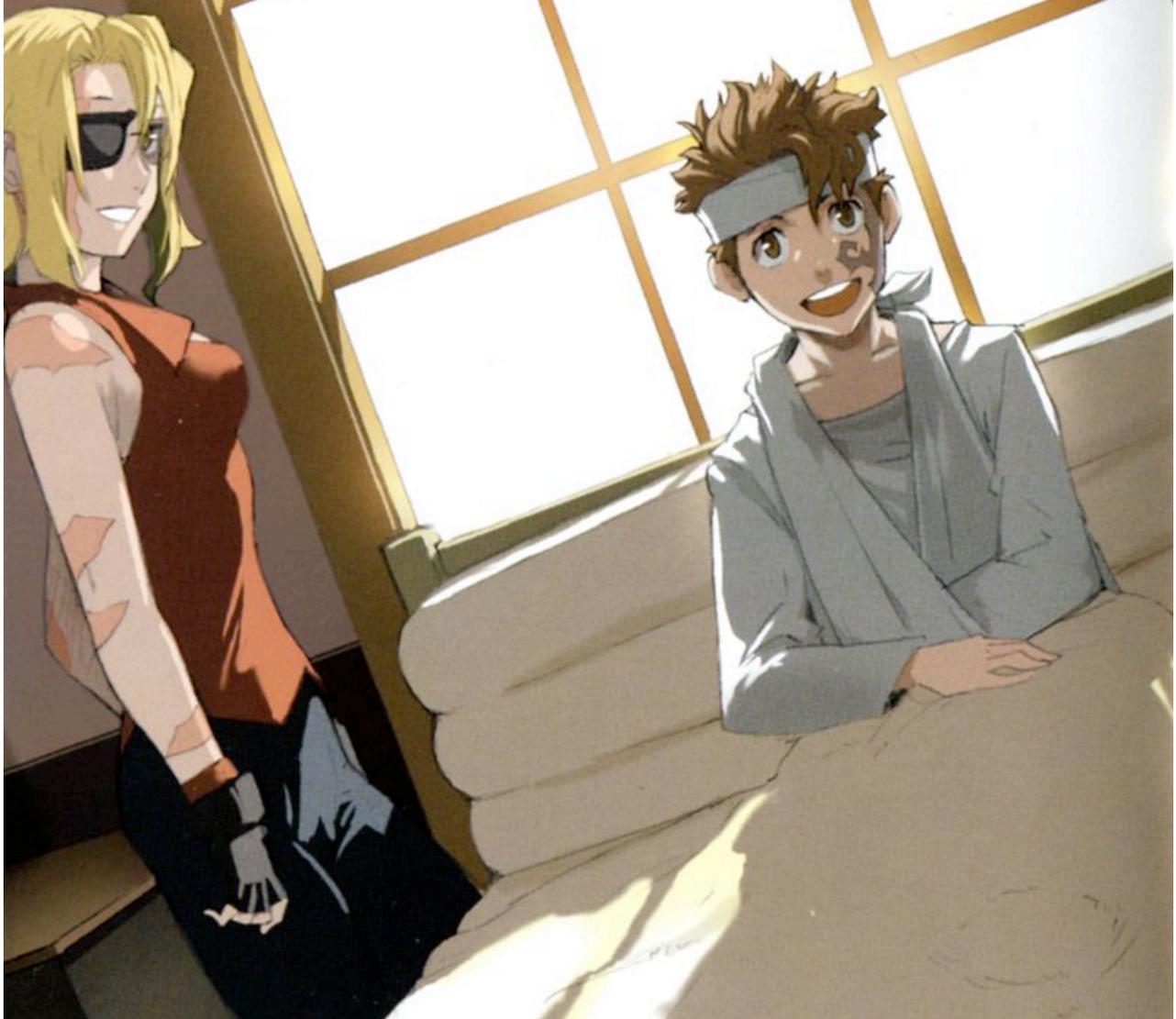
「ほら、そんな顔すんなよ。俺の妹になる予定の美人な姉ちゃんでも見ても心ほぐせ」

と、首をグキリと捻られ、件のテロリスト女の方に視線を強制的に向けさせられた。

するとそこには、確かに白百合みてえに綺麗な顔と――底冷える氷みてえな冷たい視線があつて、俺の事をその目でギロリと睨み付けてきた。

その瞬間、俺にできたのは――ある意味仲間達の間論み通り、笑う事だけだった。

おっかなくて、笑うしかねえだる畜生め。



『病院』

「ピヤムアー」ひゃっほー!

「オメーらは平和でいいよなあ」

チャイニーやチビ助がいつも通り騒いでるのを横目に、俺は小さく溜息をついたわけだ。

ったく、俺らがどんな苦労をしたのかも知らねえで、荷物回収組は暢気なもんだぜ。

ジャグジーが大怪我してるってのに、みんな心配したのは最初だけで、命に別状がねえと解った途端にいつも通りと来たもんだ。

俺やニースの姐さんが縛られたり、ジャックがボコられたり、ドニーが荷物落とししたり、とんでもねえ苦労してきたってのによ。

「どうした」ラク。何で聲めっ面してんだ？」

「お前らの暢気さが羨ましくてな。俺らが仕事してる間にナンバとは大したもんだ」

しかも、こいつらがよりによってヤバイ女を連れてきやがって、話がややこしくなった。

テロリストの仲間だった、化け物みたいな動きをする女だ。ジャグジーは何も知らねえからニースにしているが、さて、この事を伝えたもんかどうか。

……ていうかよ、この病院も変っちゃ変だ。

何であの白服の仲間だった奴が助手なんかやってんだよ。まあ、その医者のおッサンからして全身に灰色の布をグルグル巻いてるっついカれた格好なんだが……。

At the Hospital

"Hyaha!" "Hyaha!"

"You two look like you don't have a care in the world."

I glanced over at Chaini and the kid who were chattering away as usual and sighed.

Damn, the retrieval team had it easy. They have no idea how much trouble we went through.

Sure, everyone was worried that Jacuzzi was hurt pretty bad, but they all cut their mothering as soon as they figured out he wasn't *dying* or anything.

Me and Nice were tied up, Jacuzzi got turned into a sandbag, and Donny was tossing out all the luggage--we all went through a load of shit, and then some.

"Why the long face, Nick?"

"How're you so relaxed? You even picked up a girl while we were away."

And the guys just had to pick up one bother of a lady.

It was the broad from the terrorists--the one that moved like a monster. Jacuzzi was just smiling and laughing the whole time. How am I s'pposed to tell him the truth?

...Speaking of, this hospital's pretty shady, too.

Why is one of those white suits an assistant here? Then again, the doc's a pretty creepy sight himself, with all the grey he's wrapped up in.

'Course, I guess it's just like Jacuzzi to break out in a smile every time he sees Nice's face.

And while I just sat there, the retrieval team came up to me, shaking their heads.

"Seriously. While you people were lazing around on a luxury train, we were going through a crisis! Some kidnapers, a huge monster, and a bunch of soldiers popped out of nowhere."

"And there were gangsters around, too. It was 723 seconds of terror!"

"...Huh?"

I frowned as the retrieval squad rambled on-

"Hey, don't make that face. Take a look at the pretty lady who's going to be my little sister and cheer up!"

One of my friends forcefully turned my head around with a crack and turned me to the terrorist lady.

A face like a lily and eyes like ice glared at me.

In some ways, what I did then was no different from what my friends did.

Shit, what was I supposed to do?! I was so scared I ended up just laughing.

うぼどじりして行くくらいさね。

ま、店に来る客も変わり種ばかりだからねえ……。どっちにしろ、ここに通ってる連中はみんなあたしの息子みたいなもんさ。

モルサの旦那やヤグルマの爺さんだって例外じゃないよ。まったく、男って奴はいつまで経っても自分の中に子供を飼ってるんだからね、手間ばっかりかかって仕方ないよ。

フィー口なんかはもう、見ててこっちが恥ずかしくなるくらいだよ。エニヌちゃんの方が落ちついてるから、釣り合いは取れてるんだろ。うけど。

そつえば、さっき来た赤毛の客がいたら？

あの子はなんか、ただものじゃやないって雰囲気だったけど、中身はやっぱり子供みたいなものさ。話の内容は解らなかったけど、雰囲気を見れば解るよ。まあ、本職は多分、殺し屋か何かだと思っただけねえ。

例え大統領だろうが、世界一のボクサーだろうが、女から見りゃやっぱりどこか男って子供な部分があるもんだよ。

特に、ここに屯してるのは子供な部分ばかりでっかくなってるくでなしばかりだけどねえ。

問題児ばかりだけど、それだけに可愛い連中だよ、本当に。



あたしも長いことこの店を預かってるけどね、
まあカモツラだなんだって言っても、男連中はみんな子供みたいなもんだよ。
普段子供っぽいリアの方がまだ大人びてるし、最近店に顔だすようになったチエスくんの方がよ

『闇酒場』

At the Speakeasy

I've been working in this shop for a while now. These men are Camorrista, but they're all no different from little kids.

That childish Lia looks more mature in comparison, and Czes--who just started coming out to the shop--acts cleverer than them.

'Course, all the *customers* are weirdos, too. In any case, anyone who comes in here is like a son or daughter to me.

Boss Molsa and old man Yagulma are no exceptions. All men stay kids deep down, no matter how old they get. It's so much work, fussing over them!

And *Firo*? I get embarrassed every time I look at that boy. Thank goodness Ennis is so calm--she manages to strike a balance with him.

Come to think of it, notice the redheaded guy who just came in? He *looks* like something big, but inside he's just another kid. I don't even need to listen to what he's saying. You can tell by that air around him. 'Course, he's probably actually a hitman or an assassin.

In a woman's eyes, whether you're the president or the best boxer in the world, all men have a childish side to them. Especially the ones who sit around here.

They're all problem children, but that's what makes them such dears to take care of.

『廃倉庫』

「悲しい……悲しい話をしよう……」

「どうしたんですかグラムさん。空でも落ちてきましたか？」

「空が落ちる……？ それはまた不思議な話だ。空が落ちた後に俺達の頭上に残されるものはなんだ？ 空が空っぽになるとはどういう状況なんだ……というか一体どこまでが空なんだ？ 宇宙も月も落ちてきて、火星や太陽も俺達の所に落ちてくる……となると、つまりはこの地球が重力の中心であり、天動説が正しかったという事か？」

「いや、そんな皮肉をマジに受け止められても困

るんですけど」

「待てよ。そう言えば、俺は昔、怒った姉貴に四階の窓から放り投げられた時、一瞬こう思ったんだ。

「あ、地面が空から降ってくる」つてな。だがしかし、落ちているのは俺の方だったわけだ……。つまり空が落ちてくるというのは錯覚で、実際は俺達の方が空に向かって勢いよく落ちていくんじゃないだろうか!? これは凄い発見だ！ だが待て、地球は丸いという。仮にそれが本当だとすると、俺達が地面と一緒に空に向かっていくとすれば、地球の反対側の奴らはどうなる？ そいつらも平等に空に向かっていくとすると、つまり地球が膨張している事になる。膨張すると面積が増えてこの倉庫も広くなる……!」

「あの、グラムさん？ グラムさん？」

「土地が広くなれば、それだけ色々なものが置けて便利！ つまり空が落ちてくるのは嬉しい話じゃないか！ ……悲しい……ああ、悲しい話をしよう！ 空が落ちてこないなんて、なんて悲しいんだ！」

「……色々と駄目だなあ、この人」

「よし、この悲しみを紛らわせる為に、今日は早めにラッドの兄貴を迎えに行くぞ！」

At the Abandoned Warehouse

"Let me tell you a sad, sad story..."

"What is it, boss Graham? The sky fall on you or something?"

"The sky? Fall to the ground...? That *is* a rather interesting notion. What remains over our heads should the sky fall upon us? What does it mean for the sky to be empty? In fact, where does the sky *end*? Perhaps outer space, the moon, Mars, and the sun will fall upon us... Then does this mean that the Earth is the centre of gravity, and those medieval theories we once thought to be nothing but baseless conjecture were absolutely correct?"

"I was just joking, boss."

"Wait. Come to think of it, I had a thought once, when my outraged sister pushed me out the fourth storey window. I thought, 'Oh, the ground is falling from the sky', but in reality, *I* was the one who was actually falling... In other words, our perception of the sky falling is a mistake--which must surely mean that *we're* the ones falling towards the heavens! What a magnificent discovery! But wait! They say that the earth is round. If that is true, and we are rising towards the sky along with the ground under our feet, what happens to the people on the other side of the planet? If they go up to the sky like everyone else, that must mean the earth is expanding. Which means that even this *warehouse* will expand!"

"Um. Boss? Boss?"

"If there's more space, I have more room to put stuff in: therefore, it is a beneficial occurrence. In other words, the fact that the sky is falling is a happy story! ...How sad... Oh, let me tell you a sad story! How tragic! The sky is *not* falling!"

"This guy's impossible."

"All right, men. Let's say goodbye to this sadness by going out to meet boss Ladd early!"

物々しい警備に囲まれ、暗い廊下を進む男達。その警備は決して男達を護るものではなく——寧ろ、その中心を歩くテロリストを外部に出さぬためのものだった。

「それにしても、よく私の計画を事前に察知する事ができましたね。流石は同じだけの年数を生きていると賞賛すべきでしょうか」

自分に対する警戒心を一斉に浴びながらも、そのテロリストは静かに笑う。

「一方、声を掛けられた男は、仏頂面のまま、振り返りもせずに語りだした。

「勘違いするな。お前を捕らえたのは俺の功績じゃねえ。お前に言わせれば『50年も生きてない若造連中』の努力と研鑽の賜物だ」

「個人の努力と研鑽、とききましたか。」

確かに、国家が積み重ねてきた捜査力を理由とするには、まだこのアメリカという国は若すぎますからね。独立を誕生と考えれば、我々よりも年下だ」

「そうかもしれない。だが、それも変わるさ。うちの今の長官は、良くも悪くも手広く手堅い。個人の努力や研鑽をありったけ……煮詰めに煮詰めて、この組織に国家以上の力を握らせようとしてやがる」

「貴方はそれに賛成なんですか？」

「お前みたいなバカを止められるなら、清濁合わせて飲み込みますし、飲み込ま

『NY某所』

れてもやるさ」

力強く答える眼鏡の男に、テロリストは静かに微笑みながら言葉を返す。

「それは、やはり貴方が不死者だから言える言葉なのでは？ 普通の人間には中々できぬ覚悟だと思えますよ。悪意が無いなら尚更に」

「不死者、か」

皮肉の込められた言葉をどう受け止めたのか——眼鏡の男は、テロリストを短く振り返り、自嘲気味に笑いながら呟いた。

「俺達は、不死になった瞬間に死んだようなもんだらう？ 『幽霊』のリーダーさんよ」

Somewhere in New York

Two men walked through a dimly-lit hallway, surrounded by guards. However, the guards didn't seem to be protecting them--they seemed to be there to keep hidden from view the terrorist walking between them.

"In any event, I'm astounded you were able to figure out my plan before I put it into action. Perhaps I should have expected no less from a man who has lived as long as myself."

The terrorist chuckled, despite the overwhelming sense of wariness directed at him.

The man the terrorist had spoken to did not even look around, but replied anyway.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not the one responsible for your capture. If I put it your way, this is the fruit of the efforts of 'children who've yet to live fifty years'."

"The efforts of individuals, you say? Of course, America is still far too young to have a specialized investigation force on the national level. In terms of independence, this country is even younger than we are."

"Maybe so. But that's about to change. Our director's quite the reliable one. He's planning on creating a culmination of individual efforts and investigations and pushing them to their limits... to give this organization power greater than the country itself."

"And you agree with this plan?"

"I'd let anything slide if it means I can stop idiots like you."

The terrorist quietly smiled at the bespectacled man's declaration.

"Is that not something you can say only because you are immortal? I believe that might be a difficult resolve to maintain for a normal human being. Especially if he had no ill intentions."

"Immortal, you say?"

How had he taken this slight? The bespectacled man glanced back at the terrorist and, let out a self-deprecating laugh, and mumbled.

"We've been practically dead since the moment we became immortal. Right? Mister Leader of the Lemures?"

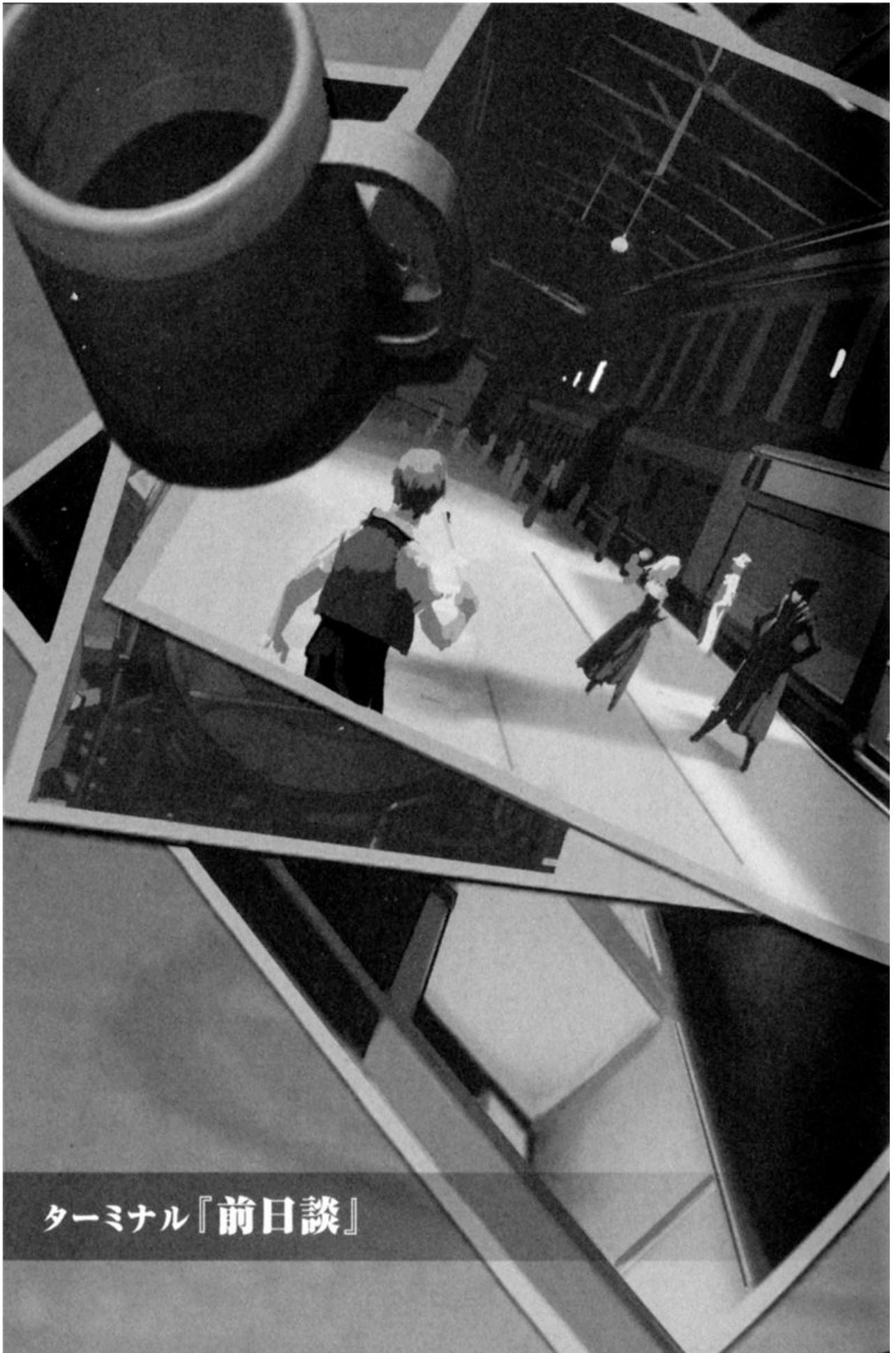
- P11 ターミナル「前日談」
「幼馴染み」
「笑顔と悪意」
「ヒューイ・ラフォレットという男」

- P45 第一章 「語られる世界1」
間章 「TIPS ヒューイとシャーネ」
P65 第二章 「孤独な世界」
間章 「TIPS 幼馴染み」
P111 第三章 「楽しくも悲しい世界」
間章 「TIPS 列車到着前夜の男女」
P147 第四章 「裏返る世界」
間章 「TIPS 不死者達」
P223 第五章 「俺の世界」
P261 終章 「語られる世界2」
余章&ターミナル「繋がりのゆく世界」



バツカニム!
1931 臨時急行編

Another Junk Railroad



ターミナル『前日談』

Terminal: The Day Before

Childhood Friends

December 29th, 1931. Somewhere in Chicago.

"Hey, Who. You free tomorrow and the day after? You *are*, right?"

"?"

I could picture the guy's face before I turned around to look at him. Who else'd call me "Who" in the middle of the street?

And just as I thought, there he was.

"Whaddaya want, Ladd? I might not look it, but I'm pretty busy right now."

"That's awful cold of you. You're just worried about what to have for dinner tonight, right?"

"Unlike a certain rich boy, I'm practically broke. You might not know it, but I've been on my toes keeping myself from starving to death for the past few years because of the depression."

I was joking around, but that Ladd? He just laughed and nodded.

"Oh, I see. Y'know, they say death by starvation's relatively painless. But I wouldn't want to *kill* someone that way. Think about it! When you're starving, you'll think, 'Oh, I'm going to die' even if you get a tiny bit hungry! And I don't feel like killing folks like that. You too, right?"

"Don't ask me to agree with you."

Ladd Russo.

I know plenty of creeps, but this guy's the real deal.

He's a homicidal maniac.

One of the worst of the worst--someone who enjoys killing.

I've never seen anything good out of being this guy's childhood friend.

Every time I get dragged out of one of those get-togethers of his, his buddies'd always ask me, "Who are you?". So before I knew it, they were calling me "Who". It was stupid for even Ladd to call me that, since he knows my name, but I let him do what he wants. I've known from the start that you can't talk sense into this guy. And I started getting kinda fond of my new name, too.

If you think about it, these so-called friends of Ladd all have a screw or two loose somewhere.

They made a bet a few years back--something about beating the shit out of the Nebula Chairman--and Ladd *actually* charged into that building to give the Chairman a beating.

Me? I was just busy trying not to get caught in the crossfire.

In the end, nothing big happened--I don't know what happened inside the Nebula building, but Ladd and the Chairman are both still alive--but I was sure I was gonna die.

Even if I was living a normal life, it's perfectly possible for me to get killed by a falling flowerpot or something.

But if I hung out with Ladd and his little gang, it'd just give the reaper more shots to get at me.

But I still stood by him so I could try and at least hold him back a little. I can't stop him completely, though.

Anyway, you never know if he'll end up burning Chicago to the ground on a whim. And then I might get killed too, dammit!

"So what if I'm free tomorrow?"

It was probably something stupid. I knew that, but I decided to lend an ear anyway.

Ladd looked at me like a kid on Christmas morning. He put his arm around my shoulder and whispered something.

"Hey, wanna come help me hijack a train?"

I knew it. Something stupid.

"No thanks. Why don't you just stop right there and forget about it?" I replied immediately.

But Ladd ignored me and began to go on about this ridiculous plan of his, patting me on the back.

"It's gonna be tomorrow--this luxury transcontinental, The Flying Pussyfoot, is coming to Chicago. We'll just hop on board, kill off half the passengers, kill off the rest of them, then crash the thing into New York... whaddaya think? Isn't it great?"

"So tell me why I have to come with you. What's in it for me?"

"Aw, Who. It's no fun when you just think in terms of benefits and losses. Sometimes in life you just have to take a few hits... and that time is now!"

That didn't even make any sense.

I felt like I was going to get drawn into Ladd's pace again, but I decided to struggle against this whirlpool of danger.

"Listen up, Ladd. Some weak nobody like me? Get into a train hijacking? I'd probably end up getting killed by one of *your* stray bullets. And even if I don't? Just *try* and go on a rampage on a train going fifty miles an hour. Or what if I trip over and fall into the furnace? If I slip and get turned into mincemeat on the wheels? What if some strong passenger grabs me and snaps my neck? And the Rail Tracer? It'd swallow me headfirst! And maybe I'll just end up dying of a heart attack because I'd be so damn scared! It's a dangerous world, Ladd. I ain't going somewhere just to get myself killed!" I yelled, breathing heavily.

But Ladd just gave me a simple answer.

"You know? That almost over-the-top fear of dying you have is great. As a human being, I *truly* respect that."

"Then stop going on those crazy rampages of yours."

I calmed myself, and mentioned a certain name.

"I don't want to end up like Leila."

"..."

Leila.

The mention of her name stopped Ladd for a moment.

And normally, this would be enough to stop him. But--

"Hey, hey, Who. It's not nice to get tied up by the past. When are we living? That's right. We're living in the *now*. The past is important, but we can't let it hold us back, y'know? We always have to think about the future. Isn't that right?"

For once, Ladd said something that sounded right. He grinned elatedly and mumbled.

"That's right... that humble little future I'll have with Lua."

It's over. This guy is incurable.

"...No way. If you're doing something crazy, go ask that guy in New York. What was his name again? Y'know, that guy with the gigantic monkey wrench."

"Hm? 'Lil Graham? Can't use him. I trust the kid, but if he goes crazy, the train's gonna get busted before it can get anywhere.

"But I *did* give him a call. *I'll* break the people, and *he'll* break everything else. I'm so excited for this party, I think I'm gonna go crazy!"

<=>

In the end, I ended up getting roped into this mess.

I spent three hours trying to talk him out of it, but Ladd spent the next four hours convincing *me* to join him.

It looked like he was going to sneak in shotguns and stuff onto the train tomorrow. I'd give it a fifty-fifty chance for the passengers to come out alive.

I went along out of worry because I thought I might be able to hold him back at least a little bit... but maybe if I was really worried, I would have beaten him half to death if it meant I could stop him. 'Course, I don't have the guts to go up against him.

In other words, I'm also an idiot.

Out of paranoia, I bought my tickets separately from them so I wouldn't be grouped in with them. If the police had us surrounded, I'd just take off my white shirt and say I just happened to be wearing the same colour. This is stupid, but what's a coward like me supposed to do, dammit?!

If I can't stop them, I might have to get away by jumping off the train.

...

I *could* call the cops on them right now.

But then I'd be dead meat.

I know Ladd wouldn't kill me. He goes on about killing people, but he makes it a personal rule to never kill anyone he considers a friend.

But there's another reason I'm scared of being killed.

It's because Ladd's the only one who follows rules like that. If I get caught calling the cops, I'd get rubbed out by his buddies. Even worse would be if the Russo Family gets involved because I got rid of their hitman... Ladd's uncle Placido might arrange for something downright terrifying.

Ladd always said, "There's no particular reason I'm like this. I've been crazy from the start". Maybe he was just a born killer. I can't deny that, since I don't remember anything that could have been something that triggered those homicidal tendencies.

But I do have some idea about where he got the "I only kill people who don't think they're gonna get killed" idea from.

Leila.

It must have something to do with her death.

She just died so suddenly.

And I... I might be partially responsible.

And that's why-

Tomorrow, I'll be boarding the train.

To take part in this ridiculous hijacking attempt.

...

No, that's just an excuse.

I'm trying to justify myself by saying I'm going to try and hold him back.

I just can't take my eyes off this, almost like I have some responsibility to him.

I'm tied up by the past, just like Ladd says. I'm tied up by Leila, dammit.

I can't ignore him, run away from him, or stop him.

All I can do is get scared as I watch him kill people.

This was what I was thinking, but in the end I could do nothing but get ready for the trip.

<=>

Several months later, New York.

That's right. Back then, I never could have imagined what would happen.

I thought I might die--or that the passengers would get killed.

But I would never have dreamed that Ladd and Lua would fall off the train, and that I'd be the only one who made it to New York without getting arrested or killed.

There was something strange about that train.

There was something strange about that night.

There was something strange about *them*.

That's right. *Everything* was weird.

I'm not going to say that *I'm* normal.

After all, no normal person would hang around Ladd.

But still... there was definitely something strange.

I'm still mulling it over--wondering what it could have been.

I'm working as something like an assistant to this weird doctor.

I'm still alive, even after Ladd got badly hurt and a bunch of his buddies got killed.

I guess I really am a crazy coward.

Smiles and Malice

December 30th, 1931. Union Station, Chicago.

A chilly wind blew across the station platforms.

The train sat on the tracks, as if defending the people on the platforms from the breeze.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of course, the only people who could possibly afford to take trains like this in this day and age were probably those who had no such cares--in the eyes of commoners, they would be little different from kings and nobles.

And on December 31st, 1931, a tragedy would strike this train.

However, there were several people whose presence in the massacre was not well known.

One of them had stepped into the tragedy in the place of one very lucky couple.

And he would do so with a smile.

"Now, dear. They won't even reimburse us for these tickets if we go home now."

"It's better than dying on the train, right?"

It was a couple in their fifties, who were quickly walking ahead of the train.

In contrast to the woman, who was briskly walking away in flight, the man was doing his best to delay her.

"I know your intuition's never been wrong, but still..."

They had been planning to go on a trip to New York on the *Flying Pussyfoot*, but the wife had suddenly changed her mind right before boarding.

"I'm getting a terrible feeling about this train."

Although the husband knew that his wife's intuition was often accurate, to abandon this trip so quickly would be quite a bold thing to do, considering the price of the tickets.

"I understand, but..."

"I have some extra savings left over. We won't be too badly off."

"Th-that's not what I'm saying, dear! I just..."

Then, someone stepped into this conversation.

"Hey there. Excuse me."

"Pardon?" the elderly couple asked the young man who spoke to them.

The young man looked like any person you'd find on the street, with an average build and height.

He had a big smile on his face. It was hard to tell what he was so happy about, but he spoke to the couple with a grin.

"I happened to hear your story... if you'd like, I'll take those tickets off your hands. For full price, of course."

"What...?"

"The lady's not willing to go on the train, and the gentleman's worried about the money. And *I* wanted to get on the train, but tickets were sold out. Isn't it perfect?"

"..."

The smile on his face was no doubt sincere.

But the woman felt something eerily off about the clarity of his grin.

"I think it's a great idea! It'll bring a smile to everyone!"

"B-but, you see, this train-"

Faced with the decision to sell the tickets, the man found himself worried about his wife's prediction. As he fretted to himself about telling the young man everything, his wife spoke in his stead.

"You might not believe me, but... I'm getting a terrible feeling about this train. Something is going to happen here. But if you're still willing to go..."

Although her words sounded like something straight out of a fanatical evangelist's preachings, the young man just let out a soft exclamation, went silent, smiled, and nodded.

"Then it's all the more reason to sell me those tickets."

"What?"

"If there *is* going to be an accident, it's better to have even one more person out and about to help save people."

The woman got a strange feeling about this young man who spoke as if he could survive any injury. But the young man just grinned sheepishly and told them the truth.

"You might not believe me, but... I'm not human."

<=>

At the same time, outside Union Station, Chicago.

A man was standing there.

That was all he was doing.

This was the only thing about this man, when seen from behind--

He was practically a part of the scenery, lacking in any sort of distinctive air about himself.

It was as if he had been there since the creation of Chicago, the U.S., and the Earth itself.

It was a short distance away from him that a young man and a young woman were conversing in a car.

"... I'm not gonna go on, after all."

"Oh? Are you sure about that? You worked hard for that second-class ticket. You never know when you'll get to ride the Flying Pussyfoot again."

"It doesn't matter."

"I see..."

The black-haired young man was mumbling. The brown-skinned woman smiled impishly and muttered back.

It seemed that something had come up--the young man had suddenly decided to not board the train.

"-I'm sorry--kay--setta--"

"--you--Ja--too--"

Their conversation was scattered in the winds, cut off in the noise of the city.

And having heard this short conversation, the man who had been part of the scenery slowly began moving.

"Second Class, is it...?"

Actually, it was more like he had begun to slither from his roost.

This man began to draw in a heavy air towards himself as he stepped towards the station. It was almost unnatural how naturally he walked, the way he left not a trace of his existence in this space.

This man silently walked forward, like a crow flying through the night.

There was one distinguishing feature about his face.

It was that his eyes were completely covered by the bangs that extended over his brow, all the way to the bridge of his nose.

Although this might normally be considered a rather striking feature about him, the fact that his eyes were covered made him look even less distinctive.

And as he molded a muddy, viscous atmosphere around himself, the man began walking forth with purpose.

So one man snuck on board the train, allowing no one to glimpse his appearance.

He boarded with malice in his eyes--not so wide like a lake, but like a deep, dark bog.

A Man Named Huey Laforet

1931, Somewhere in New York.

"How do you feel, you impossible imbecile?"

It was a closed space, covered on all four sides by sturdy metal walls and doors.

In the middle of the room was a simple desk, and two chairs were placed on either side of it.

That was all the room contained in terms of decor, leaving its occupants surrounded by nothing but drab walls.

The rough voice prompted one of the men, sitting in one of the chairs, to open his eyes.

"...Wasn't the questioning to take place in New York's Justice Department, if I am not mistaken?"

Although a weaker man would have been psychologically crushed in this strangely oppressive room, the man who had been locked here for half a day spoke coldly and calculatingly.

Meanwhile, the man who slammed the door open on his way shook his head overbearingly.

"The questioning at the Justice Department is for the terrorist. *My* questioning's going to leave no records outside of my brain, so it's my prerogative if I want to forge bullshit evidence. You better think carefully before you talk. Be honest, 'cause *I'm* the one who gets to decide how long you're gonna rot in prison."

"Talkative as usual. You haven't changed a bit, Victor. Setting aside the matter of forging testimony, I must say I find it difficult to imagine you remembering *every word* I speak, don't you agree?"

"... ..! ... Whoa there. Don't think you're gonna provoke any info outta me."

With a quick flitting between emotions, the man called Victor re-adjusted his glasses.

"Please, Victor. Provocation? I was merely making a suggestion based on what I remember of you from the past..."

"In any case!" Victor interrupted, then plopped into his seat and looked the other man in the eye.

"I'll ask you again. How do you feel, Mr. Oh-So-Great Terrorist? Not only did we foil your plan before you could get it off the ground, you even got yourself got arrested."

"I suppose, as a terrorist, there could be little more humiliating than this--but as the individual of Huey Laforet, I can't say this is the worst experience of my life."

"That so? Well, I'll make you experience the worst soon enough." Victor threatened. The man named Huey went silent for a moment, then talked back.

"I wonder... You see, currently, my worst memory is the experience of watching my mother die to prove her innocence in exchange for the execution of many of the people I loved. Another would be the memory of being unable to rescue my wife, back when we were in our hometown."

"...Hey."

"It is positively fascinating to hear you insinuate that you could force me to experience something even more painful than these two memories. Could you perhaps enlighten me to the specifics? Perhaps such a level of despair might be helpful in staving off the loneliness that may accompany the thousands of years ahead of me..."

"..."

Huey's suggestion left Victor dumbstruck.

Victor Talbot.

He was a member of a federal organization called the Bureau of Investigation, which would later come to be known as the FBI. He was also the head of an extraordinary division.

Sitting before him was a terrorist, who was assumed to have plotted highly destructive actions with the purchase of scores of weaponry.

Huey Laforet.

He was a criminal who headed a group of armed men known as the Lemures, as well as other such subordinate organizations, if rumours were anything to go by.

The two men were about as far apart as anyone could be, but they had one thing in common--a similarity that lay far beyond the scope of normal human understanding, and very difficult to notice for normal people.

Immortals.

It was a simple yet effective word straight out of a picture book or a Greek myth, concisely describing the kind of beings these two men were.

They were fellow alchemists who had crossed the Atlantic on the same ship in the year 1711.

Even if they were to explain that a demon they summoned on the ship gave them the Grand Panacea, most people would take it as something straight out of the Arabian Nights.

However, the truth was that the men had indeed lived up to this point--the 1930s, and the passage of time had completely altered their relationship.

A loud sigh broke the brief silence, as Victor finally spoke up again.

"...What's with you? You and Elmer both. Does everyone from Lotto Valentino have a screw or three loose? Describing your worst memories like you're reading out of a goddamned history textbook... with a smile, in Elmer's case!"

For the first time in this conversation, a very human look crossed Huey's face at sudden mention of a place called 'Lotto Valentino' and the name 'Elmer'.

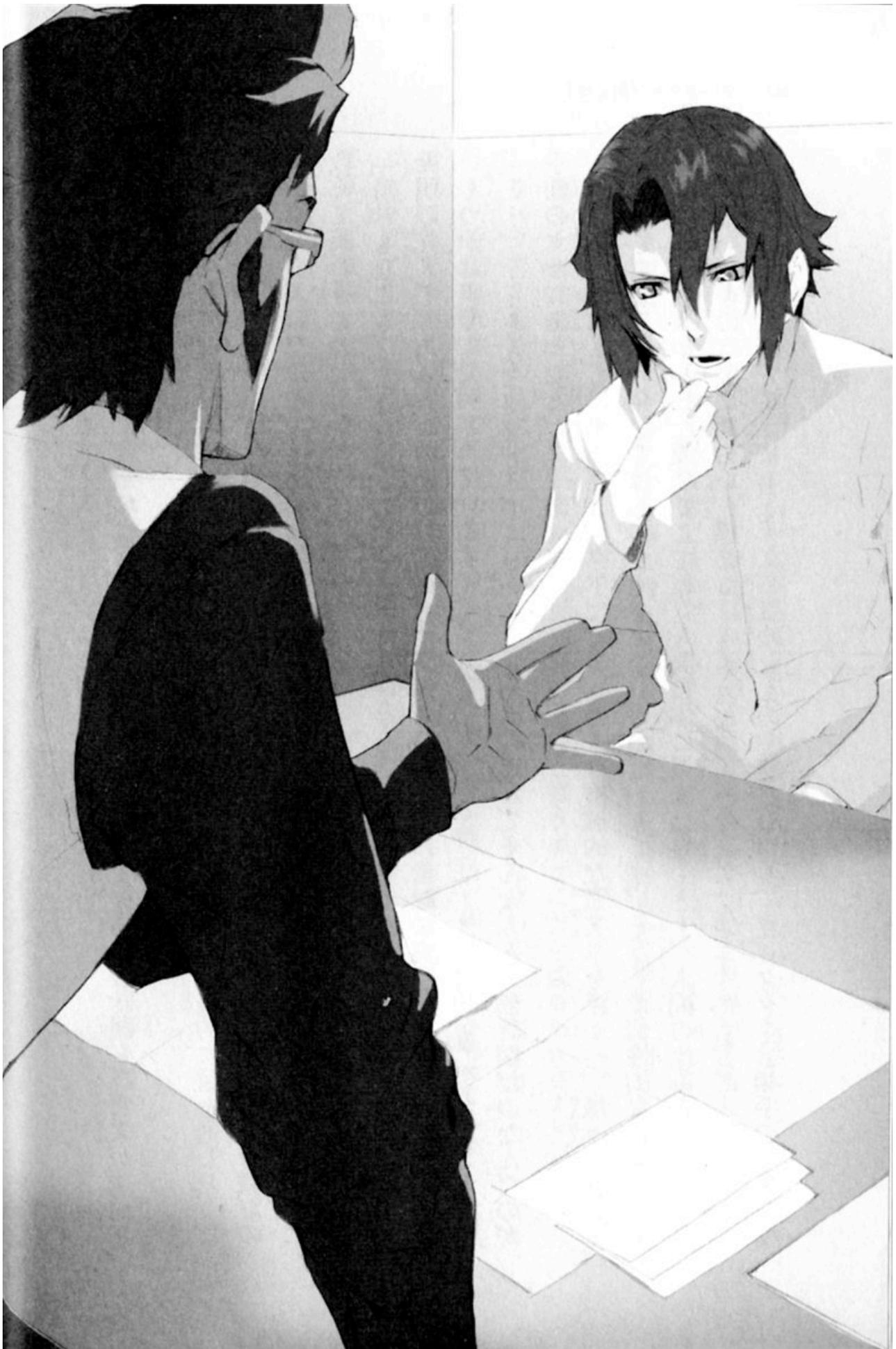
Thus far he had been wearing a very faint smile like that of a doll, but now, if only for a moment, it turned into a wry grin, full of human emotion.

"Elmer is insane, after all."

"Speak for yourself."

"Elmer is a madman. He's just very much a headache in that sense, as he appears to be normal at first glance. You see, everyone mistakes his insanity for kindness, not realizing how terrifying the hand he reaches out to them really is."

"What, so you two weren't friends after all?" Victor asked mockingly.



"Why do you say that, Victor? Even now, Elmer is still my dear friend. Of course, I'd be too embarrassed to say this to his face."

"Don't say it's embarrassing if you can't at least bring yourself to look embarrassed. So you're calling someone that dangerous a friend of yours?"

"That's correct. Although I do suppose half the credit should go out to some strangely dogged twists of fate. In any event, no matter how the world may change, that twisted philosophy of Elmer's never will. Or perhaps I should say it will never be cured... I suppose, to me, that nature of his is somewhat like the North Star that guides one through unknown waters." Huey answered vaguely, and shook his head conclusively.

Victor seemed to have understood this. With a click of the tongue, he got to the point that he had based this entire questioning session on.

"What the hell were you trying to accomplish by demonstrating your immortality to some pitiful humans? Those idiots have no idea that they'll get sick of things after less than a century. Why were you baiting them with immortality? I'd almost understand if you were creating a cult, but you just went ahead collecting weapons. What are you trying to do, restart the crusades?"

"That is an insult to the crusaders, Victor. And I'm sure you don't have to ask to know what I'm after. We are not friends, you and I, but I believe we still have a good idea of what to expect from one another's characters."

"Then it was an experiment, was it?" Victor mumbled, disgusted, and took out a stack of files and tossed them onto the desk. "We found these in your hideout. Don't even think about pretending you don't recognize 'em."

"Oh? This would be..."

In the files before Huey were countless photographs, as well as manuals and blueprints for all kinds of devices.

"I scoured these documents of yours, knowing you probably recorded the details of your plans in them. But you know what I found? Some goddamned blueprints for flying warships, wheeled ships, bird-powered airplanes, talking clocks and dolls... Now, I want you to tell me how the fuck you encoded your plans into these shitty blueprints."

"Encoded? Please, Victor. These blueprints are exactly what they appear to be. They are the creations of a man who, while much younger than us, deserves our respect. These blueprints were all created in the nineteenth century, and several of these items have been properly patented. I'm sure even *you* have seen a talking clock before."

"... ..Never mind! So tell me, why the hell were these blueprints in your hideout? Answer me!" Victor demanded, face flushed red. Huey smiled mechanically.

"It's little more than a hobby of mine. I enjoy perusing these inspired ideas that I could never come up with myself. I'm not a very easy person to please, you see. I have no interest in humans, but I truly delight in seeing their ideas."

Huey's twisted smile gave Victor the chills, but he held himself back, trying not to pay too much attention to what Huey was saying.

"I'm real happy to hear you've got some cute hobbies. See me doing backflips in midair? Yeah. So I don't expect anything from you, but I do see some pretty dangerous stuff in these blueprints. Like this portable flamethrower-- something like this poses a serious danger."

"Oh? That would be one of my inventions. ...I built an experimental prototype not too long ago."

"...What?"

"Now that I think on this matter, perhaps I still hold some unconscious trauma about the witch burnings. In other words, perhaps this invention of mine is a product of my unconscious anger."

"The hell? You *made* one of these? Where'd you--"

"That was what I'd initially thought you'd come to ask about."

The condescension was wiped clear off Victor's face.

But just before he could talk back, the door opened, and a man who seemed to be Victor's subordinate entered the room.

"Edward? What's going on?"

"Well, sir..."

The young detective glanced at Huey, then quickly whispered something into Victor's ear.

Upon hearing the report in its entirety, Victor desperately shaped his twitching face into something resembling an angry grin.

Huey curiously observed Victor, and asked the obvious question.

"What might be the matter, Victor?"

"...So that's how you're going to play, you fucking bastard?"

"I beg your pardon?"

The terrorist's mechanical smile did not budge. Victor forced himself to grin back, his face trembling, and spilled the contents of the report to the criminal before him.

"We've received a report that your men have taken the transcontinental--the Flying Pussyfoot--hostage... in return for your safe release."

"Is that so?"

"Fuck if I know! Now I see why you were so relaxed! That's what you were planning all this time, am I right? You've finally started going after innocents, you incurable freak of nature?!"

"Those were not my orders. I believe my men are acting independently in order to demand my release."

"Same difference! They're *your* men! Listen up, Huey. Creating an organization means you're taking responsibility for it. In other words, the fact that a bastard like you, who considers humans lab rats, is creating an organization..."

Huey zoned out Victor's ranting, moving on to thoughts about the half-expected rampage of the Lemures.

'Considering Goose's personality, I suppose this was inevitable.'

'Now, Chane... what will you do? The government is not likely to budge for a few hundred hostages.'

'You are a mortal, Chane. Will you live by your loyalty to me and end up shot to death by the police? Will you split off from Goose and the others? Or will you give up on me and go your own way? Or perhaps you will betray my expectations entirely.'

'You are my daughter, but sometimes you do things that I could never expect from you.'

Huey thought of his daughter, someplace far away, and laughed silently.

'You truly are a wonderful experiment.'



第一章『語られる世界1』

Chapter 1 - A World Coming to Light

1934. Inside a transcontinental express train.

"Wow! A rainbow!"

The high-pitched voice of a child pierced the air of the small cabin.

A young girl's fingers rhythmically ran along the window frame to the beat of the shaking of the train.

The tiny girl, not yet fifteen, carried herself as any other child her age would. But around her neck was an object obviously out of place--a camera used by reporters. The juxtaposition, however, only served to highlight her youth.

The camera was most definitely not a toy. The silver-and-black Leica practically exuded a heavy force of its own around the girl.

The girl, however, was oblivious to that air. She merely looked at the rainbow and smiled innocently.

Of course, no matter how much she smiled for the world, only one person was around to see it.

Occupying the First Class cabin of the westbound transcontinental express was the girl with the camera and an adult man sitting opposite the table from her, a newspaper opened before him.

The cabin, however, looked a bit small, even for its two occupants. The window frame was ornately carved, but the curtains were made of cheap fabric with simple, bumpy designs. There were chairs, beds, and a table, but they certainly didn't look very comfortable. In fact, Second Class looked much more welcoming thanks to the lack of furnishings leaving more space in the cabin.

This train was likely not for those who enjoyed travelling, but geared towards people who used it solely for transport. The tickets for First Class here were actually about half the price of First Class tickets on other trains.

Of course, it was still a luxury that most people couldn't dare to afford, especially considering the Depression.

"A rainbow, you say...? Indeed they are wondrous occurrences, Carol. After all, their very presence soothes the hearts and minds of all those who gaze upon them."

The man spoke, as if to himself. The newspaper was still hiding his face.

"An immense work of art drawn into the sky... Why, I wonder, does a phenomenon resembling the simple, thoughtless drawings of a child so lead us to marvel at its sight?"

"Right, sir?" The girl asked innocently. The man slowly folded his newspaper as he deepened his tone.

"And yet, Carol... From the time we were but children, we have thought of rainbows as exquisite, holding no doubts in our mind otherwise. Why is that?"

"Huh? Well..."

The girl called Carol turned around towards the man, wondering what he was talking about.

From behind the newspaper emerged the face of a sharp-eyed, middle-aged man. At first glance he looked rather young, but the grey hairs on his head made it difficult to pinpoint his exact age. His eyes shone like a hawk's, and over his left eye was a monocle. A distorted reflection of Carol appeared on the concave-convex lens of the glass.

The man's elegant manner of dress, his expensive-looking clothes, and the obviously expensive umbrella at his side made him look like a wealthy entrepreneur. His sharp eyes, looking nothing less than evil, were always sure to make an impression on all those who met him.

The man tossed the paper onto the desk, then looked out towards the seven-coloured beam of light with his right eye.

"Imagine the sudden appearance of such an object in the sky. People who do not know about the refraction of light may see it as a harbinger of disaster. In fact, there are some cultures that do consider rainbows as such. Perhaps the arc of the rainbow is a path along which disaster will rain down. Perhaps vegetation is ablaze at the foot of the rainbow. It is by no means unusual to see things in such a way. And yet we look upon these seven-coloured pieces of wonder with a sense of childlike wonder. Have you ever thought about that, Carol?"

"I haven't."

"..."

"But it's not like thinking about is going to get me closer to the answer, right? Besides, our job isn't to think about things, but to report to others the outcome of what's already happened. Right, Mr. Vice-President?"

Carol tried to be mature in her reply to the Vice-President's analytical question. A look of confidence in her own answer was written all over her face, only serving to further emphasize her childlikeness.

The Vice-President smiled faintly and shook his head.

"Hm... I'm afraid that answer is only worth about three hundred and nineteen points."

"Huh? Out of how many?" Carol asked, flustered. The Vice-President continued as if to console her.

"You are correct in thinking that it is our job to make the facts known to the world, Carol. But you must never stop wondering about the authenticity of a given piece of information, even after you have taken possession of it. We cannot allow ourselves to be satisfied with the mere knowledge of the veracity of the facts, and that is our responsibility as those who convey information to others."

Though there could be little more dignity stuffed into the Vice-President's tone, Carol failed to understand.

"What's there to think about? I mean, it's not like I can change the facts just by thinking about them, right?"

She was likely upset by the fact that her proud answer had been shot down so quickly. The Vice-President, in sharp contrast to his narrowed eyes, smiled gently.

"No, it *does*. Perhaps not with the aforementioned rainbow, but... Depending on how one thinks, the facts of the past and the future that has yet to come are both capable of changing."

As the Vice-President continued, he began folding the newspaper he had set aside earlier, as if working on a piece of origami.

Even if she were to pay attention to the newspaper instead of listening to the Vice-President's words, Carol would have no idea what he was doing with the paper.

The Vice-President continued on both fronts, folding the newspaper and speaking as if the two actions belonged to entirely separate organisms.

"For example... Yes. No matter what may have happened in the past, knowledge of the future directly ahead of oneself allows one to change the outcome entirely. After all, information you obtain only gains value after you *think* about it with your mind... and also your heart."

Though his hands continued fast on the newspaper, there was no hesitation in his speech. Carol attempted to make a rebuttal, but she was interrupted by the Vice-President and the occurrence of an unthinkable situation.

"In other words-"

Carol felt something terribly off about the hallway outside their door as the Vice-President spoke.

There was a muffled racket coming from the hallway. Suddenly, the door beside Carol slammed open.

Entering the cabin was a group of men with scarves over their mouths.

Dressed like quintessential bank robbers, the men instantly turned the First Class cabin's air of elegance into an air of unease.

"Eeek?!"

Carol flinched, scared by the sudden intrusion. She had no idea what was going on, but her body had acted on its own and froze. The Vice-President, meanwhile, raised his right hand over his head like clockwork.

In his hand was the folded-up newspaper.

Before even noticing the Vice-President's arm, the intruders tried to explain themselves in a quick sentence.

"All right! Keep quiet-"

At that moment, the Vice-President's right hand swung down with incredible force.

In an instant, the air blew up in their ears.

An explosive noise, rather like the sound of fireworks, rang out through the cabin. Carol and the men all flinched at the ear-splitting noise.

"Ugh... The hell...?"

The men, armed with knives, looked around, their purpose forgotten. Their eyes flickered around, searching the tiny cabin for the source of the terrifying sound. But they could not find explosives or firearms of any sort.

By the time the only intruder to have set foot into the cabin itself had blinked twice, he felt a sudden pressure at the back of his knees as his balance collapsed at once.

"Huh...?"

His eyes turned to the ceiling, growing ever distant from his viewpoint.

By the time he realized that he was seeing his friends upside-down, a powerful shock rattled the back of his head as his pain and consciousness faded.

The last thing he saw before falling unconscious was the sight of the dark figure sliding to his feet from the chair, throwing a newspaper into a fellow robber's face, and landing an uppercut to his chin.

"Huh?"

Carol, cowering in the corner in fear of the sudden noise, watched the scene unfold before her between the fingers over her face. Even though she was in a relatively clear state of mind, she let her voice slide out of her mouth in confusion.

"Mr. Vice-President... What happened?"

All she could do was watch.

At the moment of the ear-splitting noise. The Vice-President had taken hold of the end of the umbrella that had been leaning against the chair, using its hooked handle to trip the man who had just entered the room.

As the shady-looking man dramatically fell backwards, the Vice-President threw the newspaper at one of the two men in the hallway. He then landed an unusual uppercut on the man, sending him flying into the air.

The third man, distracted by his flying friend for a single moment, tried to point the metal object in his hand towards the Vice-President. But before he could pull the trigger on the object--a revolver--the Vice-President's hand covered the magazine and firmly grasped the gun.

With the cylinder stuck in place, the gun could not fire. The Vice-President easily snatched the gun from the final man, then landed a powerful kick between the man's legs.

The man fell to the ground with his eyes rolling into the back of his head. With this, the three intruders were defeated in an instant.

In the end, the girl had been unable to do anything. Silence had returned to them before she could even scream. It was as though nothing had ever happened.

"A, are you all right, Mr. Vice-President?" Carol asked nervously, even though the man in question had not been struck once.

The Vice-President stowed the gun in his coat pocket, then sharply glanced at Carol with a smile.

"I apologize for using the newspaper before giving you a chance to read it, Carol... If it is still intact, it should still be quite readable."

"Oh, right, sir."

"So, let us return to the matter at hand. In other words, it was because I could foresee such an event occurring through the use of preexisting information that I could prepare myself ahead of time and escape danger." The Vice-President said matter-of-factly. Carol thought hard for a moment, wondering where she should chime in. She then sighed loudly and looked at the Vice-President in astonishment.

"In other words, you knew from the start that we might be attacked, Mr. vice-President?"

"No, it was merely an educated guess, quite close to a definitive conclusion."

"Then why did we get on this train in the first place?!"

"Carol. I only arrived at this conclusion at a point when it was already too late to return the tickets I had already purchased. I had even handed the receipt to the President ahead of time. Or are you suggesting that we follow Rachel's example and climb under the cars?"

'That's not the problem', Carol was about to complain, but their conversation was yet again interrupted by a third party.

"...You... Who the hell are you?"

"Eek?!"

Carol froze again at the sound of a sudden, unfamiliar voice.

The speaker's cold voice had come from just outside the cabin door, but he was just out of Carol's line of sight. He was likely standing against the wall right beside the door, but Carol didn't feel like she should poke her head out to check.

The cold, bloodlust-laden voice was directed at the Vice-President, as though the three unconscious men were none of the speaker's concern.

The Vice-President, however, took a sip of tea from the cup on the table as though to refresh himself and began to effortlessly begin a conversation with the man outside.

"...Who am I, you ask? If it is my name you are asking for, I shall introduce myself as Gustav St. Germain, sir. ...Allow me to add that 'St. Germain' is a pseudonym I happened to borrow from the famous immortal alchemist and peerless information broker--the Count of St. Germain. Although I suppose that has little to do with what you are asking for, good sir.

"...So it is my occupation you ask about, sir? Then I will introduce myself as the Vice-President of the Daily Days, a newspaper company based in New York. We are one of the top tabloids in the city, if I do say so myself, and I would greatly appreciate it if you would consider a subscription, sir. In addition, I also dabble in some information brokerage as well."

A mass of condensed information contained within a series of polite sentences.

The Vice-President's tone had done a 180 from his conversations with Carol. His voice now perfectly matched his sharp eyes, making him resemble a master tactician scoping out his prey.

His ramblings were rather long, but the fluidity of his speech had rendered both Carol and the man in the hall unable to even think about interrupting him.

However, the bloodlust emanating from the hallway did not let up, even for a single moment.

"Let me tell you... Let me tell you an unfathomable story."

"I am listening."

"We had, you see, determined that we should announce our arrival in Chicago with a rather explosive bang by robbing some unsightly bluebloods while aboard this train. Yet, as soon as I open the curtains on this act, I am faced with this cruel twist of fate. ...Who tipped you off about us? ...No, let me *borrow* your words. Where did you obtain this 'educated guess'? Could it be that one of my men spilled everything to you? Then this unfathomable tale would become a mere tragedy, but I trust my friends and therefore discount the possibility altogether. Then this tale remains an unfathomable one..."

The man's voice grew tenser and tenser by the second. Even Carol, who wasn't facing him personally, could feel the bloodlust emanating from the man's ranting.

But as she held back tears with the camera in her clutches, the conversation went back to the relaxed Vice-President.

"Haha... Hahahahaha... Of course. How did I obtain the information that allowed me to anticipate your plan, sir? Perhaps you could let this one slide by virtue of my occupation as an information broker. I ask you to accept this, as the conclusion will not change on your whims. After all, there is no changing the past, no matter how much you search for meaning in a completed action."

Although the Vice-President of the information agency--Gustav St. Germain--spoke to the man outside in a very humble tone, there was a note of absolute confidence in his voice.

"I am not obligated to accept that. For one, wouldn't it be a wonderful reference for my next attempt at a robbery? Now, the fact that there's a little-miss-pint-size here makes me feel much less inclined to barge in on random cabins to commit robberies. Lemme tell you something. I always thought that bastards who could afford First Class in this day and age must all be goddamned criminals evading taxes or something. But seeing this ankle-biter here just takes all the excitement out of it! But the problem I got with that roundabout way you talk like some kind of broken carousel is neither here nor there, so I will nicely suggest to you that you'll be a lot better off if you just *answer the question*. Capische?"

As the fast-talking, supposed leader of the robbers reached the height of his bloodlust, Gustav narrowed his already sharp eyes and posed a question.

"If you would recall, sir. I am an information broker. To acknowledge everything--from the latest in stock market trends to one's own traumatic memories--as nothing but pieces of data, and deal in them as merchandise is the work of one such as myself. And that is the face with which I speak to you now."

"...You're making a sales pitch at a time like this?"

"I believe our negotiations are already underway, good sir."

There was great power in the Vice-President's words. The three men rolling on the floor before them were testament to that. Yet there was not a hint of fear in the tone of the man in the hallway. Only his bloodlust had diminished slightly.

"...It seems I'll put off tearing apart both of your joints for now."

"Eek."

Carol screamed softly, realizing that she was also one of the man's intended targets. What he had just said made it sound like she was out of danger for now, but Carol still could not bring herself to be relieved.

"Haha... Putting prices on people's heads, are we?" The Vice-President asked.

"I fail to see how it differs from putting prices on information." The man in the hallway retorted. The Vice-President snickered and took another sip of tea.

"If you insist, sir, I agree to those terms. ...Well then, I suppose I will explain to you the details surrounding a certain incident. Carol, this will be an excellent learning experience for you as well. I expect nothing less than your full attention."

"Huh?!" Suddenly put on the spot, Carol looked around in shock.

"It would only be beneficial for you to know this story--the story about a man named Claire Stanfield and the strange people around him. Of course, this particular tale is centred around a certain young lady, who happens to be his other half."

"A man named... 'Claire'...?"

"In the past, the name 'Claire' was used for men, Carol. It seems his father was a rather old fashioned man. ...But let us return to the matter at hand."

The Vice-President poured himself another cup of tea as he prepared an empty cup.

"Perhaps you would care to come inside and join us for tea, sir? No doubt it must be quite chilly out in the hallway."

Carol froze, but Gustav invited the man in the hallway into the cabin.

The man hesitated, but the Vice-President poured tea into the new cup and delightedly began to tell the story behind a certain incident. It was as though he was enjoying the act of storytelling itself.

"So... Where shall I begin this tale?"

"Yes, perhaps it would be best to start off with her story. Her name is..."

Interlude - [TIPS: Huey and Chane]

"I will raise this child." Huey Laforet declared to the woman before him, holding in his arms an infant wrapped in a blanket. "I do not presume to think that you could properly raise her. It is obvious that you will trip and fall while holding her and bring about a tragedy."

The woman, who seemed to be the baby's mother, complained with a miffed look--but surprisingly, she backed down after only a few disagreements. She soon disappeared from her daughter's presence with a spring in her step.

"To think you would give up so easily, even for a child you bore and gave birth to... I'd known you had lost touch with your humanity, but it's still quite astonishing to see that you've also lost touch with any sort of maternal instincts." Huey mumbled, and spoke to the girl in his arms as if playing with her.

"Of course, I am no more in touch with humanity than she is."

Huey looked down at the infant sleeping soundly in his arms, and whispered self-deprecatingly.

"And that is why you will not have a normal upbringing."

Over fifteen years passed.

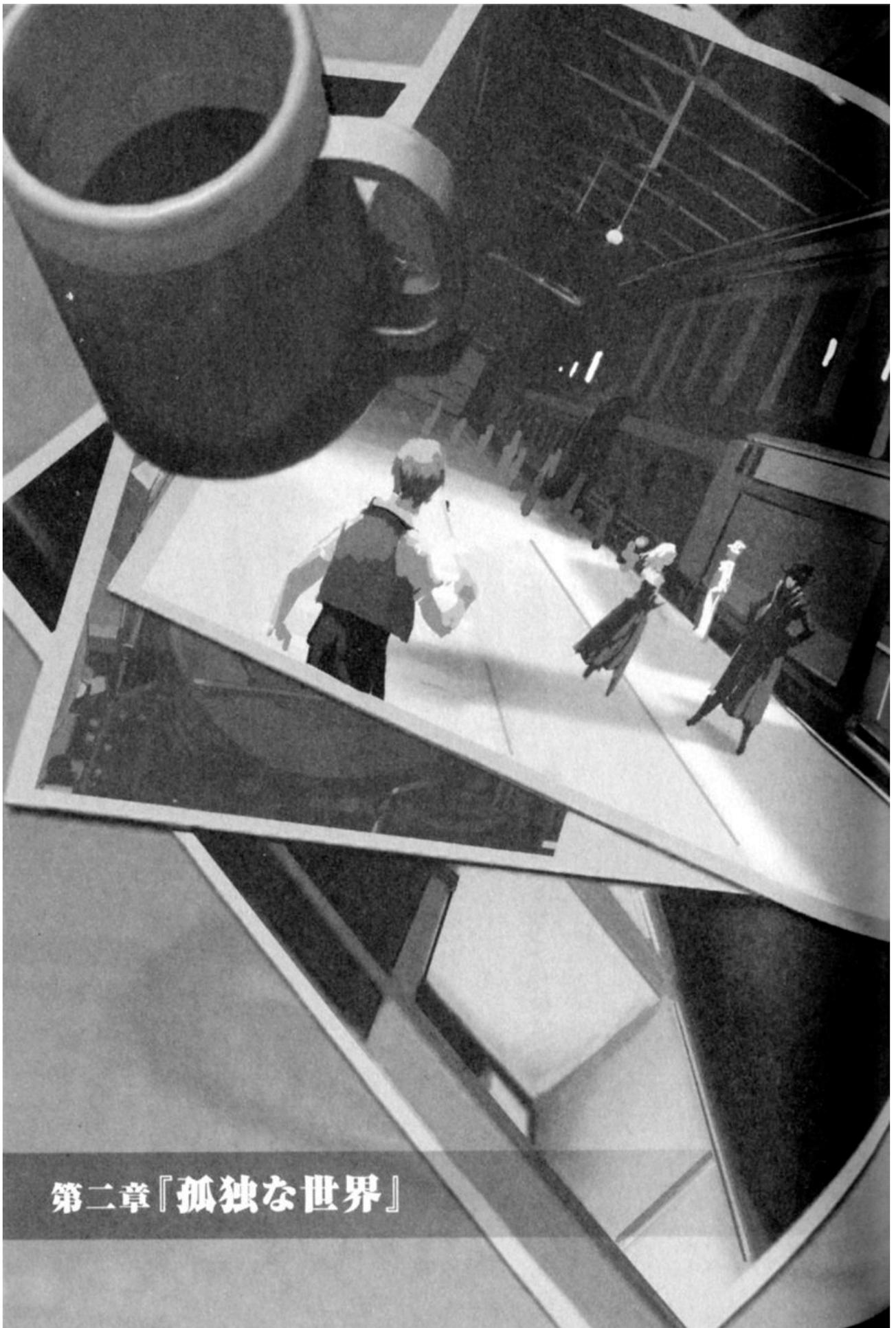
The girl who had lost her voice boarded a certain train, all in order to rescue her father.

To rescue her father, who was her only reason for being.

She was not a normal person. She knew understood that she was abnormal by the standards of others, but did not even question why.

And on the Flying Pussyfoot, she met a certain man.

A terrifyingly bizarre and curiously ludicrous monster who would turn her world upside-down.



第二章『孤独な世界』

Chapter 2 - A Lonely World

I recall hearing before that I was named by my mother.

I have never even seen her before, but I believe that this name is our only link. Even now I still feel a sense of connection between us in this name.

I never missed her, but I treasured my name.

Because this is the name my father calls me by. My name cements the connection between father and myself.

And I am thankful for it.

Just hearing my father call my name brought me happiness. I was overcome with joy whenever he spoke to me.

After all... my father is all I have.

That has still not changed.

My father is everything in my world. I need nothing else.

And yet, that man so easily pierced this shell and stepped into my world.

It was as if I was looking upon a character straight out of a fairy tale my father used to read to me as a child.

He was no knight in shining armour--but an evil sorcerer, taking joy in breaking rules left and right.

<=>

January 1932. New York.

Prohibition.

Some say that this is the word that best represents the state of New York City in this era.

In the future, those who hear the word 'Prohibition' are more likely to picture things like the mafia, organized crime, or Al Capone rather than the political origins of the policy or the people who put it into motion.

By prohibiting something that people desired, all in order to stop corruption, the law gave birth to a system of highly methodical order of criminal organizations.

As the economy worsened by the day after the Great Stock Market Crash of 1929, massive fortunes were being made in the criminal underworld through the circulation of bootlegged liquor.

Speakeasies popped up along the streets, and much blood was shed over control of the profits.

Culture in America had also begun to evolve rapidly in this era.

The countless musical films that were spawned by the invention of talkies became one of the main sources of entertainment for the people from whom liquor had been forbidden.

Hand-in-hand with the rise of musical films came films that depicted the criminal underworld, such as [Little Caesar] or [The Public Enemy].

The gangs, who provided the people with liquor, were even seen by some as heroes who were above the foolish government.

As cash changed hands in speakeasies in the midst of the Depression, people fell deeper into debt. The gangsters who should have always stayed in the underworld had simultaneously become the heroes and the villains.

The criminal underworld and the world of law had come together in the form of a moebius loop, entrapping people within.

This was the era into which Chane Laforet was born.

New York, a city where the intermingling of light and shadow was even further complicated.

Chane was standing there among a crowd of people in a corner of this city.

Standing was all she could do.

The streets that were home to government buildings and offices were filled with many more people than usual.

It was a crowd drawn by morbid fascination, determined to witness the transportation of Huey Laforet, the man who had raised no small uproar in his terrorist plot against the government.

Chane had hidden herself among these crowds in order to rescue that terrorist--her father.

Over her black dress she wore a thin coat, hiding the bandages around her left shoulder--and the knives she concealed.

It had been several days since the incident aboard the transcontinental express, the Flying Pussyfoot.

The Lemures had planned a trainjacking in order to rescue their leader, Huey Laforet. Chane also had taken part in that plan, prepared to give her life for the plot that would grant freedom to her father.

But the plan had been ruined thanks to the intervention of multiple parties, such as the gang of murderers in white suits. She had lost all of her allies--no, she had lost those that she now clearly knew were no allies of hers.

Chane knew all of this. She never trusted them to begin with.

After all, she was also only using them as tools.

She never cared if others were to betray her.

Chane never trusted anyone, and knew full well that she was only a guinea pig to her father. The betrayal of the Lemures mattered nothing to her.

As for her father, Chane was happy to help him by being his guinea pig.

In the end, though she thought Goose's organization would be of some help to her in rescuing her father, the Lemures had been all but wiped out. Chane was now practically its only active member, though she had heard rumours of survivors who were on the run--but she was certain that she would never end up joining them.

'In the end, it is all up to me.'

Even though she had lost anyone upon whom she could put her trust, Chane refused to give up. In fact, she was now more determined than ever to rescue her father on her own.

The transportation of the suspect was delayed because of the incident, but as soon as the date was set, all it took were rumours to have the crowds descend upon the street in an instant.

The rumours, of course, also reached Chane. She had come alone to this place, ready to make her final stand and cut down every officer in the area if necessary.

The moment her father emerged to board the transport, she moved to draw the knife at her waist and cut down the officer in front of her.

Suddenly, her father mouthed something.

It was as though he knew that she was watching him. He looked as confident as one could be as he silently gave her his instruction.

[Do not worry]

Chane had never learned to lip-read, so she could not be sure that she had interpreted his words correctly.

The one thing she was certain of, however, was that her father had no fears about his impending imprisonment.

As a result, she hesitated to jump in, losing her final chance.

Had she made the right decision?

As the crowds began to disperse, the quiet young woman began to ask herself. She asked the same question over and over, knowing that, no matter what conclusion she reached, the results would never change. Was this really all right?

As she stood alone, quickly losing confidence, Chane suddenly noticed rushed footsteps approaching her and reflexively turned to face the sound.

Of course, in her hands were her favourite knives. A set of silvery blades lightly touched the throat of the approaching man.

"Huh? AAAAHHHH! Chane! I-it's me! Please calm down!"

"..."

Seeing the distinctive tattoo on the newcomer's face, Chane quietly lowered her knives. Passersby stared for a moment in shock, but quickly looked away and walked off briskly, not intent on getting involved.

The young man, who had just been in mortal peril, took gasping breaths as he smiled at Chane, teary-eyed.

"P-please don't scare me like that, Chane..."

"..."

Even after sheathing her knives and concealing them under her coat again, Chane continued to icily stare at the young man.

There was a sword-shaped tattoo on his face that might leave a bad impression of him were he a normal man, but the young man acted more like the kind of person who would be on the receiving end of beatings from tattooed crooks.

There was not a hint of aggression in his teary eyes. The sword tattoo almost looked like part of a clown's makeup on his face.

'Jacuzzi... Jacuzzi Splot.'

Silently looking upon the young man's face, Chane reiterated his name in her head.

He was the one providing her with a temporary residence during her stay in New York.

A group of young people had pulled her from the river as they hauled in some special cargo that had been tossed out of the train. The young people were train robbers, and the young man Chane was looking upon now was their leader.

Looking at the young man, who looked to be quite inadequate for his position in his gang, Chane wondered one thing.

'Why is he here?'

Chane had told no one of her intention to come to this place.

Then did the young man's presence mean that he knew she was planning to rescue her father?

How?

Why?

As Chane went over these questions in her head, Jacuzzi slowly calmed down.



"Are you all right, Chane? I'm so relieved... I-I thought you were going to rescue that Huey person all by your- AAAACK!"

Jacuzzi's sentence turned into a scream partway through. Chane's knife had gone to the side of his throat the moment he mentioned the name 'Huey'.

"W, why are you threatening me again, Chane?!" Jacuzzi cried. Chane ignored his complaint and glared at him murderously.

What was he plotting, bringing up her father's name at a time like this?

Chane wanted to pry further, but having given up her voice and purposely forgone learning any sort of sign language, the act of interrogation was a difficult task for her with nothing but her gaze and expressions.

'Or perhaps it will be easier to slit his throat here and flee.' Chane thought for a moment, but the thought of losing the hiding place she had so fortuitously found stopped her from pursuing this line of thought any further.

However, Chane refused to lower her knives and continued to stare at him.

"W-wait! Chane, calm down!"

As she saw the girl approaching, Chane finally regained her composure.

The newcomer was a young blonde woman covered in scars, who wore a black eyepatch and glasses. She was perhaps the same age as Jacuzzi, and looked equally out of place in a law-abiding environment. However, the tone of her voice was no different from that of any other girl her age.

'That's right. This girl... she knows who I am.'

Chane had bumped into a certain duo when she encountered the white suit atop the train. This young woman with the eyepatch was one of the two people crawling across the roof at the time.

The fact that she had dropped her food the moment she caught sight of Chane in Jacuzzi's hospital room several days ago made it quite clear--along with her nervous laughter--she knew exactly who Chane was.

Chane had come to this conclusion several days ago, and continued to look upon the girl with a blank expression.

She was expecting them to turn her in to the police, but she caught wind of no such thing in the past few days. It was almost disappointing, as she had even planned out an escape with a hostage in tow.

'What is he thinking?'

Jacuzzi was the leader of a group of delinquent youths. Currently Chane was accompanied only by these two, but she knew that the gang numbered somewhere between thirty and forty people.

Though they were no match for the mafia, even young people like them, who had no firearms, were quite strong in their own right, especially with their numbers.

And although she had only observed them for a short while, Chane could tell that this motley group of delinquents were a rather efficient organization.

Chane still had no idea about the things the gang had done on the Flying Pussyfoot. At this point she knew of neither Goose's defeat at Jacuzzi's hands nor of the gang's rescue of the hostages in the dining car.

Even so, Chane was convinced of the gang's strength.

Although she was confused about the fact that an organization strong enough to influence a small society had so easily accepted a stranger like herself, something else nagged at her even more.

She was most uneasy about the fact that they did not pry about her identity.

Even though they knew that she was one of the black-suited terrorists, they did not blame her, question her, or call the police on her. And it wasn't as though they were sheltering her for fear of retribution.

Although the eyepatch woman--Nice--and the young man beside her--Nick--had initially been visibly terrified when they first met, over the past few days their fear had begun to slowly dissipate.

Having lived among the untrusting Lemures all this time, the way Jacuzzi's gang treated her almost frightened Chane.

'Are they also trying to use me? Or my father?'

She did not know just how much these people knew about Huey Laforet, but Chane could not overlook the possibility that they knew everything and were keeping her safe in order to earn her father's favour.

'If that should happen, all I have to do is leave them.'

If they did not mean to harm her father, there would be no need to kill them. After all, things could be easily solved by removing herself from the equation. Chane calmed herself with this thought and sheathed her knives again.

"A-ah... I-I'm glad you're not misunderstandin' or anything, Chane." Jacuzzi sighed, eyes still watery.

But Chane's question had still not been answered. She stared at him, wide-eyed.

Nice seemed to have read the question from her eyes and answered in place of Jacuzzi, who had been blinded by his tears.

"Um, well, you told us that your name was Chane Laforet, right? ...We thought that maybe you were related to that man from the newspapers--Huey Laforet. That's why we thought you might be here."

Nice's explanation relaxed Chane, if only a little.

She remembered that she had written out her name for the delinquents who had pulled her from the river. At the time she was too disoriented to think of using a pseudonym, but she now wondered if she had made the right decision.

Although she had her regrets, Chane quickly dismissed the thought.

'My name connects me to my father. How could I think of denying it?'

Whether or not she knew of the limitations placed upon immortals and their names, Chane treasured her name more than might be typical. It was as though the name "Chane" connected her to her father.

As she convinced herself that she could not abandon the name she shared with her father--the name "Laforet"--even if it were to be a temporary abandonment, Nice spoke to her with a slightly dampened look.

"...So you were planning to rescue him."

Chane did not deny it. But even though she did not acknowledge it, Nice took it as a confirmation.

'What does this matter to her?'

Not knowing what Nice was after, Chane glared at her uneasily. But her face was not suited to expression--she could not convey her anger with looks alone.

Nice smiled gently, a contrary picture to the scars over her face, as she helped Jacuzzi stand.

"Don't overdo it, okay? If you need any help, we'll be there for you."

Jacuzzi also wiped his tears and grinned.

"That's right. Don't try to take on everything by yourself, Chane." He advised, dragging his wounded leg while supporting himself on a crutch.

"You too, Jacuzzi. The doc hasn't even given you permission to get out of bed."
Nice said, exasperated.

"Huh, I guess you're right, Nice... Oh no...! Now that I start thinking about it, it's starting to hurt... AAAAAACK! My bandages! Blood! There's blood! I-it hurts! I think I'm gonna dieeeeeee!"

"It's been that way since yesterday, Jacuzzi. Lets go back to the doc, huh?
Let's get those bandages changed."

Although Jacuzzi and Nice had returned to their own world again, Chane still could not understand completely.

After all, she still had no idea why they had come to this place.

Jacuzzi's injuries consisted of gunshots and burns.

Although Chane did not know about Jacuzzi's battle against Goose, she was certain that the wounds were caused by her former allies, the Lemures. She had been shot in the shoulder when they betrayed her, and it was likely that Jacuzzi had also gotten involved. If he was telling the truth about swiping cargo from the freight hold, he would have likely run into one of the Lemures along the way.

Although this was the conclusion Chane arrived at, it did not change the fact that Jacuzzi had been heavily injured.

She had heard that he had miraculously avoided bone or organ damage, but Jacuzzi should have been resting in bed.

Why did he take the trouble to come all this way?

Was it because it would endanger his gang if she were to break the law?

Then Chane could see it as a logical decision he undertook in order to preserve himself. She would not bow to such sentiments, but she at least found it rational. She looked at Jacuzzi.

"..."

"Y-you wanna know w-why we're here...? Well, it's not like we're gonna get in your way, if that's what you're worried about..." Jacuzzi laughed nervously.
"And... well, y'know... W, we're worried 'cause you left by yourself..."

"...?"

"No, I mean, i-if you're gonna go rescue this Huey person, then it'd be better for you to have some help, right?"

It was a surprising answer.

'Help me?'

Chane thought over the phrase several times, then changed her expression--although it was little more than a slight cringe of the brow.

'Why?'

It would be understandable if Jacuzzi had come to assist her in order to get in her father's good graces. But instead of bringing his entire gang, with whom he might stand a chance, Jacuzzi had come alone--it was practically a suicide mission. Even Nice's presence would not make much of a difference. Chane wondered if their friends had also come, but could not see any of them around.

Setting aside the fact that *she* was also intending to fight the police officers alone, Chane wondered if Jacuzzi was even sane.

She would have understood if he were like the conductor in red from the train, or an immortal like her father. But the young man before her looked as though he could be beaten to death by a ten-year old from the slums. She could see no special strength in him.

As questions popped up in Chane's head, Jacuzzi looked at her with envy.

"But you know, I think you're real amazing, Chane."

"?" Another question was added to the list.

"I can't believe you'd try to fight off the cops for someone else's sake, even though you were alone."

Although Jacuzzi hadn't thought much of what he had just said, something about his words resonated with Chane.

"Alone."

"Even though you were alone."

Jacuzzi was not incorrect in this assumption.

'But that isn't right.

'It's not "Even though I was alone".

'I am alone. I had no other choice.

'The words "give up if I am alone"... do not exist in my world.

'That's why I have never thought that way... the concept of "even though I am alone".

'Only my father and I exist in this world. I am satisfied that way.

'And now that my father has been taken away from me, I am alone in this world.

'I have no allies.

'I have no family.

'Though I feel a connection to my mother, who gave me this name, in the end she is still someone I have never met.

'I accept my isolation. Even if I remain alone for the rest of my life I will be happy.

'Both the Lemures and this city are the same--they are only temporary homes for me.

'It will be this way now, and forever.'

"If you put it that way, Jacuzzi, don't you think you're pretty strong yourself? I don't know any sane guy who'd turn the Chicago mafia against him."

"I-is that s'pposed to be a compliment, Nice?! W-well, I couldn't have done any of that without you. N-Nice, I..."

Setting aside Chane, who was still trying to force herself to accept her own way of life, Jacuzzi and Nice lost themselves in a tender conversation.

"Haha, thanks, Jacuzzi. But don't you think it's a bit big for us? Facing the cops or the government?"

"N-now that you m-mention it, Nice... All those police officers have g-guns, right? I-I just r-remembered how bad it hurt w-when I got shot, a-and... n-now I'm all scared, a-and now I'm glad I d-didn't end up fighting them. Th-thank you, Chane. Ahaha... Haha..."

Jacuzzi laughed nervously, his knees shaking.

Chane watched him as his eyes filled with tears again, and fell into thought.

'So he really has no concern for his own safety. Was he so intent on helping me that he had forgotten about his own well-being?'

'I don't understand.'

'He is so different from the people I have seen until now.'

'When I was with the Lemures, every day was filled with lies. I revealed useless information to them, learning to see through their deception.'

'And yet I can sense nothing but honesty from him.'

'Why...?'

Chane stood absentmindedly on the street, confused by Jacuzzi's character.

Her surroundings were returning to normal, but her world remained infinitely dark and cold. In a world without her father, Chane could not even sense the temperature of the world.

So she could do nothing but stand there.

<=>

That afternoon, Fred's Clinic

[I am one of the terrorists who took over the train.]

A note was pushed into Jacuzzi's face.

"...Huh?"

The one giving him that note was the mysterious voiceless woman who had recently joined his gang.

It didn't seem like she had learned sign language. If she ever needed to communicate--which wasn't often--she would write out what she wanted to tell them. This was the first time she had come to speak to anyone of her own accord.

The problem was, Jacuzzi had no idea whatsoever as to her reasons.

"Uh, well... I know that."

Lying on his hospital bed, Jacuzzi looked over from the notepad to Chane's face.

The night his friends had brought her to them, Nice and Nick wasted no time in telling Jacuzzi everything they had witnessed about Chane. Nick suggested that they send her away, as they had no idea what she might do to them. But the retrieval squad, which had picked her up in the first place, protested vehemently. They had finally concluded that they would wait see how things played out.

"S-so... what about it?"

Had she just found out that he had interfered with the black suits' plot? If she was going to avenge the black suits, Jacuzzi, in his current bedridden state, was no better than a sitting duck. The doctor was out, Nice was not present, and next door were patients who looked far from healthy--an old man reeking of alcohol, a young man with bags under his eyes who looked like a drug addict, and a tall man with injured legs. Jacuzzi would not be able to find help.

As he trembled in his seat, Chane suddenly held out another note that she had, presumably, written out earlier.

[Why are you not turning me in?]

"W-what are you talking about?"

Jacuzzi came to the conclusion that Chane was not intending to harm him, and breathed a sigh of relief. However, he could not answer her question so easily.

As he pondered how he should answer, Chane held out another note.

[Why did you accept me, knowing that I am one of them?]

"H-how many notes did you have written out?"

Jacuzzi received the pieces of paper that Chane handed to him one by one, hurriedly reading them over. Chane just kept passing more notes to him, not caring for her pace.

"Y-you're so prepared!"

[Why were you planning to assist me in rescuing my father, even if it meant jeopardizing your own safety?]

The polite messages written on the pieces of paper did not hold the same ice that Chane's eyes did. But Chane herself was looking straight at Jacuzzi, confusing him and driving him to tears.

"W-why? Uh, well, if you could talk-I mean, write a little slower.." Jacuzzi sat up, eyes filled to the brim with tears. He then smiled sheepishly. "I sure can't forgive those black suits for what they did on the train, but... we stole cargo from the train, too. I can't just say the black suits were the only bad guys. ... And, well, you're different from them, right?"

"...?"

"You were only there 'cause you wanted to save your family, right? I know what that feels like, I think... And besides, we can't tell if you're a good person or a bad person unless we spend time with you and get to know you, right?"

Hearing this, Chane took the pen on the nightstand and wrote out another message on the notepad beside her.

[You were going to help me because you had determined that I was a "good person"?)

"Uh... I'm not smart enough to tell if someone's good or bad after just a couple of days, but... sorry. Well, you might spend the rest of your life with us and we still might not know for sure, but that doesn't mean we can't be friends, right?" Jacuzzi laughed abashedly. Chane curiously gave him one of the memos she had handed him earlier.

[Why were you planning to assist me in rescuing my father, even if it meant jeopardizing your own safety?]

"Huh... To be honest, I don't know. I never really thought about it. Sorry." Jacuzzi tensed slightly before continuing. "But see, we don't know this city well enough to hide you from the cops and all... it'd be great if we don't get into any trouble with the mafia, but I think these days there've been a lot of delinquents like us popping up..."

Jacuzzi trailed off timidly, as a shadow cast over his face.

"Oh, what do I do...? I remember hearin' about a really dangerous guy with a blood-covered wrench gettin' rid of delinquents, so what do we do if he catches us? If the others get hurt or killed because I brought us all here... B-but I get

the feeling *I'm* gonna be the first to die if that happens... Oh no! What am I supposed to do?! AAAHHH!"

Jacuzzi burst into tears, terrified. He then looked up, only to find the room empty and the door creaking shut.

Only the note lying atop his blanket told him that the previous conversation was not just a dream.

But even after Chane's departure, Jacuzzi wept as he mourned the future of himself and his gang.

"Ohhh... Come to think of it, I don't even have the cash to pay for the hospital! I know everyone was happy we managed to sell the bombs from the train for a big price, but I wonder if they set aside some of the profits for me... Ohhh... O- or what if that drug addict next door suddenly starts going crazy...? What if one of the black suits from the train survived and comes back to kill me? A-are we gonna be able to make it in New York...? What does everyone think about all this...? Ohhhhh..."

The cries of the hero who saved the train reached no one's ears in the empty hospital room, as though they were chiding him for his own weakness.

<=>

'Were they truly trying to help me without ulterior motives?

'That can't be. They must be trying to earn my father's favour through me.'
Chane thought, trying to justify the actions of one man she just could not understand.

'But... there was no deception in his eyes.'

'Just like him.'

The image of a certain beast entered Chane's thoughts.

'He's just like that man--the red shadow who suddenly appeared as I tried to kill the man in white.'

I could sense no lies from the words of that man in the bloodstained conductor's uniform.

'If he read the letter I carved onto the roof of the train, he will come find me. He will appear before me.'

'And when he does, I...

'I will kill that red-haired conductor from the train.

'All for my father's sake. So that I can remain devoted to none but my father.'

Interlude - [TIPS: Childhood Friends]

"Damn it, get it through your skull! You're supposed to be *hurt*." I said, and changed the bandages for that patient--Jacuzzi, I think his name was.

Anyway, I managed to get off the train safely.

I begged the doc--Fred--who happened to be there (though he agreed pretty quickly) to pass me off as his assistant. I was dressed in white like the rest of the gang, but I seriously didn't expect that my excuse ("I got dragged around by my childhood friend Ladd 'cause we just happened to meet on the train.") was actually gonna work. I think it's partly 'cause I bought my ticket separately, and partly 'cause the doc's got some connections with the cops.

I had nowhere to go afterwards. I ended up really working as an assistant at the doc's clinic so I could fool the cops, but...

The patients here are all bizarre.

We got a druggie in here the other day, and some drunk old guy.

They even carried in some guy with a couple dozen guns strapped to himself. He was in pretty bad shape, too. Is this place a *mental* hospital, too?

But the most awkward part is taking care of this tattooed little bean sprout.

It's 'cause he knows that I'm a friend of Ladd.

He was on the train, too. I think he's one of Ladd's enemies. From what I hear he's wanted by the Russo Family. A kid like this? Seriously?

But I'm not gonna contact the Russos about him. I don't have anything to do with 'em other than the fact that I'm one of Ladd's buddies. 'Sides, one wrong move, and the big guy or the crazy eyepatch dame with the fireworks might kill me.

So here I am, helping out in this clinic. Changing this kid's bandages or making food and all that... But this is still freaking awkward, damn it.

At first I couldn't even talk to the kid, but I eased up after a few days. And after he walked outta here and came back half-collapsed, well, I couldn't just sit back and not complain.

The kid flinched and looked down like some kinda newborn rabbit.

"I-I'm so sorry... But I couldn't just sit back and..."

"I know you're worried about your friends, but look at yourself. You gotta take care of yourself more, or you ain't gonna survive. It's a miracle you came out alive with injuries like that."

The brat's name is Jacuzzi Splot.

Ladd said that he's the boss of some delinquent gang who killed a bunch of guys from the Russo Family. But 'cept for that tattoo, he just looks like the gofer of a gofer's dog.

I looked down at him. I wasn't convinced.

"Um... Are you... one of the white suits?" Jacuzzi asked nervously. He looked more scared than cautious.

Damn it, why're you getting all scared of someone like *me* for?

"S'right. I practically grew up with Ladd."

"Th-then, why aren't you turning me in to the Russos?"

It was a pretty obvious question. I laughed bitterly.

"Uh, wh-what's wrong?" Jacuzzi tilted his head. I glanced over at the piece of paper on his nightstand.

"Don't tell me you actually practiced to ask me this." I said, holding out a scrap of paper that read, [Why are you not turning me in?].

"Huh? Wh-what? Th-that's not it! That was what Chane wrote out for me just now..."

"I know. The broad in the black dress who just stepped out, right? I only heard your voice, so I guess she musta been writing to you."

I was just teasing him, but the kid's eyes went all red and teary. The hell?

"Y-you were listening?!"

"Don't sweat it. I pretended I couldn't hear your crying after the lady left."

"Ack! I-I'm so sorry!"

"...Why're you apologizing?"

What a weirdo. Is this kid seriously the leader of a bunch of delinquents?

He doesn't look like a scapegoat for the cops, but the gang doesn't look like it'd have something like a figurehead for a boss.

I made sure the bandages were completely changed, then leaned against the window and answered his question from before.

"Ladd and I go way back, but I'm not in the mafia. I don't think nine lives'd be enough for me to go hanging around with dangerous bastards like that."

"But from what I saw, Mr. Ladd looked scarier than any mafia goon..."

"Guess that's true, but Ladd's not the kinda guy who'd kill his friends. That I can count on. 'Course, otherwise he's nothing but a loose cannon. ...But you're too nice for your own good, you know that? I don't think I'll ever sleep easy if I hand over a kid like you to the mafia, even if they gave me a fortune in reward money."

"R-reward money...?"

The kid's face went white as a sheet as soon as I reminded him about his position.

He just had to bother the Russos like that, huh?

I was going to walk out of the room then, but the kid suddenly spoke up.

"Uh, um... Thank you."

"Don't bother. Changing your bandages is my job."

"N-no, I mean, for not turning me in. ...You know, mister? I don't get why a nice guy like you is friend with someone that scary."

...Is he just curious?

Or is he worried about me and trying to say that I should stay away from Ladd?

Damn it, I wanna tell the kid to butt out, but he's not *wrong*.

"...I know better than anyone that I should be pretending I never even knew him."

"N-no, I'm so sorry! I really am! I didn't mean..."

"I'm just saying, everyone's got their own problems. You, me, and Ladd."

Since I told him this much, I guess it wouldn't hurt to tell the kid a bit more.

"Stop your twitching for one second. Y'know, I doubt you're ever gonna get killed by Ladd."

"Huh?"

"Ladd only ever kills bastards who live like they're never gonna die. Dunno about those chirpy buddies of yours, but you're always wettin' your pants worrying about you or your friends dying... And the doc told me something: You don't get hurt that bad unless you risk your life for something."

When I saw 'em carrying this kid into the cabin, I thought Ladd must have done this to him. What with the burns, the knife sticking outta his arm, and the holes in his gut and his leg. I'm surprised this kid can still talk like this.

"Anyway, Ladd never kills people like you, even if he's a homicidal lunatic."

"H-homicidal?!"

D-don't tell me he didn't know?!

"...There's no evidence, but before he boarded that train, he's probably killed more people than you can count. He went there in the first place to kill the passengers and people here in New York, y'know? Though... I guess he was gonna be discriminating about it. You better count your buddy Jack lucky. Ladd coulda killed him."

"That's terrible! Wh-why would he do something like that?!"

It looked like some of the fear left Jacuzzi's face.

I guess he can't stand for letting Ladd get away with something like that. That's the right reaction to have. That's what *normal* people think.

The kid's right.

People like me and Ladd--outsiders--we're the one who have it all wrong.

"...I'm not a mind reader. I don't know, but it's not like something turned him into a homicidal maniac. He just suddenly turned up like that. We've been friends since we were brats... but he just showed up like that one day, out of the blue. I wasn't strong enough to stop him. I'm saying I'm a coward who didn't even think about trying to stop him."

"...Then why are you still hanging around him? If you can't stop him, you could leave, right...? You don't look like the kind of person who'd enjoy the same stuff as Ladd."

He looked at me, confused. I wanted to look away, but then I'd feel guilty. Damn, this kid's look is annoying me.

I shut the door, sighed, and sat down on a chair in the corner of the room.

He was still looking at me. I decided to tell the tattoo brat a little story about the past.

"...I have no idea why he suddenly became like that. I doubt there was a real reason, but... There *was* someone. Someone who might have been able to stop him.

"Leila. A girl me and Ladd were friends with since we were kids."

<=>

This girl named Leila was something like our leader.

She was headstrong and stubborn. Always wanted things her way, nothing else.

But she was real good about taking care of people. Whenever I got beat up and started cryin' my eyes out, Leila would go up and slap the bastard who did it. When the guy got angry, that's when Ladd stepped in with a brick. He'd always try to beat the bastard until he couldn't move, but Leila'd kick Ladd and say, "We're done here!". Guess she had to do that, or the poor bastard would die.

I always watched 'em from the back, admiring how strong they were.

That's the way things usually went.

Leila was the only girl who could just tell Ladd what to do. Can you imagine that?

She had a pretty cute face, too.

Ladd was from a mafioso's family. Leila was from a rich Senator's house.

I guess, in one sense, they were a pretty good match.

Me? I was the normal one. I thought it'd be best to just stand back and watch 'em from afar.



But we grew up, and we started to learn things about the world. That's when things... started going wrong.

I think that's around when Ladd started going loony, but he tried not to let it show around Leila.

Leila, being herself, knew all about it. But she kept her mouth shut.

I was watching them both. I knew what they were both thinking, but I wasn't strong enough to do anything.

But for some reason, I thought that, maybe Leila could bring Ladd back to normal. I still believe that now.

Still... those two? Getting married? I could never see that happening.

In the end they were friends, not lovers. But they made that mistake of thinking that their friendship was actually love.

It really was a mistake. They had no idea what it really meant--to be in love, I mean. They just thought their friendship was love and went crazy with it.

I knew all of that.

How could I *not* know? I'd been watching them from afar the whole time.

But I never said anything. I thought that, even if they were making a mistake, it would be best for the two of 'em to be together.

It felt great, watching them running around the streets without a care in the world.

But that was a mistake, too.

Leila and Ladd were still under that mistaken impression when they finally decided to elope together. Makes sense, since their families are like oil and water. They'd never mix. Leila's old man, for one, was a Senator tryin' to stamp out the mafia.

It wasn't like eloping was their only choice, though. I think they did it because it was the *easiest* choice.

And even when they ran off together I just watched them. I was satisfied.

That is, until I heard that Leila died partway through.

I asked Ladd what happened, but I don't know if he was telling me the truth.

...Hey, just because I'm telling you all this, don't think I'm gonna tell you how Leila died, kid.

But I'll say this: Ladd wasn't the one who killed her.

I don't know if Ladd was telling me the truth, but that's one thing I trust him on.

After all, if *he* was the one who killed Leila, he'd be even worse than he is now--even people like me and Vicky mighta gotten killed if Ladd got bored.

But that didn't happen.

I didn't have the guts to ask any more. And I don't think he was willing to talk about Leila if no one asked.

So I just sat there, too scared to ask anything, and realized something in exchange. Well, more like remembered something I'd always known.

People die.

People are so easy to kill.

I finally understood that.

I was the audience, and Ladd and Leila were the actors on the stage.

No, maybe they were living in another world altogether--the main characters of their own story.

That's why I always thought that they'd live forever.

I never would have thought that someone who could call the shots on someone as strong as Ladd could die before me.

"..."

Why didn't I join them on stage?

Maybe if I'd shared their perspective and said something, things might have turned out differently.

But maybe I'm giving myself too much credit. Maybe I wouldn't have been able to change a goddamn thing.

But still, if I *was* on that stage with them... Then I would have been able to at least tell Ladd something... anything.

So here I am, regretting it all. I don't have the guts to climb onto Ladd's stage.

That's why I've been following him all this time. To steal glances at his ending--not from the seats or the stage, but from backstage.

Even I know I'm a good-for-nothing bastard.

<=>

"Afterwards, Ladd started putting a rule to his murders. He'd only kill bastards who think they're never gonna be killed. As if something like that's gonna help the world any."

...

I ended up talking more than I was going to.

Damn it, this is all this brat Jacuzzi's fault.

This kid is the kind of guy who could do what I never could. He could put himself on the line for his friends.

"..."

He was quiet, listening to me all this time. It looked like he had a lot on his mind, but that's not my problem. I just told him all this for my own safety.

"Doesn't matter what kinda past Ladd has. Both him and me, the guy who couldn't stop him, are the lowest of the low. Blame me all you want. Swear at me, or somethin'. I don't wanna die, so I'd run away if I see murder in your eye, but let me off easy then, will ya?"

"Uh, well..."

"Tch. I talked too much. Get smart and forget this story. However much you feel like."

I cut off Jacuzzi before he could say anything and walked out of the room like I was running away.

When I was alone again, I got to thinking.

What about me?

Did I love Leila?

Well, yeah. But did I love her as a friend? As a person? As an audience member looking up at an actress? Or was I really in love with her, like a romance?

Kinda weird for me, but I don't know myself.

Maybe Ladd would be able to tell. 'Course, I don't have the guts to ask him.

Once Leila was gone, Ladd's homicidal impulses ballooned out of control.

A bunch of weirdos joined up with him then. Like a girl even crazier than him, who can't wait for him to kill her... Or that weird dismantling guy from the car factory.

I think Lua and Ladd are actually in love. 'Course, Lua probably doesn't care about holding Ladd's impulses in check.

Come to think of it, what was that dismantler's name? He always used to swing around that giant monkey wrench... Ah, damn it. I remember Ladd mentioned his name the day before we boarded, but I can't remember.

Anyway, he was a real wacko. Always muttering about being sad or happy.

I think I heard he was in New York right about now...



第三章『楽しくも悲しい世界』

Chapter 3 - A Sad yet Fun World

Several days later.

An abandoned factory by the wharf, somewhere in New York.

"Oh... Let me tell you a sad, sad story..."

It was a decrepit, abandoned factory by the Hudson River. The paths were nearly deserted, a stark contrast to the crowded streets of New York. And yet this place was still a part of the metropolis.

Many factories were closed due to the Depression, draining the metaphorical energy that had been present in its interiors and leaving them to rot like the unemployed.

As the economy of the honest men collapsed, the underworld's power grew. Those who had been abandoned by both faded into a pale grey and were forgotten.

This factory was one such abandoned place. And those who gathered here were much the same--people in shades of grey who could fit neither here or there.

The building, which seemed to repel anyone who could call themselves normal, was inhabited by multiple silhouettes that were obviously not normal people.

"This... is a tragedy for the ages. Anyone who lays eyes upon it or is cursed to hear this tale will be drawn into it, unable to resist... So if you're gonna cry, you better get your hankies ready."

The rather strange silhouette was sitting on a drum canister instead of a chair. He was about twenty years old. With his blue work wear, he could fit right in among a group of factory workers.

But the blue of his clothing was brighter than that of any normal uniform. It was the kind of outfit that would turn heads on the street.

But the strangest thing of all was not the colour of his clothing, but the object he was playing with.

It was a monkey wrench, used to tighten bolts and nuts.

That in itself was perfectly natural for a man in work wear to be carrying, but two things about it set him apart.

One was the sheer size of the wrench. The man was by no means large, but the silver wrench in his hand was longer than a child's arm. It looked less like a work tool and more like a mace used by medieval warriors.

The second was the fact that the silvery surface of the wrench was caked with blood.

He was a pretty young man with surprisingly defined musculature, and the sleek blond hair over his face covered his distinctive, half-asleep eyes.

Though his hair and pale complexion gave him a rather handsome look, the hazy glint in his eyes put all those who saw him on edge.

He twirled the giant wrench in his hands as he quietly pontificated to the young men and women standing before him.

"They say that humankind ekes out a meagre existence by maturing through sadness and the sloth of amusement. However! I have no intention of seeking any further maturity."

The man stopped spinning his wrench and lightly hopped off the drum canister.

"So why is it that I must tell you such a tragic tale? What is God planning, trying to force me to mature? Where does he intend to take me, when all I want to do is continue to live this mortal life in sloth and fall to corruption?!" He laid out his grievances in an outlandish tone, as his hands continued to fiddle with the monkey wrench.

"The first tragedy to be spoken of, then, is news: Tudi, that most unfortunate of souls, was caught cheating at the casino, had all of his fingers and even his goddamn thumbs broken, leaving him in the hospital."

He turned his expressionless face around as he tossed the wrench into the air.

The wrench fell towards the ground, spinning like a disc. And as the five-kilogram weight neared the floor, the young man caught it effortlessly. A pleasant *smack* rang out across the factory.

"That damned capo... Firo, or whatever his name was... Who could have expected such a cute face to ever be capable of such horrifying cruelty? If only he could have spared Tudi the excruciating agony and murdered him outright... But wait, if Tudi died, then I'd be too damn depressed and wouldn't feel fun at all! What is this hypocrisy? Oh, what maddeningly sad, sad hypocrisy!"

The wrench flew into the air and fell back into his hand again and again. Though he would not be able to escape major injury were the wrench to fall upon his head, the man continued his dangerous juggling act and changed the subject.

"My second tragedy is as follows. I was driving along the street inoffensively, when out of the blue a single ashtray fell out of a hotel window and drove itself into my car.. The latest Ford model. By some miracle I was able to continue driving, but I continue to marvel at the sturdy construction of these vehicles. Which, of course, does not negate the fact of my tragedy."

Smack. Smack.

The wrench picked up speed. It began to rotate faster.

"So I pondered for a moment about barging into that no-good hotel, but I was told that this particular establishment has been, as one might say, *taken in* by the Runorata Family. Even someone like me does not wish to turn an organization of that magnitude into an enemy."

Smack. Smack.

"And another thing."

Smack. Smack. Slap. Slap.

"I hear Mr. Smith from earlier on tried to take on one of the Gandor capos and got his face smashed in for all his trouble. Goddamn it. I was supposed to get a couple of the guns he stows in that crazy coat of his afterwards, but now it's as if that agreement never even happened."

Slapslapslapslapslapslapslapslapslap

"Life is fun! Tell that to yourself ten thousand times a day, and eventually your head will spin and tell you that there *isn't* any pain in the world! OK OK OK OK! I have overcome the tragedy of my past and ascended to a higher plane! Power is good. Power is wonderful! Am I right?"

He was saying something completely different from before, but the people around him could do nothing but nod in unison like it had been planned from the beginning.

Graham Specter was a former employee at a car factory in Chicago.

He had been running jobs for the Russo Family in Chicago, but moved to New York when the factory he worked for went under.

He treated Ladd with the fanatical respect of a crazed younger brother, and derived great pleasure from the act of destruction.

But what bothered those around him above all else was the fact of his violent mood swings. No one knew if he was acting this way on purpose or not, but the people around him would always have to play along with his emotions, which only had two levels: 0 or 100.

In New York, the information broker Elean was well-known for his depression, but Graham was a different case altogether. Graham's mood was always at an extreme, only switching from one disposition to another.

This was the kind of man Graham Specter, the leader of the delinquents who took over the streets after Dallas Genoard's disappearance, was.

"Magnificent! Life is a magnificent beast! Now I was going to tell you all a fun story, but the truth is I can't think of a decently entertaining one at the moment! How exciting! My OK brain is so OK it's OK! You! Tell me something interesting! Give me an entertaining story, or you understand I'll pop off your joints one by one and is this even all right with you?!" Graham spat atrociously, and tilted sideways the wrench he was holding.

The others could clearly imagine their own elbows at the end of the wrench, breaking apart with a simple *crack*, and shuddered.

If they remained silent, someone really would end up losing an arm or things would go back to grey lethargy. Realizing this, one of the delinquents spoke up tentatively.

"B, boss Graham... Uh, well, I dunno if this is a fun story, but you heard about those new kids on the block?"

"No. I haven't. ...This... This is a story I've yet to hear! My heart's aflutter--it's beating with the intensity of a stampeding animal! What could possibly stand

against such force?! Or maybe I should just break it?! That's right. I should *break* something, right?! What to do? Oh, what to do?!" He rambled, and got to work on one of the factory's machines with the wrench.

With a huge upwards swing, he accurately and precisely dismantled the machine's joints with the wrench. Once in a while he would take out a small screwdriver or a pair of pliers and continue the dismantling with both hands in action.

"Uh. Well, I think they're delinquents like us... But I think they're goin' in and out of Millionaire Row."

"Millionaire Row? Where all the rich people roll around in their decadent mansions?"

"Yup."

Millionaire Row was the name of a street in New York lined with luxury mansions belonging to the richest people in America. It was the standard in high-class living, far removed both physically and psychologically from the abandoned factory.

"An excellent story. I love exciting tales like this! But let me ask a simple question: Why are delinquents little different from the likes of us walking in and out of a such a ritzy locale? Could it possibly be? Are they burglars? Of course! There's no other explanation! Damn... There is no way we can let them get ahead of us, therefore we should dismantle their mansions and run off with the safes and dismantle them right here and dismantle them again and again and again... This excitement's killing me! It's like all this some kind of depressing transcendent thrill is driving me to a freaking high!"

Although his hands were still busy at precise work on the machinery, Graham's body shook from side to side as if in a dance.

Relieved that Graham's destructive impulses had been focused on the machinery (as opposed to being relieved that his spirits had been raised), his underling spoke up.

"No, see... I hear they're all friendly with the Genoard head, so they got one of the Genoard manors all to themselves."

"Genoard? Of course! I know them! Didn't their old man and the heir drown in a dam or a river sometime last year?"

"Right. The second son, Dallas Genoard, disappeared, too. I dunno if she's the head, but this dame named Eve, the daughter, inherited the whole shebang."

"Of course! In other words, this new gang of delinquents, for some reason, got on this lady's good graces, or they're threatening her as we speak! Brilliant! Are they geniuses or what? Excuse me, I don't really know why, but I really just wanted to use the word 'genius' just now!"

Led along by Graham's unusual mood, his underling's spirits also began rising.

"So what I'm saying, boss, is that we bait 'em along nice and easy, then snatch it all and we can mooch off thgahck?!"

The end of the delinquent's sentence crumpled into a strange cry of pain as he fell forward to the ground, knees trembling.

Lodged in his stomach was the end of the gigantic monkey wrench. The shock had probably pushed back the man's innards and sent the impact straight into his spine.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes. NO. NO. What is this 100% Parasite plot of yours? I was just getting excited, too! But NO! Again! NO! We're not going to get anything demolished acting so goddamn quiet. Sure, we might take apart their friendship, but I only like destroying *material* things! Capische? Answer me if you get it!" Graham smiled, shaking his wrench. The delinquent he had attacked, however, had been momentarily rendered mute by the force of the jab.

"... Answer me."

His eyes were pinched into a smile, but there was no humour in his voice.

The delinquent knew full well that he must answer, but his vocal chords and even his lungs refused to move.

Desperately fighting the fear and despair, the man tried to calm both his lungs and his own psyche. But the terrifying beating of his heart and the dull, throbbing pain in his stomach gave him no mercy.

And as if to quicken the beating, Graham raised his gigantic monkey wrench high into the air, gleaming rather like the blade of a guillotine.

"No answer, huh? Then why don't you just stay put and let me turn you into a *corpse*?!"

"GAAAAAAAHHH!"

The voice the delinquent finally managed to squeeze out instantly turned into a scream. A heavy thud soon rang out across the factory.

"Hahahahaha! You know I was just joking, right? This isn't good. I'm positively drowning in guilt because you're still lying on the ground before me! What to do, it feels like something's squeezing my stomach! This sensation... This is the sensation of loneliness and joy mingling together into one smooth concoction! So think about that and forgive me, you hear?"

The blank-eyed delinquent was lying on the floor, beside a patch of shattered concrete.

After a quick act of what counted as an apology in his mind, Graham took out a baseball-sized cog from his pocket and began tossing it back and forth between his hands.

"Now, even a no-name pack of delinquents should have a head honcho, right? But who?"

It was an obvious question. Another man stood up straight and answered.

"R, right! I caught a look at him at Fred's clinic. Some nervous twitchy guy with a sword-shaped tattoo on his mug!"

"A nervous, twitchy guy... with a freaking tattoo on his face?! I don't think I comprehend all of these implications, but this is breathtaking! *He* is breathtaking! At the rate this is going, there's going to be a murder here... Who's the victim? Me! And you! And the murderer is some person!"

['Some person'?!]

Although the delinquents knew that Graham often spouted nonsense when he was in one of his good moods, they could not bring themselves to exclaim out loud.

"A sword-shaped tattoo... Finally, a mug worth dismant- hm?"

Although Graham ignored the pointed criticisms of his underlings with no effort, his own thoughts were enough to suddenly stop him.

"...If I remember..."

He darted towards a desk in a corner of the factory and furiously began to rummage through the mess of papers and garbage upon it.

"Aha! It's here! This one!"

He pulled out a single sheet of paper and held it out towards the delinquents.

"This is the face you're talking about?"

"Th, that's him, boss! It's gotta be!" The underling from before cried out without even thinking, seeing the face printed on the paper.

"Biiiiiiiiingo! Hya! Hyaaahah! Eeee! Eeee! Eeee!"

As Graham let out a series of unrecognizable cries of joy, the other delinquents curiously looked over at the picture on the paper. The reason for their leader's behaviour was soon made obvious to them.

Written on the paper was a note from a Russo Family capo--Graham had worked with the Russos in the past--in short, the note read, [There will be a reward for anyone who finds this man].

The piece of paper looked innocuous enough that even to a police officer it might look like nothing more than a missing persons poster, but anyone who knew the Russo name knew what it actually meant--a bounty.

"Let me spin you a happy yarn. Savour it! Happiness and fun are two entirely different entities, as I have determined that fun is temporary but happiness remains in your memories forever! I made this decision just now! With no supporting evidence! Haha... Call me a simpleton and laugh if you will, but remember that I'll make *mincemeat* out of you!"

Prattling away again, Graham got to work on a large piece of machinery and began to dismantle it even faster than before.

"So let me tell you a fun yet sad story. Is fun truly the opposite of sadness? In other words, heaven and hell and local and express and love and peace! Love and peace!"

"Why're you repeating yourself, boss...?"

Several minutes later, Graham proudly stood before a piece of machinery demolished to the point where it was impossible to tell what it originally was. He began to tap the tiny pieces with his wrench and proposed a plan.

"First we capture this Jacuzzi fella, which will land us a stunning sum of dough from ol' Boss Russo! It might even become a sweet little offering for our boss Ladd in the slammer! But that doesn't matter at all!"

Although he had no idea that Ladd had already met Jacuzzi, Graham continued to pursue this line of thought and steadily raised his voice.

"That's right... Let me tell you a two-birds-with-one-stone story derived from love and peace."

"Why does it have to derive from love and GAH--!"

"Setting that aside, here is the first course of action--to kidnap this girl called Eve! Oh... it's exciting in itself to kidnap a maiden of her age, but unfortunately, I prefer older women! I have no interest in people my age or younger!"

"Oh, then you'll give her to us- UGH!"

Graham lightly tapped on his underling's stomach with the wrench and began to lay out his plan.

"With the girl as a hostage, we'll drag in this Jacuzzi and get ourselves a bonus on top of the ransom! Isn't this a wonderfully crafted tale of sadness and fun?"

"How's any of this sad?" one of his underlings asked.

Graham put on a look of utter confidence and smiled as though he was having all the fun in the world, greatly resembling a certain homicidal maniac in white.

"It's a fun story for us... but a sad story for *them!*"

Interlude - [TIPS: The Couple on the Night Before the Train's Arrival]

December of 1931.

A room in an old apartment building, somewhere in Little Italy.

Tonight was a little removed from the norm for the young gangster known as Firo Prochainezo.

Of course, tomorrow was New Year's Eve--a day that obviously marked the end of the year. But there was someone else he had to welcome before the new year dawned.

He was waiting for Isaac and Miria--a slightly dim couple that he had met last year during a certain incident. They were coming to visit him from all the way in California, riding a transcontinental express called the Flying Pussyfoot.

"So I hear they were mining for gold over in California. I mean, I knew they were a bit strange in the head when I first met them, but why *gold*? Actually, aren't you supposed to pan for gold dust in a *river*?" The baby-faced young man asked the rather large room.

The room was tidy, like the interior of a decent hotel, but the decor was rather generic. An apartment this size was a bit of a luxury for a single like Firo, but he had been living alone here for several years.

After losing his parents to tuberculosis at a young age, Firo was left with no choice but to leave his family's apartment in Hell's Kitchen. He had been forced to say goodbye to his friends and was tossed into the streets of New York.

Later, he had found himself a place in the Martillo Family, a criminal organization, and found himself a steady income to go with his new home. Although the Martillos were not mafia, but an organization called a camorra, society at large saw little difference between criminal gangs like theirs.

In any event, the young man named Firo Prochainezo had earned himself the right to live in this apartment, though the means were not entirely legitimate. Ever since then, he had spent many lonely nights in his overly large home.

But now, there was another presence there to answer his questions.

"They're digging into an old mineshaft that used to produce gold, so there's still a possibility, small as it may be. And there are lapis lazuli veins in California, so they should be able to at least make a living and keep themselves fed."

"It's not like they're gonna starve, though. They drank the liquor, too."

"They won't succumb to malnutrition, no, but it *is* more efficient to keep oneself fed. And you can't ignore the psychological effects of hunger, either. After all, even a non-human like myself can feel hunger after an extended period of starvation. ...Although I've gotten used to the feeling, since Szilard did not provide me with food unless I was accompanying him."

The matter-of-fact reply came from a young woman about Firo's age.

Unlike Firo, who still retained some childlike features, she had a rather mature bearing. At a glance they looked like an older sister and her younger brother.

Firo's eyes widened as the young woman explained her painful past.

"E, Ennis! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you remember all that stuff."

"?"

The young woman called Ennis, not understanding why Firo was apologizing to her, looked flustered.

Ennis appeared to be nothing but a normal young woman, but she was not actually a human being.

Of course, this might be subject to one's definition of a human being, but in any event, Ennis was created as an imitation of human form.

Having been born as a byproduct of research into the Grand Panacea, up until last year, Ennis had been nothing but the pawn of an alchemist called Szilard.

But a certain incident had granted her freedom, and her current master was the baby-faced young man before her.

He was a member of a crime family in New York, but Ennis was in no position to criticize his involvement in such an organization. After all, she had also committed many crimes under Szilard's command.

Initially, Ennis had no idea why this young man had given her freedom. She only realized that it was a gesture of kindness once he brought her to his apartment.

He began to prepare a meal for her without a word. The moment Ennis took a bite of his cooking and said, "It's delicious", the young man broke out into a delighted, childlike grin. Ennis then lost all doubts about his kindness.

Of course, she had always worried herself sick trying to repay his kindness in any way she could.

Ennis never realized the truth--that Firo actually had an ulterior motive for his gentle attitude towards her.

And Firo himself was much too shy to be able to explain this ulterior motive to the lovely but emotionally dense Ennis.

In any case, it had been over a year since he had lived with her as her new master. Firo had not even been able to confess his feelings for her to her or share a kiss with her, let alone hold her hand.

Despite Firo's timidity, and despite Ennis's lack of awareness, their life together worked in a wonderful routine.

Firo, being the the romantic he was, was more than satisfied with Ennis's presence alone. He was merely happy to be in love with her, wishing for her happiness.

Ennis, being so naive, was always relieved to see Firo's smile. Seeing him that way reassured her that it was all right for her to remain here in this place.

Childlike innocence and scars of the past.

Their feelings were completely different, but by some miracle they had fit together.

At this point, the little missteps and confusion in their communication had begun to clear. Ennis was starting to appreciate the joy of having Firo as a family, and Firo was starting to think that it was about time for some progress in their relationship.

<=>

Several hours earlier, an underground casino somewhere in New York.

Firo was speaking to a giant of a man, a full head taller than himself.

"Huh? What?"

Berga Gandor was the name of the man who gave the disinterested reply.

He was the second of the three brothers who led the small Gandor mafia family. He was a childhood friend of Firo who was usually around to lend an ear.

They were just discussing the matter of going to pick up their friends together tomorrow, when Firo suddenly blurted out something rather unusual.

"So, uh, you know, how you married Kalia the year before last?"

"Right."

"What's with that face? You two have a fight again?"

"Shaddap. That's got nothing to do with you." Berga replied. The fact that he looked away made it quite obvious that Firo's guess was correct.

Firo smiled wryly and decided to ask a confident question.

"Say... how'd you end up marrying Kalia?"

"...What? You sayin' you can't believe I married a beauty like her? Huh?!" Berga roared.

Firo sighed, not taking a single step back.

"No! That's not what I meant! Uh... Well, about how you asked her to marry you... I was just curious what you asked, specifically." Firo's voice slowly fell to a half-mumble. Berga looked at him in exasperation.

"So *that's* what this is all about? And you're asking me *now*? You shoulda asked me at the wedding, 'cause it wouldn't have been so damn embarrassing, y'know?"

"Uh, it's not like I don't get that, but back at your wedding *I* was too embarrassed to ask."

"...Kalia's the one who brought it up. What was I supposed to say when she put on this serious face and said, 'Then we'll have the wedding sometime next month'?"

"I see... So Kalia asked you? I guess that's not much help..." Firo mumbled.

Berga noticed the hesitance in Firo's tone. He grinned mischievously and teased Firo.

"What, you're finally gonna propose to Ennis or something? You even kiss her or sleep with her yet?"

Firo's childlike face flushed beet red. He yelled back at Berga in a feeble attempt at hiding his embarrassment.

"D, don't make me laugh! Y, you sayin' I'm living with Ennis b-because I-I'm in love with her or something?!"

"What, am I wrong?"

"W, well, uh. I... guess I can't say you're, uh, completely wrong, but... I wouldn't wanna go doing stuff like kissing, or holding hands until we get ma- but i-it's not like I'm even going out with her yet... we're just living together."

Firo's reaction was so innocent that Berga felt compelled to react seriously.

"...Firo. That thing from before still bothering you?"

"Wh-what thing?" Firo asked, flinching.

Berga matter-of-factly began to recall a certain incident from Firo's past.

"Remember that time some sicko thought you were a girl and kidnapped you? And how Keith and our old man bust in and saved you at the last second? Don't tell me you're still hung up on that..."

"What?! N-no way! I told you before, I coulda taken that bastard myself!"

"But Luck was sayin', 'Firo's so timid because any man who lays a hand on a woman looks like the worst piece of trash to him' or something..."

"L, Luck, that bastard! Why'd he have to go around spouting nonsense like that?!" Firo complained, voice cracking. Berga sighed, knowing that he had hit the mark. He then mentioned the name of a certain acquaintance he was going to pick up tomorrow.

"Act a bit more like Claire or something. He never took more than a couple of seconds to ask a girl out if he liked her."

"Y'know, I've always wondered. Is he even human?"

"Speak for yourself. But... Right. Try taking after that stupid couple."

"Isaac and Miria, right."

'I don't think they'd want to be called stupid by Berga of all people, though...'
Firo thought, but Berga's surprisingly valid advice soon took root in his mind.

Firo remembered Isaac and Miria's extraordinary displays of closeness.

'If I could open up like they do for each other, maybe I could even... Hold hands with Ennis...?'

'Wait, is that really all right? What if Ennis doesn't like it?'

"What's wrong? You got a fever or something?"

"Huh? What?"

Firo's head snapped upwards. Staring back at him was the toughened face of a man who could not be less like Ennis if he tried.

"You're so red you're practically a lobster."

"Huh? Uh... nah..." Firo shook his hands in front of his face and turned around in escape. "A, anyway, I'm gonna meet up with Maiza and head over to the station tomorrow, so maybe we'll see each other then."

As Firo climbed the stairs towards the exit, he began to draw out a plan of action. If successful, this plot of a lifetime would finally let him make some progress in his relationship with Ennis.

<=>

That was why Firo had mentioned his plans for tomorrow to Ennis once he had returned to his apartment.

He then found out that Ennis was also planning to go pick up Isaac and Miria. Firo was on a roll.

"That's good to hear. Why don't you come meet me and Maiza at the casino tomorrow? We can go to the station together."

"Of course. I'll head to the casino from the Alveare." Ennis replied plainly.

In his head, Firo clenched his fists tightly.

'All right! It's been a while since we went out together, so things are looking pretty good so far.'

Although this wasn't exactly the most difficult of missions, Firo was already more than satisfied.

'R, right. Now I just have to wait for Isaac and Miria. I haven't known them long, but I know what kinda people they are. They're always going around together, and they're probably, uh, going to be, well, holding hands all the time.'

Firo's mind played the image of Isaac and Miria's energetic antics over and over again. In the images, Isaac and Miria would sometimes hold hands and dance in the middle of the street--which was not too far removed from what they did in reality.

'Right! Then I'll say to Ennis, "Maybe we should hold hands too", and take her hand!'

The plan was perfect. That is, until Firo realized something and froze on the spot.

'...I'll take her hand... and then what?!

'I, I guess it'd be too early to ask her out? Wait, is it even all right to hold hands before asking her out properly?! Damn it, I can't even ask anyone for advice on this...'

Having always been so timid around women, Firo Prochainezo had grown into a young man who had no idea about how to deal with women, let alone his own feelings for one.

And it would be decades before he understood if this was a blessing or a curse.

<=>

Several days later, the Alveare

"..."

Firo suddenly snapped back into reality.

It had been several days since the Flying Pussyfoot arrived in New York, and Firo found himself working on a domino setup.

'What the hell am I doing?'

That's right. He was setting up dominoes of his own free will. As soon as they arrived in New York, Isaac and Miria suddenly declared, "We're Dominists!" and purchased a huge quantity of dominoes.

And now, a domino boom had swept through the Alveare.

They would fill all kinds of designs with dominoes, sorted by colours, then topple them all with a single poke for a single fleeting moment of extraordinary catharsis.

Firo was in the middle of one such design when he suddenly remembered what he was actually planning to do.

'Right! I was supposed to take Ennis's hand... Use Isaac and Miria's example... and make some progress.'

'So what am I doing, setting up dominoes?'

'Oh, right. Czes is staying at our place now, so the whole plan fell apart.'

Chiding himself for taking part in such a childish game, Firo decided to stop what he was doing. He looked up.

Right in front of his eyes was Ennis's face. She was kneeling on the floor in much the same position as himself, setting up dominoes.

"...!"

"What's wrong, Firo?" Ennis asked. Firo reflexively looked away and made up an excuse.

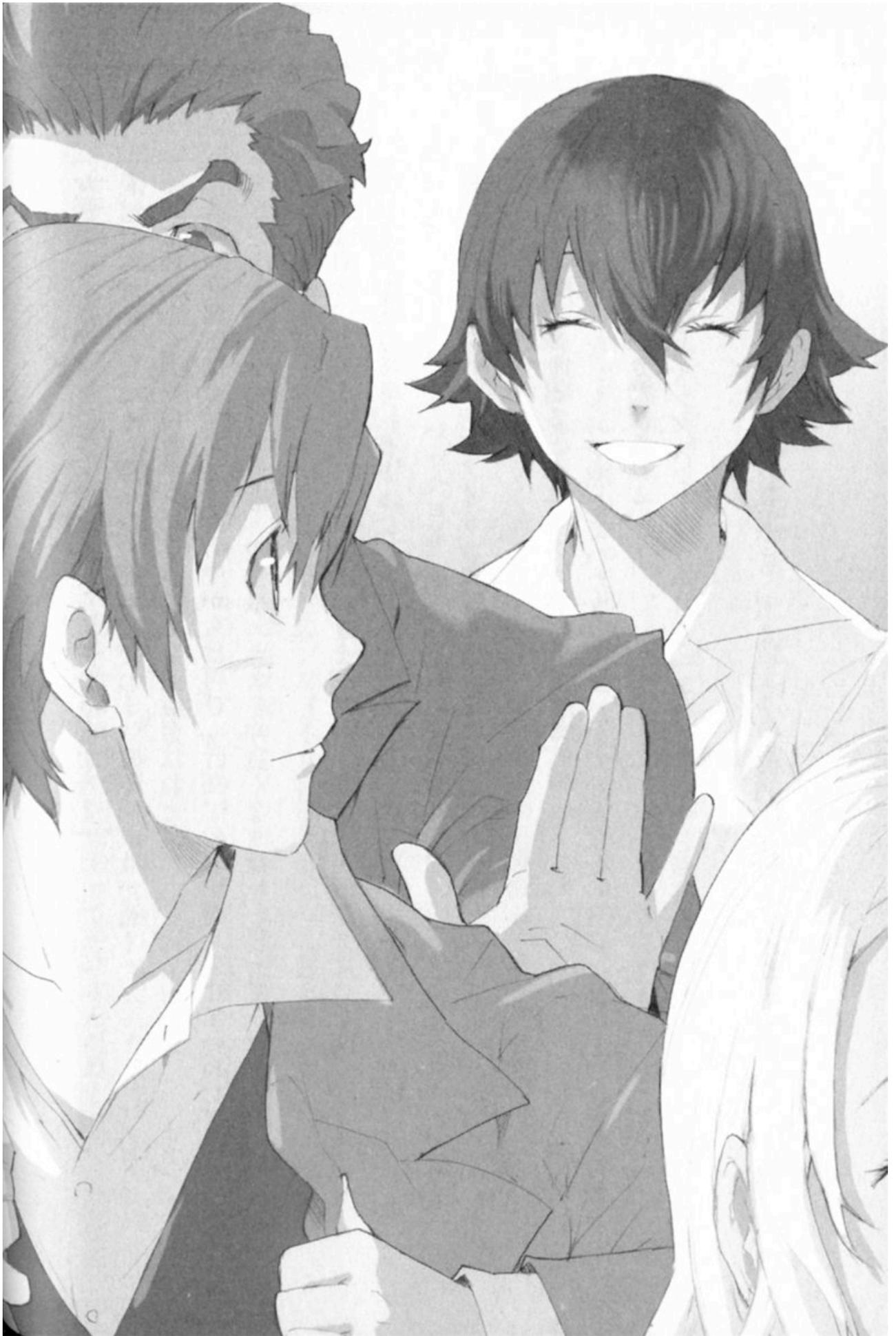
"N, no, it's just that... Say, it's almost lunchtime, isn't it? So maybe..."

Just as he worked up the courage to ask her if she wanted to have lunch with him, a pair of oblivious voices mercilessly descended down upon him.

"Hey, Firo! We just heard from Pecho and Randy that you're the boss of some casino?"

"With cards and slots and roulettes and monopoly evenings!"

Firo looked up. Hovering above him was a man and a woman, both wearing identical grins.



Firo sighed as Isaac and Miria looked down upon him with eyes glinting with excitement.

"I'm not the boss of the casino, actually... and what the heck are monopoly evenings?"

Whether or not they had heard Firo's questions, Isaac and Miria began to shake his shoulders from either side of him.

"Firo, could you please take us to your casino? You see, I've always had my heart set on becoming a gambler!"

"They serve milk for children, right? And then you throw it in the bad guy's face!"

"Card sharks! Cheating against each other until they get found out and bust out the guns!"

"If you lose, you get ventilated! If you win, it's off to the gallows! That means anyone who fights dies either way!"

"We don't have those cheap tables from Westerns, you know."

As Isaac and Miria chattered on, Firo's plan once again fell apart. It was an ironic situation--he thought he might be able to use Isaac and Miria as an example that would get him closer to Ennis, but the couple's presence just got his mind off his original plans.

Not even noticing his own change of heart, Firo gave a wry grin.

"Guess there's no other choice, huh? Don't blame me if you lose big, though."

In the end, Firo was half-forced to take Isaac and Miria to the casino.

"Have fun."

Firo turned around. Ennis, the owner of the gentle voice that sent them off, was smiling.

Although Firo had been feeling a little down, her smile was enough to instantly dispel the air of gloom over him.

The simple and naive gangster grinned in satisfaction, with the ironclad belief that there could be no greater joy than being able to smile as they could now.



第四章『裏返る世界』

Chapter 4 - A World Upside-Down

January 1932. In front of the Alveare

"...It must be somewhere around here..."

It was dusk. A cold wintry chill filled the air as a woman dressed in fancy street clothes quietly stood in an alley in the streets of New York.

There was one particular store in that alley that flaunted eye-catching lights and aromatic scents--the Alveare, a honey shop.

The sweet smell of honey tickled her senses, arousing her hunger as she did nothing but just stand there.

"Is that boy really here? Or is the President just pulling my leg...?" She wondered.

Rachel--the woman formerly in work wear, recalled the events that took place at the end of the previous year.

The Flying Pussyfoot incident.

The details of the incident had been concealed from the public, but Rachel was involved in the events that took place on the train, from two different perspectives.

One was the perspective of an agent of an information agency.

The other was the perspective of a criminal, a repeat offender as a stowaway.

As an associate employee of the Daily Days Newspaper, an information agency, Rachel had boarded the train in order to deliver information about a certain incident that had occurred in Chicago.

Of course, she never officially bought a ticket. She had stowed away on the train.

Now that she had resolved to stop stowing away, it felt like a foolish reason. But her actions had been born out of revenge.

The railroad companies had betrayed her father, and Rachel hated the rails for it. Yet at the same time, she could not bring herself to hate the rails her father loved so much. Stowing away was the only thing she could do to satisfy her anger.

Even after the incident had ended, there were still some things bothering Rachel. She asked her employer, the President, about them.

"One boy was murdered on that train." She told him. Rachel had seen it with her own eyes--the sight of the red shadow pushing the boy against the tracks, grinding off half of his body onto the gravel.

'He couldn't have survived that...' Is what she thought, but when she asked about the boy back on the train, the red monster--the conductor--had said something strange.

"You should ask the kid personally."

He replied nonchalantly.

Rachel could, of course, interpret the words as a threat to send her to join the boy in his fate, but she remembered that the conductor's tone suggested no such thing.

Afterwards, following a great deal of struggles (both literal and metaphorical), Rachel spotted the boy just once more. Of course, the boy was dead at that point. But Rachel saw a gunman and a woman in a red dress taking hold of the boy, who was tied up under the train, falling off the side of the car. She reached out a hand to save them, and with the help of the red monster, they narrowly managed to prevent them from falling onto the tracks.

But what happened to the gunman and the woman in red afterwards? Though they had been pulled back into the train, they had bounced off the ground once. The pair could not have escaped sustaining serious injuries.

The thought stayed with Rachel, haunting her enough to drive her to ask the President.

The boy's corpse must have been removed by the company as part of their cover-up efforts.

Rachel prepared herself for the worst, but the President's answer from beyond the stacks of paper could not have been more nonchalant.

"Why don't you ask the boy himself?"

Several hours later, Rachel found herself here at the Alveare.

'But... would the President really lie about something like this? A child's life?'

Rachel stepped into the store, confused.

"Inside, please," she said to the tough-looking woman at the counter.

"You're a new face... Don't make a scene, you hear? We get a lot of dangerous types in here." The woman advised her, opening the back door leading into the speakeasy.

Stepping through the door, Rachel took in the sights of the underworld.

'This place is huge...'

The speakeasy was more lavishly decorated than she could have imagined from the way it looked from the outside. Rachel drew a surprised breath, feigned calmness as best she could, and began to search for an open seat.

It was just as the woman at the counter had said. The people there certainly did not look like men who made an honest living.

An elderly Asian man of sturdy build was laughing in his seat.

A sharp-eyed man who looked impossible to approach.

A man with a creepy laugh, who was talking to himself in a low mumble.

A middle-aged man with a huge scar on his neck, who carried himself as a seasoned warrior.

A dignified man in his twilight years, sprinkling massive quantities of pepper onto his food.

A smiling, bespectacled man who looked entirely out of place here at first glance, an exceedingly skinny man who couldn't look more like a gangster if he tried, and a fat man with a round belly--

With its eclectic mix of ethnicities and statuses, the speakeasy reminded Rachel of the Flying Pussyfoot's dining car. She finally managed to find an empty seat beside a young boy. Wondering what a child like him would be doing in a speakeasy, she stared at him for a moment.

Their eyes met.

"Huh...?"

Rachel froze.

As she stood there absently, the boy looking into her eyes spoke to her, confused.

"What's wrong, Miss?"

A childlike tone. But the voice was familiar to Rachel.

Specifically, she had heard this voice screaming as its owner's body was ground along the railroad tracks. Rachel knew she had heard this voice before.

"How...?" Rachel blurted out. The boy looked at her suspiciously.

"Wh-what is it? Is there something on my face?"

"I saw you... being killed on that train."

"!"

The boy's expression changed visibly.

"E, Ennis, I'm just going on a walk for a bit!" He said to the woman sitting opposite him, put down his cup of honey juice on the table, and quickly began walking out of the Alveare.

Rachel followed after him, walking out of the shop she had just entered. Although the other patrons might mistake her for a curious passerby or an undercover cop, Rachel was in no state to consider any of those things.

"Huh? What's going on there?"

"Hey, the kid's not for sale."

A rowdy chorus of teasing accompanied the apparently ten-year old boy and the woman about ten years his senior as they left the restaurant together.

"What, is the kid gonna practice his moves on her or something?"

"He's pretty good, huh?"

The skinny man and his fat companion joked rudely, but Rachel couldn't hear any of them.



'He's alive.'

The boy who should have lost half his body was walking right in front of her, uninjured. It was as if nothing had ever happened to him.

'It can't be.'

Her inner wall of logic denied the possibility of the reality before her.

'This isn't possible.'

Perhaps the boy had a twin brother.

'That's right. Nebula must have threatened him to keep him quiet.' Rachel concluded, and steadied herself as she left the Alveare.

They were in an alleyway right beside the store. The boy spoke as soon as he made certain that there was no one around.

"Miss... you saw me die, right?"

"..."

"Was it when I was shot? Or when I was being ground onto the tracks?"

The boy's questions instantly destroyed Rachel's expectations. She was struck dumb by shock.

The boy looked up at Rachel with a clearly suspicious expression. He then broke the silence by introducing himself.

"...My name is Thomas. It's nice to meet you."

"Oh, um, my name's Rachel..."

She revealed her name without a second thought, but for some reason the boy looked extremely relieved. He finally looked at her directly, eyes no longer clouded with suspicion.

"I see... I'm glad you're not an immortal, Miss. Did you just step in by coincidence?"

"No, well... The Daily Days President told me."

Rachel had a mountain of questions she wanted to ask, but the shock of the fact of the boy's survival had addled her thoughts. She found herself on the receiving end of questioning.

Rachel regretted blurting out the Daily Days name, but in the end that name became the catalyst that smoothed the process of their conversation.

"...That information agency, huh? I guess lying to you won't be of any use, since you'll find out about me sooner or later. My real name is Czeslaw Meyer. You can call me Czes."

"Huh?"

Rachel was confused. Why was this boy claiming that he had another name, calling it his real one? She remained frozen. The boy called Czes sighed loudly and slowly returned to the conversation.

"...From your reaction, I suppose it might be best to start by explaining the matter of immortals."

"...Immortals...?"

"All right. Now that I'm certain that you're not one of us, I'll answer any question you might have for me."

The boy smiled impishly, but Rachel caught a glimpse of maturity in his expression.

The thirty minutes or so that Rachel spent listening to the boy named Czes would be forever etched into her memories.

She remembered that, despite it being in the dead of winter, Czes's story was captivating enough to dispel the chill outright.

Everything about his tale sounded like it was something straight out of a dream, but the boy's very existence told her that she was, indeed, awake. Of course, when he made a large gash on his arm and left it to show her how the flesh folded back together, Rachel doubted if she was still in the real world.

Rachel's world, already once upturned by the incident on the Flying Pussyfoot, did yet another turn, this time more decisive and clear.

Immortality.

The mere act of acknowledging the veracity of this phenomenon painted over Rachel's existing impressions of the world.

Of course, the world itself hadn't changed in the slightest.

"...I guess that's a good enough explanation."

Though his voice was no different from that of any other child, Rachel could sense the underlying maturity in Czes's tone.

"Oh, um... Yes, th-thank you, sir."

"Don't mention it. And, well... I *am* technically older than you, but I'd prefer if you'd continue to treat me like a child."

"R, right. Thank you, Czes."

'This one piece of information turned my world upside-down.'

At the same time, Rachel finally understood the power of information. Working for the Daily days, she had collected all kinds of data in the past--but the power behind what she had just learned surpassed all else she knew.

"Information changes both the world and the fates of people." Henry, the arrogant information broker, had once told her.

He was right.

'So the world is filled with information like this--information that can change so much.'

"Thank you so much, Czes."

"Huh?"

"You... helped me make a decision about my life."

"Huh? I don't think I get it, but I'm glad to hear that."

'I'll become an information broker, not just a field agent like I am now. I want to be like the President or the Vice-President--dealing with more information than ever before.'

As long as she had information at her disposal, she might be able to prevent things like what had happened to her father.

Although she had yet to decide how she would use her information, or what kind of an information broker she wanted to become, Rachel was sure that that also would be decided by the information she collected from this point on.

'I'll talk to the President once I get back to the office.'

'How do I become an information broker like them? How can I find a permanent job at the Daily Days?'

The answers to those two questions would probably become the first important pieces of information that would lead her down her path.

The sun set, casting an orange light over the cold winter streets. Rachel's face was lit by a look of newfound resolve.

It was as though a new world had opened up before her eyes.

If things had ended there, it would have been nothing less than a wonderful day for Rachel and Czes.

But for Czes, at any rate, today would not end on such a high note.

"Hey there!"

A sudden, lighthearted greeting from one of the alleyways interrupted Czes and Rachel's conversation.

"?" "?"

As Czes and Rachel looked at the newcomer in confusion, the young man who stepped into the conversation spoke to them like an old friend.

"Wow, this an amazing coincidence or what? I came here to see Firo, an old buddy of mine, but I hear he's out taking a couple of his friends to the casino. It'd be pretty rude of me to interrupt 'em, so I was gonna head back for today... So what are the two of ya up to? Actually, since when were you two so friendly with each other?"

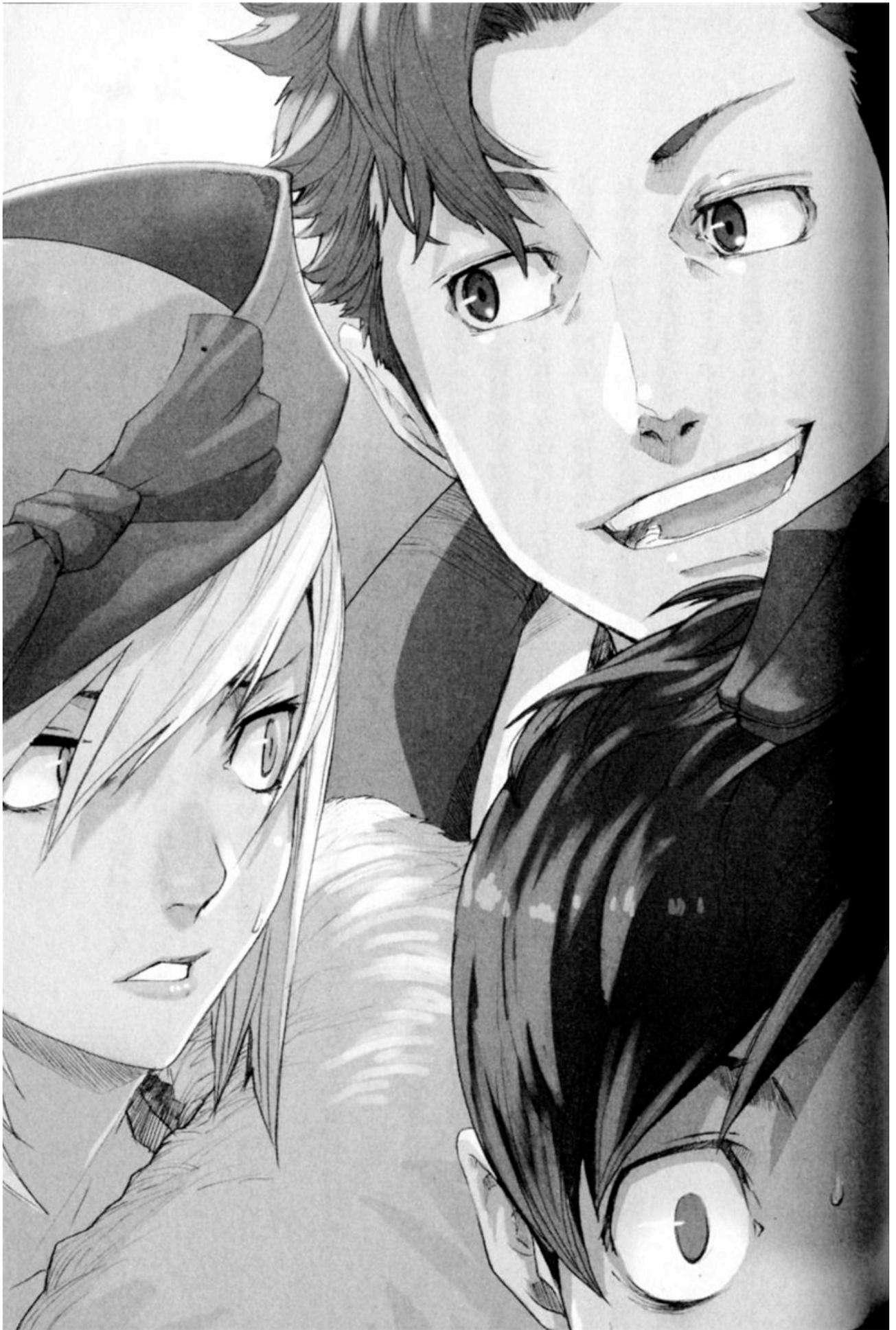
"Hm?"

'Is he from the Daily Days? Wait, I know this voice...'

"...Who are you, mister?"

Rachel and Czes looked at the man doubtfully, unable to recognize him. They thought that perhaps he was some sort of swindler, but something about his voice sounded strangely familiar.

"That's awful cold of ya. 'Course, I'm dressed all clean now and I'm not covered in blood anymore, but..."



The smile never left the man's face as he brought up a more macabre topic of discussion.

"I thought most people'd remember the voice of the guy who tried to kill 'em."

"What...?"

Suspicion and recognition began welling up in Rachel's mind as the lid on her memories began to shake itself open, no matter how much Rachel felt as though it would be better not to recall this particular event.

Should she open it, or not? As Rachel wavered between the two choices, the man cheerfully continued the one-sided conversation.

"Don't worry. The train got to New York safely, so I'll let you off now, kid. And you, Miss Stowaway, I hear you bought your tickets properly after all. I mean, that's what you're normally supposed to do, but I can't say I ain't happy to hear that."

Confirmation and terror instantly arose in Czes and Rachel. In the latter's case, it was a resurgence of her fears from before. But for Czes, the terrifying nightmare had not yet ended.

"N, no... no... no... AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

With a defiant cry, Czes fled into the alleyway like a child possessed. His legs propelled him with the strength of a beast, obedient to the laws of nature despite his immortality.

The predator who had awakened such instincts in Czes looked a little dissatisfied.

"I said, 'don't worry', didn't I?"

'As if that's even possible.' Rachel quipped in her mind, and looked at the newcomer--the man who had nearly drowned her in absolute fear during the incident on the train.

'The conductor.'

She recalled a conductor covered in red.

But now the young man was dressed inconspicuously, looking like any ordinary person you'd find on the street, He didn't give off the impression of being employed, but there was nothing that stood out about him save for his pleasant attitude.

The aforementioned pleasant young man smiled, a far cry from the bloodlust he emitted on the train, and made a proposal.

"Why don't we go have something to eat at this speako here? I was actually looking for a lady's advice."

<=>

Rachel re-entered the speakeasy. All eyes were on her.

"S, see? What'd I tell ya? Czes came back all grown up!"

"Is that some kinda magic trick?! One of those escape tricks they do with twins?"

The shock of Rachel returning with a full-grown man instead of Czes turned heads everywhere. But soon the other patrons realized that the young man was actually a different person altogether, and returned to their own business.

They sat facing each other at an empty table and placed orders without much thought.

"Um... what should I call you?"

"Right. See, I used to be Claire Stanfield, but a bunch of things got in the way and now I go by Felix Walken."

"Uh... oh."

Rachel wondered what might have led him to change his name, but she didn't have the courage to ask as long as he did not speak of his reasons himself.

Of course, she doubted that he would give her a straight answer even if she asked him.

"I don't know if you knew this already, but my name is Rachel. It's nice to meet you. ...So, what is it you wanted to talk about?"

Rachel cut to the chase immediately. She determined that it would be easier to ask the man directly instead of prodding at him for the answers.

"Well, there's this girl I'm in love with. How do you think I should confess to her? Oh, but don't worry, I'm not talking about you."

"...I think you should start by learning the meaning of tact. But thank you for the warning."

Though his lack of sensitivity was astounding, Rachel decided to be frank with him.

Still, she was rather far removed from any normal woman in this day and age. How well could she answer the former conductor's questions, she wondered. Rachel stiffened ever-so-slightly.

'But he wouldn't kill me for giving him a strange answer... right?'

Rachel knew too little about the man. She had no intention of revealing to him all of her honest opinions, but she didn't want to antagonize him by being too guarded. She carefully began to help him work out his problems.

"So, you know this person well?"

"Oh, I just met her on the train. I didn't get to talk to her for too long, though. But she left a note for me! I remember every last word. [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.] was what she said."

"I don't know all the details, but that means you have a pretty good chance, right?"

'Did he bring me here just so he could show off?'

Though she wasn't entirely convinced, she urged the 'monster' sitting across her to continue.

"Well, it's just this one problem. I don't know if she wants to meet me to kill me, or if she wants to meet me because she's in love with me."

"...Huh?"

What was this man talking about? Rachel found herself almost regretting the decision to hear him out. She then reminded herself that she was dealing with someone who worked by no logic she knew of, and decided to continue the conversation.

"...Let's set that aside for now. What if she's planning to kill you? Would you kill her?"

It wasn't a kind of conversation she would normally partake in in public, but conversations like "I just wanna rip off the bastard's _____", "Why don't you just kill him?" "Right, kill 'im off!" "But that's such a pain..." were going on in the background, relaxing Rachel's sense of caution.

The conductor, meanwhile, was as laid-back as ever.

"Well, I thought about that, but I don't necessarily think that necessarily means that she isn't in love with me."

"...How am I supposed to know?"

"Stay with me here. Y'know, maybe she loves me enough to kill me, or maybe it's one of those situations--she actually loves me, but she has to kill me for something else she loves more."

"Is it that complicated? If I were in your shoes, I'd back out on my own..."

Rachel had a point, but the conductor swept it aside.

"Really? Personally, I wouldn't really care. But anyway, up 'til now whenever I started to like a lady, I proposed to her right away. And when she turned me down, I moved on to the next one right away."

"That's a hopeless pattern... but why don't you just keep going along with it?" Rachel asked half-heartedly, but for the first time in the conversation, the conductor tensed.

"Uh... Well, that's what I thought about doing at first, but... See, I just keep remembering her letter, the way she fought that white suit to kill, and that really quiet, emotionless face of hers. and every time I do, I... I end up liking her more. Maybe when I offered to help her out, I wasn't being *sympathetic*... Maybe I was already in love with her at first sight! It's like some kind of destiny!" Claire muttered, looking away. Rachel thought for a moment that she had seen his cheeks faintly go pink.

"...You know, just now, for the first time, I started seeing you as a human being. Though I thought I heard some weird things about killing people partway through our conversation..."

Rachel normally wouldn't say things like this to someone she had only met twice, but things like politeness were not a problem because she understood from his behaviour on the train and their conversations that the conductor was no normal person.

"So up 'til just now you didn't think I was human?' is what I wanna ask, but to be honest, I'm in a bit of a mess here, too."

The conductor slowly began to reveal his humanity. Rachel almost began to like him as a person being at this point, but what he said next completely vaporized such sentiments.

"Well, I know I'll get things my way eventually. It might take some time, but if she doesn't like me back, I'll make her love me, no matter how many years it takes."

This was a kind of thinking that might get him labeled a stalker in later generations. Though Rachel was nonplussed by Claire's tone, completely lacking in any sort of tenacity, she decided to give him some advice.

'I'm starting to feel sorry for the girl he's in love with.'

She wanted to at least teach him to approach her like a normal human being. Although the strange things he told Rachel about the girl bothered her a little, Rachel was sure that the conductor's intended couldn't be worse than him.

"You should start by finding out where she is, right?"

"Uh, actually, I already got that covered."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I asked your information agency."

'That'll be accurate information, then.'

Though she had no idea who in the Daily Days spoke to the conductor, there should be no fault with the information if the employee had spoken to the conductor as broker and customer. Rachel was happy to see that the information she retrieved was used so accurately.

"I see... Then the most important part is going to be the way you approach her."

Normally Rachel might suggest writing a letter or making a phone call, but in this case, they had no idea if the woman wanted to see the conductor out of personal interest or with murderous intentions. Although she felt like the conductor wouldn't hesitate to greet the woman pleasantly even if she showed up armed with a machine gun.

In any case, Rachel wanted to avoid causing (possibly mutual) death with her advice.

'I'm going to become an information broker. Giving advice like this shouldn't be a big deal...'

Although Rachel was failing to draw a line between business and personal life, she had begun to seriously think over her resolution.

Things might have been easier for her if not for the fact that the one consulting her was not bound by the same rules as the rest of the world. Rachel could also tell that his intended would be no more easily dealt with by normal means.

"If you want to figure out what she thinks of you, what about sending her a gift and a letter?"

It was a spur-of-the-moment idea on her part, but the conductor thought it over for a moment and nodded in acknowledgement.

"Right. A gift..."

"Yeah. Find her something that'll go well with her. If she likes it, it'll mean that she wants to see you in the good sense, right?"

"That sounds just about right."

Glad that the conductor found her advice useful, Rachel continued to discuss her own opinions on the matter.

"If she's trying to kill you, she'll probably react differently--although she might not necessarily throw out your gift. But since you can't just spy on her in her room or anything, how about something you could see on the streets? Like an accessory?"

"Hey, that's pretty clever!"

Rachel didn't share his sentiments, but being complimented by the superhuman conductor made her feel a strange mix of joy and confusion.

"Hm... I expect she's already got all the knives she ever wants..."

"...I'll stay away from asking about the girl you're looking for."

Rachel's complicated emotions gave way to a series of annoying questions.

"That so? That's a shame. I think she'd look real sweet in a military uniform with a set of nice knives, you know?"

"I don't know how anyone could look sweet wearing a uniform and carrying knives... But if she's that far removed from everyday materialism, how about some clothes? The kind that normal women wear?"

Rachel was certain that the conductor wasn't the only unusual one in this romantic endeavour. Of course, considering what she knew of his personality, the conductor might describe even a five-year old or an old woman as "looking good in a military uniform with knives", but she decided to ignore the possibility for now.

"All right! A gift, huh?"

With this, the conductor got up from his seat, took the coat hanging from his chair and put it over his shoulder, smiled pleasantly at Rachel, and flashed her a thumbs-up.

"Thanks for everything. The food's on me."

"You don't have to..."

"No, no. I insist! Gotta keep the record straight, y'know?"

The man proudly stood up straight and called for the waitress.

"Hey, miss! Put all this on Firo's tab, okay?"

"H, huh? Isn't 'Firo' that old friend you talked about-"

"Yeah. Thing is, I don't know when he's gonna be coming back here. So if I just do this, he'll come back to see me to get his money, right? Saves time for everyone."

"I guess so."

Although Rachel still had her doubts, she assumed that being an old friend of the conductor must mean that this "Firo" person was also an oddball, and sighed.

"...Maybe I should have just taught him some common sense."

Several minutes later.

'Most people'd probably be surprised if someone suddenly sends them clothes out of the blue.'

'But maybe it's best for the conductor that he finds someone who doesn't take something like that too badly...'

After Claire left, Rachel finished her meal and left the Alveare.

And as if changing shifts, a group of people entered the speakeasy.

"Damn it... That dealer just had to mess up big in the biggest round."

Behind the muttering complaint followed a pair of excited voices.

"Wow! Look at how much we won today! I put on my coins on lucky seven, but who could've imagined I'd win so big?"

"Amazing, Isaac!"

"All right then, today we're having a party to celebrate this win! It's time for a smorgasbord for everyone!"

"Wow, Isaac! It's like we're royalty!"

"Haha... They say that if you can't finish your food by yourself, you must gather two others with you and attain the wisdom of Mori (毛利)... In other words, it must mean that, even if you can't eat everything, if you share it with everyone else, you get smarter! I don't know who this Mori fellow is, but it sounds sort of like Moses, so he must be a great man!"

"It's survival of the fittest!"

"That's right! I'm sure Mori probably meant that, even if you can't split the sea on your own, when three brothers work together to land a chop on the waves, the water will split for them! Some sort of heartwarming tale of brotherly love, if I remember correctly."

"So family wins out in the end!"

Though the content of their conversation left much to the imagination, the simple couple's presence warmed the atmosphere around them.

"Well... I'd appreciate it if you could spend all that money here, if you can. Reduces deficits and all, y'know."

Mumbling in front of the somehow familiar couple was a young man in a green suit, fresh-faced enough to be called a boy. He didn't look any less suspicious than most of the other patrons in the shop, but the couple accompanying him offset that impression with their undeniable honesty. They stepped into the Alveare.

Hiding in the couple's shadow was a young boy. It was Czes the immortal, who had not so long ago fled from the conductor.

Czes recognized Rachel, standing outside the shop, looked around for a moment, and hesitantly spoke to her.

"I-is he gone?"

Rachel nodded. Czes let out a sigh of relief and smiled relaxedly like a child. Rachel grinned as well.

"Haha... So I guess immortals aren't so different from regular humans. You can get happy or scared... I thought you might be a little beyond things like that."

"...Hmph. It's not all great. I'll see you around."

Czes wiped the smile off his face and quickly disappeared into the shop in the footsteps of the baby-faced young man. Watching the boy's exceedingly human reactions, Rachel thought to herself:

"Anyway, I wonder what kind of woman she is? The one that monster is in love with..."

<=>

"What? Someone left that on my tab?"

After Rachel had gone, the Alveare was filled with the voice of the young man in the green suit.

"...Wh, who the heck is Felix Walken?!"

<=>

Several days later, Millionaire Row. Eve Genoard's Manor.

"..."

Inside the luxurious manor that was filled with majestic ornamentation, Chane was frozen to the spot as though bewitched.

"What's wrong, Chane? Did you get that package that came in the mail for you?"

Jacuzzi, who had been released from the hospital miraculously quickly, spoke to her. He was still relying on his crutches to inch him forward, but at this point he was doing quite well for someone who had been just released from hospitalization.

Jacuzzi and the others had been given permission to stay in this great mansion as housekeepers, thanks to Fang and John's connections. Chane lived with them as well, and the gang slowly began to get used to her oddities.

Chane's silence was expected, but Jacuzzi was worried because he had never seen her so absolutely motionless.

"Oh, wow... A white dress! It's beautiful, Chane!"

Nice, who had entered the room with Jacuzzi, looked over at the object that Chane was fixated upon. A simple but elegant dress was laid out before her.

"Was this in the package that came for you just now? Whoever sent you this has wonderful taste."

"It looks amazing. I bet it'll look really good on you, Chane." Jacuzzi said, unsuspectingly checking for the name of the person who had sent her the outfit.

"Huh...?"

The moment he registered the name, Jacuzzi froze just like Chane.

[From: The Rail Tracer]

They had encountered the rail Tracer, the living urban legend, on the Flying Pussyfoot.

This blood-red monster had disappeared into the morning sun, leaving behind nothing but a pile of mysteries.

"Wh, what's going on...?"

As Jacuzzi stood still, trying to process the shock, Chane was also struggling in a storm of questions.

'What is he thinking?

'Clothes? This is the first time anyone other than father has given me such things.

'When I was a child, father always used to give me gifts of clothes. I was always happy to receive them.

'But now that I have received clothes from that man, how is it that I am supposed to react?

'I... I was planing to kill that man. He may eventually get in father's way.

'I don't understand. Why did he send me a gift? What good does this do for him?

'What is he thinking?

'No. I must stop thinking about this. He will ruin father's plans, I am sure of it. I must think only of killing him.

'..."Ruin father's plans" ...?

'No, that's not right. He said he would protect father.

'He said that he would marry me.

'Marriage...

'I have no interest in such things, but I think I understand what it signifies.

'Marriage is a ceremony undertaken by a man and a woman who need one another, in order to cement their relationship and become "family".

'"Family"... Like father and I?

'But what meaning does such a thing hold to him?

'I don't understand what would drive him to say such a thing.

'But at least... if I were to accept his proposal... He would not go back on his word. He would protect father.

'I sensed no lies in his words... And that is what puzzles me.

'Should I accept his proposal?

'I am the one who is afraid. I am the one who wishes to kill him.

'So what is it that I am afraid of? Ah... Am I using father as a mere excuse to justify my fears?

'How idiotic I am. What is that man thinking, proposing marriage to a fool like me?

'I cannot support another, like my father supports me.

'So why...?'

'?'

By the time Chane came back to her senses, she was surrounded by a small crowd.

"?!"

Jacuzzi's friends, eyes filled with anticipation, chattered and began comparing Chane's measurements with the dress's size.

"Whoa... so who's this Rail Tracer?"

"Amazing! You're gonna look great in this dress!"

"Dunno about that. I bet my little sister'd look better in it."

"You don't have a little sister."

"I'm talking about my *future* little sister." "Why don't you get yourself a girlfriend, first?" "I'd prefer a little sister!" "What?"

"Ahaha! You've been staring at that dress for 136 seconds already, Chane!"

"That's adorable."

"Hyaha!"

"Hyaha!"

'When did they-?!'

Chane was shocked.

She had noticed Jacuzzi and Nice, who had spoken to her, but she had not realized that so many people had entered her room.

Though Chane *had* been focused mostly on her doubts about that man, this was just not like herself. Even though she was lost in thoughts, she would never have let her guard down so much before, when she was in the company of the Lemures.

How had she allowed such people, who hadn't even been trained to hide their presence, to get so close to her? Had her senses dulled so much since she left her battlefields?

Anxious about her dampened senses, Chane intentionally blocked out the other possibility.

'It can't be... I couldn't have accepted these people into my world...!'





She had persisted in remaining alone in her world thus far. She could not allow this change to continue. Unable to hide her disappointment in herself, Chane chastised herself for her weakness.

The other gang members, completely ignorant to her plight, innocently ended up thrusting another trial upon Chane's path.

"Why don't you try it on, Chane?"

'What?'

"That's right! We'll step out while you change."

'No, that isn't the problem-'

"Wait! As her friends, I maintain that we are honour-bound to watch her undress."

"Hold up! I just heard a freaking big suggestion just now!"

"Pardon?"

"As her friends, we are honour-bound to watch her un-"

"...Do I need to set off an explosion here?"

"NoNicepleasedonttakeoutabombfromyourchestwiththatgrinplease"

"Damn it! I missed seeing her taking out the bomb!" "Tragic!" "Precisely *where* around her chest did she get it from?"

"..."

"NoNicepleasedonttakeoutamatchwiththatgrinplease"

"Forget about these idiots! Let's go for a walk!"

'What are these people talking about?'

"Find a new you, y'know?"

'What if I don't want to find such a thing?'

"All right, now take off your clothes."

'Don't make me laugh. I refuse to wear something like this.'

'And it's not because it's from him. Who would wear something so stifling...?' Chane thought, but she took a closer look at the clothes and realized that they wouldn't make her any less mobile than the clothes she was wearing now.

What surprised her more, however, was the fact that there was something on the back of the dress for hiding certain objects. At first glance it just looked like a stylized part of the dress, but Chane saw it for that it was.

'This is a sheath...'

Realizing that this dress had been unquestionably made for her alone, Chane fell deeper into the waters of confusion. As she continued being unable to think up anything but questions, the voices of the delinquents swept towards her, as though they were trying to push her into an abyss.

"Come on, try it on."

"Damn, I feel like I'm gonna get a nosebleed just thinking about it..."

"Your nose *has* been bleeding. For the past twenty-three seconds."

"Anyway, who the hell's the guy who sent this to you?! Is he your boyfriend?! Is that how it is?!"

"Hyaha!"

And Chane--

<=>

Millionaire Row. Inside a certain car.

"Boss Graham! Someone just stepped out!"

"...That so? Then let's pray that this will not be an excruciatingly tedious tale. Oh... Tedium... Tedium is a crime. Instead of letting a man spend his given time in indolence or wallowing in pleasure, it just sits there, breaking it down... I can't take it! Tedium is a *sin*! Death to tedium!"

"Sure, if you could kill it I'd be all up for that, but... Hold up, boss! There's a pretty eye-catching dame over there! Is that her, you think?"

Graham, who was lying on the back seat of the Ford, slowly sat up.

"Wow... She's a cute one! She must be the Genoard girl, boss! You gotta be some kinda heiress to wear a dress like that."

"...Then let me conclude that tedium is but a short coffee break in preparation for the harshness of life, so to speak... That is the kind of proverb her beauty brings to mind."

"Is that a real proverb? ...Anyway, you think she's actually Eve Genoard?"

Although Graham's henchman had already exclaimed out loud his certainty in the young woman's identity, he hesitantly asked for Graham's confirmation in order to avoid a monkey wrench to the head in case he was wrong.

Graham raised head with an audible crack and grinned.

"And if that's incorrect, then let us assume that is just another spice in the proverbial dish of life. Because there is no such thing as tedium in this universe."

"That's not what you were saying earlier, boss. Are you okay? Your head, I mean."

"Shaft... Could it be that your first encounter with the unconscious state has rendered you immune to fear or tact?"

Hearing Shaft's surprisingly nonchalant question, Graham wondered to himself if this henchman was really the same person he had almost killed only a few days ago. If Graham had known Shaft would end up this way, he might even have considered actually breaking open his skull back then.

Whether or not he knew of Graham's murderous thoughts, Shaft complained tiredly.

"Guess you could say that near-death experience really helped me come to terms with the world, or something... Oh, looks like she's on a walk! A bunch of 'em are moving at once."

"That so? Then let me tell a sad story..."

"To them, of course."

<=>

The streets of Millionaire Row.

Even people who never spared a glance at delinquents like Jacuzzi's gang were drawn to them today. This was because of the beautiful young woman who walked among them, serene as an invisible wind.

Pale white skin, shimmery black hair, and golden eyes.

Her usual black dress was eye-catching enough, but the dress she wore today served to highlight her beauty even more. Each and every passerby on the street was captivated by her, eyes full of admiration and envy.

But Chane herself had no inkling of her own charm, and assumed that people were staring at her in curiosity because the clothes were not very suited to her.

'I ended up wearing this dress.'

Ultimately, Chane had been unable to turn down the requests of the gang members. She had tried on the dress that *he* had sent her.

'What is going on? I'm faltering.'

Chane had never encountered a group like Jacuzzi's gang before.

They were different from her father, from the Lemures, and even the police she was up against. Having lived a life so far removed from normalcy, Chane had never met people like those in the gang.

They were, without a doubt, delinquents. They committed crimes and robbed trains.

But there was no malice in them--things that anyone should have, like jealousy and hatred, ambition and plots to step on anyone who was in their way, ever-present among the members of the Lemures, was practically nonexistent here.

She didn't understand why. She didn't even know if this was a good thing.

But Chane could feel with certainty the sensation of something shaking within her heart.

Was she going to break at this rate? The world that contained nothing but the happiness of herself and her father?

As she delved deeper into her own thoughts, Chane slowly began to feel fear. She considered just running away to some faraway place. If her father was in

Alcatraz, she wondered if she should turn herself in to the police so she could join him there.

'I wonder if women are imprisoned in Alcatraz as well.'

Chane lost herself in thought, but noticed a car driving up towards her. She instantly put up her guard and focused her senses on the area around her.

Her instincts had noticed the suspiciously slow car heading towards her and raised an alarm. Why hadn't this happened for her earlier?

Although Chane wondered for a moment, she quickly returned to the real world and focused on the car.

Although she made her suspicions obvious in her gaze, the car never lost its arrogance as it stopped by the curb a little distance from Chane and the others.

"Huh? What the hell?"

The delinquents, also noticing something off about the situation, looked at the car.

At that exact moment, the car's black-painted door opened. From behind it emerged a man who looked more like the builder of this car than the rider. He was wearing blue work clothes, and was holding a gigantic wrench the size of a man's forearm.

The delinquents noticed the way the man walked up to them, holding a silver object splattered with dark splotches, and visibly tensed. The man stepped towards them, relaxed as could be, put the wrench over his shoulder, and began to talk--all like a piece of clockwork.

"Let me tell you... a sad, sad story."

"...!"

The man was obviously not normal. The delinquents looked at one another in confusion.

And Chane noticed something dreadfully dangerous about the way the man carried himself. He talked and gesticulated as though he was unconcerned, but his eyes were fixed on her, showing absolutely no weakness.

'This man... he's similar.'

Realizing that this man had the same kind of aura as the man she had faced recently, Chane instantly maximized her level of caution.

'He's just like that white suit from the train!'

Although a sneak attack was impossible at this point, the man continued walking towards Chane, tossing out another incomprehensible line.

"It's a story sad enough to break your heart to a million pieces... but don't worry, *I'm* having fun."

<=>

Several minutes later.

"Jacuzzi! Jacuzzi!"

One of Jacuzzi's friends scrambled over, grabbed him by the collar, and screamed into his face.

"Wh, what's wrong?! Did something happen?!"

"Just listen! We got trouble! Chane... they took Chane!"

"What?! What do you mean?! W-was it the cops?!"

Jacuzzi was imagining the worst-case scenario of Chane being arrested, but his friend's answer was beyond that.

"What kinda cop carries around a monkey wrench?! It was *him!* That Graham guy, the head honcho of all the delinquents in town!"

"What?! That can't be!"

"Damn it! I don't even know what happened! The guy just swung his wrench, and the next thing we know we're all on the ground... By the time my head stopped spinning Chane was already on their car.. He took off and left this note!"

Jacuzzi's friend handed him a scrap of paper. In neat writing the letter recorded several sentences that conveyed both Graham's intentions and his demands to Jacuzzi.

[Dear Jacuzzi Splot. We have taken Eve Genoard. If you want her back safely, bring all the money you have to the abandoned factory at district #13 in the harbour. By yourself, of course.]

The ransom note said nothing else.

It was clear that Graham had mistaken Chane for the owner of the manor in which Jacuzzi's gang lived. But it was not likely that Graham would believe the fact even if Jacuzzi were to explain. Not only that, the fact that Graham knew Jacuzzi's name meant that he knew that Jacuzzi was in no position to be calling the police.

And what if they had no money to hand over? Jacuzzi realized that there was no need to detail the consequences of such a situation. His face went white as a sheet.

But--

"Jacuzzi! What do we do?" Nice asked desperately. Though Jacuzzi was trembling in fear, he replied without hesitation.

"What do you mean, what do we do? ...I gotta go over there!"

But the strength in his voice quickly faded, as he fell against the wall and weakly crumpled up the ransom note.

"...E-even though I'm so scared I think I'm gonna die, but..."

<=>

As Jacuzzi continued to quiver in terror, one man was trying to calmly assess the situation.

In a corner of Millionaire Row, one man who had been watching the events leading up to Chane's kidnapping from amidst the crowds put his fingers to his temple and muttered to himself.

"Wow, so she really *did* wear the clothes I sent her.. I didn't think she'd go through with it this soon. I guess I'm, in a word... happy."

Although he was being a bit too dramatic for his words to be mere monologue, he was really lost wondering about one thing.

"Who was that guy in the blue suit that walked outta the car? Should I go after him?"

The woman he was in love with was taken away by a mysterious man in a car.

Of course, since they weren't officially dating yet, most men in that situation would either hesitate in fear or gather the courage to go rescue the woman in question.

The difference was the fact that this man was not like most others. The man in work wear's gigantic wrench did not scare him. And if he made up his mind to do so, perhaps he could even go after the car on foot.

But this man knew Chane well--perhaps even better than the other member of the Lemures. This was why he was hesitant to follow after her, in doubt about her actions.

"I wonder why Chane went along so willingly?"

Interlude - [TIPS: Immortals]

January 1932. The speakeasy [Jane Doe].

The speakeasy, its name derived from for a term used for unidentified women, was on the large side when it came to such underground locales.

There were many seats, but very few guests were present to occupy them.

That was only natural, as this particular establishment was literally under the ground. Overhead was just another New York cemetery.

The interior was decorated with frightening ornaments befitting a mausoleum, deterring would-be customers from entry with its vampiric atmosphere.

The owner of this speakeasy was dressed in black, and his face was covered in scars. Displayed in plain sight behind him was a shotgun and a gigantic hand axe, both presumably for discouraging robbery.

The few patrons who occupied the space mostly had the look of 'I picked the wrong speakeasy to drink in today'. Everyone who didn't fall into this category looked terrifying enough to match the owner, or worse.

Sitting in one of the seats here was a man who fell squarely into the former category. He was a gentle-looking young man with neat black hair.

Sitting across the table from him was a prim-looking reporter. Pinned on his lapel was the logo of a small newspaper company in New York, but their conversation felt less like an official interview than it did a personal conversation of curiosity.

After a period of silence, an eerie woman who looked to be a waitress brought them drinks and jerky. The frail-looking young man began speaking.

Although his tone didn't quite match his looks, there was no mistaking the honesty in his eyes as he recalled the incident he was part of two weeks ago on the Flying Pussyfoot.

<=>

Upham's monologue

Where did I leave off yesterday?

...Oh, right. It was up to the point where I was caught by those delinquents.

That's right. I boarded the Flying Pussyfoot with the other black suits and took part in the hijacking plot.

I don't know why, but a bunch of delinquents captured me. But if I hadn't been caught, I wouldn't be here talking to you. Probably prison--or if I was *really* unlucky, I'd be six feet under by this point.

...But I guess it's not 'if I was unlucky'. After all, someone with average luck would've died, no question. I think I was probably one of the luckiest guys. I never got turned into mincemeat by that wacko in white or the red monster. I even managed to get away from the cops.

...

I was never a really firm believer, y'know? When Neider kept bugging me about betraying the others, I didn't know what to do.

Sure, I was interested in Master Huey's immortality, but I honestly didn't think Neider would believe me if I told him about that power. And I'm pretty surprised a reporter like you knows about it, too. That's why I agreed to this, you know? That, and this didn't look like a trap by the cops.

So I was hesitating then, when I happened to see one of our guys ratting on Neider to Goose. So I reported to Goose too, and managed to escape being executed with the other traitors. That's just how it went.

I'm not someone that amazing.

I wanted Master Huey's gift of immortality, but I wasn't ready to risk my life for it or anything.

I'm not that big of a man.

I understood that. I really have no business in all this immortality stuff.

...But I know it's real. I saw Master Huey's regeneration with my own eyes.

Still, even though it's as real as you and me, in the end it's just like a fairy tale. It's not the kind of world a person like me can just waltz into.

And even if I were to step into that world, I don't know if I could stay sane. There's no point in getting an immortal body if your brain is dead, right?

That's right. I understood all of this when I met the two immortals on the train.

...Two.

Yeah, there were... at least two immortals on that train. People just like Master Huey.

After the tattoo kid and the gigantic Mexican caught me, I spilled everything I knew about the Lemures' plans. Those two tied me up and left me in the cargo hold.

I was thinking, oh, it's all over, I'm going to die.

Pretty stupid, but I was practically in tears at that point.

That's when *he* came.

...You wanna know who he was?

Well, he wasn't exactly eye-catching. Pretty normal guy, but...

Oh, yeah.

His smile.

I remember how warmly he was smiling.

Even after all the things that happened afterwards, he was still smiling. And every time something happened, he'd turn to me and say, "You have to smile".

I guess I'd call him... a Smile Junkie.

<=>

Millionaire Row

As the young man under the cemetery divulged his side of the story, Nice and the others were gathered on the street after Jacuzzi had gone off on his own.

"What are we gonna do, Nice?"

"What *can* we do? We just gotta trust Jacuzzi."

Nice looked down, her fists clenched tightly. The other delinquents knew well that, if they were to take their eyes off her for even a moment, she would set off enough explosions put a battlefield to shame.

Nice was the one who had most wanted to stop Jacuzzi, but at the same time, she was also the one who most wanted to respect his determination to go alone.

"We should have stopped him even if we had to beat him up." "Don't be stupid. He's already hurt!"

"You can't stop Jacuzzi when he's set like that, though."

"It's already been a hundred and twenty-nine seconds. If we want to follow him, we have to go now..."

"Forget Jacuzzi--if we just force ourselves there, who knows that they'll do to *Chane*?"

"Right. We have no idea what that wrench bastard might end up doing."

"It's better than hanging back like this!" "But Jacuzzi told us not to follow him!"

"Who cares?" "Hyaha!"

As the commotion continued to crescendo, a laid-back voice suddenly joined in.

"Can I see that ransom note?" "Huh? Right. Here."

"Oh... Uh huh. Come alone, huh...?" The man read over the note for a few moments, then looked up. "I have an idea, if you're willing to hear me out."

He then revealed the contents of his epiphany to the others.

"-----, -----."

The man was grinning. The delinquents looked at one another.

"That's it!" "Yeah, we *could* do that!" "That was simple!"

"I bet even Jacuzzi'd understand something like that!"

"Now all we have to worry about is rescuing Chane safely."

All they needed was a little push.

Whether they took the man's advice or charged in thoughtlessly, the outcome would not be very different. But it was their faith in Jacuzzi that kept the delinquents from chasing after him. The man's suggestion had provided them with a way to take action without disrespecting Jacuzzi's wishes.

"We can do it!" "Hyaha!" "Hyaha!"

"Gah, gotta help Jaccuzi." Donny said.

The delinquents grinned and nodded. As they prepared to run off, the man spoke again.

"I don't really know what's going on here, but I'm glad to see you're all smiling. I hope that Jacuzzi person, the Eve lady, and the wrench person you guys were talking about all catch a case of the smiles, too. I'll be off now!"

With that, the man disappeared into one of Millionaire Row's alleyways.

"Yeah, thanks a bunch!" "Yahoo!" "Yahoo!"

The delinquents watched the man walk away. One of them spoke up.

"...Uh, so who was that guy?"

"Isn't he a friend of yours?"

"Nope. You know him, Nice?"

"No, I was sure he was a friend of Nick or Jack..."

"Never seen 'im before."

"Hm... I'm pretty sure he was going around looking for someone around here. An old man named Quartz? Quits? He's a bit of a nosy one. Always butting in if you look like you've got something on your mind."

"Maybe he noticed we were in trouble and came to talk to us."

"Wow! And I was so sure he was a swindler or something!" "That was bad of us."

"Shouldn't we say thanks?" "Hyaha?" "Hyaha!"

"Gah, hurry. Jacuzzi danger." Donny said, bringing the delinquents' conversation back to their biggest problem. They decided to forget the man for the moment.

"Anyway, let's do it! Now we can rescue Jacuzzi, no problem!"

<=>

Upham's monologue

...Anyway, he was a real strange guy.

I had no idea what he was trying to do, so as soon as he untied me, I... I put a knife to his throat.

You can't blame me, though. What kinda weirdo would walk around a train at a time like that with a creepy smile on his face? He even untied a suspicious guy like me!

I thought that, maybe, *he* was the red monster that was picking off our guys. I was so scared I thought I'd pass out.

But he, well...

He pushed my knife into his own throat.

Could you believe that?

His blood just splattered like a fountain, right in front of my eyes.

...

I guess you don't need me to tell you what happened next. After all, you know about those immortals.

Yeah. It was just like with Master Huey.

The blood from his neck started crawling up his clothes and his skin, like a huge mass of red slugs... And it flowed right back into the cut in his neck. It looked more scary than miraculous, to be honest. This was the second time I'd seen it--first time was seeing Master Huey--but I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing something like that.

I ended up seeing it again not long afterwards, and I didn't feel any different about it then.

Or maybe I was just out of it. I was injured back then, too.

My clothes are covering the wound, but my arm got stabbed.

Better than the red monster grinding me on the tracks or having the guy in white pump my face full of lead, I guess.

...You want to know what happened?

No, it wasn't the smiling immortal.

I told you, there was another one of them on the train.

About the second guy, huh?

...

...

...

...How should I explain?

I'll put it like this:

Let's say that some nutcase suddenly steps in here and ventilates us all with a Tommy gun. No, I'm just saying.

We have no idea why, but this bastard is trying to massacre everyone in this speako. So let's say this sicko takes his sweet time pumping lead into anything that so much as twitches. And let's say--just saying, again--that there's someone standing behind the guy.

The sicko wants to kill everyone in this shop, but he never, ever turns the gun on the guy behind himself.

But it's not like the guy behind him's working with him or anything.

But the second guy's just there from the start. Acting like he's completely safe and enjoying the show, even though he *shouldn't* actually be safe.

...Right. I guess I could call him something like an audience member.

We're all living our lives real seriously, but to this second guy, everything about us is just a story up on a stage.

The sicko can shoot his gun as much as he likes, but the audience isn't ever going to get hit.

And even though he's nothing but an observer, this second guy keeps trying to meddle with the story.

Y'know, there's always one of those types. The kind of guy who watches a musical and goes around talking at the top of his lungs about how good a musical was, how bad it was, and what he'd have done differently, right?

Now, this second guy's pretty quiet about it, but his voice carries real far and clear.

That voice just spins round and round, reaches an actor or a writer's ears, and controls their actions without them even noticing.

That's how he directs the play the way he likes, from a total safe zone as an audience member.

He's not a playwright or anything that great. An audience member like him doesn't care about others, as long as *he's* satisfied.

And getting back to that story about the nutjob with the Tommy gun... Once he's finished killing everyone, the second guy'd whisper into his ear:

"Hey, there's still one left. Yourself."

...I guess that's how I'd describe the second guy. Real creepy.

I didn't spend too long with him. Maybe a few minutes, tops. And what happened to me in those few minutes? I almost got stabbed to death.

Yeah. That creepy bastard stabbed me.

Me and the Smile Junkie went to the conductor's compartment together. I was following him because I just wanted to get a handle on everything that was going on back then.

And then I saw the conductors. By then they were just useless sacks of meat.

"Huh. I wonder what happened here? One was shot, and the other... looks like he was half-eaten by a dragon or something. I've seen more corpses like this in the freight holds along the way here, too. Who do you think could have done this?"

"Th-that's what I want to know..."

"I wonder... did these people have families of their own? I wonder how we should break the news to them so they could get back on their feet as soon as possible."

The two of us were looking at the corpse. We were *talking*, sure, but it didn't seem like much of a conversation. He talked about some really weird things.

Anyway, I looked at the corpses and started getting worried about Chane, and...

...Huh?

Wait, Chane has nothing to do with this.

Anyway, I was thinking about a lot of things, when I heard a voice from the compartment entrance--right behind me.

"You're in the way."

It was that simple.

...

Thinking about that voice still gives me the shivers.

It wasn't like he sounded angry at me or anything. There wasn't anything really *evil* about his tone, either.

None of that.

....

Right.

There was *nothing*.

There was nothing bad or good about his voice. I was in his way, and that was all he meant to say.

I turned around when I heard him. He was standing right in front of me...

And he was stabbing a knife down at me.

So I got hurt, but I took out my own knife and stabbed him back. It was real close. I don't care about the Lemures now, but I don't know what would've happened if they didn't train me all this stuff.

So I managed to stab him right in the heart, and... you know the rest, right? It happened again.

It was the same as with the smiling guy. The blood got sucked back in, like a bunch of red insects crawling back into their nest.

I think those two immortals knew each other. They were muttering something, but I couldn't really follow any of it. They mentioned Master Huey, and the name of one of their friends, or something.

But I couldn't keep up.

After that the, second immortal nearly killed me.

Yeah, it hadn't even been a few minutes since I'd met him, too.

I was stabbed.

But I finally realized at that point--that bastard was in another world altogether.

You know, it's like Captain Hook from Peter Pan. No matter how much he swings that hook of his, he'll never hit *you*, right? It was the same with me. I was Captain Hook, and he was the kid reading the book and laughing at me.

And what happens if you don't like Captain Hook?

Normally you'd just close the book, but what if the reader's a real selfish brat?

All he has to do is rip out all the pages with Captain Hook.

That's right. I was ripped out of the story.

I couldn't think up all that stuff about plays and the audience at that exact moment, but that's what it felt like.

I was so scared I couldn't move.

We were on completely different levels.

And once I really accepted that, I thought I was gonna go crazy with fear.

I was scared of both of them--the Smile Junkie who helped me, and the second man.

But... even though I was terrified of him, the Smile Junkie saved me again.

He took the hit for me and got a knife to his gut for his trouble. He then twisted the second guy's arm, and slowly pushed him towards the back of the compartment. Towards the open door.

I guess it's pretty obvious, huh?

The Smile Junkie was trying to push the other guy off the train, along with himself.

The moment the other immortal was about to fall, I heard him say something. His mouth twisted into this creepy grin, like he was enjoying himself way too much...

"One day, I'll make you understand."

That's what he said as he fell. I knew he was talking to the Smile Junkie.

But I... I get scared even thinking about it. I feel like I'm gonna go crazy.

I just know--that bastard's going to be out for blood, and not just the Smile Junkie's, either.

I get the feeling that he's going to destroy the world someday, just so he could do something with his power. And I have no idea when I might get caught up in that. Not just me, either. I'm talking about you. I'm talking about *every last human being on earth*.

...

Hey, that's enough, okay?

That's all I have to say about them.

I have a few theories of my own about that smiling immortal, but that's for me to know. That's really not something I should be telling you, and I doubt my thoughts could change a thing.

Besides, he asked me to keep quiet about him, too.

Which is why I'm not telling you his name, even though I remember it perfectly.

I might be a lowlife, but I have to at least keep half of my promise, you know?

Why 'half'?

...It's cause no one would be crazy enough to believe a story like this, and I'm not strong enough to keep this locked in my head for the rest of my life. That's why, if nothing else, I'm telling this story to an information broker like you.

But I never thought there'd be someone around who was looking for information on immortals. You'd lose a whole lot of customer confidence if you let this info slip too easily, y'know?

I'm planning to stay in town for a while now, but... I'm not exactly looking for a lot of attention, you know? So if we run into each other on the street or something, let's just pretend we've never met.

The food here was pretty good. Maybe I'll come back here more often. Later.

From tomorrow on, we're all strangers.

<=>

With that, the young man calling himself 'Upham' left the speakeasy.

The man with the Daily Days logo pinned to his lapel remained seated at his table for some time, nursing his drink.

About ten minutes passed. The reporter then spoke to the man sitting back-to-back behind him at another table.

"Hah... Should I end things off here, sir?"

"Yes, thank you." The man sitting behind him replied, not even looking around at the reporter.

The reporter heaved a sigh of relief, then engaged in casual conversation with the man behind him.

"What did you think of my performance, sir?"

"Very natural, I must say."

"But honestly, you've no idea how thankful I am... searching out a third-rate actor like me? I honestly have no idea about any of this talk of immortals, but once you finish writing the script, I hope you'll contact me again, if only for a bit role."

"Absolutely. You've been a great help. I do believe that the script will turn out much stronger thanks to your efforts."

The second man smiled softly, finally revealing his presence.

The man in the role of the reporter took the Daily Days pin off his lapel and spoke to the man behind him, a flattering smile plastered over his face.

"I, I'm honoured to hear that I've been of help, sir. But really, this is quite a novel idea! Giving myself and that fledgling back there only the premise of the story, and having us ad-lib a realistic conversation..."

The actor nodded in reverence, but the 'playwright' did not respond to the compliment.

"I'm afraid that young man in the role of the criminal made one crucial mistake." The playwright said suddenly.

"Pardon?"

"He did not fight back immediately after he was stabbed by the second immortal."

"Sir?"

The man in the role of the reporter tilted his head.

There was something inorganic in the attitude of the man behind him, who still refused to turn around. The actor felt as though he was talking to a portrait, but the actor's sense of danger was completely dulled by the huge sum of money he had received from the 'playwright' ahead of time.

"That young man fell to the floor like a fool. In reality, the immortal was taken by surprise and stabbed only because he was distracted by the sight of the Smile Junkie... or, rather, that was the original premise. Of course, it's not unusual for a fledgeling actor to want to rewrite his own character to appear more heroic."

"Of course, you're right! Quite understandable for a young actor, as you say!"

"In any event, thank you for your hard work today. Now, a change of scenery, perhaps? We could discuss further payments and the matter of what happens once this play has been completed."

Noticing that his employer was getting off his seat, the actor playing the role of the information broker did the same.

"Of course, sir! You have my deepest gratitude! Oh, uh... apologies, but your name, sir..."

The actor finally realized that he had forgotten the playwright's name yet again. He had heard the name countless times, but each time it slipped his mind.

The actor thought this strange, but soon corrected himself--it wasn't so difficult a phenomenon to understand, as the playwright was much too nondescript a man. He had long bangs that concealed his eyes, naturally lending a hazy aura around his presence.

"Please, it's no trouble." The self-proclaimed Broadway playwright smiled.

"Victor. My name is Victor Talbot. It was a pleasure to work with you today." He said cheerily, making sure to use a certain proper noun.

<=>

Several minutes later, somewhere in Manhattan.

"Well then..."

Having left the speakeasy with the actor, the 'playwright' led him down a back alley, cracking his neck along the way. The sun had already set, and very few people were out and about.

As they headed for their destination, someone got in their way.

"Excuse me, sir! But could you by any chance tell me where the warehouse district is again?!"

The young man standing before them was obviously a delinquent. There was something off about his question, but he was obviously showing the men respect. The actor responded.

"Huh? The warehouse district's just down that road, to the right."

"Sorry, sir! I'm pretty new to town! Thank you!"

With a quick apology and expression of thanks, the delinquent ran off.

"Dammit! They all left me behind!" He yelled as he disappeared round the corner.

"Wonder what's happening over there..." The actor wondered out loud. The 'playwright', meanwhile, watched the young man disappear towards the warehouse district and mumbled to himself, so quiet that no one could hear.

"Can't use the river, then."

"Pardon me, sir?"

"No, it's nothing. Perhaps we should talk more about the specifics at your residence." The playwright said with a pleasant smile. The actor was obviously flustered.

"Hm? But sir, well, my apartment's quite a mess at the moment..."

"That is no trouble for me. In fact, would it not be a better setting to discuss the matter of your payment? In a place where you go about your daily life?"

"...I suppose you're right! Once I get work, I could even say goodbye to that shabby little home! I'm in your debt, sir!"

"Haha, it is a wonderful thing to dream." The playwright smirked as the actor laughed in an attempt at flattery.

"Life is long, you see. Only by dreaming can we keep ourselves from growing bored..."



第五章『俺の世界』

Chapter 5 - My World

The Abandoned Factory.

The sun had long since set on Graham and his gang's headquarters, the crumbling factory by the river.

The air was dark and cold. The wintry chill and the blackness of the night only compounded the atmosphere of eerie desolation.

And inside this factory, several figures that fit well into the dark stage stirred.

But standing among them was a lovely young woman who could not be more out of place here.

In terms of appearances, anyway.

The factory interior was littered with machine parts. And in one corner of this room Chane sat on a rickety chair made of metal pipes.

Pieces of lumber smouldered in the drum canister before her. The orange light danced before her eyes, casting a red glow upon the darkness around her.

Illuminated by the flames was a man in work wear, his darkened eyes a surprising contrast to his spirited demeanour. Standing around him was a group of what was presumably his fellow delinquents.

"Look at this dame. She's so scared she can't even talk. Heh." The delinquent who had driven the car chuckled, but Chane maintained her silence.

Of course, her state of quietude was more due to her muteness rather than any fear she might have held.

Chane had willingly abandoned her voice so that she would be able to protect the secrets entrusted to her by her father. She never learned any sort of sign languages, and communicated the only most basic of her necessities through writing.

She had not hesitated to give up her speech, and had not pursued sign language--both because she could potentially be tortured or drugged into confessing her father's secrets if either were possible for her. And by

abandoning conversation altogether, she built up an even stronger wall around herself.

Even though she had the option of writing, she did not communicate anything unless she felt it absolutely necessary.

And now, she was too astonished to even think of writing out the truth to her captors.

She had initially allowed herself to be kidnapped without a fuss, thinking that these men might be connected to her father somehow. But a quick listen at their conversations revealed that they had merely mistaken her for a girl named Eve.

"Sorry to say this, young lady, but in some ways, don't you think it's a blessing, being unable to make a single utterance? Human beings expend so much energy expressing despair and joy and rage with their mouths, not to mention fear and pain."

The man passing a wrench from one hand to another looked to be the leader of this motley gang of delinquents.

"In other words, the fact of your losing your voice out of shock might perhaps be an instinctive method of self-defence that prevents you from expending unnecessary amounts of energy! Hey, did you hear that? I actually sounded pretty freakin' smart just now! All right, sing me your praises! I want to hear that roaring applause!"

The delinquents obeyed, clapping with blank looks on their faces. Shaft, looking particularly unamused, made a snide remark.

"That last part more or less cancelled out any of the smartness back there, boss. Actually, never mind. That whole spiel of yours sounded pretty out there."

"You've gotten bolder, Shaft, but I don't disagree with this change. It was worth smashing the wrench into your gut, after all. But don't consider yourself off the hook."

Chane, astonished, determined that she no longer had any need to be here. She slowly got up off her seat. The delinquents had neglected to restrain or search her, assuming that she was a powerless young woman.

"Hm? Hey, doll. Don't just get-"

'But to think they would fail to notice even the knives I've concealed on my back... Are they really so inexperienced?'

Chane determined that there was no possible way that these men were connected to her father, and drew her knife.

"Whoa?!"

A nearby delinquent screamed at the sudden glint of silver.

The man in work wear also seemed surprised, but in a pleasant way. It looked like he was actually enjoying the situation.

"Hah... And here I thought you were just a delicate flower of high society, but that's quite the interesting toy you have there. Ain't that knife a bit big for self-defence? But all right. I was a bit surprised, but surprises are good. They serve as a constant reminder of the fact that we humans live in darkness, eternally unaware of the future that lies in wait-

Chane didn't even let the man finish. She ducked down low and kicked off the ground.

Within a moment's notice she had closed the distance between them. She flicked her slender arm like a spring-loaded mechanism, going for the man's arm without so much as a hint of hesitation.

The man's actions against Jacuzzi's gang earlier were extremely precise and calculated. He would use that gigantic wrench to trip people by their feet without making a sound. It didn't appear very damaging, but that was only because he failed to follow up with an attack.

'This man fights using his wrench.' Chane thought. So if she was to escape this place, all she had to do was disable the man's arm.

But the second before her knife reached him, it stopped mid-attack with the sharp sound of metal clanging on metal.

'!

"That was surprise Number Two. Tell me, are you, in fact, *not* Miss Eve Genoard? You know, it isn't often you see someone attack with such mind-boggling agility. I'm rather impressed! But... I would have been even more impressed if you could have had the courtesy to wait for me to finish my spiel."

Chane's trained eyesight could immediately tell what had just happened.

The man had covered his neck and chest area with the wrench in his right hand. Grasped in his left hand was a pair of industrial pliers, holding Chane's knife in an iron grip.

Though she had been holding back so as to avoid killing the man, Chane could not hide her shock at the fact that her attack had been stopped.

Seeing that the shock had fazed her surprisingly little, the man in work wear burst out laughing.

"Interesting. You're so OK it's too much! Wait, is my heart starting to flutter? All right, I have come to a decision. From this point forth, I will not be the least bit shocked even if you confess to me that you are, in fact, a Martian with eight arms! 'Cause if you're not human, that means it'll be worth the effort to take you apart piece by extraterrestrial piece."

'He really does remind me of the man in white. From the things he says, to the bloodlust he drapes around himself like a cloak.'

Determining that this man was a danger to herself, Chane also solidified the air of danger around herself.

At that exact moment, she kicked off the ground and kicked the man in the thigh.

She had been planning to use the momentum to dislodge her knife from the pliers, but the man seemed to have read her movements exactly. He quickly swung the wrench towards her leg as she sped towards him, and took hold of it with the tip of his wrench.

Chane felt no pain, but the sensation of powerlessness overwhelmed her body. Before she knew it, she was spinning in midair.

The knife, having fallen out of her hand, rolled to the ground with a metallic clang.

'I've made a mistake.'

The man behaved madly, carried around a wrench, and had around him an air of bloodlust not unlike that of the man in white.

Because of these conditions, Chane subconsciously attacked this man as though she were fighting Ladd Russo. In reality, however, Ladd was the type to use brute force whereas this man would redirect the force of the impact away from himself.

It was because she treated him the same as Ladd Russo that she had made this error in judgement. Chane internally rebuked herself and quickly put some distance between her and the man in work wear.

'I still have another knife concealed in the back of my dress.'

All she had to do was find her foe's Achilles' Heel, and she would have a chance to recover. The problem was the matter of creating said weakness.

As she considered her options, the man in work wear closed the distance between them without a care.

"I don't entirely understand the mechanics of the situation, but this has become quite the exciting battle. Let's spin ourselves an exciting tale--but to do that, there's one matter that has to be taken care of. Specifically, this. You have to lose to me."

Though his words were far from sane, the man's movements showed absolutely no weak point.

As he excitedly raised his wrench into the air, Chane spotted a chance and prepared to launch herself towards him again.

But the tension around them shattered as a young man entered, coming to the wrong place at the wrong time.

"P, please! Stop it!"

A voice of deterrence rang out through the factory, almost pitched like a scream.

Of course, the voice didn't belong to Chane. It had come from a timid delinquent, standing a little distance from them in the middle of the factory.

"P, please... I brought the money, so please let her go!"

Though he was quaking in fear, Jacuzzi Splot slowly approached Graham's gang with determination shining in his eyes. Of course, the fact that he was on crutches made it look more like he was struggling towards them, if anything.

'I didn't think he would come.' Chane marvelled, but now that she thought about it, Jacuzzi had also followed after her when she left to rescue her father, in spite of his own injuries. In hindsight, his presence here was nothing surprising.

But what could he do in a situation like this?

Putting things frankly, Chane still had some doubts about Jacuzzi. She still suspected that he and his gang had approached her in order to meet her father, use him, and take advantage of him.



Although the time she had spent with them helped to dissipate her suspicions somewhat, Chane still held an inkling of doubt towards them--the last remaining barrier between herself and Jacuzzi's gang.

But several minutes later, her suspicions would be cleared from her mind altogether.

"Oh? That was surprisingly fast of you. Then let's change this from a surprising story, to a happy one--for me, anyway. Yes! Good! Money is good. I don't really understand why, but they say that money is a good thing. And you know what's even better than that? The sight of the rich delighting in their wealth as they drive themselves to their inevitable ruin."

His excitement not the least bit dampened by the intrusion, Graham turned to Jacuzzi. But half his senses were still focused on Chane, not allowing himself to show any weakness.

"Hold on. You said you brought the money, but you certainly don't look like you've got more than half a penny on you right now."

"Uh, it's not that I actually *have* the money, but... I have something that's just as good."

"?"

Graham and the others eyed him doubtfully. Jacuzzi opened his mouth, eyes filled with uncertainty.

"I don't know if you'll believe me, but..."

He hesitated for a moment. Then he took a deep breath, and set his internal determination upon them in a single moment.

"The Russo Family in Chicago has a bounty on my head."

"?!"

"If you hand me over to 'em, you'll get all the cash you want."

There was silence.

No one had expected such an offer.

Graham and his gang had naturally expected that, since Jacuzzi had nothing to give them, he would try to take Chane back by force. The fact that the prospective rescuer was a frail-looking young man took them all by surprise, but that was nothing compared to the shock to hearing him propose an exchange that could very well end his own life.

Jacuzzi had actually been Graham's second target. The kidnapping plot was staged to take Jacuzzi into their custody, but no one had expected that Jacuzzi would come to them himself before anyone could inform him of the facts surrounding the exchange.

Jacuzzi's offer, of course, came as a shock to Chane. She had heard from the other delinquents that he was a wanted man in Chicago, but never had she expected that he would offer up himself in exchange for her safety.

'Why? Is he doing this to save me?'

If Jacuzzi really was trying to use her or her father for his own ends, his offer could be nothing but contrary to his plans.

'We've only recently met. We are not even family. So why is he doing this for me?'

For a single moment, a forbidden thought reared up in her mind--the sight of Jacuzzi and his friends' smiles, and the idea that she would not mind being used by them.

"Hah! Look at this kid, Boss! What a dunce! And he doesn't even know what we're really afturrgh!"

Graham slammed his wrench into Shaft's gut mid-insult. He widened his murky eyes and opened his mouth.

"Hah. Now you're something else."

All eyes were on Graham as he tossed the wrench high into the air. He caught it with a satisfying *smack* as it fell to the ground, the sound echoing through the factory.

"Damn... That was actually really moving, you know? Interesting. You're making things fun, Jacuzzi Splot. But alas, how tragic and heartrending this situation has turned out to be. They say that joy and sadness are only a hair's breadth apart, but as of this single moment! You! Have locked me in that elusive prison between the two worlds!"

Rambling like some sort of a poet, Graham spun the wrench in his hand again.

"Then it's decided. Because my heart has been so greatly moved, I will let the lady go free. After all, since she's not even Eve Genoard, we never needed her to begin with. And considering the state of those legs you dragged over, letting the lady go free won't help you make any decent kind of escape. Gotta say, I'm surprised you even made it here on those mangled sticks. Now that's real, genuine strength."

"Uh, but I... it hurts so much and I'm so scared I think I'm gonna cry..."

"Strength *and* weakness... Damn it all, are you trying to ensnare me in that elusive in-between world again?"

Graham excitedly and nervously turned back towards Chane.

"Go on. And you better make sure to properly thank this guy."

The hostage, however, did not budge. In fact, she was glaring at Graham with even greater intensity than before, every fibre of her attention focused on his movements.

"...Hm? What's the matter? Don't tell me you're secretly itching for a rematch?"

Chane's bloodlust never wavered. Graham grinned bitterly and fixed his grip on his monkey wrench.

"I was half-hoping for an answer like that."

"Chane!"

With Jacuzzi's voice still ringing in her ears, Chane quietly steeled her resolve.

She had no idea why she was thinking this way, but she knew that, as long as she defeated this man in work wear, Jacuzzi would be safe.

Re-affirming this fact in her mind, Chane silently focused on the thin boundary between life and death. The boundary line became a distorted barrier around Chane and Graham, compressing the hostility into the space it encompassed around them.

The air in the factory grew cold with bloodlust.

But just as before, the tension was shattered in the blink of an eye--this time, by a small explosion that demolished the factory wall.

Jacuzzi could see an orange light blossoming from out of the corner of his eye. A part of the factory wall was blown apart with a loud bang.

"Huh?!"

Of course, Jacuzzi wasn't the only one taken by surprise. Most of the people inside the factory turned their eyes to the explosion. Graham and Chane both thought that this might give them an opportunity to attack, but because they were both thinking the same thing, neither of them could find a weak point in the other. Their stalemate continued.

The flames died down quickly, and from beyond the black and grey smoke appeared multiple figures.

"Chane, you're safe! Thank goodness!"

"Whoa. Nice. The door's open. Why bomb?"

"Do you really gotta ask, Donny? Nice just wanted ta blow somethin' up."

"...If someone heard that explosion and called the cops, it won't be long 'til they come barging in! I suggest that we make an escape."

"Hey, that's right!"

"Sounds pretty made-up, if you ask me."

"If we were gonna call the cops, then we shoulda just done that beforehand."

"If the cops got here, they'd probably arrest Nice first."

"Don't worry. According to my estimate, it will take at least six hundred and twenty-three seconds before the police arrive."

"How'd you get that answer, Melody?"

"Call it intuition."

"Intuition?" "Then where'd the 'at least' part come from?!"

"Apologize!" "Why?" "My intuition says so!" "Intuition's pretty useful, huh?" "What, you think you can get away with anything as long as you call it 'intuition'?" "Apologize to intuition right now!" "Sorry." "You seriously *apologized*?!"

"Hyaha!" "Hyaha!"

Jacuzzi's gang stirred up a frenzy of discussion as they barged into the factory. The gang in the factory could not hide their shock at the sight of dozens of delinquents crowding into their hideout.

Graham, alone in his immunity to panic, looked at Jacuzzi in confusion.

"...Hey, didn't I tell you to come alone?"

"H, he's right! Guys, what are you doing here?! I told you not to follow me!" Jacuzzi asked in turn, but Nice looked back at him without so much as blinking.

"Yes, since Jacuzzi came all the way here on his own, just as the letter demanded, I also came here by myself."

"I walked here alone."

"Me too."

"Me too."

"Surprisingly, I as well!"

"Came alone, to America from Mexico."

"Came by myself, too."

"In life, you're always alone. Don't ever count on others to help you!"

"In the end, we're all alone, you know?"

"I got here on my own, too."

"Sorry, but I came with my little sister. I swear I did!"

"You don't *have* a younger sister."

"I guess that means the figment of his imagination walked here by itself, too."

"Shut up and go back to 'Hyaha', Chaini!"

"Hyaha!" "Hyaha!"

"Anyway, I'm alone too."

"Same here." "Same goes for me." "Me too." "I came alone as well."

Graham took in the delinquents' answers and recalled the exact words he had written on the note.

"So this isn't a contradiction after all. You all are a lot more clever than I ever gave you credit for!"

"You were just being careless, boss! N, now what?!" The blue-faced Shaft cried, still reeling from the wrench to his gut.

Graham, however, continued without a care in the world.

"Why so serious? Don't forget that we still hold a hostage in our midst."

"How do you call a girl like that a *hostage*?!"

Hearing Shaft's reply, Graham looked back at Chane, standing frozen still with the knife still in her hand, and felt into thought.

"Would these people leave us, I wonder, if I took you as a hostage instead, Shaft?"

"You're not making any sense!"

Ignoring Shaft's complaints, Graham relaxedly opened his mouth.

"Even considering the number of potential enemies in my presence, it seems that things won't be too impossibly difficult. I would be overjoyed and delighted if they were all cars or machines I could take apart, but in all honesty I have no interest in deriving pleasure from taking apart human joints..."

As Graham lost himself in his own world, Jacuzzi and the others found themselves with a new concern.

"...Didn't one of those 'Me too's sound kinda unfamiliar to you guys?"

"You think so too?"

"Hyaha!"

"Hey, that guy by the wall..."

"Who's that redhead?"

The delinquents soon focused their attention on a young man who was standing by the wall.

Jacuzzi and Nice felt something terrifying about the red-haired man. At this point, Chane had already leapt forward.

"What?!"

Chane's sudden lunge caught Graham completely off-guard.

'This one just might kill me.'

He quickly tried to turn to avoid a fatal injury.

However, Chane ignored him completely and charged towards the red-haired man like a bullet.

As her knife sliced through the air like an artillery shell and made for the red-haired man's neck, Chane found herself frozen still.

She hadn't, however, been physically stopped by the man.

Holding her back were nothing but the conflicting feelings racing through her mind.

'Why did I stop? Why am I hesitating to kill this man?'

'I knew as soon as I looked into his eyes. He's the one from before! So why did I stop?'

'This is not normal. Nothing has been right today. Just like when I tried to save Jacuzzi. I've been acting on illogical emotions all this time.'

'This man... he will get in Father's way. That is what I had determined.'

'No... I realized the truth when I received this dress from him today. My selfishness is what is trying to kill him.'

'I'm scared. I'm scared of accepting someone new into this world, which I have only shared with Father.'

'I'm terrified that the past I have believed in might be destroyed by accepting this man.'

Whether or not he was oblivious to Chane's internal conflict, the red-haired man did not try to disarm her or evade her attack. In fact, his cheeks turned pink as he spoke to her.

"...It's a bit awkward that this is the first thing I say to you after all this time, but..."

There was no mistaking it. The young man's voice definitely belonged to the Rail Tracer.

"Well, uh... It's all right if you still want to kill me, but I just thought I should confess my love to you properly first."

'What are you trying to say? Stop confusing me. Stop putting my thoughts in disarray.'

"I guess I'm trying to say that all I did on the train was preach at you. I didn't really make my feelings clear."

'No. Don't say it.'

"To make a long story short, I'm afraid I'm really in love with you. Actually, that's not true. I'm *not* afraid. But it's true that I love you. ...Damn, I'm really no good at waxing poetics. Let me get to the point. I love you. Will you marry me?"

It was a straightforward proposal, devoid of any romance whatsoever.

Jacuzzi, Nice, and Graham had no idea how to react to the newcomer. However, from the faint tinge of pink on his cheeks, they could tell that his confession--laughable as it may have been--was sincere.

Chane also knew that there was no deception in his words.

Back when she was still with the Lemures, plenty of men had lightly used the word 'love'. But she had always sensed lies from them, and once they had gotten to know Chane's personality better, they stopped talking to her altogether.

'But this man is different.'

There was not a trace of pretence in the world he had shown her aboard the train.

'I'm scared.'

At the same time, Chane was having difficulty trying to get the emotions swirling in her heart under control.

'I'm so scared that I think I might lose my sanity.'

This matter came before anything about falling in love or not.

'I never thought it would be so frightening.'

The act of sincerely accepting someone's affection-coated words, no matter the outcome, was a foreign concept to her altogether.

'To think accepting anyone other than Father into my world would be so terrifying.'

"Are you scared?" Claire asked tentatively, looking into Chane's eyes.

Even though Jacuzzi and the others were watching, listening to them, Claire spoke even more clearly and cheerfully, as though they would serve as the witnesses to his vows.

"Don't worry. I promise you that I will never destroy the world you've come to believe in. If you can believe in me, I swear that the world you put your faith in will never be harmed." Claire confessed confidently, as though he was reading Chane's mind. "The world doesn't break so easily, y'know? One person squeezing his way into a world isn't enough to destroy anything."

It was as though he was speaking to his world itself.

"It just means your world gets a bit bigger, is all."

The young man affirmed before his world that he was prepared to take in Chane's world into his own.

"If you think your world is about to collapse, I'll keep it safe for you."

Again, and again, and again.

"Normally, I guess you couldn't trust anyone who talks like this, but..."

He affirmed his own love, making sense only in his own world.

"You already know, right? I'm far from normal."

The young man laughed sheepishly. Chane realized that she had lowered her knife unconsciously.

'This man... and those people, as well...'

Such terrifying beings lived in this world that she had never known--the world she had never tried to know.

They had so effortlessly broken through the shell she had built up all this time and offered her a friendly hand and a smile. There was little she could fear more.

But strangely enough, right now Chane felt the same way for them as she felt for her father. She felt that she never wanted to lose these people who had entered her world.

Not even Chane herself knew if this was the emotion called love. After all, she had never once heard the words 'I love you' from her father as she lived in her world.

<=>

The ear-splitting noise of metal against metal brought everyone back to their senses.

Jacuzzi and the gang, not aware of what had just happened, turned towards the source of the sound. They found Graham, standing there as though caught in a dilemma.

"Let me tell you an incomprehensible story. What does it mean to human existence for a story to be incomprehensible? It just keeps slipping away from me, but that doesn't matter right now, as in the end it's all a waste of time. That is why, although the meaning of this situation still escapes me, what do you say to me bringing us back on topic?"

Being excluded from the conversation altogether had rendered Graham extremely impatient.

"All right. I'll give you permission to do that." The first person to speak up was the red-haired man responsible for the interruption. "I mean, Chane still hasn't given me an answer, but if you're gonna try and go up against her and her friends here, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to step in. So if you wanna run, you better do it now."

The newcomer's command could not have been more condescending if he tried. Graham was dumbstruck for a moment, but he sighed and responded.

"Now, perhaps this might be the first, the greatest, most meaningless question in existence, but my curiosity compels me to ask! Who are you?"

"Me? Well, my real name's a secret to you all, but for now you can call me Felix Walken."

The moment the young man finished, Graham's underlings paled.

"Wait a sec..."

"Does he mean... that legendary assassin?"

"I thought that was just a rumour."

Ignoring his confused underlings, Graham swung his wrench around and spoke relaxedly.

"There's no need to lose ourselves to panic. After all, if this intruder here really is the legendary assassin, remember that we have the legendary killer on our side. What's there to fear when you've gazed upon Boss Ladd with your own two eyes?"

"Ladd? The killer?"

Graham's statement seemed to have reminded the red-haired man of something.

"The guy that fell off the train a while back, right?"

The air suddenly went cold.

Graham's underlings could feel their mouths go dry in an instant.

The atmosphere had done a 180. Anyone who knew what his meant unconsciously stepped away from Graham as though in escape.

"...How do you know this? Only those of us closest to Boss Ladd are privileged enough to have access to this information."

His voice was dark, heavy, and sharp enough to pierce the souls of all who heard him.

But the red-haired man was unfazed.

"That's because I'm the one who dropped him."

In the blink of an eye, the silvery wrench spun at impossible speeds as it made its way towards the young man.

'That man's as good as dead,' was the thought running through every head in the factory.

However, the young man caught the wrench with astonishing ease, throwing it back to Graham with even more spin.

Although the power of the throw was enough to send everyone thinking, *'That guy in blue isn't gonna make it'*, Graham also caught the wrench without breaking a sweat. He spun it around to dispel the momentum, and turned himself around 180 degrees.

'Why'd he turn his back on him?' Jacuzzi and the others thought for a single moment.

But Graham threw the wrench back, this time adding a half-spin with 360 degrees' worth of extra momentum.

The wrench was spinning faster than ever before. It now looked rather like a disk as it flew towards the red-haired man, who did not catch it this time. Instead, he evaded it by a narrow margin.

In a moment's notice, a blue figure lunged towards him. Graham had charged at him as soon as he had thrown the wrench, following behind it.

In either hand he held a small wrench and a pair of pliers. The unusual dual-wielder was almost to his target, the red-haired man.

"Huh."

The target, however, sounded only mildly impressed as he leapt back.

The factory was rocked by something that sounded like an explosion.

However, nothing had actually gone up in flames. It was the sound of the giant disk of a wrench smashing into a drum canister that happened to be behind the red-haired man.

Though the canister was empty, it was badly crumpled. The part hit directly by the wrench had been ripped apart completely.

If a human body had been the one to take the blow, it might have been torn in two.

The visual refusing to leave his mind, Jacuzzi prepared to see the worst. However, things were only just beginning. So intense was the sight before him that it would not even allow him to lose consciousness.

"I'm actually surprised. You're better than I thought." Although he had been avoiding countless fatal strikes, the red-haired man praised his opponent nonchalantly. "Don't tell me you're actually stronger than that Ladd guy?"

"You would call me someone powerful enough to defeat Boss Ladd? I like that compliment, but my heart is strong enough to withstand flattery!"

Even as his arms were engaged in frenetic attack against the red-haired man, Graham still replied to his question without hesitation. His words emerged with no regard for the rhythm of his attacks. It was as though his mouth and his body were working separately altogether. Graham's attacks were, after all, based upon the act of dismantling--an action that had carved itself into his muscle memory. Perhaps his attacks really were completely detached from his thoughts.

Dodging Graham's unpredictable, erratic strikes, the red-haired man grinned.

"That Ladd guy was practically red in the face when I decided to ruffle his feathers a bit. So doesn't that at least mean you're a bit better in the head?"

"Impossible... After all, Boss Ladd falling to provocation is practically a law of nature. And that is because Boss Ladd is so strong that it's only natural that he demolishes his enemies even in his incensed state, and therefore there is no hypocrisy in this fact! In other words, Boss Ladd is constantly under the handicap of being susceptible to provocation! And I just finally realized that what you said before was not flattery, but provocation, but since I've long since let the opportunity pass, would it be impossible for me to get angry at you for it?!"

"Don't ask me. Hah, you talk pretty funny, too."

The red-haired man chuckled.

Although it sounded like a conversation between friends, the way they two opponents moved said otherwise.

Graham took a step back, picked up the wrench off the ground, and raised it into the air, dragging it slightly along the floor.

With a metallic clang, something flew towards the red-haired man's face. It was Chane's knife, which Graham had wrested away from her earlier.

The silver blade, carefully picked up from the ground with the wrench, made its way towards the redhead. But he caught it mid-flight with ease and offered it to Chane, handle pointing towards her.

"Here. It's yours, right?"

"..."

Chane blinked and received the knife, surprised at his actions in the middle of the pitched battle.

Scarcely a moment had passed when the red-haired man disappeared from sight.

Graham, charging in from the side, swung down the wrench, but his opponent dodged the attack not a moment too soon, and used the wrench stuck in the floor as a foothold to leap onto Graham's shoulder.

The red-haired man twisted, taking hold of a hook hanging from a chain on the ceiling. He kicked off a nearby pillar, manoeuvring himself with ease.

"You up for more?" He asked.

Graham looked up at him and responded with yet another string of half-logic.

"You seem to be entirely without either fear or terror of my wrench, you red-haired intruder! This... This is an insolent story! Myself aside, I demand an apology to the power of the impact of a swinging wrench and the laws of physics!"

"Course I'm not scared, but a wrench isn't much different from a bullet in the sense that you die if you get hit by it. And if you're talking about impact, fighting with Cookie trained me for it all."

"Who the hell is that?!"

"My friend. Didn't you know?"

His reply was surpassing even Graham in terms of sheer nonsensicality. Graham lightly hit a nearby drum canister into the air.

"How do you expect me to have foreknowledge of all of this?! Introduce me later, and tell me exactly what kind of a monster can keep up in a fight with you!"

Graham hit the drum canister in mid-air with his wrench as though he was swinging a baseball bat.

The red-haired man let go of the hook, effortlessly landed on the drum canister, and landed on the ground with it.

"Well, he *is* over three metres tall."

"So he *is* a monster!"

Standing on the slightly crumpled drum canister like a performing acrobat, the red-haired man looked slightly disappointed.

"I see. I mean, me aside, Cookie was pretty famous, y'know? I'd introduce him to you, but he hates the smell of metal, so he'd probably eat you for breakfast just like that."

"Breakfast?"

The conversation was making no sense. However, the rhythm of their battle knew no cessation as it continued as though in a marvellous dance.

Jacuzzi and the other observers, watching their inhuman battle, began to wonder if they were not actually dreaming.

Several minutes since their battle began, Graham came to the realization that his opponent had still yet to make a proper counterattack.

'...He's not fighting back because he can't.

'No. That's the kind of thinking that's gonna come back to haunt me. This guy's not gonna be so easy.'

"I see. So you truly are the ruffian responsible for throwing Boss Ladd off the train..."

As the two fighters put some distance between them, Graham inhaled as he slowly calmed his destructive urges.

"So it looks like you weren't lying about it, at least."

Graham bowed his head slightly, tapping the ground with his wrench. Without allowing anyone to see his face, he mumbled to his gang.

"...We're outta here."

"Huh? Wait, what?"

Although his fellow delinquents were confused, Graham turned his back to the red-haired man and spoke.

"Let me spin you a sad yarn." With the monkey wrench resting against his shoulder, he continued in an overtly dejected voice. "Though my loathsome opponent stands right before my eyes, I am unable to so much as lay a finger on him."

"But Boss, you were just--urgh!"

Sticking a smaller wrench into Shaft's gut, Graham continued.

"But that is of little concern to me. After all, the one to slaughter this man will be Boss Ladd himself. If I were to fight him, Boss Ladd would gruesomely murder me for the crime of taking his kill."

The red-haired man put on a slightly more serious face as he addressed Graham with a bit more respect.

"...Thanks for the advice, I guess."

"That wasn't an advice. That was your death sentence."

With that, Graham began to walk away towards the doors. His underlings followed behind him reluctantly.

As he passed by Jacuzzi, he whispered something.

"I like you, kid. I'll let you use this place whenever you feel like. It's yours now."

"Huh?"

"See you around. When that redhead isn't here, anyway."

Graham departed with a bitter laugh. Jacuzzi found himself left with nothing but confusion.

"So, does that mean... he's a good guy? Or not?" Jacuzzi wondered to himself.

"Does it really matter, Jacuzzi? We're all safe." Nice replied. Jacuzzi fell to his knees in relief.

"I don't really get it, but... we, we're all alive, right?"

"That's right. But Jacuzzi, who the heck is that?"

Nice was staring at the man who had arrived like a sudden storm. He was looking Chane in the eye, engaged in discussion. Of course, it was obviously a one-sided conversation.

It occurred to Jacuzzi that the newcomer looked somewhat familiar to him, but he decided not to pry this time and end things here.

"I don't really know, but I think he's all right." He smiled, looking at the young woman who had become one of them. "I think... Chane looks kind of happy."

<=>



"I'm going to tell you, and only you, my name, Chane. This is the name of my soul. I guess you could call it a vow I'm taking."

Although his words were something straight out of a joke or a comedy show, his eyes were entirely sincere.

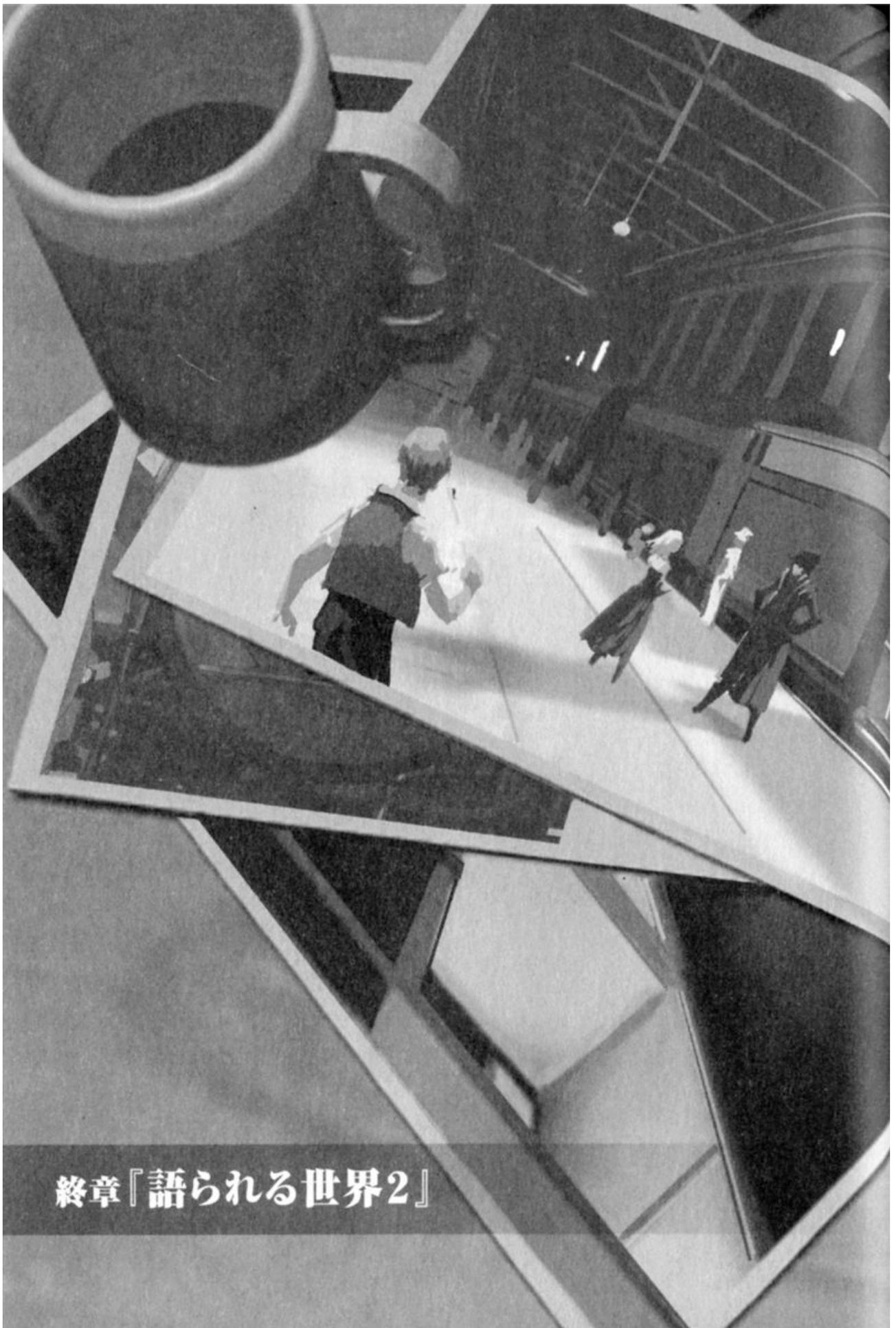
"My name is Claire. Claire Stanfield."

Although he was a little embarrassed by the fact that he took so long to introduce himself, Claire decided to embarrass himself further while he was still at it.

"We could start off as friends, if you'd like. But do you think you could fall in love with me one day?"

Chane looked away without a word, but her cheeks were flushed a slight tinge of pink.

She had given him her answer.



終章「語られる世界2」

Final Chapter - A World Coming to Light 2

The Transcontinental Express, First Class

Smack. Smack.

The sound of metal against hand rang out through the cabin.

And as if in rhythm to the beat, the information broker calmly recounted the outcome of the event.

"In the two years since, Graham's gang continued their activities, but unlike Jacuzzi's group, they made too much commotion in areas controlled by the larger mob families. They were slowly becoming targets. But of all the serendipitous things to occur, the Russo Family, for whom they had worked in the past, made them a welcome offer."

With the gun stowed in his jacket, the Vice-President narrowed his already sharp eyes and proceeded to sell his product with exceeding composure. It was as though he was carving the formless product of information into his customer's mind.

"The train they chose to take to Chicago had something of a security problem. The problem being that, once the train has passed a certain point, it is impossible to know that a robbery has taken place in First Class until the train reaches the station. They planned to strike two birds with one stone, if you will. Boost their own morale while emulating their ever-idolized murderer, Ladd Russo, by attacking this train. Not only that, it seems that they had also heard a rumour that a passenger in First Class is a rather unpopular miser. Although I deemed the possibility of their taking action rather unlikely, I was in the midst of preparing this newspaper gun when I heard them coming down this hallway and found myself assured that the robbery was indeed about to occur."

The young cameragirl, seated beside the Vice-President, was trembling. She knew full well that the man before them could not be defeated by a single gun.

However, the one wielding the gun was the Vice-President, who had not too long ago defeated three men on his own. Although she had no idea what might happen should a fight occur, she knew that her life could be easily jeopardized by the conflict.

Once the Vice-President finished, Carol nervously glanced over at the man sitting across from them, Graham Specter.

Graham's eyes, a stark contrast from her superior's sharp gaze, were in a drowsy half-open state, dark and heavy enough to crush her spirits altogether.

The sound of metal against hand ceased. Silence returned to the cabin.

Noting Graham's stillness, the Vice-President smiled.

"...Does this satisfy you, sir?"

The provocative tone of the Vice-President's question finally got a reaction out of Graham.

"Hah. Haha! Hahahahahaha! AAAAAAHHHH! I understand everything now. The clarity of my mind in this one moment is exhilarating! All you had to do was tell me that last part, but you give me the whole damn story about what happened two years back! So in the end I was just a tool for you to tell this long, long story to the girl there!"

However, Graham did not seem very angry. In fact, it looked as though he was enjoying the situation.

"Consider it a favour from us, free of charge, sir. I'd thought that it would be useful for you to remember this story on your way to Chicago."

"Haha... Hahahahahaha! Amazing. You information brokers these days are friggin' omniscient! How do you obtain so much information? But I'll grant you that I'm on my way to make a beautiful mess in Chicago. Those Russo capos were mumbling something about 'immortals' and some guy named 'Huey Laforet', too, although I'm still not entirely convinced about the immortality bit."

Graham's earlier seriousness dissipated. In fact, he looked so elated that it looked like, if he started to laugh, his veins would burst all at once due to the sheer force of his laughter.

"Anyway, there's no denying the absolute fact that hearing this nostalgic story of yours really made my day. Heh. How interesting... Today has been nothing but interesting events all over! Humans' ability to feel enjoyment is simultaneously a divine blessing and a cruel curse! Hah! I hope that red-eyed fanged freak they said they hired as a bodyguard manages to be at least as interesting as you or Jacuzzi!"

Humming to himself, the man euphorically spun his wrench in his right hand as he finished his cold cup of tea with his left.

"This... This is delicious. I usually ramble about how you can only draw out the pinnacle of a tea's flavour once it's gone cold, but don't tell me that you knew about that and purposely told me such a long story? Ah well. As I promised, I'll let you off the hook. Even if it's more because I don't feel like robbing you anymore."

Graham stood up and made to leave, but the Vice-President took a sip of his own cold tea and spoke to him once more.

"Hah... Then, as thanks for complimenting the tea, please allow me to give you one more piece of information, free of charge. There should be a man with a thin moustache in the First Class cabin next to ours, in the direction of the engine room. He is said to always carry around large quantities of cash and jewelry for the purpose of displaying his own wealth. And I suppose the 'unpopular miser' whose rumours you followed here might point to this man. Of course, it's up to you how you choose to use this information."

Graham frowned for a moment, but a smile soon spread over his face as he slammed open the door to the hallway.

"Hm... It's not always a wise thing to trust free information, so let's go find out for ourselves. Get up, you lazy bastards! I know you all came to while I was listening to that story!"

The men lying near the doors tentatively opened their eyes and got up.

The first of the men to get to his feet rubbed the back of his head. "M-more, Boss Graham? Haven't we had enough for today?" He complained, making a very understandable point.

But the man in work wear was far from understandable by normal standards.

"Since *I'm* still completely uninjured, there should be nothing stopping us from the proverbial Round Two."

"How can you say that, Boss?! Oh right, you mind givin' me a cup of tea too, Mr. Information Broker?"

"You're a lot bolder than I gave you credit for. Anyway, you'd better hurry up."

Ending their conversation, Graham stepped out into the hallway with his two remaining underlings.

The last delinquent poured himself a cup of tea and looked at the Vice-President with an overtly smile-happy expression.

'Is he feeling weird because he hit his head?' Carol wondered at the way the delinquent looked at the Vice-President so fearlessly.

"I really must apologize, Mr. St. Germain. I had no idea that you would be on board today."

His tone did a 180 as he politely bowed to the Vice-President, cup in hand.

'Huh?!'

The delinquent suddenly addressed the Vice-President by name. The addressee frowned slightly.

"Hm? Ah, Sham, I presume. I'm quite surprised. I didn't expect to see you among the members of a group like that."

"Haha. Please, sir. This is just between us. Nothing for Master Huey to know."

"...So you've finally begun to branch out, and of your own free will? Taking into account your side job of providing us with information, are you planning to also exercise power over Huey Laforet and Nebula, as well?"

"No, sir. I am indebted to Master Huey, and I respect him greatly. I merely wish to enjoy freedom. After all, Master Huey isn't the only human in whom I have a personal interest."

"'Huey'? Are they talking about that terrorist from earlier?"

Ignoring Carol's confusion, the delinquent called Sham continued with a smile.

"Mr. Graham can be terrifying at times, but he is also quite interesting. Although it's deathly painful when he hits me in the stomach with his wrench, I would have to say, in his terms, Mr. Graham is someone I both like and dislike."

Suddenly, they heard Graham's voice from the hallway ("All right, let's move out!"). Sham hurriedly gulped down the rest of his tea.

"He's quite fast about getting things done, as well. In any event... I ask that you please keep it a secret from Master Huey that we are providing you with information."

With this, Sham opened the door and joined the other silhouettes in flight. And with the same footsteps as when they first approached, the delinquents disappeared towards the back of the train.

Carol had been unable to say a thing during the conversation. The First Class cabin was silent, as though nothing had ever happened.



"Are you confused, Carol? It's quite understandable that being exposed to entirely new information can cause a great deal of bewilderment. But I suppose it might be best for you to learn the details about this matter once you've become slightly more accustomed to dealing with information."

The storm had left, leaving Carol in a state of wonder and fear.

She tried her best to organize this information in her mind, but the more she reflected upon it, the more confused she became.

The Vice-President, having sympathy for her plight, took a sip of newly-brewed tea and offered her assistance.

"If there is anything you would like to ask, you are free to do so, Carol."

"Sir?"

Although the offer was welcome, Carol had so many questions on her mind that things only became more jumbled. Suddenly under the mistaken impression that she was being pressed for information, Carol turned from objectively thinking about the information to her most pressing concerns.

"S, Sir, is it really all right to encourage robbery?!"

"Carol, the man next door to us is a certain Mr. Turner. In the past, he wormed himself out of paying full price, claiming he could not trust my information. Not only that, he used that very information to make himself a great deal of profit. And as such, illegal as it may be, I feel that it is justified from my perspective. And, to be frank... It serves him right."

"Wow, sir. Isn't that abusing your power?"

"Is there anything else you would like me to answer, Carol?"

They could hear vulgar yelling from the cabin next door, but the Vice-President ignored both the noise and Carol's point, quickly changing the subject.

"Um... if that Graham person got angry at you, sir, would you have been able to beat him?"

Carol had a mountain of questions she wanted to ask--Who was this man called Sham? Who was Huey Laforet, and what were immortals? But in the end, she prioritized the matters closer to her current state of confusion rather than what was logical.

The Vice-President's analysis was accurate and to the point.

"If he had come at us with all his strength, setting aside myself, you would not have made it out alive, Carol. As you are aware of, I specialize in the use of my mind, and leave work like this to more capable hands."

"...You could've at least lied and told me you'd protect me with your life, Mr. Vice-President."

"It is the duty of an information broker to clearly analyze the objective facts, Carol. There will be time for fantasy later. ...Hm. Well, seeing as calm has been restored to this place, let us try an attempt at losing ourselves in fantasy. I would have thrown away my life to protect my dear subordinate. In all likelihood."

"Ohh, where do I start?!"

No longer interested in asking serious questions, Carol looked out the window, intent on observing the rainbow again. The moment the rainbow faded and she spotted the urban high-rises in the distance, a new question formed in her mind.

"...Sir, what's going to happen in Chicago?"

"I wonder. Not even we can gather information on events that have yet to occur. Thinking and theorizing is all we are capable of."

Continuing what he had been saying before the robbers barged in, the Vice-President joined Carol in looking towards the buildings that silently drew nearer.

"The most accurate way to gather information is with our own two eyes. And that is our duty."

"...Yes, sir."

"I am expecting great things--from your eyes, your camera, and your talents."

"Yes, sir!"

Carol's earlier terror had dissipated. Her voice, still carrying a hint of childishness in its tone, carried out through the window and into the clear blue skies.

1934, the year after the abolition of Prohibition.

As America made its way into a new era, the train continued into the metropolis. Into the stage of the next incident it ran--Chicago, or beyond--San Francisco, where Alcatraz lay.

Would they remain observers to the incidents, or would they be drawn into the whirlpool of events to come? No one knew what lay in store for them.

Only the sound of the shaking train echoed into the skies, steady and rhythmic as though it was the beat to which their fate would be played.

-To be continued in Baccano 1934!-

Extra Chapter + Terminal - A Connected World

January 1, 1932. Somewhere in New York.

"So that's how you're gonna play, is it? You fucking bastard!"

Victor slammed the door open as he huffed and puffed into the interrogation room.

"What might be the matter?"

"What might be the matter'? Shit! This is all your doing, isn't it?!"

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Victor."

Huey looked truly clueless. Victor's temples visibly twitched.

"That fatass Turner barged in today to file a complaint against the Bureau, saying that I defrauded him!"

<=>

An hour earlier.

"I'm telling you, I want information on this Victor Talbot character! It's the duty of you civil servants to fulfill the needs of an exalted citizen like myself!" The rotund, moustached man demanded, spit flying from his mouth. He was practically wrapped in luxury brand-name items, but it looked less like he was wearing them and more as though they were being displayed on him.

The man facing Turner attempted to get some objective information out of him.

"Please calm down, sir. What in the world did this 'Victor Talbot' do to your personage?"

"It was when those damned Flying Pussyfoot cooks kicked me out of the dining car! I was standing there, not knowing what to do, when that Talbot fellow claimed to be from this Bureau, and stole my jewelry and other valuables! He

went on about protecting me and whatnot, but in the end all he did was take his payment and leave me with a shotgun he found rolling on the floor! Damn you! Is this how you train your men?!"

"...Sir, do you remember what this 'Victor Talbot' from the Bureau looked like?"

"Just bring his filthy little face here, and I'll tell you! He must exist! Do a thorough search, and he won't be able to escape!" The large man barked.

The Bureau member sighed loudly.

"Actually, sir. We've brought him over already."

"Hm?"

"My name is Victor Talbot, sir. I suppose I should say it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"What?!"

"Well, if you'd be so kind as to take your time describing to us the appearance of this impostor you met on the train..."

<=>

"In the end, the bastard goes on about how he doesn't remember the guy's face, so I get stuck with seeing him off all polite and respectful! You have any idea how shitty it is, brown-nosing to assholes like that?! Do you?!"

Finishing his explanation, Victor took out all his pent-up anger at Huey.

"It's pretty obvious you planted thugs on that train besides your Lemures. And you had them use my name just so you could get at me! Am I right? Why the hell else would anyone go by my name?!"

"That would be victim mentality and humility at play on your part, Victor. I think much too highly of you to do anything less than thorough and vicious, should I ever find the desire to harm you in any way. Perhaps a bomb, at the very least?"

"Tch..."

Whether Huey's comment was a compliment or an insult, Victor took it as provocation, his fists trembling in rage.

Huey fell into thought for a moment, then spoke.

"Tell me, Victor. Did you know that a machine called an electroencephalograph was created two years ago in Germany?"

"What?"

Huey's comment was out of the blue, but the term piqued Victor's interest enough so as to calm his anger for a moment and allow Huey to continue.

"A fascinating medical device that displays a visual rendition of electrical brain activity within the human skull. Through this, we have learned that human emotions, logic, dreams, and everything else in our minds may be nothing but electric signals going to and fro in our brains. Setting that matter aside, it is truly interesting to see the rate at which civilization progresses. After all, we are now at an age when even the human heart and soul can be analyzed empirically. Do you not agree, Victor?"

"What're you getting at?"

"Humans have come to such a frightening degree of understanding about themselves, yet their inherent nature has changed surprisingly little. A human lifespan is both long yet brief. In the past, I had thought that perhaps there was not enough time to come to an understanding about this matter, considering the innumerable history built up in this ancient thing we call society."

"Hm?"

As Victor looked at him in confusion, Huey continued to voice his thoughts with frightening calm.

"If, hypothetically, all of humanity were to become immortal, their biological evolution may cease, but would their *minds* continue to evolve? At one point, this was a question often on my mind, but it seems that three hundred years are not enough to change the twisted malice in the human heart."

"That! That's exactly what I'm talking about! I know *exactly* what you're talking about because I'm looking right at one of those goddamn examples in the flesh! Maiza's still with the fucking mob, but I might still be able to talk him out of it. But *you*! That twisted, malicious brain of yours is going to stay that way even after the sun explodes! Both you and Elmer-"

As Victor continued his lengthy rant, Huey fell into thought.

'To go around using the names of other immortals... Of course, the only one who would play such a game is... him.

'He's never once changed since the past, and he never will.

'That's right. That bastard is never going to change.

'...He'll remain that way forever, frozen in place since the moment he killed Monica...'

<=>

Several days later, Central Park.

It had been two days since Jacuzzi's confrontation with Graham's gang and the momentous occasion of Chane's reunion with Claire.

A man sat on one of the park benches, skimming a newspaper. It was published by a rather small company (by New York standards) called the Daily Days.

[Suicide or Homicide? Mysterious Falling Death of Actor Hopeful at Own Apartment Sparks Investigation]

Reading an article printed in a corner of the paper, the man mumbled to himself.

"I was trying to make sure it looked like a suicide, but these third-rate papers won't leave me alone."

The man sighing by himself blended into his surroundings exceedingly well, as though he were a part of the park scenery. However, the words out of his mouth were terribly far removed from the air of normalcy surrounding him.

"Maybe I should've picked another day and dropped him in the Hudson."

Still mumbling to himself, he neatly folded the newspaper and slowly rose from his seat.

"Oh well, at least I found out about all the toys here in New York."

There was no one else around, but the man talked to himself as if he was also his own audience.

His eyes were completely covered by his long bangs, and though his lips gave away part of his full expression, the whole of his face was concealed.

"Upham, was it? It's pretty interesting, what he had to say about immortals."

"Maybe I'll get some fun out of having him play with Czes."

<=>

The same day, Fred's Clinic.

"ACHOO!"

Upham's extraordinarily loud sneeze prompted Who to look up.

"What, you got a cold or something? Wanna go back and see the doc again?"

"Nah, my nose just itches. And you know what? My arm doesn't hurt every time I sneeze anymore. The doc here's a godsend, you know that?"

"You got that right. He takes in junkies and assassins, and the kind of folks that can't go in and see a legit doctor. Aren't you like that, too?"

"...I guess so." Upham muttered blankly. Who tilted his head.

"Hey... have I seen you somewhere before?"

"Dunno, but I get that a lot." Upham mumbled self-deprecatingly, and added half-jokingly, "Though I guess I could say the same about you."

<=>

Several minutes after Upham's departure, another man stepped in as if changing shifts with him.

"Hey there. Can I talk to Fred?"

"Oh, it's you."

Greeting the smiling man, Who started by telling him what he came to hear.

"I helped the doc look at some charts and those spots where they make the deals, but we've still got nothing on any geezer named Szilard."

"That so? Too bad. Fred knows a lot of people, so I thought maybe he'd be able to find out..."

"Hey, not even the cops'd appreciate having to look for a guy with just a name and a vague age. I dunno why you're looking for this guy, but finding him might take *years*."

Listening to Who's astonished voice, the man grinned.

"That's true, but I'm willing to wait a couple decades or centuries."

"Centuries, huh? You gotta be kidding." Who chuckled bitterly. The smiling man shrugged as though he was joking.

"Lucky for me, I've got all the time in the world.

"Though I guess that's really all I have."

<=>

Central Park.

'Well, since I'm more or less done here, I'll take my leave for now.'

The man tossed the newspaper in the trash and slowly made his way forward.

'If I stay here any longer, I might end up running into that sick Smile Junkie again.'

'All I have to do right now is make careful preparations. After all, meticulous planning can only make the party more exciting.'

'That's right. The best parades are flashy and extravagant.'

'Until Huey gets out of prison, I'll just stay put and sharpen my fangs. After all, I don't want to lose my chance at the meat of the fun.'

His excitement bubbling over, the man's thoughts tumbled out of his mouth and turned into words.

"Now, who to put on the plate? I guess I can think about that once the party's begun."

His words reached no one's ears, dissipating into the streets of New York and spreading malice into the air.

Time continued to move forward, bridging the distant past to the present--dragged by the timeless immortals and the countless humans who made their mark upon it in their own lifetimes.



FROM BACCANO! 1710
TO BE BACCANO! 1935



な-9-29



Another Junk Railroad
バックロード1931 臨時急行編

成田良悟

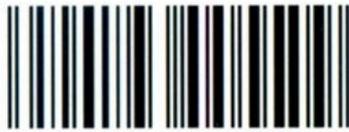
電撃文庫



550



9784048674621



1920193005509

ISBN978-4-04-867462-1
C0193 ¥550E



ASCII
MEDIA
WORKS

発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 **550 円**

※消費税が別に加算されます

