

BACCANO!

バッカーノ!

1933〈上〉

THE SLASH ~クモリノチアメ~

成田良悟

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イラスト*エナミカツミ

Illustration : katsumi enami



電撃文庫

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Illustrated by Enami Katsumi**



BACCANO!

1933
<First>
THE SLASH -Cloudy to rainy-

Ryohgo Narita
Illustration Katsumi Enami



Conversation

The Brothers

Hey, Tick.

"Yeah?"

Why do you always carry scissors around?

You're weird.

It's strange.

"Mmm... I don't know, myself. Maybe it has something to do with why you're so smart."

Don't change the subject.

"Ahaha. But you know, Mother used to say that there shouldn't have to be a reason for someone to like something."

...

"And it just so happens that I like scissors."

I can never understand what you mean.

"Sorry... It must be because I'm dumb."

Yeah, you're right.

People tell me that you're not as smart as me.

They say that I'm a genius, and you're just normal. They say that I stole everything good from you when I was born.

"Ah... So that's it. You might be right..."

...Aren't you mad?

"Nope. Why?"

Your little brother's calling himself a genius and saying you're dumb.

"But it's true, isn't it? You *are* a lot smarter than I am. So that's that."

...I really can't understand you.

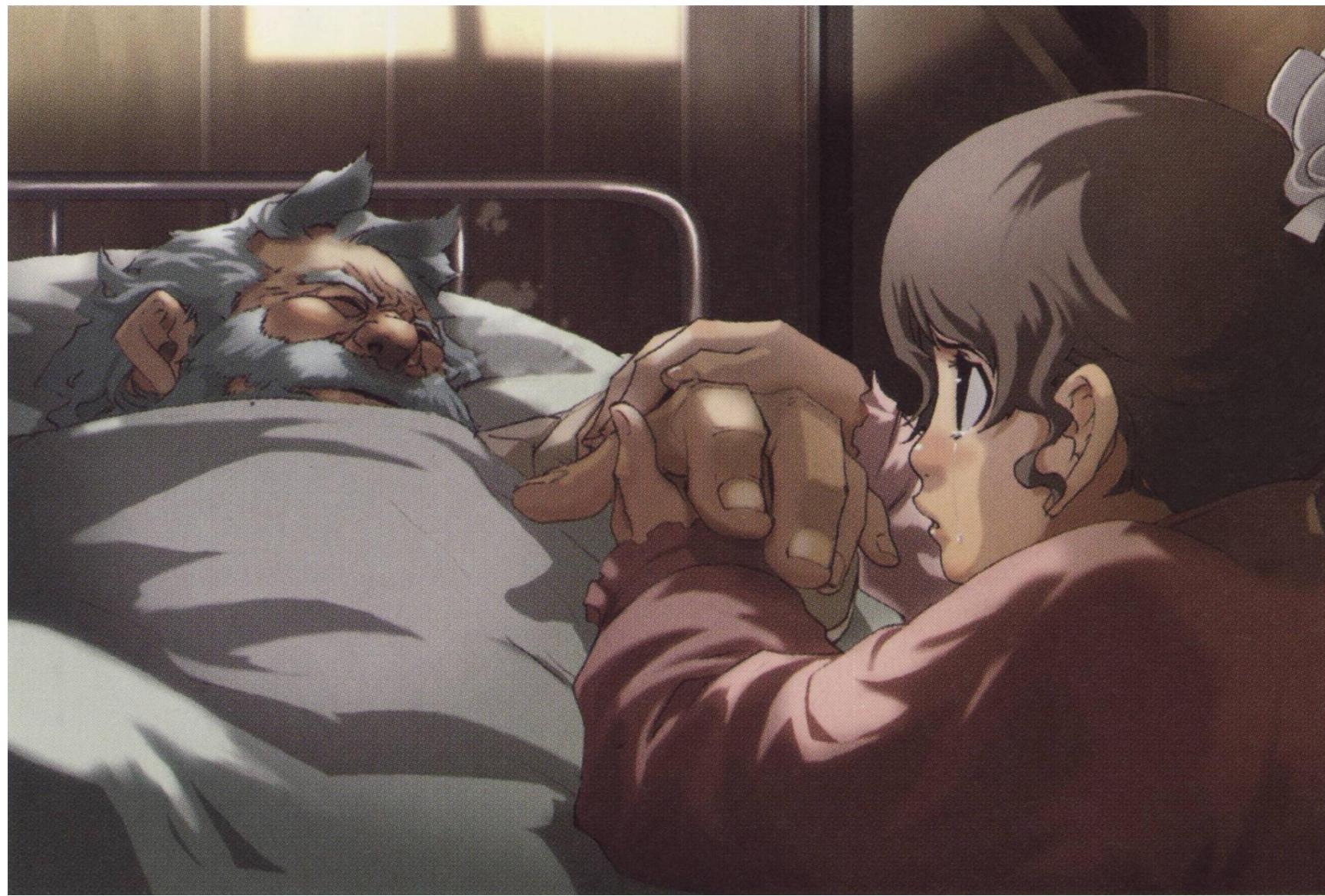
You think of yourself as a fool. You honestly believe it's true...

So how can you look so happy?

I envy you, to be honest.

It feels like you have everything that I don't...

That's why... I hate you, brother.



Conversation

The Old Man and His Granddaughter

No.

No, you can't.

You can't die yet, grandpa...

"Maria... is that... you...?"

Yes, grandpa.

"Haha... Why are you crying, child?"

I don't want you to die.

"Hah... You think... I want to? But everyone has to go... sometime..."

No, you can't.

I... I haven't been able to...

I haven't been able to cut you down yet!

"...Haha... Hahahaha..."

What is it, grandpa? Why're you laughing? Are you feeling any better?!

"You are a good girl, Maria... Thinking of killing me even now..."

That's right! I'm going to cut you down and take your life, grandpa!

That's why you can't die until I do!

"...That's enough. That's enough, Maria."

Grandpa...?

"...You... have the clearest eyes... The eyes of someone who could kill... without a moment's hesitation..."

...Grandpa, no! Don't say anything more! The doctor said you had to rest...

"But even then, you can still shed tears... with those eyes. You can still show sadness at losing something... in those killer's eyes... Haha...ahaha... Maria. You'll make... a fine... assassin..."

Grandpa...?

Grandpa!

Noooo!

...I couldn't slash you.

I couldn't cut you down.

Grandpa... I tried my hardest.

You told me, grandpa.

You told me that with Murasamia¹, I could cut down even things I can't see!

So I tried to cut down the Grim Reaper, and the ghosts that came to take you away!

But my sword... couldn't even touch them...

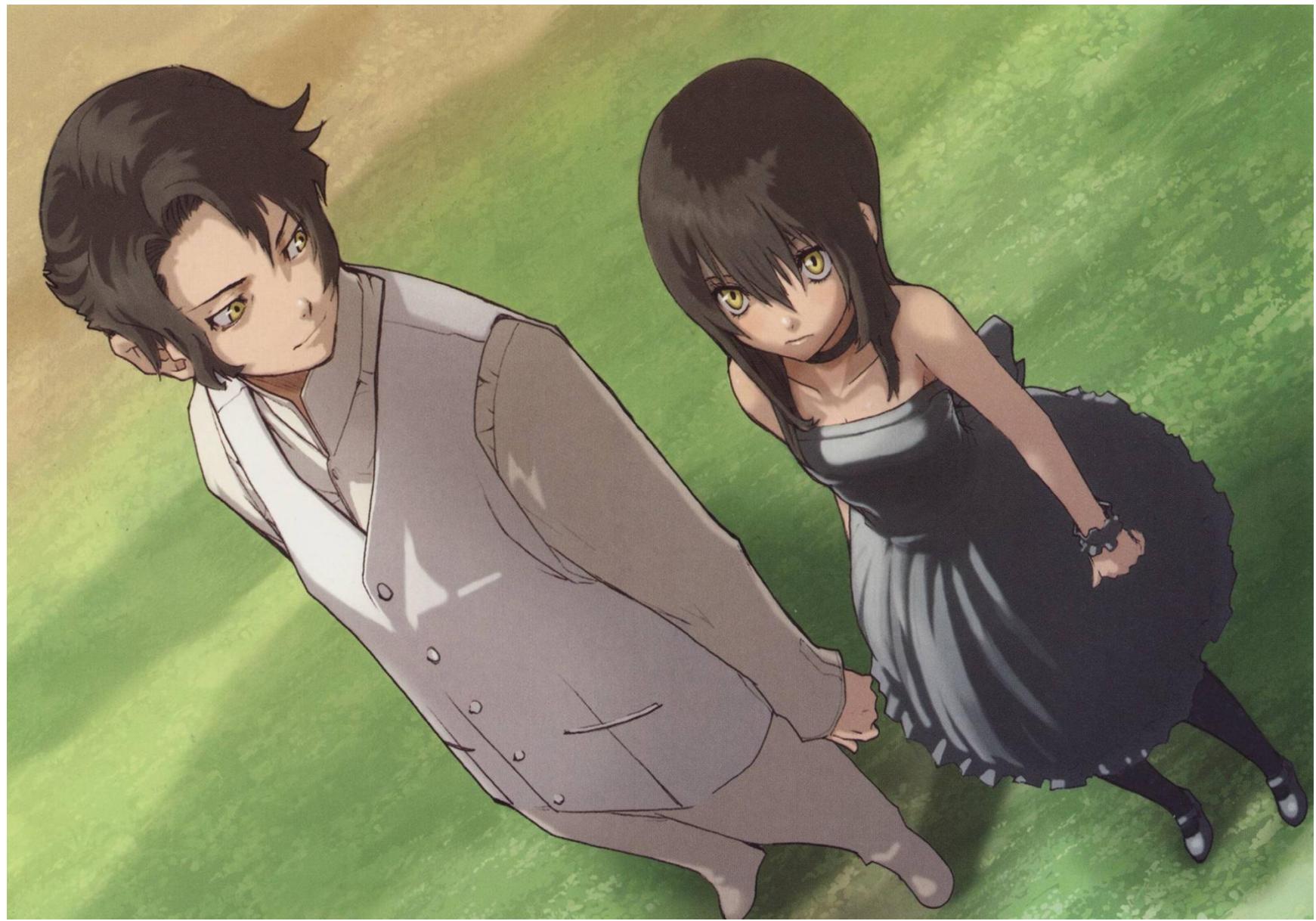
It's because I'm weak.

I'm weak, so I couldn't slash them.

I want to be stronger.

I want to be stronger...

¹村雨 (rain shower). Actual pronunciation is "Murasame."



Conversation

Father and Daughter

Chane.

"Yes, Father."

You are a good child. You will do anything I say, and on the other hand you shy away from following the words of others.

Granted, you do not come into contact with people besides me enough for that to ever be a problem in the first place. Your mother included.

"..."

You are my daughter, my guardian, my experiment, the sentinel of my knowledge. That is why you were created.

So I will show you, and only you, a glimpse of the knowledge that only I hold.

But I will only show you. You are allowed only to listen, and remember.

You cannot tell anyone of this, nor use it for yourself.

Can you promise me?

"Yes, father."

Not a moment's hesitation. Excellent, Chane.

Then... I will show you. All that is forbidden. My goal. The world as it is seen through my eyes.

I see. I am practically forcing this on you, am I not? Very well. If you wish for anything in return for this, tell me.

"My voice..."

Your voice?

"Take my voice away."

...

Ah, you are truly a good child, Chane.

As your father, I will do anything you wish for. Taking your voice from you is but a moment's work.

Indeed, taking my own daughter's voice away forever is as nothing to me...

Hah.

Hahaha...

See, this is why I cannot help but continue to experiment.

Elmer, oh, Elmer. What would you say if you could see me now?

Even guinea pigs show unexpected behavior from time to time. That is why I must conduct my tests.

I told her, "You cannot tell anyone," and behold. Chane, my daughter, chose to lose her voice—solely to prove to me her determination.

Truly sublime loyalty, is it not!

Well, Elmer? Smile Junkie, Mister Happy End. Do you think that this pitiful specimen can achieve happiness as well?

No, perhaps I will observe the answer to that question myself.

That is my obligation as a researcher, after all...



Conversation

Brother and Sister

Dammit, I hate these stupid picture shoots.

"Dallas... Were you out fighting again?"

Yeah. So what? What's it to you?

How'd you know, anyway? I didn't get hurt.

"Of course I know. You've had your left hand in your pocket all this time... There's blood on it, isn't there?"

...It's someone else's. Don't worry about it.

"That's not what I meant! Why do you have to fight all the time...?"

I told you, it's none of your damn business! Or what, are you talking back to your big brother now?

"..."

...Oh, come on. I was joking. Don't look at me like that.

"Promise me you won't go out fighting again."

Yeah, yeah, I promise.

"...Honestly, Dallas, this is probably the thirtieth time you've promised me that."

Really? I could've sworn today was the first time.

Hey, what's so funny?

"Actually, I'm glad you won your fight, brother."

...

"And I believe that one day, you'll keep your promise!"

What're you talking about? You keep on babbling like that and the neighborhood kids're all gonna laugh at you!

"Then you'll come and help me, right?"

You mean I can fight?

"Mmm... Then I'll take care of it by myself!"

Don't bite off more than you can chew, Eve. Fine, I got it.

I promise you. I'm never gonna let anyone lay a hand on you. And that's a promise I'm gonna keep.

"Ahaha... That's enough to make me happy, even though I know it's a lie. Thank you, Dallas!"

...Shut up and smile for the goddamn camera.

Dramatis Personae

Tick Jefferson

The Gandor Family's torture specialist. Perpetually cheerful, and a masterful user of a pair of scissors.

Tack Jefferson

Tick's younger brother.

Maria Barselito

The Gandor Family's uninvited guest. At first glance a naive Mexican girl, but actually a katana-wielding assassin.

Luck Gandor

Youngest of the three Gandor brothers. Not quite suited to be a gangster. Immortal.

Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent

Practically one person in two bodies. Immortal. Enough said.

Firo Prochainezo

A young officer in the Martillo Family. Immortal. Deadly with a knife.

Ennis

A young woman who lives with Firo, and is also part of him.

Maiza Avaro

The Martillo Family's bookkeeper. A handsome man who's always mild and calm. Immortal, and originally an alchemist.

Ronnie Schiatto

The Martillo Family's secretary. The most dangerous man in the organization. Skill level unknown. Demon.

Pecho

Martillo Family officer. Fat. Nicknamed "Meatball." Immortal.

Randy

Martillo Family officer. Thin. Nicknamed "Ghost." Immortal.

Dallas Genoard

Trash.

Eve Genoard

Dallas' little sister. Completely different from her brother.

Jacuzzi Splot

Leader of a motley band of young misfits. Despite the tattoo covering half his face, he is actually extremely shy.

Nice Holystone

Jacuzzi's companion and girlfriend. Absolutely crazy about anything that explodes. Wears glasses and an eyepatch. Always polite to everyone but Jacuzzi.

John and Fang

Jacuzzi's companions. An Irish bartender and a Chinese cook, respectively.

Donny

Jacuzzi's companion. A monstrously strong Mexican man.

Chane Laforet

Jacuzzi's companion. Mute. A master with her knife. Originally a terrorist.

Huey Laforet

A nationally infamous terrorist. Currently in prison. Immortal, and originally an alchemist.

Tim

Leader of an organization under Huey's command, the Larvae.

Adelle

Member of the Larvae. A shy, reclusive young woman. Deadly with a pronged spear.

Vino

A killer who's made his home in Manhattan. Monster. Nicknamed "Rail Tracer."

PROLOGUE



**Prologue
8 Years Ago
The Older Brother**

— —

Snicker-snack, snicker-snack.

The scissors danced in the boy's hands.

Madly.

Madly, they danced.

**Someplace in New York
September, 1925**

"I may be young... but I assure you, my business here is anything but child's play."

"Oh, of course, sir! Wouldn't dream of saying otherwise! No sir!"

Afternoon heat still lingered in the evening air.

Two wildly contrasting voices filled the small store.

The stained counter inside was dominated by a large cash register. The counter was made of wood, giving the observer a certain impression of solemn weight, but it was so badly damaged that it only looked cheap instead of stately.

Said counter stood between two people as they stared at one another.

"Well, I'll cut to the chase. You need to pay us back," the boy said, his sharp eyes and unexpectedly mature tones belying his appearance.

"Ah, well... Err! Bu-bu-but please, young master! Lord have mercy, you're scaring me out of my wits! I can't even think straight!"

The man looked to be almost three times the boy's age, but nevertheless he all but prostrated himself before the youth. He wore a thick vest that looked totally out of season, and fat beads of sweat rolled down his face as he groveled.

The boy, for his part, was also dressed in apparel that didn't look quite right considering the weather. It was still early autumn outside, but he wore a bulky trench coat, and a grey fedora was pressed down deeply over his eyes.

He paid the man's subservient smile no mind and continued the conversation, his voice as calm as before.

"It baffles me as to how you can't pay back just two thousand twenty-five dollars and fifty cents. It's been twenty-three days, fourteen hours, thirty-four minutes, and nineteen seconds since you said you would, come to think of it. Assuming, of course, that the clocks in this store are accurate."

The boy fell silent, fixing the man with his sharp gaze.

The man bowed his head, ashamed, and only the sound of clocks echoed hollowly in the room.

Tick, tack².

Tick, tack, tick, tack, tick tack tick tack ticktackticktack.

The pendulums raised their voices in cacophonous harmony.

The many clocks arrayed in the dimly lit rim made it obvious at a glance that the owner made his living as a clockmaker. They were arranged haphazardly around the room, but despite that, it was hard to say there were many varieties.

To a one they were simple brown grandfather clocks, the sort one might see in any family's living room. None of them had any defining characteristics that made them stand out; the only readily apparent difference being their size.

The boy, Luck Gandor stood inside this house of clocks and opened his mouth once more.

"...Judging by your words, it's obvious you don't have the money to pay us back. What are you going to do about this?"

Understand he might, but pity he did not.

The clockmaker, transfixed by the boy's cold gaze, began to quiver.

He attempted a weak smile, still sweating profusely.

² Variation on "tick, tock."

"Ha... Haha... Well, err."

"First," Luck offered, cutting off the man's excuses before they could properly begin. "Two thousand dollars is a mere two months' worth of a banker's salary. I think that selling this store should more than cover that amount. Selling off the clocks as well would be good, but then again, I suppose you're in this situation precisely because they don't sell. Then, assuming the clocks are worthless, the price of the land alone would be..."

"Ju-ju-just a second, young master! Please!"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't call me that," Luck said, narrowing his eyes. The clockmaker shook his head from side to side, babbling wildly.

"I... I'm so sorry, young- Err! Mister Gandor! Won't happen again! But, but just hold on a second! I actually live here, so if I sell this place I wouldn't even have a roof over my head! Have mercy, sir!"

"I'm honestly curious. Do you seriously believe excuses like that will work on people like us, especially after borrowing our money? We, who you ordinary citizens call *mafia*? Do you expect us to feel pity for the debtors we force out onto the streets?"

Luck, the Gandor Family's youngest executive officer, leaned in close to the clockmaker, the incredulity he felt clear in his eyes.

No youthful enthusiasm was present in his gaze. Only bone-chillingly cold ruthlessness.

The Gandor Family.

They were a small organization that controlled an equally small portion of Manhattan Island's turf. Though their territory and numbers were laughable, in other aspects the Family more than lived up to the title of mafia, to the extent that even other organizations in the area acknowledged them.

Luck's two older brothers, Keith and Berga, led the Family. Luck, still young, was currently the lowest-ranking executive in the organization.

Young he may have been, but his gaze carried no hesitation, for he had already waded through countless scenes of bedlam and come out tougher for it. If the clockmaker dared to say anything that made light of the Family, the boy was more than prepared to make him pay dearly for it.

The clockmaker shrunk unconsciously from the boy, sensing that he was someone who had clothed himself in the darkness of society, but despite his fear his mouth continued to move.

"No no no, of course not! Err! Not to imply that you're cold-blooded at all, sir! I, uhh, I mean, I'd never presume to think I could get away with not paying!"

And then the clockmaker made an offer that Luck hadn't seen coming.

"I-I'll pay back the debt with my body!"

"...What?"

Luck blinked slowly, unable for a moment to understand just what the man meant. Perhaps sensing the boy's doubt, the clockmaker hastily raised his hands in denial.

"Ah! Please, don't misunderstand! I'm not suggesting I'd try and become a gigolo at this age. I just recall hearing that the Gandor Family was looking to hire, you see!"

"...That may be true, but we have not fallen so far that we'd consider bringing you into our ranks."

It was a rude thing to say no matter how one looked at it, but the clockmaker seemed to take no offense.

"Of course not, sir! Why, what use would an old man like me be to you? That thing about my body was just a figure of speech. I'm actually hoping to sell you my son!"

"What?"

Luck's lips parted slightly, his face showing open surprise for the first time. He looked utterly nonplussed, as though he had utterly failed to understand the meaning behind the man's words. He quickly realized how he must look and closed his mouth firmly.

The clockmaker, though, didn't even notice this quick changing of expressions and hustled over to one corner of the store, raising his voice in a shout.

"Tick! Tiiick!"

The name bore a passing resemblance to his own. Luck shifted his gaze to the dusky depths of the store.

That was when he finally realized that there, in the hall, decorated only by long rows of clocks, he could hear something else mixed in with the sound of ticking pendulums.

Snick...

Snack...

The sound of metal sliding smoothly against metal, a sound that even had a certain crisp quality about it.

Luck soon realized just what it was.

Simultaneously, he wondered how it came to be that such a sound would be heard in a clockmaker's store.

The rhythmic song of well-sharpened blades came closer...

And there, in the deepest corner of the hall, there appeared a small silver *something*.

"What is it, Father?"

The boy who came around the corner was like *a living pair of scissors*.

All he did was open and close the silver tailoring scissors he held in both hands, as though in time with some unheard beat. That was all.

But that was simply the impression the boy gave.

Only the boy's scissors gleamed in the dim corner of the store, giving one the illusion that they were controlling the boy's fingers and body, not the other way around.

Indeed, Luck even found his gaze drawn to the silver blades, not the boy holding them, who looked to be about two or three years his junior.

"Oh? We have a customer?"

The boy's voice was so relaxed it almost seemed to melt into the air, a marked contrast to the sharp metallic sound of the tools he held.

Luck snapped out of his reverie at the sound, focusing again on the other boy's face.

His willowy body made it impossible to gauge his strength at a glance. He looked amicable enough, his eyes curved upwards in half-moon smiles.

There was nothing else remarkable about the boy, and so the eye was naturally drawn once more to the scissors in his hands.

If pressed to explain what he felt, Luck would have said that it felt as though the scissors were the boy's true form, while his actual body was simply an afterthought.

"Oh, hello..." the boy said, the slightly ponderous way he drew out his words making him seem even younger than he looked. But rather than making him seem disarming, it actually gave a somehow unsettling impression when considered together with the scissors held in his hands.

"...And this is?"

"Ah, Mister Gandor! This here's my son Tick! He's awfully good with his hands! I'm sure he'll be of great help to you, yessir! So, err, what I mean is, maybe you can take him as collateral?"

"You've got to be joking..."

Normally Luck would have flown into a rage at being taken lightly, but this time, he could not.

True, he'd been caught flatfooted at the clockmaker's bizarre offer, but even more than that, he found himself interested in Tick.

Specifically, in the scissors Tick held in his hands.

Taking Luck's silence as agreement, the clockmaker unleashed a torrent of words, relief obvious on his face.

"You see, Mister Gandor, I just remembered what you told me back when I borrowed the money! You told me that if I couldn't pay you back I'd have to be ready to sell my own family to make it up!"

"That was just a-

"So anyway! Just a day! Try him out! If he don't please you, why, I'm a man of my word, yes sir! I'll sell this store and the land it's on, just you see if I don't!"

"...I'm too soft..." Luck murmured to himself with a sigh as he stepped out of the store. Unlike his cold tones earlier, this was said in a boyish way that fit his appearance.

The sky had clouded over, making it look like it'd rain at any moment. At the end of the street he could see the tower that supported the Manhattan Bridge standing tall. Having been made in 1905, the bridge was still relatively new, but the meticulous decorations festooning it gave the observer a sense of stately history.

Considering that the debtor's property was so close to a tourist attraction like the bridge, there should have been no problem attracting customers. In fact, it'd be hard to find a better location. Luck reflected that the clockmaker was either extremely bad at managing his business or extremely unlucky, to have been forced to borrow money from the mafia in spite of such fortuitous conditions.

He knew how much such land was worth, and so he'd stepped into the store fully intending to press the clockmaker into selling it, but...

"...So, why do you carry those scissors around?"

"It's a hobby."

"I... I see."

How had things come to this? Luck glanced sidelong at the boy walking alongside him and heaved another sigh.

"What's the matter, Mister Luck? Something wrong?" Tick asked, smiling innocently.

Faced with those strangely good-natured eyes, Luck let out yet another long-suffering sigh.

...What the hell am I supposed to do with him?

The scissors in his hands were still quite unnerving, true, but besides that there was nothing really outstanding about the boy. He seemed a nice enough fellow, but it didn't look like he was that smart, and Luck was willing to bet he wasn't that strong, either. Perhaps as strong as Luck himself, if that.

Such was Luck's assessment of Tick.

"You were named... Tick, correct?"

"Yup."

"Do you understand just what kind of situation you're in right now?" Luck asked the smiling boy, just to make sure.

"Mmm, I think that Father borrowed money without being able to pay it back... So he sold me to you as collateral, Mister Luck."

"...That's enough."



Luck wagered that Tick understood the words but not the meaning behind them. Still fighting his misgivings, he turned and began walking toward the Family's headquarters.

...Either way, if the boy turned out to be useless, he'd have the clockmaker right where he wanted him. The store would be sold, and the Family would get their money.

Granted, Luck could have dismissed Tick as good for nothing on the spot and intimidated the clockmaker into just selling the store right there and then, but for some reason, Tick intrigued him. There was the matter of the scissors, yes, but it was also true that the clockmaker's boasting had caught his interest as well. *Awfully good with his hands, was it? Sure he'll be of great help* had been in there as well.

"Listen, Tick. If I decide you're of no use to us, I'm going to stick a debt reminder on you and leave you outside your father's store again."

"Okay. I'll do my best," Tick replied, as breezy as before, and Luck's voice rose, sharp with agitation.

"Do you truly understand what it means to help people like us? It won't matter how 'good' you are with your hands. What matters is that you'll have to get them dirty. Do you get what that means? Are you prepared for that?"

Caught up in the moment, Luck followed up with a somewhat petty question.

"Say, for instance, that I told you to kill someone. Would you be able to do it?" he asked coldly. Now Tick would have no choice but to admit-

"If you told me to, Mister Luck," Tick said, without a moment's hesitation, and gave the scissors in his hands another snap.

Luck had nothing to say to that.

...What the hell. This kid's got a few screws loose in his head.

Luck searched for a retort, his mouth half open, but at length he gave up and turned to look at the people on the street.

Perhaps because of the rain, there weren't all that many pedestrians, and only horse-drawn carriages clattered busily over the roads.

One such carriage passed in front of Luck, and once it was gone he noticed two people standing across the street.

The pair was composed of one skeletally thin man and one immensely fat one.

Luck knew their faces.

They were members of the Martillo Family, a small organization that operated in the same general area as the Gandors.

"What's this? It's the Gandor kid," the thin man—Randy—called teasingly upon catching sight of Luck.

"Off on a debt collecting errand for your brothers, eh?" the fat man—Pecho—added.

"Yes, I am. Have a good day, sirs."

It was clear that they weren't taking him seriously because of his age, but he didn't mind.

Luck himself was keenly aware of how strange it was for someone as young as he was to be acting as a member of a mafia family, and furthermore, it was obvious that Randy and Pecho weren't truly making fun of him.

The two men went their way, and Luck turned to leave...

"Oh, it looks like those people have business with Father, too."

Tick had turned around to watch them, and Luck, too, whipped around at his offhand comment, just in time to see the Martillo men kick open the clockmaker's door.

The frightening crash had barely faded when Randy and Pecho's voices rose in a fearsome roar.

"Look here, ya bastard! Hope you got the money you owe us ready, 'cause if you don't...!"

"You're gonna have to sell this store to pay back the twelve thousand dollars debt you racked up at our gambling house!"

Their shouts had been deliberately calculated to be heard by those nearby, and none among those bystanders was more shocked than Luck.

"Wha—"

He clapped his hands to his mouth to stop the cry that threatened to come out.

...Twelve thousand dollars?! That's almost six times what he borrowed from us!

So the clockmaker had gone and saddled him with this scissors boy and piled up more debt with another organization.

Maybe he'd managed to scrape up just enough to repay the Martillos? And then given away the boy because he didn't have enough to pay back the Gandors...

Luck could see it all in his head. He turned around, all set to show the clockmaker personally just how terrifying the Gandor Family could be...

"Please don't do it."

The ponderous voice stopped him in his tracks, speaking as though its owner has read his mind.

"Father's already done for."

"...What was that?"

"He never had the money to pay you back. Not just you, and not just them, either. He borrowed lots and lots of money, from about eight other people. He couldn't pay it back even if he sold the store," Tick explained calmly, the smile never leaving his face even as he laid out the dire straits his family was in.

Luck slowed, then came to a stop as they talked, leaving the two facing each other, unmoving, at the end of the road.

"That's why it's all over for Father now. The people who're going to come now are all going to threaten him and maybe even kill him. That's why..."

The scissors sheared the air once again, but Tick's expression didn't change.

"I think Father's going to run away tonight."

Luck had been listened quietly up till then, but at those last words he took a quiet breath, looking at Tick as though he were something strange.

"...Run away? Leaving his family behind?"

"I have a little brother," Tick replied, his answer seeming to go off the mark. Luck wondered what he was talking about, but Tick continued before he could ask.

"He's named Tack, and he's really really smart. Not like me. People call him a genius, and he's good at whatever he does. He's a lot more help than most adults. So Father probably thinks he'll be alright as long as he has Tack."

Luck could find nothing to say in reply.

"I just get in the way, so Father was thinking of abandoning me anyway. He doesn't have the money to feed me. So he told me to go with you, Mister Luck, to get you out of the way."

It dawned on Luck that the boy before him understood his own situation far better than he had first supposed.

"...How can you still smile, knowing what you do? Never mind your father. Do you hate your brother too?"

"Hmm? I love them both a lot, actually. Why do you think that?"

"Why...? No, it doesn't matter. Now that I know what your father had planned, I can't let this pass," Luck said shortly, heading back toward the clockmaker's store.

But... Tick's willowy hand grasped his arm.

The scissors made a dry metallic clang as they hit the pavement.

"...What is it."

"You still don't know, right?"

"Don't know what?"

"You don't know what I might be worth, Mister Luck. For all you know, I might be worth Father's debt to you, right? You said it yourself. You promised Father that you'd look over me for a day. You said you'd see whether I could do enough work to pay back Father's debt to your family."

The light tone had faded just the slightest bit from Tick's voice, nervousness creeping in in its stead.

But even then, his eyes never quite lost their sparkle.

...Okay, so he isn't entirely an idiot.

Luck realized with some degree of relief that the boy did have emotions after all.

...He fully realizes the situation he's in, and he's long since come to terms with what he'll have to do.

"If you prove worthless and your Father does make a run for it... You'll be left holding the debt," Luck said, showing grudging respect for Tick's resolve. His interest in the boy renewed, the Gandor Family's youngest executive turned away from the store.

"...I really am too soft..."

Luck allowed himself a rueful smile as he led the other boy to the Family's office. He didn't turn to look back at the clockmaker's store, walking straight to his destination.

And as for the boy in question, who had been sold for a paltry month's wages... His fingers danced, looped into the scissors' handles.

In turn, the metal blades clanged open and shut at the behest of those long white fingers.

Merrily he brought them together, the sound of metal on metal rising rhythmically like some sort of instrument.

Luck cast Tick a sidelong glance and couldn't help but feel a twinge of pity for his future.

There was no way he'd become a member of the Family. The boy looked far too kind to become part of an illegal organization.

Still imagining the boy's future, Luck gave voice to a question, as though trying to make sure one last time.

"Still... Are you okay with this? You didn't even get to say goodbye to the family you're trying to protect."

"It's nothing as great as that, Mister Luck. That's why I don't think I'll regret it. And the links between people aren't cut that easily. They don't have any form, just like air, so you can't cut them even if you tried..."

Luck found himself smiling along with the other boy, his leisurely good cheer finally proving infectious.

But...

"But that means that on the other hand, people are easy to cut. You can touch them, you see. My scissors could cut them right up. That makes me sad, and happy."

Tick's smile widened, and a sudden chill ran down Luck's spine.

It wouldn't be long before Luck came to understand the meaning of his words.

The scissors in the boy's hands sang, clashing metal raising its voice on the street.

The sound did not mingle with the mundane noises of the road, instead ringing clear to the end of the dusky evening street.

As though prophesying the path the boy would walk in the days to come.

— —

Eight Years Later
The Gandor Family Office's Basement

"That's why I need to make sure," Tick murmured, smiling brightly at the man in front of him.

The man replied...

"Aaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

With a scream.

The anguished shriek, like silk being ripped apart, echoed around the small, plain grey room.

Tick had just told his life's story to the man who was currently thrashing about, though most of it had, admittedly, been lost in the sound of the man's screams.

He didn't even know the man's name. He just sheared his flesh, the two of them alone in the secluded basement.

Healthy peach color split apart, crimson oozing through the gashes.

"I just wanted to see how much pain a person's mind can handle. How much a person's bonds can take. These invisible bonds. I really wanted to know, and that's why I tried to find out, with so many many many different people..."

Tick smiled sadly, snapping his scissors shut.

"Human beings are really strange. Some people won't ever betray their friends because of torture no matter what, and some people just start talking before I even cut them. I think you're the type who doesn't talk. That's amazing. I really respect that."

The next moment, his blades flashed once again, splitting open the man's skin.

He'd cut parallel to the previous wound—the two slashes running side by side with only a fraction of an inch between them—turning the wound into something far crueler than it had been before.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

The room's single door opened as the man's screams rose an octave, and through the doorway stepped a young man with eyes as sharp and narrow as a knife. Luck Gandor.

"Mister Tick... Perhaps a short break before you continue."

"Yes, Mister Luck."

The scissors snapped closed as Tick replied docilely, and he exited the room.

Luck watched him leave for a moment, then walked forward and came to a stop in front of the ragged, helpless man.

"...Though, just how short this break will be depends entirely on what you have to say," Luck commented conversationally.

The man had been wheezing hard, bereft of even the strength to scream, but at Luck's words he looked up and forced himself to speak, his teeth chattering uncontrollably.

"Pl-pl-please, n-no more. I'll, I'll talk! I'll tell you e-everything! Just don't let that freak near me agaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

Pain had turned his words into a shriek, but Luck had no problem deciphering what he meant.

He sighed and cracked his neck from side to side, waiting for the man to come to his senses... But suddenly the man's voice rose in a terrified shriek.

"Oh god noooo!"

"?"

Following the man's gaze, Luck saw that Tick had come back, peeking around the open door.

"Oh? Is something wrong, Mister Tick?"

"Umm... If you don't get him to a doctor soon, I think he's going to die."

The young man's smile faded for just a moment as he looked worriedly at the wounded man.

"Yes, yes. I'll take care of it. You can go upstairs and have some crackers."

"Yay! Thanks, Mister Luck," Tick said, the smile reappearing as he turned and headed up the stairs outside, humming to himself as he went.

He disappeared from view, the scissors hanging limply from his hands. Luck waited until he was sure Tick had left, then turned and smiled at the bloody man on the floor.

"Mister Tick is a kind man, isn't he," Luck said, and then kicked the man hard.

The man could only thrash soundlessly, the air he would have needed to scream suddenly forced from his lungs.

"But I am not. I hope you understand."

Tick *was* a kind man.

He was a supremely innocent person, one who had no business associating with the mafia.

But he had one talent.

He was very, very good at hurting and torturing people.

Perhaps that talent stemmed from his innocence, or, like some said, his scissors were cursed.

It had only taken a year for him to become infamous as the Gandor Family's torture specialist.

Snicker-snack, snicker-snack.

Every time the boy's scissors spoke, screams followed as though in chorus.

Still, he smiled.

Innocently, he smiled.

Snicker-snack, snicker-snack.

The scissors danced in the boy's hands.

Madly.

Madly, they danced.

Prologue
8 Years Ago
The Younger Brother

— —

September 1925
The Docks

Thick clouds blanketed the night sky, hiding not only the stars but also the moon from view.

But those clouds weren't heralds of a coming storm; only silence reigned over the darkness.

Neither the neon lights of the city nor the raucous chatter of the taverns reached this place. The boy looked down at the river flowing through the dark and muttered quietly to himself, "The world really is a big place."

His gaze traveled upward from the lightless waters, looking up at the starless sky.

The boy's expression didn't change as he took in the inky blackness that filled his entire field of vision.

"It feels like it's going to swallow me up. No, I'm sure it already has."

...I know.

I know that Father's planning on selling Tick tomorrow.

He wants to sell him to some mafia called the Gandors or something, to cover a debt of just two thousand dollars.

And then he's going to take me and run. Just me. No, if worst comes to worst, he's thinking of selling me, too, for a lot more than he will Tick, to a camorra called the Martillo Family.

I like to think I'm pretty smart.

I'm not giving myself airs or anything. It's just an objective fact.

They call me a wunderkind. I can understand what they teach at school just by reading the books, before the teachers even open their mouths. Actually, I can go further than that, extrapolating to conclusions that are outside the confines of the textbooks.

It's just that I don't really see much worth in it.

What use is all my talent, when it can't get me what I really want?

I just wanted to be happy.

It's a foreign thing to me. It has been ever since my biological father died.

Tick and I ended up moving to this new neighborhood because Mom found a new husband—that worthless clockmaker. A new life, new people, a new atmosphere.

I should have formed new bonds of family with my stepfather, finding new happiness.

But the neighborhood of New York was too large.

Far, far too large.

Mom died of tuberculosis before we even got settled down here.

Our stepfather didn't care about us.

In fact, I think he thought of us as a nuisance.

But that changed once he heard the rumors about me.

He'd decided, you see, that I'd be a good source of money for him.

That wasn't the sort of family I wanted.

I hate my stepfather.

All he thinks of is money. Just as I have no love for him, so does he harbor no affection for me.

Tick, on the other hand, thinks of his new father as family.

His new father, on the other hand, only thinks of Tick as a tool.

We're all the same.

Whether or not he cares for us, our relations with him are strictly one-way.

I hate Tick, too.

My older brother is a really innocent person. That's why things never ended well when it came to him.

Like my guinea pig.

He killed my first and only pet, my guinea pig, Jimmy. I'd raised him myself, and I honestly loved him.

Tick stabbed those scissors he always carried into Jimmy's back.

I don't know why he did it.

I don't want to know, either.

I haven't spoken a word to him since then, and I have no intention of ever forgiving him for it.

I just wonder... What does he think of me? I know that he thinks of the clockmaker as family. But I can't even begin to fathom what he thinks of me.

Tick acts that way to everyone, so there's no way to know for certain.

Still. I didn't forgive him for what he did, but I still wanted to believe that there was something between us, some sort of brotherly connection. A familial bond. That's why I thought to stay together with him as family, even though I hated him so.

But even that ends today.

The clockmaker is planning on tossing Tick to the wolves and making a break for it tomorrow night. I don't want to live together with someone like that, a goose forever laying golden eggs for his benefit.

I'm not being arrogant. I'm just confident in my ability to earn money—at least better than my stepfather, who managed to rack up enough debt at an underground casino to be able to sell his store and still come up wanting in paying it back. The ways I would do so might not be entirely legal, but it doesn't matter.

I don't want to live with my stepfather.

I'll never be happy then, no matter how much money I earn.

I imagined my future with him, as I might extrapolate a new equation from the answers in my textbooks.

I could only foresee boring days ahead of me. I was sure my predictions would turn out to be true.

That's why I ran away.

I won't say that it was in pursuit of happiness. Talk like that is cheap.

This is an experiment.

I'm conducting an experiment on myself, to see how far I can run on my own from the things I hate, from the misfortune that is sure to befall me.

That's why I won't regret the results, come what may. I need only to modify the procedure and try again. Over and over again, until I get the result I want.

Still...

There was something I dare to hope, just a little.

It's already been two hours since I ran away, but in my breast I still hold the small hope that Tick might come to look for me.

There's that hope that I might hear his voice calling for me from far away.

It's a selfish thing, yes, but it interests me, you see.

Do familial bonds really exist?

Furthermore, would they hold fast for someone despicable like me, who thought to test such things for the sake of potential personal gain?

That's why I allow myself to hope.

Hope that my experiment will come to a swift end as someone calls me from behind.

If that happens, I plan on running away together with Tick.

I hate him, yes, but compared to the clockmaker he's much much-

And from behind the boy came a voice.

"Tack Jefferson. Twelve. Single."

Naturally, the voice did not belong to his brother, nor did it belong to his father.

"Who's that?!"

Tack's gaze snapped down from the dark heavens to earth, and soon focused on a faint light.

"Hmm. Perhaps the 'single' part was unnecessary. No, I say, I must make sure. There is not a single phenomenon in this world that is unnecessary to observe."

A person was there, illuminated in the wavering light.

"...'I say', hmm. That leads me to wonder how Nile is doing... Ah, that was just me talking to myself. Pay it no mind."

The light was coming from the round thing the stranger held, something unlike any lamp that Tack had ever seen.

It was roughly the size of a man's head, shaped somewhat like a butterfly's cocoon. It looked something like a sphere that had been stretched vertically, and stiff white paper covered its surface. Tack peered closely at it and saw that there were many wires overlapping each other to form a frame inside the paper.

From the flickering of the light inside the paper ball, it seemed that a candle or lamp had been placed inside.

All this was processed within an instant in Tack's head. It wasn't really the time for such things, but the sudden fear that gripped him had left him unable to look directly at the stranger's face.

"So while this may seem a bit silly, I must ask. Are you single?" the stranger asked quietly, heedless of Tack's anxiety, and only then could he bring himself to glance up.

Lit by the dancing firelight was... a beautiful, perfect face, like one would expect of an angel.

Tack cautiously thought it might be a man.

The way the stranger spoke was all the basis he had for that conclusion. The voice itself was androgynous, and the face so fair he might have mistaken it for a woman's. The stranger's expression was mature, but on the whole he seemed somehow young.

He wore white clothes, and the light in his hand reflected oddly off of them, making him almost seem to glow in the night.

"I suppose it must be startling to be faced with questions so suddenly. My apologies. Ah, does this light catch your attention? It is called a chouchin. I made it myself, based on a friend's

description from Japan. Though, it is constructed entirely from hearsay, and I have never actually seen one, so I have no idea how accurate a recreation this is."

The man smiled gently as he spoke, as though to calm the boy's nerves.

Tack felt the urge to ask a question, but he couldn't find the words to express it. He felt a strange sort of pressure rolling off the man that made him hesitant to talk.

The stranger kept his smile as Tack struggled for words, and took a step closer.

"There is something I must make clear before anything else. Our meeting here is no coincidence."

"Wha..."

Tack took a step back despite himself, unable to decipher the man's intentions.

He couldn't muster the courage to walk toward him. But neither was he brave enough to turn and run, and so he stood rooted to the spot, unable to move. Such was the quaint air about the stranger; Tack couldn't tell whether it was allure or menace.

"No, not a coincidence. I feel this is most important. Yes, I was waiting for you to come. I know what sort of straits your family is in right now, and predicting that you would leave your home tonight was well within my ability to foresee. You see—and for this I must apologize—I have been observing your every move for the past month. And my observations have borne fruit, for thanks to them I was able to meet you."

...What is he talking about?

The stranger kept going, even as Tack tried his best to make sense of the situation.

It seemed almost as though he was not talking to Tack, but was instead talking to himself in an attempt to confirm why he had come.

"You are far more brilliant than those around you can possibly imagine. I came here because I heard of a genius named Claire Stanfield, but it seems he has already left... Instead, I came to learn of you, and I must say that perhaps you will turn out to be even more outstanding than young Stanfield."

The stranger took another step. One step closer to Tack.

There was still a gap of a few yards between them, but the man's voice seeped into his thoughts as though he were whispering into Tack's ears.

"I must say I like your adequate level of misfortune. And I approve of the way you left your life behind without hesitation well before you came to taste despair. Truly, you are a fascinating *specimen*."

"Who... are you?"

It was the only question that Tack could manage, and he had to scrape together all of his rapidly flagging courage to eke it out.

He had provided the incentive, and now a flood of words was sure to pour out in reply. Perhaps making a run for it would have been wiser, but it seemed that his curiosity regarding the mysterious man far outweighed any concerns about his own safety.

"Ah, me?"

The man folded down the outer layer of his chouchin... and held his finger to the flame of the large candle inside.

"I am... a monster."

His right hand held up the bottom of the lantern, while his left hand hovered inside the fire.

Normally, Tack would have dismissed it as a simple magic trick. Anyone could do something similar, as long as they had chilled their hand sufficiently with something like ice beforehand, and then cunningly used a layer of moisture or air to momentarily ward off the heat.

But soon enough the man's hand caught alight, his flesh merrily burning.

And then... the skin that should have sloughed off of his immolated hand *slipped back into place and began to heal before his eyes*.

The man's hand was wreathed in flames. But no matter how long Tack watched, his flesh never melted away completely.

The boy gulped, entranced by the display of regeneration in the firelight... and then his eyes hardened as he began to analyze the phenomenon.

"A trick? No, but..."

After a moment of thought, Tack used the fastest method he could think of to explain the situation.

In other words, he decided to ask the man himself.

"Let me ask again... *What* are you?"

"Oh? I am quite impressed. I had not expected you to keep your calm so well confronted by such things. Most of the specimens I showed this to lost their senses, you see. Even Goose showed more of a reaction than you did... Granted, that time I chose to forgo such mild displays and instead sliced open my own jugular vein."

He'd completely cut Tack off, but the man continued, his voice growing louder with excitement.

"You could have run away upon deciding that I disturbed you, you know. Such actions are well within the expected behavior patterns of human beings, and I would not have been overly disappointed... Though I had no intention of letting you escape."

The man's stare slipped from Tack to a point behind him.

As though enthralled, Tack turned to follow his gaze and discovered a new silhouette standing behind him.

It was a girl about his age, dressed in black.

She stood barely a yard away from him, her golden eyes focused on him from behind a curtain of black hair.

There was nothing that could have been quantified as emotion in those eyes. She merely stared at him silently, like a puppet.

"Chane, it seems our guest won't be attempting to flee, so you can go now."

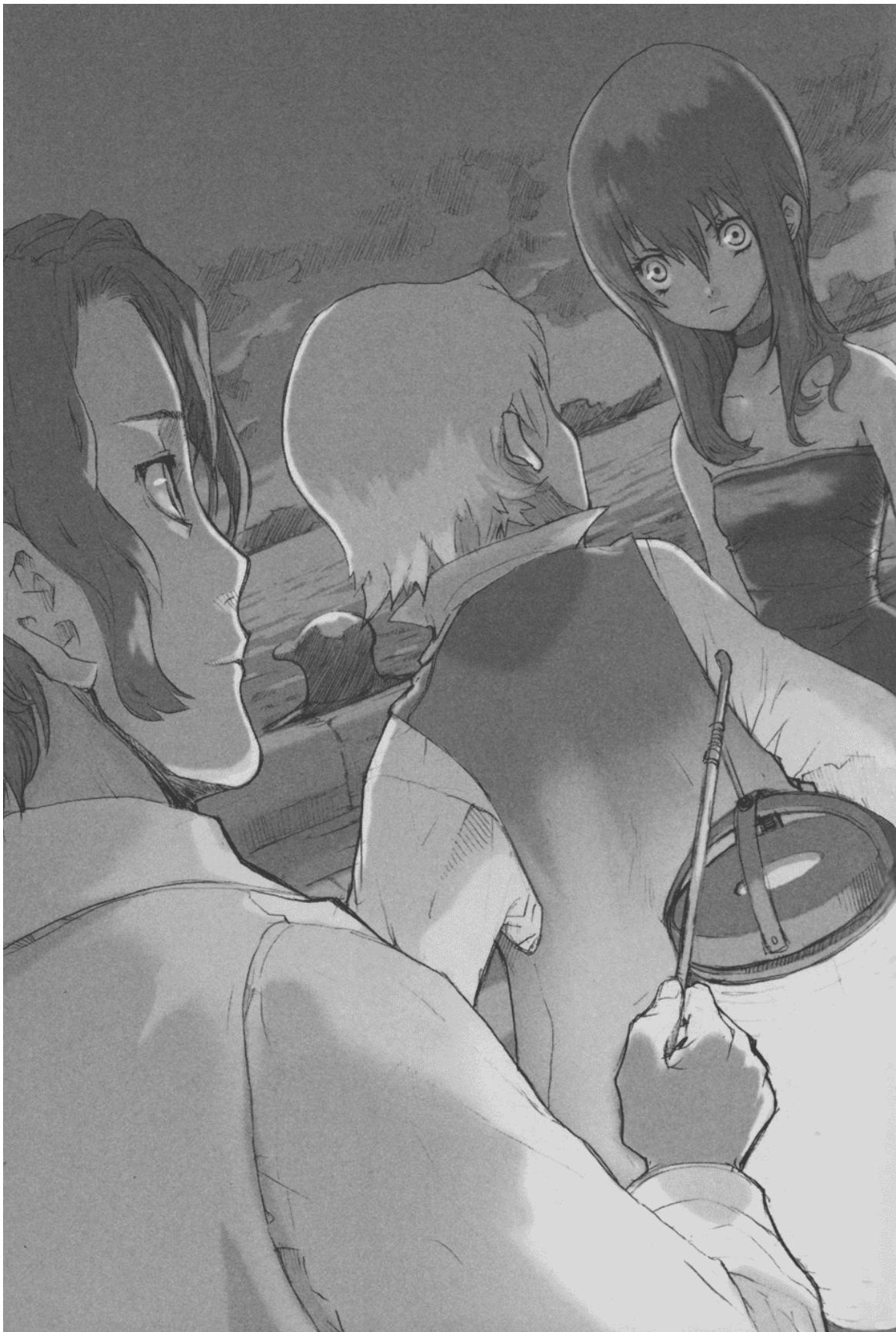
The girl nodded and vanished, sprinting soundlessly into the dark.

Utter quiet blanketed them, as though to say that there had never been anyone there save the two of them, the lantern's light revealing only Tack's shadow where the girl had once stood.

...Am I dreaming?

The chain of bizarre situations began to make Tack think everything was some sort of hallucination. He was losing touch with reality.

The man's voice, which was the most fantastic thing about the situation, was ironically the thing that brought him back to reality.



"Now, I suppose I should introduce myself. My aim is to understand the limits of the materials collectively known as humanity. To that end, I am gathering various specimens. Specimens such as yourself, for example..."

He trailed off, as though he had just remembered something once forgotten.

Both his hand and his lantern had returned to exactly like they'd been before the fiery display, almost making Tack suspect that he'd dreamed the whole thing.

"My, my. I completely forgot about the most important thing."

The laughter faded from the man's features, replaced by one of trite embarrassment as he shook his head.

These motions were so natural and intimate, so completely friendly and comforting, that they could not possibly have been anything other than coldly calculated.

"Huey. My... Mmm, my name is Huey Laforet."

The man finally revealed his name, and at the same time, revealed the reason he'd come.

As though they'd just met, and everything before this truly had been a fantastic dream.

"I want to take you with me. I come from the happy world you so fervently wish for."

**Prologue
8 Years Ago
The Only Daughter**

— —

**September 1925
A town in Northern Mexico**

Far south of New York, there was a village close to the border between the United States and Mexico.

The sun had already set there, and deep dusk had fallen over the buildings.

Normally, beautiful stars would have lit up the sparkling night sky, but tonight, a thick cover of clouds served to make the night a single dull shade of black.

There were farms dotting the land around the town, and with the coming of nightfall the rustic atmosphere became dyed in subdued tones.

There was a single house, on the outskirts of the village, that fit perfectly with the placid air.

An old man and a young girl stood talking in front of an extinguished fireplace. The table beside them had been prepared for dinner, but they paid it no mind, instead seemingly absorbed in some great debate.

It was a rather ordinary, if heartwarming sight, but on that night, in that home, the reality of it was somewhat different from what one might have expected.

"Listen closely, Maria. This here is no toy."

The old man's prodigious mustache bristled as he squatted in front of the girl.

Illuminated by the lamplight, they seemed at first glance like family, and at second glance like complete strangers.

"This, you see, is a weapon and a soul and a simple lump of iron."

The old man raised the long object he held in his right hand and smiled gently at the child.

As for the girl, tears were threatening to spill from her eyes despite the old man's reassuring smile as she focused on what he had to say.

"It's not something you can just play around with."

"I'm... I'm sorry, grandpa... I, I didn't know this would happen," the girl, Maria, said, stammering through the sobs that shook her body.

"I didn't mean to do it! I didn't want to hurt anyone! I, I never thought... I never thought something like this would happen!"

The old man's left arm was swathed in bandages... and instead of keeping their pristine white color, over half the area covered by the cloth was stained dark red.

He had been content to listen, but at Maria's last outburst he spun the long object in his right hand around and with it slapped his wounded left arm.

"Maria, my girl. If you really mean that, that was the worst thing you could possibly have said."

"What...?"

The girl looked up cautiously, still sniffling. The old man grinned wider than before.

It was not a gentle smile. More a pure and innocent grin, the sort one would expect from a child who had found something interesting to play with.

The old man laughed and gripped the end of stick and held the other end fast within the crook of his left elbow. Then, before the girl's eyes, he drew forth from inside the stick—no, the scabbard—a katana.

The dazzling light reflected off the blade nearly blinded the girl for a moment. When she squinted cautiously through shuttered eyelids, she became aware that the end of the sword rested against the center of her forehead.

"Ah..."

The girl could only stare at the living silver before her, enchanted.

Stationed directly between her eyes, the sharp blade confused her vision as her eyes crossed to look at it.

But in the end, what she focused on was not the point of the sword, but the rusty red-brown stain that was smeared on the middle of it.

This was the sword she had carelessly waved about.

This was the sword that had cut her grandfather's left arm as he tried to stop her.

Left untouched, the blood had soon dried right on the blade. It seemed to be scolding her, spread haphazardly across the shining silver. At least, that was what the girl thought.

But...

"Look here. When you use this blade, you must never say 'I didn't want to hurt anyone!' When you swing this thing... No, when you draw it from its home, there should only be one thought on your mind. 'I'll cleave you in two!'" the old man cried, his words a far cry from what any guardian in their right mind would ever say.

"Look, Maria! This is my own blood, caked right here on this sword! My own blood, from my arm, that you cut! Do you understand how incredible this is?"

The girl looked curiously up at her grandfather.

"I fully intended to stop you right then and there, but look! Even though I was serious and you were just playing, you managed to avoid my grasp and slash me!"

The old man laughed, his shoulders shaking with mirth, and cleaned away the dried blood with a rag hanging from a nearby chair. The sword had been sheathed once already, so such a measure would be nowhere near sufficient to fully clean the blade. The blood caked inside the scabbard would surely serve to damage both the scabbard and the sword it housed.

But such considerations seemed to be the farthest thing from the old man's thoughts.

"I thought that I could easily take the sword from you. You're just a child. But you moved far more nimbly than I had imagined, and struck! A girl like you! Perhaps this is what they call genius... and I'm glad of it!"

He sheathed the cleaned blade casually, though he had but wiped it once with a rag, and thrust it toward the wide-eyed girl.

"Remember that you can only cut a few people down at a time with a katana. The blood and human fat will dull the blade in the blink of an eye," he said seriously, moving closer to the girl.

But then his features split with a wide smile as he continued.

"I'll have you know that's all a lie!"

The old man tossed the sword to Maria and sprang to his feet, his voice rumbling powerfully as he laid out his thoughts in a long ramble, as though he were drunk.

"All you need is belief! If you just believe, and if you have the strength and the skill, you can slash a person with a stick or a sheet of paper. You think a little blood and grease can stop a katana from doing what even a pipe or a plank of wood can do?!"

It was a preposterous theory, but it didn't seem like the old man was drunk at all. The flush on his cheeks was because of excitement, not liquor, and it was clear that he was in full possession of his senses.

If one had to define it, the old man looked like a dreamer drunk on his own dreams.

"If anyone tells you something can't be cut, take it as a lie. If only you believe, you can slash as many people as you want! You can keep on going forever. Dozens, hundreds, thousands, millions of people. You can cut down everyone except yourself—no, *including* yourself—in this wide world!"

The old man's gaze focused on something he could see as he continued to explain his bizarre dream.

"No, not just people, Maria. You can slash anything you want! If only your skills can follow your belief! That sword will let you do it!"

He spread his arms wide, then clapped his hands on the girl's shoulders.

"Try it out! Experiment! It doesn't matter what, just slash and cut and hack and slice and hew and slash and slash and slash and slack!"

The old man coughed once, out of breath, but soon the manic smile reappeared on his face and he took up his chant once more.

"Slash and slash and slash and slash and slash and slash... cut down everything in your path!"

At the time, the girl didn't understand what her grandfather meant.

But looking into his eyes, seeing the fierce resolve burning there, she unconsciously tightened her grip on the sword's handle.

Her tears had dried. Her sadness was long gone, as was her regret and her fear. All that was left in her mind was awe—awe of her grandfather's rousing speech.

"There's nothing in this world that sword can't cut! Even if you can't see it, that sword can cut it! As long as you believe! Water or air or vacuum or souls or bonds or hate or regret or hope. You can cut it all!"

The old man suddenly exhaled, sitting down heavily on the chair.

"Maria, you have the right to bear that blade."

"...The right?"

"Your parents were skilled assassins. But they fell to the allure of firearms, and lay down their swords! And because of that, your Mama and Papa are dead. *I killed them myself, with that very sword!*"

The old man's story would have shocked anyone. But the girl's expression didn't change, and her voice remained calm as she spoke.

"Uh-huh. That was when I was still a baby, right? I can't remember anything, but *abuelita*³ used to tell me about it all the time!"

"And she told you the truth. I'd intended to take that blade with me to my grave, but I saw you and changed my mind," the old man said, leaning back and letting the plushy chair shroud his body. The smile on his face was that of a man at the very pinnacle of life.

"You cried with fear at seeing the blood on my arm, didn't you."

"...I'm sorry."

"I told you, it's nothing! What's important is your expression when you did it."

The old man stopped and smiled, baring his teeth.

"Maria. When you were playing with that sword, and what's more, at the moment you slashed my arm, do you know how you looked? Did you see the look on your face? You looked *so happy*, my child! *That's* what's important! Now, Maria. Draw the sword passed down from person to person without regard for the bonds of teacher and student, of parent and child! Draw forth Murasamia!"

"...Okay!"

The girl unsheathed the strangely named sword as her grandfather had instructed. The blade came forth so cleanly it was hard to believe that a young girl's short arms could have done it.

For an instant, the lamplight reflected off the metal and shined on the girl's innocent smile.

The old man whistled unconsciously with respect for the perfect fusion of girl and sword.

³ Spanish for "grandma." Masculine form is "abuelito."



"That's it, Maria! Once you've drawn the sword, don't think about anything else. Just believe in the power to slash. All you have to do is rejoice in cutting things!"

"Okay, *abuelito*!"

The girl sprang forward from her chair as she spoke...

...And swung her sword at the old man before her without a moment's hesitation.

"...Hah! Just as I'd expected! Maria, you truly are my most delightfully insane little angel!"

The old man held the fork he'd picked up from the dinner table firm in one hand as he smiled in his granddaughter's face.

He'd blocked the strike with but the tines of his fork. The keen and deadly blade came to a stop just a hairsbreadth away from his head.

"You have the belief, but not the skills to slash me. Not yet, that is. No matter! Technique can always be learned! When you become good enough, I'll give you another sword. With two blades at your side you can cut twice as many things twice as much!"

The girl stood with her eyes wide, her head slightly bowed as she drank in her grandfather's manic, absurd ranting. Perhaps the slight upward curve of her lips was a smile, and then again perhaps it was anger.

"Huh... What did I just..."

"You don't understand why you tried to cut me, yourself, do you? That's fine! Once you draw, you have to slash! Slash anything! The why of it can come later! That's how you and your blade will shine brightest! Hahahahahahahahaha!"

Her grandfather threw back his head and laughed crazily, and at length, following his lead, Maria began to laugh quietly as well.

"Aha."

Innocent madness colored her still childish features.

The grandfather—no, the killer—nodded in satisfaction at his granddaughter's mad laughter.

"I'll tell you once more. This thing here is no toy."

"This sword is... your *compañero*⁴."

—

**Some Years Later
Somewhere in Manhattan**

"What the hell is wrong with you, kid?!"

Shadows grew thick in the alley of the great city.

One man's shout rang out in the dimly lit passage.

Several figures lay arrayed about him. None of them were moving.

"The hell is going on? What do you want, huh?!"

The cloudy sky prevented even the moon from lighting the narrow pathway.

Only the faint light seeping in from the faraway road let the man see that the thing in front of him was actually a young woman, traces of girlishness still clinging about her.

And in her hands were two swords. They, too, shone faintly in the dusky light.

"Hi, *amigo*! I'm Maria, an up-and-coming assassin! Actually, that's why I'm here right now! This funny guy wanted me to slash you, you see!"

She finished her friendly introduction and began stalking forward. Even when she stepped in one of the puddles of blood pooled in the area, she made no sound as she approached, step by step.

"And now you're the only one left, *amigo*!"

"You... you little bitch! Who do you think..."

The man drew his gun and pointed it, his finger tightening on the trigger.

In that same instant, the girl's body seemed almost to sink into the ground, and then darted wildly to the right.

⁴ Spanish for "companion."

"...you're fucking with?!"

A gunshot.

And at the same moment as that gunshot, the sharp sound of steel on steel.

The shrill noise rang dizzily in the man's ears, and when he came to his senses he realized that there was no longer a gun in his hand.

"Wha-"

The katana had been far closer than he imagined, lashing out at the moment he fired to knock the muzzle away.

He drew a breath to shout, and suddenly remembered the fact that the woman had wielded two blades.

A realization swiftly followed.

One sword had hit his gun.

Then where was the other one...?

The answer came quickly, but too late for the man to notice, for by that time it was already lodged in his throat.

A moment later, a fresh fountain of blood stained the alley walls.

Not a drop of it landed on the young woman, who had at some point come to stand behind the dying man. She paid him no heed, instead staring down at a black mass on the ground.

It was the pistol she'd knocked out of the man's hand just a few seconds ago. She focused on it for a while, then stepped over the dead man as he keeled over, walking deeper into the alley.

"Aah... I'm still not skilled enough to cut a pistol in two," the girl mumbled, honestly disappointed, as she silently vanished into the dark of the city.

Her unsheathed blades, practically unstained by blood or grease, reflected the faint city light and shone with a calming luminescence.

Wavering, ever wavering.

The girl's heart, and the keenness of the blades, and everything else, melted away in that light, sinking into the shadows of the streets...

CHAPTER 9

THE BARREL



September 1933

Construction Site on the Banks of the Hudson River

The island of Manhattan fit snugly in between two rivers.

To the east, there was the East River. To the west, there was the Hudson.

The Hudson was one of the great rivers that practically represented New York. There seemed to be some sort of vast construction project going on along its banks at the moment, for construction vehicles of all sorts were arrayed along the riverside. Perhaps they were there to shore up the river's banks, for several pieces of equipment for digging up the river floor could be seen assembled here and there.

And there, on the banks of the mighty Hudson, was a girl.

Eve Genoard stood beneath the cloudy, light grey sky and tried vainly to keep her calm, though expectation and anxiety ran in equal parts through her heart.

The gunmetal sky fit perfectly with the old construction vehicles littered about the area. The girl's pure white clothes, however, did not blend in quite as well, but she paid it no heed as she stared longingly at the ongoing construction.

If her expensive clothes weren't enough of a clue, even the very way she held herself made it clear at a glance that she came from a wealthy family. As though to drive the point home even further, a worried voice came from behind her.

"Miss Eve! This sea wind can't be good for you," the old butler said, concerned for his mistress.

But the girl only shook her head, and made no attempt to leave.

"I'm sorry, Benjamin... But if it's alright, I just... I just want to stay here a while longer."

The butler fell silent and took a step back, taking up his own quiet vigil, breathing in the salty ocean breeze as he watched over his young charge.

The construction project was merely one of many, a simple administrative procedure made in the course of maintaining the city, but to Eve it was a very personal matter, one that concerned the fate of one of her family.

...Her immortal brother had been buried alive somewhere in the river.

She had come to stand and wait on the river banks because she believed in these words, which anyone else would have dismissed immediately as a preposterous flight of fancy.

She'd followed the only lead she had to the whereabouts of her older brother, who had been reported dead. Then, swept up in a dizzying series of events, she'd come to know the truth, and holding that truth close to her heart, she had persevered.

It had already been a year and six months since she'd learned where her brother had been buried. Those eighteen months had felt like forever to her, but considering that during that time she had managed to start an unscheduled construction project, citing the need to shore up the river banks, at least that time hadn't been wasted.

No matter how rich her family might once have been, there was no way she could have afforded to dig up the Hudson on her own.

So she had instead chosen to fund the city's ongoing river construction project, masking her desire to save her brother behind the pretext of supporting the city.

In exchange for her financial support, she had demanded that the workers dredge the river floor and retrieve everything that came up. That was just one of the many measures she had taken that had led her to today.

Of course, there was the distinct possibility that the steel barrel holding her brother had been carried downriver by the currents, out into the great Atlantic Ocean.

But as long as she had even the smallest hope of saving him, the girl was prepared to bet everything she had on that slim chance.

She would meet him again. She held the dream of that one moment in her breast as she watched the machines work.

Then, on the third day of the great dredging work that preluded the construction proper, one of the workers suddenly dashed up to her, out of breath.

"Uh, y-you're Miss Genoard, right?"

He'd clearly sprinted all the way from the construction site to see her. Eve felt her own heartbeat speed up as she nodded.

"We, we found those barrels! Just like you said!"

There was something more than just surprise in the man's voice and actions, a small hint of fear that suggested he had seen something out of the ordinary.

"You found them!"

"B-b-b-b-but there were, there were, there were people! Inside! Inside them! The barrels! Breathing! Still alive!"

He was obviously shocked to the core. It was hard to make sense of what he was saying, but Eve understood perfectly.

With a little difficulty, she managed to coax the location of the barrels from the worker and immediately set off, heedless of her butler's worried cries.

...Dallas!

She had seen with her own eyes what it meant to be immortal.

He'd been underwater for years now, and had he been a normal human she would have been overly optimistic to even expect a whole corpse... but she knew better. If she were to believe the words of the mafioso who had told her everything, her brother would be unharmed.

No, even if he *was* harmed, even if he had become a pitiful thing of bones and rotting flesh, as long as he was still alive...

She held that hope in her heart as she ran to the warehouse where they stored the dredged objects.

But...

What she saw there was completely different from what she'd expected.

"Oh...?"

The sight that greeted Eve's eyes was one of a handful of workers lying on the floor, and three steel drums, standing in the center.

All manner of trash had been piled up in the corners of the wide storage area. A little ways away, arrayed haphazardly as though they too were refuse from the river floor, were people.

"What's going on..."

Caught flat-footed by the unexpected sight, she ran up to one of the workers and shook him slowly. She knew that she shouldn't have touched him, but he appeared unharmed so she gave him a gentle nudge... No reaction. He was still breathing, but it looked like he was out cold.

"What happened here?"

She left the man where he lay and slowly stepped toward the barrels in the center of the warehouse.

...Dallas is inside one of those?"

Unconsciously she swallowed hard, her throat suddenly parched as she observed the situation. One of the drums had been knocked on its side, and she couldn't see anything that looked like a person inside. Instead, for some reason, there seemed to be books, chess pieces, and what looked to be playing cards mixed in with the broken cement.

Eve's courage wavered at the eerie sight, but she did not falter, keeping her gaze locked on the barrels as she slowly approached.

She got close enough to just see the inside of one of the upright barrels, and glimpsed something that might have been human hair.

"Uuungh..."

A groan emerged from the drum as she stepped closer.

"Dallas?!"

It was as though that moan was a signal, and Eve covered the remaining distance to the barrel in a flash. She paid no heed to the river muck on her hands and clothes as she gripped the rim, peering inside.

There was a large man huddled inside.

Clumps of mud and marine plantlife were hopelessly entangled in his hair, and most of his clothes had long since rotted away, but the man's skin was only wet, not blemished at all. From time to time he groaned and coughed up dirty water from his mouth and nose.

She'd heard about it, certainly, but actually seeing the proof of a human being surviving such an ordeal was still shocking. If she hadn't known in advance, she would never have believed that he'd been dredged up from the bottom of a river.

She could make out the man's features easily, despite the thick mud.

Eve studied the man's face and was taken aback.

"You're... not Dallas?"

She'd heard that two of her brother's cronies had been buried along with him, so that meant that the man must be one of those two.

There were three drums in the warehouse. The numbers matched up.

But it bothered her, that one of them was already empty.

Quickly, she hurried over to the second upright drum and looked inside. Sure enough, there was a man inside, in as poor shape as the other one, and sure enough, he wasn't her brother, either.

"This... this can't be happening..."

She was unable to hide her shock as she looked at the last, empty drum.

Maybe the workers had already dragged him out, and he was among the people who lay comatose around her.

She whipped around and began searching, not even pausing to catch her breath, but her brother was nowhere to be found.

"Miss Eve! What's going on in here?"

Benjamin had finally made his way after his mistress, and upon arriving found himself unable to hold back his surprise.

The butler's cry reverberated in the vast warehouse... and as though in reply, one of the masses of trash in the corner rustled.

"Dallas?!"

Eve dashed over, heedless of her own safety. She made her way into the forest of girders and car parts, and discovered there a single silhouette, squatting behind a pile of refuse and shivering violently.

However, it was not her brother but instead a young worker, one of the people who had been working on the dredging project.

"Aggh!"

The man let out a short yelp as he caught sight of Eve, but soon enough realized that the thing that had appeared before him was just a normal girl, and gradually seemed to get a hold of himself.

"Please, calm down... Are you alright? What happened here?"

At first the man could only open and close his mouth silently. At length, though, he appeared to find some measure of comfort in Eve's soothing tones, and slowly began to explain what had happened.

"R-right after one of the guys went to, to call you, Miss... S-some strange people came and dragged out one of the people in the drums... so we tried to stop them but they knocked out everyone in a flash! Just like that! W-what the hell were those guys?! T-there was a woman with 'em too. It, it was like magic, almost, when she took out this long stick thing and it turned into, into, a spear or something, and then she smacked and stabbed people with the blunt end..."

At that point, the man had fled and hid, so he knew nothing of what had occurred afterward.

Eve and the butler listened gravely. Soon, other workers from different parts of the construction site arrived, attracted by the commotion, and the warehouse became a scene of chaos.

The girl slipped out and turned to her butler, sorrow clear on her features.

"I honestly believed that I'd finally be able to meet him, Benjamin."

"Miss Eve..."

"...But I'm not giving up. I don't know who kidnapped Dallas... But at least I know that he's really alive!"

The butler knew that his mistress was only putting up a brave front.

But he merely bowed his head, and injected as much false cheer into his voice as he could manage, and agreed.

"Of course, Miss Eve!"

Eve nodded resolutely and stepped forward. It was the first step of her renewed quest to find her missing brother. She had almost no leads about the mysterious group that had kidnapped him, and it was clear that she had her work cut out for her.

But she held her head high, and there was no hesitation or regret in her carriage.

"But... why would they take Dallas? Who could know of him except me and Mister Gandor..."

—

Water.

It flooded in.

It happened in an instant.

It was over just as quickly.

I was taken outside at night and thrown into the river and water rushed in the openings of my barrel.

By the time I was even aware of the cold, the drum was already half filled with water.

By the time I thought to cry out for help, my voice reached only the river.

Water.

It was water.

Water took over my entire world, forcing out the air from my lungs, from my stomach, from my throat, from my mouth, little by little by little no matter how much I resisted.

I can still remember that first taste of water pouring in my nose.

I can't stop shivering. The water flowed down my nose and I fucking *tasted* it.

It tasted like salt and mud. But even that was over in the blink of an eye.

That taste, that came from my nose and eyes and throat, it changed. It changed into the taste of my own blood.

When that taste reached my lungs I started coughing. I actually coughed up what was left of the air in them along with the river water. When I tried to breathe again, of course there was nothing left but liquid.

It hurt.

That was all I could think. Every time I thought it couldn't get any worse, it started hurting more.

It hurt it hurt it hurt it hurt it it it it it...

Then it all went black.

The pain I felt all flowed together, and overpowered everything else, even my senses. Everything went black.

It's not the same as going to sleep, or even getting knocked out. You can still tell it's black, see.

All that was left in the dark was the pain.

Aah, I wonder how long it was until I finally passed out.

Shit. Shit, shit.

Why can I remember this stuff so well?

I don't wanna remember shit like that.

How can I think of it all so calmly, dammit?

I wish I could forget it all.

Every time I remember, all the pain and fear I felt comes back too.

I don't want to remember that anymore. Who the hell would? To hell with you, memories.

I need something else. Something else to think of.

Yeah. The first thing I've gotta think about is...

...Where the hell am I?

"Did you know that the person who invented the steel barrel was a woman?" someone says.

Who's that? I don't recognize the voice.

"Her name was Nellie Bly. There's even a song about her, so you might recognize the name. She made an attempt at Jules Verne's 'Around the World in Eighty Days', and completed it in just seventy-two. Impressive, isn't it?"

I look around the room, looking for whoever keeps yapping like a broken radio.

I'm lying down on a bed. I can see a cheap looking lamp hanging from the wooden ceiling.

There's nothing else in the room. No cabinet, no dresser. Only the bare minimum, I think—a chair, a table, a bed. Nothing that'd fetch a decent price.

"And you spent years trapped inside the barrel that she invented. It's up to you whether you take that as an honor or something to curse her for."

Goddammit, who the hell's talking and why can't he shut the fuck up?

Found him. Sitting on a chair like he owns the place. He's turned it backwards, straddling it like a saddle, with his arms folded on the back. He's looking at me.

He's wearing glasses, and his hair's covered by a black bandanna. Nah, scratch that, he's probably bald under that thing. I can see some kinda fancy tattoo running down his temple, stretching around to the back of his head. Freak. Look at those eyes, rolling around behind those glasses like a dead fish.

"I wonder how funny you must have looked. You couldn't even die down there in the river. You probably just kept choking and sobbing and wishing it'd end."

Who the hell do you think you are? Dammit, my body won't listen to me. I wish I could get up and beat the shit out of this joker. Fuck.

"Don't get too excited. I don't see why I should be the recipient of such hatred. I did save you, after all."

Save? Me? He fished me up, then... Wait, really, where the hell am I? This isn't Heaven?

I'm still alive? I don't have to keep dying over and over in that goddamn river anymore?

Hang on. Hold up. Calm down. The celebration can come after I find out who the asshole in front of me is.

Anyway, if I don't need to die anymore... Maybe I'll pay Pops a visit. Maybe he and my brother'll have kicked the bucket by now and the inheritance'll be mine. I guess the house and the land're all that's left of the family fortune anyway. Well, whatever. If I get it all maybe I'll buy Eve a present or something...

...No, there's something I have to do before that.

Revenge.

I'm gonna kill everyone who ever looked down on me.

The Gandor brothers. Those fuckers are the ones who threw me into the river.

The old geezer who ordered me around. Sirrah or Sara or Serred or something.

That bitch, Ennis. She humiliated me more than once.

Whoever it was that drove that car over me... No, wait. I remember. I remember now.

The people driving that car were that retard and his bitch we beat up the day before it all happened.

And more than anything, I have to kill the fucker who's at the root of all my misfortune.

Firo. Firo Prochainezo.

Aah, what a relief.

I didn't forget his name. That little bastard's probably still alive too. Damn, I could've sworn I shot him in the head... Maybe I missed?

Who cares. I'll make sure to kill each and every single person I just remembered.

Yeah, I'm immortal. All I gotta do is be a little careful and I'll have no trouble killing them all. As for the other immortals, the old fart and that Ennis bitch, I'll stick them in barrels too, see how they like it.

First, I think I'll look for that retard couple...

"I don't presume to know what you're thinking, but..."

What? Stop butting in on my fantasies, dammit.

"Aren't you a little curious about what's going on? Do you have any questions? Or are you still groggy?"

Ah, shut up already. The hell would I have to ask to a chump like you?

Oh yeah, where the hell am I? And who the hell are you?

You? Save me? Pfft.

I don't remember you helping me. Like I'd just take your word for it, asshole.

"Dallas Genoard. Twenty-two. An altogether ordinary good-for-nothing, though a record does exist that claims you once won a neighborhood pool tournament... Hmm. Not quite what I was expecting, that."

Fine. You can die too.

Just shut the hell up and die. Who the hell are you, anyway.

Dammit, I can't open my mouth. I can't even give this sorry idiot a piece of my mind.

"Come, now. Don't look at me like that. You're going to make me wet my pants. It almost looks like you don't want to thank me for saving you. Hmph. Maybe I should have brought the other two."

The other two? What other two? Oh, right, they threw in someone else along with me but I'll be damned if I can remember their names.

Whatever. It doesn't matter.

What's important right now is taking care of this blabbering jerk and getting out of this boring room. Ah, damn it, my body won't move.

"Oh, right. I injected you with a paralytic agent so you won't be able to move just yet. Don't stress yourself."

I'll kill you. Just you wait.

"I thought I told you not to glare at me. Listen up, this is business. I've got a proposal for you that can make you money."

Money?

I decide to hear the baldy out a little longer.

"It's a simple trade. You cooperate with us, and you get a considerable sum of cash, more than such a role would warrant."

Cash, eh. Cash is always good.

But I don't like that part about "more than such a role would warrant." Gimme a number, dumbass.

"Of course, if you refuse, someone gets to go barrel diving in the Hudson again."

...Yeah, you are one dumb motherfucker. You think I'll be scared of you if you come at me like that?

Fine, I'll pretend to go along with this bullshit, and then I'll take the money and be out of here before you know what's going on.

"Naturally, that someone would be your little sister, Eve Genoard."

...

...What?

...What?!

"Haha! If only you could see the look on your face! To be honest, I was a bit worried when we went investigating your past. I had my doubts that a hostage ploy would work on trash like you, you see! But look! You can stab your allies in the back without a second thought, but the moment your sister's mentioned... Oh, the look on your face! Yes, yes. The glare you're giving me doesn't even compare to the one you gave me before. It's not just hatred. There's fear mixed in there as well, fear that you'll lose something precious to you."

Shit, shit, shit!

What the hell! What the fuck, man! Seriously! This has nothing to do with Eve, you sick fuck!

Dammit! Why the hell am I so nervous?! It's none of my business what happens to Eve! That's what I told myself when I left, wasn't it?!

...Fine. Okay. I admit it. There, you satisfied? Huh?!

I really care about Eve, okay? I don't want her to die!

But if you know that much about me, then you probably know that if you even touch a single fucking hair on her head, you get a red carpet reservation right at the top of my shit list, right? I'll, I'll, I'll kill you, no matter what it takes! Even if I have to erase everyone else from that list! No, I'll go beg 'em on my hands and knees if I have to if it means you die!

"Familial bonds, hmm? Must be nice. To be honest, I envy that sort of thing."

The hell do I care what you think?!

"That's right, I forgot the introduction. Hey, Adelle! Tell everyone to get in here."

The door in the corner opens at the freak's call and a bunch of people walk in. The hell, all of 'em look like chumps.

And even among these clowns, there's one girl, maybe a little younger than me, who really looks dumb, and she keeps flinching like a fucking idiot while she talks.

"Uh, umm... Tim, are you sure that this person's okay? He's glaring at me."

"Don't worry, Adelle. That just means our hostage plan's working."

Yeah, so the freak's name is Tim. Got it. Memorized it. Now you're dead, motherfucker.

"Anyway... Don't worry. We're not exactly keeping watch over Eve or anything."

...

"But if you cross us or refuse to cooperate, then Adelle here is going to take a little trip to kill your sister."

This dumb sheep? Are you fucking with me? Do I look that stupid to you?

I glare at her and she nods timidly at me, murmuring, "Nice to meet you." What, is she a freak too?

Dammit, what's up with these people?

Why're you doing this to me? What did I ever do to deserve this?!

No, never mind. It's true I did a lot of shit that'd get me on peoples' bad sides. But so what. I'll pay it all back someday.

It's just... this has nothing to do with Eve!

God damn it, I'll kill you all! And don't think it'll be quick! I'll make you die cursing the day you ever threatened Eve! It'll be too late to say sorry then, you dumb fucks!

"I suppose I should make a proper introduction. I'm Tim. I guess you could say I'm the leader of this motley crowd."

Who the hell asked for your name? Not me, retard.

"Who... the hell... are, you... fuckers?"

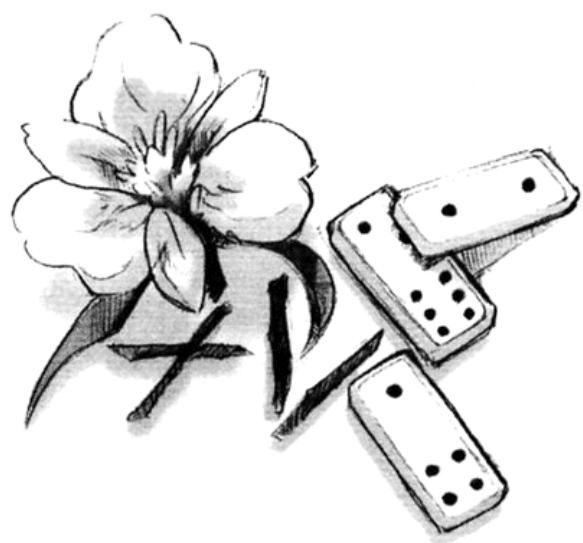
I can finally speak. It feels like my throat's getting torn to shreds but I manage to get the question out, and that asshole Tim replies so promptly it pisses me off.

"We're the Larvae⁵."

"We're a band of crazy misfits who serve Huey Laforet."

⁵ Restless spirits of the dead from Roman mythology who terrorized the living. Also known as lemures, which is also the name of another one of Huey's organizations.





CHAPTER I
FLOWERS AND DOMINOES

"Now then... If you have any excuses, Miss Miria, I am all ears," Luck said quietly, tapping the table with one finger.

A gentle smile graced his features, but the mirth there stopped far short of reaching his eyes.

There was a small jazz hall located in Little Italy. Beneath this place was the office of the Gandor Family, who ran the illegal operations in the area.

The jazz music drifting down from above gave the underground office an easygoing atmosphere. Several round tables dotted the wide room, and there were even pool tables in the corners.

The shifty looking men gathered there made it clear that the Gandor office was no place for normal, law-abiding citizens.

However... There was one person in this office who acted nothing like the others.

She sat at one of the tables in the center of the room, facing Luck. At a glance, her colorful clothes could have led one to believe she was a dancer. She was a young woman with smooth brown skin, attractive in a healthy, robust sort of way.

The woman, Maria Barcelito, looked away and pouted.

"Hmph."

"What do you mean, hmph?!"

Luck lost his composure and slapped the table with his palm, as though scolding a young child. The gangsters gathered in the room stifled their laughter.

"Miss Maria. Your job is to guard the casino dancers. You *do* understand this, right?"

"Of course I do, *amigo!* That's why I took out those rowdy guests! It was over in the blink of an eye, chop chop!"

"And in the blink of *my* eye, I found myself looking at three completely totaled slot machines, an obliterated baccarat table, something that had once been the casino door, and a broken chandelier—all casualties of your blade along with the men you killed. Now, I would very much like to hear the reason why you found it necessary to destroy my property."

The truth stared her in the face, and Maria averted her gaze.

"...It just sort of happened."

"It just *sort of* happened?!"

Luck hit the table once more and heaved a heavy sigh, colored with long suffering.

Spying the smile disappear from his face, Maria offered an innocent grin of her own, as though to comfort him.

"Don't look so down, *amigo*! You look better when you smile, you know!"

"And who is at fault for my current mood, may I ask?"

"...I'm sorry, *amigo*."

Maria drew back, cowed. She looked like a beautiful woman, but her actions were still those of a child.

Maria was a guest of the Gandors—though, admittedly, she had invited herself—who had originally made her living as an assassin.

That didn't mean she'd retired, so perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she *still* made her living as an assassin.

She'd come into contact with the Gandor Family due to a certain event that had taken place last year, found herself swept away by Keith Gandor's charisma, and entered the organization as a steadfast ally. At least, that was the story she liked to tell. In reality, she was more like an uninvited guest.

Women were a rare sight in the Gandor office, and a Mexican señorita even more so. There had been some friction between her and some of the Family when she first joined. However, the truth of the matter was that most of those incidents had not been brought about by her gender or nationality, but by her overly innocent personality.

But soon enough she and the Family had adjusted to one another well enough, and no serious problems had arisen for quite some time.

Instead, she had promptly begun causing migraine-inducing but minor problems instead, like the one that made Luck sigh sorrowfully now.

"I approve of you taking care of our rowdy customers. In that I can find no fault. I just want to know if you can do it with a little less collateral damage."

Maria smiled demurely and patted the two swords sheathed at her side. The darkly shining grips, connected to swords that looked a bit too long for someone with such slender arms to wield, provided a somber contrast to her colorful clothing.

"Murasamia and Kochite⁶ here just cut up whatever they want when I draw them, you see!"

"Don't blame your swords for this."

"Hmph."

"What do you mean, hmph?!"

Palm met table for the third time. Some of the Family members watching could bear no more and burst out laughing at the comical play.

Luck shot them a frigid glare and they looked away hurriedly, but from the way their shoulders shook it was clear that they were struggling to hold in their laughter. Luck was normally calm and collected, for some reason he seemed to have trouble handling Maria, and their talks often devolved into something that resembled a rookie schoolteacher scolding a misbehaving student.

Technically, he could have punished her far more harshly than he actually was, but Maria was the greatest fighter the Gandors had. Of course, if one were to look outside the Family, there was a hitman named Vino, but Luck considered him entirely too flighty and unreliable to be counted as part of their strength.

In other words, there was nobody in the Gandor Family who could have actually carried out any punishment on her. Granted, she obeyed whatever Luck's brother Keith said without question, but the problem was that Keith only spoke once a month, if that, and he seemed ill inclined to fix Maria's behavior.

His other brother, Berga, seemed to like Maria's hearty personality, and when asked had merely smirked and said, "Let her do what she wants, why don'cha?"

Which led to Luck being left alone, looking as though he'd downed a mouthful of lemon juice, lecturing his organization's best killer.

"Well, it'd been so long since I got the chance to do anything... Nobody ever attacks the casino."

"Of course they don't! They shouldn't! Do you have any idea of how hard we work to ensure that we don't make enemies?! In the best case scenario, you would always continue dancing on the stage, because nobody would ever start any trouble."

Now Maria could take it no longer.

⁶ 虎徹(tiger slayer). Actual pronunciation is "Kotetsu."

"That's no fun! No fun no fun no fun at all, *amigo*! You know I'm an assassin! Don't you have something more exciting and fun? It's boring just dancing day after day after day! If I keep going like this I might end up slashing someone's eyes if he stares at me the wrong way!"

"Please, don't even joke about that."

Luck seemed to realize that there was no use in continuing the argument, and switched tactics.

"Very well, Miss Maria. If you insist, I can give you something else to do."

"Oh? Really?! Thanks, *amigo*! So, which Family's don do you want dead?!"

"Nothing quite so fearsome as that, I'm afraid."

"What? Fearsome? Come on, I could just walk over to that little camorra that's nearby. The Martillos or something? Want me to go and take out their boss?"

If anyone not in the Family had chanced to hear that, it could have led to serious problems. Luck gathered his hands and bowed his head as though offering a prayer to some uncaring god.

He sighed yet again, and tried to decide just what he wanted to say to Maria.

"Miss Maria. We are continuously doing our best to make sure that no such conflicts ever occur. If a turf war were to erupt during times like these, Lucky Luciano's Cosa Nostra would be on us before we could blink."

The mafia of the time were swiftly becoming modernized, thanks to the efforts of one Lucky Luciano. A vast organization known as the Cosa Nostra ruled the criminal underworld with an iron fist, and even such matters as revenge hits and turf wars had to be approved by the Cosa's council first.

The Gandor Family itself was not part of the Cosa Nostra, but it was exactly for that reason that they had to be even more careful. Luck in particular, being in a position of responsibility within the organization, wanted to avoid anything that could lead to the Family's decimation more than anything else.

And so he decided to give the woman before him a job that would keep the status quo maintained, just like he wanted.

"If you wish to fight so much, I'll give you a job that might give you the chance to do just that. It would be against some delinquents who are not part of any organization, in a place where none of our property is around for you to destroy. Of course, this is entirely dependent on how the negotiations go."

"So what is it, *amigo*?"

Maria leaned forward a little, a hint of curiosity in her eyes, and Luck wasted no time in taking his chance.

"There seems to be a group of young misfits in the area who've been doing odd jobs without our permission since last year. Of course, they're just playing at doing what we see as business, but... as you know, the Prohibition is being lifted this year."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes!"

The Prohibition had had a profound influence on American history since its passing in 1920, particularly on the growth of criminal organizations.

It went without saying that said influence had been resoundingly positive.

The Prohibition laws had been set into place according to the wishes of politicians and certain citizen groups, but instead of diminishing sales of alcohol as intended, the Prohibition actually led to a sharp increase in speakeasies and underground brewing activity, providing a huge source of income to America's mobs and gangs.

This unintended effect had in turn led to a protest against the flawed laws, and finally, in February of 1933, Congress amended the U.S. constitution. The states abolished their individual laws one by one, and when Utah ended its ban on liquor in December of that year, the Prohibition came to its end.

That time hadn't come quite yet, but it was common knowledge on the street that the Prohibition was on its last legs, and taverns could now proudly order their spirits from legal breweries instead of having to smuggle them in.

This in turn forced the gangs of America, who had made hefty profits from their smuggled liquor, to find a new source of income. The Gandor Family, which made most of its money from illegal brewing and smuggled alcohol, was no exception, and Luck had been wrestling with the problem of what to do for quite some time...

"Miss Maria, these young troublemakers are taking up several illegal activities without our permission on the streets. They dabble in illegal brewing, horse betting rings, and even some illicit bartering on the side. Normally we'd rough them up a little and leave it at that, but it seems that their group has more members than we expected... It's a bit of a headache."

"I hear you loud and clear, *amigo*! So you want me to go and slash them all!"

"...I don't even want to know about your modus operandi before you came here. Anyway, we don't want to cause a commotion, so I'd like it if you could simply go and intimidate their leader a bit. Just enough so that he won't think to cross us. Of course, if he submits to our demands, even that will be unnecessary."

Maria thought it over for a moment and said, "I think I understand, *amigo*. So you want me to cut down just one of them first and if they attack I can take that as resisti—"

"Miss Maria."

"...Sorry. I guess I got a little carried away, *amigo*."

Maria had no choice but to apologize in the face of Luck's icy smile. Her time in the underbelly of society had served her well, for Maria could instinctively sense when she was about to cross the line and truly anger someone.

"The problem is that they operate on our turf, but their base is in another organization's territory. We have a cease-fire pact with said organization, and so I would very much like it if you refrained from causing a ruckus."

Mollified by Maria's trite expression, Luck eased up a little and began to explain.

"To put it succinctly, I want you to be a bodyguard. Mister Tick will take care of the negotiations and the threatening. All you have to do is keep him safe."

Luck glanced pointedly at the back of the room, and Maria turned to look as well.

They saw a young man sitting at a small table, his scissors snipping away as he cut at a vase of flowers.

He was named Tick Jefferson, and he was the Gandor Family's torture specialist.

The young man sat and continued cutting the flowers with a bright smile on his face, until at length he realized the two were staring at him and raised his hand to give them a wave.

He held a pair of shining silver scissors in that hand, and they reflected the light as he waved his hand back and forth, drawing a metallic arc above his head.

"Hi! Anything you want from me?"

If one were to only take in his tone and his actions, he would have seemed like an affable young man—perhaps a bit childish, but likable enough nonetheless—but the scissors in his hands dashed that image to pieces.

Luck gave him a quick smile and turned to look at Maria once more.

Like Tick, she too smiled innocently and waved her fingers at the torturer.

...It looks like you two are at about the same level of maturity.

Luck revealed none of his thoughts in his expression and continued his explanation to Maria.

"I've already explained everything to Mister Tick, so I leave the matter in your capable hands. And one more thing! The delinquents I'm sending you to deal with have also been working on the Martillo Family's turf, so they're involved too. The Martillos have told me that they intend to make their move around today as well, so please, *please* don't start any trouble with them!"

"...Fine..."

"Hiii!"

Maria jumped up as soon as Luck finished speaking and zipped over to Tick's table, taking a seat across from him and giving him a soft smile.

"Whatcha doing, *amigo*?"

She studied him as though he was doing something quite fascinating. There was a vase full of flowers on the table, and from time to time Tick would thrust his open scissors at random into the bouquet and close them with a snap.

There was a clear snap of metal on metal, and as it faded a flower fell silently onto the table, its stem cut in two.

"I'm cutting flowers," Tick said calmly, picking up the severed flower and sticking it back into the vase.

"Edith gave them to me. She said I'd make a good florist."

Edith was an employee at one of the Gandor Family's taverns. She'd come to know Tick through a series of strange events, and having grown to see him as a friend, had given him flowers as a present. But...

"I think flowers are amazing."



Snick.

Again, the metallic shearing sound, and again, another flower fell to the table.

Tick had told Edith that he'd cut them with care, and true to his word, he'd spent the past few days cutting them to pieces.

"You can cut them right in half and they'll stay alive as long as you keep them in water, see?"

Though the flowers had already been trimmed when he received them, and he'd sheared through the stems on all of them at some point or other, none of the flowers had yet to wither completely.

The bouquet had shrunk to half its original height, and the once carefully grouped flowers had become a hopeless disheveled array of haphazardly grouped blossoms.

Edith had told him he'd make a good florist, but it was hard to imagine anyone buying such a ragged bouquet.

"Mmm... I guess, but I want to slash things a little more substantial than flowers, *amigo*," Maria said, completely derailing the conversation. Most of the Family sat far away from Tick, finding his habits unsettling, but Maria was utterly uncowed by the young man's strange hobby.

"So about that mission! When're we going, *amigo*? Now, right? Right now, right?!"

Maria leaned in closer, her eyes shining. Her gently curved chin touched the petals.

If one were to take a picture of that moment it would have been beautiful, but her words ruined the atmosphere. The man watching her sighed and muttered to themselves wistfully that she would have been perfect if only she were sane.

Only Tick smiled innocently and said, "Wow, Maria. The flowers make you look even cuter."

"Really? You think so? Thanks!"

Maria seemed to take the complement to heart, looking once more at the flowers. There were many different types in the vase, but instead of looking flamboyant or fancy, Edith had chosen varieties that would serve to soothe the eye.

"Hmm..."

Maria stared at the vase for a moment, lost in thought, and then suddenly grabbed Tick's arm.

"The flowers can wait until after we're done! C'mon, let's go work! Please?"

She looked almost like a child at a carnival as she tugged persistently on Tick's arm.

Unable to refuse her forceful proposal, Tick gave the bouquet one last snip and then rose, murmuring under his breath.

"...I wonder if this flower has a family too..."

"What was that?"

"Oh. It's nothing."

Tick's smile grew somehow softer and more gentle than before. Following Maria's lead, he mounted the steps leading to the outside.

Their expressions were utterly bereft of fear or hesitation, making it hard to determine whether they understood what they were setting out to do.

Whether they truly understood that just one small error could lead to a bloodbath...

The Family members left in the office chatted idly amongst themselves after the two left.

"You think those two'll really be able to handle it?"

"They act like kids, yeah, but then again those little punks they're going to deal with *are* kids, so I guess they'll be okay. I mean, Tick might talk like an idiot, but he's smart enough."

"Maria's with him, so it's not like he'll get hurt, at least."

"Those samurai swords of hers are even scarier than most machine guns..."

The men all believed in Maria's skills to some degree, and so nobody was truly worried for them.

Luck stepped in and put a damper on the lighthearted mood.

"Gentlemen. Don't you think you're relying too much on her strength?"

If an organization came to lean too heavily on one person's ability, the rest of its members could grow complacent and lazy. It was a situation that Luck wanted to avoid more than anything else. He'd worried that it might happen when Vino came to visit, but fortunately the man had gone to earth soon enough, and so that matter had settled itself.

But now there was the matter of Maria. Under no circumstances could the Gandor Family afford rumors that their power hinged entirely on the whims of some girl.

"But Boss, you gotta admit that she probably really *could* go and bring back Martillo's head by herself--"

"Don't even say joke about that. Unless you've suddenly decided that life is a burden, in which case by all means, feel free to continue."

His voice was positively glacial; no hint of the emotion he'd revealed while talking to Maria entered his tone now. The gangster on the receiving end of that veiled threat found a shiver running down his spine.

"Besides, the Martillos are no laughing matter. They have Ronnie Schiatto, a man on par with Vino himself... and Yaguruma and Maiza are not to be underestimated, either."

Once he was finished scolding his subordinates, Luck muttered quietly to himself, "And then there is their youngest executive... Firo Prochainezo, as well..."

— —

**At the same time
Alveare**

"You're terrible, Firo!"

"The worst!"

"There's nobody more evil than you!"

"Not in the whole wide world!"

There was a road that stretched between Little Italy and Chinatown, and on that road there was a honey shop, and in that honey shop there was a small restaurant.

There was a metal board in the shape of a beehive hanging at the entrance, with the word Alveare—"beehive" in Italian—written underneath.

Among the criminal organizations of Italy, there existed a group called the Camorra. They were structured differently and had different rules compared to the mafia, and they were counted as one of the three great Italian crime rings, together with the Sicilian Mafia and the 'Ndrangheta.

Among the many lesser organizations that made up the Camorra was the Martillo Family, a gang that controlled tiny portions of Little Italy and Chinatown. This restaurant, drenched in the smell of honey, was their base of operations.

Originally it had been the largest speakeasy on the Martillos' territory, but thanks to the Prohibition being done away with, Alveare had been changed into a completely legal parlor. Inside there was a chandelier that sparkled with gemlike glass, a bar decorated with stately sculptures, tables, oil lamps on the walls... The area was festooned with flamboyant decorations, and above all filled with the scent of sweet dishes, made with liberal use of honey.

It was lunchtime, and normally the restaurant would have been filled with hungry patrons... but on that day, things were a bit different.

"Oh, come on. Gimme a break already. I said I was sorry, didn't I?"

A man leaned heavily against the bar, a look of tired irritation on his face as he reluctantly apologized.

He looked to be in his late teens, perhaps eighteen or nineteen years of age. If one were to look at his boyish features alone, they could easily have been led to believe that he was a couple of years younger than that.

He sat surrounded by several people, and at the forefront of this motley crowd was a couple raising their voices in protest, waving their arms wildly about.

"Sorry won't cut it!"

"Won't cut it at all!"

The man wore a tuxedo that made him look like a stage magician, and perhaps in an effort to match her attire with his, the woman wore a dress that would have let her fit in perfectly at a formal dance.

They looked utterly out of place, but nobody really thought to question their choice of clothing.

The man, Isaac Dian, swung his fists about in the air as he glared at the boy.

"Do you have any idea how hard we worked to set up those dominoes?!"

The woman, Miria Harvent, chipped in as well. She, too, waved around clenched fists of rage.

"Our blood and sweat and tears went into those, you know!"



The boy, Firo Prochainezo, sighed again in the face of their angry ranting.

"Scuse me, but I don't remember any blood and tears being shed."

"Don't think to deceive the righteous passion flowing through my veins with your devilish tongue!"

"Isaac cried a little when you knocked those dominoes over, you know!"

Their words didn't really make much sense, but the people gathered around seemed to agree, for they too joined in on admonishing the young man.

"Man up and admit it was your fault, Firo."

"You big fat screwup."

"You lack concentration. This is all because you've been lax in training."

"I think you should try and apologize more sincerely, Firo."

"Firo..."

"Aiya, more things on floor to clean up because of Firo."

"Go home already."

"Yeah, buzz off."

"Get out."

"Beat it."

At first he'd taken it all without complaint, but it looked like he was getting more and more irritated as his companions lashed out at him. The slight frown on his face slowly deepened into an expression of true anger.

...I am a Martillo Family capo, right?

Randy and Pecho, I can take. They're Martillo executives too. But why should I have to take flak from Czes, and the non-executive Family members, and even Lea, the damn waitress?

True, I screwed things up. But do I really deserve to get chewed out like this over something like that?

Firo brooded moodily on his dark thoughts, the anger in him building up until...

"Pay us back for those dominoes!"

"We demand reimbursement!"

...It finally came to a head.

"Shut up!"

"Gah!"

"Aah!"

"Why the hell do I have to pay anyone back for some stupid dominoes? I just knocked 'em over, for crying out loud! Did I smash them? Huh? What, did they break into itty bitty pieces just 'cause I knocked 'em over?! Well?!"

Isaac and Miria stiffened in surprise in the face of Firo's sudden outburst.

But Firo's anger had not yet run its course, and he continued.

"I mean, this place is for eating, not for setting up dominoes! I even let you borrow our turf for this, you know, so can't you just let it go already?!"

Firo stopped, breathing hard, glaring at the couple.

Randy and Pecho whispered loudly to themselves as they glanced askance at the furious youth.

"You'd almost think that we're the bad guys here, eh?"

"I didn't see him complainin' while he was stackin' them dominoes, no sir."

Firo could hear them, of course, but he deliberately ignored them and kept his features fixed in a mask of rage.

Isaac and Miria stood frozen for a long while, then suddenly began to tremble in unison, and...

"Aaaugh! You're an utter jerk, Firo!"

"Waaah! You're a total *touhenboku*⁷, Firo! A complete barbarian! Stupid and mean and a bad guy all around!"

⁷ 唐麿木. Ignorant oaf.

...unleashing a torrent of the most terrible insults they could imagine, they dashed toward the exit, sobbing loudly.

"...To, tohen... what?"

Firo faltered, his anger replaced with confusion as he tried to make sense of what Miria had said. Yaguruma, who'd immigrated over from Japan, muttered quietly to himself from Firo's side.

"I wonder how Miss Miria came to know Japanese so well..."

Isaac and Miria threw open the door and nearly smacked straight into the man coming in. He was holding a paper bag in one hand, and he stepped neatly to the side to avoid the couple.

"What's this?"

Just when it seemed they were gone for good, Miria stuck out her head from behind the man's back and stuck out her tongue at Firo.

"Bleaaah! I hope Mister *Yagyou*⁸ tramples you with his headless horse, Firo!"

Her final devastating insult delivered, she stomped out after Isaac.

The sight of Miria running away, her long dress whipping behind her, brought to mind the fairy tale of Cinderella. Firo watched her leave and sighed heavily for the third time.

"Who's this *Yagyou* guy? Damn it... I'm so confused I'm not even mad anymore..."

He turned around, still grumbling, and found everyone in the store glaring at him. They didn't say anything, but it was clear that they were all expressing their disdain.

"...Alright, already! I was wrong, okay? It's all my fault! There, you happy?"

The man who'd come in late looked curiously at Firo.

"Something happen while I was gone?"

"Ah, Ronnie. No, it was nothing. I just knocked over Isaac and Miria's dominoes right before they finished."

Firo's manner changed in an instant from petulant and angry to respectful.

⁸夜行さん. A ghostly horseman who rode a headless horse at night, trampling unlucky travelers.

Officially, Ronnie was the Martillo Family *chiamatore*⁹. Unofficially, he was the organization's second-in-command.

"Hmm. I see... So they ran away. But where did they go?"

"It's nothing, don't worry about it. They don't have anywhere else to stay so they'll be back when they get hungry."

"...No matter. I had to go out again anyway, so if I happen to see them I'll persuade them to come back with me."

Firo's eyes widened at the senior executive's offer.

"N-no, it's fine, really! You don't have to~"

"If I happen to see them, I said. If I don't, then that's that," Ronnie said calmly, taking a bunch of pepper shakers out of the paper bag and arranging them on the counter.

"And I heard that the workers on that riverside construction project were assaulted by a group of strange people. It's probably nothing, but then again there's nothing wrong with exercising a little caution."

He finished laying out the contents of the bag and immediately turned around to leave again.

A slender silhouette stood up to follow him.

"I want to go with you."

"Ennis," Firo said, surprised, staring at the young woman in the black suit. "I'm telling you, don't worry about them. They'll come back by themselves sooner or later."

"But what Mister Ronnie said bothers me, so..."

Ennis stepped closer to Firo's side and leaned in close, her lips nearly brushing his ear.

"...Please do try and think up a proper apology while we're out," she said, like an adult gently chastising a child. Instead of getting angry or retorting, Firo went beet red and could only manage the slightest of nods.

"O-okay..."

⁹ Italian for "one who calls." In this instance, used to mean "secretary."

Firo frowned exaggeratedly and averted his eyes like a young boy. Ennis smiled gently and turned, slipping out the door and into the streets of New York.

Firo watched her leave and slowly turned around, as though expecting the worst.

But nobody was glaring at him anymore; they all seemed to have gone back to their own business, tucking into lunch or reading the papers.

Firo breathed a sigh, this time of relief, and sat at the counter to finish his coffee.

Another man took a seat at his side as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Hey."

"Maiza..."

It was a tall man wearing a pair of glasses—Maiza Avaro, the Martillo Family's *conta è oro*¹⁰ and also Firo's mentor.

He alone had stood to the side while everyone else took their turns haranguing Firo. Perhaps he had decided to wait until he was alone? Firo glanced at Maiza out of the corner of his eye, trying to gauge the other man's intentions.

"Firo," Maiza said, his gentle expression never changing, "you did it on purpose, didn't you."

"...Did what?"

"I'm saying that you knocked over the dominoes on purpose."

There was a long silence.

Maiza's voice had been calm but clear. Firo looked around to see if anyone had happened to overhear, but it seemed like nobody was eavesdropping on the conversation.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Firo."

Still gentle, that voice, but the force behind it denied Firo's attempts at playing things down.

Firo kept his silence for a moment, but at length gave in.

¹⁰ Italian for "bookkeeper."

"...Yeah."

"Why?"

The young man thought it over, then replied tersely.

"I was scared."

"Scared?"

"That old man, Szilard. His memories in my head are so far beyond anything I can understand."

Szilard.

The sudden appearance of that unwelcome name made Maiza fall silent this time.

"I think... I think this might be a sort of karma for *us immortals*, a kinda payback for our original fates being erased."

— —

"Damn it... Do you have any idea of how much we paid those information brokers to get a lead on your whereabouts? Those people are like brick walls when it comes to immortals. We practically dumped information and money into their mouths by the truckload just so that we could find where you were. I think a little thanks is in order, don't you?"

"...Hell if I know."

"Hah, you're right. Then perhaps we can find out what you *do* know, Mister Dallas. Just how much do you know about immortals?"

A strangely dressed band walked along the road leading to Little Italy.

It was the Larvae, with Tim at their head.

At first glance they seemed like just a group of run-of-the-mill neighborhood punks, but some of them were dressed in banker's suits, making it hard to define them at a glance.

"How much did you hear from Szilard Quates when you became immortal?" Tim asked Dallas, who was straggling along a few paces behind the ten-odd strong group.

"Hell if I'm telling you," Dallas grumbled, still glaring fiercely at the back of Tim's head.

"Then I'll take it upon myself to explain the basics in case you don't know. The first and most important part is that you're not really immortal. *You can't be killed, but you can still age.* A sort of in-between stage of immortality, because you can still die of old age. I guess you could say that you're defective."

...This fucker's got a talent for pissing me off.

Dallas' glare intensified, but of course, the back of Tim's head showed no ill effects.

"The real immortals are a bunch of alchemists who made a deal with a demon about two hundred years ago, and drank the elixir of immortality."

"Alchemists?"

"Wow, do I really have to explain all this? Adelle, explain that bit to him for me, will you?"

"What? Oh, right!" Adelle said with a start. She'd been walking docilely beside Dallas.

She was wearing white clothing that had been tailored for easy movement, and there was a strange stick-shaped object strapped to her back. It looked like some sort of weapon, but Dallas couldn't really imagine what sort of weapon it might be. Nor was he was really inclined to do so, honestly.

He really didn't like the girl, who seemed timid and easily startled by even the smallest things. And to top things off, Tim had told him that if he stepped out of line, Adelle would be the one to kill his sister. Just the thought of it made him want to murder the girl.

...Not that she looks like she could really kill someone, but...

Dallas stopped and shook his head.

Three years ago, he'd had his ass handed to him neatly by a girl just like Adelle. Her name had been Ennis, and Dallas spat scornfully to the side as he remembered the face that went with the name.

"...Well, ah, alchemists are people who, well, they do... Ah, excuse me, are you listening?"

"Does it look like I'm listening, dumbass?"

"Y-you don't have to be so mean..."

He halfheartedly pretended to listen to rest and then looked scornfully to Tim.

"So what about these immortals."

Tim laughed and replied, "Well, to cut to the chase, we've heard rumors that there are quite a few true immortals in this area. This is information that our boss Huey heard from the info brokers, so we haven't confirmed it ourselves, but apparently the old man who made you immortal, Szilard, was *devoured* by one of these immortals a while ago."

Devoured. It was a strange expression, but Dallas could easily call up a fitting image in his mind's eye.

He remembered it clearly. It had been just after he became an incomplete immortal. Szilard had simply placed his right hand on the forehead of one of his friends, and the man had been sucked straight into his palm.

"You see, true immortals can devour other immortals with their right hands—including defects like you—but you, on the other hand, can't return the favor. You pretty much just exist to be exploited."

"Shut up and stop pissing me off."

"Alright, alright, don't get so mad. Anyway, long story short, our boss, Huey Laforet, is one such true immortal," Tim said, calmly revealing the inner workings of his organization to the outsider, Dallas. But Dallas seemed quite unconcerned despite the secrets being revealed and spat again, as though urging Tim to hurry up and get to the point.

"Aren't you curious who devoured Szilard?"

"Why would I be?" Dallas said diffidently, but Tim ignored his reply and gave voice to a name.

"Firo Prochainezo."

Dallas stopped walking.

He ran the meaning of what hearing that name implied over in his head, standing stock still in the center of the street.

One, that asshole's still alive.

Two, that asshole's a real immortal.

Three, that asshole can kill me, but I can't kill him.

"You've gotta be shitting me," he muttered, trying and failing to deny the conclusion that stared him in the face as sweat beaded on his face.

He found himself gripped by the delusion that he had suddenly become the weakest being in the entire world.

—

Immortal.

Firo Prochainezo was immortal.

He'd become that way by chance, when he'd been swept up into a fight between alchemists three years ago.

And it wasn't just him. All the Martillo Family's executives, the Gandor Family's three bosses, the bandit couple Isaac and Miria, several family members of those Martillo executives, and two Alveare employees...

All of these people had been granted immortality in the space of a single night.

Szilard Quates had been one of the alchemists with a hand in those events, but all of his experiences and memories had been absorbed that night by one Firo Prochainezo.

Not just his memories and experiences, but his past as well... Everything that he had been.

"That old man's memories are still inside me... He was really a terrible person. I think I can remember what sort of things he enjoyed... but to be honest, I can't understand any of 'em."

Firo stirred his coffee and began to lay out his thoughts to Maiza.

"He... he felt happiest at the moment when he took away everything someone else had achieved. It didn't matter whether it'd taken lots of time or lots of effort to him; all that mattered was that it meant something to someone, and that he took it. He enjoyed it so much, so much more than I ever enjoyed anything in my life! I don't know what to think. My memories've changed. It feels like he was happier when he ate someone than I was at the moment I became a capo."

Maiza neither agreed nor disagreed, and instead continued to listen silently.

"I don't even understand them, those memories, but... they're part of me now."

Emotion revealed itself starkly on Firo's face. It was terror, pure and absolute, like that of a young child.

"I'm scared."

Maiza said nothing.

"I'm scared, Maiza! As long as those memories stay inside me, maybe one day I'll turn out like tha-"

Firo's voice rose with panic, but Maiza merely raised one hand.

The young man focused on the upturned palm and seemed to come to his senses, dropping his gaze to his cup as he took in his surroundings.

"I... I'm sorry."

"No, it's quite understandable."

The waitress came and placed a cup of coffee in front of Maiza as well. He added two cubes of sugar and stirred, keeping his eyes fixed on the cup as he talked quietly.

"So that's why you had to make sure."

This time it was Firo's turn to stay quiet and listen.

"You had to see if you, too, felt a sense of accomplishment, of joy at taking and destroying what other people had worked to achieve," Maiza said calmly. Firo couldn't bring himself to disagree.

"You didn't want to, but the need was too strong to bear. Perhaps you *would* feel happy. Perhaps you wouldn't, and all your worrying would be for naught. That's why you thought to experiment with something that would do no real harm to anyone..."

Firo stared openly at Maiza.

"...Can you read my mind or something?"

"Just a theory," Maiza said, smiling lightly. "So, Firo. Tell me, how did you feel about taking away the things they had worked so hard to set up?"

He held back on giving a conclusion, instead only asking for the result.

Perhaps Firo had been expecting the question, for he promptly said, "When I saw 'em crying, I wanted to beat myself up."

"Haha. That's good to hear."

Maiza had been expecting nothing less, and he threw back his head and laughed on hearing Firo's reply. The two of them shared an amicable chuckle and each took a sip of coffee.

"I'll try my best to forget everything about him."

"That isn't necessary. All you need to do is accept it and overcome it. As long as you're able to cut it loose if you feel it's dragging you down."

Firo thought it over and said, "I'll try."

He took a gulp of coffee.

"But... Do you really think I can overcome someone else's past or emotions all by myself?"

"I believe that's a dilemma that everyone faces, not just immortals," Maiza said solemnly, and added another cube of sugar to his cup.

"Though if that past was something that you experienced yourself, perhaps you would need to deliberate a tad more on whether to let it go."

He sipped his sugary coffee and stared at something far away, his eyes unfocused.

"Everyone is capable of moving on past their sadness and pain solely through their own efforts," he murmured quietly, but there was firm conviction there that belied his placid tone. The man who had called forth a demon so long ago, who had been the first among his peers to grasp the secret of immortality, gave voice to his philosophy.

"That's what I believe."

— —

"Grrr... Damn that Firo! We've got to make him say uncle!"

"He'll cry bitter tears!"

"Wait, we're going to make him say uncle *and* shed bitter tears? Don't you think that's a little cruel, Miria dear? I think the uncle part will be enough! We'll forgive him after that!"

"Wow, Isaac. You're so kind!"

Isaac and Miria had wandered aimlessly through the streets of Little Italy after running out of Alveare.

"That's right... Maybe we can give him a slip of paper with 'uncle' written on it and tell him to read it out loud. Or maybe we can find Firo's uncle and stage a family reunion."

"The perfect plan! But why do you want to make him say uncle?"

Isaac puffed out his chest as though he'd been waiting for the question.

"The expression is actually a traditional chant of some sort that comes from Japan! Back in the Edo period, they used to say 'oncle' instead, but a Japanese man named Uchida Roan¹¹ wrote it down as uncle! It was in a book called The Hundred Faces of something or other... probably some sort of novel about a cunning thief like Arsène Lupin¹²!"

"You're so smart, Isaac!"

Isaac thrust out his chest even more at his partner's praise.

"Of course! I can't read Japanese so I asked Mister Yaguruma to read it for me! Perfect, isn't it!"

"So that's what they call hired help!"

"...Wait, I can't remember whether there was actually a wily thief like Lupin there," Isaac said worriedly, voicing a concern that any sane person would have mentioned long ago. Miria, however, seemed to take it all in stride and helpfully provided a solution.

"He was there, but you probably couldn't see him because he was hiding! What a sneaky guy!"

"You're right! They don't call him the man of a hundred faces for nothing!"

"Even a todomeki¹³ wouldn't be able to see him!"

"Damn it, he must have stolen into my mind while I was distracted!"

The two of them went off on increasingly bizarre tangents as they discussed their next plan of action.

"But Firo's even worse than that. He burgled more than my heart! He stole away my dreams and hopes and time! I declare war on Firo!"

"A war for the ages!"

¹¹ 内田魯庵. A Meiji-era critic, author, and translator. Known for translating Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment. Also wrote a collection of novellas and short stories critiquing the negative growth of Japan's new capitalist society following the first Sino-Japanese War titled "社会百面相," or "The Hundred Faces of Society."

¹² A gentlemanly rogue created by the French author Maurice Leblanc.

¹³ 百々目鬼(Ghost with a hundred eyes). A female monster with a hundred bird's eyes growing on her arms. Often surprised travelers by showing these eyes to them. Also pronounced "dodomeki."

"For the dominoes! We won't go back until he apologizes once for every domino he knocked over! Are you ready, Miria?"

"Of course... ah!" Miria cried, something occurring to her that put an abrupt damper on her zeal.

"But Isaac, where are we going to sleep tonight? We left all our money and belongings back in the restaurant."

"Don't worry, Miria! There's a saying that's originally from the far East, don't you know? Any port in a storm!"

"What does that mean?" Miria asked curiously.

"I suppose it means that no matter what kind of port you're in, as long as it's storming outside there'll be boats waiting to take you anywhere... In other words, we can head wherever we want and things will turn out okay somehow!"

"You're so dependable, Isaac!"

With Miria's adoration ringing in his ears, the small fact that he was utterly wrong didn't matter to Isaac at all. He started on a new train of thought, intent on impressing his partner even more.

"I've got it. Hahaha, Miria! It means Heaven will send Noah with his ark to save us, like it did for Moses!"

"Like the great flood of Egypt!"

"Hah, that means we've got the Ten Commandments. We'll command Firo to apologize for the dominoes ten times! In the name of the god of dominoes!"

"So that's why they call it a dominion! What else did the domino god tell you, Isaac?" Miria asked, her eyes sparkling with joy at Isaac's makeshift plan.

"We've got plenty of friends to depend on other than Firo! We can ask them to give us a place to sleep tonight!"

"What a great plan!"

The two set off immediately, not a shred of doubt in their minds that their chancy plans would come to fruition.

The sky was cloudy, but somehow they shone brightly nonetheless. It almost looked as though they were the center of the world.

—

A while after the strange couple left, a new pair of people came to stand where they'd been.

One was a sharp-eyed man wearing a trenchcoat, and the other was a slender young woman wearing a business suit.

Ronnie and Ennis.

The two made a strange but not totally unlikely pair as they stopped in the middle of the busy street and looked around.

"Hmm, looks like we're late... Well, no matter."

"We should split up and look for... Mister Ronnie?"

Ennis turned around to see Ronnie deep in thought, his eyes closed and his fingers pressed to his forehead.

"Mister Ronnie? Is something wrong?" Ennis asked tentatively, and Ronnie slowly opened his eyes.

"...It looks like they're headed to the same place I am... No matter. This way."

"Excuse me? What?"

Ennis followed him, bewilderment clear on her features.

"Wait, Mister Ronnie... Wait!"

Ronnie immediately set off to complete his mission, as though he could see where Isaac and Miria had gone... It was like his eyes saw everything.

Ennis gave up and decided to just follow him.

I wonder why Mister Ronnie does this from time to time. He does this whenever he's searching for something, and then he'll find it, wherever it is, like he can see where things are without looking.

She'd long felt strange vibes from the man known as Ronnie. He seemed different from normal humans—more like her old master Szilard, or Maiza, or Firo.

What perplexed her more than anything was that she felt as though she'd met him somewhere before.

She'd looked through the memories of the immortal she'd devoured long ago, thinking that perhaps those memories had belonged to him... but still failed to recall anything regarding Ronnie Schiutto's past.

As though that past was something forbidden for her to see.

— —

"So where're we going, anyway?"

"Mmm?" Tim said, easily replying. "Millionaire Row. Why?"

"Millionaire Row...?"

Dallas floundered for a moment upon hearing the name of Manhattan's most affluent neighborhood. It was a place for rich people, not a motley band of ruffians like Tim's crew.

Dallas himself, of course, was different. He came from one of New Jersey's richest families, and there was actually a great mansion built by his grandfather on the Row.

He'd been one of the heirs to that great fortune, but there'd been some friction between him and the rest of his family besides his sister, and in the end he'd run away from home, gotten caught up in Szilard's plot, and somehow or other found himself where he was at present.

"That place ain't for trash like you chumps."

"...Your arrogance never fails to amaze me," Tim said, smirking blandly. He peered at Dallas as though he were some sort of strange new life form. "I can see why Huey's interested in you."

"Huh?"

"Oh, pretend I didn't say that, will you? Anyway, about our destination. I'd wager you've been there yourself a few times."

Dallas drew back in surprise, then suddenly realized what Tim meant.

"You asshole, you're heading to my house, aren't you?! Why... There's nobody there right... wait, is there?! Hey! Eve ain't there, is she?! If you bastards..."

"Well, you're right about one thing. A round of applause to our guest for getting the place right... Though, the rest is wrong."

Tim kept going, his expression serious as though to head off Dallas' angry shouts.

"Don't worry. Your little sister's not there."

He chuckled quietly, and murmured something that Dallas wouldn't understand.

"Instead, there's a small gang of delinquents staying there..."

"Though I suppose it'd be more accurate to call them *bait*."

— —

"So, *amigo*, where're the people we're looking for?" Maria asked her partner as they walked along Broadway, boredom clear on her face.

Ads festooned the street like flower petals, and through that dizzying flurry one could spy colorful billboards. There were many that were so flamboyant that one could almost be forgiven for thinking that they were festooned with neon lights despite the sun still hanging high in the sky, and indeed, some of them *did* sparkle with bright florescent light.

The beautiful decorations drawn on the ads came together to form a great mosaic, so large that one would have to crane one's neck back to take it all in at once, and these mosaics in turn came together to form the grand advertisement known as Broadway.

But even in such extravagant circumstances, Maria's beauty caught many eyes, and several men stopped what they were doing to whistle appreciatively as she passed by. They probably thought she was some sort of actress.

Maria, for her part, was completely oblivious to these admiring gazes, her head instead filled with dire thoughts of how to wield her swords with maximum efficiency so as to cut down everyone around her.

Her question to Tick had been an attempt to stave off her boredom after finishing one such massacre simulation.

"An abandoned factory? A basement? Where are you taking us, *amigo*?"

It was a question that should have been asked much sooner, but Tick didn't seem to mind.

"Mmm, well... It's a house on Millionaire Row that belongs to a Mister Genoard."

"So this Genoard is our target today? Can I slash him?" Maria asked, an excited flutter in her breast, but Tick shook his head.

"No, mmm, the people living there right now are led by someone named..."

He took a memo out from his pocket and read the name written there.

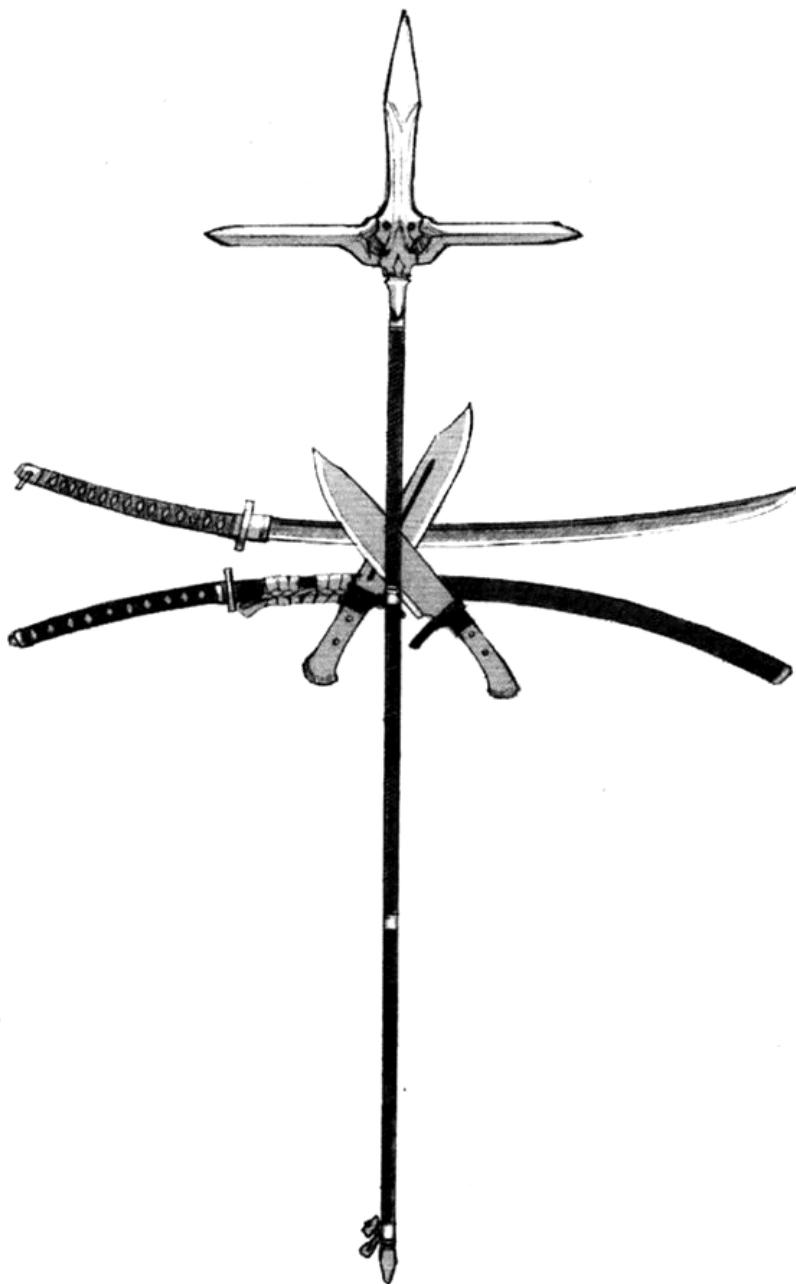
"Let's see, he has a tattoo on his face..."

Tick had to read to the end of the memo to finally find the name he was looking for.

"That's right, it's Jacuzzi! We're looking for a Mister Jacuzzi Splot!"

CHAPTER 2

A SPEAR, KNIVES, AND KATANA



Millionaire Row, located close to Grand Central Terminal, was a place solely for New York's most affluent families, the richest of the rich, and among the great mansions situated on the Row was one belonging to the Genoards.

It was not ornately decorated, but that simplicity only accentuated the building's stately design.

Its vast gardens could almost make a visitor forget, for a moment, that they were in the center of Manhattan.

So magnificent was the Genoard Mansion that it seemed to have sprung straight from the silver screen, an impossible symbol of success and wealth, and so many of the people passing by glanced at it with envious eyes, certain that the people living in it had won at the game of life.

But in reality, the current master of the house was crouching in a hallway, bawling his eyes out. An actor in a tragedy couldn't have mustered a more sorrowful expression.

The winner of life cried like a chastised child, a copious stream of tears flowing steadily down his face.

"Aah... I ju, I ju, I just thought... I thought it'd be guh-good to clean up a li, a little, but, I-I didn't know things would turn out like this!"

"It's okay, I'm telling you. You can stop crying now. Sheesh, it's just a stupid vase. What are you, a baby?"

There, inside the great mansion, was a young man sobbing pitifully, huddled in what looked to be the reception hall. Several men stood in a loose circle around him.

"B-b-b-but think of how much that vase cost..."

"Jacuzzi, are you telling us that you wouldn't be crying if it was cheap?"

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean t-to put it that way..."

"It's okay already. Just give it a rest."

The man who the others called Jacuzzi looked around fearfully at his companions.

He was quite young, almost young enough to be called a boy, and the most noticeable thing about him was the sword-shaped tattoo gracing the left side of his face. But despite the fearsome brand, the young man's bearing was so timid that it was almost contagious, inducing a sense of shyness in the beholder.

His friends had been trying to stop his crying for some time with a combination of reasoning and stern lecturing, but it looked like they would be at it for a while yet.

"Se, see, John? I-I'm not cut out for this... If I k-k-keep living in a place like this for much longer, I'm gonna have a heart attack."

"What's this about a heart attack now? D'you have any idea how much trouble Fang and I went through to get this place for you? You don't know how good you have it, living in a fancy place like this after getting chased out of Chicago."

"B-but you're living here too," Jacuzzi pointed out, still sniffling, but John was anything but understanding.

"Don't you go complaining on me now, boyo. You should be thanking Miss Eve for letting you live here in exchange for keeping the place tidy. If it were me in charge here I wouldn't think twice before turning out a rowdy bunch of hooligans like you."

John drew himself up for a lengthy sermon, but the onlookers around him put a stop to it before it could properly begin.

"I think that is enough, John. We only got a job here too thanks to Head Chef, you know."

"Wow, John. You made Jacuzzi cry. Again. Bad John. Poor Jacuzzi."

Next to John were an Asian man and a giant with golden-brown skin. There were others in the mansion too, of wildly varying nationalities and races, making it difficult to guess the common thread that had brought them together. The only thing that was certain was that their business probably had little to do with the right side of the law.

More people trickled in from various parts of the mansion, as though attracted by the sound of Jacuzzi's sobs.

John, sensing that things might get a tad out of hand, sighed and shook his head sorrowfully, patting Jacuzzi on the shoulder.

"Fine, I won't get angry at you anymore. I'll try and break the news about the vase to Miss Eve for you, so you just clean up this mess."

"Th-thanks, John, but I'll apologize to Miss Eve myself."

"You silly nit. You're honestly thinking about going to see her with that great fearsome tattoo on your face?"

"S-sorry..."



Jacuzzi shut up and began to pick up the ceramic shards from the carpet.

"What, it's already over?"

"And here I was hoping for some fun."

The people who'd gathered voiced their disappointment and scattered back into the corridors of the house.

John watched them leave and shook his head.

"They're too rowdy. Jacuzzi, keep them in control, would you?"

"Oooh... but..."

"You're our leader, aren't you?"

Jacuzzi Splot was, in fact, the leader of a *rather amateurish* gang.

What had originally just been a loose group of wandering boys and girls in Chicago had, through his natural talent and effort, become an organization capable of taking on a small mafia head on.

He wasn't especially charismatic, but he had a strange way of gathering people about him—or, to be more specific, it was like they gravitated to him. His appeal didn't spring from any sort of trustiness, but instead from the feeling that if left to his own devices he'd probably end up walking off a cliff somehow—he evoked a strange sort of protective instinct in people. He was Jacuzzi Splot, the only gang leader in America who spent more time crying than scheming.

His gang, which had no official name, had run into some trouble with the mafia of Chicago in the winter of two years ago, and had been forced to make a break for it all the way to Manhattan, where they finally settled down again.

They were practically kids, but there were still a lot of them, and so the most pressing matter at hand had been to find a proper home for them to stay. A truly fortuitous stroke of luck had landed them the most unexpected lodging place imaginable.

Their companions, John and Fang, had somehow managed to land a job at the Genoard Mansion—the house they were in at that very moment—using their credentials as a bartender and cook.

Later, the heiress, Eve Genoard, had left the Millionaire Row mansion in their hands as she prepared to go back to the main Genoard manor in New Jersey, asking them to take care of it while she was gone.

They'd secured Eve's trust thanks to a curious series of events that had taken place just before she left, and so John had taken the chance that presented itself and asked her if they could call in some friends who just happened to need a place to stay in exchange for helping manage the mansion, which he argued was far too vast for just two men to keep clean.

Eve had given her assent without suspecting any foul play, and to be completely honest, John hadn't been lying. He'd just neglected to mention that "some" meant "a few dozen."

Not even the Genoard mansion could house all of them, so only about twenty were currently staying at the mansion to help the caretaking. The gang was also doing a little illegal brewing on the side, but they took care to do it in Little Italy, so that no fallout would reach Eve should they get caught.

Normally they would have had to obtain permission from the mafia who controlled that territory, but they'd lost some friends to the mobs of Chicago, and were wary of coming into contact with the mafia again. It seemed that two small organizations, called the Martillo Family and the Gandor Family, had split the area that Jacuzzi's gang worked on, and Jacuzzi had taken care to research them well beforehand.

It seemed they weren't the bad sort—considering they were mobsters, of course—but Jacuzzi did his best to keep his gang from meeting them nonetheless. He knew that it was risky business but he kept going, trying to fool himself into believing that things might turn out okay even if there was trouble, since both the Martillos and the Gandors were quite small, as criminal organizations went.

Still...

"Th-things will turn out okay, right? I mean, It's been two years and they haven't made their move yet..."

Jacuzzi spent his days worrying ceaselessly over whether this would be the fateful day that the mafia sent a hail of bullets his way, or some faceless assassin showed up on his doorstep.

Every time the doorbell rang, an icy shiver ran up his spine, and even the slightest unexpected noise from outside made him shriek girlishly with fear.

Today was no exception. The doorbell chimed, and Jacuzzi froze in place like a frightened deer.

Dingdongdingdongdingdong.

It was a raucous sound.

The intrusive noise, its flat and uncompromising blare sounding almost rude when heard in those stately halls, echoed so fearsomely through the mansion that it was a moment before Jacuzzi's gang realized it was actually the sound of the bell.

Nevertheless, Jacuzzi's reaction was like lightning.

...A loud doorbell is scary, scary like something dangerous, dangerous like the Mafia, which means the Mafia have come to kill us, I know it, I have to hide!

"What're you doing hiding there?" John asked curiously, as Jacuzzi trembled in his impromptu hideout underneath the table.

"Sssh! Y-y-you guys have to get away too! Hide! Hurry!"

Jacuzzi did his best to adroitly guide his companions to safety, but his concerns were ignored in favor of the woman's voice coming from the other side of the hall.

"Jacuzzi! Jacuzzi! Some old friends decided to visit!"

It was a young woman wearing glasses, one eye covered by an eyepatch, her body covered with scars. Jacuzzi's girlfriend, Nice. They were living together, which would probably have sounded quite suggestive if it weren't for the fact that they were also living with about twenty other people.

"Huh? N-ni-nice, what's that about old friends?"

Jacuzzi peeked out from under the table, and his questions were soon answered by shouts coming from the entrance.

"Greetings, Jacuzzi! It's been so long, hasn't it!"

"It's been ages and ages!"

He cautiously crawled out and looked toward the end of the hallway, where he caught sight of the friends who he met on the streets from time to time.

"Isaac! Miria!"

His fears banished in an instant, he jumped up on his feet and dashed over to greet them.

"What's the occasion? You should have told us you were coming in advance, we would've prepared something for you to eat at least!"

"Hahahah, don't worry your head about that! We've already had lunch, you see!"

"But Isaac, didn't we skip lunch to set up more dominoes?"

It was like Miria's words had been a sort of trigger, for Isaac's hunger suddenly made itself known with a vengeance.

"...There's a saying in Japan that a samurai will pick his teeth contentedly even if he's full!"

"Wow, Isaac! You're a samurai! You're going to slit your belly!"

"That's right, Miria dear! A samurai never eats because it's no use. It'll all come tumbling out of that slit stomach anyway! So a samurai has to endure that hunger. That's the samurai way!"

"It's bushido!"

Set at ease by their ludicrous conversation, Jacuzzi soon found himself chuckling.

"Weren't you a gunman, Isaac?" he asked rhetorically as he led them to the reception hall, fond memories of their first meeting in his mind.

"Wow..."

"Amazing! This place must be bigger than Alveare!"

The couple openly showed their admiration at the sight of the grand reception hall.

They gazed this way and that, entranced with the vastness of the room, looking wide-eyed at the angels painted on the ceiling. The ceiling had been colored with pastels, which lent it a sense of warmth, blending perfectly with the painting of the angels in its corners and giving the hall a feeling of gentle calm.

The paintings and reliefs hanging from the walls, too, had been specifically chosen to convey a sense of harmony that blended in with the rest of the room. The place was obviously not the work of some tasteless middle class man who had merely happened to strike it rich.

It was a room of subtle balance, its deep grace and beauty serving first to impress the viewer, and then gradually soothe them.

"Astounding, Jacuzzi! I'd heard that you lived in a mansion, but I never dreamed that it would be this incredible!"

"You really hit the jackpot!"

"Haha, no, well..."

Jacuzzi had neither built the mansion, nor had he bought it, but nevertheless he smiled bashfully as though it was his own home being so lavishly complemented.

"It looked pretty much like my house from the outside, so I had no idea it'd be this great *inside*!"

"Ah... You're right! It *did* look just like home!"

"Come again? W-what kind of houses did you live in...?" Jacuzzi asked, knocked off balance by their unexpected declaration, but whether they hadn't heard him, or they *had* but had decided not to answer, the couple ignored him and walked into the center of the reception hall.

Jacuzzi decided not to pursue the issue and dashed into the kitchen, intent on preparing some tea for his friends.

They'd first met late in 1931. They'd been on the transcontinental train from Chicago to New York when they all got involved in the great train robbery perpetrated by multiple groups (granted, Jacuzzi had been technically been involved right from the beginning, seeing as how he was the leader of one of the aforementioned groups) and through that coincidental meeting had grown to become fast friends.

To be precise, they'd got the fast friends part down before the train robbery began, and then split up once the action started, each influencing the outcome of events in their own way.

They'd gone their separate ways after the train arrived at its destination, but a chance meeting in the streets of New York had brought them back together again. It wasn't like they really had any trouble noticing each other. After all, Isaac and Miria were pretty much impossible to miss, and the tattoo that covered half of Jacuzzi's face had a certain way of standing out in a crowd.

Still, it was the first time that they'd taken it upon themselves to visit Jacuzzi's current hideout...

"Anyway, we have to make that dastardly Firo say uncle!"

"It's our top priority!"

Personally, Jacuzzi was more interested in asking them a few things about the events on the train, but the couple seemed completely absorbed in disparaging a young man named Firo.

"This Firo person sounds like a really bad guy. Did *he* really get mad at *you* after knocking those dominoes down?"

Jacuzzi was a nice guy, and even as he nodded and agreed with them, he didn't seem to realize that the man they were talking about was a capo of the Martillo Family. Granted, it was doubtful whether Isaac and Miria remembered that fact themselves.

"That's right!"

"What is it, Isaac?"

Isaac slapped his knee and bolted to his feet, and Miria gazed up at him expectantly.

"I just remembered that we're robbers! Isn't that right, Miria?"

"We're *serial* robbers, Isaac!"

"Come again...?"

Jacuzzi could only smile blankly as the couple continued the conversation on a completely different tangent, once again plunging into a world of their own.

"So we've decided to steal something important from Firo!"

"How diabolical!"

"Hold on a second, Miria. It's a terrible thing to steal things because of personal motivation, as I'm sure you already know. Absolutely horrible! So here's what we'll do! First we'll steal from Firo and then we'll write a ransom letter! Then we'll give his treasure back to him!"

"We're going to stage everything!"

...*What?*

Jacuzzi cocked his head to one side, sensing that this particular train of thought was beginning to barrel irrevocably off the rails. Isaac and Miria, however, didn't seem to notice or even particularly care, their eyes shining as they came to their conclusion.

"Then Firo will be glad, won't he? Making up will be no problem!"

"What a criminal mastermind!"

"Huh? Didn't you say that you were going to make him say uncle or something?" Jacuzzi blurted, realizing that things had ended up completely awry.

Isaac and Miria stared open-mouthed at Jacuzzi for a moment, realizing the holes in their master plan highlighted by his impartial opinion... then turned to look at each other with dramatic gasps.

"I can't believe we missed taking care of such a basic issue."

"Uncle!"

"Mmm... No, wait, perhaps...? That's right, Miria! Uncle must be a cry of *victory!* Yes, I think that'll work quite nicely, don't you?"

"...It looks like the two of you really like Firo," Jacuzzi said, laughing. Isaac and Miria raised their voices proudly instead of attempting any denials.

"Firo might be our enemy now, but we like him a lot!"

"You just can't hate him, no matter how much you try!"

They smiled brightly, and the tattooed boy was just about to laugh along with them when...

Ding dong, ding dong.

The Genoard mansion's doorbell rang for the second time that day.

— —

The moment they set foot in Millionaire Row, Maria once again asked the question she'd been asking over and over the whole way there.

"Tick, can I slash them?"

"Nope," Tick said, his tone still like that of a child as he refused Maria's pleas. "We're only going to talk today."

"I'm telling you, there's no way things'll turn out okay, *amigo!* It's going to end up in a fight anyway, so why don't you let me cut down maybe three or so of them before they can do anything? They'll calm right down, I promise!"

"Nooope. You do anything that violent!" Tick said, a little strictly this time. Maria pouted and looked up at the sky.

The heavens were grey, utterly devoid of any blue at all, but Maria kept her eyes fixed on them as she complained in a small voice to the young man beside her.

"Hmph... I thought you of all people would understand, Tick..."

"Understand what?"

"You cut people all day every day with those scissors of yours, don't you? Snick-snack! You really enjoy it, I can tell! So I thought you'd understand me when I said I wanted to slash some people."

Tick seemed taken aback a little, but he opened his mouth nonetheless.

"...I don't cut people willy nilly, you know."

Maria kept her face turned toward the sky, but she glanced out of the corner of her eye at Tick, who seemed a bit from normal.

"Mmm... Why do *you* want to cut people, Maria?"

Surprisingly, Tick was the first to ask, but Maria replied without hesitation.

"Because it's fun, *amigo*! I don't just like slashing people. It doesn't even matter to me whether what I cut is an animal or a plant or whether it's even alive! I'll cut steel if it's there. It's just so so so much fun!"

The smile reappeared on her face and she looked at Tick without the slightest hint of guilt.

"I feel stronger every time I slash something, whenever I cut someone down! The stronger the person, the sturdier the thing I cut, the happier I get, *amigo*! It makes me so glad to know that me and Murasamia are cutting something that nobody's ever cut before! That's why I just can't stop! So... can I please slash them?"

She tried to return the conversation to its beginning and gazed expectantly at Tick, but sighed in disappointment as he kept his silence.

This time, she decided it was her turn to ask something of her unreadable partner.

"What, are you different, *amigo*? Don't you enjoy it too? Aren't you doing what you do because you like hurting people, because you like seeing other people's blood?"

"...Yeah. It's fun," Tick said with a wan smile, giving the reply that Maria had half expected.

"But it's really sad, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Hey, Maria. Do you believe in things like... like the bonds of family, or the ties between people, or loyalty, or compassion? Do you believe in links that are so strong that they can't be broken no matter how much you hurt, no matter how much pain you're in?"

He answered the question with a question, and Maria had to think things over a little before replying.

"I don't know, and I never really gave it any thought, to be honest. But... if you believe they exist, then maybe they do? I think that kind of thing is different for everyone, *amigo*."

It wasn't a proper answer, but neither was it avoiding the question. Tick took a pair of scissors from their place at his side and looked at his own reflection in the well-polished blades as he spoke.

"What's fun for me isn't cutting people, it's the instant when I can feel those formless somethings."

"...?"

"You see... I can't believe in anything but things that have a shape," Tick said flatly. His voice itself was the same as always. But nevertheless Maria couldn't shake the notion that a different soul was now in control of the young man.

"I can only believe in things that break. If they can break, that means that they exist, see? That's why I torture people, so that I can feel the moment when their bonds break. That's why I hurt them so much."

Maria kept her silence, listening to what Tick had to say.

They'd had many conversations in the year and a half since she'd entered the Family, and she'd come to see him as a fast friend, one who was perhaps a little childish but still entirely likable.

But now, she came to a realization. It dawned on her that she knew absolutely nothing about the young man in front of her. All she saw of him was the exterior; his true self was hidden deep inside.

This hadn't really been a special occasion.

She had only asked him—asked him thoughtlessly, lightly. And still Tick had told her his thoughts.

Maria didn't know whether that meant he trusted her that much, or if he would have given the same reply to anybody.

So Maria only listened, unsure of how to react to Tick's unexpected soliloquy. She merely stood by and quietly took in his words.

"...But I want to believe."

Tick's voice changed just the slightest bit as he tilted his gaze upward.

"I want to believe that there're things out there that won't break, no matter how much you hurt them, no matter how much you damage the body they're in."

"..."

"I want to know whether the things I felt for Father and my brother when Father abandoned me were the sort of things that can break because of pain... Maybe that's all I really want to know, in the end. That why I take all sorts of people and..."

Snip.

The metallic noise signaled the end of Tick's speech.

He only smiled innocently, his narrowed eyes betraying no negative emotion, as always.

Maria thought it over a little and then gave her reply. Her expression, too, was the same as ever.

"Mmm... Well, don't you think they must exist since you believe in them, *amigo*? Those things that don't break! Think about it... You can't *prove* that something that doesn't exist, doesn't exist! Then all you can really do is believe, *amigo!*" she said, telling him her thoughts in lieu of any consolation or commiseration. Tick looked a bit surprised for an instant, but his features soon settled into his usual placid smile.

"Right... I see, now... You're strong, Maria."

"Belief is important, *amigo!* I heard from my grandfather when I was just a girl that you can cut anything in this whole wide world as long as you believe!"

"Then doesn't that mean that there's nothing in this world that you can't break...?"

"We can have a contest! We'll see whose belief is stronger!" Maria said with a bright smile.

Tick nodded enthusiastically, and added something onto the end of his thoughts.

"You're right... I do believe in them. That's why I've hurt so many people until now... And some day, I'm going to be hurt and break too. I'm okay with that. I might get beaten to death by the people we're going to meet today, but... I can't help but feel that my bonds to you or the Gandors might break before I do, just like they did for all the people I've hurt so far!"

Tick stopped, suddenly aware of a thin, cold line along his neck.

He looked back and saw the edge of Maria's blade resting on the back of his neck. She'd drawn it without a sound.

"What're you doing, Maria?" he asked, and there was almost no fear in his voice. Maria stopped walking as well, and likewise, he could detect no animosity from her.

"You shouldn't think like that."

Tick looked away from that fearless gaze, ashamed. He seemed completely unaware of the dire threat to his life resting against his neck.

"I'm your bodyguard. I'll never lose to anyone, *amigo!* Well, there was that one time with Vino, but... I won't lose again! Not to the people we're going to see, and not to Vino! So not a hair on your head's going to get hurt. Let's believe that, okay? This is something we can believe in together, so there's nothing to get confused about, *amigo!*"

All that Maria believed in was her own power.

That was why she wanted Tick, her charge, to believe in it as well.

Believe in her power, that she was stronger than anyone else...

Perhaps sensing her thoughts, perhaps not, Tick chuckled quietly.

"I believe you. You won't lose to anyone, Maria."

He smiled, seemingly more for himself than for her, and nodded once more.

The two continued on, chatting animatedly with one another... completely unaware that they had passed the house by.

Completely unaware of just what sort of people were currently visiting their intended destination...

The Genoard Manor

"Ah... There a Mister Jacuzzi Splot here?" the bespectacled, bandanna'd man asked rudely the moment he entered the lobby.

"Err, uhh, tha-that's... me..."

Jacuzzi hesitantly identified himself and looked at his second set of visitors.

There were about ten of them. Together with Isaac and Miria and Jacuzzi's gang, they would have filled any normal house to bursting, but there was still more than enough space in the Genoard manor's spacious hall to house them comfortably. Jacuzzi had feared that this time they were mafia assassins for certain upon clapping eyes on the man in the black bandanna, but he relaxed just slightly as he caught sight of the timid looking girl behind him.

The rest of them were also dressed haphazardly, as though they all came from different walks of life, and Jacuzzi decided that they must be similar in nature to his own band.

"Uhh... umm... if you don't mind, could you, err, tell us why you're here...?" Jacuzzi asked haltingly, still unable to completely lower his guard.

Isaac and Miria were still absorbed in a debate as to just what Firo might hold dearest in the reception hall, which left only Jacuzzi, Nice, and a few of their companions who'd wandered in on a whim in the lobby.

"Oh, right, look at my manners. I'm Tim. The rest of these guys are sort of my friends. You don't need to worry about them."

"Ah, okay."

Tim gave them the bare minimum of information and then revealed his objective.

"I'll cut to the chase. How would you guys like to *become immortal?*"

— —

While Jacuzzi cocked his head to one side, wondering what sort of new religion the man was advertising, a woman staying in one of the rooms deep in the mansion was opened eyes.

The doorbell ringing twice had probably been what had awoken her. She slowly rose, shaking off the sleep that still clung lightly to her.

She'd been planning on just taking a short breather, but apparently she'd nodded off.

I have to go back to the garden and finish pruning the trees, she thought, and remembered the dream she'd been having.

It had been a dream that more or less reenacted a scene she'd actually experienced about two years ago.

She'd been in the midst of a crowd.

The news hadn't revealed much, save that the man being escorted by the police was a terrorist who'd plotted grand acts of terror against the government. The curious people spilled out onto the streets, fighting each other to catch a glimpse.

Out of all the people present, she alone had a different objective entirely in being there, under the watchful eyes of the police.

She was there to rescue the terrorist—her father.

The original plan had been to hijack a train and use the passengers as hostages to demand her father's freedom, but some complications had arisen and that operation had died a quiet death. She'd lost all her allies as well. No, she knew now that they'd never been her allies at all.

But she'd never been all that enthusiastic about that plan anyway, and so she did not despair at its failure.

That did not, of course, mean that she had given up on her father.

She'd come alone to this place, fully intent on taking out all of the guards standing in between her and her father.

The moment she saw her father being led to the armored car that would take him away her hand flashed down to the knife at her hip, her body tensing as she prepared to dash forward and cut down the men in her way...

She saw her father's lips move.

His face betrayed no emotion save calm confidence as he mouthed the words silently, as though he knew that she was there.

Just two words, that was all...

"*Don't worry.*"

She was no expert at reading lips, so she had no way of knowing whether those were the exact words.

But what she did know was that her father was not concerned about his own safety in the slightest.

That instant of hesitation cost her her chance to strike, and she could only watch as her last chance passed her by.

Then she'd awoken, her last memory of looking down at her own hesitant self.

I wonder why I dreamed of that after all this time.

Now that she thought about it, she was wearing the same black dress that she'd been wearing on the train back then. She'd just put it on because it had no sleeves, making it easier for her to move about, but perhaps it had influenced her dream just now.

She still couldn't say for certain whether her choice then had been the right one.

All she could do for the moment was believe in the smile her father had shown her and wait. Such thoughts occupied her days.

The new friends she'd met in New York had shown her all kinds of different views on life, ones that she'd never had the chance to experience before. Jacuzzi the crybaby, Nice the bomb lover, Donny the strongman, Nick and Jack the knife wielders, Fang the cook, John the bartender, and... *The Rail Tracer*... And so many others, people from all walks of life, of the sort she'd never met before.

People who had no suspicion in their hearts, who trusted each other to a fault.

They had welcomed her warmly, heedless of her confusion. Chane was a little glad. She was a bit surprised at feeling such emotion in herself, but it wasn't a bad feeling by any means.

She loved her father. She would do anything to keep him safe.

And she loved her current companions just as much.

Was there anything she could do for them? Such thoughts occupied her days.

She stayed with Jacuzzi's gang, feeling that for the first time ever, she'd finally discovered why life was worth living.

She'd resolved never to regret the present days she'd chosen.

Today, she'd again been on her way to the gardens to help them...

...When she was struck by a strong feeling of wrongness as she looked down through the windows at the outer gardens.

There were two people at the back door of the manor.

One was a man; the other a woman.

She'd never seen them before, but there was something she could readily identify even from far away.

The man held sharp pairs of scissors in his hands. The woman had two swords sheathed at her side.

A sharp light entered her eyes. She slipped noiselessly from the room.

As though by magic, a knife appeared in each of her hands.

The woman, Chane Laforet, hooked the door closed with the crook of her hand, simple thoughts running through her mind.

She would remove the people who threatened her way of life and the lives of her friends. Even if it cost her her life.

She began stalking through the manor's halls without a sound, her resolve held steadfast in her heart.

— —

"Immortal? What're you-"

"Aah, ah. I know, I know. I know exactly what you're about to say, so don't bother."

The man who'd introduced himself as Tim raised one hand to stave off Jacuzzi's questions and adjusted his glasses with the other.

"Of course you'd think we're bonkers. I would too, if someone came up to me and just popped that sort of question. But you see, the tricky thing about this is that even if I chose a more roundabout way of saying it, you'd still think I was crazy, and it might even end up with you guys trusting us less than if I'd gone this way."

"Well, y-you're right, but I d-don't think you should have explained that..."

"But anyway, about what we're after... Hey, Adelle. Take it from here."

Tim ignored Jacuzzi completely and snapped his fingers, giving the signal to the woman waiting behind him. She had vacant eyes, and her general air was slightly sleepy and very shy. She gave a start when Tim called her, stepped forward uncertainly, and nodded once to Jacuzzi.

Jacuzzi caught a glimpse of something like a long rod strapped to her back, but he didn't give it much thought as he nodded cautiously back.

"Ah, ah, umm. Well, umm, I'll try my best to explain, so, uhh, umm, hello..."

Tim chuckled once, the sound obviously meant to get her back on track, and from behind him a young man in a suit glared daggers at the both of them.

Who are these people, anyway? It doesn't look like they really get along, and I don't get what they meant by that immortal stuff...

Suddenly, Jacuzzi remembered that he'd once heard something about immortals from the information brokers in the neighborhood.

It had been about the boy he'd met on the Flying Pussyfoot, Czeslaw Meyer. Apparently he'd been an ancient alchemist with an immortal body.

He hadn't really believed it when he'd heard it, and he hadn't told his friends about it either.

In fact, he'd completely forgotten about it until just a moment ago... But now the memory rose back to the forefront of Jacuzzi's mind, making it hard for him to dismiss what Tim had told him out of hand.

Apparently unaware of his inner turmoil, Adelle began to speak.

"Umm... You ran here from Chicago because the Russo Family was after you, right? Umm. I mean, if I'm wrong, then I'm sorry..."

"?!"

How does she know?

Nobody but his own gang should have known that. Even if one of them had happened to mention it in some speakeasy somewhere, how had this woman heard of it?

Even Nice and John, who up till then had been watching the events unfold with an air of bemused good humor, suddenly tensed upon hearing the name "Russo."

If Tim's group was related to the Russo Family somehow, they represented a direct threat to Jacuzzi's gang.

Adelle whimpered as she felt the temperature in the room plummet below zero, forcing herself to keep talking in a faint voice.

"Uhh, please, don't... I don't mean for there to be a misunderstanding... We aren't related to the Russo Family at all..."

Jacuzzi's gang didn't let down their guard. Perhaps sensing the tense atmosphere, more of the group began to filter in, one or two at a time, from the various rooms of the mansion.

"What's wrong, Jacuzzi?"

"Who're these people?"

"Enemies? Are they enemies?"

"Should we get rid of 'em?"

"Hyaha!"

The latecomers gossiped idly among themselves, unaware of what exactly was going on, but Jacuzzi paid them no heed and instead observed the movements of Tim's group.

Adelle's face paled as more and more people entered the room; if she had a tail she would have tucked it between her legs. But even then, she didn't stop talking.

"Eek... Err, well, so... We, we were looking for people like you..."

Tim took up where she'd left off with a smirk.

"We were looking for a group of people in New York who weren't affiliated with any mafia, but at the same time had a good number of people and decent leadership too," Tim said, his rough frankness a marked contrast to Adelle. He'd probably ordered Adelle to start the explanation exactly to call attention to this difference in demeanors, making his words more memorable.

"Long story short, we want you to join us. The pay'll be *immortality*. I think that's enough, don't you?"

They were back to square one. The "join us" bit was new, but as long as the part about immortals was there, there was no way Jacuzzi's gang could really take them seriously.

"But what do you mean by immortality?"

Tim turned in place, looking around at Jacuzzi and his companions before he answered.

"Oh, looks like we have enough spectators for our little magic show... Adelle!"

"Ah, right!" Adelle said, reaching for the long rod on her back. She bowed sheepishly to Dallas.

"Umm, this is probably going to hurt a lot so I'm going to apologize in advance! I'm really really sorry about this!"

"Huh?"

Dallas opened his mouth to ask the crazy girl what the hell she was talking about, when a very familiar pair of voices reached his ears.

"Hey! Did someone just say something about a magic show? Well come on then, where is it?"

"Where're the white doves and rabbits?"

A couple dressed in formal wear poked their heads out of the doorway leading to the reception hall.

Dallas froze as he clapped eyes on their faces, memories flaring to life inside his brain.

It was the couple wearing strange outfits.

More accurately... it was the couple wearing strange outfits who had run him over with a car on the day the Gandors threw him into the Hudson.

The knowledge burned in him like a fire, the reality of the situation staring him in the face.

"You bastards! You were therrk."

His hateful shout cut off with a strangled gurgle.

For the rod in Adelle's hands had suddenly seemed to grow a wicked set of blades...

...And then plunged mercilessly into the soft skin below Dallas' chin.

"Wha...?" Jacuzzi said dumbly, unable to process the gruesome sight for a moment.

A spurt of blood colored the tattoo on his face, and as though that had been some sort of signal, Jacuzzi let out a scream that could have been either a girly shriek or a strangled sob, and fainted dead away.

"Hey, you sure this guy's the boss around here?" Tim asked, looking bemusedly down at the unconscious boy. He heaved a heavy sigh.

"You fainting is gonna throw a wrench into our plans."

—

A little while earlier, outside the Genoard manor...

"I'm sorry, I think we went a street too far."

"You should pay more attention to where we're going, *amigo*."

Tick and Maria had walked quite far before they finally realized that they were going in the wrong direction, and then took a wrong turn somewhere, leaving them closer to the mansion's back door than the front.

"It'll be a bit of a walk, but maybe we should go around to the front."

"No, it's fine! Let's charge right through the back!"

"No charging, please..."

Heedless of Tick's attempts at reining her in, Maria stepped confidently through the small gateway leading to the back porch.

"It's okay! We're here to scare them, aren't we? Then we have to show them we have the upper hand! I always ambush people when I'm on a job. You get them unaware, take out the small fry first and then have yourself an honorable one on one duel with the honcho! You have no idea how good that kind of thing feels, *amigo*!"

"But still..."

Tick reached out to grab her, then realized he was still holding his scissors and lowered his hand.

Maria was still striding toward the mansion. The gardens were mostly situated to the sides of the house and not in front and behind, so it wasn't a long walk to the back door.

She walked straight up to the door, which she had to admit looked a tad run down when considering the grandeur of the rest of the house, and raised her hand to knock...

"!"

Someone's there.

Soundlessly, she withdrew a couple of steps from the door, her fingers resting feather-light on the grip of her sword.

The door creaked ponderously as it slowly swung outward, just as Maria began to draw her blade.

On the other side, there was a woman with sharp eyes, wearing a black dress.

She was beautiful, looking to be about the same age as Maria. Appearances aside, though, there was a frightfully keen light in her eyes, so sharp that a person of timid disposition would probably have been rooted to the spot had they fallen under that gaze.

"...Hello, *amigo*," Maria said quietly, nodding once to the unknown woman.

Her previous flippant attitude was nowhere to be seen; it was obvious at a glance that she was warily assessing the woman.

It wasn't just the look in the woman's eyes that made Maria so careful. There were also the things she held in both hands to consider.

They were large hunting knives, their blades easily over eight inches in length, that would have looked more at home in the wilderness than in a house in New York City. They looked slightly unwieldy for a woman to use, but nevertheless the woman in the black dress held them comfortably in her hands.

Chane kept her senses on edge, staring at the Mexican woman before her.

...No, I've never seen her before.

A peaceful conclusion would have been ideal, of course, but she'd heard something about "ambushing" and "getting them unaware" from the other side just before she opened the door. If they were here to attack the residents of the mansion, she couldn't let them pass.

With that thought firmly in her mind, she'd pushed the door open, her knives grasped firmly in both hands. Just as she'd expected, the Mexican girl was already drawing her blade, and once she clapped eyes on Chane, it was obvious that she was getting ready to kill.

"What's wrong? Say something, *amigo*! Oh, let me introduce myself first. I'm Maria. I'm an assassin!"

Maria revealed her own name first, as a sort of taunt, but Chane did not reply.

To be perfectly accurate, Chane *could* not reply. Her body no longer had the means to do so.

But even if she had been able to speak, she would not have chosen to do so.

"Hmph, it's no fun if you don't say anything," Maria said, grinning, and sheathed her blade.

A metallic *ching* reached Chane's ears...

And Maria had already burst forward, going straight for Chane's feet. She swung Murasamia straight from its scabbard in a flat arc that would take it cleanly through Chane's ankles.

The point traced a keen arc, almost skimming over the walls as it passed through where Chane had been standing in an instant.

But Chane was no longer there. She'd taken to the air before Maria had even finished drawing her sword, landing lightly on the doorknob and kicking smoothly off of it, spinning as she passed over Maria's head.

She landed right behind Maria, leaving them almost back to back, one knife already thrust back in a vicious stab.

There was a sharp clang.

Maria had blocked the knife with her second sword. Chane hadn't seen her draw it, but the long blade poked out over Maria's shoulder, protecting her back.

Another clang.

Maria spun in place, Murasamia whipping through the air only to be blocked by Chane's other knife.

Sparks flew from the point of impact, and both women leaped backward as though repelled by some magnetic force.



That same force seemed to draw them together once more as they dashed forward, mirror images of each other as they raised their weapons to strike.

The shriek of metal impacting metal.

Again and again, they fell back and rushed back together, their similarly aggressive close quarters fighting styles forcing them together for brief, heated exchanges of frenzied attacks.

Again. Again and again, a symphony of clangs and clashes.

It was like seeing a pair of comets orbiting one another, furiously crashing together and then coming apart again.

"Wow, awesome..."

The lone spectator gave a cry of surprise as he sat back and watched, but his innocent smile soon frayed at the edges as he remembered something.

"Ah..."

Tick sagged, his arms drooping lifelessly to his sides as he let out a small sound of distress, heedless of the staccato beat of metal around him.

"Oh no... This isn't how it's supposed to go..." he murmured, but from the sound of his voice and the look on his face, he wasn't overly worried. There was nothing he could realistically do to stop the two fighters, and even if he were to shout, only Maria would pause to look at him, leaving her open to attack from the woman in the black dress.

That meant that the only thing he could do was silently keep watching them.

It was hard to tell whether all those thoughts actually ran through his head, but either way he kept his calm, observing their duel.

But a sudden scream drowned out even the metronomic beat of shrieking metal.

"Eaaaaaaaaagh!"

Chane jumped away from Maria and stopped the instant the cry came from the opposite side of the house, near the front door, her whole body tensed and still on guard.

...That scream just now...

An image came to the forefront of her mind, of the tattooed young man who had welcomed her unconditionally into the fold.

Certain that the owner of that voice was Jacuzzi, Chane ignored Maria completely and dashed off into the house.

Maria's eyes widened as she watched the woman in the dress suddenly turn her back on the fight.

"Ah! Don't run away, *amigo*!" Maria shouted, but seemed unfazed when her unrealistic expectations were not met, instead following hot on the woman's heels.

Left alone, Tick let out a relieved breath and began walking through the gardens that flanked the manor.

"I don't really know what's going on," he said to himself, strolling leisurely along in a way that made it clear he'd given up on getting the situation under control, "but I really think it'd be good manners for visitors to come through the front door."

— —

"Wha... what in the world are you people doing?!" Nice cried in the unconscious Jacuzzi's stead, shock and bewilderment coloring her voice in equal parts.

A senseless murder had just taken in place in front of her and her friends.

The strange rod on Adelle's back had actually been a spear, folded into three equal lengths. No, not *just* a spear—once it was fully extended, a pair of wicked tines split outward from the blade at the end, locking into place at ninety degree angles from the center point.

And from the end of that spear hung the limp body of the rough-looking young man who had come with Tim's group.

The spear's keen point had passed straight through his spine, poking out the back of his neck.

The impaled man twitched spasmodically for a few moments before going still, his entire body going limp like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Gah!"

"What the hell, is that for real?"

"What's going on?"

None of Jacuzzi's companions seemed able to completely understand the situation; they milled about uneasily instead of screaming like their leader.

Isaac and Miria didn't say a word, their eyes round. Tim grinned snidely, and Adelle merely stood where she was, her expression blank as she held her spear firmly in place.

"I think that's about enough, Adelle. You can take it out now."

"Ah, okay."

Only on Tim's command did Adelle finally draw her spear from Dallas' throat, kicking his bloody body away.

"Now everyone pay attention," Tim said, spreading his arms out grandly to his stunned crowd.

"The best part's yet to come."

He gave a thetic bow, gesturing to Dallas' corpse with his right hand.

"I told you I'd put on a magic show for you, didn't I?"

Everyone in the lobby save the unconscious Jacuzzi moved their gazes to the ragged corpse...

...And witnessed a miracle take place.

"Wha..."

Nice's left eye took in a sight that went completely against everything she'd ever experienced, everything she'd been taught.

She knew that blood could not ignore the call of gravity, nor could a soul come back to a dead body.

She felt those two truths, hitherto unquestioned in her view of the world, on the verge of shattering.

She stared at the dead ruffian's body.

The blood flowing steadily from the wound in his throat had stopped.

No, it hasn't stopped... It's...?

Nice's gaze fell on the blood staining the carpet.

That was when she saw it. She saw it.

She saw the puddle of blood begin to shrink.

She saw that the blood that had splashed on Jacuzzi's face had disappeared while she wasn't looking.

She saw that crimson liquid was squirming at the fallen man's neck like a swarm of red slugs.

Nice and her companions were held in thrall by the nightmarish sight.

Nobody could move. No, nobody could even think of moving.

It was resurrection.

No, it could hardly be seen as something so holy.

Each droplet of blood writhed like a live thing, merging with each other and evolving into a single mass. Each mass then came together with another, combining and growing... Until finally, like a beast returning to its den, it crawled back into the gash in the man's neck.

The last drop of blood returned to its place in the man's body... and as though to signal the end of that red march, the wound closed up on itself.

Only clear, unbroken skin could be seen where there had once been a gaping slash; there was no trace on the man's body that he had ever been touched.

The blood and grease had disappeared from Adelle's spear, leaving the finely sharpened silver blade glinting softly in the light.

Tim saw that the entire lobby had been blanketed in silence and grinned widely.

"You see now?"

The crooked smirk still fixed on his face, Tim turned and kicked the man hard in the stomach.

"*Guh!*"

He was still unconscious, but he still coughed and hacked from the pain.

The man had been dead, beyond any doubt... but now he was breathing again.

Tim looked down at him, making sure that the man was alive, and quietly spoke.

"You see, immortals really do exist..."

Chane saw it happen as she entered the hall and gasped.

...That was... just like Father...

She'd gotten there just as the wound in the man's neck closed, but even that brief glimpse had let her put everything together in an instant.

She knew that the man lying there was *a being exactly like her father*.

Actually, Dallas was an incomplete immortal, but Chane, who had no knowledge of Szilard Quates and his incomplete elixir, mistakenly believed that Dallas was the same sort of person as her father, Huey Laforet.

Her mind was awhirl with thought.

What was that group in the lobby after?

Why was Jacuzzi unconscious? Who had attacked him?

And... just what could she do against an immortal?

Tim saw the woman who'd appeared in the hallway and inwardly flinched.

Huh? Those eyes... I swear I've seen them somewhere before...

He sifted through his memories but found himself unable to place precisely where and when he'd seen her. He shrugged it off as a moment of confusion and attempted to continue his speech.

"So what I'm trying to say is-

But then a sudden round of applause cut him off.

The strange couple standing at the entrance of the reception hall had begun to clap furiously the moment he opened his mouth.

"Incredible! I've never seen anything like it! You were just like Howard Thurston!"

"You sawed him in half and put him back together! It's Harry Houdini! It's Horace Goldin!"

Isaac and Miria rattled off a list of all the famous magicians they knew, and only then did Jacuzzi's gang begin to chat amongst themselves as well.

"Wait, it was just a magic trick?"

"I... guess?"

"That bald guy said it was, didn't he?"

"Huh, you're right! An' here I was thinkin' he was some kinda vampire or something! Scared the shit outta me!"

"Hmph, so it was just a trick, huh."

"Hyaha."

One by one, they broke into relieved smiles. Luckily, hardly any of them had had the opportunity to see an actual magic show before, so the unlikely excuse was enough to bring an end to their unease.

Nice and John glanced at each other, unconvinced, but the others were already gossiping away, their shock quickly forgotten.

"What the hell. These people must all be retarded or something..."

More than anyone, Tim was left open-mouthed at the unexpected turn of events. He hadn't expected them to take his grandstanding seriously.

He scratched his temple idly with one finger, unsure of what to do, then set eyes on Nice and turned to her.

"What I was saying is, how'd you like to join us and all become immortals like that guy over there? All you'd have to do is help us a little in stealing some *liquor* that's hidden away somewhere... Well, maybe we could discuss things in detail once your boss wakes up. What do you say?"

"...Our objective is making as many immortals as we can, you see."

Chane had no trouble hearing what the bald man had said to Nice.

In that instant, Chane's body specified the man, Tim, as an enemy.

He was out to make more immortals.

In other words, *he was out to make more beings who could kill her father, Huey.*

She didn't know who these people were, or why exactly they wanted to make more immortals.

But one thing was clear. These people were planning to recruit Jacuzzi's gang, her companions, in order to increase the ranks of her father's enemies.

Silently she dashed across the floor, weaving in and out between her friends as she made a beeline toward Tim.

She wouldn't kill an unaware enemy in cold blood. If she killed him, she wouldn't be able to find out what he was after.

She'd intended to drive the hilt of her knife into the man's solar plexus, but a keen bolt of light flashed in between them just before she reached him.

Chane sensed danger and bent her body back, bringing her knives up in the space where her head had been.

The next instant there came a ringing clang and the point of a spear passed by her cheek.

She'd blocked the two side-blades with her knives, bringing the weapon to a stop right before one of those tines gouged into her face.

But it looked like the center blade had nicked her; a thin line of red appeared on her cheek, followed a heartbeat later by a single drop of blood that slid down like a crimson tear down her face.

"..."

"Umm... I'm sorry, you just came and attacked so suddenly that I... just..."

If Chane hadn't avoided the thrust, the spear would have taken her right between the eyes. Still, she showed no sign of fear, instead glaring at the enemy before her.

The enemy wielded a spear that was easily taller than Chane herself. The enemy looked timid, but she'd shown no hesitation and no effort in wielding her weapon to try and kill Chane.

Chane quietly observed her unnatural opponent.

Her head was filled only with thoughts of how she would have to move in order to efficiently destroy her enemy.

At the same time, Adelle stared at the enemy who had appeared before her.

She'd thought for certain that she'd killed her opponent, but from the way her attack had been blocked with almost no damage done, apparently she was more skilled than she'd expected.

She made her assessment in an instant and drew back her spear, putting some space between herself and the unknown assailant.

"Hey, Adelle. Don't kill her if you can help it," Tim said from behind her.

Adelle sounded much like she had just before, though she kept her eyes on her enemy as she spoke.

"Ah, right... But... I think she's really strong. I don't know whether I'll be able to go easy on her..."

But something else was going through her head.

...She has black hair and golden eyes... Just like Master Huey... she thought, drawing back her spear...

And then, from the same hallway that her current opponent had run in from, there came a vibrant, enthusiastic voice.

"Ahahahaha! Looks like things are really getting fun now, *amigo!*"

"...What now?"

Both Jacuzzi's gang and Tim's Larvae stared, nonplussed, at the Mexican girl who'd suddenly appeared in their midst.

"Donny, do you know her?" someone asked the brown giant, looking to the only other Mexican in the room, but he only gave it a moment of thought before shaking his head.

Maria paid the uncertain atmosphere in the room no heed, raising both of her katana high and striding lightly down the hall.

"This place is huge! I got a little lost on the way here, *amigo!*" she said, and though her words stayed measured if a little exuberant, her footsteps fell faster and faster.

Adelle quietly took stock of the situation, while Chane glared vehemently at both Maria and the Larvae.

Just as Maria tensed to leap right between Adelle and Chane...

Ding. Diiing.

The doorbell rang...

...For the third time that day in the Genoard manor.

The sound was somehow relaxed, in stark contrast to Isaac and Miria's frantic ringing earlier in the afternoon.

"Who could it be now..." Nice muttered, her features rigid with nervous anticipation as she wondered what dire threat could be behind the door this time. Her hand crept toward her waist, her fingers closing around one of the spheres hanging from her belt.

Tim, Adelle, Chane, Maria, Isaac, Miria, Jacuzzi's gang, and even the Larvae who hadn't said a thing since they entered, all fixed their gazes on the door and awaited the newcomer with suddenly dry mouths.

However...

"Uhh... Hello, everyone."

The man who walked in as the door slowly swung open had a voice that was as gentle as a lamb, and a face to match.

The young man discretely glanced around, caught sight of Maria standing frozen with her swords still in her hands, and grimaced.

"Maria, I told you we didn't come here to fight... What if Mister Keith gets angry with us?"

He spoke like a child, but the moment the name Keith passed his lips Maria shuddered unconsciously. She thought it over a moment and said, "Okay, Tick. I don't want him to get mad at me."

She heaved a sigh that spoke of great patience and personal sacrifice, and shoved both her swords back into their scabbards.

"..."

Tim stared at Tick for a moment, then gave a jerk of his head that signaled a retreat to his companions.

"Looks like we're out of luck today. Tell Mister Jacuzzi we wish him well when he wakes up. We'll try and come back tomo--"

"Ah, wait, wait," Tick said suddenly, stopping Tim in his tracks before he could leave.

"...Yes?"

"Hey, actually, if you have business with Mister Jacuzzi here, we'll wait for you to finish. It'd be better if you went first."

"What?"

Tim and his Larvae stared coldly at him, waiting for him to explain his incomprehensible words.

Tick paid the frigid glares no heed, his smile staying fixed on his face as he continued.

"Because... Depending on how these people reply to our negotiations today, *they might end up disappearing from these streets.*"

"What?" Nice asked dumbly.

The rest of the gang looked uncertainly at each other and then at Tick, staring at him as though he was some sort of fascinating new life form.

"What's that--"

And just as Nice prepared to interrogate her mysterious guest...

Ding dong.

...The doorbell rang for the fourth time since Isaac and Miria had arrived at the front door.

"...What is *with* today?" Nice asked aloud, weary resignation and fear both present in her voice.

Chane tensed, intending to use the sound of the bell as an opportunity, but Adelle snapped into a flawless defensive stance, keeping them locked in a strained stalemate.

On the other hand, there were certain people who seemed to have no idea what the word "tension" meant.

"Wow, Isaac! We've got so many guests coming in today!"

"They must all be here to see the magic show! Or maybe they're all part of a traveling circus troupe!"

Isaac and Miria seemed to think that everything that had taken place so far was part of some grand play, taking both Chane and Maria as performance artists.

Actually, they had been on the same train as Chane during their great train robbery... but they had only caught a fleeting glimpse of her before they boarded the train, somehow managing to avoid running into her until the train arrived at the station in New York.

The bell stopped ringing, whoever was on the other side staying quiet as though waiting for an answer.

Of course, this was actually the polite thing to do, while Isaac and Miria with their frantic ringing, and Tick with his uninvited entrance had been the strange ones.

But no matter how much the visitor waited, the inhabitants of the manor did not respond.

The doorbell rang again, as though the visitor had grown impatient.

Still, nobody moved, and from the other side came the soft voice of a woman saying, "Maybe they're not home..."

"...A woman?"

Tired of the tense standoff, Tim gestured with a nod, signaling to one of the Larvae.

The young man who'd received his gaze nodded and wordlessly walked to the door, pulling it open.

And there, on the other side, stood a lovely young woman wearing a black business suit.

"Ah, hello...?!"

The visitor trailed off halfway through her sentence and fell silent as she took in the sight in the lobby.

Almost thirty people were gathered in the lavishly decorated room, but most of them looked like street rats and hoodlums, quite out of place in the expensive surroundings. What was more,

there were even two women standing quite noticeably in the center of the room holding a spear and a pair of knives—any normal person would have had reason to be surprised.

...She's a normal person.

Most of them made that snap decision on seeing her reaction. True, it was rare to see a woman wearing a business suit, but outside of that she seemed entirely ordinary.

The woman in the suit looked around, taking in the strange group gathered in the manor... and then realized that among them were some quite familiar faces, waving frantically to her.

"Hey! Ennis! Over here! Heey!"

"Wow, Ennis! Are you here to see the magic show too?"

"Isaac! Miria! Wait... A magic show?"

A smile settled upon Ennis' features as she caught sight of Isaac and Miria, and, perhaps still not quite understanding what was going on, she turned expectantly to the open door as though asking for help.

"Huh?"

As she did... The elegantly crafted door swung open wider, revealing a man wearing a trench coat.

And time stopped.

The atmosphere had plummeted several times in the ten odd minutes since everything had begun, but this time, it was on an entirely different level.

The air didn't grow cold...

It just stopped.

Completely.

The man who stepped into the manor then seemed to deny the very passage of time, seeming to take away not the air in their lungs but their very time itself.

Even though he hadn't actually done anything except appear.



He was a man with sharp eyes, and everything about him—his expression, his movements, the measure of his steps—gave off a mysterious sense of awe while simultaneously declaring to all and sundry that his line of work had little to do with the right side of the law.

Outwardly, he appeared no different from any other human being.

Still... The air froze solid the moment he appeared.

Even Jacuzzi's gang, who had been sniggering, ignorant of the situation, seemed to feel something that triggered their instincts, for their eyes grew serious and they tensed in anticipation of action.

Adelle, Chane, and Maria, too, stared wide-eyed at the sudden intruder.

For an instant, Adelle's attention shifted completely away from Chane, but Chane, too, found herself unable to move, mesmerized by the man in the trench coat.

As for Maria... Her fingers rested lightly on her sword, her body coiled and ready to draw in an instant if she needed to.

...He's dangerous! Really dangerous! This guy spells trouble, amigo!

The Larvae, too, found their flow of time stolen by the man who had walked in without warning.

...Who the hell is this guy?

He's just standing there. That's all, so why does he feel so...

Even Tim, who up till then had kept an expression of smug composure fixed on his face, clenched his jaw hard, bewildered.

His expression making it clear that, rather than finding such a response satisfying, he simply accepted it as nothing less than his due...

The *chiamatore*, Ronnie Schiatto, took a measured step into the mansion.

In a word, he was an *existence*.

An *existence* that had been born from the dark, breathed it, and lived in it.

To put the feeling into words, it was as though the man was something else, something that looked like a human being but was actually an embodiment of everything evoked by the word "mafia"—no, by the words "organized crime."

He was not a punk like Jacuzzi's gang, not an unknown factor like Tim or Adelle, and not trash like Dallas—he was an entirely different, singular *existence*.

If he had just been a simple mafioso, those gathered there would not have felt such an alien sense of awe. The aura rolling off of him was that of innumerable things mixed chaotically together... of something that was not human.

But even in the cessation of time brought about by this being's power, there were still those who had the privilege of moving about freely.

Mister Ronnie's quite... intimidating, when he's on the job.

Gone was the affable man who'd walked into Alveare holding a bag of pepper shakers, and yet his demeanor was also completely different from the seriousness he would show when teaching Firo how to wield a knife.

Ennis quailed under her first encounter with his force of personality, only just keeping her composure because she had known him from before.

Naturally, Isaac and Miria merely laughed gleefully as they caught sight of Ronnie.

"Oh hey, Ronnie's here too. Wait, you didn't bring Firo along, did you?"

"These people are amazing magicians! You should stay and watch them too, Ronnie!"

"*You know him?!*" Nice blurted in surprise, but Isaac and Miria seemed not to notice her shock, instead waving innocently at Ronnie.

Besides the two unconscious men sprawled on the floor, there was only one other who kept his calm.

Tick had been standing just inside the doorway, looking quite lost, but when he saw Ronnie's face, he slowly opened his mouth to speak.

"Wow, I didn't know that you'd come personally, Mister Ronnie."

Tick's greeting felt silly in the tense atmosphere, but Ronnie answered calmly, the awe he inspired not lessening in the least.

"It's my job to take care of this kind of thing, no matter how trifling. *I* certainly didn't expect to see *you* here. The Gandors must have gotten impatient, to send their infamous torture specialist."

Jacuzzi's friends focused on one noun from the conversation, and their expressions turned suddenly serious.

"...Gandor?"

"Hey, did that guy just say Gandor?"

"An' somethin' about torture too..."

"Wait, that guy? Torture? He looks like he wouldn't hurt a fly."

"No way."

To Jacuzzi and his gang, the Gandors were simply the mafia that controlled the territory that they worked on. They hadn't had any direct contact with the Gandor Family yet, but it was safe to say that they probably weren't on the Gandors' good side.

The agitated mutters grew louder, and Nice finally realized just who they were facing—at least, who Tick and Ronnie represented—and rushed over to Jacuzzi's side, crouching next to him. She began to shake him desperately, trying to get him to wake up.

"Jacuzzi, Jacuzzi!"

"This is serious," John murmured from her side—he, too, had realized just how bad things had become. He grabbed Jacuzzi around the waist, trying to get him to sit up.

The hoodlums looked over to Tick and Ronnie, while Tim's Larvae moved to the sides of the doorway and took stock of the situation. Isaac and Miria waited with bated breath for the next magic trick, and the three armed women stayed where they were, eying their respective enemies with tense expressions.

Nearly thirty people stood in the room, each of them caught up by waves of suspense. Ronnie alone walked unflinchingly through those currents, speaking as though he owned the place.

"It seems that there's a complicated situation unfolding here... Well, no matter."

He came to a stop a few feet away from Jacuzzi and Nice and addressed all those assembled from his place in the center of the lobby.

"I have come to this place as the Martillo Family's messenger, as their negotiator, as their judge, as their executor, and... also, I have come here to bear witness to everything that will occur here from this point on," he said gravely, his voice ringing in the souls of those listening.

"I believe we all know why the Gandors and the Martillos have seen fit to send people here. Our business is built on trust. When we hold out our hands, we trust in our partners' strength and diligence. When we raise our fists, we trust in our enemies' weakness and error. Everything is but a succession of such matters."

He spoke grandly, almost as though he were an actor on stage, but the power in his voice came together with the atmosphere emanating from him to dominate Jacuzzi's gang completely.

"Which side will you choose? Which card will you deal to me? Amity, or animosity. Depending on your answer, I will judge your past, deciding your present and the future that lies ahead of you."

A blanket of silence fell over the room as he finished... only to be broken as Jacuzzi moaned, waking up from his impromptu nap.

"Ugh... Uhh...? Wait, what happened..."

"Oh, you're up, Jacuzzi."

"That's good... Well, no, actually, it's not."

"What?"

Jacuzzi tried to get up, then saw the sweat trickling down Nice's face and took a moment to look around.

"Huh... Were there always this many people here? And... Wait, where'd all the blood go?! What happened to that guy just now?!"

He looked to his girlfriend beseechingly, looking for an explanation for what had happened just before he fainted, but Nice could only tell the truth she'd seen, though it was clear she couldn't quite believe it herself.

"The man who got stabbed came back to life without a scratch. And... Chane started fighting with that woman holding the spear, and then that strange girl with the swords appeared, and... Listen up, Jacuzzi. This is the most important part."

She took a deep breath, and laid out the cold truth.

"The Gandors and the Martillos say they have something to say to us."

"...What?"

Jacuzzi took another look at the people in the lobby.

He discovered Ronnie, giving off an obviously shady air, and felt his consciousness slipping away from him again.

...No, no! I have to get a hold of myself!

Jacuzzi kept himself from fainting through a massive display of effort and quietly summarized things in his head.

The first thing he had to do was make sure his friends were safe. He turned slowly to Ronnie, satisfied with his conclusion.

C'mon, think. Think. How can I get us all out of this situation?

"Say, Miria dear. Why do you think Ronnie's suddenly talking so fancy?"

"Maybe he's angry?"

In stark contrast to Jacuzzi, who was preparing to put his life on the line, Isaac and Miria were absorbed in a conversation that paid no attention whatsoever to the goings on in the lobby.

"Ah, actually. While we're on the topic of Ronnie."

"What is it?"

"We said we were going to steal something precious to Firo, right?"

"Right," Miria said, lowering her voice to a conspiratory whisper, matching Isaac's hushed tones as she leaned in close to her partner.

"Ronnie is Firo's boss and also the one who taught him how to fight with a knife, right?"

"He's Firo's wise old master!"

Isaac gave the matter a moment of thought and then spoke musingly, as though confirming something he already knew.

"Say, Miria."

"What is it?"

"Wouldn't Ronnie and Ennis... both be..."

Miria caught on to what he was saying and grinned brightly.

"...Firo's treasures!"

...I want to slash them all.

All around her were strong people. People who looked like they would be hard to cut down.

There was the knife wielder from before, and a woman holding a spear, who looked to be the one who'd wounded the knife user.

And there was also the man from the Martillo Family who'd made his appearance last of all, the one who called himself Ronnie.

This is great. There're so many people here worth slashing.

Maria felt something hot bubbling up inside her as she basked in the strained atmosphere.

She didn't want to find out whether she was the strongest person in the room.

She already believed. She *knew* that she was the without a doubt the most powerful being among these people.

Maria just wanted to prove it.

She wanted to prove her skill, and the strength hidden in her blade.

To put it a little more simply... She wanted to slash them.

Her mind emptied out, everything collapsing into that one sentence.

That was how she'd always been. When someone hired her to kill a strong assassin or mafioso, she would laugh happily and draw her swords and cleave her target's flesh and bone and life in twain.

She wanted to cut things, so she did. That was all the reason she needed. That was all she needed to survive.

The fact that it was her job was merely an afterthought to her. Her work as an assassin was only a means to an end, a way to sate her daily appetite. It was truly the best job she could have asked for, one that provided both fun and profit.

She had only failed once. Just once, when she'd been contracted to kill Vino.

Vino had annihilated her completely, while she had been unable to wound him at all.

But if we had a rematch right now, I'd win.

It was a baseless belief, but she still held it close to her heart, and looked forward to the day when someone would approach her with a contract for Vino's head.

Perhaps today, she'd be able to stretch her wings for once, after a long period of rest. She might be able to slash people. She could show off her power, Murasamia's power. She could believe in her own strength.

Now she had an opponent against whom she could show off her mettle. No, she had many of them!

She bottled up the tension threatening to overflow inside her and quietly observed the breathing of the people before her.

She was looking for a chance. A chance to cut them down.

She had to be faster than anyone, stronger than anyone.

Sharper than anyone.

The woman who had devoted her entire life to the sword—no, to the act of cutting—once again reaffirmed her resolve and narrowed her eyes.

Her heart shone like the keen edge of her blade.

Chane counted her enemies.

From the reaction of Jacuzzi and his gang, the latecomers were certainly unwelcome guests.

The spear wielder and her companions were most probably enemies of her father.

Which side would she have to fight?

But... It wasn't yet decided for certain that these people were her foes at all.

She couldn't get a handle on how the mafia would react, nor the katana wielding woman.

Everything would become clear once they began to move.

That moment of motion would decide her own actions as well.

She couldn't afford to miss that instant. She had to take the fastest, most efficient route to achieve her objectives...

And so her eyes narrowed to slits as she observed the atmosphere.

Tim, Adelle, and the rest of the Larvae found themselves unable to move as well.

They were probably the closest thing to outsiders in the current situation. There was that dumb couple who seemed to think the whole thing was a magic show, too, but even they looked to be more familiar with the situation than the Larvae.

Then why had the knife woman attacked them?

They had no idea what was going on inside her head, and both Tim and Adelle couldn't shake off the feeling that they'd seen her somewhere before.

They didn't know whether that feeling had something to do with why she was hostile to them. If they could just figure out who she was, perhaps they'd know the answer, but the tense lobby was neither the time nor the place for an impromptu brainstorming session.

Either way, it would probably be best for them to sit tight and wait for someone to make the first move.

Their decision made, they too quietly waited for the situation to unfold.

"Huh? Why did everyone stop moving all of a sudden?" Tick said slowly, having missed the rapid exchange of silent glances, but even then nobody made a move.

Isaac and Miria were whispering busily to each other, while Ronnie had fallen silent, waiting for Jacuzzi's reply. Everyone else was clearly on edge, their eyes ceaselessly darting about.

Time had stopped.

Ronnie's appearance had dropped the temperature of the room to absolute zero.

Just when it seemed that they would be stuck in this staring contest forever...

The one factor who had the power to make things start again slowly got to his feet.

"Ugh... You... you motherfuckers... I'll, I'll kill you all... goddammit..."

The man who'd been lying limply next to Tim raised his head, malice dark in his voice.

"It was faint, but I still heard... it all, you bastard... This is why you wanted me to come with you, huh? Is that... really all?" he gasped, his recent death and resurrection having left him still short of breath.

"Kind of, but not entirely."

"You asshole...!"

Dallas reached for Tim's neck, but suddenly realized that the mood had changed since he'd died and stopped.

"...What's going on?"

Almost everyone in the room still held themselves like tightly coiled springs, ignoring the revived Dallas completely as though he was beneath their consideration entirely.

He looked around in an attempt to get a handle on the situation, and in doing so discovered that there *was* one person in the room who was staring back at him. It was the slender girl wearing a business suit, Ennis.

She cocked her head to one side as she stared at him, as though trying to remember something... and Dallas, too, gazed blankly at her face, overcome by the feeling that he knew her somewhere.

An instant of silence passed... Only an instant, because then Ennis remembered.

"Mister... Dallas?"

Her hesitation became conviction as the name passed her lips.

I remember him. It was three years ago when...!

He'd been one of the thugs who she'd taken down and brought in back when she'd still served Szilard Quates. He'd been the leader of those punks, and in the end he'd betrayed her, judiciously ventilating both her and Firo with machine guns.

She didn't know what had become of him after that... But she knew for certain that it was him standing before her now.

The moment she said his name... Dallas, too, recalled who she was.

"You..."

And then... time began to move once more, rushing onwards.

It advanced like a roaring avalanche, as though it had been pent up and gathering force, and the floodgates had just now opened.

"Huh?"

Dallas looked about wildly once he recognized her completely, and suddenly *made a beeline straight for Tick*.

"Gimme those!"

Dallas reached for the silver scissors hanging at Tick's side—the closest weapon within easy reach.

Like a ravenous wild dog, he snatched the scissors from Tick's belt the moment he was within reach.

"Aah."

Tick fell over, letting out a soft cry.

Dallas paid him no heed and whipped around, intent on charging toward Ennis.

Just as he took his first step forward, someone took hold of his hand, almost making him lose his balance.

He glared murderously over his shoulder and saw Tick, still sprawled on the floor, his hand grasping Dallas' wrist.

"You can't," Tick said placidly, his eyes sad as he looked up at Dallas. "Give me back my scissors."

"Shut up an' lemme go!"

Dallas shook his arm violently, but Tick's grip proved to be surprisingly strong.

"Don't use those scissors for hatred or revenge!" Tick shouted in an uncharacteristic show of forceful defiance, having read Dallas' intentions.

"Why you little..."

Dallas raised his stolen scissors high, fully intent on bringing them down into the back of Tick's hand to make him let go...

But *his right hand went flying toward the wall.*

Splat.

Dallas' right hand hit the wall behind Tick with a wet splat. The wrist and body that should have been attached to it, however, were nowhere to be seen—only the hand itself lay in a bloody puddle, the scissors still held loosely in its limp fingers.

"Huh...?" Dallas said dumbly, staring at the fountain of blood spurting from where his right hand had been.

"Aaaaarghh!"

Just as he realized what exactly had happened to his hand, fierce agony overtook his mind.

The person who'd cut off his wrist seemed quite happy with her work, grinning widely as she watched Dallas make noises like a strangled goose.

"It's not my fault, *amigo!*" Maria said, tipping Tick a sly wink as she patted her shoulder with the back of her sword. "I told you I'd keep you safe, didn't I?"

She chuckled and turned her gaze to Dallas, expecting to see a rapidly widening pool of blood... and froze.

The blood had begun to flow backward over the floor, toward Dallas' wrist.

The hand that had been lying near the wall had somehow rolled over to its owner's feet. It writhed as though the blood inside it was controlling it, the scissors it held falling to the floor as it spasmed. Viscous red liquid flew upward as though attracted to the wound by magnetism... and finally, the severed hand rose into the air as well.

The next moment, hand and wrist collided with a wet slap and the wound sealed up completely, leaving not a single scratch, much less any evidence that the hand had ever been severed.

The healing seemed to have gotten rid of his pain as well, for Dallas' ragged breathing steadied soon enough, leaving him aware enough of his surroundings to shoot a murderous glare at Maria.

"Gah... That hurt, you bitch...!"

His body had healed completely.

Maria hadn't been around to see the "magic show" earlier, and she stared at Dallas with wide eyes...

"Haha!"

...and laughed brightly, like a child who'd been given a new toy.

"Not bad! You're *just like my boss, amigo!*"

Quite a few of the people in the room exhibited visible reactions to Maria's thoughtless words.

The members of Larvae had not seemed all that concerned at all about a man getting his hand sliced clean off, but just those few words from Maria were enough to make them all look at her, their brows furrowed and their eyes wide with concern.

"...What did you say just now?" Tim muttered, but Maria didn't hear him, instead lifting her katana happily in the air and waving it about.

Judging from her words and actions so far, it was a safe bet to say that the swordswoman was affiliated with the Gandor Family.

They'd managed to piece together the information they'd gleaned, first from the information brokers and then from Dallas, arriving at the conclusion that the three Gandor brothers were probably immortal. The lack of rumors on the street had led them to believe that the Gandors' immortality was a closely kept secret.

"Wait... so it wasn't a secret? What the hell."

They didn't know exactly who had become immortal in the events of three years ago. They knew that Firo Prochainezo had killed Szilard Quates, which meant he had to be an immortal, and that the three Gandors had come back to life after being shot by Dallas, which made them immortals as well. The information brokers had hinted at other immortals as well, but the fee that Tim paid hadn't been enough to justify revealing that much information.

Tim stared strangely at Maria, who was laughing as she brought her sword down.

"Ahahaha! This is fun! You come right back to normal no matter how many times I slash you!"

Dallas charged at Maria with murder in his eyes, only to be stopped dead in his tracks by a flash of silver.

Rather, he fell forward, suddenly bereft of a foot to support his weight on.

But the missing foot quickly found its way back to its owner, the blood and muscle visible in the open wound squirming as though in harmony with his screams.

"Wha-wha-wha-what's wrong with him?! What *is* that?!" Jacuzzi shrieked. The rest of his gang didn't seem quite as disturbed, having seen it happen twice already, but they still looked uneasily away from the stomach-turning sight.

Maria gave the fully healed Dallas a sunny smile, her voice making it clear she was having the time of her life as she gave him a dire declaration.

"Ahahahaha! It's no use, no use at all, *amigo*! As long as you keep healing, I'll keep slashing. Over and over, and over and over. Every time you stand up again I'll cut and cut and cut and cut until..."

The sword sliced through the air, lopping off Dallas' left hand.

"...you'll *wish* you could die, *amigo*!"

"Shit," Tim spat, watching the pitiful scene unfold.

He'd prepared the incentive of immortality to get these people to work for him, but the sight of Dallas being slaughtered over and over, dying and coming back to life again in a terrible cycle that almost made death seem preferable, might actually have the opposite effect. He had to prevent that at all costs.

He sidled up to Adelle and spoke in a low voice, taking care not to distract her in her standoff with Chane.

"Adelle... Stop the samurai girl."

"...Ah, right."

She was moving before she'd even finished talking.

The point of her spear traced a huge circle in the air, arcing toward Maria's shoulder.

"Oh?"

But Maria saw it coming in the nick of time, drawing her other sword to block the strike.

She managed to get her blade in position, but the spear had gathered speed as it arced through the air, and it crashed into Maria's sword—and, by extension, her entire body—with terrible force.

"Ack!"

Maria acted without conscious thought, putting her weight on her heels and rolling backward.

Her slender form tumbled over and over, but she came up lightly on her feet and immediately darted straight toward Adelle.

Her body practically skimmed the floor as she went, her blade shooting out like a bullet, but Adelle had already read her movements.

She brought the spear blade around, pulling it back toward her, then thrust it forward at Maria. The simply decorated point tore through the air like a bolt of lightning, homing in on Maria's face.

The Mexican girl brought up her sword to parry, but even as she did so Adelle threw herself backward.

A feint?

Maria's eyes widened with surprise.

The murderous intent she'd felt from Adelle had been the real thing. The blonde woman's thrust had been aimed right between her eyes.

But the instant she moved to block it... her opponent immediately gave up on the attack and withdrew outside the range of Maria's parry and counter.

She'd changed her tactics on the fly in response to Maria's movements. The lightning response told Maria in no uncertain terms that the woman she was facing was highly skilled.

Maria drew back, putting herself out of the spear's range, and took another look at her enemy.

They had similar builds. Maria wielded two swords, while the other woman had a single spear. Maria would guess that they were about the same weight as well, which would mean that both of them were using weapons that would normally be considered too heavy for them to use properly.

Adelle still looked as uncertain and hesitant as ever, but none of that was apparent in the way she handled her spear.

"...I've never fought anyone using a spear before! My heart's pounding, *amigo*!"

Maria adjusted her grip on her swords and laughed tauntingly.

But Adelle didn't rise to the bait and spoke, her expression still as apologetic as ever.

"That's... a lie, isn't it."

"..."

The humor vanished from Maria's face.

"What're you talking about, *amigo*?"

"You're only pretending... to enjoy this," Adelle said calmly, her eyes like those of a frightened puppy.

"Maybe you were really excited until a few moments ago... But the moment you crossed blades with me, you started to doubt, didn't you? You thought to yourself that just maybe, I might be stronger than you are."

"...What're you talking about? There's no-"

Maria snorted and tried to deny it, but Adelle ignored her and kept on talking.

"You're trying to convince yourself by putting up a brave front, aren't you? You tell yourself that you're stronger than anyone, that your sword can cut anything..."

Maria kept her silence, glaring daggers at Adelle.

"Umm, there's nothing to worry about, really. You're probably at least twice as skilled as I am..."

It seemed like an attempt at comforting her, but Adelle's expression stayed the same as she continued.

"But... did you know that to defeat a spear with a sword..."

A shining blade appeared in front of Maria's eyes, as though by magic.

"...I think they say you have to be at least three times as skilled as your opponent... Yes, that was it."

It had been a straight stab from far away. That was all Adelle had done.

But that simple act stressed Maria out more than she'd thought possible.

Despite herself, she'd been distracted by Adelle's words.

Unlike Maria, who had a habit of synchronizing her speech and mood with the rhythm of her body, Adelle was the sort of person who could act in a way that completely belied her emotional state.

Her hesitation and shyness were no act, but her actions possessed an alacrity that wasn't reflected in her words at all.

The thrust, so precise and cold it practically made the air crackle, sent the silver blade rocketing toward Maria once again.

"Ah!"

Maria gasped and brought both her swords back in an attempt to catch the triple pronged point in between her blades.

But Adelle's eyes flashed as she saw Maria move, as though she'd been waiting for just that to happen.

With a flick of her wrist, the triple bladed spearhead, which had been advancing on Maria with its blades lying flat, suddenly twirled as Adelle spun the haft. In the blink of an eye the points were set on top of one another.

Maria gasped, but by then it was too late. Swirling like the blades of a windmill, the spearhead slipped through Maria's defenses...

And a spurt of blood stained the lobby's floor.

But unlike before, the dark red splashes stayed where they had landed and did not return to their owner, no matter how much time passed.

— —

"Hey, what the hell's going on?!"

"Who are those people?!"

"Do something, Jacuzzi!"

"Hyaha!"

The entire lobby had become a scene of chaotic bedlam, Dallas' foolhardy move acting as a sort of trigger that set off a volatile chain reaction.

The young ruffians gave wide berth to the woman as they suddenly clashed, forming a large circle around them and moving away frantically. Still, none of them actually turned tail and ran, instead turning their gazes, one by one, to their leader.

For his part, Jacuzzi looked utterly lost, merely sobbing and whispering to himself, "C-can't you please go and do this somewhere else?"

Chane had taken just a few short steps away from where Adelle and Maria were duking it out, choosing a position that would let her easily protect Jacuzzi and Nice if she had to.

"Ah, Cha, Chane... You're bleeding! Are you okay?"

Chane gave Jacuzzi a silent nod, setting his worries to rest. The young man heaved a sigh of relief, but perhaps too soon, for the next moment a low voice came from behind him.

"It looks like things are getting complicated..."

Jacuzzi looked back, feeling a sudden chill run down his back, and saw the man from the Martillo Family standing right behind him with his eyes dangerously narrowed.

"...Gah!"

"When did you...?!"

Ronnie ignored the surprised reactions from around him and focused only on his objective.

"But no matter. I'll repeat this for you, since you weren't awake to hear it... You know why I'm here, don't you?"

Jacuzzi just stared up at Ronnie, his eyes wide.

"We can discuss the details later; for now, I only need a simple answer to a simple question... Will you become our enemy, or will you serve us?"

Jacuzzi's face crumpled as though he would cry in the face of Ronnie's oppressive manner, but then he shook his head hard, getting a hold of himself, and gathered his courage to look the monstrously threatening man in the eyes.

"...We aren't going to be your enemies."

"Mmm..."

Ronnie looked at Jacuzzi expectantly, and the younger man quietly continued.

"But... That doesn't mean we're planning on joining you, either."

Giving the tattooed young man a subtle smile, Ronnie waited for Jacuzzi to explain.

"We... We've lost good friends to mafia in the past... so as long as we stay together as one group, we'll never become part of a mafia organization."

The quiver had vanished from Jacuzzi's voice.

Nice and John, and the other members of Jacuzzi's gang who'd been within earshot nodded in support of his resolve.

"Indeed," Ronnie said, smiling as though he'd seen something amusing. He glanced around, and his next words were quite bizarre.

"You looked like you would burst into tears just moments before, but now you have the face of a warrior. And your friends, each so different and so obstinate, now acting as a single organism. Hmph... It's because of people like you that I find mankind so amusing... Well, no matter."

Ronnie spoke as though he wasn't part of mankind himself.

"I have heard your answer. But you know as well as I do that it's quite the bold thing to say."

Jacuzzi had said he didn't want to be enemies, but at the same time that he wouldn't kneel to the Martillos, either. In other words, he wanted things to continue as they had, with everyone minding their own business.

But if that had been an option, then neither Ronnie nor Tick would have had cause to pay their visits in the first place.

Ronnie set his lips in a hard line again, the amusement disappearing from his face as he looked around.

The two women were still fighting, the sound of their clashing blades still filling the great lobby.

"No matter... I suppose I should get rid of the distractions before we begin negotiating in earnest."

"What...?" Jacuzzi said, but Ronnie ignored him, turning and heading toward the ferocious battle in the middle of the room.

He took measured steps toward that storm of blood and blades, as calmly as though he was crossing the street.

And... time came to a stop once again.

— —

Alveare

"So... Where did Ronnie go?" the young capo asked his superior.

Firo had long since emptied his cup of coffee. The other outlaws in the restaurant, too, were enjoying their afternoon free time in their own various ways.

Maiza finished adding sugar to his third cup of coffee and calmly replied to Firo's question.

"There're some people who're doing business on our turf, you see."

"...Aha, those weird kids with Chicago accents who showed up around last year."

"Right. We've been content to ignore them, but the Prohibition is ending soon and we needed to tidy things up in preparation of our new business prospects anyway, so Ronnie went to have a talk with the rookies."

"Alone?" Firo looked slightly surprised. "You know, I only found this out three years ago when I became a capo, but it turns out that Ronnie always goes to take care of things that look like they might turn out to be trouble. And he does it alone."

"Yes, that is the way things go most of the time."

"Isn't that dangerous? I mean, sure, Ronnie's awesome with a knife, and he got turned into an immortal like me and the rest of the Family during that party, but..."

"Haha... You've got one thing wrong there, Firo."

Maiza laughed, his mirth softening his already gentle face.

"What is it?"

"I thought Szilard's memories would have clued you in... But perhaps he had no use for remembering people's faces. No, maybe he thought remembering it unnecessary because *he* isn't a person at all."

"What're you talking about? C'mon, stop laughing at me and let me in on the secret, will you?"

Firo frowned and pressed for answers, feeling left out, but Maiza glossed over the matter with a light chuckle.

"I suppose he'll tell you himself when he thinks the time is right. And remember. Whatever else he may be, Ronnie is Ronnie."

"Yeah, try to be a little more mysterious, why don'cha. Hmph."

Firo stretched and looked out the window at the sky outside. The clouds were thickening ominously, and Firo muttered hollowly to himself as he watched them darken.

"...A storm's coming."

— —

No way.

No way this is happening.

I can't believe it. I won't believe it.

I can slash her. I can do it.

My sword, my Murasamia can cut this woman.

If only I could reach her, if the edge even nicked her skin...

But it can't.

My blade can't reach her.

No, it's okay.

I can reach her.

Of course I can.

What I can reach, I can slash. I can beat this woman.

I believe it. I can do it.

I can take my blade to this woman.

I can avoid the point of her spear and charge in, past her defenses.

I believe that my arms will reach her...

Metal crashed on metal in the Genoard manor, producing a ringing metallic shriek.

Maria and Adelle had already been fighting for many minutes. At first glance it seemed like a mighty clash between evenly matched masters, but a closer look would reveal that one side clearly had the upper hand.

"That's enough, don't you think? This is just... a waste of time."

Adelle's voice stayed calm, though she was attacking ferociously. Despite the fact she'd been fighting for quite some time wielding a heavy spear, she wasn't even breathing hard.

"Shut up... Shut up, *amigo*! No way I'll lose to someone like you! No way! Never!"

Maria, on the other hand, was gasping for breath, her clothes stained crimson with blood.

They'd come together in titanic clashes several times, but each time only Maria came away wounded. Every one of her attacks was deftly stymied by the long spear; if she tried to make a sudden, unorthodox assault, Adelle saw it coming and immediately leaped away, far more than was necessary, effectively bringing the fight back to square one.

She'd done everything she could, but despite her best efforts Maria just couldn't bridge the gap between the reach of the spear and the reach of her arms.

Still, her skills were amazing, and every time Adelle had thrust with intent to kill, she'd managed to avoid each attack by a hair.

Nevertheless she looked terrible; the wounds covering her body made it look as though she'd run through a hailstorm of razors.

It was clear who was going to win. But the fire burning in Maria's eyes refused to go out.

It wavered, though—the last fitful spurt of a flame before it winked out entirely.

Adelle spoke coldly, as though to extinguish even that last flickering flame.

"You're trying to deny the fear you feel with belief."

"...No."

"But belief is just, umm... *something that you cling to in order to console yourself.*"

"No!" Maria screamed, crouching low and bringing her sword around in a slash that was twice as fast as normal.

But even this last desperate strike failed to reach its target. The haft of the spear struck her body just before her blade reached Adelle's body, and Adelle simultaneously stepped to the side, out of range of Maria's attack.

If only her enemy hadn't been using a spear. No, if only that spear had been just a tiny bit shorter.

But she *was* using a spear.

"And as proof of that... You're beginning to doubt, aren't you?"

Adelle smiled.

Finally, she smiled.

"In some small part of your mind, you're already starting to falter. You can't believe anymore."

It was the smile of a victor.

"No... Haven't you found yourself believing something else?"

It was the triumphant smile of someone watching a defeated opponent fall.

"You believe that you can't defeat me... No, since you're more skilled than I am, maybe it'd be better to say..."

Adelle pulled her spear close, delivering the final blow with words.

"...You believe that a sword... can't defeat a spear."

"...Gah!"

Maria attacked wildly, as though trying to disprove Adelle's words.

Her swords became flashes of silver, faster and more powerful than anything she'd unleashed before.

But her ferocious offense naturally led to more openings in her defense, and Adelle's eyes flashed once more—she was not one to miss such chances.

The spearhead flew forward, in a straight line toward Maria's heart. The fatal attack drew near.

And... time came to a stop.

Wait, don't kill her.

They couldn't afford to have this getting out of hand and drawing unwanted attention. Tim took a step forward to stop Adelle, but by then she'd already committed fully to her final, terrible thrust.

But the spear did not pierce Maria's heart.

Adelle gasped as the weight of her weapon suddenly vanished from her arms.

Tim, Adelle herself, and even the other Larvae, who up till then had been watching the battle unfold with a detached air of disinterest, now stared aghast at what had just happened.

"My spear...?!"

If Dallas' resurrection had been a miracle of restoration, then what happened to Adelle could only be called a *miracle of disappearance*.

The instant her spear touched Maria, it vanished, evaporating from her hands like smoke.

"...Ah!"

Adelle wasn't the only one shocked. Maria, too, looked down at her body, as though unable to believe what she'd just seen.

The spear heading for her heart had dematerialized... and moments later, the two swords in her hands had disappeared as well.

The feeling of her swords faded from her palms, her hands closing into fists on nothing.

She fell to her knees, unable to make sense of what had just happened.

"Why..."

Their shock spread through the people in the mansion like a contagion.

What had just happened? The ones with the most complete view of events were none other than Jacuzzi and his gang.

"Wha, what just... What *was* that?"

But even they, who had seen everything unfold, could only manage stammering questions.

What they had seen was quite simple, and at the same time entirely unbelievable.

The man who called himself Ronnie had stepped into the path of both attacks without hesitation... and then, the next moment, he was holding in his right hand a spear, and in his left hand a pair of katana.

Had he perhaps taken them with a lightning fast display of some strange technique?

No.

All three weapons had clearly been far out of his reach in the instant before they appeared in his hands.

But the next moment, there they were, in his grasp. It was impossible no matter how one looked at it.

Ronnie put the weapons down on the floor, shook his head slowly, and said, "Be quiet, won't you."

His message delivered, he turned away from Maria and Adelle, both of whom looked utterly lost, and walked back to Jacuzzi's group.

"Nice..." Jacuzzi whispered to his girlfriend as he stared at the approaching man, his voice low enough that only she could hear, "what is he?"

He realized something was wrong.

He realized that there was an unfamiliar sort of dread rising up inside him as he stared at the man who had just ignored the laws of physics.



Tim and his Larvae were not exempt from the general air of surprise in the mansion—even those members who had watched events unfold with nary a raised eyebrow were now showing clear signs of unease.

"...Hey, Adelle. What... what the hell just happened?"

"Umm... Err, that... that's what I want to know, as well..."

They could only stare at each other warily as the situation took a sudden turn into the unknown. But none of them were able to provide an answer or explanation for what Ronnie had just done, and an uncomfortable silence fell over them.

Just as a chilling, heavy air of fear filled the lobby...

The raucous sound of sudden applause rang in the mansion, chasing away the oppressive aura that had threatened to permeate the air.

"Wow! Amazing! Simply amazing! I didn't know you were a magician too, Ronnie!"

"Was there a magic contest scheduled here today?"

"The *dance* those lovely young ladies showed us just now was astounding, too. We must have picked just the right time to come."

"This is our lucky day!"

It seemed that Isaac and Miria thought everything that had just happened was part of some grand performance being held in the mansion. Any normal person would surely have had something to say about such a bizarre "show," but thankfully, the two were just a little bit removed from what any sane person would call normal.

Still as delightful as ever.

Ronnie hid his smile so nobody could see it.

Isaac and Miria advanced toward Adelle as she picked up her spear, still clapping. They'd only just seen her less than an hour ago, but they talked to her as if they were old friends.

"That magic you showed us was incredible!"

"It's the amazing human healing act!"

Their eyes were filled with respect and adoration, as though they had met a famous movie star.

But Adelle ignored them, adjusted her grip on her spear several times...

...And gave it a powerful thrust, just to the side of Isaac's head.

"Oww!"

One of the bladed prongs on the side of the spear nicked Isaac's ear as it passed, marring it with a small wound.

"Eeek! Isaac!"

Miria rushed to his side, concern clear on her face, but Adelle still paid them no heed, instead staring strangely at her weapon.

"There's... there's nothing wrong with it... right...?"

Tim stepped in and raised his voice in an attempt to cover for Adelle's strange actions.

"Understand, pal? That was no magic sho..."

His bluster trailed off as Isaac removed his hand from his ear, looking perplexed.

"Huh? It doesn't hurt."

"Wow, Isaac! The cut's disappeared entirely!"

"What?!"

Tim and his Larvae were unable to hide their surprise.

There should have been a wound on Isaac's ear, but as his hand fell away they could see it was completely untouched, and there wasn't a drop of blood on his hand, either.

"Something's wrong..." Adelle murmured, looking as though she couldn't believe her eyes, and once again adjusted her grip. This time, she aimed directly at Isaac...

But someone grabbed the haft from behind.

She turned around, a quizzical look on her features, and saw the woman in the black business suit staring coldly back.

"...Apologize."

"Excuse me?"

"Apologize to Isaac," Ennis said, her eyes like chips of ice. Adelle looked away, flustered, and tried to shake free of her.

"I'm sorry, but, umm, this isn't the time for apologies..."

Adelle jerked the spear back, but Ennis kicked smoothly off the ground, somersaulting over Adelle and landing behind her.

"Apologize."

Adelle drew back slightly, surprise entering her eyes as she registered that her opponent knew how to fight. Cautiously, she drew her spear up in preparation to fight.

A tense silence fell over them.

Said tense silence was promptly shattered by Isaac and Miria's loud voices.

"Hold on, Ennis! Wait just a second! This fine young lady here was just showing us a magic trick!"

"It's just hocus pocus!"

Ennis searched for the right thing to say to the comical couple, but Adelle spoke first, her brow furrowing in concentration.

"Ennis... Wait, someone from the Martillo Family and... Ennis? Umm, excuse me, are you Szilard Quates'...?"

"What...?"

The unexpected name brought back terrible memories that had been buried deep in the past.

How did the woman know of Szilard? Ennis stared at Adelle, opening her mouth to pursue the issue, but a man's gasp from behind her threw a wrench into any conversation.

"Guh... Argh...!"

Behind them, Dallas had finally come to his senses again, and he slowly forced himself to his feet as they watched.

"You... you bitches..."

Just when it seemed that this new ember of conflict would burst into an uncontrollable inferno...

"Excuse me!" Jacuzzi cried, his voice rising above the general chatter. "E-excuse me! This house doesn't actually belong to us! We're only borrowing it... So we're really going to get in big trouble if you keep fighting!"

He should've said that sooner.

Tim laughed at the absurdity of it all... But then his grin froze on his features.

The woman standing next to Jacuzzi, the one wearing glasses over an eyepatch, was holding something in her hand.

It was a sphere of some sort, copper in color, and there was a black string that looked like the wick of a candle sticking out of one end... And on the end of that string was a flame that emitted fierce crackles and bright sparks, hungrily eating away at what Tim now realized was a fuse.

"Get dow-"

Tim tried to order his companions to run, but it was already too late.

"I'm sorry, Mister Ronnie! Things are a bit scary here so I'll listen to what you have to say next time!" Jacuzzi shouted over his shoulder as he turned to run, and as he did so Nice tossed the sphere in her hand high into the air.

The flame disappeared into the sphere.

There was a deep, muffled bang... and white smoke filled the lobby.

"It was a smoke bomb?!" Tim shouted, as he scrambled to his feet.

A wall of white obscured everything, and as it spread, the flow of time once again began to flow vigorously forward.

Jacuzzi's gang scattered madly into the depths of the mansion like rabbits running from a hunter, making their way out and into the streets of Millionaire Row.

Chane hesitated, the matter of the Larvae still bothering her, but Jacuzzi shouted "Help the others!" to her, and she left too, throwing a last reluctant glance over her shoulder as she went.

"Don't panic! Scale the fence and get out! Try not to get any smoke in your lungs!" Tim ordered and promptly put his words into action, ducking low as he made his way out of the mansion.

Tick moved just before the smoke cloud hit, reaching toward Maria with one hand, scooping up her swords with the other, and making a dash for the door. The swordswoman looked utterly lost, and she followed Tick without complaint as he practically dragged her along.

The white smoke darkened to dirty grey, flowing out of the door and forming a striking harmony with the overcast sky.

It was as though the whole house was shrouded in a thundercloud.

Like a rabbit warren that had been smoked out, the once crowded mansion emptied out in seconds.

As though by magic...

Ronnie walked through the blinding smoke, unperturbed by the fact that his entire field of vision was filled with white.

He felt that Jacuzzi had already left and smirked.

"Impulsive, isn't he. No matter. I'll come again tomo..."

Suddenly, someone grabbed his right wrist in a viselike grip.

Ronnie frowned just the tiniest bit and looked through the choking veil of smoke to see...

**CONNECTING
CHAPTER**

**RAIN AND
LETTERS AND
SCISSORS AND
LOVE AND**



There's this instant when everything breaks.

Even diamond can crumble into dust if you hit it right.

I like the feeling I get when I watch something that was built to last breaking.

It's always over in an instant.

The larger something takes to build up, the greater its mass, the grander the crash when it falls to ruin. That's just the way the world is.

That's why I never built up anything more than necessary, why I never desired anything more than my due.

All I wanted was a place for myself. Just a little foundation, to let me amass just the bare minimum of happiness.

...That's why I'm here right now.

Tim sat on the stone stairs near the entrance to Central Park, reminiscing as he stared up at the darkening sky.

Adelle and the rest of the Larvae also sat in the general vicinity, enjoying a brief moment of rest.

By all rights they should already have set the next stage of their plan into motion, but an unforeseen series of events had thrown a wrench into that. Tim bit back a frustrated sigh as he looked back on what had gone wrong.

I didn't desire anything beyond the bare minimum, nor did I build anything beyond it, and yet...

And yet, in the space of less than a day, many things had come tumbling down inside him.

The first sign of trouble had been that strange couple who'd called Dallas' resurrection a magic trick. He still needed to find out if that healed ear meant that they were immortals too, or if he'd just been seeing things.

Then there was the woman with the knives, who'd attacked them without provocation. He knew he'd seen her somewhere before, but try as he might he couldn't recall when and where.

The Gandor Family woman, the one who'd wielded a pair of katana with reckless abandon. Absolutely insane, that one, but thankfully not a problem as long as he had Adelle.

And finally... there was the gangster with eyes as sharp as a knife, who possessed some sort of incomprehensible power.

"...Dammit, and we have to chase down Dallas too..."

Only once they regrouped after fleeing the smoke-clogged house had they realized they'd left Dallas behind. He must have slipped away unnoticed during the commotion. By the time they went back to check the mansion, he was long gone.

But what had broken him the most wasn't anything remotely as insignificant as that.

There had been someone there who'd threatened the most basic things that composed *him*, who'd threatened his very existence.

I've changed everything about myself so that nobody would ever recognize me.

I threw away my face, the way I talk, my sensibilities, my strengths, everything; threw them away and gained them anew.

Nobody would look at me now and think of the boy I used to be.

Tim had been secure in that knowledge—it was no exaggeration to say that was what he lived for.

Case in point, I don't think he even recognized me.

But though he'd changed everything about himself, *he* hadn't changed at all.

Tim had forsaken his name and his past, but even so he clearly remembered those good-natured narrow eyes.

That slow, placid way of talking that never seemed to succeed in reading the mood, and the sharp scissors in his hands, and everything else about *him* had been just like they'd been when they were boys.

He recalled Tick's face as he went over the events at the mansion.

Tim—no, Tack Jefferson—*recalled the face of the brother he hadn't seen for the past eight years.*

"Why... Why was Tick there..."

It had been a most unexpected reunion with the past he thought he'd long since discarded.

As though symbolizing Tim's mind, which had begun to quake with complicated thoughts...

...Cold drops of rain began to fall on his face as he stared up at the sky.

Just as the soft patter of rain drove the silence away, one of his underlings came up to him. The man hadn't been present for their visit to the Genoard manor; he normally acted separately from Tim's main team.

"Boss."

"Yeah?"

"I just got a call. Christopher and his crew are going to meet up with us tonight."

Tim blanched visibly at the mention of the name.

"Christopher? *Christopher?*!" he said, and his underling flinched and looked away at the uncharacteristic fury coloring his voice.

"Why the hell is he coming?! You know as well as I do what could happen if we bring in a loose cannon like him in on thi..."

"Master Huey's orders, boss."

"...Gah!"

An order from someone who was currently in police custody.

It was impossible, but Tim merely gave a short snarl of frustration and gave up, accepting his subordinate's explanation as fact.

"Bah... So those savages are making their way here. To be honest, I wanted to avoid working with them if possible."

"We don't really have a choice. The Lamia¹⁴ form the backbone of the Larvae, after all."

Adelle looked up from polishing her spear at the mention of the name and butted into the conversation, a smile spreading across her features.

¹⁴ A female monster from Greece with the lower body of a snake, sometimes attributed with vampiric qualities. Used in this case as "vampire."

"Umm... Is Christopher coming?"

"...Yeah."

"That's great... I guess that means I can *run wild*, then?"

Adelle looked quite cheerful, a marked departure from her normal demeanor. Tim shook his head and sighed.

"...Damn it, the Lamia, huh. I already have my hands full with Adelle, and she's the most obedient of the lot."

He wiped away the rainwater running down his cheek and once again gazed up at the skies.

He thought of his brother, and of the companions who were due to join him later that night, and of the mission with which he'd been charged, and muttered to himself in a low voice.

"...It's going to pour."

— —

"It's raining," Firo said as he watched the rain splatter against the windows, a note of worry entering his voice. "I hope they don't get too wet..."

Maiza smiled teasingly, as though to make jest of Firo's anxiety.

"Worried about Isaac and Miria?"

"...I was talking about Ennis and Ronnie."

"I do hope you've thought up a proper apology."

"Aww, leave me alone," Firo said, pouting in an attempt to hide his embarrassment. He got up and walked over to the windows, looking outside.

Until just last year, there had been only one window, and even that had been a small one made so that one could only look out at the street from inside, and not into the restaurant from the outside. With the end of the Prohibition looming nigh, however, the restaurant had been extensively renovated in order to welcome visitors with a more open atmosphere.

Firo now stood before a window taller than he was, looking out at the rainy streets of Little Italy.

Suddenly, a shiver ran down his spine, there and gone almost before he recognized it for what it was. It had been a strong feeling that something was wrong, though he couldn't pinpoint

exactly why. He looked out the window again, carefully this time, trying to find just what had caused it, and discovered a man standing on the curb across the street.

The moment he locked gazes with the man, Firo realized what had caused that sudden feeling of foreboding. The shifty-looking man continued to look Firo's way as he stood in the rain without an umbrella. He seemed to pay the downpour no heed, instead staring into the store—no, straight at Firo.

The strange thing was that the man's gaze was a baleful, murderous thing, so full of hate that it was obvious even from a distance.

"What the..."

Disturbed, Firo narrowed his eyes, trying to place the man.

He'd seen him somewhere before.

"Where did I meet him again...?"

The particulars of his job necessarily brought on quite a lot of animosity from no small number of people, but he'd never felt such clearly murderous intent sent his way like this before.

He tried to focus on the man's face... but the unknown man, perhaps realizing that Firo was looking back at him, turned and slowly disappeared into the bustling crowd.

"...What the hell was that all about?"

Firo kept his gaze fixed on the outside for a moment, still perplexed, then finally gave up and went back to his place at the counter.

"Something wrong?"

"No, it was nothing."

He fixed a smile on his face, but inside he was furiously trying to remember who the man had been.

Who was that guy...

He was taking absentminded sips from his refilled cup of coffee, sifting through his memories, when Sena, the owner of Alveare, walked up to him.

"Firo, someone left this on the counter."

"Huh? What is it?"

Sena handed him an envelope with only the words "To Firo Prochainezo" written on the front in rigid block letters.

"What's this...?"

Firo frowned and tore it open, giving the note inside a cursory glance.

A long moment passed.

He went white as a sheet, threw away the note and bolted out of the restaurant at a dead run.

"Firo?! What's wrong?! Firo!"

Even Maiza's alarmed shout didn't slow him down in the slightest, and in the blink of an eye he had disappeared from sight.

Maiza picked up the discarded note, noting the obviously faked penmanship.

WE HAVE ENNIS AND RONNIE SCHIATTO

A single line, that was all the letter contained. There was nothing else, not even the sender's name, or a demand for ransom, or even a threat.

"Kidnapped? Ennis... and Ronnie?" Maiza turned the matter over slowly in his head, and at length voiced his conclusion.

"Impossible.

Sena glanced over Maiza's shoulder at the note and shook his head in exasperation.

"I suppose he thought that'd keep anyone from recognizing him, but... Isaac's handwriting is still as bad as ever."

— —

I'll kill 'em.

I'll kill 'em all, doesn't matter who.

Thought you could look down on me, huh. I'll kill you.

At first I thought, maybe I can't beat anyone? Maybe I can't do anything?

I felt like that when that crazy Mexican bitch was cutting me up.

But then I remembered. I remembered, dammit. I saw that fucker's face and I remembered everything.

It was worth going all the way to Little Italy, even if he saw me too.

Ah, Firo Prochainezo. I saw your face and remembered.

This is what it's like to want to murder someone.

That will to kill someone in cold blood.

Now we're talking.

Ah, the rain hardly bothers me anymore. It actually makes me feel better.

I'll kill you, whatever it takes. I'll make you regret that you were ever born. I'll make you wish you never existed.

I'm gonna kill everyone who ever looked down on me, every single fucking one...!

First, Tim and Adelle. I gotta take care of those two before anyone else.

Otherwise Eve'll be in danger.

Yeah, I love her. I'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.

Sorry, Eve. Your brother never was very smart.

I don't know how else to protect you.

What can I say? I can't think of any way to keep you safe other than killing everyone who'd hurt you.

Dallas Genoard walked through the rainy streets, his mind filled with selfish resolve.

"The hell," he muttered, his quiet voice lost in the downpour that fell down around him. "This place is just like that damn river."

"It's so dark... I can't see a thing."

— —

Firo dashed through the alleys of Little Italy, the face of the man he'd just seen coming to life in the forefront of his mind.

It was him! It was him, I know it!

Firo knew that the man who'd glared at him from outside Alveare had been the same man who'd kidnapped Ennis and left the letter. Searching through his memories regarding Ennis, he finally succeeded in recalling who the man was.

Dallas! How the hell did he get out?!

Dallas, who had murdered both him and Ennis three years ago, gunning them down with a machine gun.

Dallas, who should have still been enjoying his one-way trip to the bottom of the Hudson, courtesy of the brothers Gandor.

How had he gotten free? By all rights, Dallas should have been drowning and dying over and over again in an endless cycle, not walking the streets of New York. The question bothered him, but that wasn't what was important at the moment.

Firo Prochainezo ran aimlessly.

That bastard took Ennis...!

He ran blindly forward, determined to save the woman he loved.

The rain that ruled the streets swallowed up the sound of Firo's footsteps and stained the pavement in dark, heavy colors.

As though the streets themselves wished that it would keep raining forever.

— —

"It's really pouring now."

Tick and Maria had taken shelter in a deserted building slated for demolition close to Grand Central Terminal.

Tick was the same as ever, but Maria looked like someone else entirely. She sat in a corner of the grey concrete room with her head buried in her knees, like a child who had been scolded and sent up to her room.

Her wounds had been hastily treated, but she'd been forced to use her own clothes for makeshift bandages, and her tattered clothes together with the dried blood all over her body made her look even more pitiful than ever.

"Are you okay?" Tick asked, concerned, but Maria didn't even look up when he stepped close. Her voice as she replied was so subdued that Tick had trouble matching her to the energetic woman he normally knew.

"Hey, Tick..."

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry... I lied to you. I told you I wouldn't lose to anyone..."

"It wasn't a lie. You didn't lose to anybody, and you kept me safe," Tick said, giving his honest opinion. He hadn't said it just to comfort her, or pity her.

But Maria gave no sign she'd heard him speak, keeping her head bowed as she clenched a fist in frustration.

"Why... Why, damn it... I didn't even get this upset when Vino beat me!"

She knew why, of course. Vino had completely outclassed her in every category, from strength to speed to technique to mental fortitude.

But... the woman she'd fought today, Adelle, had been noticeably weaker and slower than she was. Adelle herself had even acknowledged as much.

In the end, though, Maria had lost.

Had it really been because of her choice of weapon? Or was it something else? She still didn't know for sure. She didn't want to know, actually.

Tick listened quietly as Maria continued, bitterly berating herself.

"Grandpa told me! He said that if my skill matched my belief, that I'd be able to cut anything! That there was nothing in the world I couldn't cut! But... I still don't know if I've gotten any better. I thought that slashing Grandpa would be proof that my skills had increased, but he died of a disease before I ever could... I was scared. I didn't know whether I really had the power to

cut everything. That's why I blindly cut everything I could see. It was the only way I could prove my strength to myself..."

The heat gradually drained from her voice as she talked. She drew in on herself like a frightened kitten; the normally cheerful girl Tick knew was nowhere to be seen.

"But I lost. You saw it too, didn't you? You saw that woman with the spear beat me without even breaking a sweat..."

Tick thought it over for a while and said, "I'm sorry. It's probably my fault!"

"...What?"

"You know, I don't think I can actually *believe* at all. You told me that things would be fine as long as we both believed in you, right? But I kept doubting myself. I didn't know if I could do it."

Maria lifted her head at the strange explanation and looked curiously at Tick, meeting his gaze.

"I couldn't believe in 'belief' because it doesn't have form, and because of that you got weaker... I'm sorry. I'll try my best to believe from now on. Then we'll be fine next time, right?"

His words were filled with the innocent optimism that only a child could muster. But Maria only gave it a moment of thought before shaking her head.

"I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"I'm scared. When I think of what might happen if I lose to her again, that I might lose faith in Murasamia... I imagine blaming the loss on my swords and I get so scared I can't do anything..."

Her fingers tightened on her swords in an effort to hide her anxiety as she laid out her thoughts. She knew she was just comforting herself, but she felt that if she didn't at least do that, she'd lose all hope.

"My swords are all I have. They're everything to me... It feels like if I doubt them, I'll end up losing my past and my pride and my faith and my soul, and it scares me, *amigo*..."

The way she said that last word made it sound like she was pleading for help.

Tick didn't try to console her, nor did he deny her request. He only spoke his mind.

"I told you I can only believe in things that break, didn't I?"

She stared at him, uncomprehending.

"That's why I won't believe what you said, because I haven't seen your pride and your soul or anything else break yet. I just think that you are who you are, Maria."

His words hadn't really refuted any of her doubts, but nonetheless Maria gave Tick a small smile.

"You're kind, *amigo*," she whispered.

Then her eyelids drooped and she slowly nodded off, her fatigue overtaking her.

Tick started talking to himself without checking to make sure if she was asleep.

"Things have really gotten complicated."

He looked out at the streets beyond the abandoned building's entrance, lost in his thoughts as he watched the rain pour down.

"The fastest way to cut through a tangled knot is to just cut it into pieces, but... Maybe if there was someone with strength sharp enough to cut through this tangled mess..."

Tick stood next to Maria as she slept, losing himself in the soothing sound of falling rain. At length, he drew a pair of scissors from his side and held them up in the air, slowly opening and closing them.

It was like he was trying to cut something that nobody could see.

Snip. The sound, somehow lonely, soon blended into the dull roar of the falling rain and vanished.

Still, Tick silently continued to scissor the air.

Snicker snack, snicker snack.

— —

"...And?"

A man's voice rang hollowly in the dim room.

The thuggish young man who'd been standing at the entrance swallowed hard and spoke to the darkness.

"And, uhh... Well, Jacuzzi and the rest of us're hiding out in this abandoned factory near the river for now... Bu-but that Ronnie guy looked really dangerous! I swear nobody but you'd even stand a chance against him!" he said, finishing his condensed summary of what had happened to them.

"Please, I'm beggin' you! Just havin' you on our side'd make us almost invincible!"

"Take out the almost part," the man in the darkness said, in a voice that made it impossible to tell whether he was joking or being serious. Slowly, he got to his feet.

"I don't really feel any obligation to help you guys at all... But my ravishing, lovable, charming, lovely, altogether charming *fiancée*? That's another story. Fine, let's go."

"Really?!"

"How's Chane doing, anyway?"

"Ah, uhh, well, there were these weird guys who weren't with the Martillos, and she got into a fight with one of 'em and got a cut on her fac-"

The presence in the darkness suddenly flew forward to the thuggish young man.

"Is she okay? Is Chane alright?"

The thug gasped harshly, the hand that had gripped him by the collar and lifted him off the ground making it hard to breathe.

"Ergh! S-she's fine! J-just fine, I s-swear!"

"Oh... Okay, then!" the man said, opening his hand and ignoring the young thug completely as he fell to the floor.

"No, wait. That's not okay at all."

He covered his mouth with one hand and drummed the bridge of his nose thoughtfully with his forefinger, deep in thought.

"Chane chose to live with me. She made a promise with me that she'd become a part of my world, that we'd share that world together," he said, slowly narrowing his eyes.

"Unforgivable... So these 'enemies' of yours cut Chane's face? That's the same as cutting my world. That's the same as cutting my own body," the man mused, expressing his anger over his lover's wound in a roundabout euphemism as he started changing his clothes, getting ready to leave.

"And come to think of it, what kinda guy cuts a girl's face, anyway? And he still calls himself a man?"

"Uhh, actually, the one who fought her was a woman too."

"...I'm an equal rights activist!"

"That doesn't make any sense!"

The man brushed off the young punk's retort and continued energetically, having finished his preparations.

"Now, it's time to raise the curtain. The stage is me, the hero's also me, and the heroine's Chane."

He sounded flippant enough, but his eyes burned with cold fire.

"Let's get this party started."



And so...

One of the most dangerous beings in New York began to move silently through the rain, determined to burn the tangled knot of events to ash.

The man's name was Felix Walken.

Previously, he had been known as Claire Stanfield.

But those who knew him well called him by a different moniker. Some voiced it with reverent awe, while others whispered it in hushed tones of terror and despair.

Vino... they said. Or, sometimes, *the Rail Tracer...*

The fierce downpour showed no signs of stopping.

It seemed as though it was intent on swallowing the streets entirely with the sound of falling rain.

The light drizzle became a roaring torrent, merely a harbinger of the storm to come.

The rain fell without pause, staining the streets and the people in dark hues.

Harder, and yet harder still.

As though to slash the streets themselves in two...

To be continued in the next volume