



BACCANO!

バッカーノ!

1933〈下〉

THE SLASH ～チノアメハ、ハレ～

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

イラスト*エナミカツミ

Illustration : katsumi enami



電撃文庫

Written by Narita Ryohgo
Illustrated by Enami Katsumi



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1933

< Last >

THE SLASH -Bloody to fair-

Ryohgo Narita

Illustration Katsumi Enami



The Lamia

"Say, Chi. Did you hear the news? They say old man Szilard bit it."

...Bit it?

"Yeah. Guess that means he got eaten."

Then that Ennis girl's probably dead too, huh.

"That's what they're checking right now."

Really now... You know, I never thought that anyone would get the better of that sly immortal.

"I suppose that in the end, he was only human. He was born as part of the sublime, grand, refined cycle of nature despite everything he did. Unlike us. We were unnatural right from the start."

Harsh. But true.

"See, he returned to nature through death. But us? I can't say for certain whether nature would welcome us even after we died... You agree with me, right, Adelle?"

"...I don't really know much about things like that. I just complete my missions..."

"Don't be such a downer. Come now, don't tell me you've forgotten what Master Huey did to us for all those years in the laboratory?"

"...I... I don't want to go back there. Not again. I don't want to go back. No..."

"Enough to make your stomach turn, isn't it? You don't want to go back to such an unnatural state of being, right? Hahaha. Ahahahaha."

That's enough of that, Christopher. You know that you're the one who doubts his own existence the most out of us, anyway.

"Of course, of course. That's only natural! Haven't you ever worried about it? No matter how many people we kill and kill and kill and kill, no matter how much we interfere in this world, the gap that exists between us and the world will never shrink in the slightest. All that's left is an ever-increasing sense of inferiority."

That's all we have. What do you want us to do about it?

"But, Chi. Adelle. Hear me out. I think that no matter how much we turn the matter over in our heads, we'll never really know for sure whether we're human or not."

Hmm?

"So I thought up a simple way to find out! Instead of trying to *become* human, we'll just *surpass* humanity! Then, at least, we won't have to feel inferior. What do you say?"

More stupid drivel... So what proof do you propose we use to show that we're better than humans?

"Mmm, well, we can follow the natural rule of survival of the fittest... In other words, we can find the strongest human being in the world, and kill them."

"Humanity has its limits... and we're going to surpass them."

You don't seem to realize that that sort of thinking is exactly what cuts you off from the rest of the world.

...Granted, I suppose that those foolish fantasies are all you have...



Claire

The cheers...

I can hear the cheers.

Ah, it feels good.

Really good.

I'm on the tightrope. It's clear to all and sundry that this place, at least, is definitely my world.

People who don't know me at all are looking at me and my skill. They're thinking, "That guy must've put in a lot of effort to do that. He must've put in hours and hours, maybe even weeks of practice."

Of course. Of course I did.

Ah, these cheers are acknowledging me. They're recognizing the things I worked so hard to build up.

See, the guys who *do* know me always say the same thing.

"Musta been nice bein' born a genius."

"Everything just falls into your hands."

"You were blessed with God-given talent."

Like hell I was.

Why would any god give anything to a guy who doesn't believe in him?

I earned these cheers. I built this world of mine.

Sure, the ringleader and the others helped make this stage too.

But these cheers, at this instant? All for me.

Ah, I can feel the fact of my existence amid these cheers. All the effort I put into making sure of it wasn't wasted.

But it's not enough.

Nowhere near enough.

They say mankind has no limit, after all.

I need more.

I need to experience more, to try harder, to improve myself...

Everything, to reach for the skies.

And if it turns out that I'm at the pinnacle of humanity...

Then I can still reach higher, and higher still.

There's no such thing as a limit on being the best. You can always go for more.

That's what it means to be human.

No...

That's what it means to be me.



Maria

...Who are you?

"That is what I would like to ask."

I'm Maria. An assassin.

"Aha. Now I understand. So Mr. Maloney did not fall victim to a crazed killer, but instead lost his life for an entirely understandable reason."

Huh? Why're you so calm? Aren't you going to run away? You just saw me kill someone. You know I'm an assassin.

"If you are an assassin as you claim to be, then you would have no reason to kill me, isn't that right? Unless, of course, you were contracted to kill me as well, in which case there is little I could do to stop you in any case."

Mmm... Nope, you're not on my contract. But now that you know who I am, I really have no choice but to silence you, get what I mean? Can't have you telling people about me.

What now? Heheh.

"I sincerely doubt anyone would believe my testimony that Mr. Maloney was struck down by a Mexican girl wielding a sword of Japanese make."

You've got a point.

"I see this was your first time killing a person?"

...What?

"It's a politician's job to read people. Your shaking hands, the dilation of your eyes, and the forced levity injected into your tone in an effort to hide them, make it readily apparent. Hmm. Perhaps I should revise what I said earlier. It seems you have the predisposition to become a crazed killer after all."

Why do you say that?

"Because only half of your trembling is because of fear, and the other half is due to excitement."

...

"Mr. Maloney resisted, so you cut him down. I will not resist, so doing away with me would have no meaning."

Ho, hold on a second!

"You have no need to do so, nor do you have any obligation. I will make sure to put Mr. Maloney's death to good use, so you may refrain from expending effort which will not yield any compensation. It may be what your instincts tell you to do, but it goes against the foundations of capitalism."

And with that, he just walked away.

What a creepy guy.

...Not that I was scared of him, mind.

I'm telling the truth, really. Believe me, amigo.

...Sorry. I was lying.

I was actually a little scared of him.

His name? Of course I remember, amigo. His picture was in the next day's paper. He said he'd seen the murder... though he said that a neighborhood mafia did it, not me.

It was... uh... Belinu, or Belial, or something like that!



The Present

Miria

Isaac! Look, look! The bunny's finally doing what I want it to!

"That's great, Miria dear. As for me, these doves just won't come out of my top hat."

Maybe they really like it in there?

"It's been three days since they made themselves at home in there. You know, I did lay down some newspaper at the bottom to make them feel a bit more comfortable. Maybe they like that so much they don't want to leave..."

Home is where the heart is!

"Aaaaugh!"

Eeeek! What is it, Isaac?!

"This dove laid an egg inside my hat!"

Wow! They made it their nest!

"Darn, I won't be able to do any magic like this!"

Amazing, Isaac!

"Mmm? What is, Miria?"

Look! There used to only be doves in that hat, but now there's an egg in there, too!

"...Astounding! It must be magic!"

There was nothing up your sleeve, but the egg just appeared!

"Unbelievable! I've just brought new life into the world!"

You're a genius magician, Isaac!

"I'm incredible! I'll start the show right away! You can be the audience. Here, watch this egg until it hatches!"

It's the world's longest magic show!

...But, you know, Isaac.

I've seen a magic trick that puts this one to shame. I've seen a show that lasted even longer.

I should have died that day—I thought I'd never be able to laugh again—but look, Isaac. You've made me so, so happy.

Your magic show's still going, and I've been watching it the whole time, Isaac.

And I'm not hiding anything up my sleeve, either, when I say that I love you.

Now, and forever...

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 Barcelito

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 eye patch. 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."

Nicholas

An information broker. Also Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Days. In charge of the English version.

Elean

An information broker. A severely bipolar black man. Wears Chinese style clothing for some reason.

Henry

An information broker. Trash number two.

Rachel

An information broker. An errand girl who travels all over the country gathering information.

The Director

The information brokers' boss, who spends his days behind a mountain of documents. It's said that nobody but the vice-director has ever seen his face.

Christopher Shouldered

A member of the Lamia, a subdivision of the Larvae. Possessor of an unforgettable face; lover of nature; wielder of a pistol sword.

Hong Chi-Mei

An Asian member of the Lamia. Christopher's brusque friend. Uses a pair of steel claws.

Liza

A member of the Lamia. A chilling being who exists only as a languid woman's *voice*.

Sham and Hilton

Mysterious beings thought to be part of the Lamia. Called 'the Twins' by Christopher's group.

Manfred Beriam

A senator who'd do anything for money.

Mary Beriam

The senator's daughter. A gentle and innocent young girl, unlike her greedy father.

A company is like... Well, in a word, it's like an organism.

Our company is no exception.

Maintaining your body solely through use of your brain—through conscious thought—is nearly impossible. Everything in your body is hard at work whether you're aware of it or not; your cells and organs slave away to keep your body in working order. It's not clear whether the cells know that they're working for the good of the body and not for their individual gain, but there you have it.

It's the same for a company. Every employee works for the good of the company—to advance their own interests—even if the higher-ups aren't actively supervising them.

But just as the whims of one's mind, that infinitesimal portion of the brain, can bring about the end of one's life so simply, so can the fleeting impulse of a corporate executive decide the fate of any number of normal employees.

They know, after all, that the cells cannot complain.

There are probably many reasons why people commit suicide, but the reason that companies turn the knife in on themselves is, by and large, in order to survive.

Indeed... People long for eternal life, and, from time to time, companies wish for the same.

Eternal growth.

That is the corporate philosophy of our company, Nebula.

We reach for endless heights, just as the heathen people of Babel did so long ago.

Of course, the Tower of Babel was destroyed. In the end, it was nothing but a simple building.

But we... We are not a base aggregate of rocks and bricks.

It is our objective to grow forever as a single organism, and we believe that that goal has far more meaning than simple immortality.

Haha, look at me.

Assuming for a moment, of course, that there are indeed people out there who have achieved eternal life.

As you already know, we have dabbled in many different enterprises since our establishment, and absorbed many others—enough to be able to form an approximation of a self-sufficient economy within the bounds of our company.

If one were to think of society as a living thing, then surely our corporation also fits that definition as well.

Instead of blood we shed assets, and instead of oxygen we breathe in the laughter of our satisfied customers.

Such is the true form of Nebula.

...You wanted to us to loan you our money. Our blood.

Do you know what that means?

It's simple, Mr. Turner. You will become part of our body as well.

But take care.

Many of our executives are quite fickle.

Don't forget that useless cells—overly long hair, flakes of dead skin—are immediately cast away like so much worthless trash.

Now, about the matter of the loan...

Oh, dear... You needn't be so tense.

What happened to the temper you displayed when you threatened to sue us?

...If you're not feeling well, would you like to have a sip of the elixir of immortality?

I must warn you, though. It is a tad expensive...



Daily Days Director's Office Evening

"Amusing. No, not just amusing—I must say that things have become truly interesting."

A mountain of paper dominated the room.

The dull roar of rain from outside filled the room, the damp seeping in as well and spreading slowly but surely through the great pile of documents. Even the ever-present shrill ring of telephones was, for once, absent.

A leisurely voice floated out from a corner of this rain and paper ruled area.

"I never expected that one of the groups involved in that terrible Flying Pussyfoot affair would become involved not only with the Martillos and the Gandors, but also with those in the employ of the researcher, Huey Laforet."

"Isn't it so amusing to you only because it's someone else's business and not yours, sir?" a blonde young man said reproachfully from the other side of the paper mountain, as though to scold the eagerness in his boss's voice.

"Personally, as a poor employee who works day and night just to pick up his paychecks, I'd like to avoid a ruckus like what happened last year if at all possible."

"Oh? Can you say in all honesty that you aren't enjoying this, not even a little? If you could answer yes to that question, you wouldn't be standing here in the first place, would you?"

A small stack of papers fell over, as though offering its own rebuttal to the young man.

"Perhaps you might be a simple employee in the editorial department, but in here? In here, you are Nicholas Wayne, an independent individual and also a fine information broker in your own right."

The newspaper company also dealt in the buying and selling of information, guiding the flow of peoples' lives.

Inside the document-filled room, which practically symbolized the spirit of the company itself, there stood a handful of men, their expressions as varied as their looks. Somehow, they managed to find places to stand amidst the hopeless clutter and turned to face the giant pile of paper.

From the core of that pile, hidden away from all and sundry, the director of the Daily Days began to assess the situation, the levity in his voice making it clear he was relishing the ongoing peek into "someone else's business."

"Now, let's start off with a brief organizing of events, shall we. Let's slice everything into simple, easily digestible slices, like an apple pie."

"If only things were that simple," Nicholas sighed, and began to explain how things had started in a measured tone.

"It's all because of that damned Flying Pussyfoot. That train transported Jacuzzi Splot and his gang here to New York, where they promptly set up shop. I suppose if that work had been even remotely legal, we wouldn't be here right now."

Nicholas paused and smirked bitterly, and the black man standing next to him picked up where he'd left off.

"Hahaha, as if. No way, my friend! You're telling me that *that* many mafia wannabe brats could find honest work? In *this* depression? No way, no how! God in his wisdom is equal in all things, and this time's no exception! Unfortunately for those hoodlums, there's no such thing in his dictionary as a special rule that lets kids and thugs get work while the rest of us go hungry."

"Shut up, Elean."

The black man, Elean, gave an exaggerated shrug and turned to the bespectacled man standing to Nicholas' other side.

"I was just expressing my views. Anyway, what happened was, the Gandors and the Martillos sent people to scold those little rascals. Right, Henry?"

"Well... The thing is, the kids were already entertaining some guests. Members of the Larvae, one of the many terrorist cells created by the infamous terrorist Huey Laforet, were there attempting to form an agreement with Jacuzzi Splot's gang... Acting on information I sold them, of course. They were looking for a group of thugs who weren't affiliated with any criminal organization while still possessing a non-negligible modicum of strength, after all."

The discussion came full circle, back to the master of the room.

"And then, as all the forces came together, there was a clash. After that... Well, from the reports we received, something like a cloud of smoke spread out from the mansion and the people inside used that as an opportunity to scatter. Things are clear enough until here."

Elean spoke up the moment the director fell silent, curiosity clear on his face.

"Wait, wait, wait, I sincerely hope that's not all you've got to say to us, boss. You called us here yourself, so I'm guessing that there's got to be something else that you want to tell us, right?"

"No, that's all I have so far. It seems that a single couple visited the mansion even before the Larvae came for young Jacuzzi... but I suppose they must have been his friends."

"Huh? Then why'd you-"

"Huey Laforet," the director said, quiet but firm, the name itself sufficient answer to Elean's question.

"His involvement in this matter was more than enough reason to gather you here. I thought that it would be good to use this incident as an opportunity to give you a brief summary of the situation, at least."

"...But he was arrested a while ago, wasn't he?"

"Let me ask you a question," the voice behind the papers said, calmly listing the facts as he tested his underlings. "A full year and six months have passed since he was caught, and yet... Why, do you think, have we heard next to nothing about him after his arrest? It's almost as the world wants us to forget about him."

Silence fell over the room; none of the information brokers could find an answer.

Huey Laforet was a terrorist who had, some time ago, caused a moderate amount of commotion. He'd been arrested on charges of purchasing vast quantities of weapons to use in an attempt to overthrow the U.S. government, but nothing about him had been revealed after his arrest—not the details of his interrogation, not the results of his trial, not even his current status.

There were rumors, of course, that he'd been sent to the military prison on Alcatraz Island, but as for concrete information... Neither Nicholas nor Henry had been able to find any clues.

"What that tells us is that the man known as Huey Laforet represents something quite special to the United States of America. What's more, Huey Laforet does not care about being captured. It's possible, in fact, that even his arrest at the hands of the police was part of his plan. That goes for the decimation of his organization, the Lemures, as well."

"That's preposterous... Why would he do something like that?"

"Who knows? This is, of course, mere speculation, but as far as I am aware... Huey Laforet is the sort of man who would not bat an eye at such sacrifices. But enough of that for the moment. In other matters... I must wonder if the members of the Larvae know that the daughter of their master, Chane Laforet, is a member of Jacuzzi Splot's group."

The director did not shy away from revealing these important facts.

"Now... is there anything else you would like to have explained?"

Henry adjusted his glasses and considered his boss's offer for a moment before opening his mouth.

"If I may say, sir, I believe that this matter will soon become even more chaotic... Or, on the other hand, it may come to a very abrupt end."

"Oh ho. And what tidbit of information leads you to say this?"

"...Vino is on the move."

Vino. The temperature inside the room plummeted at the simple mention of the name.

"...The Rail Tracer..."

"...*Formerly* Claire Stanfield..."

"...*Currently* Felix Walken..."

Nicholas and Elean listed several names in succession, but they only had one man in mind.

Henry, his spirits bolstered by their reaction, continued.

"I received a report that one of Splot's underlings went to Walken's hideout, and later exited with Walken in tow, leading him to join up with the rest of his gang."

"Why would that assassin..."

"Obviously, it's because his fiancée's got a stake in this matter."

"His fiancée?"

The director answered Nicholas' question for Henry.

"Haha, that is another story, for another time. The tale of the assassin and the terrorist's reunion is far too grand, and far too long, to tell at a meeting like this."

He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts, and musingly led the conversation in a different direction.

"But my... Considering that this would be nothing more than a minor commotion if one were to ignore the involvement of Huey Laforet, it feels to me as though it has the potential to grow into something quite entertaining."

The voice buried amidst the papers had just started to rise in excitement when a light knock came from the other side of the door.

"It's Rachel," a young woman's voice said from outside, and the director's voice lost none of its enthusiasm as he bade her enter.

The door opened wide, and through the open doorway stepped a young woman. Nicholas looked a bit confused once he caught sight of Rachel's face.

"When did you get back?"

"...I took the evening train," Rachel muttered, a cloud passing briefly over her face as she stepped over to a spot on the floor that wasn't overrun by stray papers.

"You don't look all that well. Something wrong?"

"...I saw some unwelcome faces on the train."

"Unwelcome faces?" Elean asked.

"No mistaking them," Rachel spat. "It was the Lamia."

"The Lamia..."

The men gathered in the room turned the word over in their heads, trying to attach a significant meaning to it, but nothing really came to mind except the monster from Greek mythology.

Only the man hidden behind the papers spoke up gleefully.

"Really, now... Christopher and his Lamia, here in New York?"

The director seemed to think it over for a moment before continuing.

"It goes without saying that they're here to join up with the Larvae, I suppose. But how did you recognize them?"

"...This was actually my first time seeing any of them. At first I thought they were some sort of circus troupe, but then I remembered the rumors I'd heard during my travels. I guess with looks like that, it'd be hard not to recognize him."

"Ah... I see, I see. So Christopher was there, then?"

"Yes... The moment I saw him, I remembered the things that I saw on board the Flying Pussyfoot."

Rachel gazed at something far away in the distance, for a moment transported someplace far away in both space and time.

"How many were there?"

"I only saw one Asian man traveling with Christopher... But if the information I gathered is to be believed, there'll probably be a few more with them, though I can't say who."

"I see. Yes, the Lamia are quite few in number, and one of them is already here in New York."

Nicholas couldn't take it any longer and butted in, clearly annoyed.

"Wait, wait. Hold on a second. Are you two just going to keep on leaving us out of the loop?"

"Ah, excuse me..."

The director offered his apology and continued the meeting.

"Now, now, things have become quite entertaining. We have not only the infamous Vino, but also the 'vampire', Christopher Shouldered, entering the fray... I suppose this matter will revolve around a battle between those two—no, I suppose we should include the Martillo's Ronnie Schiatto as well, which makes it a three-way melee. Hahaha. My fellows, it appears that this will become a great deal more captivating than we had first supposed. Don't you agree?"

Nicholas threw a bucket of cold water on the director's manic enthusiasm with a pointed question.

"...Christopher Shouldered... Can't say I've ever heard of him before. Should the name mean anything?"

"Ah, of course. Only Rachel has heard of young Christopher besides the vice-director and I, since she regularly travels all over the country. He—no, they—are a sort of roving urban legend, you see... But it's the Lamia's first time visiting New York, so I suppose it's not too out of the ordinary that you don't know of them."

The voice behind the hill of papers began to introduce a single person to its rapt audience.

"Very well. First, I suppose I should tell you about the man known as Christopher Shouldered..."

The Daily Days treated information as property, and the man at the head of the agency managed each piece of information like a movie director would oversee his actors. Observing that all of his actors were in place, the director jovially began to speak.

The staccato beat of rain hitting the window accompanied his words.

"Ah, yes. Christopher Shouldered. I'll start by introducing him, as a sort of prologue to the *events* that will soon begin..."



CHAPTER 3: THE MAD BLADES MAKE MERRY

Several Days Ago
Night Over Chicago
A Warehouse Row Near Lake Michigan

The moon rose bright and beautiful on the night of the deal.

The Russo Family had fallen on hard times, surrounded and pressured on all sides by powerful mafia organizations. Their last desperate attempt at clawing their way out of the hole they'd found themselves in involved selling drugs to an Asian based crime family based in a different area.

And the biggest of their sales was scheduled to take place that very night...

"Ah... Isn't this flower beautiful..."

Soft moonlight illuminated the warehouse row.

There were small patches of dirt amidst the concrete that served as the floor around the row, and in one such patch there had blossomed a single flower.

Just one.

The sole sign of nature in a sea of slate grey.

A young man squatted in front of the tiny flower, talking quietly to himself.

"What a lovely color. What a lovely shape. Just the fact of its existence, of life not only triumphing in the face of such adversity but even mustering the strength to shoot forth a blossom... Simply breathtaking."

His features, softened by the light of the moon, formed a delicate harmony with the flower before him.

But if there was just one thing that seemed out of place in this peaceful scene...

"Hey, hey... I thought we told ya to beat it, asshole."

"This joker break outta the crazy bin or somethin'?"

...It might the group of dangerous looking men encircling the youth and his flower. There were about a dozen of them, all glaring murderously at the foreign element in their midst.

But the young man seemed unaware of the dire straits he was in, still gazing wistfully at the flower.

"Beautiful..."

"Oi! Ya hear me?!"

One of the men stalked up to the flower gazer and grabbed him by the frills on the back of his collar.

He wore strangely antiquated clothes that made him look like a medieval nobleman. Perhaps the only redeeming quality about his archaic getup was the fact that his outfit was colored in dark tones of black and crimson, fitting perfectly with the muted colors of the night.

He didn't resist as the mobster forced him upright, instead looking back at his assailant with a smile as soft as before.

"Don't you think it's inspiring? It managed to grow just fine despite the strong wind blowing in from the lake."

"Huh?"

He paid the gobsmacked man no heed and continued.

"Is there nothing I can do for this incredible little flower?"

"...You'll make great fertilizer for it once I'm done with ya, kid," the mobster growled, grabbing the young man by the shoulders in preparation to deliver a dizzying headbutt, followed by a crushing knee to the stomach.

"That's right!" the young man suddenly cried.

The shout came from nowhere, making the man hesitate for just an instant before attacking.

But that hesitation became a full stop as the younger man continued, and his hands suddenly grew slack with shock.

"I think *all of you will have to die* for this flower's sake."

"...What?"

The man suddenly realized that something was wrong about the smiling face of his adversary.

Every single tooth in the young man's mouth *was a razor sharp fang*, bringing to mind the jagged grin of a vampire.

Then their eyes met.

The sclera of the young man's eyes were stained deep crimson, and his irises were colored shocking white. In the middle of each bizarrely colored eye was a black pupil, so solid and deep it seemed as though it would devour all its gaze fell upon.

He looked like something from an old wives' tale, or something sprung straight from the horror stories that children would whisper to one another around the safety of a campfire.

"You look just like a vam-"

Snik.

It was an innocuous sound.

The silver blade sunk deep into the man's throat like a hot knife through butter.

He opened and closed his mouth silently several times, but the keen point severed his spinal cord in an instant, and scant moments later everything went black.

"...Huh?"

"Hey! What's wrong?"

The men standing behind the dead mobster were slow in realizing what had befallen their comrade.

To them, it looked like he was still standing with his hands on the stranger's collar. They merely thought it strange, perhaps a little worrying that their friend had frozen so suddenly.

As though replying to their confusion in the dead man's stead, the young man began to speak in a friendly voice.

"What's wrong, you ask? Well..."

His knife still stuck deep in the dead man's throat, he glanced quickly over the faces of the assembled mobsters.

"...Ah, you all *are* so very beautifully worthless, pathetic beings."

"What..."

Only then did the mafia realize that something was wrong.

Dark thoughts began to fill their heads regarding the fate of their frozen comrade, each one more fearsome than the last, and their features tensed with apprehension as they inched closer.

"That's right! You know, while we're talking, I might as well inform you that the people you were expecting to deal with tonight couldn't make it!"

The men paused, caught flatfooted by the sudden declaration. They'd thought him someone completely unrelated to their business, but now he mentioned their purpose here out of the blue.

Heedless of the way he'd trodden on the unspoken barriers erected by the mafia, the young man kept talking, the gentle smile still fixed on his face.

"You have been abandoned! Forsaken! Your *partners* have not only refused to accompany you in your journey to the next world, but indeed, they won't even deign to leave flowers on your graves! Why, the thought of how absurd you are would even move me to pity... But alas. Before the beauty of this flower, you are all... equally worthless!"

He finished his short speech with a jerk of the hand that held his weapon.

Sharp, impossibly dry cracks rang in the air.

The sound of gunshots split the night sky, and simultaneously the dead mobster's neck exploded, spewing forth a barrage of bullets.

"Gah..."

"Argh..."

The closest mobsters suddenly came into possession of bright red holes in their chests and faces, and slumped bonelessly to the ground like masterless puppets.

"What the-"

"You bastard...!"

The remaining men, about ten in number, stabbed their hands into their coats, caught flatfooted at the sudden appearance of death in their midst.

But the young man didn't move an inch from where he stood, using the dead man's corpse as a shield as he continued to *pull the trigger of the blade* that he held in his hand.

Bark after bark echoed out over the lake, but each and every single one came from the young man's weapon.

His bullets found their mark in those men who were closest to drawing their guns, and when about half their number had fallen, he drew his knife from his human shield's neck. A small fountain of blood spurted sluggishly from the gaping wound.

The mobsters' eyes were drawn to the weapon flashing in the moonlight even as their hands darted to their pistols.

...A gun... and a knife?

Well, it was shaped like a gun; there was no mistaking that.

What surprised the mafiosos so much was the fact that the barrel was much longer than the norm for a gun that size.

Then the moonlight shone on the shadowy thing they'd thought a barrel, revealing a wicked edge.

"A pistol... sword?" one of the mobsters muttered incredulously. He quickly shook off his surprise, drawing his own gun and pointing it at the young man.

Incredibly, the mysterious young man chose to lower his weapon instead of firing, letting his strange gun hang limply at his side. Clearly, his fate was sealed, as the gangster's finger tightened on the trigger.

But something lurking in the shadows would not allow that to happen.

A sharp clang reverberated through the night, a split second after the gunshot.

There was a silhouette standing in front of the youth, one that hadn't been there a moment ago. The metallic impact had come from the figure's arms, which it held crossed in front of its face. A brief cascade of blue-white sparks flew from them as the deflected bullet rocketed away into the darkness.

The mobsters froze for an instant, digesting the sight before their eyes.

"What the hell..."

"Who the hell're you, asshole?! Where'd you come from?!"

"Don't... test me," the shadow growled, scowling at the man he'd just protected. "This isn't the time for games... Christopher."

Christopher shook his head slowly, as though saddened by the anger he was receiving.

"Oh, come now, Chi. You know I'm always serious. And I wasn't testing you just now! I trusted you—there's a difference. Why, you might even say I *loved* you! Oh, let me make it clear, though. I don't have a thing for men, just so you know. Wouldn't want you to get disappointed."

The man named Chi wordlessly shook his head, stalking toward the remaining mafia. They snapped back to reality, firing wildly at the advancing figure, but the bullets merely pinged off into the darkness, blue sparks on cold metal.

Chi hunched low, his gauntlets forming a circle in front of him as he ran forward. He ducked so close to the ground his chest almost skimmed the floor, allowing his arms to shield his entire body.

Holy shi-

The mobster closest to Chi couldn't even finish his last thought.

The circle made by Chi's arms suddenly expanded into a sphere, just brushing by the gangster. Then Chi's limbs flashed and the sphere grew to encompass the his target's entire body in an instant.

What had until then seemed like nothing more than steel gauntlets abruptly split open near Chi's wrists, four wickedly curved blades springing into place over his fingers. The gloves transformed into a pair of claws and passed through his target's head.

Four red lines welled up over his neck and face.

More than deep enough to be fatal.

Chi didn't even have to look; the feeling told him all he needed to know as he bolted forward, past the already dead man. The shadow didn't slow down as it slid through the ranks of the mafia like a bolt of dark lightning.

Half the remaining men fell over, slain.

"What the fuck's goin' on?!"

"Monster!"



Those lucky men who had been outside the range of Chi's claws turned quickly, pointing their guns at the retreating shadow's back.

But just as their fingers tightened on the triggers, they heard someone speak behind them.

"Hmm... You all *are* so very weak, aren't you?"

The dulcet voice sounded like it belonged to a woman, the beguiling tones completely out of place in the night with the scent of blood and gunpowder thick in the air.

For a moment, the men hesitated, deliberating on whether to look behind them or just shoot. Some of them instinctively pulled their triggers, but their shots went wide of even Chi's upraised arms.

The woman's voice behind them chuckled at the sight.

"The Russo Family, was it? I seem to recall hearing that several of your number were killed by some of the local children last year... or was it the year before that? Hah..."

The derision in her voice was gratingly obvious, but even then the men found bewilderment, not anger, at the forefront of their minds.

What the hell are these people?

"How pathetic. I thought the Russo Family was supposed to be one of Chicago's most influential organizations. But if you consider that a few dozen children managed to bring down a handful of you... and now, a few dozen of you are getting handily taken care of by a handful of *us*... Well, then. I'd say that's quite humiliating. Wouldn't you agree?"

It was clear by now that the woman was in league with the pair of monsters set against them.

That meant she was an enemy.

In that case, the course of action was simple. All they had to do was whip around and fill her with hot lead.

But what if she had a gun?

Doesn't matter.

The time for careful deliberation had come and gone. One of the men turned, his finger already tightening on the trigger.

If the woman was armed, he'd shoot her right between the eyes. If she wasn't, he'd take her hostage.

It was a good plan, and simple too. He whipped around, confident that he'd succeed.

The rest of the survivors, perhaps following his lead, also pivoted to look back...

"Wha...?"

...and their minds went blank.

There was *nothing there*.

They'd heard something there—they *knew* it, but only the rusty red of the warehouse wall greeted their eyes.

Their confusion gradually shifted to fear, and they looked wildly about for the owner of the mysterious voice.

"...Wha... Where-*grrk*"

Cold, sharp steel flew from the darkness. Lodged in their skulls, the blades quickly grew warm from their coating of blood, but the mobsters were no longer in any condition to notice.

"The hell's goin' on back there?!" one man yelled over his shoulder; he had kept his eyes fixed on Chi as he approached but nonetheless he realized that something was going wrong behind him. He chanced a look back and saw his allies slumped on the ground, black rings protruding from their heads.

The rings were sunk deep into the bone, actually disappearing into the men's skulls, making it clear even from a casual glance that they were already dead.

Then, a voice.

"I'm sorry," a woman's voice said, clear and quiet, from a shadowed corner of the warehouse. It rang in a way that made it seem like she was talking directly into their minds.

"We weren't planning on killing any of you, but Chris has his moods. You understand, don't you? I'm so very sorry."

"Fuck..."

The chaotic whirlwind of emotions that ran through each man's mind finally came to rest on one shared feeling: terror. But just as they opened their mouths to give voice to that primitive instinct...

"Shut it. I hate loud people."

...Chi passed among them like a breath of wind, and the screams died in their slashed throats with soft sighs.

Just one among them, bleeding heavily from a wound elsewhere, not from a cut throat, found the strength to curse his killers with his dying breath.

"Dammit... If only... if only Ladd were here... Y-you fuckers'd be so... sorry..."

"I don't know who this Ladd is, but he's not here."

Chi sunk one of his blades deep into the fading man's neck, his face expressionless.

"Hrrrk!"

"And that's all that matters."

Less than a minute had passed since the fight began, but already the warehouse air was thick with the stench of blood.

The scene of carnage was enough to drive any normal human being mad, but Chi's face as he stood in the center of the massacre was utterly flat and impassive. His steel claws had already folded back into the shape of gauntlets, the blades lying flat against his arms to shield them.

The mysterious woman was still nowhere to be seen, and only the sound of the wind blowing in off the lake filled the silence around them.

"Ah, yes, flowers are beautiful, aren't they?"

The young man, Christopher, had bowed out of the action at some point in the frenzy and was now lost in his own little world, completely absorbed by the single flower blooming in the street.

"Oh... Oh god..."

A man stood behind him.

He had been among those who had stood surrounding Christopher just moments before, but he stood unharmed, having somehow avoided both Chi's claws and the curious bladed rings. What

was more, he hadn't even attempted to draw his gun, or even shown the slightest sign of hostility toward the killers.

Well, he hadn't up till just that moment, to be exact.

Anger clouded his expression as he opened his mouth, readying a tirade against Christopher.

"...*What the hell just happened.*"

"As you can see, a flower has blossomed here. Quite pretty, if you ask me."

"Don't fuck with me! I hired ya to make a commotion and *kill this guy and only this guy*, not fuckin' everybody!" the man cried, giving one of the corpses lying on the floor a hefty kick. It was the first one Christopher had murdered.

"But... But you *did!* You fucking *did!* Now everything's so fucked up I don't even know!"

Christopher turned to face the raving man, a childlike smile gracing his features.

"But you were doomed from the beginning, weren't you? Don't blame this all on us."

Chi spoke from behind the man, taking up Christopher's lead.

"Look, undercover agent. You did well to infiltrate the Russo Family, but our sources say that you've been doped to the gills on the drugs they deal for the past few months. You went in as a hunter, but now you're nothing but trash."

"Wha..."

The woman's voice came from the darkness, cutting off the "mobster" before he could defend himself.

"Look at you, darling. You knew that if the Russo Family went belly up, headquarters would learn of your little... hobby. You'd be a criminal yourself. You knew that when you hired us, didn't you? You wanted us to take care of the only man who knew you were an addict, the man who sold you his wares. You wanted us to make it look as though he'd been killed in a disagreement with another organization."

The man tensed, unable to hide his surprise as all the information he'd thought safely hidden flew at him from his hired help.

"...Well, congratulations for findin' that out. But then why the hell'd you do this?! Think how bad it'll look if I'm the only fuckin' one left alive in this whole fuckin'-"

"Please don't shout."

Christopher's face loomed suddenly in the man's field of vision.

His smile revealed two rows of sharp fangs that gleamed dully in the light.

"The flower might wilt, you know," he said in an exaggerated whisper, lazily lifting a single finger to his lips.

"If you're in the mood to shout, then why not turn it into a song? A song about flowers! A song about nature! We don't need lyrics for a song that celebrates the world, do we? Anything will do. Now, follow my lead... *La... lalala!*"

Christopher's clear tones rose into the air, a song with no words escaping his lips.

"*Tralala la la la...*" A smile broke across Chi's face for the first time as he sang along with the rhythmical voice.

"*Ladeedum, ladeeda...*"

Now the woman's voice joined in from the shadows, surrounding the undercover agent in a gentle ensemble of music.

Naturally, he wasn't in the state of mind to just relax and listen.

"*Answer me, dammit! Why'd you do it?!*" he shouted, veins standing out on his neck. The leader of the impromptu choir only sighed and shook his head.

"I already answered your question," Christopher said, his voice patient and even, like an adult explaining something to a child. "*I did it because this flower was beautiful. That's all.*"

"...Huh?"

The undercover detective ran it through his head a couple of times, unable to understand.

"Tha... that doesn't make any sense! Who the hell kills people 'cause they think a fuckin' flower is *pretty?!*"

"Well, why not? It's all a matter of perspective."

"Like hell it is! It's common fuckin' sense!"

The detective was panting for breath, shaking with emotion, and Christopher's grin grew wider and wider, his head shaking back and forth, as though his own emotions were rising up in unison with the other man's.

"Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong *wrong*. *That* is where you're wrong, friend."

Christopher paused his incessant movement and poked the detective on the nose, like a man reprimanding his misbehaving dog.

"Common sense says that killing people is wrong *period*, for whatever reason. Since, as you can see, quite a few people have been killed, common sense obviously had no place in what happened here. That's what's important."

"That's stupid! What does the damn flower being pretty have to do with killing people?!"

"You wouldn't get it even if I explained. It's got to do with my own subjective views, you see. I just wanted to see a flower blooming amid a bunch of corpses. Life in the midst of death, if you will. Understand?"

"No, I don't, and I don't care, either! You people're supposed to be fucking hired killers! You think you can pull shit like this and still find work?! Huh?!" the detective cried, clearly at his wit's end. Despite the fact that he'd been the one to hire them, he quailed before Christopher like a mouse faced with a hungry cat.

The mouse bared its teeth; backed into a corner, it had no choice but to go down fighting. But Christopher merely smiled, paying the threat no mind. His childlike grin and the razor teeth inside it formed a chilling dissonance that only made him more terrifying.

"I'm sure our reputation is safe. Why, you ask? Well..."

The bladed revolver came to rest against the undercover detective's throat.

"Gah..."

"If there's nobody who knows about this job left alive except for us, no one will be the wiser. Right?"

"Y-you bastard..."

"I love pistol swords, because I can stab someone with the bladed part and then finish them off with a bullet. It's two times the fun. Sort of like a rifle with a bayonet, except I suppose this is a bit small to be called a bayonet, or a rifle, for that matter," Christopher murmured, willfully ignoring the weapon's original purpose. Gently, his finger rose to stroke the trigger.

The detective could sense that there was no hesitation in his movements, and the terror in him rose to an unbearable crescendo. His mouth opened in a scream, but no sound came out.

Christopher moved his gaze to look up at the moon.

"Such a beautiful moon tonight... Mmm, that's right. How could I ever be concerned about things like our contract or our reputation or justice or evil or the people I've killed in the presence of such a sublime moon, of such a perfect flower? Doesn't everything just fade to insignificance in the face of that?"

He grinned brightly, and drew the gun away.

"I was just joking. Surprised? Frightened? Chase that fright away with a song! Come on now, give voice to the relief you feel at still being alive! *Tralala, lalalala!* Let it flow out of you!"

The detective stood with his mouth still open, struck wordless with terror. Christopher sighed and prompted him again.

"Here, follow me. *Lululu, lalala...* Come on, sing. I'm getting lonely," he said, the expression on his face open and friendly... but to the detective, that was more frightening than anything else.

"Falala la la... La, la...?"

The smile stayed on Christopher's face as his finger once more crept toward the trigger.

The man's mind, already weakened by weeks of drug abuse, began to shut down under the looming threat of impending death.

"Buh... Ah..."

The blade mounted on the gun's barrel pressed against his throat, dimpling the skin, just about to draw blood...

"Chris."

Christopher stopped, cocking his head toward the woman's voice.

"I've got a message from the Twins... From Sham and Hilton."

"Really, Liza?"

Christopher lowered the gun and turned around.

...I'm alive?

The only thought that passed through the client's mind was no longer that of complaint toward his unruly hired hands, but pure instinctive relief.

...I'm really alive?

"Oh, that's right. I did lie to you, actually."

"Huh?"

"I said that your partners wouldn't be coming, but that was a lie."

"...Oh."

"The hell happened here?" a low, flat voice said from behind the undercover detective.

He whipped around and saw, instead of Chi, roughly a dozen Asian men standing in a loose half-circle around him.

"You the one that did this? Answer the question."

The men had chosen to stand where the blood still leaking from the numerous corpses would not stain their shoes. The quiet air of deadly calm that surrounded them battered the detective's mind like a fierce wind.

"N-no... This... it ain't what you..."

He looked behind him, but no one was there.

Not Christopher, nor Chi. Not even the unseen feeling of being watched by the mysterious woman called Liza. Everything was gone, like morning fog evaporating in the sunlight.

"Ah..."

Despair.

Understanding dawned in the detective's drug-addled mind. A different emotion replaced the fear that had gripped his heart just a moment before.

Utter despair.

They wouldn't believe him if he explained what had happened.

No, even if they did believe him—about the killers, and that they'd decided to leave him alive—he'd have to explain why they'd chosen to do so. He'd have to tell them that he'd been the one to hire them.

It would be no different from forfeiting his life.

He had to explain it in a way that made it seem as though he'd survived by chance. There was no way he could let them know about the hired killers.

In other words, Christopher hadn't risked his reputation at all. He'd secured its safety just as surely as if he'd killed the detective outright.

He couldn't do anything. He was trapped.

Faced with the despair that was reality, the undercover detective fell to his knees in the sea of blood, mumbling numbly to himself.

"...Monster..."

— —

"Amazing! Fantastic! Magnificent! A single flower, blooming at the feet of a man falling deep into despair... There's no doubt, this will be one for the ages! A grand epic, a story loved by all!" Christopher cried, peering into his telescope as his boat made its way across Lake Michigan. Beside him, Chi looked into his own telescope and said nothing.

"But one thing does worry me. Will that flower make it through the ages, too?"

"The author of the story would be too dead to care," Chi muttered, but despite the cold rebuttal Christopher grinned widely, baring his fangs in a delighted smile.

"That sounds just fine. They call that impermanence in Buddhism, don't they?"

"...Not that I care, but you do realize that if we keep on doing this, we *are* going to have to worry about our reputation."

"Ahahahaha. What does it matter? It's just a lark we do on the side, anyway. We only need care about the opinion of one person. That's our real job, isn't it?"

Chi sighed and shook his head. "We've managed to make a name for ourselves in the business over the years. We're not as infamous as Vino or Walken, but try to keep it in mind that we do have a certain presence among hired killers, okay?"

"That kind of fame means nothing to me. What worth is there in such voices, though they be raised in adoration? Oh, that was quite marvelous, what I said just now, wasn't it? Write it down for future generations, will you?"

"Don't push it."

"Regardless! If we're to become the 'biggest names' in the business, we've got to take care of Vino, right? Working our way up through the ranks would be ever so boring."

Christopher stared at the shore for a moment, as the movement of the boat caused the man and flower to be covered in shadow. Uncharacteristically serious for a second, he said, "So what's the word from Sham and Hilton?"

"Don't ask me," Chi replied, but a voice made itself heard from somewhere on the boat, as though it'd been waiting for his dry retort.

"I'll answer that question, since it's related to your 'real' job."

Christopher and Chi looked where the sound had come from, but only a dark expanse of lake water greeted their eyes.

"Liza? Huh? Wait, we're on a boat and you didn't... Where *are* you?!"

"Hmph. You startled me."

The two men glanced at each other, nonplussed, but Liza's "voice" paid them no heed and continued to talk.

"About what Huey had to say. He wants you to take the train tomorrow to New York and help Tim out."

"Wow," Christopher said, affecting surprise, then grinned widely. "My word! How long has it been! I daresay it's been years—no, *decades*—since we got called for a *real* job!"

"It's been three months."

Christopher tacitly ignored Chi and bared his teeth to the world, his eyes sparkling with glee.

"And Adelle! I haven't seen her in ages! She's got to be frustrated, you know, working under Tim and all. That fellow insists on *no casualties*, can you believe it? Poor, poor girl."

He shook his head in a mockery of sorrow and arched his body back, tilting his head to face the moon full on as it shone down on the lake.

"Well, the time for sadness is past! The moon is smiling down on us, so it's obviously smooth sailing from here on! That's right, my friends. Everywhere we go, we're followed by the sun's blessing... and the blood rain..."

A Few Days Later Penn Station, New York

"Sun's blessing my ass. And any blood rain that did fall would get washed away in no time," Chi muttered derisively, his bandaged arms crossed over his chest as he stood at the entrance, glaring out at the stormy streets of New York.

"Mother Nature is so very fickle. That's what I love about her," Christopher said with a sheepish smile, brandishing his umbrella with one hand. "Let's sing of rain. Something optimistic, something that would cheer me up even if I was soaked to the bone. Chi, be a dear and think up some good lyrics, will you?"

"No."

The fierce rain blasted past the umbrella and began to drench the both of them.

They had arrived, amidst a downpour so fierce it felt like it would slash everything in two.

They had arrived, fully intent on staining the rain a hot and sticky shade of scarlet...

The Same Time An Abandoned Building Near Grand Central Terminal

"Doesn't look like it's going to let up," Tick murmured quietly, listening to the dull roar of falling rain outside as it intensified.

"...Yeah," Maria replied, huddled in one corner of the dusty, dirty room. The usual levity in her voice was nowhere to be found, leaving her sounding dull and grim.

One clash of blades had sent her plummeting into the abyss.

The blade of a katana, slashing through anything and everything.

That was all she'd ever believed in. No, it was all she was. Her belief in her sword was her *raison d'être*.

To believe in the keen blade of her katana, to believe that her sword was the best of them all, and to prove that faith with her own two hands and the keen blades they wielded... That was Maria Barcelito's life.

But a crack now ran down the length of that belief.

The spearwoman's words came back to life in Maria's mind, as clear as when she'd heard them for the first time.

"But belief is just, umm... *something that you cling to in order to console yourself.*"

...*No.*

"And as proof of that... You're beginning to doubt, aren't you?"

...*No!*

Again and again she denied it, but the ghost in her head refused to leave, the spear her enemy held screaming toward her neck...

"...You believe that a sword... can't defeat a spear."

The phantom blade plunged deep into the soft flesh of her throat.

"Aaaaaaaaaah!"

"Maria?!"

Maria had been sitting with knees drawn up to her chest, her arms loosely wrapped around her legs, but suddenly her hands flew to her head as she let out a tortured scream.

For once, the smile vanished from Tick's face as he rushed to her side. The torture specialist looked worriedly into her face as she trembled violently, clutching her head.

"What's wrong, Maria? Are you hurt?"

"Aah... Aaaaaah..."

Maria seemed to get a hold of herself, glancing fearfully at Tick out of the corner of her eye like a frightened puppy. She took a shuddering breath, trying to gather her wits about herself.

"Ah... Ah. Sorry about that, amigo."

"Are you really okay?" Tick pressed, childlike in his insistence.

Maria forced a smile and said, "Of course I am, amigo! Just had a little nightmare..."

"You didn't lose."

"Wha..."

Maria's eyes widened at the sudden proclamation, but Tick stayed calm, speaking as though he'd seen the phantom haunting Maria's mind.

"I've been thinking about it ever since we ran, and I think you didn't lose at all, Maria..."

"...Ahaha, there's no need to console me."

"Mmm... But think about it. Mr. Ronnie butted in and messed up the fight. That means there's no winner or loser..."

Maria thought back to the fight, pondering Tick's words.

Ronnie.

The name meant nothing to her, but at the same time she knew exactly who Tick was talking about. It had to be the mysterious man who'd butted in just before her fight with Adelle came to its grisly end, taking away both their weapons in an instant.

How had he managed it, when both of them had been so alert, their reflexes dancing on the razor's edge? It did bother her... but not much. Maria had other things on her mind.

"Mmm... No, Tick. I already lost... It wasn't about strength. I doubted my Murasamia, even if it was just for a moment. I lost..."

"But-"

Maria cut him off before he could say anything. "I'm telling you, I lost! I lost! You don't understand anything about how I feel, Tick!" she shouted, her voice trembling with stress and insecurity. It occurred to her that only the fighters themselves had the right to decide a battle's outcome, and Tick's words came across as supremely thoughtless.

Her pent-up emotions exploded outward in frustration, the downcast girl from a moment before disappearing like a dream. "What do you know, anyway?! You didn't even fight, what do you know about winning or losing? You've never won a fight at all! All you do is cut apart

people who can't even resist! You spend your whole life hiding! What could you possibly know about me, Tick?!"

Tick didn't answer.

"All you ever do is smile! How could you, could you, understand..."

Maria stopped, her breath coming in short gasps, regret washing over her. She was a loser, she was pathetic, she was the lowest of the low. And then she'd gone and lashed out with all her sadness and rage at the one person who was trying to help her.

All he'd done once they took shelter in the abandoned building was try to bolster her flagging spirits. In fact, part of the anxiety she felt came from her disappointment at herself, at not being able to rise to his expectations.

Then she'd turned around and unleashed those negative emotions on none other than Tick himself.

"Ah..."

She knew she had to apologize. But still she hesitated, unsure of what to say.

Tick took advantage of that moment to speak, the trite tone in his calm voice like that of a boy who'd broken a friend's toy.

"I'm sorry..."

"What?"

"I probably can't understand how you feel because I'm dumb."

...No, that's not it.

Maria tried to deny it, but the casual acceptance in Tick's words had shaken her greatly, giving her no chance to disagree.

"I told you before, didn't I? I can't really understand what you call belief, Maria, because I can't see it with my own eyes. That's why I can't believe in it. If I was a bit smarter, I know I'd be able to understand you. I wouldn't have made you so sad..."

She was at a loss for words.

"...I'm sorry. I can't understand what you feel when you say you've lost, Maria."

Every time he apologized, Maria's heart clenched with guilt. It felt like every word revealed another damning piece of evidence proving her weakness.

But she couldn't stop him. She felt like she didn't even have the right to stop him. A failure like her had no choice but to listen to Tick and carve every word into her heart.

His next words, however, went completely against everything else he'd been saying.

"That's why... you have to *win*."

"...?"

"I'm sure I'll be happy if you win next time."

Maria could only wait for Tick to continue, at an utter loss as to what he meant.

"I'm going to try really hard to understand what it's like when you lose, Maria... But you know I'm dumb, so it'll probably take a really really long time."

"..."

"But even a dummy like me will have no trouble understanding how you feel when you win. I'm sure of it," he said, the promise coming out like a flippant comment. "I know it because you always smile when you win a fight, Maria, and I know when people smile. That's got to be the same for everyone. So next time, when you win, I'll know for sure how you feel. And besides, you were protecting me earlier, so you can't call that a real fight. Right?"

Tick snapped his scissors shut and smiled a sunny smile, offsetting the chilling words that came from his mouth.

"Because you're not a bodyguard, Maria. You're an assassin."

— —

The Banks of the Hudson River A Construction Site

The metallic smell of rust filled the abandoned factory.

The place was huge—it looked to have been made for manufacturing heavy machinery of some sort—the interior filled with hopelessly rusted machinery and pipes that would never be filled with steam again. Naked bulbs hung listlessly from the ceiling, providing the bare minimum of light needed to illuminate the building.

"Now what do we do?" a small voice asked, muffled by the dusty interior. The voice's owner was a young man with a tattoo covering half his face, a watery frown twisting his face. He stood surrounded by at least a score of young men and women.

They were a gang that had sprung into existence in New York, a loose gathering of young hoodlums without any name in particular, composed entirely of people who'd come together through shared interests.

The tattooed young man standing in their center sniffled and said, "We're really stuck between a rock and a hard place now... What should we do, Nice?"

"Mmm... Well, I'm guessing that there's probably nobody left at the Genoard Mansion anymore..."

Jacuzzi Splot heaved a massive sigh.

"How did things end up like this?" he muttered to himself, thinking back on the events of that afternoon.

It had been a day like any other.

A perfectly normal, peaceful day, until the moment that their first guests came calling.

But the moment Isaac and Miria had stepped through the doorway, their faces admittedly a sight for sore eyes, the storm front that was abnormality began to roll toward his motley gang.

A peculiar group had come to see them, just a little after Isaac and Miria arrived. They asked only one thing of Jacuzzi's gang—"Wouldn't you like to become immortal?"—and then killed a man before Jacuzzi's eyes.

After Jacuzzi fainted, Chane had suddenly decided to attack the group who called themselves the Larvae, and immediately after, a woman wielding a pair of katana and a man with a thing for scissors had joined the fray—probably the Gandors' people, from what Jacuzzi gathered.

Not satisfied with that, the powers that be had seen fit to add a Martillo Family *capo* to the chaos, turning the luxurious manor into a scene of hectic bedlam.

To Jacuzzi's gang, both the Martillos and the Gandors were to be avoided at all costs, for they had been doing business on both organizations' turf for the past two years. To be honest, it couldn't really be called *business*—that made it sound like more than it was, and thankfully both Families seemed to agree, seeing as how neither had seen fit to contact them since they'd settled in New York two years ago. That had led most of Jacuzzi's friends to believe that they were safely beneath the notice of the criminal organizations.

They were wrong.

Jacuzzi's greatest fears had become reality. He and his friends didn't know what kind of negotiations a mafia might take up with a gang of street punks—they hadn't even thought that far ahead—but they instinctively knew that whatever the case, they'd be putting their lives on the line.

"Well, we can't run away forever. That'd just make them madder... I just hope we can settle this peacefully," Jacuzzi said dully, summing up the situation.

"Don't you worry, Jacuzzi!" one of his friends said, drawing his attention.

Jacuzzi turned to look at him quizzically.

"Even if it does come down to a fight, we ain't gonna be on the losing side!"

"What're you talking about, Nick?" Jacuzzi asked nervously.

Nick only snorted and said, "Vino's coming."

A murmur rippled through the assembly. Those two simple words were more than enough to cause a commotion.

"...You called Mr. Felix?"

"Course we did. Jack's gone to call him right now."

The hooligans looked at each other awkwardly, the face of the man who Jacuzzi had called Felix becoming clear in their minds. There was clear relief in their expressions, granted, but also a sort of uneasiness that clouded their faces.

Their gazes came to rest on one of their number. They came to rest on the pretty young woman wearing a black dress that matched her black hair... Chane Laforet. Her eyes had widened briefly at the mention of Vino, but she soon schooled her features back into a neutral expression and simply stood there silently.

A closer look, however, revealed that the light in her eyes was decidedly softer than normal.

"Must be nice havin' your fiancé coming to save you, hmm?" Nice said with a teasing grin.

Chane looked away, but everyone saw the soft blush that colored her alabaster skin.

The man who currently went by Felix Walken had once been known as Claire Stanfield, though only Chane, his fiancée, was allowed to call him by that name anymore. He'd come to them about a year ago, almost single-handedly taking care of the events that had taken place around Chane at the time.

He was a rather infamous figure in the criminal underworld, called "Vino" by some and "Walken the Cleaner" by others, but to Jacuzzi's gang he was a rather amicable fellow who'd introduced himself to them out of nowhere some time ago, calling himself Chane's fiancée. Chane hadn't quite agreed with this assessment at the time, but things had happened, and lately it seemed like she'd more or less come to accept it.

But...

"I don't know... I think things might just get more complicated if he gets involved..." Jacuzzi muttered anxiously, not bothering to hide his emotions.

The others, too, knew about Walken's quirks, and they nodded cautiously along with their leader.

"But you've gotta admit, we don't stand a chance against that Ronnie guy by ourselves..."

"Bu, but still..."

Jacuzzi shook his head, unable to let go of his worries, but just then one of the guys who'd been standing watch outside came running into the factory.

"Hey! Everyone! That... that guy from back in the mansion! He's here! Alone!"

His warning cry immediately enveloped the factory in a tempest of tense silence.

The weepy pout on Jacuzzi's face disappeared, replaced by a determined frown as he took stock of the situation.

"Which guy? Where's he come from?"

The other young man paused for a moment, sorting things through in his head, then replied with the first thing that came to mind. "Mmm... Yeah, that's right! You remember that guy who came with those weirdoes and *got a spear in the neck*, then a little after that died a bunch more times to that chick with the swords?"

Dallas Genoard found himself dominated.

His conqueror was a single emotion, one that boiled up from deep within him.

The intent to kill.

A pure, dead black that charred his heart, a terrible thing made up of rage and greed and hate and fear.

The rain soaked him to the bone, but even the fierce torrent of water from the skies could do nothing to cool the searing heat bubbling inside him.

To be honest, there were actually quite a few people he wanted to kill, in quite a few ways, but none of that mattered to him anymore.

Each and every grudge in him had melted into one huge and terrible tidal wave of animosity, one that would be released indiscriminately against the first poor soul unlucky enough to cross his path.

But he needed one thing to unleash that pent up rage, something he lacked... He knew better than anyone what that thing was.

Power. I need power.

Just enough to kill someone. That's all I need.

...Why don't I have the power to kill the bastards I hate? It doesn't make sense, not being able to kill assholes who need killing.

He walked through the rain without an umbrella, wrapped up in his own selfish thoughts.

It wasn't that he lacked the nerve to kill someone. If one were to say that the resolve required to kill another human being in cold blood was *nerve*, then certainly, Dallas Genoard had nerve in spades.

The only problem was that every single person he wished to kill was out of his league. All Dallas had on his side was the power of incomplete immortality, one beyond the reach of normal humans.

But most of the people he thought of as enemies were *complete* immortals, and even those who weren't were far above Dallas's capability to take on.

Maybe that stupid couple...

Dallas turned the matter over in his head, unaware that Isaac and Miria, too, were immortal, but soon shoved it aside.

Those shits don't matter... I need to kill Tim and all his fucking Larvae... Right, fucking, now!

His teeth audibly grinding, Dallas looked up to see the construction project on the Hudson's banks laid out before him.

The river, where he'd spent years dead and drowned. He could almost see the watery bottom in his mind's eye, a place that consisted solely of pain.

The only reason he'd come back to such a terrible spot was because he'd remembered something.

He'd had companions when he was dropped into the river. He couldn't even remember their names anymore, but he knew for certain that there had been two of them, incomplete immortals just like him.

He couldn't recall the exact circumstances surrounding his dredging, but nevertheless he'd made his way back to the banks in hopes of finding some sort of hint.

He called them companions in his head, but the word carried no connotations of camaraderie whatsoever. All he felt when thinking about them was a vague sense of expectation, for he knew that they were as immortal as he was, and so they might prove to be undying, reusable tools.

But in the end, all that greeted his eyes was an empty construction site; there wasn't a sign of the tools he'd hoped to acquire, or any hints on where to find them.

"Dammit... All that walking for nothing..."

He glared at the slowly roiling Hudson through the hard rain.

Just a few days ago, it had been his world, a watery prison. He had been forced to drown over and over again, time stretching on until it felt like forever... Dallas had even welcomed the short periods of unconsciousness that came between deaths.

After all, if he'd been conscious for all that time, his mind wracked with unending pain, he might very well have gone insane. The thought twisted his face in disgust, and he spat into the stormy surface.

He was done here. He turned to leave, then froze in his tracks.

A small gang of young people surrounded him in a loose half-circle, old and tattered umbrellas shielding them from the pouring rain. The roaring downpour had masked the sound of their footsteps, preventing Dallas from sensing their approach at all.

"The fuck do you want?" Dallas said, clearly not intimidated despite being vastly outnumbered. The only thing that had changed in him since his many meetings with death was that fear had become a very distant, almost foreign concept to him.

"You got something to say to me? No? Then fuck off. On second thought, even if you do have something to say, fuck off. I'll kill ya."

"Ah, erm..."

Dallas' aggressive manner actually made the gang's leader shrink back a little. Jacuzzi fidgeted nervously as he spoke, his voice nearly drowned out by the sound of the falling rain.

"Err... Are you one of the Larvae people...?"

Dallas stared at the tattooed youth, finally remembering where he'd seen him before.

These are the brats Tim said he'd use as bait...

They were the gang of hoodlums who'd been inhabiting the Genoard Mansion on Millionaire Row.

Come to think of it, what were these clowns doing in my mansion, anyway? Tim didn't explain any of that shit to me, that bastard... Bah, whatever. Probably some kinda deal that Dad or Jeff worked out.

Dallas knew that his father and elder brother had had a hand in illegal drug manufacturing. After all, the whole reason he'd left the house was from resentment at being excluded from the business on grounds of being too young. He still didn't know that the Runorata Family had carried out hits on them, so he automatically assumed that Jacuzzi's gang was dealing with his family.

Determined to find out for certain, he made the first move.

"Umbrella."

"What?"

"Gimme an umbrella if you want to live, kid."

"Ack... S-s-sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. Here, please don't hurt anyone," Jacuzzi stammered immediately, reflexively handing over his umbrella.

"Jacuzzi!" Nice and the others barked, but Jacuzzi tipped them a small wink, making soothing motions with his hands. A few of them glared resentfully at Dallas, but he ignored them, swaggering up to Jacuzzi.

"What's the matter? Didn't you wanna know who I am? C'mon, hurry up and take me to your hideout already, punk."

"...What? Oh, of course! Right away!"

Dallas stared pensively at the soaked young man and thought back to what Tim had said earlier in the day.

"Though I suppose it'd be more accurate to call them *bait*."

Bait.

"I like the sound of that word."

"Excuse me?"

Dallas paid Jacuzzi no mind, chuckling grimly to himself despite the puzzled youth's inquiry. He'd already thought of how to use them in his plans.

If I can make them do what I want... I might be able to kill those Larvae assholes.

He'd found a way to make his murderous intentions a reality. In his mind, Jacuzzi and his gang had already fallen under the classification of "companions."

"Well, looks like we're gonna be seeing a lot of each other from now on..."

The word "companion," in Dallas' mind, was synonymous with "tool."

He drew himself up pompously to greet his new friends.

"...So let's try and get along, eh?"

He looked up as though remembering something, thrusting the hand that held the stolen umbrella toward Jacuzzi.

"Hey, you're getting wet. Come here."

"Ah... uh, okay."

"No need to thank me. Just remember, you owe me one now... No, two... No, three, come to think about it, since I'm gonna be helping you out a lot from now on."

Jacuzzi, though no longer getting any wetter, blanched, unable to get a handle on what sort of person Dallas was. The only thing he knew for certain was that the man sharing an umbrella with him was likely not a man at all, but instead an immortal monster.

Still, monster or not, his curiosity niggled at him, and he opened his mouth to ask, "Umm... We owe you for the... umbrella... and the... advice? And what's the third one?"

"Huh? Slow one, aren't you?"

Jacuzzi frowned, still puzzled, but Dallas paid him no heed as he continued calmly, still wrapped up in his own thoughts.

"You all were living in *my* mansion, remember?"

"...What?"

Dallas ignored Jacuzzi and his growing number of questions, turning to face the stiff wind coming in off the river bank and walking resolutely forward.

Inside, he chortled in childlike glee, exulting in having found tools to use in the execution of his murderous will.

The rain fell even more furiously... and the sky remained murky and dark.

— —

5th Street The Empire State Building

Once, the plot of land had been occupied by the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, one of New York's finest establishments. When the grand hotel finally moved to a different site, the Empire State Building took its place there.

In contrast to the flamboyant Art Deco style of the exterior, the inside of the building had been simply designed, filled with drab offices.

Completed in 1931, the building was rather famous both for being the tallest building in the world at the time of its construction, and the dodgy measures that had been taken to secure that covetous title—for example, the great spire, ostensibly meant to be a mooring mast for

dirigibles, that had been added to the blueprints in a bid to surpass the Chrysler Building, which was also being constructed at the time.

Once inside, a visitor would see dozens of elevators, doors to a fortress of offices stretching up and up.

In an office about halfway up the building, there stood a couple who even at a glance were obviously not there on business matters, chattering excitedly to one another as they looked out the windows.

"Incredible! Look, Miria! The people look as small as ants down there!"

"It looks like you could step on them if you wanted!"

The two of them kept talking, looking down at the milling mass of pedestrians walking outside under their umbrellas.

"But wait, Miria! Be careful! You know what they say: make an ant angry, and it'll turn you into a grasshopper and starve you all winter long!"

"Eeek! Save me, Isaac!"

Their conversation, too, was anything but businesslike.

"I had trouble even telling what that was originally supposed to be from," someone sighed from behind them. It was a man wearing a business suit, his sharp eyes closed for the moment in amused exasperation. His manner of dress and the way he carried himself were a marked contrast to the couple at the window, who wouldn't have looked altogether out of place at a dress party.

Standing behind him, a woman dressed in a black business suit and matching pants—Ennis—stared at him quizzically. Making sure that Ronnie had finished speaking, she took advantage of the opportunity to ask him, "Excuse me, Mr. Ronnie, but... Where are we?"

She looked around at their surroundings as she spoke, taking in the men who were working frantically around her. Some of them moved goods back and forth across the large room, while others ceaselessly opened boxes and wrapped their contents.

"This place deals in things like jewelry, watches, small works of art... it's an import agent that deals specifically in small goods."

"No, that's not what I meant..."

"I'm just the director here; the *capo societa*¹ is the owner. Well, that's what the books say, I suppose. I hardly ever bother coming here," Ronnie explained. Ennis cocked her head to one side, still confused.

"What that means is that we still have to take care about hiding our business. I didn't bring you here to boast, though... I just thought it'd be a decent place to take shelter from the rain."

Ennis allowed herself a sigh of relief as Ronnie casually shrugged.

Just thirty minutes ago, in the mansion on Millionaire Row, he'd been like a completely different person. The sheer force of presence he'd exuded had made her feel like just touching him would destroy her, the light in his eyes so terrible that it took all of her courage just to muster the thought of defying his will.

But the being capable of such terrifying feats had transformed back into the slightly old-fashioned, affable camorrista she knew, the only hint of his true nature being his unusually sharp gaze—and even that looked out of place compared to the rest of him now.

I wonder what he is...

In the space of less than a day, countless questions had come to fill Ennis's mind.

She'd left the Alveare in search of Isaac and Miria, looking to bring them back after their impromptu squabble with Firo. Accompanying her had been Ronnie, ostensibly helping her while he went to take care of some Family business.

How had he found Isaac and Miria so easily?

What had been the cause of the commotion at the mansion he'd led her to?

How had Ronnie stepped in so easily, taking away weapons that had been aimed to deliver killing blows mid-strike?

And...

How did she know me?

There had been a woman using a spear at the mansion, who had opened a small wound on Isaac's cheek. Angered, Ennis had stepped in and grabbed the woman's arm. But then, hearing Isaac and Miria call her, the woman had merely looked at Ennis and repeated the name to herself quietly.

¹ Italian for "leader of the society." A mafia or camorra's leader.

"Ennis? Umm, excuse me, are you Szilard Quates'...?"

To Ennis, the name stood for both the being that had given her life and the most terrible thing she could imagine. But there couldn't be more than a handful of people in New York—no, in the entire world—who knew of her connection to the ancient alchemist.

The thought bothered her as she reflected on the mysterious gang she'd encountered back at the mansion. In comparison to them, the young hoodlums who she'd surmised to be the mansion's owners—though they certainly didn't look the part—had had an entirely different demeanor. The fact that one of the first group's number was capable of wielding such a spear indoors already made it clear that they were far from normal.

Ennis could remember every detail of the spearwoman's face, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't come up with any clues on who she might be.

If the next word to come from her mouth had been "secretary," then Ennis would have been able to rest easy, knowing that the woman was merely a part of the organization that Szilard had created in the past.

But if the word had been "homunculus." If.

That would mean that she knew exactly what the relation was between Ennis and Szilard Quates.

What bothered her more than anything was that the spearwoman had reacted not to Ennis's face, but to the name "Ennis." In other words, that meant that the woman didn't know her face. But she did know the name.

If I meet her again... I'll ask her then.

Ennis's meeting with the spearwoman's group had been through pure chance; they had no actual relation to her current mission. Of course it bothered her, there was no denying that, but she decided that worrying about it more would do no good, and put it out of her mind.

She turned her gaze to the two people she'd originally left to find.

"That's right, Ronnie! Did you remember to leave that letter like we told you?"

"I hope you didn't just eat it without even checking to see what it was!"

Isaac and Miria had also witnessed the chaos in the mansion, but their expressions showed none of the confusion and bewilderment that Ennis felt.

"Mmm... Yes, I took care to leave your... *ransom note*... on the counter where it'd be sure to be seen," Ronnie replied, smirking.

"Really, now! Thank you so much! We made a solemn oath to ourselves, you see."

"We swore we wouldn't go back until Firo apologized to us!"

Ennis stared oddly at the three of them as they continued their baffling conversation. She'd been standing, uncertain, in the midst of the choking smoke when Isaac and Miria had suddenly grabbed her hands and led her outside. One thing had led to another, and they'd ended up coming to where they were now on Ronnie's suggestion.

The odd couple had said only one thing to her since then.

"We're really sorry about this, Ennis, but could you *let us steal you for just a little while*?"

"We're really really sorry! We'll apologize more later!"

She had no idea of what had happened, exactly, but somehow she'd ended up stolen—or rather, kidnapped.

"Mwa ha ha, if only we could see the look on Firo's face right now."

"He's got to be at his weakest! He's lost the things he treasures most!"

The two of them gave rare sinister grins, prompting Ennis to finally ask, "Excuse me? The things that Firo treasures most...?"

The kidnappers did a little jig in a circle at her question, the electric lights reflected against the raindrops dotting the window making it look as though they were dancing wreathed in a veil of silver.

"Why, you, Ennis. And Ronnie, of course."

"His faithful beloved and his venerable old master!"

Ronnie smirked again at their declaration, while Ennis's eyes widened in surprise as she stared at them.

"Master, hmm? I think that old Yaguruma probably has a better claim on that title than I do."

"Beloved...?" Ennis said slowly, blinking slowly as she turned the term over in her head. For a moment she was unable to understand what they meant, but at length she said, "I'm afraid you must be mistaken. I only live with Firo..."

"Hahaha. Oh, Ennis. You're a bit slow on the uptake in regards to love, aren't you?"

"That must mean that Firo's love is tragically unrequited!"

Isaac and Miria took a moment to stop and giggle, while Ennis's eyes remained almost comically wide, her head cocked to one side uncomprehendingly.

"It must be terrible, being called slow by those two... Well, no matter." Ronnie shook his head in amusement and walked into the office to oversee the goings on.

Ennis considered their words for another moment, turning her consciousness inwards.

"Firo and I... lovers?"

She'd never even considered it.

Firo had shared his life with her, and if the thought should occur to him that he wanted her dead, then that would be the end of her. Her life was in his hands.

That should have been the entirety of their relationship.

But she couldn't actually think of the word to express that relationship.

It wasn't one of master and servant, and though Firo had given to her a portion of himself, they could not be called brother and sister, nor father and daughter.

Ah. She saw it now. Considering those circumstances, and the fact that Ennis lived with Firo, it made sense that people thought of them as lovers.

Ennis nodded to herself, but for some reason she couldn't completely accept that explanation.

It had not been long since her creation, and Szilard had granted her only the bare minimum of knowledge, so the concept of romance was almost entirely foreign to her. She knew what it was to cherish another person, and what it meant to love.

But she still couldn't fully comprehend the difference between her love for Firo and the love she felt toward, for instance, Isaac and Miria.

What was more, regardless of what others might think of them... what did Firo think?

And what do I think of Firo?

If Firo loved her, but she was incapable of thinking of Firo as a lover in return, how deep a betrayal that would be.

She still didn't understand her own emotions, and so she was helpless in the face of Isaac and Miria's teasing.

I wonder what Firo is doing right now?

I wonder how he would react if he knew that I'd been kidnapped?

Thoughts of Firo ran through her head.

She wondered where the owner of her life was, and what he might be thinking...

— —

Dammit, dammit, dammit!

Look up *useless* in the dictionary and you'll find a picture of me!

I can't do anything. Not a goddamn thing. Shit.

You call this knowledge, you damn geezer?

All your knowledge ain't helping me, not one bit.

Dammit, it hasn't even been a day since I told Maiza I'd try to overcome these memories by myself.

But now look at me! I can't even control how this one moment goes, much less someone else's past! How dumb is that?

Wait, none of that matters right now.

Doesn't matter that I'm making a fool of myself.

All that matters is Ennis. Is she safe?

That's all I wanna know.

If she's safe... As long as she's safe, I don't care if these memories end up swallowing me whole.

I actually surprised myself.

I didn't know that Ennis meant so much to me, that I'd put my life on the line for her so willingly.

Maybe it's some kinda affection because we've been living together so long?

No, that's not it.

No way it is.

Of course not.

It's not something like that at all.

I fell for her the moment I saw her. I fell for her hard, hook, line, and sinker. Every move Ennis makes, every line of her face, every word she says, every feeling she shows to me.

That's all I need. I don't need a reason to love her.

So... So somebody, for God's sake, tell me what's going on.

How did Dallas do it?

I can't believe that Dallas managed to kidnap both Ennis and Ronnie by himself.

Maybe it's got something to do with that attack on a construction site Ronnie was talking about?

Or maybe the kids from Chicago that Ronnie was gonna go and see?

Hell if I know, dammit. I never knew that *not* knowing could be so frustrating.

Is running all I can do?

No, there's gotta be something.

But I can't stop running.

My cells tell me to keep going. They're doing the thinking for my head, because my head is too worried to do any thinking at all. Find Ennis, they tell me, you need to find her, find her now because you have to no matter what, you can't stop, even if it kills you...

No... I'm at my limit.

I might be immortal, but the strain that keeping up a dead run puts on my muscles is becoming too much for the power of my regeneration and the natural healing of my body to keep up with.

My legs start trembling, like an engine that's all out of oil...

And then I fall to my knees, the strength draining from my body as I lose my balance and collapse in the street.

The water flowing through the street splashes mud all over my body, but even that's washed away soon enough by the pouring rain.

"Shit..."

Now what do I do?

Somebody tell me what to do, goddammit!

I look up, prepared to let loose my frustration in a shout at the rain itself...

But then, I suddenly realize that no raindrops are falling on my face.

I see a black shadow over my head. I think someone's holding an umbrella over me.

But who?

I follow the hand in my field of vision up to the arm, and then up to the face and see...

— —

East Side of Grand Central Station

There was a huge building next to the station known as the Mist Wall that served as the gigantic megacorporation Nebula's New York HQ.

It was colored a translucent shade of grey like the mist that was its namesake, the Art Deco style design of the building fooling observers into thinking that a cloud had come down and rooted itself into the earth.

The highest floors were made in the shape of pyramid steps, bringing to mind ancient ruins.

It wasn't quite as tall as the nearby Empire State Building, but all the same it was quite popular with the neighborhood's populace; its stately majesty served to captivate the hearts of those who beheld it.

But unlike the Empire State Building, the Mist Wall was not home to many different businesses, but instead just one. Every room, office, and shop inside, from the first floor to the very top, belonged to the Nebula Corporation. The building stretched up toward the skies, as though to symbolize Nebula's power.

In front of that building stood about a dozen men and women. The young man who led them looked up, toward the top of the building, his umbrella tilted back so the rain fell on his face. He paid it little heed, his mind already far away.

The man... remembered a mouse.

He had been given a white mouse as a pet when he was a boy.

It was a small thing, the first living thing ever entrusted to his care.

To the lonely boy, the mouse was his only friend.

He had no human ones, after all. It wasn't that his peers made fun of him.

It was more that he couldn't accept his peers.

The boy was a little smarter than the people around him at the time.

He saw them as so incredibly dull, so infinitely moronic, that he thought it a waste to even attempt conversation with them.

He didn't just think this way about his peers. He thought that way about his father, about his brother, about his dead mother.

In a way, perhaps the boy was not as bright as he thought himself to be.

He had, after all, driven himself into the depths of loneliness by looking down on others.

From his place in the depths, he found his brother's cheerful sunniness something to be envied.

He himself was so lonely, but his foolish brother smiled as though he enjoyed everything the world had to offer.

The boy couldn't accept that, and hid himself ever more under layer after layer of aloofness.

The only thing to soothe his mind during those dreary days was the white mouse he'd kept on a whim.

The mouse could not reply to what he told it, save in faint squeaks. He spoke to it, telling it all the worries and woes he couldn't tell to anyone else.

Like King Midas's hairdresser whispering secrets into the earth, the boy shared everything with the mouse who would never answer back.

"That's it. I'm just using this mouse to keep myself sane. I'm going to make my world inside this mouse—inside Jimmy," the boy told himself coldly, though he was not yet even fifteen years old.

The mouse was not a pet. It was a tool and nothing but a tool, something to anchor his mind to, something he would use to create a place where he could rest.

And that was all.

At least, that was what the boy decided to think.

But one day... the world that the boy had constructed inside the mouse came tumbling down, and with it collapsed the thoughts he'd built up around it as well.

He walked into his room one day to see a huge pair of scissors, many times bigger than the mouse itself, buried in its white back.

The sight was pure and cruel and real, telling him without a doubt that his brother had stuck his scissors into the mouse.

He killed it. It's dead. Tick killed it. Jimmy's dead.

What had surprised the boy more than anything was that the emotion that welled up inside him was sadness. Far greater than the annoyance of having a useful tool broken inside the boy was the sense of loss at having something precious to him taken away.

The sorrow he felt at losing his close friend soon turned to pain and anger.

The boy cried out aloud.

He screamed over and over again, begging for someone, for anyone to give Jimmy back.

But what he didn't scream was "Why."

Why had Tick killed Jimmy?

The thought didn't occur to him, not even for a second. And as time passed, he came to think that it didn't even matter why Tick had done it.

Whatever the reason, the fact remained that Tick had taken his scissors and stuck the cruel pointed blades into Jimmy's back.

The boy cried and raged and shouted until his throat was sore, and when his fury was spent, he realized one thing.

Not once had Tick offered an explanation. Not once had he said he was sorry.

And... That his brother had looked sad, for the first and only time that Tim could remember.

Not that I could ever tell what the hell he was thinking... But I'm certain that he didn't care what happened to me at all.

In the end, the boy parted ways with his brother without telling him anything, and he continued to grow.

The man who helped him on the road to maturity, who erased his past and assisted him in recreating his self, was none other than his current master, Huey Laforet.

The man who *came to meet him* when he ran away from home had known everything that went on in his mind. It could be said that Huey understood everything about the boy, from his emotions to his past, even the very the thoughts that ran through his head.

The world that the boy had locked away inside his mouse had appeared before him in the flesh then, speaking directly to him. The white mouse's avatar came to him and returned the world he'd whispered to it, many times over.

Everything about Huey Laforet had been hidden behind a veil. The boy regarded him with equal parts fear and adoration, captivated by his mysterious charisma.

In the end the boy accepted the world that Huey offered, determined to dye the world he lived in with those colors.

It took him years, but the boy managed to change everything about himself.

His name, his hairstyle, his clothing, his voice, his build, his thoughts, his personality. Everything about him save his memories—in other words, everything that made him Tack Jefferson—was discarded in favor of another life, the life of a man called Tim.

But those memories, the only things he had failed to throw away, now stood before him once more as his greatest obstacle.

What's more, they'd been brought meeting someone he's never expected to see again... his brother, Tick Jefferson.

Why did it have to happen now... There's too much on the line! I can't afford to be distracted like this!

It hadn't even been a chance and fleeting encounter, like passing him on the street. They'd met while Tim was on a mission, right in front of Jacuzzi Splot's gang.

And it even seemed like his brother was at odds with Splot and his friends.

But maybe it's nothing to worry about. Nothing changes as long as I don't let it bother me. It's another obstacle, nothing more and nothing less. My past is an obstruction that hinders my mission. I just can't let it distract me. I can't let it...

The young man repeated the line in his head like a mantra, slowly finding his calm.

He remembered how badly he'd been shaken upon meeting Tick, even showing his shock visibly. But it seemed that Tick himself hadn't recognized him at all, treating Tim as a complete stranger as events unfolded.

Well, I did go so far as to shave my head and wear glasses, but still. What the hell. I tried my utmost to forget my past but I still recognized him the moment I clapped eyes on him... But he didn't know who I was at all.

"...oss."

Being family is hardly different from being strangers, in the end. I guess that small hope I held all those years ago, when I ran away from home, can finally be put to-

"Boss!"

Tim turned around, finally realizing that someone had been calling him.

"What is it?" Tim asked calmly, deliberately schooling his features to project an outward air of serenity. "Sorry, I couldn't hear you over the rain."

The rain was indeed falling quite fiercely, and the drumbeat of it on their umbrellas made it even more deafening. But it seemed like Tim's underling had been shouting quite loudly, for he looked at Tim oddly before speaking.

"Uh, yeah... We went to pick up Christopher and the others, but they weren't there."

"What?"

"But they left this letter at the station's bulletin board."

The man passed Tim a small folded note and sighed, clearly miffed.

For his part, Tim gingerly unfolded the letter, skimming over the red colored text as he tried to fight the vague feeling of dread settling over him.

-Dear Boss,

How are you? My own feelings at the moment are wretchedly good.

Do you love nature?

Do you want to water the flowers?

I don't. Want to water the flowers, that is.

Too much water can make flowers rot.

In other words, it can make the world rot.

It can make people's hearts rot as well.

I can see that the rain on these streets is making the hearts of this city's people rot away.

For instance, I've rotted too. I don't want to do this.

Fortunately, however, Master Huey's orders only asked me to help you tomorrow.

So I've decided not to meet up with you but instead go out for a lark.

I'm going to enjoy myself until I'm utterly tired.

I wish to use my rotted heart as fertilizer to make the flowers of cherished memories bloom.

Perhaps I'll make a hundred friends?

Say, do you think the ratio of friends to soul mates is in inverse proportion?

Well, it doesn't really matter to me either way, so I'm off to have fun in rainy New York.

Don't worry. I'll try my best not to kill anyone until we get our mission started.

Oh, that's right. The Twins are watching you wherever you are, so don't call us. We'll call you.

Rain is a part of nature too. But I don't like it.

Someday, I'll throw down with the great will of nature.

Haha. From Hell.

Both the beginning and the end of the letter were quotes from the notes that the infamous serial killer Jack the Ripper had left for authorities to find half a century ago in London. Seeing as how they had little to do with the contents of the letter itself, chances were good it was nothing but a thoughtless homage.

The red letters smelt faintly of iron, making it clear what the "ink" was.

Tim realized it soon enough and shook his head irritably, tired of his co-worker's perverse tendencies.

"Christopher's really bent on testing me, isn't he."

"He mentioned Boss Huey's name, too," Tim's underling said, clearly worried. Huey Laforet was a highly infamous terrorist currently serving a prison sentence, and if the authorities caught any hint that people working for him were in the area, Tim's team would end up subject to extremely unwanted scrutiny.

"He knew full well what dropping that name meant. That asshole's mocking us. He didn't care at all what would happen if the station attendant happened to read it, or if someone else just came and took it. The bastard would just grin and say that things had gotten interesting," Tim muttered anxiously to himself, looking back up at the building before him.

"Dammit, I was hoping I'd have the chance to at least let him scope the place out before we went in for real."

The rain fell so hard it was hard to make out the top of the Mist Wall. Water dripped from his face as he mused aloud, "Not much when you think that it's barely half as tall as the Empire State Building... but when you consider that *we're going to be invading this place tomorrow*, it gets kinda worrisome."

He kept his gaze fixed there for a moment longer before suddenly looking away, cracking his neck as he turned to the woman standing next to him.

"Adelle."

"Ah, yes?"

The spearwoman flinched—clearly she hadn't expected to be singled out—and hurriedly turned to look at her leader.

"Go and find Christopher. Tell him to at least scout out the building from outside... We're going back to our hideout. From there we'll try and get a hold of Splot's gang."

"Right!" Adelle yelled, sprinting away into the rain. She stopped after just a few paces and looked back.

"What's wrong?"

"Ummm..."

The timid girl fidgeted as she confirmed her schedule for the day.

"If I find him quickly and have time left over, umm... I'll go and kill Eve Genoard, like we promised."

Tim froze.

Eve Genoard was Dallas Genoard's little sister, and incidentally the hostage they'd had prepared to keep him in check. Not that they'd actually kidnapped her, but they'd made it clear to Dallas that if he double-crossed them, they'd find and kill her.

"Well... No, not yet. We still don't know for certain that he's betrayed us."

"But hasn't he outlived his usefulness? We've already, umm, shown his regeneration to Mr. Splot, haven't we?"

"Maybe."

They had recruited Dallas for two reasons. The first was because their boss, Huey Laforet, had taken interest in the Dallas' "incomplete" immortality, intending to use him as a guinea pig if possible.

The other reason was as bait, to lure Jacuzzi Splot and his friends into joining their band.

The plan had been to show them Dallas's immortality first hand, and then coax them into joining forces with the promise of sharing that power. If all they'd intended was to show off Dallas's regenerative powers, then they would have done away with the pretense of him being

their companion and just dragged him in front of Jacuzzi's gang to cut open a few times, but that would be self-defeating.

After all, Jacuzzi and his friends would hardly find immortality appealing if it was displayed by having a helpless human guinea pig cut to pieces before their eyes over and over again.

That was why they'd used Eve as a hostage to control him...

But in the end the result had been half success, and half failure.

If all had gone according to plan, then they would have shown Dallas's regeneration and then dragged him out before he regained consciousness and made it clear he wasn't one of the Larvae, but unforeseen events had tossed a wrench into those plans quite neatly.

To make things even worse, Dallas seemed to have recognized some of the people there, and he'd gone wild upon catching sight of them. That had been just one of the many factors that had led to the chaotic mess at the mansion.

Something suddenly occurred to Tim, and he asked, "Come to think of it, Adelle. Do you know that woman in the business suit who was at the mansion? You called her Ennis, I think?"

Adelle had shown a peculiar reaction to one of the women at the mansion, even in the midst of all the chaos. She'd even gone so far as to deliberately drop the name "Szilard Quates" in an effort to see how she'd react.

Of course, the bedlam that had ensued shortly after had cut that conversation short before either side had the opportunity to react, but that was beside the point.

Who was she? The information broker didn't mention her at all, even when we asked about Quates.

Tim frowned, perturbed at the knowledge that there was something he *didn't* know about the situation, and Adelle's reply only served to further increase that feeling of foreboding.

"Erm... I'm sorry, but this is strictly Lamia business..."

"You mean you can't tell me, despite the fact that I'm the leader of the Larvae, an organization that encompasses the Lamia?"

"Umm... Maybe... But that's what Master Huey told us... So I would have to ask him first..."

Tim heaved a long sigh, Adelle's hesitant reply only serving to annoy him further.

Directly from Huey, huh.

Adelle, Christopher, and the rest of the Lamia were a special team put together specifically for rough work, even among Huey's Larvae. Who they were, and how they'd come to work for Huey, was something that only the Lamia themselves knew for certain.

They were even closer to Huey than Tim himself, but every single one of them had severe personality disorders that made them poor choices for leading the Larvae, and so it came that Tim had to take up those reins.

Even as he lamented the pitiable state of his motley gang, Tim was steadfast in his loyalty to Huey.

But while he might respect the man who had given him his new world, he had no such feelings for the man's underling, Adelle.

"Anyway... Adelle. Don't kill Eve Genoard yet."

"Bu, but..."

"You just want to *kill someone*, isn't that it?"

Adelle flinched, her mouth snapping shut for a moment before it twisted in an awkward smile.

"...N-not really."

"Then why did you pause before answering me? Well, whatever. It doesn't matter. Genoard still has his uses, so leave his sister be for now."

"But even now, he might be going to where his sister is..."

"So what if he is? It's already too late to do anything about it at this point, then. Don't bother. That'd be an even greater waste of time. You'll just end up causing more trouble."

Adelle looked down, unable to fully accept Tim's decision, but at length her expression changed to one of resignation as she wordlessly left to find Christopher.

Watching the smooth curve of her shoulders recede from view, Tim shrugged tiredly.

"...Dammit, why do all of Lamia have to be insane in one way or another?" he grumbled, mentally preparing himself to restrain the man he'd be meeting up with the next day.

"It's not like there's anything to see in this pouring rain, anyway..."

"A rainy, rainy, rainy soooooaataaaa..."

"Shut up."

"Really, now. Do you have to be so ornery? Don't you know how hard I worked to come up with a song praising this rain? Ahem. Now where was I? Oh, right. *Seeping into all the crevices and cracks in this world...*"

"Be quiet."

Chi didn't even bother to glance at Christopher as the taller man spun his umbrella in circles, singing like a madman.

"But whyyyy? Don't you love songs too, Chi? You even sang along with me back at the warehouse. Don't be such a killjoy. Come on, let's sing. *The time is now... Strike! With a fatal rainy punch...*"

"I don't hate songs, I hate the abominations you call lyrics. Are you too thick to understand that, or do I need to explain it in more detail?"

"How could I be expected to deduce that from 'shut up' and 'be quiet'?"

"...Mmm, you're right. My apologies for my failure. Let me expand on that, then. Your immature lyrics are an offense to my sense of hearing, and if you don't shut up right now I'll kill you."

The rain fell in sheets on Broadway. Though just a few hours ago it had been bustling and lively, now the rain held it in its viselike grasp, forcing the people of New York to dash willy-nilly toward the entrance of the grand theater. Once there, however, they met with the customers who were trying to leave, creating a human quagmire at the doors.

Christopher's peculiar eyes and mouth were hidden by his umbrella, but Chi's Asian-style red paper umbrella did more than enough to draw the eye.

"You know, your preference in umbrellas is almost as bad as my lyrics. This is New York, my friend! The eastern frontier of the American Dream. Don't you think you're overdoing the pioneer spirit a little, bringing over all that culture from the other side of the Pacific?"

"Not as much as your eyes and teeth."

"Everyone, look here at this terrible specimen of callousness. Making fun of another person's physical characteristics like that simply isn't right."

"You're that way because you wanted to be," Chi shot back, and as the conversation strayed into increasingly strange territory Christopher seemed to give up on the idea of singing.

At length, he gazed admiringly at the black umbrella in his hand and said wonderingly to himself, "Umbrellas are incredible. I daresay I respect them, yes."

"What?"

"Think about it. The umbrella is the pinnacle of mankind's collective wisdom, the result of its effort to block the great natural phenomenon known as rain. More than any other part of technology, this must be a clear symbol of defiance against nature. I suppose clothes might be up there too, as a way of fighting against nature's changes in temperature, but they're seen as so essential that they don't feel very defiant, wouldn't you agree? But the umbrella! Now, that's a different matter entirely. Can't you feel the will of the person who made it, shouting 'I shan't let you get me wet, you damn rain!' at the heavens?" Christopher grinned, revealing rows of razor sharp teeth as his ruby eyes shone with childish glee. "And so efficient as well! Who would have thought a frame of wire and a little bit of cloth would be able to stand against rain, that which soaks everything on Earth?"

"Can't say it's doing that job very well."

Chi was right. The howling wind that made the rain whip about almost horizontally through the air notwithstanding, the water fell with such force from the heavens that it bounced up off the pavement, soaking the both of them halfway through from the bottom up.

"As long as we don't let the rain get our feelings wet, then we've won. Granted, I love both nature and myself so very very much that it doesn't really matter to me who wins in the end."

"...I don't even know what to say to that."

"Everyone, look here at this man, his heart soaked through and through. I know just the thing to lift your spirits: a song! Now let's sing a song, a song to save your soul. A song to save your world, in other words. My, isn't the scale becoming grand? Marvelous. Shall we kill someone to celebrate?"

"...I thought we'd agreed to try to keep the killing down when we weren't on the job," Chi said, cutting off Christopher's resolve before it could properly gather steam.

He'd worked with Christopher for a long time, so he knew. He knew that Christopher's suggestion hadn't been made in jest at all, and that the instant he himself made any sign of approval, Christopher would not hesitate to shower the people running in search of shelter around them with a rain of blood.

Christopher just shrugged lightly and stopped quietly, confidently, in the middle of the road.

Thankfully, there weren't any people or cars there to complain about him blocking the way. From the way he held himself it seemed as though he considered himself the equivalent of a star on the silver screen.

"Mmm. Here I am, standing in the middle of Broadway. But what's this? The rain keeps me from feeling Broadway's famous frantic energy. Why, I'm even getting a little bored."

"Let's go meet up with Tim's team then."

"Tim's double boring, so no," Christopher said, petulantly turning his head to one side. He started walking again, looking left and right for something to entertain him.

They spent half an hour like that, walking through the rain with Christopher's head swiveling back and forth like some sort of broken doll.

They'd left Broadway quite far behind by the time Christopher finally caught sight of something quite strange.

"Oh?"

It was a running man.

The man was quite young, wearing an olive colored fedora that was as drenched as he was, running desperately through the rain without an umbrella. It looked as though he was in search of something, his need so great that he couldn't afford to be bothered by the rain.

They couldn't tell for certain from where they stood, but he looked very young, more like a boy than a man.

"What a peculiar person. He's accepting the rain for all he's worth. I almost feel like I've lost somehow, for hiding under this umbrella," Christopher said with a pout, but otherwise wrote off the running man as nothing of note.

That changed ten minutes later.

Christopher paused to look around and get his bearings in the weblike maze of alleyways, and spied the boy he'd seen earlier running straight at him from a passage to his right.

It seemed he hadn't stopped to rest once since Christopher had last seen him, for the boy's legs seemed to give up on him as he watched, leaving him staggering and gasping for breath.

Still, if he'd been running for ten minutes straight at that rate, that was no mean feat in itself. Not even marathon runners could sprint flat out for more than a few minutes before stopping to rest.

His interest piqued, he looked at the boy's face as he forced himself to keep going, his legs shaking from fatigue.

"Hee." He giggled unconsciously, catching sight of the expression on the boy's face.

It was not an expression of exhaustion, from having run so hard.

It was despair.

Christopher perceived it in an instant, observing the sharp and raw emotions playing across the boy's features.

He and Chi had seen that expression many, many times before.

After all, they had been the ones to cause it.

But to see someone in such despair when Christopher himself had no hand in it... Ah, that was a rare sight indeed. It interested him, as well, as to why a man wearing such an expression would be running so fiercely through the rain.

The boy had just made it past where they stood when his legs finally gave out on him.

His upper body lurched forward, his legs crossing over one another as he fell to the ground.

"Oh, my."

Christopher stood observing the boy for a while longer... and then, seeing him struggle to rise even as the mud stained his clothes, he began to walk over to him.

Chi, previously silent, realized what his partner meant to do and moved to stop him.

"Leave him. No good ever comes from getting involved in other people's misfortune."

"But don't they say that one man's misfortune is another's good luck?"

He winked with one red eye and splashed his way through the puddles, thrusting his umbrella toward the kneeling boy without a thought for how wet he'd get.

Toward Firo Prochainezo, a man charged with controlling a portion of New York's criminal underworld.

— —

Who the hell?

That was Firo's first thought upon seeing the man offering him his umbrella.

A very strange man indeed had appeared before Firo as he teetered on the brink of utter despair.

He wore stiff, cumbersome clothing, the kind that European nobles might have worn a couple of centuries ago.

White irises encasing dead black pupils floated in a pool of scarlet sclera.

Inside his grinning mouth were two neat rows of fangs, like the maw of a dolphin.

If one were to judge him on appearance alone, he was, in a word, a freak. A timid person would probably have cried out in fright upon seeing him.

But Firo's position as *capo* of a camorra wasn't for show.

His brow furrowed for an instant, but otherwise he remained unperturbed, coldly waiting for the strange man to make his move.

The despair he'd felt at losing Ennis was still there, of course, but those feelings had been set aside for the moment—he needed to focus all of his attention on the man before him.

The fanged man noticed Firo's change in demeanor and grinned even wider, his voice gentle as he spoke to the soaked camorrista.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly, and it was so out of place coming from someone who looked like he did that Firo had to give him a second glance.

True, he did look very strange. But the eyes and teeth aside, he was quite handsome. He looked to be in his early twenties at the latest.

Firo kept his silence.

"Is something wrong? You mustn't run through the rain like that... Why, you might catch your death of cold."



His gentle concern was wildly at odds with his suspicious looks, and Firo couldn't hide the look of chagrin on his face.

"Thanks for caring," he said, looking down at his feet, "but it's really none of your business."

The torn muscles in his legs had knit themselves together, and even the cells destroyed by the incredible stress he'd put them through had completely regenerated.

"...Well then, I'll be leaving."

Firo got to his feet and turned to leave, but for some reason his body refused to listen.

It was the man with the red eyes. He'd grabbed Firo's arm with an unexpectedly steely grip, and he refused to let go.

"Hey... Let go already," Firo snapped uneasily. His voice changed to something that didn't fit with his boyish face at all, to the dangerous tones he used when he was doing "business."

Normally, he'd try and talk things over, but he simply didn't have the time. Firo tensed the muscles in his arm, intending to shake off the other man's grasp as he stared hard into his red eyes.

But instead of backing off, the strange man simply kept talking, the gentle expression still fixed on his face.

"But say I do let go. It's not like you've got a destination in mind anyway, right?"

Firo froze.

The man was right.

Firo saw something in his eyes then, something that made him loosen the muscles that had been prepared to break into a flat run. Instead he focused entirely on the man in front of him.

"I saw you earlier too, you know. You looked like you were looking for something you'd lost, something precious to you... but you don't know where to find it, do you? You were just running without any real sort of goal in mind. You don't have any idea of where that something might be."

"Wha..."

Who the hell do you think you are!

What do you know?! This isn't any of your goddamn business!

Firo stopped, the words on the tip of his tongue, but the way the stranger's words had cut to the quick made his protests die in his throat.

"From the way you haven't said anything, I'm guessing I was right."

The man chuckled, revealing the teeth tightly packed into his mouth. Each tooth overlapped over another to form a hypnotic twisting pattern. It looked as though he hadn't been born that way, but rather more like he'd removed his original teeth and had the strange fangs put in sometime afterward.

"If you don't mind, could you tell us what's the matter? Who knows? Maybe we might be able to help."

"...I thought I told you it's none of your business."

"So I guess whatever you're looking for isn't important enough that you'd be willing to swallow your pride for it, hmm?"

Firo paused. The stranger was right, but he still wasn't planning on pleading for help. If, say, Maiza had been the one to suggest it, or even Randy or Pecho, he would gladly have thrown his pride away and begged his friends for help without a second thought.

But what did he really stand to gain from doing that with someone he'd just met?

"Oh, right. I completely forgot to introduce myself," Christopher said once he realized Firo was still staring at him, facetiously smoothing his clothes with the hand that wasn't holding his umbrella.

"I'm Christopher Shouldered. This is my first time in New York, but I've got a few connections here so I should be of some help to you. Let's make music together, shall we?"

Christopher gave Firo a fancy bow and then gestured to the man who stood next to him.

That man was taking shelter from the rain under a red paper umbrella, and on further observation he was even more noticeable than Christopher himself.

"This fellow here is Hong Chi-Mei, but we just call him Chi."

The man Christopher had gestured to didn't seem to be a people person at all. He only merely glanced at Firo once and gave him a short nod.

"...Hi."

"And I suppose Liza is probably somewhere around there, I suppose, but... Well, I suppose we can get to know each other better some other time."

Firo didn't completely let down his guard even as he listened carefully to Christopher's words.

Why was this man so bent on butting into his business?

And for that matter, what the hell was he, anyway?

The questions rose up one after another inside of him, but Firo couldn't find the words in him to express them. Almost as though reading his mind, the man with red eyes smiled softly.

"I don't really have a reason. I'm actually just here on a job for my employer, but... Well, that doesn't start until tomorrow and I was a little bored, you see. So I thought I'd look for some new friends in this new neighborhood."

Firo narrowed his eyes suspiciously, unwilling to take Christopher's innocent explanation at face value, but looking into the other man's red eyes it was impossible to tell how much of what he'd just said was serious and how much was a joke.

"...That's really it?"

"I've got three things I hold dear to my heart," Christopher said, listing them calmly, "and one of them is the grand bounty of nature. The next is whatever job I happen to be on at any given time. After that comes my handmade knife. And finally..."

Christopher paused, smiling full force in the face of Firo's mistrust.

"...there's wasting time."

Firo frowned, suddenly disturbed for some reason, and tried to mask it by tossing Christopher a meaningless question.

"...Wasn't that four just now?"

"Hmm?"

"I thought you said you held three things close to your heart."

"...Everyone's got a different definition of what's precious, you know. Trying to corral concepts like that with numbers might be the smart thing to do, but it's just not romantic at all, so I won't," Christopher said, smirking.

I get it now.

Only then did Firo realize what the source of his uneasiness had been.

They're really alike, aren't they.

The thought that rose in Firo's mind was that of his childhood friend.

This guy's personality is just like Claire's.



CHAPTER 4 **RED HAIR & RED EYES**

"I got the umbrellas."

Tick and Maria had taken shelter from the rain in the abandoned building, but a few long hours with no sign of the rain letting up had prompted Tick to leave for the nearby train station and pick up a couple of umbrellas. It was normally only a few minutes' walk, and Tick had dashed through the rain as fast as he could, but such was the downpour that he was already soaked to the bone by the time he got back.

"...Thanks, amigo," Maria said, forcing a weak smile.

It still bothered her in the back of her mind that she'd gone and blamed Tick for her troubles, but Tick himself was acting as though it had never happened. It was a small mercy that kept her sane, but at the same time even his quiet acceptance weighed down on her heavily, like steel manacles shackling her mind.

There was the possibility that Tick was not choosing to ignore the conversation, and had instead actually forgotten it completely, but Maria didn't consider that.

"Hmm... What should we do? I don't think we can just go back empty-handed like this. And we don't know where Mr. Ronnie from the Martillos has gone either."

He thought it over for a moment and nodded resolutely, taking Maria's hand and helping her to her feet.

"Let's go and visit Mr. Splot's house again."

"Wha..."

Maria hesitated for a moment.

That was where she'd nearly fought to the death against the spearwoman.

There, she'd tasted bitter defeat.

"Who knows? Maybe someone'll have come back by now."

"Y-yeah. Yeah, you're right, amigo."

But what if that someone was the spearwoman?

Maria imagined it and found herself shivering, chilled to the bone for a second in a way that had nothing to do with the rain.

...Am I afraid? Me?

"Are you okay?"

"Ahaha! Of course, of course! You told me yourself, didn't you? I didn't lose at all! Right? And if we end up fighting again, I'll be the one to come out on top, just you watch! You can believe in me, amigo!" Maria blustered, inwardly terrified of admitting the truth to herself.

She knew, of course.

She knew that whatever Tick might say, his words didn't matter at all if she couldn't accept them herself.

And to do that... she'd have to defeat *her*.

She'd given it some brief thought, thinking that perhaps there might be some other way to go about things, but she'd ended that train of thought even more certain that the path she'd chosen was the only way to do things.

It wasn't as though she could change the way she worked when that was how she'd lived her whole life, after all. She knew that she had no choice but to tackle the problem head on, as she always had.

But can I really win? she asked herself. *Can I beat her... No, can I beat her spear?*

The spear was a formidable weapon, and it was wielded by an equally formidable opponent.

Maria would have to penetrate a kill zone nearly twice as long in pure range, and many times larger in sheer area covered, just to bring her own katana to bear. Even if she did make her way through, the cross-bladed point of the spear was easily wide enough to deflect both of her weapons at once.

If only her weapons could reach as long as that spear...

Maria shook her head fiercely.

She'd won handily against guns before, hadn't she? And those had an effective range many times that of any melee weapon. Chalking up her loss to a simple difference in reach would be, in effect, acknowledging that her swords were inferior.

Still, it was true that the spear had a longer reach than her swords. No use denying that.

When she fought people armed with guns, she'd dart in while avoiding bullets, dodging them not through speed but through skill—she would read the directions the barrels were pointing and move accordingly. She overcame the difference in power with sheer technique.

But would that work against a spear as well as it did against a firearm?

And not just any spear. Could she prevail against a spear wielded by someone she'd already lost to once, without any time in between to train in preparation?

True, she hadn't fully understood her enemy's style, and there were many unknown factors that could come into play should they fight again.

But the most important thing was Maria herself, and she was still afraid that she might not have it in her to win.

She wasn't afraid to die, of course. What she feared was that the life she'd lived up to that moment—that her swords, Murasamia and Kochite—would be rendered meaningless in one fell swoop.

Her hands balled up into fists, hiding the tremors that ran through them.

Tick didn't seem to notice, and he smiled reassuringly as he said to Maria, "It's alright. I'll believe in you for real this time, okay? You won't lose to anybody, Maria."

The young man's eyes were as clear and honest as a child's, and Maria could see her own face reflected back at her behind his slightly squinted eyelashes.

Embarrassed at her own failure to overcome her nerves, Maria nodded once, forcefully, to hide her uncertainty.

Of course, her smile said, and she looked Tick straight in the eyes for the first time.

It might have been that she envied the way he could smile so.

"...Yeah, thank you. Thank you, amigo."

She took an umbrella from Tick, ignoring the slightly confused look on his face as she passed him by and walked outside.

Filled with both anxiety and resolve, she stepped out onto the streets, out into a downpour that seemed bent on washing away all of creation.

It was almost as though she was trying to hide the thundering of her quailing heart with the sound of the rain.

Hudson Riverbank

The Abandoned Factory

"...So what that means is, the bastards were planning on icing all of you from the very beginning. You guys still following me?"

Jacuzzi's gang stood in a loose ring around Dallas as he gestured grandly in the center of the old building, arrogantly dominating his fitfully lit stage. He'd been like that since the moment he stepped into their hideout, swaggering about as though he were the guest VIP at an exclusive gentlemen's club.

None of Jacuzzi's friends were really keen on welcoming such a person into their midst, but the valuable information he held kept them from kicking him out. Of course, they could have tortured him until he talked, but Jacuzzi obviously wouldn't have approved. Nobody bothered to mention that option.

They needn't have resorted to that anyway. Dallas had barely taken a cursory glance around before he launched straight into a long explanation, telling them everything he knew about the Larvae and immortals.

Well, no, "telling" wasn't the right word. The way he spoke made it obvious he thought he was bestowing some great favor on them, and indeed, he'd paused several times in his explanation to let them know as much.

"Don't forget, you owe me. If I hadn't decided to help you guys... Well, you'd all be too dead right about now to regret it, and you'd have died as chumps to boot."

"Huh."

To Jacuzzi and his friends, Dallas' story was almost as far-fetched as a fairy tale.

For starters, there was the story of what had led to Dallas becoming immortal in the first place. Naturally, Dallas had discretely left out the parts that made him look bad, but even then the story came off as wildly unbelievable to his rapt listeners.

Jacuzzi himself had once faced the Rail Tracer, an alien and terrifying being, and just the knowledge that such a thing existed in the world made Dallas' story somewhat easier to swallow. Still, if not for the fact that they'd all seen Dallas regenerate and come back to life from the dead, his outlandish tale of elixirs of immortality and shadowy organizations with connections that spanned the nation would have been impossible to believe.

They still couldn't accept it completely, but faced with Dallas' immortality they had no choice but to go along with it.

Still, his story only brought up several more questions.

"Uhh... So that Ennis person back at the mansion. You say she worked with the evil man? Szilard, was it?"

"Yeah, and don't let that pretty face fool ya. She's killed dozens. Hundreds, even. A cold-blooded murderer if I ever saw one."

Dallas had no idea as to how many people Ennis had or had not killed, but he needed something to spice up his story and murder was as good as anything for that purpose. Technically, Ennis *had* killed a few people under Szilard's orders, so it wasn't as though what he said was a complete lie.

"But... but it looked like she knew Isaac..."

"Isaac? Oh, him. Who cares about that pair of retards?"

So the man's named Isaac. Gotta remember that, to help me track him down and kill him later.

Both Isaac and Miria were actually on Dallas' hit list, but he decided that telling Jacuzzi's gang as much probably wouldn't be the wisest decision.

"Err, so, uhh. Mr. Dallas. You're really one of the Genoards, and it was your mansion we were staying at?"

"Dammit, how many times do I have to tell you?" Dallas snarled.

"Well you see, that's the part we find hardest to believe, boyo," a voice said from behind them. Apparently, John wasn't as willing to back out of the matter as Jacuzzi was. "You mean to tell us that you're Miss Eve's brother, then?"

"What...?" Dallas' eyes widened briefly, then narrowed, a brief show of his surprise at hearing his little sister's name brought up by a complete stranger.

"How do you know about Eve?"

"How do I know about Eve? I very well should, seeing as how she's the heiress to the Genoard family, and she's the one who let us borrow the mansion..."

"The hell?!"

Dallas could hardly believe his ears.

Eve? Heiress? The fuck?! What happened to Dad and Jeff, then? They're dead? Someone really went and whacked those assholes!

He took a deep breath and calmed himself, but his mind still raced on at breakneck speed.

Wait, so if they're dead... Then it's my lucky fuckin' day!

If both his father and his older brother really were dead, that meant that he only had to prove that he himself was still alive, and the entirety of the family fortune would be his. Sadness for his murdered relatives didn't even enter the equation as his greedy mind filled with sudden glee at the unexpected windfall on his hands.

Dallas didn't know the sorry state that the Genoard fortune was in, so the news filled his head with visions of mountains of money and endless days living the good life.

"Hmm? Something the matter?" John asked, and Dallas hastily raised a fist to his mouth and made a show of coughing.

"Uhh. Err, no, I mean, yeah, Eve's my little sister. But remember, now that I'm back, I'm the rightful heir to the family fortu... the family."

"Well, not that it matters to us, but Miss Eve's been worrying herself spare over her older brother, and now that we've finally met him in the flesh... Well, I must say you aren't quite what we were expecting," John said, the criticism clear in his tones. Normally, Dallas would have taken the bait in an instant and gotten himself into a fight an instant after that, but at the moment he couldn't care less.

He was remembering the last time he'd seen his sister, the scene flaring back to life in his mind.

People might call Dallas trash, and truth be told he often did his best to live up to their expectations. The only person who he held precious—the only being who linked a man who even saw the death of his father and brother as an unexpected stroke of good luck to normal human society—was his little sister, Eve Genoard.

She was also Dallas' Achilles' heel (not to say, of course, that Dallas was anywhere near as formidable as the ancient Greek hero), and the only person in the world to whom he would ever show anything resembling kindness.

"...Leave her out of this. I'm my own man," he said calmly, not even deigning to give John a scorning glance. Perhaps sensing the change in his demeanor, John dropped the subject of Eve. Dallas, in turn, didn't mention her again.

Eve was Dallas' weak spot, and also the reason why he was so bent on killing Tim and Adelle.

It went without saying that he hid the bit about Eve being held hostage against him from Jacuzzi's gang. The fact that they were merely tools to him had something to do with it, but more importantly, there was the fact that he was afraid of others finding out what could make him hurt.

Even at that very moment, Eve was at the forefront of Dallas' mind.

He'd actually stopped to give her a call before going to seek out Firo Prochainezo, but she hadn't picked up for some reason.

Fear had gripped him for an instant, and he'd worried that maybe the Larvae had already gotten to her. But then he thought it over and realized that there was no way that they could have made it all the way to the Genoard estate in New Jersey in the time it had taken him to escape the Millionaire Row mansion and get to a phone.

He couldn't deny that part of him still worried about it, but it wasn't like he had any way of making Eve realize the danger she was in and run for it. No, he had to choose another plan of action to keep her safe.

He had to take care of Tim and Adelle, and all the rest of the Larvae.

And in order to do that, he needed to figure out a way to get this motley band of misfit kids to do what he wanted.

The question was, how would he convince Jacuzzi that Tim and Adelle were his enemies?

Dallas himself hadn't been completely filled in on what the Larvae were after. But he remembered for certain that Tim had mentioned needing tools, and something about assaulting a place.

So Dallas had simply taken that information and run with it, adding his own conclusions and quite a bit of imaginative creativity in introducing the Larvae.

Based on what little he'd heard, he surmised that they didn't have the secret to immortality—the "liquor" he'd heard mentioned. That meant that wherever they were planning to attack most probably *did*.

"Yeah, so like I was saying. The Larvae bastards meant to use you as a distraction, making you attack the place where that elixir is while they sneak past and make off with the stuff."

Dallas had no idea whether the elixir of immortality the Larvae sought was the knockoff he'd drunk, or the real deal. But whatever the case, it was clear what the outcome would be once they obtained their objective.

"They'd probably kill you all once they got the stuff they wanted... Or who knows, they might share it with you. Like they promised. But what'd happen after that, huh? Who knows, they might have a real immortal with 'em, and then that one'd eat all of you."

Tim hadn't actually bothered to elaborate on what fate would befall Jacuzzi's gang, but Dallas continued to explain things as though it was a given that the Larvae would turn on them once the job was done. He drove the point home again and again.

"Think about it. They let you see me—now you're in on the big secret. You know there're immortals out there. You think they'd let you just walk away from this, whether you took 'em up on their offer or not?"

"No way..."

His plan seemed to be working, because Jacuzzi looked distinctly worried as he glanced at his friends.

"We're in another giant mess, ain't we?"

"Well, shit. What do we do now?"

"Those assholes thought they could pull a fast one on us, eh?"

"Hyaha."

They seemed inclined to believe Dallas, urging their leader to take action, but a few of them—Nice and John among them—still looked unconvinced.

"Hold on a second, I don't want to jump to any conclusions."

"I won't say you're lying... But it's pretty clear that some of what you're saying is just conjecture."

Tim and his Larvae worried them, no doubt, but that didn't mean they were going to just let down their guard around Dallas and believe everything he said.

Bah. These fuckin' punks are doubting me? Who do they think they are?

Dallas snarled irritably inside his head, but kept up an appearance of outward calm.

"Well, it's up to you to believe me or not... It ain't like it matters to me what happens to you in the end," Dallas said, giving Jacuzzi a meaningful look.

Jacuzzi thought it over for a moment and decided to start with organizing the information they had, starting with the basics.

"Uhh... So you said that you weren't sure what kind of organization these Larvae people were, right? Are you at least sure that their leader is the one called Tim? That's it? Nobody above him, no group pulling his strings?"

"What, you think they sat me down and gave me a lecture on-"

Dallas stopped mid-rebuttal, his mind racing back into the past.

Come to think of it, they did tell me something when I first came to, didn't they.

"We're a band of crazy misfits."

Don't I know it. Wait, I think there was a bit more to it...

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

That's right, the name was...

"Huey Laforet..." Dallas finally said, returning from his trip down memory lane. It surprised him that he could actually still remember the name. He chalked it up to having seen it once in a newspaper or something.

"Yeah, now I remember. They said that they were working for this guy named Huey Laforet..."

He'd been talking mostly to himself, but the words had a massive effect on those around him.

Jacuzzi's gang immediately stopped gossiping and fell silent, their gazes shifting as one to focus on a young woman who'd been standing on the outskirts of the main group.

"Huh?"

Dallas followed their stares, baffled at the sudden change in the atmosphere.

His gaze came to rest on a young woman with black hair and golden eyes, and it was obvious even to him that she was fundamentally different from the rough-and-tumble gangsters surrounding her.

She stood and met his stare with one that was frighteningly intense, her eyes wide and her back ramrod straight.

"W-what?"

She didn't react to his irritated question; Jacuzzi hesitantly stepped forward in her stead.

"Are... are you sure about that? About who's in charge of them?"

"...Why're you asking? What, is this Huey person famous or something?"

"Ah... Well, we know him. Kind of. Not that I've met him myself, but..."

To most people, the name Huey Laforet would bring to mind the infamous terrorist who'd made headlines some time ago for plotting to overthrow the government, but to Jacuzzi and his friends, it meant something a little different.

Jacuzzi's gang had attempted a train robbery about two years back, and through a stroke of sheer bad luck they'd come face to face with a band of terrorists who'd been plotting to take over the same train.

The terrorists, a band of dark-suited men called the Lemures, had set their plan in motion intent on demanding the release of their leader, Huey Laforet.

It had been a grand and ambitious plan, one that involved holding an entire train full of people hostage, but unfortunately for the Lemures, Jacuzzi's gang had gotten involved. Not only that, another organization also bent on taking over the train had jumped into the mess feet first, and finally a terrifying being called the Rail Tracer had attacked the train as well. Needless to say, the Lemures suffered an ignominious defeat.

One of the few among them who'd survived the fiasco had ended up joining Jacuzzi's gang. Her name was Chane Laforet, and she was Huey Laforet's biological daughter.

Jacuzzi and his friends all knew who she was and where she came from, but they'd accepted her unconditionally as one of their number nonetheless, and she'd been living in New York with them quietly and without incident ever since.

Until just a few scant moments ago, that is. Until Dallas mentioned the name of Huey Laforet.

"What? The hell's going on? C'mon, spit it out," Dallas said, left completely bewildered by the sudden turn of events.

But if Dallas was merely bewildered, then Chane's world had been turned upside down.

How.

How did Father's name come to be mentioned here?

Chane trembled violently, unprepared to face the sudden reality before her.

The most terrible thing about what Dallas had said was the fact that if he was telling the truth, and her father was indeed controlling the Larvae, then everything made sense.

It made sense that they knew of immortals. It made sense that they were trying to make more of them. If she looked at it under the assumption that it all was one of her father's experiments, then everything clicked.

But did the Larvae know about her? Chane was curious, but she realized that she had no way of knowing for certain just based on how they'd acted.

After all, her father was exactly the sort of man who would see even his own daughter as just another guinea pig.

As far as she knew, there was only one person in the whole world who her father acknowledged as a human being other than himself.

There was a reason why her father refused to sacrifice innocent bystanders in the name of his experiments. He'd told Chane, and only Chane, why. "Elmer would be sad," he'd said.

She'd never had the chance to meet this Elmer herself, but she could surmise easily enough that he was probably a friend of her father's. The only time that naked emotion showed on Huey's face was when he spoke of him.

Inversely, of course, that meant that Huey was always slightly detached when speaking of others.

Anyway. Huey Laforet would not sacrifice innocent bystanders.

But to those who did not fall into that category—to those he labeled as "specimens"—he showed no mercy whatsoever.

That was what worried Chane.

If... if Father decides that Jacuzzi's gang are specimens...

Then that would probably mean I'm one to him, too.

That doesn't matter. I would gladly sacrifice myself for Father.

But...

But could I stand by and watch while Jacuzzi... or Nice... or Donny or John or Fang or Jack or Nick...

The names of the people around her fluttered through her mind.

They were her friends, people who had welcomed her as one of their number even though they knew of her past. They were her companions, *true* companions, the likes of whom she'd never known during her time with the Lemures.

What would she do, if her father ever told her to kill them?

She thought to herself that she would probably follow her father's request.

But they were almost as precious... No, at this point, they were effectively just as precious to her as her own father was.

The more she thought it over, the more frightened she became.

Fear was an emotion that had been unknown to her before she met Jacuzzi's gang.

It had taken life on the streets of New York for her to realize what it meant to lose something.

To Chane Laforet, who would have thrown her own life away without a thought if only her father were to say the word, the thought of losing her friends was the most frightening thing she could imagine.

Like Maria, who had been terrified of losing her pride... Chane teetered on the brink of being swept up in a fearsome tempest of swirling emotion.

"Well? Who's she and why're you all staring at her?"

"Uhh, well..."

Jacuzzi stammered and looked away, but still he refused to answer Dallas. Irritated, Dallas opened his mouth to force the younger man to answer or else.

Then he stopped.

Everyone in the abandoned factory suddenly became aware there was something was out of the ordinary.

It felt like the very air itself had grown cold.

As though *something* that had not been there before had entered the building...

Dallas looked around, trying to catch sight of what only his instincts told him was there, and soon found it.

There. The woman with the gold eyes, the one everyone had been staring at.

No. Behind her.

Behind her was a shadow that had not existed a moment ago.

But Dallas had been looking straight at Chane the whole time, as had Jacuzzi and everyone else in the building.

When had the shadow appeared behind her? Nobody could say for certain, except for the shadow itself.

"Ah..."

Jacuzzi gasped despite himself, realizing what the dark silhouette was.

Chane herself, however, seemed still unaware of the being behind her, still wrestling with the doubts that had suddenly welled up inside her. The roiling emotion in her eyes grew increasingly intense, threatening to overcome her whole body...

And then the shadow took a step forward and placed its hands gently on her slender shoulders.

She flinched at the sudden hug from behind, but soon realized who it was and relaxed, melting into his embrace. The muscles of her face barely moved, so those who didn't know her well probably wouldn't have noticed her relief, but it was there.

"It's okay," the shadow murmured softly, soothingly. "It's okay. Whatever it is, don't worry about it. *You have me.*"

To the casual observer, the words would have seemed preposterously arrogant, blindly presuming that the shadow's presence alone could solve whatever problems Chane had despite remaining ignorant of what those problems actually were.

But Chane knew otherwise.

It seemed flippant and presumptuous, but Chane knew that the shadow's assurance was backed by rock solid, absolute *strength*.

The man behind her could turn even the most casual utterance into a thing of power, just by giving it voice, just by believing in it.

Everyone in the room knew who what his name was and what he could do. Everyone except Dallas, that was.

For his part, Dallas had no idea who the stranger was, but he found that he was shivering despite himself, unconsciously affected by the sudden pallor on the faces of those around him.

"Wh-who...?"

The word he finally managed to force from his suddenly dry lips rang in the still air, warranting him a single glance from the man embracing Chane.

A single glance, and nothing more, as though everything that Dallas was had been perceived and judged and dismissed in that one instant.

Normally, the way he'd been casually ignored would have had Dallas up in arms, but he found himself unable to move, swallowing hard as he watched the man's every move.

If he looked away for an instant, he'd be dead. The man before him radiated such an impossibly overpowering sense of danger that Dallas could hardly think straight. The man's hair, flaming red in the naked bulb's harsh light, seemed like the warning colors of a poisonous animal.

Shit.

Dallas realized that his mind had simply given up and acknowledged defeat.

This guy's... dangerous.

He had no way of knowing, but the emotions washing over him at the moment were almost the same as those that Jacuzzi and his friends had felt back at the Genoard Manor, confronted with Ronnie Schiatto.

Dallas himself had been various states of unconscious or dead through the duration of Ronnie's visit and so hadn't noticed, but those who had seen both Claire and Ronnie would swiftly realize that both men triggered an almost instinctual desire to run away in those who faced them.

For Jacuzzi's gang, it was their second encounter of the day with such a dangerous man, but they clearly weren't as tense as they'd been when Ronnie had come to them. They knew that the man in front of them now was not, at the very least, an enemy.

"Mr.... Claire."

"That's Felix to you," the man said to Jacuzzi, not even bothering to turn around.

"Ah... Right, I'm sorry, Mr. Felix."

"Claire is the name of my soul. Only Chane's allowed to call me that. What part of that don't you understand?"

He said it lightly enough, but the dangerous emotion pulsing off of him in waves made it clear he was dead serious.

It seemed ridiculous that only Chane, a mute girl, would be allowed to call him by his real name, but nobody dared point it out.

The man who answered to Claire but insisted he was Felix looked down at Chane for a moment, smiling gently as he brushed the shallow cut on her cheek with his fingers.

"...Were you hurt anywhere else?" he asked, and Chane silently shook her head.

Felix let out a sigh of relief... and like magic, the heavy atmosphere that had blanketed the factory evaporated.

"I see... Mmm, well, you know." He made a show of coughing. "I'm glad you're alright."

Chane stared up into his eyes, as though she had something to say.

"Hmm? Oh, that's what you were worried about? I'm telling you, it's fine. You're more important to me than any job... Yeah, yeah, don't worry about that. I'll talk things over with Luck, and settle things with this Ronnie guy one way or another.... Mhmm. Of course. I'll make sure nobody lays a finger on your friends," he said, pausing from time to time as though he were answering questions.

Chane hadn't said a word, or even opened her mouth, but that didn't stop Claire from smiling reassuringly and saying, "What? Oh, yeah, sure. Leave your father to me too. He's going to be my father-in-law one day, right? It's the least I can do.

"One thing, though. Whoever it was who did that to your face... Well, I don't even need to tell you that something's got to be done about that, right? I'm not doing this part for you. Not really. I just can't let it slide on a personal level, see."

It looked like he was talking to himself, gesturing at nothing.

An ignorant third party would most probably have written him off as a mental patient.

But a closer look would reveal that Chane was reacting to Felix's words, nodding or shaking her head appropriately in time to his words. Sometimes she even smiled. It looked like she might actually be conversing with him somehow.

"Umm, Mr. Felix," Jacuzzi said, finally mustering the courage to butt in on the lovers' conversation, "can you really understand what Chane's saying?"

"Of course."

Jacuzzi stared at him for a moment before wordlessly turning to Chane.

Realizing what he meant to ask, Chane nodded immediately, acknowledging that there was indeed a proper conversation going on between them.

"But you're not using sign language or anything. How're you doing it?" Nice said, shaking her head.

Felix stared at her as though she were the strange one and said, "I can tell by the look in her eyes, obviously."

"That doesn't even make any sense."

"Well, I do love Chane with all my heart, so that probably explains it," Felix said, without the slightest hint of embarrassment. It was clear he meant every word. Jacuzzi realized that pursuing the matter any further would be futile and shut up, though he looked absolutely floored and was obviously itching to ask more questions.

Chane, too, stared at her erstwhile fiancé as though he'd grown a second head, but—though perhaps it was a trick of the imagination—it seemed almost as though a light tinge of pink dusted her cheeks.

Perhaps she was embarrassed.

The man standing next to his inexpressive lover gestured with his hands in a deliberately exaggerated motion, moving the topic onward.

"So, what do I need to do?"

Felix Walken, sometimes known as Vino, glanced once around the factory, his gaze coming to an abrupt stop on Dallas. Dallas himself blanched, still utterly confused as to what was going on, but Claire ignored him and instead spread his arms yet wider.

"You've got balls, daring to use me as a tool. Just make sure you don't hurt yourself trying to use it... Understand?" he said, the last with a pointed nod to Dallas.

"What..."

The Genoard suddenly found himself in the spotlight, still at an utter loss as to what was going on.

"Wha... Who the hell are yo-"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. I don't need to hear whatever it is you've got to say. I heard everything anyway."

Nobody knew when he'd entered the factory, and so it was unclear as to just how much of Dallas' explanation he'd heard, if at all.

Still, Dallas found himself reluctant to point that out.

The look in Felix Walken's eyes made it clear, after all, that he would brook no argument. The penalty for ignoring that look might be death.

And so Dallas only nodded, his mind filled with vaguely formed dread thoughts.

"So let's cut to the chase here. You're trying to use these kids to get rid of the Larvae or whatever you call 'em, right? Oh, I get it. There's some kinda personal grudge between you and them, huh."

"Wha..."

Caught utterly flatfooted at being revealed, Dallas' jaw dropped, but he wasn't the only one who was surprised. Jacuzzi's gang immediately erupted in excited gossip.

Some of them—namely Jacuzzi, Nice, and John, among others—had caught on to Dallas' plan some time ago and had been merely waiting to see where he'd try and take them, but now that Felix had revealed Dallas' intentions to all and sundry they could do nothing but sit back and watch to see how things would unfold.

"You... I... That's not..."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Felix interrupted, waving one hand dismissively. "Beating around the bush ain't my style. Like I said, let's cut to the chase."

He sauntered over to where Dallas was sitting and casually placed one hand on the other man's shoulder, leaning in close. There was a smile on his face, but the fearsome strength in his voice belied his sunny demeanor.

"I don't really care what you're up to. Whatever it is, it stopped being a threat the moment I got here," Felix said loudly, displaying arrogance that put Dallas' best to shame. "It doesn't matter what kinda scheme you might come up with. It's not even worth entertaining the thought that whatever harebrained scheme a punk like you can come up with might possibly threaten my world, and these kids weren't born yesterday, either. So let me just make this clear. If you're really bent on using me—on using us—then fine. Go ahead."

The threat hidden in those words was obvious to all who heard them.

"Just know that we'll use you in turn," huh...

It went unspoken, but it was no less effective on Dallas for it.

"I'm gonna use you as it suits me, too."

He actually said it.

The encounter, if it could be called that, ended almost as soon as it had started, but it was more than sufficient to make Dallas realize he was up against someone not to be trifled with.

Felix Walken wasn't the sort of person who schemed and plotted, adjusting his plans according to the people he was up against. No, he merely put into action whatever plan might suit his fancy. There was an absolute confidence in him that served to back up those actions.

This fucker's got everything I don't. All the power I need, he has it. That's right, everything. He probably has all the power that exists in this goddamn world!

The emotion that washed over him together with that realization was not envy, but terror.

How can someone like this even exist? Ain't this against the rules or something?

Of course, Dallas hadn't actually seen Felix in action, but the very fact that the man could say and do such things without the slightest hesitation had impressed Felix's power on him just as surely as if he'd had it shown to him physically.

Dallas found himself utterly cowed by the mystery that was Felix Walken, but it wasn't like he could turn tail and run. He kept up an expression of outward calm despite the sweat beading his forehead, frantically trying to come up with an excuse to salvage the situation.

But before he could even open his mouth to say anything, Felix suddenly spoke, cocking his head curiously to one side.

"Hey, aren't you still hiding something?"

"Wha-"

"Well, I guess I should say, you *are* hiding something. Trust me, pal, I know! But it doesn't matter to me."

Truth be told, Dallas was hiding so *many* somethings that even he had no idea as to *which* something Felix meant. The sudden inquiry only knocked him further off kilter, so much so that he actually opened his mouth and said, "How did you know?"

Dallas didn't have the faintest idea which of his secrets Felix might know, but he decided to at least acknowledge that Felix knew something, if nothing else.

He sat and stewed, waiting for Felix's reply, unable to predict that that reply might be.

"Hmm? Gut feeling, I guess. Or maybe I can just tell by looking in your eyes. Actually, it's kinda hard to think of a good word for it now that I actually try to tell someone about it. But I guess if I had to express it in words, what I'd say would be..."

Felix paused, briefly searching for the proper words... and finally came up with something that would have sounded more at home coming from the mouth of a fairy tale wizard.

"For me, *anything's possible*."

— —

Millionaire Row

The sun had long since set over the Row, leaving only the dark and the steady drumbeat of falling rain.

Soft light shone from the wide windows in each mansion, illuminating the garden plants. The raindrops flashed like short-lived gems, briefly reflecting the light before pattering down into the foliage.

A man and a woman walked silently along the dimly lit rows, shielded from the rain by a pair of umbrellas.

"Hmm... I'd better clean my scissors later, or they'll get rusty..."

"Mhmm. It's about time I gave Murasamia a good sharpening too."

The two of them gazed at their weapons for a moment, eyeing the moisture beading their sheathes before laughing sheepishly.

"We really don't tend to our weapons well, do we."

"Not so, amigo! I look after my swords every day!"

"But they say that the worst thing for the lifespan of a blade other than chipping it on metal is using it to cut living things."

"Ahaha, now that's a lie, amigo. I've heard that it just makes the blade stronger!"

Their voices light and their words dire, the assassin and the torturer continued toward their destination.

There had been such a huge commotion there that it wouldn't have been strange for the Genoard Manor to be in shambles, but there was actually nothing on the outside that made it apparent anything had happened there at all that day. Needless to say, there wasn't a trace of the choking smoke that had flooded the mansion earlier that day.

"Hmm? The lights are on."

Tick and Maria caught sight of the light pouring from the first floor windows and looked uncertainly at each other. They'd expected nobody to have made their way back to the place after such a huge commotion, or at least that anyone who did return would choose to lie low and hide themselves, not leave the lights on after dark.

"Is someone home?"

"Maybe it's the police, amigo."

It was likely, in fact, that the police had turned out in force after hearing reports of the thick smoke that had billowed out of the mansion. It wasn't like the ruckus had taken place in the slums, after all. This was Millionaire Row, home of the rich and powerful. Any strange occurrences would surely be noticed and reported to the proper authorities immediately.

"What do we do?"

"Hold on, let's take a quick look first."

Tick had a pair of wickedly pointed scissors hanging conspicuously from his belt, and Maria was even worse, with two honest-to-God katana sheathed at her side. If the police were to see them, chances were that they wouldn't believe that Tick and Maria were simply a barber and Broadway actor passing by.

They peered cautiously through the windows, but it didn't seem like there were any police inside or in the immediate vicinity. Still, they kept themselves on the alert as Tick stepped up and pressed the doorbell.

The sound should have been shrill, but the rain drowned out even the doorbell's piercing voice, taming it into something careful and subdued.

Tick raised his hand to press the doorbell again, unsure of whether the sound had penetrated the roar of rain...

"Yes...?"

The door swung upon slowly, the current master—or rather, mistress—of the house cautiously poking her head out.

"Huh?" Tick said, taken aback at the sight of her. "Excuse me, but... who are you?"

It was a question that had no business being asked by the visitors, but in this case Tick had a right to be surprised. He had, after all, expected to be greeted by a group of surly punks, not a slender, gentle-looking girl who looked to be in her mid-teens at the latest.

Granted, there had been a few teenage girls in Jacuzzi's gang who were around that age, but the girl before them radiated none of the roughness that those young women had.

She looked to be someone who had grown up utterly untainted by the dark side of humanity, someone who, had she been but a bit older, would have brought to mind the word "lady" rather than "woman." Tick and Maria, themselves full-fledged members of the criminal underworld, were completely blindsided by the unexpected appearance of this sheltered flower.

"Pardon? Oh. I'm sorry. My name is Eve Genoard," the girl said, duly replying in turn to the question she'd been asked.

She gazed pensively at them for a moment as though considering something, then asked, "Pardon me, but are you Fang's friends?"

"Huh?"

Tick and Maria glanced quickly at each other.

Who's Fang?

All they knew was that the leader of the gang they'd been sent to talk with had been named Jacuzzi; the names of the rest remained a mystery.

Was this Fang part of Splot's posse, or was he someone entirely unrelated?

It was entirely possible that Fang was the name of the repairman who'd been called to fix the destroyed interior, or someone connected to the police.

Still, they couldn't very well say "No." How would they explain their visit otherwise?

"Mmm..." Tick scratched his head, at a loss as to what to say.

Maria, however, had no such qualms. "That's right, amigo!" she said brightly, giving Eve a sunny smile.

"*Maria?*" Tick whispered.

"*Just leave this to me,*" Maria hissed back.

Eve heaved a sigh of relief and smiled, oblivious to the quick conversation being held between the two criminals.

"Ah, I see! Wait just a moment, please. I'll tell Fang you're here. Won't you come in out of the rain for the moment?"

"Oh, thank you, amigo."

"Pardon?" Eve said, the foreign language alien to her ears. Still, ever the gracious hostess, she smiled and let it slide, turning and walking back into the mansion.

"Fang? Fang?" she called, and soon enough an Asian man with a white bandanna wrapped around his head walked out from one of the rooms a little ways away from the hallway.

"Hey, what happen while I was out shoppi..."

Apparently he'd come out expecting to see his companions. He walked toward them already talking, but soon realized that something was wrong and stopped dead in his tracks.

"...Who are you?" he asked, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Who are they?"

Eve began to turn, but Maria had already begun to move, dashing forward across the hallway in a beeline toward her.

Eve drew a single breath.

Then Maria was there, and the temperature in the mansion abruptly plunged below zero.

"...I don't think you want to move, little *princesa*."

Murasamia had appeared in her hand as if by magic, coming up and around as she slid into place behind Eve. The keen blade came to rest at the Genoard heiress's throat, and Maria grabbed her roughly around the waist and dragged her back, placing her own back against the wall and facing Fang.

"Ack! Miss Eve?!" Fang cried, but froze in place as he realized it was already too late to do anything.

"Maria, what are you doing?"

Maria tipped Tick a playful wink to allay his worries, wordlessly telling him to trust her. The smile vanished from her face as she turned to Fang.

"Ahaha! I don't need to tell you what's going on here, right? Now, I just want to ask a few questions."

Eve soon overcame her fear and surprise at having a live blade against her throat and struggled to throw off Maria's arm, but the assassin proved surprisingly strong and didn't budge an inch despite the smaller girl's efforts.

She'd trained day in and day out with a heavy metal blade; she didn't even need to exert any visible effort to restrain Eve. If need be, Maria could probably subdue her completely with just one arm.

"Fang, was it? I've got just one question for you, amigo. Do you know Jacuzzi Splot?"

Fang hesitated, unsure of what to say, and Maria flashed a mischievous smile.

"Actually, it doesn't matter what you say, amigo! I can tell that you know him just because you're here in this house! And even if you don't, I'm guessing that this girl might have a clue," she said, sticking out her tongue at him.

Tick cocked his head to one side, uncertain how to react to Maria's strong-arm tactics, but overall seemed disinclined to interfere. He seemed to be able to tell that she had no intention of actually killing anyone.

"Ah..."

"I'm sorry, amigo, but... Oh?" Maria said, looking down at Eve as she struggled against her grasp. She seemed surprised for some reason.

"...Have we met somewhere before?"

Eve stopped struggling and cautiously looked up at Maria's face.

At first she didn't make the connection, but soon enough the assassin's unique appearance really began to sink in. Slowly she sifted through her memories of her short time in New York, finally coming up with...

"Wait... Were you with Mr. Gandor at the newspaper office last year...?"

"Huh...? Oh. *Oooh*. I remember you now, amigo. You're that girl Vino brought along, aren't you?"

They'd never talked to one another, or even been introduced. Their only connection they had was that they'd caught sight of each other's faces for a fleeting moment a year ago, when Eve had been kidnapped and dragged to the Daily Days' office by the Runorata Family's cronies, and Maria had been hired to kill Vino.

Normally that wouldn't have been nearly enough to leave a lasting impression, but Maria's flamboyant getup had stuck in Eve's mind, and Maria in turn seemed to have remembered the willowy, almost ethereal maiden, so unlike the hardened criminals she worked with on a daily basis.

"How... Are you Mr. Gandor's friends? Why are you doing this?"

"Wait, you know our boss?"

...Well, this is bad, to say the least.

The edge up Maria had seized by taking the girl hostage promptly evaporated as it became clear that she was, at the very least, an acquaintance of Luck Gandor.

Still, it wasn't as though she could back out now. Maria kept her eyes on Fang, never loosening the tenseness of her body for a moment.

"Well, uhh... Where's Jacuzzi Splot? No telling what I might do if you don't lead us to him, amigo."

She grinned sheepishly as she told the simple truth.

"Because honestly, I'm kind of at my wit's end here."

"Dallas, hmm? Sounds like the name of a city... Oh, it is." Christopher said, grinning jovially as he sat back in the abandoned building they'd decided to stop at for the moment, south of Grand Central Station.

It just so happened to be one of the secret meeting places that Szilard Quates had installed all over the world, and it was also the very same building Tick and Maria had taken shelter in to avoid the rain just a little while ago, though they had no way of knowing any of this.

"So let me get this straight. This Dallas person is the only lead you've got to finding your friends, right? A little strange, don't you think? Usually ransom notes have demands on them, you know."

"He's that sorta guy. I only met him a few times, but I know that much. He likes to see people hurting, that's all."

"My, that's a scathing review if I ever heard one," Christopher said lightly. He sounded like a man casually commenting on the weather.

To be honest, that was perfectly normal, because Christopher really had no personal stake in the matter at all. One thing had just led to another and Firo had found himself looking for Ennis together with his two new "friends." He'd originally had no intention of dragging complete strangers into his business, but Christopher had rather forcefully insisted on helping.

This just ain't my day...

Besides, it was true that he needed all the help he could get in finding Ennis.

He'd briefly entertained the idea of going back to the Alveare and asking the other Martillo members for help, but he didn't really have any leads and not many of them knew what Dallas looked like. Considering that, Firo didn't think it'd be a great idea to have a large group wandering about without a clear target, doing nothing except making a noticeable commotion.

That ransom note was right there and Maiza saw me leave, so I'm sure he knows that Ennis and Ronnie've been kidnapped.

Ennis had no official connection to the Martillo Family besides living with Firo, but Ronnie Schiatto was none other than the Family's *chiamatore*. It would take something very serious happening to keep the Martillos from searching for Ronnie, whether Firo asked them to or not.

Come to think of it...

Firo paused in his explanation, a stray thought entering his mind.

Ronnie said something about having something to take care of when he went out to look for Isaac and Miria. Something about a talk with kids from Chicago...

Maybe that group had something to do with Dallas.

It wasn't like Firo had any other leads, so he decided to go with that, as unlikely as it seemed. He had to call Maiza to explain why he'd suddenly run out, anyway.

"...Just a second, I have a phone call to make. I'll be right back, I just need to go to the station," he said to Christopher and Chi, and turned to leave.

"Wait."

Christopher grabbed his arm before he could do more than take a couple of steps.

"What do you want?"

Firo turned back and found his field of vision dominated by a black umbrella.

"Take this," Christopher said, smiling as he handed Firo his umbrella.

Firo paused, looking down at the umbrella as though he couldn't tell what it was for a second, then finally gave Christopher a quick nod. "...Uhh, thanks."

He took the offered umbrella and dashed out into the rainy night, opening it up as he went. It was still pouring outside, and Firo found himself glad for the respite from the rain as he ran, the streets quiet save for the dull pounding of the rain.

...Well, maybe he ain't as bad a guy as he looks.

"Hold on, you're really going to help him out?" Chi asked incredulously, as soon as Firo was safely out of earshot.

"Well, of course. He's my very first out of an eventual one hundred friends!"

"We've got to help Tim tomorrow, you know."

"Well, we'll do that, and then this."

"It might not be that easy," Chi snapped, looking askance at his partner. For his part, Christopher looked as though he couldn't figure out why Chi was angry.

"Look at it this way. If he really won't let us take care of our work," he said, rows of sharp teeth exposed in a gentle smile, "we can just get rid of him."

"...You'd kill your friend?"

Chi fixed him with a cold stare, and Christopher gave it some thought before spreading his arms wide.

"...The death of a friend! Sadness without end! But alas, it is something we must all learn to overcome. We can't go through our lives sad all the time, after all."

"The state of your mind makes me sadder than anything," Chi muttered, heaving a huge sigh. "Christopher. What am I to you?"

"A friend. Why?" Christopher replied immediately, grinning innocently. "How many *decades* have we worked together? Don't worry. No matter how many friends I may make in the future, you'll always be my number one. Oh, but don't get me wrong. Like I said before, my tastes don't run toward men, so you can rest easy on that."

Chi didn't look relieved at all, his face staying stony as he asked his next question.

"If I betrayed Master Huey, would you kill me?"

"Well, of course!" Christopher cried without a second thought. From his expression it looked like he was even a little surprised that Chi even had to ask. "Why did you want to know?"

Chi saw the expression on his "best friend's" face and sighed again.

"In a way, I have to respect Master Huey for whatever he did to make you as twisted as you are."

The Empire State Building An Office

"Looks like I don't even warrant a footnote to Firo compared to Ennis," Ronnie murmured, tapping his temple with his index finger. He smirked and rested his chin on his palm.

"Well, no matter."

He ignored Isaac and Miria's excited chatter behind him as they examined the wares, calmly staring out the window at the rainy streets.

"The only thing that bothers me is Firo's new friends..." he said, almost as though he could see where Firo was and what he was doing at that very moment. He tapped his temple once more and then stopped suddenly, sitting back.

"Well, no matter. Seeing more would just take the fun out of it..."

Ennis stared at him as he spoke to himself, perplexed.

"Did you say something, Mr. Ronnie? Something about Firo?"

"It was nothing. Don't concern yourself with it."

"Right... But anyway, what are we going to do now?" she asked, a tad worried.

"I am going to have another talk with Jacuzzi Splot tomorrow. *You* are free to come along, or not, as the case may be."

"Excuse me?"

"You have some business with that other group, don't you?" Ronnie said casually, directing his piercing gaze down at the streets below.

It was foolish to think it, but from the intensity in his gaze it seemed almost like he could see everything that was going to happen in the days to come.

— —

The Abandoned Building

"...Strange," Chi said suddenly.

"What is?" Christopher looked up as his friend uncharacteristically chose to break the long silence. "That there's an abandoned building right next to Grand Central Station? Does it really matter? I prefer to think of it as divine intervention, a little help from on high to get us out of the rain. My most sincere thanks to the holy Great Depression for vacating this building for us."

"That's not it," Chi said, his brow furrowing with concern. "I want to know why Liza hasn't stopped you yet."

Chi put a hand to his forehead as he mentioned their invisible companion.

"Stop me? Why would she stop me? *What* would she stop me from doing?"

"This. Your whims. Normally she'd have told you to stop it by now... Or if things really got out of hand, she'd have *taken care of* that Firo kid herself."

"I don't see the problem here. I'm sure Liza just wants me to make friends. A hundred of them, even," Christopher said with a shrug. He grinned sunnily, and Chi heaved a massive sigh.

"...Liza's a dozen times more loyal to Master Huey than even you are. She's willing to follow your lead when it comes to our side job, but she'd never sit by and let you sleep on the job when it comes to his orders."

"Wow, do you really think that little of me? I'll have you know that I'm a hundred times more loyal than Liza is!"

"...The only way that equation could work is if both of you had a loyalty of zero. But to be serious that doesn't matter at all. I was just wondering if something had happened to Liza-

"Nothing's happened," a voice said from nowhere, ringing inside the abandoned building. It was a smooth, seductive voice that seemed to languorously slip through the air and into their ears.

But no matter where the two men might have looked, they would not have seen the voice's owner. Only the voice itself was there, lacking a mouth but still heard.

"...So you were here."

"My, how cold you sound. Is there a reason I can't be? It isn't like I'm spying on you, you know."

Chi ignored the voice's jests and pursued his original train of thought.

"You heard me, didn't you? Why haven't you stopped Christopher?"

"Because I don't feel like it right now. Chris is right; the job we've got with Tim is tomorrow, not today," Liza said, chuckling. Chi's sharp eyes narrowed even more, becoming razor shards of flint.

"Is that really it? Or... Does this Firo have something to do with our mission this time? Maybe something to do with Master Huey?"

"You're jumping at shadows, Chi dear. Master Huey isn't behind *everything* I do or don't do. Honestly, honey, you really aren't cut out to be a detective," the voice jeered.

"...Though, *you're right*," it added a moment later.

"What?"

"What's that mean?"

Chi's eyes widened, and Christopher, too, directed his gaze at the empty air in surprise. It was only natural, since they couldn't see where the voice was coming from, but even then the sight of two men staring intently at blank space was a strange one.

"I can't tell you yet, and to be honest I'd rather not even if I could. Besides, even I only heard that there *might* be something about him from the Twins just a moment ago."

"...Then why did you feel the need to make fun of me again?"

"Because life is boring," the voice muttered quietly, as though to herself, and then continued as though nothing had happened.

"I have a message for you from the Twins, Christopher."

"Let's hear it."

"Apparently Adelle is out alone on the streets looking for you. The poor thing's going to catch her death of cold, and it'll all be your fault."

Christopher only made a small noise of vague interest at Liza's taunting, then slowly stretched. It was a lazy, languid thing, like a cat stretching after a nap, almost making it look like his body was made of rubber or supple leather.

"Liza, would you be a dear and tell Adelle we're here?"

"What? You're actually willing to work?" Chi asked, his eyes widening with surprise.

Christopher just shook his head. "What in the world are you talking about, Chi?"

"Huh?"

"The more people we have to look for Firo's friends, the better our chances of finding them!" the redhead cried, a wide grin gracing his features.

Chi only sighed and drooped, his arms falling limply as though his steel gloves had suddenly become too heavy to lift.

"...I just realized that I don't think of you as a friend at all."

"W-what?!" Christopher blanched and shuffled backwards hastily. "Does that mean you think of me as a lover, then?!"

"You're someone I'd love to kill, but circumstances prevent me from doing so. For almost four decades now, come to think of it..." Chi said, though both he and Christopher looked to be in their early twenties at the latest.

A casual observer would no doubt have dismissed it as a joke, but Christopher only chuckled bashfully, taking it as a complement. On the one hand it almost looked like he was deep in thought, but on the other hand, almost like he was thinking of nothing at all.

Only the soft sound of Liza's laughter filled the silence between them, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

Gleefully, gleefully.

Snicker, snicker.

"Are you sure this is the right way?"

A strange group of people made their way through the roaring torrent of rain that had taken New York literally by storm, heading west along the streets of Manhattan.

"...Yeah," the Asian man at the head of the group said, his expression making it obvious he was none too eager to please.

The two women walking behind him, the one dressed like a dancer holding the younger blonde close as though they were sisters, were sharing a single umbrella. Beside them, a young man with many pairs of scissors hanging from his belt walked along under an umbrella of his own, lost in thought.

Fang waited until they were alone, on a narrow road leading to the Hudson River, before speaking.

"Come on, is enough already, yes? Let Miss Eve go and point that sword at me instead."

"Not happening, amigo. I get the feeling this is keeping you more honest than that would."

At first glance it looked like Eve and Maria were walking together, like good friends. But a closer examination would reveal that Maria was standing slightly behind Eve, her slender fingers resting lightly on the hilt of the katana hanging at her belt, ready to draw at a moment's notice.

She wasn't actually threatening them with it, per se, but everyone there knew that nobody could stop her if she decided to draw and slash. In fact, the threat of her sheathed sword and the lightning fast strike hidden inside was far more effective than a naked blade.

"Fang, don't worry-

""-about me and run', you want to say? No way. If I do that, John will hit me, and then Nice will kill me, and then Jacuzzi will cry over dead body. No can say which is worst."

Fang sighed, resigned to his fate, and decided to lead Tick and Maria to the abandoned factory on the Hudson's banks for better or worse. Jacuzzi's gang had agreed ahead of time to regroup there in case of an emergency.

He'd more or less figured out what they were after once he realized that they worked for the Gandors, but what worried him was that they hardly seemed like negotiators at all. That observation led in turn to dark musings about what exactly it was that the Gandors had intended when they'd sent the two of them to "talk" to Jacuzzi.

He forced himself to ignore those troubling thoughts and turned his attention to thinking up a way to get Eve, at least, out of the situation alive and unharmed.

He'd come home with a load of groceries only to find the mansion emptied and the mistress of the house at the front door, looking about uncertainly. Apparently Eve had decided to stay at the Millionaire Row manor for a bit while she looked for clues on her missing brother, but she hadn't expected it to be deserted. A quick look at the back entrance and the hallways had told Fang all he needed to know: something had taken place while he was gone. Something violent.

"Good heavens! The scoundrels even broke this vase! Did they even know how much this is worth?!" cried the butler, Benjamin, staring down at the broken fragments.

Actually, that was Jacuzzi... well, never mind.

After that, Benjamin and Samasa had gone to contact the police, while Fang and Eve had stayed behind to look after the house. Scant minutes after the butler and the maid left, a pair of uninvited guests had shown up at the door, and...

Well.

Fang couldn't be sure, but he guessed from what the mysterious Gandor Family members were saying that they had had a hand in whatever had caused the main hallway to look like someone had run it through a sawmill.

For the moment, though, he accepted that resistance was futile and continued leading them to the abandoned factory.

Isaac and Miria were there too... Hope they okay, Fang thought to himself, unaware of the complicated interactions going on silently behind him.

Tick stared pensively at Maria, the ever present smile on his face just a tad dimmer than usual.

"Mmm..."

"What's wrong? Something on my face?" Maria said. She turned to look at Tick, but most of her attention remained focused on Eve.

She'd forced Eve to hold the umbrella, leaving both her hands free, and the threatening air she exuded made it impossible for Eve to even think of running.

Maria didn't, of course, intend to really cut Eve at all, but Eve didn't need to know that. She needed to keep up a deadly pretense to keep up a credible threat. Tick knew this as well, so he didn't worry too much about Eve's safety.

Neither gave much thought as to what effect the whole fiasco could be having on Eve's mental health.

Stray raindrops caught in Maria's hair glimmered in the dim light, wreathing her in a sparkling halo that made her even more attractive than usual. Tick stared intently at her beautiful face for a moment, then whispered to her in a low voice.

"You know, Maria, I really think we should stop this whole hostage thing..."

"...What's wrong, amigo? You're a torturer, I'm a killer. Don't tell me you're getting cold feet about this all of a sudden? It's not like we care what other people might think about us."

Actually, other people might care very much—Luck Gandor in particular, who would not look favorably on anything that might drag down the Gandor Family's reputation—but Tick didn't mention that. Instead, he chose to voice his observations in a brutally frank way.

"You're trying too hard, Maria."

"...Huh?"

"I thought I told you you haven't lost yet. But you're still nervous inside. You're really scared."

"What..."

She trembled.

Outwardly, it looked like Maria was still following Fang like she'd been doing just a moment ago, but inside she was shaking, her attention wildly flickering back and forth between Eve and Tick.

Even Eve seemed to notice the change in the assassin's demeanor, and she began to listen in on the conversation in earnest instead of letting it slip past her.

The rain fell in a steady pitter-patter around them, but to Maria they might as well have been stuck in a soundless vacuum, Tick's words blocking out all sound and ringing fiercely in her heart.

"You really believe you lost that fight, don't you, Maria? That's why you're trying so hard to do this as loudly as you can, so that you can cover that up. You want to forget that you lost and get your confidence back."

A jolt of icy lightning ran down Maria's spine.

It felt like Tick had dug his fingers into an old wound... No, more like he'd torn the scabbed flesh from a poorly healed gash that she'd only just covered with a hasty bandage. Every word that passed Tick's lips struck true, unerringly revealing the thoughts behind her actions.

A sudden cold sweat dampened her clothes, and she floundered in a futile effort to deny him, to deny his words. But no excuses came. Even the simple act of speaking proved a nigh-insurmountable obstacle.

"How... How do you... How do you know all this?"

"Well. I've tortured a lot of different people, you see. I might not understand their feelings, but I know how they work, a little. That's how I could tell you were trying so hard to deny that you're afraid. You look the same as the people I cut sometimes, when they try to be brave and show me they're not scared. Before I break them, that is."

The grisly example would have had any eavesdropper running in fear, but it barely registered to Maria as Tick continued.

"Maybe it's because I've been thinking really hard."

"...About what?"

"I've been thinking ever since you asked me, 'What could you possibly know about me?' I've been thinking about you all this time so that maybe I could understand your feelings even a tiny bit better. Mmm... So that's why I said what I did. I saw the expression on your face and that's what I thought you might be thinking," he said slowly, thoughtfully, smiling at Maria all the while.

It was an innocent smile, the same as always, one so pure it looked out of place on the face of an adult.

"So was I right? Was I?"

"Tick..."

Maria shook her head slowly as Tick cocked his head to one side curiously, like a curious rabbit.

"You know, amigo... Some things you just shouldn't say aloud, even if you know they're true," she said, an incredulous note entering her tone.

And yet, she smiled.

It was there and gone in an instant, faint like a shadow on a rainy day, but it was genuine. It had been a carefree thing, and for a moment she had looked like the Maria of a day ago.

She had smiled.

Eve came to an important realization.

She decided that if she made a run for it at that moment, the swordswoman would not move to stop her.

But she didn't run.

She'd looked back, and seen for a fleeting moment the smile on her captor's face.

It had not been the sort of smile that she could easily envision gracing the features of an evil person.

I wonder if Dallas can smile like that too...

She quickly brushed the thought away, scolding herself for even comparing her brother to the assassin.

I wonder who took him away...

I wonder if I'll ever see him again...

SoHo, Lower Manhattan

"I have to say, I wasn't expecting this," Tim said frankly, caught genuinely flat-footed by the sight before him.

He sat on a chair turned backwards, his arms folded casually over the back, taking in the rabble crowding the Larvae's temporary hideout.

Dallas Genoard had suddenly appeared at his doorstep, bringing with him a small army of teenagers. It was Jacuzzi Splot's gang, and Splot himself had entered together with Genoard, flanked only by his closest friends. The rest of his gang arrayed themselves in a loose ring around the house, standing far away enough that they wouldn't attract undue attention.

Tim briefly scanned the group packed into the small room and spoke again, his voice tinged with something that might have been grudging respect.

"Not bad. I thought you would've given up on your sister and made a run for it after *what you went through today*."

"...Eve's safe, right."

It wasn't a question. The hostility oozing from Dallas' every word promised dire consequences if Tim were to provide an unsatisfactory reply.

Tim's mocking smile didn't wilt at all in the face of that murderous glare, and his tone stayed light and casual as he laid out the simple truth.

"Adelle was all for hunting her down and bringing back your little princess's head on her spear, but I told her to wait on it. Taking that into consideration, I believe some thanks are in order. What do you say?"

"Wha...!"

Dallas took half a step forward at Tim's first words, but managed to keep himself in check once it became clear Eve was still safe.

Tim took this all in with detached, amused air that could almost lead one to believe he was only a slightly interested third party instead of the direct target of Dallas' ire. He turned his gaze to the tattooed youth standing behind Dallas.

"So. I hear you've decided to throw your lot in with us?"

"Yeah... As long as you keep up your part of the deal."

"Of course, of course. Once we're done, I promise I'll make you all the same as Genoard here," Tim said, calmly handing out promises of immortality like a door-to-door salesman peddling his wares.

He got to his feet and gave Jacuzzi a quick once-over from head to toe, his gaze suddenly piercing, as though he was staring straight through Jacuzzi's exterior and into his soul.

"Y'know, though. I don't mean to come off as suspicious, but I'm having a little trouble believing you. Surely you don't expect us to believe that *you* believe in *us* unconditionally?"

"...We don't have the time to argue over it. The local mafia might decide to hit us any moment now. I don't want to die and neither do my friends, so we're throwing our lot in with you," Jacuzzi said, looking away. Tim chuckled, satisfied.

"Hahaha. Believe me, I know. Tell the truth, we worried a little about that ourselves, wondering whether the Gandors and Martillos might strike before we could get to you. I suppose it all turned out well in the end, since they just ended up nudging you toward us."

He paused for a beat, the eyes behind his glasses suddenly growing sharp and focused.

"...Mind telling me where the young woman in the black dress who attacked me has gone?"

"We left her back at our hideout. We figured that'd be better for you and for us."

"I don't mind, actually. I was just curious as to why she decided I needed killing in the first place, you see..."

Jacuzzi looked away again, the question catching him off guard despite the fact that it should have been the first thing to expect.

"Umm... Err, I guess... Maybe she just didn't like you?"

"Really, now. I'll have to take care not to be disliked by random women in the future, then," Tim muttered, clearly unsatisfied at the blatant lie, but Jacuzzi hastily changed the subject before he could properly get started.

"So... What do you want us to do?"

"Hmm? Oh, right, right. Sorry about that. That commotion earlier today kept me from telling you the most important part, didn't it."

Tim sat back down, drumming his fingers absently on the table beside him.

"...Well, I'll cut to the chase. If we're to make you guys immortal, we need some special liquor."

"Liquor?"

"Yeah. Let's dumb it down and call it the Booze of Immortality. It's a cheap knockoff and incomplete at that, but beggars can't be choosers."

Tim conspicuously neglected to explain exactly what it was that made the liquor incomplete, and instead continued to lay out the details of the plan.

"Some alchemist made this stuff a long time ago. After he went and got himself eat- I mean, after he went missing, we lost track of his liquor, but we just found out a little while ago that some company stole it, and they've been hoarding it all away somewhere."

He flashed a roguish grin and continued.

"Now, we're going up against this band of thieves. They call themselves Nebula. You might've heard of them. All we have to do is liberate the liquor and take it back to where it came from."

Jacuzzi was unable to suppress the light gasp that escaped his lips at the mention of the word "Nebula."

Nebula was, after all, a huge conglomerate, a brand name recognized all over the country—no, all over the world. In terms of financial resources and political sway, the company was on the level of a small country.

And Tim had declared his intent to take something from the grasp of that colossal organization.

He'd come looking for them, which naturally meant that whatever his plan was, it was probably more than a little removed from the right side of the law.

Jacuzzi narrowed his eyes, putting the pieces together.

"You're asking us to help you sneak in and steal this liquor, then."

"Close, but not quite," Tim said, shaking his head in mock sorrow. "We want you do help us storm the building and take it by force."

The impromptu mission briefing came to an end as the phone rang, and one of the Larvae picked it up. He held a brief conversation with whoever was on the other end, then called Tim over and handed him the receiver.

"It's Adelle. The Twins've told her where Christopher is, and she's heading over to pick him up."

"...The Twins, huh. Always leave a bad taste in my mouth, those two... Where're they getting all this info?" Tim muttered, voicing his disapproval with Huey's messengers as he lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Hello. Adelle? Things're going well over here. Yeah. Genoard came back on his own. Yeah, you should just stay with Christopher's group for now. We're done for today, just make sure that you're all where you need to be come tomorrow and..."

Jacuzzi turned to his friends as Tim continued to talk, whispering to them urgently.

"...You think we're gonna be okay? This is turning out to be a lot bigger than we thought..."

"Not like we can back out now, Jacuzzi," Nice murmured soothingly, but John seemed less than content as he stood beside her, his face twisted in a pensive frown.

"What's wrong, John?"

"Well... I just remembered something and it's bothering me."

"W-what is it?" Jacuzzi asked, dread coloring his voice. John gave it a bit more thought and finally voiced his concern.

"...We forgot Fang..."

— —

Hudson Riverbank The Abandoned Factory

"...So you *did* lie to us after all, eh, amigo?"

"No, no, wait! I just as surprised as you! Where did they all go?!"

The hollow racket of rain from outside the old factory provided the perfect backdrop to the Chinese cook's frantic denials, liberally interspersed with choice invectives in his native language. Fang sounded angry and terrified at the same time, perhaps because Maria had drawn one of her swords and was holding them ready as though to strike him down for his mistake.

The factory was empty. Jacuzzi wasn't there, and neither was anyone else.

Maria had immediately turned on Fang, intent on making him regret his decision to mislead them, but from the tone of his voice and the way he acted she could tell that he was probably telling the truth.

"Calm down, Maria," Tick said, the picture of calm himself as he reined in his partner.

Eve had already become more of a proper member of the group rather than a hostage herself, and she stood unsure on the sidelines, temporarily forgotten as events unfolded.

She had just decided that she'd do something—she didn't know what, but something—if Maria took just one more step toward her Chinese friend, but before she could put that decision into motion, a stiff wind blew past her.

She only had time to see that it was something that glinted silver even in the dim light...

And the next instant the sharp sound of metal on metal filled the factory.

"...Who?" Maria asked.

The playful irritation of a moment before had vanished, replaced with a cagey, guarded smile that was equal parts wariness and anger and curiosity.

She'd swung her sword around in an instant, the blade drawing a tight arc around her body just in time to deflect the silver flash aimed at her back, sending it clattering to the floor. A quick glance at her feet revealed that it had been a small, slender shiv, made specifically for throwing. Slowly, she raised her eyes to look at where the knife had flown in from, and saw a young woman wearing a black dress.

The woman held a pair of knives in her hands, lethal things that would have looked more at home in the hands of a hardened soldier, and animosity was clear in her golden eyes as she glared at Maria.

"Chane!" Fang cried, relief flooding his voice.

For her part, Maria's smile grew feral, her eyes alight with eager recognition as she drew Kochite alongside Murasamia.

"Hey, amigo... Ready for round two, eh?"

It never even entered Maria's mind to question what the knife wielder was doing in the factory. All she saw was a chance to destroy the doubt that festered and grew inside her.

Chane answered with only a glare, all her attention focused on the woman who'd threatened her friend.

The air became supercharged, both women poised on a razor's edge as they waited for someone to make the first move.

Tick looked uneasily back and forth, unsure of what to do, and suddenly realized that someone else was also in the building.

"Huh..."

A man stood in the shadows of the machinery behind Chane, away from the single bulb's revealing light.

At first Tick had no idea who it might be, but the sight of the man's blood-red hair, visible even in the shadows, clued him in on the man's identity.

Perhaps noticing that Tick had recognized him, the man slowly walked forward, showing himself.

"So Luck sent *you* to negotiate this business, Tick?" Claire—no, Felix Walken—said, and Tick smiled innocently in return.

"Yup, Mr. Vino. Wow, it's been a while, hasn't it?"

Maria, on the other hand, didn't take the news quite as gracefully.

"Vi... Vino!" she cried, freezing in place as she stared wide-eyed at the man. "What're you doing here?!"

"What am I doing here? What're *you* doing here?" Claire shot back. He dismissed her without waiting for a reply, turning to look at Tick instead.

"You friends with Amigo Girl here, Tick? I dunno what the heck was Luck thinking, sending a torture specialist to negotiate with a buncha kids..."

"Well, Mr. Luck told me that this was mostly Martillo Family business, but he thought it wouldn't do for us to look like we were sleeping on the job, and I was free at the time, so..."

"This is news to me, amigo," Maria said, her eyes wide, though she didn't seem too put out. All she cared about was slashing people, and she was fine with Luck hiding things from her as long as it didn't mean she'd have to rein in her fighting instincts. Her surprise had merely been because of the casual way Tick had replied to Vino's question.

"...Eh. Well, there goes the mood," Maria sighed, lowering her swords but not sheathing them. Turning to look at Chane, she said, "I'm willing to fight if you are, I guess. Your call, amigo."

Chane hesitated, blinking slowly. Still keeping most of her attention focused on Maria, she looked up out of the corner of her eye at Vino as he walked up to stand beside her.

Naturally, Vino understood the intent behind her actions immediately and spoke soothingly to her.

"It's okay, Chane. Tick's my friend, and *señorita* here is *weak*, so you can just leave this to me."

It was a casual, thoughtless taunt, but the single word made Maria freeze where she stood.

Claire, of course, wasn't one to miss that kind of reaction. He gave it a moment's thought and said, "That's a pretty strong reaction to being called weak. I don't remember you being like that. Lemme guess, you lost a fight to someone besides me recently, didn't ya?"

Not a taunt, and not an expression of pity. It was a simple question, asked out of curiosity, but Maria could not reply.

Vino tore open the wound that had once again just begun to heal.

"Guess I was right."

"None of your business, amigo."

The Maria of that afternoon would have lashed out right then and there in a storm of doubt-driven rage, but she just barely managed to keep her calm thanks to her talks with Tick and the passage of time dulling the pain.

"Not like it matters. As long as you're still alive you can get revenge, right? Besides, being called weak by me? Doesn't mean much. Same goes for 99.999999 percent of the rest of the world, too. Compared to me, that is."

"...I'll slash you too someday, amigo."

"Why not today, here and now? Because you're weak, that's why," Claire said, with an air of finality. He turned away from Maria and plodded over to Tick, his shoulders suddenly slumping.

"Y'know, Chane an' I were having a romantic moment all to ourselves before you all had to go and show up..."

Vino studiously ignored his fiancée's luminescent blush and instead looked to the young girl standing beside Tick.

"Huh... Hang on a second, you're one of Keith and Luck's friends, right?"

"E-excuse me?" Eve stammered, caught completely off guard. She hadn't expected to have the spotlight shone on her at all, but even if she'd kept her composure she would probably have answered the same, for she couldn't remember ever having seen the redheaded man before.

Claire looked down at her and took in her surprise, then suddenly raised a hand to his own forehead as though remembering something.

"Geez, look at me. I forgot I was wearing glasses and a fake mustache back then."

Vino and Eve *had* met, about a year ago. But Eve couldn't think of who she could possibly have met under such conditions, and her confusion only deepened.

"So, what're you doing here, miss?"

Fang hastily stepped in to cover for Eve while she got her bearings.

"Ah, Mr. Felix, she is the owner of the house we borrowed."

Vino gave a low whistle of appreciation, and even Chane's disinterested expression shifted to one of slight surprise as she stared at Eve.

"What? What's up with her?" Maria asked, finding herself completely in the dark.

"Nah, it's nothing. I was just surprised. Pretty good, miss. You can brag about this if you want. Ain't every day something surprises me, after all."

"Pardon...?"

"Never would've expected Dallas' little sister to be a pretty girl like you. Not much of a family relation, is there."

Now it was Eve's turn to reel in surprise.

"You... You know Dallas?!"

"Whoa, whoa. Is it against the rules for me to know him or something?"

"Please! Please tell me where he is! Please..."

Claire shrugged and gave her the truth, seeing no reason to hide it from somebody who was clearly so desperate.

"Well, he's probably busy now with Jacuzzi's gang, trying to pull off that *infiltration plan* of theirs, but if you wait I guess you'll be able to meet him tomorrow."

Just then, rapid footfalls from outside alerted them all to someone approaching.

Everyone turned to face the potential new threat, but Vino just called out to the newcomer, as though he'd recognized who it was just from the sound of the nearing footsteps.

"So how'd it go, Jacuzzi?"

Jacuzzi Splot stopped in the doorway, gasping for breath as he reported the results.

"Great... They hardly suspect a thing. I think they're gonna try and storm a building together with that Dallas guy tomorrow."

"What building?"

Jacuzzi took a deep breath, gulping hard against the dryness in his throat.

"It's called the Mist Wall... It's that huge white building that belongs to the Nebula Corporation!"

— —

"So our target for tomorrow is called the Mist Wall? Belongs to the Nebula Corporation, hmm? I wonder if it's visible from here. Mmm. No, doesn't seem like it. What a shame."

Christopher walked in circles inside the building as the rain fell hard outside, his voice as light as ever.

Firo had yet to return, but a woman had joined their group instead.

"Umm... Tim said to... Well, he said to at least scout out the building before we go in tomorrow..."

"Haha. Yes, well, that is pretty important, Adelle. Tim's absolutely right. But I don't feel like it."

"B-but..." Adelle stammered, unsure of what to say. Christopher waved his hands in exaggerated soothing motions.

"I want it to be a surprise, that's all. It's no fun if we know what we're getting into, you know? Besides, I promised someone I'd help him find his friends."

"B-but..."

"So why don't you help us, Adelle? You will, won't you? Of course you will. Thank you, dear." Christopher said, running roughshod over her weak protests as he laid out his plan. "Alright. We're looking for three people. Two of them have been kidnapped, and one did the kidnapping. Their names are..."

"Dammit... What's the matter with 'em? Even the boss and Mr. Yaguruma goin' all 'Ronnie can take care of himself'... What a load of crap. If he could take care of himself then he wouldn't've gotten himself kidnapped in the first place!" Firo muttered darkly to himself as he made his way back to the abandoned building. He stopped in the doorway, catching sight of the unknown young woman who'd joined Christopher's group while he was away.

"...Who's she?"

"Welcome back, friend! This here is Adelle. She and I go way back," Christopher cried jovially, and the timid woman beside him gave Firo a short, hesitant nod.

"Ah, uh, yeah. Nice to meetcha, I guess."

How'd he call her? There's no phone in this building...

Firo paused for a moment, but soon dismissed it in favor of telling his new companions what he'd learned.

"Sorry, I couldn't get anyone to help me, but I learned where my friends were headed. They were going to see this guy named Jacuzzi Splot-"

"Yes, yes. We know."

Christopher smiled cheerfully, though the color of his eyes and the fearsome look of his teeth twisted the smile into something that was quite removed from the word "cheerful" and steered it squarely into the territory of "terrifying."

"What? You know?"

"We do indeed. In fact, Adelle here says she even knows where Dallas is."

"Wha?! You... you do?!"

Firo took a step toward Adelle despite himself, making her shrink away. "How... What happened?!"

"Eep. Umm. I mean..."

Christopher stepped in on Adelle's behalf, smoothly laying out the situation.

"Funnily enough, Adelle says she actually met this Jacuzzi fellow earlier today."

"Jacuzzi Splot...?"

"And what's more, she says she saw a young woman wearing a black business suit there, named Ennis."

"That's her!"

Hardly any women in New York at the time wore business suits, so hearing even that small detail was enough for Firo to get his hopes up.

"So where is she now?!"

"Well, that's a bit of a problem. Seems there was a commotion over at Jacuzzi's place, and everyone there ended up scattered to the four winds. She doesn't know where they went from there."

"I... I see. Damn..."

"Oh, don't look so down," Christopher said, drawing out the fun as he tantalizingly revealed bits and pieces of vital information, one morsel at a time. "This Dallas you're looking for has apparently teamed up with Jacuzzi Splot's gang."

"Really?!"

I see now... Those Chicago kids were working with Dallas... So Dallas got Ronnie when he went to talk with this Jacuzzi guy, and then Ennis too?

Firo grew ever more nervous as he jumped to outlandish conclusions, making up stories in his head that had little to do with reality.

"So anyway, we know where Dallas is going to be tomorrow-"

"Wait," Firo said, holding up one hand as he ordered up the confused thoughts in his head.

How the hell do you people know all this? What are you guys up to-

"Excuse me," Adelle said quietly, almost as though she'd read Firo's thoughts and wanted to cut him off. "There was someone named... Ronnie... back at the house too."

"Ronnie? Oh, yeah, of course he'd be there."

"I just wanted to know... umm... *what is he?*"

"Huh?"

Firo found himself at a loss for words.

Ronnie Schiatto was his superior, and also the man who had taught him how to fight with a knife. He was an immortal, just like Firo himself.

At least, as far as Firo knew.

"What do you mean, what is he?"

He stalled for time, trying to figure out how to answer the question while hiding the matter of immortality from them.

"Err..."

"Well, it doesn't really matter," Christopher said, butting into the conversation. "Whoever or whatever he is, this Ronnie person doesn't have anything to do with us, right?"

He turned to Firo, fixing him with a stare that seemed to pierce his soul.

"And of course it doesn't matter whoever or whatever we are, either, as long as we're helping you find your friends... *right?*"

He'd had the niggling feeling at the back of his head that something was off about Christopher and his companions, but now Firo reassessed them in his head, making a definite note to be on his guard around them.

"...Yeah, you're right," he said cautiously. But inside, he resolved to find out who they were and what they were after before all was said and done. The thought even entered his head for a moment that maybe these people were actually in cahoots with Dallas.

Technically, if one were to look at it in a very roundabout way, both Dallas and Christopher were currently working for Huey Laforet, but Firo had no way of knowing that.

In a way, it was only natural that Firo was jumping to the wrong conclusions. Every decision he made and every thought he had was, after all, based on the erroneous assumption that Dallas had kidnapped Ennis.

Adelle stood to the side with her head bowed, unable to butt in on the conversation as Christopher and Firo carried it away from her.

"What happened? Something between you and this Ronnie?" Chi murmured from beside her, breaking his customary silence. Her eyes still downcast, Adelle whispered back to him in a voice low enough that nobody but Chi could hear.

"He was... foreign, somehow... different... More than any other human I've ever met... That is... *even more than Master Huey...*"

"Impossible."

Chi snorted, but Adelle knew what she had sensed.

"I think... I think that Ronnie person..."

She remembered the way the very air had frozen in the man's presence, and trembled.

"...wasn't a person at all..."

— —

The Empire State Building An Office

"This is an unexpected turn of events," Ronnie said to himself, looking out the window. Once again he had his hand to his head, tapping his temple with one finger. With each slow tap his expression changed, as though he were seeing something new every time.

"Hmm. I wonder how much I should *get involved*."

Beside him, Ennis stared at him, more confused than ever, unsure of what to think of the Martillo capo's mutterings.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ronnie. What are we going to do now?"

"Do you even need to ask? If you don't feel like playing along with Isaac and Miria, then you should probably go back home now and stop Firo's worrying."

"But..."

Ennis glanced at the couch that had originally been placed there for guests. Having tired themselves out from dancing some time ago, Isaac and Miria were sprawled in an ungainly tangle of limbs on the expensive leather, leaning against each other and snoring softly.

She'd originally come to take them with her, but somehow or other she'd ended up tagging along with them instead. She found herself torn between the urge to go along with what the odd couple had asked of her, and the increasing burden of guilt she felt over having left Firo behind.

But even stronger than that guilt was the feeling that if she went back to Firo as she was, she'd lose sight of something important, something that danced teasingly at the edges of her consciousness.

"I don't know what I should do... So much happened today that I..."

"It's just the conversation you had with that woman today, isn't it? Rather, that name she mentioned. Szilard Quates."

Ennis looked down, acknowledging that he was right.

"...Yes."

"The shades of what Quates left behind still lurk in the dark corners of this nation—no, of the world—just waiting to trap the unwary. It might be quicker to stand and face them, instead of running away."

"What was that?"

Ennis found herself even more confused than ever in the face of Ronnie's inexplicable knowledge.

How does he know about Master Szilard? Maybe he heard about it from Mr. Maiza.

She started suddenly, realizing that the title of "Master" still unconsciously accompanied the thought of Szilard Quates inside her head. The revelation only served to complicate her heart even more.

Ronnie chose that moment to speak, his voice calm and measured as though he could read her mind and sought to soothe her distress.

"...I *could* tell you who that woman with the spear was, but if you want to understand what's going on and find the answer for yourself... Pay a visit to the Mist Wall tomorrow."

"The Mist Wall? The white building just a little down the street?"

"That's the one. Tomorrow... Well, tomorrow, *something's* going to happen there, and the spearwoman'll show up there too, along with her friends," Ronnie said, with an air of finality that made it seem like he was stating a fact and not conjecture. Ennis' curiosity finally reached its limit.

"Excuse me... Mr. Ronnie. Who... *What* are you?"

Ronnie kept his silence for a second, then smiled enigmatically, as though to test her.

"Which answer do you want, Ennis?"

"Pardon?"

"Do you want me to tell you that I'm some omnipotent being, an existence that far surpasses mankind? Or do you want me to tell you that I'm just a normal man? Perhaps you want something else. Do you want me to brush it off with 'I am who I am', or do you want me to tell you that that's a question I can't answer? Whatever I choose to say, it's up to you whether or not to accept it. In that case, it's pointless to tell you right now."

It seemed deep and mysterious at first glance, but in reality the words had just been chosen to confuse her without providing a straight answer.

Ennis couldn't find it in herself to press for one.

She felt like something precious inside her would break if she learned the truth.

Ronnie did not wait for her to reply, instead staring out at the dark, rainy night.

"...Don't worry. I've *decided* I don't know the future. It takes all the fun out of life. That's why I'm looking forward to what'll happen," he said, his words making it clear that he very well *could* know what the future held, if only he so willed it. A smile appeared on his face, as though he was enjoying the whole situation.

"I've become a little bit curious, you see. I want to see who'll finally end up untying this hopelessly tangled knot... Or, on the other hand, if Huey or Nebula just decides to swallow it whole."

The rain continued to fall, heedless of the being who watched it with a dark smile gracing his features.

The heavy pounding of water on concrete slashed through the darkness, running rampant through the night.

As though the rain sought to sink all of Manhattan under the waves, drowning all the many things that were tangled up inside...



FINAL
THE SLASH
CHAPTER

You had a pet mouse.

You poured your heart into that mouse and created inside of it a world that belonged only to you.

Hah. I told you that I researched your background. I know everything there is to know about you.

But then destruction—no, death—came and claimed your world, so swift and sudden you never saw it coming.

The mouse was far too weak a container to hold your world.

But do not lament over its passing. What's done is done. Have you thought about turning this into an opportunity to truly create your world anew?

Reform this world into the one you want.

If you but help me, then yes. I will hold your world, as the mouse could not.

Tell me. Tell me of the world you wish for. Tell me all the grievances you hold against the world as it is.

You might say that the world you want is locked inside me.

And indeed, I come from that world myself...

— —

10 A.M.

Nebula Corporation New York

The Mist Wall

The walls of the Mist Wall rose up through the rain, hazily visible through the veritable wall of water that fell from the heavens.

Staring up at the white fortress, Tim remembered two worlds.

One was the mouse he'd kept as a child.

The other was the man to whom he had currently pledged his all.

Both had held inside themselves the world he wanted. The man, Huey, still did.

When he was a boy, all he could do was longingly observe the world he'd created in another. But now, things were different. Now, he had power. He had the strength to bring out the world he'd created inside Huey Laforet, to make it reality.

But that strength was not enough to completely transform the world in which he lived.

I'll change the world that couldn't accept me. I'll change it with my own hands.

And to do that, he needed the power that belonged to Nebula.

Tim clenched one fist in quiet resolve as he thought about his mission.

Beside him, the other Larvae members scoped out the Mist Wall one last time,

"...Where's Christopher's group?"

"No idea, boss."

"Dammit, Adelle... Bah. Whatever. I left them out of my plan exactly because I thought something like this might happen. We're still going in on schedule," Tim said, glancing at the entrance to the great skyscraper.

Perhaps it was the early time of day, or perhaps it was the pouring rain, but either way there was hardly anyone entering or exiting the huge building.

"Just as planned. We'll be in and out before there're too many people around."

Tim allowed himself to relax slightly as he continued his silent vigil.

But perhaps he relaxed too soon, for barely ten minutes had passed before something caught his notice.

"What's that?"

One of the cars turned in from the road and decelerated, coming to a slow stop in front of the Mist Wall.

By itself it would barely have been worth noticing, but the sleek black car's looks screamed "expensive" and "elite," setting itself apart from the rest of New York's rabble even at a glance.

"...A Nebula executive?" Tim murmured to himself, his interest slightly piqued by the high class car. Someone got out of the passenger side, and Tim gasped as he caught sight of the man, his body tensing unconsciously.

"Jesus!"

"Something wrong, boss?" one of his underlings asked, noticing his superior's surprise.

"No... No, it's nothing. Thought I saw something."

Tim took a deep breath, calming himself.

*What the hell. What brought **him** here?*

He looked again at the man as he stepped inside the Mist Wall, almost hoping that he'd made a mistake. He followed the retreating silhouette until it disappeared completely behind the opaque glass doors, and quietly said to himself, "That was... Senator Manfred Beriam..."

— —

The Same Time **Little Italy**

There was a large and homely suite that wouldn't have looked too out of place in a two star hotel, and from that room strode a man, his voice ringing through the apartment as he thanked the owner profusely.

"I don't know what to say, friend! To think you'd even give us a place to spend the night! I hereby upgrade your title from just *friend* to *good* friend! Just imagine how envious everyone will be!" Christopher cried, laughing jovially as he walked out and into the hall.

"Thanks. I'll pay this debt back one day."

"Umm... Thank... err... Thank you for the accommodation..."

Chi and Adelle followed him out, both extending their own thanks.

The mater of the house, one Firo Prochainezo, hastily grabbed a hat and jacket as he made his way out after them, determined not to be left behind.

After a long talk the night before, Christopher had finally convinced Firo to come with them to the Mist Wall. Then, making a show of noticing that it was nighttime, he'd casually mentioned that he and his companions had no place to sleep.

Firo couldn't afford to lose his only lead, but neither could he risk introducing these unknowns to the Martillo Family. He'd had no choice but to offer his own flat for them to spend the night, an offer that Christopher had graciously accepted.

He'd just pulled his hat down to hide his eyes and reached for his umbrella when a young voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Hey, Firo."

It was Czeslaw Meyer, the boy who shared the flat with Firo and Ennis.

"Oh, hey, Czes. Sorry about the ruckus last night. If you're worried about Ennis, don't be. Everything'll be alright."

"No, I know Ennis'll be fine. What worries me is... Them."

Czes hesitated, glancing at the guys in question to make sure that they weren't listening, then whispered to Firo, "...I think you should watch yourself around those guys."

"Yeah, you don't need to tell me twice. I already noticed they haven't told me a thing about themselves."

"No, that's not it. It's... uhh... How should I put it?"

Czes paused, pondering how to express his hunch, while Firo waited patiently for the boy to finish.

"They... they feel alot like..."

"Like...?"

"...Like Ennis."

Firo paused, unsure of how to really take that, but soon his expression of surprise changed to a smile and he ruffled Czes's hair good-naturedly.

"Hahaha, c'mon, Czes. How's Ennis anything like those weirdos?"

"...Yeah, you're right. Sorry."

"It's nothing. Hey, tell ya what. When I bring Ennis home tonight let's go out for dinner. My treat."

Firo gave his young charge a quick grin and then hurried out, following Christopher.

Left alone, Czes watched him go and turned the matter over in his head again, gathering his thoughts.

"...If I'm right... Then the only person who could possibly have done it now that Szilard is dead would be..."

He remembered an old, old acquaintance and said his name aloud, shivering at the sudden chill that ran down his spine as it passed his lips.

"Huey... Huey Laforet..."

— —

Mist Wall Parking Lot

The tiny paved clearing, so small that it almost seemed sandwiched in between buildings, seemed far too narrow to be a proper parking lot. Nevertheless it served its purpose well enough, and the members of Jacuzzi's gang weaved their way carefully around the expensive cars packed into the lot as they gathered in front of the Mist Wall.

All of them save Nice, Donny, and Jacuzzi himself wore white work clothes in lieu of their normal attire. A small army of janitors carrying umbrellas looked toward their leader expectantly.

"I just hope we'll be alright..." Jacuzzi whispered, thinking back to his talk with Tim.

"Just to make it clear again, we're drawing the line at murder." Jacuzzi had said, sounding quite firm for once as he stared Tim down.

"I know, I know. All we need you to do is disguise your friends as janitors, spread out to predetermined spots in the building, and then let loose with this gas when we give you the signal."

"It's... it's not poison, is it?"

"Want me to take a whiff right now to show you it's not?"

Jacuzzi didn't reply, warily eyeing the strange spheres Tim held. At length, though, he sighed and took them.

"What... what are these? You can really put people to sleep with these things?"

"They're gas grenades, a little like those smoke bombs your friend with the eye patch uses. Our boss makes it a hobby of sorts to tinker with weird things like this."

"Huh... Okay, I guess."

"Anyway. According to the blueprints we've got, there're three laboratories in the building. The stuff we're looking for is in one of them. We'll take care of that. All you and your friends need to do is gas the building and distract security."

Tim patted Jacuzzi on the shoulder, giving him a smile that revealed nothing of what he was actually thinking.

"I'm depending on you to do this right, Splot."

"I don't like folks who take people hostage as blackmail, so..." Jacuzzi started, his voice heavy with resolution. His friends, however, didn't seem to be taking the situation quite as seriously.

"Yeah, yeah, Jacuzzi. We get ya. We're gonna stab them in the back, right?" one of them said, buffing his nails on his janitor's outfit. Only Jacuzzi and Nice weren't wearing work clothes—Tim had deemed them too immediately recognizable to fit in with the rest of the janitorial crew, and had instead told them to sit tight and wait in the restaurant at the very top of the Mist Wall.

"You're talking like this's something we don't do all the time."

"I don't really get what's going on, but I *think* what you're trying to say is that we're gonna make it outta this a lot richer, an' everyone else's gonna be a lot poorer. Right?"

"Hyaha."

His gang gave him the same response as ever. Ignorant they might seem, but the brash words bolstered Jacuzzi's confidence more than any carefully planned speech.

"Yeah... Yeah, that's right." The crybaby gave his friends a confident nod, his back straightening with resolve. "We're going to help them steal this elixir of immortality. And then, we're going to steal it *from* them."

In a perfect world Jacuzzi wouldn't have had to work with the Larvae at all, but he needed a bargaining chip to use with the Martillos and Gandors, and perhaps this Grand Panacea could prove to be just what he and his friends needed.

The redheaded assassin who had nominally joined their group would be the one to actually pull off the stealing, but still, nobody among them found the idea of robbing from robbers intimidating in the slightest.

"We... we pulled off that train heist on the Flying Pussyfoot just fine, didn't we? Th-this'll be a piece of cake!"

The cheers echoed through the rain, the voices raised in confidence so absolute it almost drowned out the sound of the falling rain itself.

They cheered, unaware of what lay waiting for them in the depths of the misty monolith...

— —

Little Italy **Alveare**

"Oh, hey, Ennis."

"Morning, Ennis!"

Ennis stepped into the familiar restaurant, the greetings of her friends reaching her ears. She was just finishing replying to each one of them individually when Maiza walked up and hailed her as well.

"Hello, Ennis. How were Isaac and Miria?"

"Ah, Mr. Maiza. Well, actually..."

"Which answer do you want, Ennis?"

She'd be lying if she said that Ronnie's words last night had left her unaffected.

With no small effort she'd managed to push them aside in favor of putting Firo's worries to rest, leaving for the Alveare as soon as she woke up after a night spent in the office with Ronnie, Isaac, and Miria.

*He might be mad at Isaac and Miria, but he **did** mess up their dominoes, so I'll ask him to call it even. He'll probably be mad at me as well... And for that, I'll just have to apologize.*

For his part, Ronnie had left to have a "talk" with Jacuzzi Splot, and Isaac and Miria had promptly invited themselves along with him, announcing to all and sundry that they, too, would quite enjoy talking to Jacuzzi again.

"I didn't think that he'd actually let them go along..." Ennis finished, heaving a sigh of relief internally at the news that nothing serious had happened while she was gone. Maiza gave it a moment of thought and then did his best to explain.

"Ah, he probably decided that the negotiation would go easier if he brought along people who know Mr. Splot. And besides, he finds those two quite endearing, you know."

"He does?"

"Oh, yes. I don't know why, but he does."

Ennis gave Maiza a relieved smile and then glanced around the restaurant, searching for the person she wanted to talk to most.

"Umm... Excuse me, but do you know where I can find Firo?"

"He's probably still out there somewhere looking for you. He took a day off to do it, if I remember right."

"What?!"

A surge of newfound guilt had just begun to rise in Ennis' heart when the phone burst into her thoughts with a shrill ring. Sena picked up the phone and put it to her ear, exchanged a few words with whoever was on the other end, then turned to Ennis and held the receiver out to her.

"Here, Ennis. It's for you."

"For me...?"

It might be Firo.

I'll have to say I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused.

She hastily raised the receiver, an apology already on her lips, when-

"Hello, darling," said the voice of a stranger. It belonged to a woman, but that was all Ennis could tell; she'd never heard it before.

"...Ah, umm... Excuse me, but..."

"Ennis, was it? I'm so very disappointed in you, dear. We waited for you all night but you didn't come home."

"What?"

Home to Ennis meant the apartment she shared with Firo and Czes. What had this woman been doing there? The words shook Ennis far more than she'd expected.

"Hello? Who are you? And what do you want with me...?"

"Oh, look at me. I completely forgot to introduce myself. I'm Liza. It's so nice to finally talk to you."

A languid giggle reached Ennis' ears, and she shivered despite herself.

Liza continued aggressively, as though jeering at her for keeping her silence.

"I'll cut to the chase. We've got Firo Prochainezo."

"What...!"

Shock rolled over Ennis as the words registered, her grip on the receiver tightening dangerously.

"Well, *got* is such a strong term, wouldn't you say? We don't really have any business with him... *yet*. But one of our friends is simply dying to meet you and have a little talk, so... Would you be a dear and come to the place I'm about to tell you? Alone."

She couldn't think of anything to say.

"Is something wrong, Ennis?" Maiza asked quietly from beside her, having noticed the abrupt change in her demeanor. But Ennis couldn't reply. She could only wait, an unwilling but captive audience to the voice on the other end.

Maybe there's been a misunderstanding? Maybe Firo's still mad about Isaac and Miria and he's trying to prank me?

Desperately she searched for an innocuous reason to explain the situation she found herself in, no matter how preposterous it might sound, but Liza's next words shattered those hopes to pieces.

"Mmm... What do you say to the restaurant on the top floor of the Mist Wall? It's got such a nice view, being on the skydeck and all. We'll see you there."

The Mist Wall...

Ennis remembered all too well what the name meant to her. It was the place Ronnie had mentioned, the place where the mysterious woman with the spear waited, guarding the truth.

"Oh, and please don't think of bringing any of your friends along with you. This is an invitation to you and you alone. It doesn't extend, for example, *to the handsome fellow wearing glasses who's sitting right next to you...*"

Ennis gasped, a bolt of cold lightning running down her spine.

"Weren't you wondering how I knew to call the moment you walked in the door, darling?"

"Ah..."

She glanced surreptitiously left and right, though she knew she'd see nothing out of the ordinary. The voice on the other end giggled merrily, as though she was watching Ennis' every move.

"Keep this in mind: the Twins are always watching you. We'll be waiting..."

"Wait.. Wait! Who are you?!"

Liza fell silent for a moment, considering Ennis' last desperate question, then replied in a taunting tone.

"I'm Liza. But my friends..."

The words froze Ennis' heart, leaving her gasping for breath.

"My friends are *the successors of Szilard Quates' will.*"

— —

"...Hold on, you're sure Dallas is in here?"

Firo tilted his umbrella and craned his neck back to take in the top of the white building, heedless of the rain falling on his face. He rubbed the droplets out of his eyes and turned to look at his three companions, waiting for an answer.

"Sure? Me? I'm not sure at all. I only told you what Adelle told me. Right, Chi?"

"Why are you asking me? Tell him, Adelle."

"Eep. Umm. Yes? One of our coworkers is, umm, watching him. So he'll be inside... probably..."

Firo frowned at Adelle's hesitant reply and turned to look doubtfully at the Mist Wall again.

The skyscraper was dwarfed by the nearby Empire State building, but even then, standing before it, it was more than tall enough to be intimidating.

"So where exactly-"

"But you know, Firo," Christopher interrupted smoothly, his air of serene calm a marked contrast to Firo's own obvious anxiety, "I must admit I'm a bit surprised. I didn't expect you to walk around with people like us in public without batting an eyelash."

Firo paused, his eagerness curbed for the moment, and regarded his three erstwhile companions once more.

The slender girl with a strange pole strapped to her back was the most normal of the lot.

Then there was the lean, whiplike man, both of his arms wrapped tight with bandages, standing shielded from the rain by a bright red Oriental umbrella.

And last, but certainly not least, there was a man with red eyes and sharp teeth, dressed in an old fashioned suit with a high ruffled collar.

Christopher was right; no normal person would have wanted to be seen walking around with such a motley crew.

Then why didn't I think anything about it?

Perhaps it was because he was so preoccupied with worry for Ennis that he simply hadn't thought to pay attention, but Firo had another theory.

He'd spent three years as friends with a couple who routinely paraded through the streets of New York dressed as, among other things, Native Americans, clowns, and even Japanese samurai.

So I got used to people dressing up like weirdoes? Really?

He shook his head fiercely in denial, as though acknowledging the fact would also be accepting that he himself had somehow become one of them.

Dammit... Hey, come to think of it, I wonder what Isaac and Miria are doing now.

He was nearly at his wit's end, but perhaps if he had those two at his side he might feel a little better. Still, it was just wishful thinking; the pair of robbers remained conspicuously absent.

Ah, dammit. I shouldn't've argued with 'em over something so dumb.

He smirked bitterly at his own foolishness and closed his umbrella, walking into the Mist Wall.

"What the... Have they really been walking around in public like that?" Tim wondered aloud, massaging his temples as though to stave off the headache that threatened to overtake him. "They" referred to Christopher and his crew, who had just strolled into the Mist Wall's great reception hall.

The wide entrance resembled a hotel lobby more than anything, the walls lined with over a dozen elevators that doubtlessly led to the many businesses of the Nebula Corporation. In the center of the hall stood an information center, just like what one might see at a large shopping center. Two friendly-looking women sat behind the counter there, directing plastic smiles to the people who walked in.

Next to the information center was a small open lobby, with several tables set up so visitors would have a place to sit while they waited on appointments. Tim sat at one of those tables and pretended to read a newspaper, glancing over the top and surveying the situation. He breathed a silent sigh of relief as Adelle split from the rest of the group and walked toward him.

If it were Christopher or Chi, I'd have to pretend that they were strangers, those damn fools. What the hell were they thinking, coming in dressed like that?

"Umm... Tim..."

"You're late. Everyone else was already in position and waiting ages ago. We're starting right away."

For once, Adelle ignored Tim's brusque manner and pursued her own train of thought.

"Umm, Tim? Can you tell me where.... where Mr. Genoard is right now...?"

"Huh? What do you want with him? I told him to keep an eye on Splot and his friends at the restaurant on the top floor. There's still the chance they might turn on us." He paused for a moment. "Actually, there's the chance that he's working with them too, but at least we've got some leverage on him thanks to our hostage."

"I see... The restaurant on the top floor..." Adelle murmured to herself, as though verbally reaffirming what she'd heard, and then abruptly turned and walked toward Christopher.

"Huh? Adelle?"

Tim paused. He wanted to stop her and ask her what she was up to, but he couldn't afford to make a scene. He turned his gaze again toward Christopher's gang, waiting to see how the situation would unfold. Adelle made her way over to Christopher, Chi, and...

"...Wait, who the hell is that?"

"Umm... I found out where he is, Mr. Prochainezo. He's in the restaurant on the top floor."

"Whoa, really! The top floor, huh... Thanks," Firo said hastily, the last tossed hastily over his shoulder as he made a beeline toward an elevator that had just opened. Christopher did not deign to stop him, instead waving farewell to his friend with a gentle smile on his face.

"Now then."

He stretched, cracking his neck back and forth, the very air around him seeming to shiver and change.

Chi and Adelle, in turn, noticed the change in Christopher's demeanor... and they narrowed their eyes with glee, the corners of their lips curving upward in cruel smiles.

The man with the crimson eyes strode quickly and quietly over to Tim and stood there, staring down at the Larvae's leader.

For his part, Tim kept his eyes fixed on his newspaper, pretending not to have noticed.

"Hello, Tim. I've heard from a very reliable source that your plan for tonight involves yet another bloodless operation."

Silence.

"You're always like that. You gather your *tools* from the area around the job and make them do what you want, and then you sit back in some safe little hidey hole and watch things unfold like a chessmaster. The name of larvae suits you. You're a monster who latches onto people and controls them."

"...Shut up," Tim muttered, just loud enough to be audible, though to anyone outside of earshot it would have looked like he was still just reading his newspaper.

Christopher's shoulders shook with mirth and he shook his head, like a man who just couldn't get enough of the situation.

"You never really produce smashing successes, but on the other hand you almost never fail, either. You're so meticulous that you seem more like a someone who's just very smart, rather

than a genius. Wait, isn't that the same thing? Hah. Never mind. Don't worry, now that we're here, we'll turn your brilliance into true genius."

Tim finally turned to look at Christopher, taking in his wide smile for the first time.

"...I don't know what Huey told you, but you're not needed in this operation anymore," Tim said coldly, cutting Christopher short with one clipped sentence. But Christopher only shook his head once again, the picture of gleeful resignation.

"Of course, Tim. Of course. You don't need to know what Master Huey really wants."

"What." It wasn't a question. "Tell me what that means."

Christopher did not deign to reply, instead spreading his arms wide as he turned around.

"Now then! Welcome to the land of dreams! But I'm so sorry, we're all out of those. Would you like a nightmare instead? Don't give up, Tim! I trust in you to act responsibly as our leader... After all, we sure as hell aren't going to be held responsible for the things we're about to do."

"Wha- Wait!"

Tim hastily got to his feet, one hand outstretched to stop Christopher, but it was already too late. The tall man had already reached the help desk.

"Merry Christmas!"

The two women sitting at the information desk could do nothing but gape at the strangely dressed man as he strode up and greeted them, their professional manners temporarily forgotten in the face of his totally unexpected salutations.

"Err... Umm... Hello, sir...?"

"Merry Christmas?" Christopher repeated, this time phrasing it as a question. The two wondered if perhaps there was some sort of special event taking place over on Broadway.

Still, they had their jobs to do, and they fixed business smiles on their faces again and said, "I'm sorry, sir. Christmas is still two months awa-"

"Sorry, my mistake. It's actually Halloween."

To be honest, it didn't actually make much of a noise at all in the wide entrance hallway.

But those who saw what happened surely felt it in their hearts, though the sound died far short of their ears.

It was the sound of a blade sinking into flesh.

To be accurate, the flesh of her neck.

Christopher's bladed gun appeared in his hand as though by magic, and with one swift flash of motion, the barrel *buried itself in her throat*.

The bladed barrel sank effortlessly into her skin. The wound was obviously fatal.

The woman's mouth opened and closed silently, her lips forming shapes as though she was trying to say something, but instead of a voice only the low gurgling sound of blood bubbling filled the air.

"Ah..."

Her companion sitting beside her instantly realized what had happened and opened her mouth to scream...

But before she could do more than take a startled breath, a shaft of bladed metal filled her mouth.

"Grrk... Gukkk..."

The gun in his left hand was lodged in the left receptionist's throat, while the gun in his right had found its home in the mouth of the right.

Christopher paused for a second, both arms extended. Only then did the corners of his lips begin to rise in a cruel smile.

The woman on the right, still hanging onto consciousness by a thread, beheld that fanged grin and finally began to faint, her mind overwhelmed by terror and pain. But in the instance before she blacked out for good, her sense of sight caught the motion of Christopher's right trigger finger, and her sense of hearing detected the sound of the hammer striking home and the *bang* of exploding gunpowder. Before her sense of touch could deliver her any pain, everything went mercifully black.

Christopher's guns were silenced, and to people outside the building the gunshots must have sounded like nothing more than faraway fireworks being set off.

But those in the lobby, watching the massacre begin in horror-stricken silence, could make no such mistake.

Bright red blood dripped slowly off the barrels of Christopher's guns as he removed them from the grisly wounds they'd caused, and the women collapsed immediately like puppets with their strings cut, vanishing behind the help center desk with twin dull thuds.

There were hardly any civilians on the premises, but every single Nebula employee and security guard in the lobby had seen what had happened. In but an instant, the dead silence was transformed into a cacophony of shouts and screams.

"What... what the.."

Tim could only blink rapidly, his mind struggling and failing to make sense of what had just happened.

And as though to laugh in the face of his confusion, Christopher threw back his head and burst into an impromptu childish song.

"Trick or treat, trick or treat! Give me something good to eat! If you don't, I don't care, I'll just kill all of you! Well, actually, never mind the treats. I think I'll kill you all anyway!"

The security personnel reached hastily for their guns, but Christopher moved faster than them all, and the only dry barks of gunfire in the lobby came from his weapons.

"Look at all the red flowers blooming! Flowers and treats, all for me! All for me!"

Each sharp crack came right after the other, a deadly tune that struck fatal notes in each guard before they could fire.

"Tralalalala!"

"What the hell are you doing?" Tim whispered. He'd meant for it to come out as a shout, but the clenching of his throat made it nearly impossible for him to speak.

Sweat soaked his clothes, and only the chill running down his back anchored him to reality in the face of the fantastic scene unfolding before his eyes.

The unarmed employees began a mad dash toward the exit.

But sometime between the beginning of Christopher's killing spree and now, the great glass doors had been closed, the entrance barred and boarded with large planks. Nobody seemed to be trying to get in, which meant that some sort of fake notice had probably been posted outside, telling people not to enter.

Still, planks or no planks, if a few people ran full tilt into them, the doors would have been unable to resist.

And yet...

"...Pitiful things."

A lean shadow flitted across the entrance, passing lightly around and beside the people trying to escape.

A moment later, their throats opened wide in splashes of blood, and their knees buckled bonelessly beneath them. Those who fell did not rise again, and stains of bright red spread beneath them, hiding the shiny white marble from view like puddles of murky rain.

A few who had escaped the shadow's wrath saw what had happened and made a break for the doors on the other side...

But they, too, only managed a few steps before shining rings of silver came flying from nowhere and buried themselves in their heads.

"Liza..."

Tim knew that the weapons could only belong to one person and clenched his fists in anger, but otherwise kept his silence and continued to look around, determined to take in the entirety of the situation around him.

At first glance it seemed as though everyone in the lobby had been killed, but a select few, seemingly by chance, had succeeded in reaching the exits and burst through, disappearing into the rain.

Tim's keen eyes spotted the similarities in those few lucky survivors and he frowned, the first pieces of the puzzle coming together in his head.

Wait... The only ones who got out weren't Nebula employees...

A quick glance around confirmed his theory. All of those who'd been slain wore name badges with the Nebula logo on them.

Tim, realizing he'd regained his calm, sucked in a sharp breath and sought to bring the situation back under his control.

"What... *What the fuck are you people doing?!*"

Christopher and his companions stopped where they were, their bloody hands stayed for just an instant by Tim's desperate shout.

"What are we doing?" Christopher said a moment later, the same gentle smile as always gracing his features. "What does it look like we're doing? We're following the plan. Completing the mission. Working under orders. What orders, you ask? Well, one was the one you gave us, to help you complete *your* mission easier. The *other...* well, that one was given to us by *Master Huey himself.*"

"What..."

Adelle broke her silence and continued in Christopher's stead, her voice simultaneously soothing and hesitant as though sensing Tim's confusion.

"Umm, Tim, well. We were contacted directly by Master Huey through th-the Twins. It was an order for the Lamia, not the Larvae... And, umm, what he said was to... to *kill everyone working at the New York branch of Nebula...*"

"What the *hell?!?*"

What the hell are they talking about?!

Tim knew that Huey Laforet refused to kill innocent bystanders in his experiments. That was why he would never condone wholesale acts of terrorism, like those committed by the Lemures. Why would he suddenly decide-

A thought occurred to him, simple and terrible.

Christopher's band hadn't killed a single person who didn't work for Nebula.

Tim hastily constructed a hypothesis, feeling the bile rise in his throat at the very thought of it.

"It... it can't be..."

"Yes, yes it can be, boss!" Christopher cried, as though he'd read Tim's mind.

"What an honor it must be! This building—no, anything and everything related to Nebula— has been designated as one of Huey Laforet's specimens!"

Huey would never harm even a hair on the heads of those he thought of as innocents... But to those he saw as specimens, he would not hesitate to perform terrible acts that would turn the strongest of stomachs.

Tim knew that well, of course, but this was the first time he'd ever seen an experiment carried out on such a grand scale.

"How... why."

"Didn't I tell you just a minute ago? You don't need to know what he's thinking. And, of course, we don't need to know either. I suppose that's why he didn't tell us a thing about the reason we're doing this."

Christopher waited a second for Tim's reply. Receiving nothing, he launched into an explanation of what he planned to do.

"Now, then. Adelle and I will be heading up to kill the chef and the waiters and such in the top floor restaurant. Chi, I want you to work from the bottom up, and Liza, will you be a dear and stay here to mop up anyone who tries to make it out?"

Chi and Adelle nodded wordlessly and moved to follow his request. Adelle joined Christopher inside the elevator heading up, while Chi stepped toward one of the emergency stairwells.

Tim stood silently, watching the murderers go... and then crumpled the newspaper in his hand violently, throwing it to the ground.

"So that's how it's going to be, is it," Tim said quietly to himself, smiling suddenly.

He trembled with shock and fear at the enormity of what he'd gotten himself into, but still, for now, he smiled.

"So this is a cursed path. The path I chose for myself. But I already knew that. Didn't I?"

It was not a forced smile, but one that signified his renewed resolve toward the path he'd chosen.

"...Fine. I already threw everything away eight years ago."

The minute hand on Tim's wristwatch ticked to twelve; the hour hand to eleven.

"It's time."

A fine smoke, almost like fog, blossomed and billowed through the offices on each floor. It faded soon enough into the air, but that didn't mean its effects had faded as well—those who

took even the slightest breath of the smoke found themselves falling, one by one, into a deep and dark sleep.

Unaware of the bloodbath on the first floor, Jacuzzi and his gang—and also the members of the Larvae—took the first step toward their ultimate goal.

And so, the Mist Wall descended into silent chaos.

— —

The Restaurant on the Top Floor **Babel**

Moving back a little in time, the scene shifted to the restaurant known as Babel, the crowning jewel of Nebula's Mist Wall.

The walls of the restaurant were made almost entirely of glass, making one feel as though they were hanging in the air, suspended in the sky. Though not quite as high up as the Empire State Building, the transparent walls of the top floor still offered a breathtaking view of the Manhattan cityscape.

Despite its fancy appearance, the Babel menu boasted a wide variety of choices, from affordable to luxurious, explicitly opening its doors to customers from various walks of life.

"Hmmm... So this is all run by Nebula, huh. Is there anything they don't have a hand in?" Nice mused around a mouthful of sandwich. She adjusted her glasses so that the right lens aligned properly with her eye patch and continued her appreciation of the view outside.

"L-l-let's just switch seats to s-somewhere farther from the window, okay? Please?" Jacuzzi, on the other hand, trembled like a frightened puppy, steadfastly refusing to look anywhere near the glass walls.

"Better than standing on the roof of a speeding train, if you ask me."

"I, I was desperate then! I had no choice..."

"Oh, c'mon, Jacuzzi. Calm down and have a bite to eat, okay?"

"It's good, Jacuzzi. You have some too."

"W-we can't just sit here eating while the others might be in danger..." Jacuzzi murmured quietly, glancing toward the windows and then quickly away.

Jacuzzi and Nice sat at a large table for six together with Donny, the Mexican giant taking up two chairs all by himself. Dallas had chosen a seat a little ways away from them, frowning and glaring at the menu.

"Don't worry, I'm sure everything'll turn out all right."

"Ri, right... Yeah..." Jacuzzi nodded, then looked out the window by accident again and yelped, turning his chair away from the glass with a whimper.

They'd been like that for a while, exchanging meaningless small talk, when a waiter approached their table with a decidedly apologetic look on his face. Jacuzzi's gang definitely had a different air about them from the rest of the restaurant's patrons, but the waiter paid it no heed, bowing slightly to them just as he might to an important politician or celebrity.

"Sirs, madam. I'm terribly sorry, but the restaurant is full, and one of the guests waiting is... very insistent on being seated. May I ask you to share the table with him?"

"Ah... Ah, yes, that's fine."

"Really?" Nice whispered.

"We'll look suspicious if we say no," Jacuzzi hissed back.

He turned with a hopeful smile on his face to greet the new guest.

"Mm. Excuse me."

Ronnie Schiatto took his seat across from Jacuzzi, and the smile froze on Jacuzzi's face, his eyes nearly rolling back into his head as he threatened to lose consciousness completely. He just barely managed to hang on to his wits, a sob entering his voice as he slumped in his seat.

"Why... Why? Here?! How!"

"Magic."

That's impossible!

Jacuzzi wanted to say it aloud, but the pair of familiar faces who popped out from behind Ronnie gave him pause for thought.

"Hi, Jacuzzi! Isn't Ronnie an incredible magician?"

"He didn't even need an abracadabra or a hocus pocus to find you!"

"Isaac! Miria!" Jacuzzi's eyes widened again, though these two uninvited guests were far more welcome. "What're you two doing here?"

Ronnie smirked, seeming to enjoy their surprise.

"Now, then. Let's finish our conversation, shall we? Without any smoke bombs this time."

There was, however, one member of Jacuzzi's party who wasn't so glad to see Isaac and Miria. In fact, he had clenched his fists tightly, shaking with anger.

What... What are those fuckers doing here?!

The couple who'd had the nerve to run him over were sitting just two seats away from him, happily gabbling away with his tools. They looked like they hadn't a care in the world, like they knew nothing about the agony the world had to offer.

Stay calm, Dallas... It's not time yet. You don't have the time to waste killing them.

His face twisted with rage, but he managed to keep a hold on it somehow. At least, he kept a hold on it until someone else came up to the table, his mere presence enough to make Dallas see red.

"Ronnie! And Isaac, and Miria! What're you all doing here?"

The voice was all too familiar, an infuriating whine that made him look up instinctively.

His gaze came to rest on the man who'd made him angrier than anyone else ever had, angry enough to commit murder with a smile on his face. To Dallas, the man was the root of all evil. He was Firo Prochainezo.

"Fiiiiiiiiiroooooooooooooo!"

Dallas was shouting before he even consciously realized what he was doing, his voice so raw with hatred it was as though he was wringing out his very soul. All activity stopped in the restaurant as everyone, customer and staff alike, turned to look at Dallas.

"Dallas!" Firo cried in response, his own eyes lighting up with dismayed recognition.

Dallas slowly got up from his chair and stalked over to his hated nemesis.

"Lemme just say... thank you, asshole... I didn't expect you to save me the trouble and come find me so I didn't have to go find you to kill you..."

"Mr. Ge-Genoard?!" Jacuzzi cried, taken aback at the sudden outburst. He half-rose to stop Dallas, but the naked animosity that had suddenly revealed itself on Dallas' face stopped him in his tracks.

Firo, on the other hand, met that animosity head-on, matching it glare for glare.

"Dallas... *Tell me what you've done with Ennis!*" Firo demanded, his voice filled with hard resolve. But instead of the derision he expected, Dallas actually paused for a moment.

"...What?"

A single moment of silence passed between them.

A pin could have dropped and been heard as everyone in the restaurant held their breath, waiting to see what would happen. The only one who dared to move in that frozen moment of time was Isaac, who stared thoughtfully into space and then suddenly snapped his fingers, his face lighting up as he remembered what had happened the day before.

"Ah!"

His exclamation almost seemed to echo in the air, holding everyone present captive as they turned their heads to stare at Isaac instead.

"Hahaha! Don't worry, Firo! Miria and I saved your precious Ennis!"

"We were so dashing!"

"Huh?"

Firo relaxed, all the fire draining from his body as the words sunk in.

"Re, really?! You're not kidding me?!"

Dallas was left completely forgotten as Firo dashed over to Isaac and Miria, looking to Ronnie for confirmation.

Ronnie only glanced askance at him and muttered, "I suppose."

"You're... you're really not kidding me, are you. Ennis is really safe?" Firo asked, slumping visibly with relief.

But before anyone could reply, Dallas finally snapped out of the stunned surprise that had gripped him since Firo had turned away. The knowledge that he'd been completely ignored, brushed away like nothing more than a nuisance, filled him with even greater rage. Murder filled his eyes as he dashed at his archenemy.

"Don't you fuckin' ignore-"

Firo's shoe casually slammed into Dallas' knee.

"-Muh?"

Firo's hand snaked out and took hold of Dallas' arm as he stumbled.

Then Dallas' body did a full flip in midair, tumbling ass over teakettle to land flat on his back on the floor.

A light smattering of applause and even a few scattered cheers came from the onlookers. They didn't quite know what had happened, but clearly good had triumphed.

Firo squatted on his haunches next to Dallas, still keeping his grip on his arm. He looked down at Dallas curiously, effortlessly holding the struggling man in place.

"Man, you're still weak as ever, ain'tcha."

"You..."

Dallas' eyes widened impossibly; he looked even angrier than before, if such a thing was possible. But held in place as he was, it was all he could do to glare daggers at Firo's shoes.

"Now then. I sure hope you didn't think you could kidnap Ennis and get off so easily, pal."

It looked as though things were wrapping up quite neatly. But then Ronnie, who had been watching events unfold with a rather amused smile, suddenly frowned.

"What's wrong, Ronnie?" Isaac asked.

"Are you sick?"

"Aha! I know. You're angry because Firo only cared about Ennis, aren't you?"

"You're jealous, aren't you!"

Ronnie ignored Isaac and Miria, his head tilted to listen to a voice that only he could hear. He raised a finger and tapped his temple once.

His frown deepened and he lowered his voice so only those sitting at the table could hear.

"This is bad. I didn't expect them to go this far."

"What's wrong, Ronnie?"

"I-is something the matter?"

Ronnie closed his eyes as Firo and Jacuzzi looked at him, worried.

"...I heard gunshots on the first floor."

"Wha... Ronnie, we're on the top floor. You couldn't have heard anything from all the way down there," Firo pointed out. Ronnie hadn't even said he'd heard the noises "from" the first floor—he'd said "on," as though he'd been there, and of course that was impossible. But Ronnie was rock-solid in his conviction.

"It's not quite a battlefield down there. Not yet. But one thing's for certain. This building has become a killing field."

He sounded dead serious, but inside, Ronnie Schiatto was enjoying the situation.

Just a few more actors, and the entire cast will be gathered on this stage...

— —

Mist Wall Main Entrance

"What do you think, Maria?"

"Hmm... Feels dangerous for some reason, amigo. There's tons of people lying around in there!" Maria reported, peeking in through the closed glass doors.

Behind her stood not only Tick, but also Vino, Chane, Fang, and Eve.

"Well, they did talk about sleeping gas, so they're probably all asleep."

"I didn't think they would be so bold... This is more dangerous than I thought. Eve, I think it is better for us to be waiting outside."

"But..." Eve looked pensively back and forth from Fang to the Mist Wall.

Her brother Dallas was inside.

Her brother, the one she'd been searching for for so long, was inside the building, and something strange was going on in there. It would be unfair of her to wait outside, safe and sheltered, when her brother might be in danger.

"Just wait outside, will you? If you really do go inside then the chef'll probably follow you in. Wouldn't wanna put him in danger too, right?"

Eve nodded. She was still worried, but Vino's words made sense.

"Alright. Just... Please. Save Dallas..."

"Well, I'll get him out alive if nothing else. No, wait, he's immortal, ain't he. Nothing to worry about," Vino said flippantly over his shoulder as he walked toward the Mist Wall's great double doors.

Eve and Fang turned to wait from the safety of the building across the street, taking shelter under their umbrellas, but Eve stopped as Maria called her from behind.

"Sorry about yesterday," the assassin said, smiling.

"Pardon?"

Eve fidgeted, only then remembering that just a day before the woman she now saw almost as a friend had held live steel to her neck. She didn't quite know what to say.

"I noticed you didn't cry at all last night. You'll grow up to be a strong and beautiful lady, amigo!"

"N-no, I... I just believed that..." Eve blushed, unused to such naked praise.

"Believed what?"

"I believed that any friend of Mr. Gandor's would have a good reason to do what you did," Eve said, and gave Maria a smile of her own. Maria could only stare at her, almost aghast.

"You're too trusting, amigo. You're going to end up burned one day."

Maria had meant the words to sting, but Eve took them at face value.

"I think so too, but... it doesn't matter to me. I've accepted that."

"...Yeah, you'll grow up strong, amigo," Maria said at length, a little envious of the unfaltering resolve in the girl's eyes.

Was I like that too, when I was a girl?

What would the Maria of the past say to her, seeing her future self still so worried and unsure?

Maria smirked deprecatingly at herself and promised herself once more that she'd get back what made her herself.

Even if that means I go out with the spearwoman...?

"Umm... You can do it!" Eve blurted, perhaps sensing the sudden heavy air that had fallen on the assassin. She didn't quite know what "it" might entail, to be honest, but it had just come from her mouth without any conscious thought. She'd eavesdropped enough on Tick and Maria the night before to know that something serious was about to happen. She blushed in chagrin and said, "I-I'm sorry, but you looked so grim... I had to say something."

Such encouragement might have angered some, but Maria simply took it for what it was and smiled brightly, waving to Eve.

She's right. A draw is no different from losing.

Maria had wavered for a moment, torn between the urge to survive and the resolution to put her life on the line. But Eve's innocent words of support had made her certain. She had to make it back alive, no matter what it took.

I need to make amends with this girl for taking her hostage.

Now that she'd decided she would live, her smile was sunny and cheerful, just as it had been a few days ago.

Though Eve had no way of knowing that that smile had almost been lost forever, the sight of it felt to her like a sudden ray of warm sunshine in the midst of the pouring rain, and she smiled back.

"She's beautiful..."



Upon closer inspection, there was a sign hanging from the doors that read "**INSPECTION OF EMERGENCY EQUIPMENT IN PROGRESS. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.**" All the doors were locked.

"Should we break in, amigo?" Maria asked, one hand going to her swords, but Vino only stared at her in mock exasperation.

"Geez, you wanna bring the cops running? You're not very good at the whole *silent* part of the silent killer shtick, are you?"

"...Then what do you want to do?" Maria shot back in a huff. In lieu of an answer, Vino simply reached for her head and deftly plucked out one of the hairpins holding her thick tresses in place.

"Ack! Hey, what do you think you're doing, amigo?!"

Still ignoring her, Vino knelt and fit the pin into the keyhole of one of the doors, twisting it slightly as it went in.

"Wow, Mr. Claire. I didn't know you could do that."

"It's Felix. And I picked it up a while ago," Vino said, jiggling the pin just a little, feeling the lock on the verge of clicking...

And then he saw someone approaching in the glass of the doors.

It wasn't the image of someone coming from inside the building, but the reflection of someone coming from behind. Vino sensed that something was amiss and slowly turned around.

The person who greeted his eyes was a woman wearing a black business suit, soaked to the bone with no umbrella to shield her from the rain. Vino had never seen her before, but the rest of the people with him instantly recognized her. She was the woman who'd been together with the Martillo Family's secretary at the Genoard manor.

The woman stared straight ahead, seeming not to notice them at all as she ran straight toward the doors. She grasped the handle and shook once, realized they were locked, and took a sweeping step back, her body twisting in a half circle as though executing a dance step.

Then the twist turned into a full spin, her leg lashing out as she jumped. All the speed and force from that jump was translated into power as her foot impacted squarely against the doors.

A dull thud shook the air, so low and powerful that one could have been forgiven for thinking that the entire building had trembled. A sharp crack followed it as the door she'd kicked broke completely off its hinges, falling inward in a twisted mess of metal and glass.

The woman stepped inside immediately and stopped for a moment, looking pensively about at the people who lay scattered about the lobby. It seemed that whatever she was searching for, however, wasn't there, as she soon shook her head and called one of the elevators, disappearing behind the metal doors.

Just as the elevator doors closed, the door Vino had been working on clicked, the small sound of the latch coming undone greeting their ears.

"Man, talk about a waste of effort," Vino said, smiling sheepishly as he got to his feet. Placing a hand flat on the door, he began to apply pressure, seemingly unaware of the fact that it had been made to swing outward.

The tortured shriek of warping metal filled the air as the door slowly began to *crumple* inward, completely ignoring the intent of its design.

"That's a little better. But I'm still a little pissed at that girl. Who does she think she is, stealing my thunder? When I find her I'm gonna give her a piece of my mind!"

"Calm down! You're acting like a kid, amigo!"

"What're you talking about? Adult, kid, it's all the same to me. So when you're saying I'm acting like a kid, I'm just acting like myself," Vino replied, somehow managing to look angry and amused at the same time. Before he could go any further, though, Chane stepped in front of him and looked up at him, her golden eyes meeting squarely with his own.

A moment passed, and then Vino chuckled self-consciously. "Well, I mean, if you insist, Chane."

"But she didn't say anything."

"Hahaha, Chane, you can't just go saying that kinda thing in front of other people!"

"...Us other people're already thinking you're a huge idiot right now, amigo," Maria said, staring strangely at Vino. She looked to Chane, but the other woman looked down to avoid her gaze, seemingly embarrassed.

"You really love her, don't you, Mr. Claire?"

"Aww, stop it, Tick! And I told you, it's Felix."

Maria could only stare nonplussed at Vino as he playfully punched Tick on the shoulder, obviously chagrined. At length she just shook her head and muttered to herself, "...And I lost to this guy, didn't I..."

The Restaurant on the Top Floor

"Tell me, everyone. Do you love nature?" the man said as he stepped off the elevator.

"My, I do so love skydecks like this. Look around you, what do you see? Nothing? Exactly! There's absolutely nothing around you as far as you can see, all three hundred and sixty degrees of your vision chock full of nat- Hold on a second, that's the Empire State Building, isn't it? This is false advertising. I demand a refund. Give me back my nature. Don't you agree?"

A slender woman with a peculiar looking stick strapped to her back followed the red-eyed man off the elevator, standing wordlessly at his side as he gestured and spoke.

The restaurant patrons seemed to think that he was simply part of some performance being held at the restaurant, and though they gave him their attention they didn't seem overly concerned with his strange appearance.

"What the hell is he doing here..."

Firo glared at Christopher as he held Dallas effortlessly in place, though he seemed more annoyed than truly angry.

...I'll just pretend I don't know him.

But as luck—or perhaps misfortune—would have it, Christopher just happened to look directly at Firo.

"Greetings again, Firo! Have you found the Dallas you were looking for?" Christopher called cheerily, waving to his friend. The eyes of the captive audience once more focused on Firo Prochainezo.

Firo blushed like a tomato, suddenly intensely aware of the attention he was getting. Behind him, Isaac and Miria whispered furiously to one another, pointing at the new arrivals.

"Look, Miria! That girl who just came out of the elevator! It's the magician from yesterday!"

"You're right, Isaac! Incredible! I bet the show's already started!"

"And that man who came with her! He looks like a wizard if I ever saw one! He must be her venerable magic master!"

"He's so impressive!"

Jacuzzi and his gang, on the other hand, only looked uneasily back and forth from Christopher to Adelle and then back again, while Dallas glared at Adelle with an animosity that surpassed even the hatred he'd directed toward Firo.

Ronnie alone seemed utterly unfazed, his expression making it clear that to him, everything was merely business as usual.

An uncomfortable silence ensued, and Firo finally sighed, slapped a palm over his face, and said, "What the hell are you guys even doing here?"

Christopher didn't deign to reply, instead quietly turning to look toward the open kitchen.

"Excuse me. May I speak to the manager of this fine establishment?"

The staff looked uncertainly at each other, unsure of what to say. At length, an old man who had been talking with the chefs raised his hand.

"That would be me..."

Christopher peered at him, making sure that the old man was indeed wearing a Nebula badge...

...And promptly drew his gun, aiming and firing before anyone could even react to his actions.

The bullet struck true right between his eyes, and the manager collapsed onto the kitchen floor like a sack of potatoes.

And finally, screams of confusion and terror broke out in Babel.

"Christ! The hell d'you think you're you doing, asshole?!" Firo shouted, unable to believe the sight unfolding before his eyes.

But even his startled voice was lost before it reached Christopher's ears, blending into the many voices raised in panic and fear.

One man kept his head amidst the chaos, reacting to the emergency before anyone else.

"Donny!"

The giant Mexican began to move the instant Jacuzzi's voice reached his ears, hefting the table held in his hand with one hand as though it was made of cardboard, and not wood and metal.

He reared back and threw it straight at Christopher, the makeshift missile hurtling through the air at fatal speeds.

"My."

Christopher dodged the table without even stepping back, his upper body bending back until it was almost parallel to the floor. The deadly mass sailed past him, just barely missing the tip of his nose.

"Almost, friend. Better luck next ti- Oh. Oh dear."

Donny was already standing before him by the time he'd straightened up. The giant's massive fist closed around his right arm.

"Donny! Bring him down!"

"Yeah..."

Donny followed his leader's orders, pressing down with the entirety of his weight onto Christopher.

"You're a strong fellow, aren't you. It's enough to make me the chills."

Contrary to what he was saying, Christopher easily held off Donny's free hand with his own and braced himself, slowly pushing upward against Donny as the Mexican pressed down.

"Ugh... Jacuzzi... He... He's strong..."

"He's trying to take Donny on head to head?! He's insane!" Nice shouted, aghast.

Christopher heard her and smirked, suddenly shifting his weight.

"Me? Take on a behemoth like this head on? You must be joking."

He gave his right arm a vigorous shake, breaking free of Donny's grasp, and slipped between the giant's legs like water.

"Goodbye, Gulliver," he said, still smiling, as he aimed at the back of Donny's head.

Then something black flashed before his eyes. It was a flash bang, one of Nice's specialties.

"Oh?"

It exploded, blinding light stabbing directly into Christopher's eyes.

"Ah!"

A silhouette darted through the sudden flash, heading straight toward Christopher. Jacuzzi dashed at the Lamia with no regard for his own safety, his hand outstretched to snatch away Christopher's gun.

He stopped suddenly short, his charge arrested a hairsbreadth away from his goal.

The shining point of a spear had appeared at his throat, tickling the thin skin as he breathed. Adelle stood facing him, her spear fully assembled and held ready.

"Umm... I'm sorry, Mr. Splot... He's... well, he's on our side..." Adelle murmured, looking quite ashamed but not budging an inch.

Jacuzzi glared at her, filled with uncharacteristic fury. "You promised you wouldn't kill anyone!"

Adelle looked down guiltily.

"I'm sorry... But... umm..."

She *smiled*.

"But I wasn't the one who made that promise..."

A spike of pure ice ran down Jacuzzi's spine.

She's different...

She's so much scarier than Tim...

His thoughts stopped there, cut abruptly short.

Something cold and pointed had come to rest lightly against his temple.

"*Jacuzzi!*" Nice shrieked, her voice filled with fear and anger.

Hardly daring to breathe, he glanced sideways and saw a strange blade, affixed to the end of a gun.

"Not bad, not bad at all. You really deserved better than being Tim's tools. I mean it," said Christopher, smiling as his finger tightened on the trigger.

Even the screaming patrons fell silent, freezing where they stood as Christopher's finger inched the trigger closer and closer to the fatal point. Some of them looked away, and some of them found themselves unable to do so.

"Stop it," Firo said, still kneeling and holding Dallas in place. "I don't know what the hell you're thinking, but stop it."

"I told you what I was thinking, didn't I? All part of the job, friend."

"...The hell kinda job has you doing shit like this, you dumbass?!"

Christopher smiled awkwardly, as though he hadn't really been expecting the anger directed at him.

"Err, well, to be quite honest I wasn't planning on killing our tattooed friend here at all. I just need to get you all calmed down to make my job a little easier, and to do that I need a hostage. You understand, don't you? Is that alright with you?"

Christopher sounded quite calm, a stark contrast to Firo as he slowly got to his feet, anxiety coloring the young camorrista's features.

"Guh." Dallas gasped as Firo rose, going limp and losing consciousness as Firo deliberately pressed down on his neck with his knee.

"Then I'll be your hostage, if that's what you want. Let him go already, will ya?"

Christopher fell silent for a moment, considering Firo's proposal. It was a short moment, however, because he threw back his head and broke into laughter.

"Hahahahahahaha! No, no, no no no no no, no. No. I'm sorry, Firo, but no."

"Why!"

"Oh, come now. We've slept under the same roof, haven't we? Broken bread together? How could I possibly hold such a close friend hostage?"

"...I'm gonna beat the shit outta you if you don't tell me."

Christopher relented, telling Firo the real reason.

"But Firo... How can I hold you hostage when I can't kill you?"

Hell rose from below.

Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Bloodbloodbloodbloodbloodblood.

The halls were awash with a hell the color of blood.

Hell came for the damned before they could even draw breath to scream, opening bright red mouths in their necks as they drew their last breaths.

Hell came even to those who saw it coming, slitting their throats before they even realized their friends had fallen.

Hell came, brought by a harbinger of unbelievable speed and sharpness and cruelty.

"They said there were around a thousand and two hundred employees here. I'll probably have to take out around five hundred myself. Troublesome," Chi grumbled as he exited the office. "It'd be quicker to just collapse the entire building, but... Hmph. I suppose that would make too many innocent casualties."

The walls behind him were no longer mist white, but instead deep dark crimson.

Not thirty seconds had passed since Chi had entered the office, but that short time had been more than long enough for him to slit the throats of dozens of Nebula employees.

"...It's harder to pause and tell them apart before I kill them than it is to actually kill them. I almost wish we could be like the Lemures and just go wild... hmm?"

Chi stopped, catching sight of two squirming silhouettes at the end of the hall.

Two men, dressed as janitors, were slowly advancing toward him on their bellies like soldiers in a firefight.

"...Hey, Nick, look. There's someone walking toward us up there."

"Huh? Wait, does that mean the gas ain't reached this place yet? I guess that means we can get up..."

Upon hearing their words, Chi realized who they were.

So this is the bait that Adelle mentioned.

Chi narrowed his eyes and Nick and Jack got to their feet, the two members of Jacuzzi's gang casually dusting off their pants as they rose.

"Phew, I know they told us to just keep our heads low, but it ain't easy crawling around like caterpillars, eh?"

"Hold on a sec, you don't look like someone who works here. You one of those reinforcements that Tim fella mentioned?"

Pitiful creatures. They don't even know that they're fated to drink the incomplete elixir of life and spend the rest of their lives as glorified guinea pigs.

Perhaps it would be more merciful to them just to kill them on the spot. Chi absently licked the blade of one of his claws, thinking dark thoughts.

The next instant he froze as something caught his attention.

"Huh?"

"Something wrong, pal?"

"D'ya think he even speaks English?"

Chi ignored the two buffoons and spun in place, hoping against hope that he was wrong.

"Hey!"

"The hell..."

Chi left them to their fates and ran back the way he'd come.

If I'm right, then...!

A few minutes later, a door leading to the emergency stairwell burst open, Chi sprinting headlong through it and up toward the topmost floor.

"How could I make such a mistake... I was too lost in the joy of killing!" Chi snarled to himself, speeding up the stairs at a speed that defied common sense.

"Did he know? Did Master Huey know about this?!"

Chi had deliberately chosen the stairs instead of taking the elevator, yet such was his speed that the elevator would have been hard pressed to follow.

He was halfway up to Babel when he made a misstep, his momentum slamming him hard to the floor in a mess of tangled limbs. He ignored the pain, shouting with all his might toward the floors above even as he got back to his feet.

"Run... Run away, Christopher!"

Tim walked through the research facilities located near the top floors.

The members of his Larvae had cut the phone lines as soon as he gave the signal to begin, completely cutting off the Mist Wall from the outside world. Assuming that Jacuzzi's gang had done their job and sprayed the gas he'd given them through the building, it was a sure bet that the Mist Wall was currently almost totally paralyzed.

No, not almost. If Christopher and his lot are still going like they were when they left, then this building's fate is already sealed.

Tim gave the matter no more thought.

It didn't matter what Huey was thinking. All he had to do was follow orders. He kept his mission firmly in mind as he kept up a brisk walk, striding boldly through the nearly deserted corridors.

"It wasn't in either of the two labs we searched, so that just leaves this place..."

But when he arrived at the door to the final laboratory, he only saw two of his underlings hunched around the door. It seemed like they were struggling with the lock.

"Status report."

"Ah, boss. Sorry, this's taking us longer than we expected. The locks on this one're a lot more complicated than the others were."

"I see. This must be the place."

All the information he'd received from the organization's spies, the Twins, indicated that this lab was probably the one they were looking for. Apparently the place was almost completely deserted during the daytime, the lights only coming on in the dead of night. In other words, the place worked on a totally different schedule from the rest of the building.

But in that case, I'd expect tighter security here. I know the whole building's in a state of emergency, but they still should've left at least one or two guards stationed here...

The door finally opened, cutting off Tim's thoughts. His two underlings carefully snuck in ahead of him, and Tim followed, secure in the knowledge that he'd be able to sift through the bounty of research undisturbed.

"It's not here? What the hell?"

The only things to be seen inside the final lab were various machines. Nothing that might have gone into them or come out of them was to be found at all.

"Did they move it somewhere? Damn it, come to think of it, the Twins' last report was three days ago. If they moved it since then... Did they know we were coming?"

Half a dozen possibilities ran through his head in as many seconds, but regardless the reality facing him did not change. The thing he was looking for wasn't there.

"I guess I'll have to ask one of the researchers here... Bah. I didn't want to show my face to anyone... But then again, I supposed Christopher will take care of any witnesses."

"Don't waste your time," a voice said from behind him. Tim and his cronies immediately ducked behind nearby desks, turning around to face the unknown threat.

"The thing you're searching for isn't here," the voice continued. "Every single scrap of information you gathered was nothing but bait planted for Huey Laforet."

The owner of the voice revealed himself, walking forward into the light. It was a middle-aged man, someone who Tim recognized. Not that Tim knew him personally, but he certainly knew *of* him. Behind the man stood two men in black clothes who looked to be bodyguards.

"Senator Beriam? How... What the hell are you doing here?"

"I have enjoyed close relations with the upper echelons of Nebula for quite some time, and you could say I've been funding their research here. Oh, and I can't deny I wanted a closer look at one of Huey Laforet's most prized pupils. I invited the head of the branch to join us here tonight, but he's quite shy. I hear he's been on vacation since yesterday."

"Thanks for taking the time to come and see me, then. This's a stroke of luck for the both of us, since you've got something I need too. Care to tell me where I can find the incomplete elixir? You said you've been funding this project, so I'm guessing you should at least know where it is."

Senator Manfred Beriam was a powerful man, and the way he carried himself made it clear that he knew it. He stared at Tim, his sharp eyes seeming to see straight through him, but Tim met his gaze unflinchingly, for all that it was a bluff.

*All I **can** do is bluff him right now. Dammit, if only Adelle were here...*

Tim had no combat training and neither did his two underlings; all that he could rely on was the pistol hidden in his vest pocket. Somehow, he doubted that it would do him much good against the burly men flanking Beriam on both sides.

"I already told you. The elixir isn't here."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"You've come to the wrong place."

"What?"

Tim glanced carefully around and then back at Beriam, caught off guard by the sudden twist.

"Do you think this tiny room could serve my purposes? Do you think that something as grand and terrible as immortality itself could be contained in such small confines?"

"...What the hell are you talking about?"

A rare, vicious smile crossed Beriam's normally expressionless face.

"This building, the entirety of the Mist Wall, is my laboratory."

— —

Babel

"So you knew?"

"Knew what?"

"About me. You knew right from the beginning, and you had the nerve to..."

Christopher sighed and shook his head, as though disappointed by Firo's heated glare.

"No, no, no. It was pure coincidence in the beginning, really! When I first met you in the rain I had absolutely no idea that you were actually a... well, you know. I don't think I should let the cat out of the bag with so many witnesses, right? Don't worry. My lips are sealed. I wouldn't even dream of doing such a thing to the first friend I ever made in New York."

"Not in the mood for joking around, Christopher."

None of the people around them were listening to the Lamia's jesting. Perhaps a few of the most level-headed ones could make out what he was saying, but even they had no idea what, exactly, he was talking about.

Dammit, I didn't think he'd know I'm immortal...

Firo opened his mouth to try and ask another question that might shed some light on the identity of his mysterious "friend," but the beginning of his query was smothered by the sound of a high chime.

The bell on one of the elevators rang, letting everyone know that it had arrived.

"Oh? I wonder who that could be."

The entirety of the top floor was taken up by the restaurant, so it didn't actually have an entrance per se. The area in front of the register led directly to three elevators that ran straight up from the first floor.

Christopher strode up to the elevator and waited for the doors to open, his eyes sparkling with delighted curiosity.

But when they did open, there was nobody there.

"Hmm? Maybe one of Tim's boys pressed the wrong button?"

He stepped closer, looking to peek inside, but a foot suddenly flashed forward from above and kicked him squarely in the face.

"Gack," Christopher announced, his feet leaving the floor as he flew backwards.

"Christopher!"

Adelle, caught off guard by the sudden attack, drew her spear away from Jacuzzi and dashed over to her fallen companion.

The restaurant patrons, on the other hand, saw that the murderous madman was temporarily incapacitated and made a mad dash for the emergency exits, shoving each other out of the way in their hurry.

And finally, the owner of the mysterious foot exited the elevator. Ennis looked anxiously about as she brushed past the panicking civilians, her gaze flicking rapidly left and right as though she were searching for someone or something.

The someone in question reacted the moment he, in turn, clapped eyes on her.

"Ennis!"

Ennis whipped around at the sound of Firo's voice, dashing over in an instant to stand close to the man who was technically part of herself.

"I-I'm so glad... I was so worried, Firo!"

Most of the patrons ignored the touching reunion in favor of funneling into the emergency exits, disappearing one by one down the stairs. Suddenly depopulated, the restaurant looked strangely lonely. Only a few people—Jacuzzi, Firo, Christopher, and their respective companions—remained.

"Ow ow ow ow..."

A singularly unconcerned cry of pain filled the sudden silence.

"Ohh, that hurts. Ohh, my aching jaw. Ohh, the pain. Why, not even my own parents ever laid a hand on my face, let alone a foot..."

Christopher got to his feet, looking quite unhurt and in not very much pain at all as he grinned at Ennis.

"Not that we ever had parents, you know."

He brushed the dust off his clothes and tipped Ennis a friendly wink, as though he'd known her all his life.

"I suppose you'd know something about that too, right?"

Ennis froze, her distress so obvious that Firo couldn't help but notice. His jaw grew rigid as he turned once more to Christopher.

"Who are you? Give me a serious answer or I'll make you regret it."

"I regret nothing, for I am always serious. Mm. Well, I suppose I can tell you the truth. Think of it as my little gift to commemorate this momentous occasion. It's not every day that I get to meet my long lost little sister."

"Little... sister?"

Christopher smiled, seeming to enjoy Firo's confusion as he began to lay out the truth Ennis had so wanted.

"We were created based on Szilard Quates' research. We're incomplete homunculi."

Firo and Ennis kept their silence, waiting for him to continue. Jacuzzi and his friends, clearly bewildered, could only look back and forth at them. Ronnie, who had kept his seat during all the commotion, showed no visible reaction, and Isaac and Miria had disappeared from sight while nobody was looking.

"Of course, Ennis here is a far cry from a perfect being that knows everything as well, but at least she's immortal, right? We, on the other hand, were created based on notes that were *stolen* before that final discovery was made, so all we got was the non-aging part of the package. If you want to look on the bright side, I suppose we don't need someone else to sustain us like you do, Ennis. That's a plus, right?"

Firo frowned, quickly running over the knowledge that he'd been given. "...Stolen? Does that mean Szilard wasn't your father?"

"What was that? Father? To think that some day, someone would refer to us artificial creatures as though we were actual people... Ah, it brings a tear to my eye. You are a true friend, Firo."

"I thought I told you to be serious."

"Oh, come now. You have Szilard's memories, don't you? Nothing rings a bell?"

Firo hesitated, cautiously sifting through the memories in his head that had once belonged to Szilard Quates. If it were up to him, he'd have locked those memories up and thrown away the key, but Christopher's words had sparked his curiosity. A long moment passed, and finally one name floated to the forefront of his mind.

"Huey... Huey Laforet..."

As though to accent the terrorist's name, the elevator bell rang once again.

"And we were just starting to get to the good parts, too. Who could that be?"

Christopher frowned, clearly put out, and reached for a handful of unused steak knives from a nearby table.

"Not that it really matters."

"Hold on... Hey...!"

Firo took a step forward, alarmed, but it was already too late. In one quick, fluid motion, Christopher reared back and threw the knives with all his might at the elevator doors.

"Stop!"

Three knives disappeared into the crack between the doors as they slid open.

There was no clang of metal hitting the walls, no clatter as the knives hit the floor.

Firo realized just what that meant, and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

But when the elevator doors fully opened, the sight that greeted him on the other side was far beyond anything he'd imagined.

"Close, but not quite," the man said as he casually strode out of the elevator, masterfully juggling the three knives Christopher had thrown. Following him were a woman in a black dress, a Mexican girl with two Japanese swords hanging at her side, and a man whose eyes were perpetually narrowed in a smile, multiple pairs of scissors hanging from his belt.

"Was there a dartboard on the door or something? In that case, give my regards to the fella who designed it. Certainly adds a thrill to the end of the ride."

The man seemed completely unconcerned as to who had actually thrown the knives, tossing them up and snatching them out of the air one last time.

"Claire...?"

Firo rubbed his eyes, hardly believing what he saw.

"Claire... What the hell! Claire, it *is* you!"

"Oh, hey, Firo. Still a babyface, ain'tcha."

"Hahaha! Gimme a break, man. It's been years and that's the first thing you say to me?"

Ennis couldn't help but feel a bit surprised as she watched Firo exchange playful banter with the redheaded man.

She'd seen Firo break a man's fingers for taunting him about his youthful looks, but seeing him now, laughing it off without a second thought, that memory seemed almost hard to believe.



"Ah, that's right. Sorry to break the news to you like this, Firo, but Claire Stanfield died in a tragic accident. Hi, I'm Felix Walken, nice to meet you."

"I heard about the Felix thing from Luck but I didn't think he was serious. You're a weirdo, you know that?" Firo said, smiling. All the stress that had been in him just a moment before seemed to drain away without a trace as he chatted with his childhood friend.

Christopher frowned for the first time, put out at having his thunder stolen so suddenly. He pointed at the redheaded intruder with one of his guns and said, "Hold on, now. Who are you? What're you doing he-"

"Hahaha, okay. I get it. Shut up already."

Caught completely flat footed at the abrasive and totally uncompromising tone of command, Christopher could do nothing but obey.

Vino flashed Firo a quick smile and then looked to Jacuzzi, who had been watching events unfold with his mouth hanging slightly open.

"Hmm... Lemme guess. Something went wrong."

Jacuzzi snapped back to reality once Vino spoke to him and shook his head, mumbling, "Uhh... To be honest, Mr. Felix, I-I don't really get what's going on anymore..."

"Well, from the way everyone down on the first floor was taking a nap, I can tell the sleeping gas trick worked just fine."

Adelle and Christopher started and looked at each other, realizing something was very, very wrong.

At length Christopher swaggered forward, a jagged smile creasing his face. "Haha. A nap, you say? You're quite a funny guy. I've never heard anyone refer to a bloodbath like that as-"

Whatever Christopher might have said next was drowned out by a mighty cheer, two voices raised in unison completely erasing his own.

"Amazing! Incredible! Look at this, Miria!"

"Magic is a wonderful thing!"

"Huh?"

Isaac and Miria had apparently been snooping around in the kitchen, and had just then chosen to reveal themselves, raucous applause accompanying the sound of their voices.

"What're you two doing?" Firo asked, frowning. The two burglars were crouching around the body of the restaurant manager, the one Christopher had shot in the head.

Then he saw it.

It wasn't just Firo. Everyone still present froze as they witnessed a miracle take place.

"Ugh... What... what happened...?"

They saw a dead man speaking.

Except he wasn't so dead anymore. The manager clambered quickly to his feet, not a single drop of blood staining his face. The hole that Christopher had left in his forehead, too, had vanished without a trace.

"What the..."

Firo and Jacuzzi gasped aloud, while Christopher and Adelle froze, their thoughts immediately jumping to the same dreadful conclusion. The ones who had just arrived looked around quizzically, not understanding what all the fuss was about.

"It can't be..." Christopher whispered, and looked to his weapon.

His gun had a blade on the end, and he'd used it not ten minutes ago to stab a woman in the neck. He'd shaken it off, of course, but no amount of motion could possibly have thrown off every speck of blood. Yet the *blade gleamed bright silver in the lamplight*.

Understanding dawned on him, and at the same time he heard a familiar voice from the emergency stairwell.

"Christopher!"

"Chi..."

Chi should still have been dozens of floors below, killing dozens of people, but the blades of his gauntlets, too, shone silver.

"Christopher! This building is dangerous! We need to get out of here!" Chi shouted, beyond the point of caring whether anyone overheard. "Every single Nebula employee in this building..."

"...*is an immortal!*"

"It can't be..."

Tim felt bile at the back of his throat and swallowed hard.

"Oh, but it can. I opposed the idea, of course, but there was a scientist from the main branch who insisted on it. She's quite insane, I'm sure."

"It doesn't matter who insisted on it, dammit... This is madness." Tim's mind reeled from the implications, nearly unable to process the reality of the situation. "How far are you crazy bastards willing to go?"

He desperately wanted to dismiss everything as a lie, but Beriam had no reason to deceive him about something of this magnitude. Everything from the tone of the senator's voice to the unwavering calm in his eyes told Tim that it was the truth.

"You turned every single employee working here, all one thousand and two hundred of them... into incomplete immortals?!"

"I believe that was what I implied, yes. They were told it was a company-funded vaccination, but in reality it was the incomplete elixir of immortality, stolen from Szilard Quates' organization."

Tim shot Beriam a disgusted glare. Behind him, his two underlings had gone white with fear, quailing before Beriam like mice before a snake.

"You turned over a thousand people into monsters just to further your research?"

"Technically, they can die of old age, so in my mind they still remain just on the cusp of humanity. And were you not planning to do the same thing for your master, albeit on a smaller scale?" Beriam replied. Tim found himself at a loss for words.

"If I were a betting man, however, I would bet money that Laforet already knew about this. That was why he turned his traveling freak show loose... though, from the looks of it, it appears he kept *you* in the dark."

The look of amusement in Beriam's eyes melted away, replaced by something that could have been pity.

"Did you think it was merely coincidence?"

"What?"

"Did you think that I just happened to come here today, of all days?"

Beriam looked away from Tim, his eyes growing unfocused. "Behind every coincidence, every stroke of luck, and every miracle, there is inevitably a cold and calculating mind. I am not speaking merely of today. Plans were made and carried out during the Szilard Quates incident, and also during that of the Flying Pussyfoot..."

Tim, like his subordinates, could only wait for Beriam to continue.

"You are like a butterfly. A pitiful creature, caught up in the webs that Nebula and Laforet have woven in an attempt to ensnare the other. They do not even see you as prey, and so you must wait for death to take you, bound hand and foot.... Mm. I think the time has come for me to leave. I have an afternoon meeting I can't afford to miss."

And without a backward glance, Beriam left the room, his two bodyguards sweeping out behind him. He paused in the doorway, however, and said without looking behind him, "I loathe immortals, incomplete and complete. But you are simply a man, one who fears death and the loss of his world. We stand on opposing sides... but nonetheless, I will pray for your success."

Tim stood in silence for a moment after the senator left. A few minutes passed, and then he looked up.

"Regroup with the others and get the hell out of this building. Consider the SoHo hideout compromised. Wait for me at Point C in New Jersey."

"...Roger that, boss."

"I... I'll go to the top floor and talk with Genoard and Splot before making my way out alone," Tim said, more to himself than to his cronies. His brow furrowed with concern. "Though, I can't even begin to imagine what's going on up there..."

Babel

The knowledge that every person working at the Mist Wall was immortal sent a chill down Firo and Ennis' spines. Even Ronnie, who had been watching everything happen so far without even batting an eyelash, sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth.

Reality took a sudden turn into the land of fantasy, and everyone in the room reacted differently.

Vino seemed totally unconcerned, dismissing the revelation with a shrug and a muttered, "Huh."

Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent looked to one another, confused...

"Say, Miria. What's an immortal?"

"People who aren't mortal... So, maybe people who aren't dead?"

"Aha, I understand now. People who're alive, then. That means nobody in this building is dead!"

"Frabjous day!"

...but still the same as ever.

Jacuzzi Splot sniffled, tears welling up in his eyes as the sudden twist of events threatened to overwhelm him.

Tick Jefferson and Maria Barcelito seemed largely unfazed, instead glancing cautiously at Adelle as they'd been doing since they'd arrived.

And Christopher Shouldered...

Christopher Shouldered blinked slowly and nodded. "...Really, now. Tell me again why we have to run, though?"

"I knew you were a fool, but this is madness! Think of what will happen once the security guards realize they're immortal and mob us! How do you think we can possibly follow Master Huey's orders and massacre everyone if they're all immortal?!"

The name "Huey" made Chane's eyes widen briefly, though she otherwise showed no reaction.

Christopher smiled, completely unaware of the roiling emotions in Chane's heart.

"How? Well, that's simple." He looked to Firo and Ennis. "Look over there. We have not one, but two people here who can kill immortals."

"What the hell...!"

Ignoring Firo's outburst, Christopher calmly laid out his preposterous plan.

"We can get Firo here to cooperate with us and devour all one thousand and two hundred people here."

Technically, he was right. Both Firo and Ennis had the power to devour incomplete immortals. Actually, Ronnie, Isaac, and Miria could as well, but Christopher had no way of knowing that.

The act of devouring another immortal, though, wasn't as simple as it seemed. It involved absorbing the other person's memories, thoughts, emotions... everything that made them themselves. Firo had had more than enough of that with one experience, back when he'd devoured Szilard Quates. Ennis, too, had vowed never to devour another person again.

Christopher's callous suggestion was the last straw.

"I've had enough of this... Let's go, Ennis."

"Ah, right..."

To tell the truth, Ennis wanted to talk a little more with Christopher and his companions, intrigued by just how similar they were to her.

But I feel like if I start talking to them, I'll never escape their clutches...

The dangerous air she felt radiating from Christopher was enough to convince her that today, at least, her questions could wait.

"Hahahaha, come now, Firo. Surely you wouldn't ignore an earnest request from a friend? And Ennis, are you sure you don't want to learn a little more?"

"I understand who you are now. But I no longer have any connection with Mast... with Szilard Quates."

"Ah, but you did once, didn't you? And our boss is interested in your past," Christopher said, chuckling as he shook his head. He saw that Ennis had paused mid-step and grinned, satisfied.

"I'd wager you have the knowledge, don't you? And if you don't, Firo surely does, since he has that old man kicking around inside him. What knowledge, you ask? Why, the secret to making a near-complete homunculus, of course."

Ennis gasped.

"Szilard kept that secret very close to what passed for his heart, you see. We never did manage to get our hands on it."

Ennis felt her palms go cold and clammy, the question about her origins shaking her to the core.

"Don't listen to him, Ennis!" Firo shouted, able to sense her distress without even turning around.

"Firo, please shut up for a while, will you. Adelle."

The spearwoman nodded, immediately springing into action. Soundlessly she approached Firo as he strode unaware toward the elevator, lifting her spear and stabbing it at the back of his head in one fluid motion.

"Ah..."

The cruel point came to a stop just before it reached its target.

Vino had stepped in between them and grabbed the tip of the spear between his fingers. Adelle had struck with intent to kill, and yet that fatal blow had been stopped by the strength of Vino's index finger and thumb alone.

"Impossible..."

In a way, it shocked her even more than Ronnie's impossible feat had the day before.

"Hey, what do you think you were trying to do to my friend?" Vino asked, his voice suddenly cold.

"Thanks, Claire. I owe you one." Firo sounded grateful but not surprised, as though such near misses happened all the time.

"It's Felix." Vino, for his part, sounded almost bored.

"Try not to make him angry," Firo called to Christopher. "As far as I know, he's the strongest human being on the planet."

"Strongest human being on the planet? Yeesh, you're embarrassing me," Vino said, laughing. But the monstrous strength of his fingers didn't lessen in the slightest. Adelle gave a hard tug to free her weapon but it didn't budge. It felt like the spear was caught in a mechanical vise.

Vino stared thoughtfully at Adelle and muttered, "Hold on, a woman with a spear... Hey, it's you, isn't it? You're the one who gave Chane that cut on her cheek..."

Christopher decided enough was enough and leveled his gun at Vino, his smile looking distinctly strained.

"I think it's time you left."

He fired three shots, but the dry cracks were immediately swallowed by three sharp clangs that echoed in the air.

Vino had swiveled instantly, bringing the slender blade of Adelle's spear up and using it as a shield to deflect the bullets. The slightest mistake in calculating the path of any of the three bullets would have cost him his life, but Vino hadn't even broken a sweat. In fact, he seemed more concerned with Adelle, staring critically at her face.

"...Hmm. I guess that makes us even."

Suddenly, Adelle felt something trickle down her cheek.

One of Christopher's deflected bullets had grazed her cheek, leaving a thin cut running down her face. It looked exactly like the one that she herself had given to Chane.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" Christopher asked, his smile growing even wider as he realized just what Vino was capable of. Vino frowned, trying to understand what that smile meant, but a new voice broke into his thoughts.

"What the hell..."

Tim had run up the stairs from the research centers as fast as he could, but now he stood frozen in the doorway, blinking rapidly as he tried to get a handle on the situation.

"...Chi. Fill me in. What happened here?"

"What do you think?" Chi said tersely. "Christopher happened."

Tim heard the strained note in his voice and realized that Chi had figured out the secret as well.

"Shit... Christopher! We're out of here! I'm calling the operation off!"

Christopher replied without looking back, keeping his gaze and his gun squarely directed at Vino. "I don't think so, Tim. We're working on different orders, you know."

"This is an order, Christopher! I'm telling you as the leader of the Larvae to get the hell out of here! I'll take responsibility for the fallout, so move it!"

Perhaps he detected the desperate note in Tim's voice, for he slowly lowered his gun and said, "Alright... If you insist, I'll give up on our mission. It's not as though we could even stand a chance at completing it without the cooperation of a true immortal, anyway."

He smiled.

"So, now that we're off the job, *I can do what I want in my spare time, right?*"

"...What?"

But Christopher was already moving. Forgoing the advantage in range his gun gave him, he dashed forward suddenly, closing in on Vino in an instant.

"Whoa!"

Vino was caught off guard but not exactly surprised, and he lashed out with a lethal kick that would have sent Christopher flying away had it connected.

"God might love you..."

Christopher leaped, clearing Vino's leg and actually kicking off of his outstretched thigh for speed as he brought his knee up to strike Vino's undefended chin.

There was a sharp crack that sounded like wood snapping, and Vino's upper body reeled back.

"...but I don't, human."

Someone actually landed a clean hit on Claire?

Firo almost rubbed his eyes in disbelief, for it was the first time in his life he'd ever seen it happen.

Vino's lightning speed was for once absent as he rocked back on his heels. Not one to miss such an opportunity, Christopher kept up the attack. His guns appeared in his hands as though by magic, the blades on the ends glinting cruelly as he raised them high. For an instant he looked like some kind of terrible human mantis, his claws rising and then falling in a strike that would bury each blade deep into the sides of Vino's neck.

But even that small window of time was enough for the hitman to recover, and his hands shot up to grab Christopher's arms by the wrists.

"...You surprised me for a bit there."

"You dare to hurt Adelle, human? You dare to harm one of us?"

Christopher should have sounded angry, considering what he was saying. But instead of a snarl, his sharp teeth were bared in a gentle smile.

"Well, y'know. I probably would've let bygones be bygones if she'd apologized, but I just kinda got caught up in the moment."

"Hahaha, you're a funny man. It was a stupid answer, but funny."

Vino had stopped the blades from reaching his neck, but they were still pointing at him. Which meant that the barrels of the guns they were attached to were also facing the same direction.

"Goodbye," Christopher said, and pulled both triggers.

But neither bullet reached its mark.

Vino had leaped straight up the moment Christopher's fingers tightened on the triggers, using his wrists as an axis to avoid the shots as he vaulted up and over Christopher's head, landing behind him.

"Oh?"

Claire spun as soon as his feet touched the floor, one elbow lashing out behind him, but Christopher saw it coming and ducked, letting the assassin's arm whizzing harmlessly above his head as he stabbed at Vino's exposed side.

Vino, in turn, had seen that coming well in advance. He skipped backward, twisting so that the keen point missed him by a hair.

"Wow, you're incredible, you know that? I really mean it. I'd say you're the third strongest person I've ever met. I'm first, of course."

"Then who's second?" Firo blurted, unable to contain his curiosity.

"The old Felix."

"Who the hell is that?"

Vino ignored his friend and cracked his neck to both sides, looking curiously at Christopher.

"So what'll it be? You wanna keep going?"

"Didn't I tell you I was going to kill you?"

"But why?"

"Because the rain is falling too hard," Christopher said, then paused, looking slightly more serious than normal. "That was a lie. The real reason is because you're strong."

"Whoa, what are you, a wandering martial artist or something?"

"You see, I want to challenge God. Would you believe me if I said I wanted to do that by destroying you, a man obviously gifted by Him, and in doing so overcome a massive inferiority complex left inside me by the fact of my artificial creation?"

"Huh. Well, at least you're honest. Can't say I like the reveal, though," Vino said, chuckling as he walked toward one of the windows.

"Firo and Chane're good enough that they wouldn't get clipped by stray bullets," he began, tapping the glass pane with his knuckles, "but the kids'd probably get hurt if we fought here, so what do you say we take it *outside*?"

"...I say we'd both be bored to tears by the time the elevator reached the ground floor."

"True, but that's not what I meant..."

A high tinkle split the air, followed by a roaring whoosh of air as Vino gave the window one sharp chop with the flat of his hand, the glass spilling outward to leave a hole easily big enough to walk through. Vino smiled, his hair whipping about in the fierce wind.

"I said... *outside*."

And as he said it, he took a step outward, into the rain. The upper part of the Mist Wall was made in the shape of a pyramid, with the skydeck restaurant being situated just above the base of that pyramid. Someone could probably walk around on it, but one misplaced step would send that someone plummeting down a sheer manmade cliff. The fierce rain and wind certainly didn't make things any safer.

"I see that God didn't see fit to give you brains to go along with that brawn," Christopher murmured, shaking his head in disbelief. It didn't stop him from stepping out of the hole as well.

"Hey... Hey, wait! Christopher! Stop!" Tim cried. He'd been standing there dumbfounded, unable to quite follow the speed with which events were unfolding, but with a start he snapped back to reality and shouted to try and stop his wayward underling.

"It's no use."

Chi, who had worked together with Christopher for many years, simply shook his head.

"...I'll watch over him."

And with that, Chi, too, dashed forward and out into the rain.

Tim reached out in a desperate attempt to stop him, but his fingers closed only on air. He could only follow Chi with his eyes as the homunculus disappeared behind a curtain of falling water.

Then someone else, someone he didn't immediately recognize, approached the shattered portal as well.

"Huh? Wait... that's the girl who attacked me back at the Millionaire Row..."

"Ack! Chane! No, don't go!"

But like Chi, Chane also ignored her companion's desperate cries and disappeared through the window.

Left in the restaurant were Jacuzzi and his two friends, Firo and Ennis, and Isaac and Miria—who for some reason were still in the kitchen applauding the manager.

A short distance away from them stood Tim, still gazing numbly at the broken window. Beside him, Adelle seemed lost in a world of her own, staring blankly at her spear.

There was the man who seemed to see everything, still sitting motionless at his table.

Tick only looked cautiously around, and Maria...

Maria found herself unable to move at all, her heart holding her captive.

— —

Why couldn't I move?

When she tried to stab that guy with the green hat, why wasn't I the one to stop her?

Why couldn't I stand against her and tell her to face me?

Was it because he was a stranger, and I didn't want to stick out my neck for him? No, that's not it. That's not it at all.

Am I afraid...? Me...?

Why... Why...

Why did I feel so relieved when Vino moved first so I didn't have to?!

The roar of wind and rain from the shattered window filled the restaurant with a cacophonous din, but Maria heard none of it. Her hands clenched tightly into fists, her nails almost drawing blood.

She'd thought that Tick's words had gotten her over her fears.

She'd planned on challenging the spearwoman the moment she saw her again, demanding a rematch right then and there.

But that moment had come and gone, and she hadn't moved at all.

She was afraid.

Fear gripped her—fear of the woman who had defeated her so absolutely once before.

Can I beat her? Can I, really?

She asked herself the same question over and over.

Even now... can I believe in Murasamia?

Like Maria, Adelle had also been standing motionless up until then, but she suddenly looked up.

She looked almost lost somehow, and when she spoke she sounded far away, as though she was merely voicing her thoughts aloud.

"I... I was afraid."

"O-of what?" Unaware of the turmoil inside Adelle, Jacuzzi replied as though she'd been talking to him.

She turned to face him, her normally timid features oddly expressionless.

"When... when he was holding my spear and I couldn't move... I was terrified. I... I'd... Nobody had ever done that to me before, especially not barehanded. I never even imagined that someone could beat me without a weapon."

"A-are you alright?"

"I envy them, so much... Christopher and Chi-Mei and Liza... They get to kill so many people, but I... I..."

Light seeped back into her blank, crumbling eyes, and she suddenly gave Jacuzzi a smile.

"Ah, umm. Right," Jacuzzi said, giving her a cautious smile of his own despite himself.

Adelle turned to face Tim.

"Tim..."

"Ah, you snapped out of it. Sorry to ask this of you, but could you go outside and get Christopher and Chi to-"

"It's okay, right?"

"Huh?"

Tim felt a chill run down his spine at the sight of Adelle's shaky smile.

That chill became a premonition, which in turn became reality as Adelle opened her mouth and said, "The mission is already a failure, so... *So we don't need the bait any longer, right?*"

"What?"

"I-I can't stop shivering. I know I'll feel better if I can just kill someone. If I just kill someone and someone else and another and another... I'll be just fine. So... may I...?"

"Wh-what?!" Jacuzzi shrieked as he putting two and two together, but it was already too late. Adelle spun like a bolt of lightning, her spear sweeping around and splitting the air, rocketing toward the tattoo on his face.

— —



Eve looked up worriedly at the Mist Wall, silently wishing with all her heart for the safety of not just her brother, but also that of the strange people who had escorted her to the skyscraper.

"They said he'd be at the very top floor..."

She gazed at the white walls stretching up to the sky, her mind awl with a mix of worry and eager anticipation.

Suddenly, she realized that something was off.

The Mist Wall was famous for its immaculate, unblemished walls, shining white even on the cloudiest, rainiest days.

But to her, it seemed as though those walls had just been stained red.

She looked closer and gasped as she realized what it was.

The walls themselves were as clean and white as ever...

But the rain flowing down the side of the building was a bright shade of scarlet.

More water fell from the heavens and washed away the patch of crimson soon enough, but the sight remained burned into the girl's eyes.

A rain of blood, slashing through the white mist...

— —

The Mist Wall Upper Walls

"With all this rain soaking my clothes, wouldn't you agree that I'm finally coexisting with nature?"

"Nah. You're actually keeping the rain from falling to the ground like it should. How unnatural is that?"

"...Ah, I like that. An unconventional point of view, but I like it. I must hand it to you."

Two men stood in the roaring downpour, casually conversing like old friends.

Fierce wind whipped around them. Any normal person would have had trouble simply keeping their footing.

"You're bleeding quite a lot," Christopher commented.

Vino's shoulder was damp not with water, but dark red-black blood.

"Don't push yourself. If you admit defeat, we can be friends. Bygones will be bygones. And then I'll kill you, of course."

Christopher grinned, his expression full of compassion and sympathy as he advanced his preposterous proposal.

"Eh. It's a handicap to spice things up a bit. Don't let it bother you. Well, no, actually, if you did let it bother you that'd probably make things easier on me. I've got to say, though, I'm not really having any fun."

Vino's breathing was even and unhurried, and he sounded so calm that one could almost believe that he had taken the hit on purpose. The pain should have been significant, but he seemed to brush it off as little more than a mosquito bite.

"Let me tell you why. The biggest reason is because there's nothing in it for me if I win."

"Oh, but there is. You can brag to the Lamia that you beat me."

"Huh, really. So you're the strongest one out of these Lamia people?"

"Hard to say. We've never fought seriously amongst ourselves."

The smile slowly faded from Vino's features.

"That's technically an answer, but I feel like you're just playing around with me."

"Oh, the feeling is quite mutual, I assure you. But I find it's not entirely unwelcome."

The highest parts of the Mist Wall had small stairs leading upwards around the edges, and one could take these stairs to scale the slanted.

Christopher and Vino had taken these stairs up until they stood about halfway up the white pyramid and then promptly resumed their fight, blades and bullets and fists and feet flying.

One of Christopher's stray shots had glanced off at an odd angle from a metal support and by pure chance happened to strike Vino from behind, leaving a sizable wound.

The blood from that wound had spurting outward in a high arc, becoming a bloody rain that fell toward the earth.

The bullet had not lost much of its speed before striking Vino in the shoulder, and the mental trauma alone from such an injury should have had him panting for breath. But the hitman seemed to have dismissed the blood seeping from his shoulder as something beneath his consideration, the flow of blood becoming as natural to him as the rhythm of his breathing.

Vino seemed confident and at ease, but so did Christopher.

"You can't beat me, you know," Christopher said.

"What?! Really?! Dammit, you should've told me that before we started fighting! Man, I'm in trouble now!"

Vino's taunting had little effect on Christopher, however, and the Lamia continued to speak in the voice of inevitability.

"There's simply too great a difference in our experience. I've been doing this ever since I was created, nearly five decades ago. I didn't ask questions, I didn't wonder why. I just killed, and killed, and killed and killed and killed killed killed... Well. You get the idea."

Slowly he began to walk forward, his grip on his guns tightening.

"Even when I slept, I dreamed of killing people. Actually, I *couldn't* fall asleep unless I did! I killed over five hundred people in real life and then went on to kill ten times, twenty times, a hundred times more in my head... I don't even remember what was reality and what was a dream anymore. What do you think of that?"

Christopher came to a stop in front of Vino.

Vino gave it a moment of thought and said, frankly, "I know it's a bit late to mention this, but... Man, you have the weirdest eyes and teeth."

"That's technically an answer, but I feel like you're just playing around with me!"

"Maybe. Anyway, have you thought up a way to get around having run out of bullets while you were stalling for time?"

Claire had seen right through his bid for time, but if anything Christopher's grin grew even wider.

"Sorry, but I've got nothing!"

— —

The Skydeck Restaurant

Adelle's spear closed in on its target.

Just before the fine point pierced the skin of Jacuzzi's face, however, twin flashes of silver crossed in between them, saving Jacuzzi's life.

A tortured screech split the air, and a shower of white sparks dusted the carpet like snow.

"Please... get out of the way."

"No can do, amigo! We have a fight to finish, remember?"

I did it. I really did it.

Maria regretted what she'd done almost as soon as the words left her mouth, terrified that Adelle would see the bluff for what it was.

But I can't turn back. Not now. Not anymore.

"...But you'll just die. Umm... I mean, if you're alright with that... are you? May I kill you...?" Adelle asked, still sounding as hesitant as ever. Maria paused, unsure of what to say in answer.

She made a show of looking around, trying to hide her emotions.

"Hey! Get away already! You'll get hurt, amigo!"

"Huh? O-oh! Right! Sorry!"

Maria leaped back herself, putting some space between herself and Adelle.

Not a moment too soon. She blinked and a thin line of silver passed just shy of her eyes.

"Ah...!"

Adelle had taken hold of the extreme end of her spear with one hand and spun in a circle, sweeping the weapon *sideways like a scythe*.

Maria had thought herself safe, but even the great distance she'd put between herself and her

adversary had barely been enough. A drop of sweat trickled down her temple as she realized anew just how vast the spear's range was.

But that's not how you normally use a spear.

As though to support Maria's thoughts, Firo frowned from off to the side and muttered, "You're using it like a kid, dammit..."

The spear was a weapon meant primarily for stabbing, but Adelle tended to use it in a variety of different ways, incorporating sweeping strikes and whirls into her style. She'd probably never learned how to use it under a proper teacher, and instead relied solely on her instincts to guide her.

That was why even a relatively simple swipe, which must have been as natural as breathing to her, seemed simply wrong to those who beheld it.

But if you put it that way, I never formally learned how to use my swords either!

The only thing that remained to be seen was whose style would prevail.

Maria knew all too well that her opponent wasn't one who could be defeated simply through determination and willpower—yesterday's crushing defeat had taught her that much. But simple tricks probably wouldn't have much effect, either.

I can't lose to her. I have to believe in my sword, in Murasamia...!

From the sidelines Firo leaned discretely over the Ennis and whispered, "I'll step in if it looks like the girl with the swords can't take it."

"Firo."

"...Dammit, how come none of your brothers and sisters're like you at all? I swear all of 'em are crazy..."

Ennis gasped, Firo's words leading her to remember an important fact.

"One of them is missing..."

"Huh?"

There was one other, the one who called me at the Alveare. She said her name was Liza...

Where is she?

— —

Christopher stood a few steps away from Vino, his bladed guns—little more than oddly shaped knives now that they were empty—still held loosely in his hands.

"Funny guns you've got there. Modifications on Apache revolvers, I'm guessing? I know it's bad form to criticize a fellow hitman's weapons, but... you know those aren't that great, right? I mean, it's hard to shoot with them 'cause they're knives, and on the other hand it's hard to stab with them 'cause they're guns."

If anything, Christopher seemed to find Vino's analysis heartening.

"That's why I like them."

"Really, now."

"They're just right for me, since I myself am caught halfway between being natural and artificial."

"You're pretty hard on yourself, you know that? You don't have many friends, do you."

Christopher accepted this, too, with a smile.

His strange eyes gleamed dully through the pouring rain, his jagged smile like a slash running through his face. His unsettling features came together with his otherwise formal appearance to make him look quite like a vampire of legend.

"It's good to have friends."

"Can't deny that."

"They can even lend a helping hand from behind in a no-holds-barred fight to the death. Speaking of which..."

And just as he said it, a small silver disc came flying through the air.

It wasn't a UFO. A close look would reveal that it was a ring made of gleaming metal, probably steel. Even closer scrutiny would allow the sharp observer to see that the ring had sharpened edges that glittered cruelly despite the thick cover of clouds.

They would be able to tell that it was a weapon, known in the east as the chakram.

Nobody could tell from where it came, but one thing was for certain: the bladed hoop was flying unerringly toward the back of Vino's head.

Vino smiled and spoke. With every word the deadly ring sped closer to his spin.

"Yup, you're right."

A high clang split the air...

"And a fiancée's even better. She'll watch your back when you need it most."

Chane stood behind him, soaked to the bone, a shining steel ring still spinning lazily around her knife from where she'd hooked it out of the air.

— —

Babel

"Excuse me, sir. Could you make her stop? I'd be much obliged."

"Wha?!"

Tim jumped, his heart nearly skipping a beat. He'd been watching Adelle and Maria face off, completely unaware that Tick was approaching from the side.

Not in his wildest dreams had he imagined that "Excuse me, sir" would be the first words his brother said to him in over a decade.

"Stop... Stop her?"

Excuse me? Be much obliged? Don't talk to me like that, goddammit! I'm your little brother!

"Mhmm. I think you'd be able to make her stop, sir..."

"Not happening. She's beyond my power now. This is all because of that bastard. Claire, or Felix, or whatever the hell his name is."

Stop calling me sir. I'm your brother, not your master. Dammit, Tick, this is why people always called you dumb.

"Oh, okay..."

Tim began to sweat, feeling the silence stretch between them.

Why won't you notice? Are you really that stupid, Tick?! You're staring right at me and you can't recognize me?!

"...Are you that worried for that Mexican girl?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, not at all, actually. I know Maria can't lose."

Like hell you do. Have you already forgotten what happened yesterday?

"...Then why do you want me to stop them?"

"Because... Both of them are just trying to get back what they've lost. The fight itself is actually meaningless."

"...Huh."

You were always like that, brother. You could always see into people's hearts somehow.

Hmph. Get back what they've lost? A far cry from me, then. You know why I'm here, Tick? I'm here to get rid of my past, and that past includes you.

"But... If you're not going to stop them, then I hope you'll forgive me if I root for Maria. I'm sorry," Tick said, and leisurely shuffled back to where he'd been standing before.

Tim stared at his back, struggling with the sudden crazy urge to call him and tell him who he really was. It was only with the utmost effort that he managed to rein it in.

Calm down, you're supposed to be the smart one here! What good could possibly come from revealing that now?

Tim shook his head hard, Beriam's words suddenly coming back to him.

"You are like a butterfly."

"They do not even see you as prey, and so you must wait for death to take you."

No. I won't end up like that. Maybe right now I'm caught, but one day I'll tear the web apart and devour the spiders that trapped me.

And to do that, he couldn't afford to look to the past anymore.

The position he was in right now was one that would have proven far too painful for the boy he'd once been, the boy who'd still dreamed of opening his heart to others...

— —

"So in the end, I suppose you could say that our personalities were formed as a direct result of Huey's tests," Christopher said, stabbing at Vino with one of his guns.

"They must've been some pretty messed up tests, then. Let me guess, you were like the monkey who steals bananas from the storage closet after the scientists've left for the night."

"Sorry, no. If it were me, I'd forgo the bananas altogether and attack the scientists. Not that I could possibly do that to Master Huey, but you get my drift."

"Didn't your Master Huey ever teach you not to waste your breath mentioning choices you wouldn't take?" Vino commented, twisting to avoid the blade.

"Perhaps. Speaking of teaching, though. Poor Adelle. She never got to learn anything. There's nothing inside her at all. Huey decided she was a failure early on and used her for all of his experiments. Eventually she started working with me, and now I'm afraid the poor thing thinks she'll be acknowledged if only she kills enough people."

While Vino faced off against Christopher, Chane watched his back, on her guard against any more chakram that might come flying their way. They came at irregular intervals, each one unerringly aimed at either her or Vino.

She assumed that the enemy must be someone who would keep to the shadows and avoid revealing themselves at all costs, but as she deflected the tenth bladed ring, she heard a voice begin to speak.

"Hello."

She raised her head, looking blankly into the rain as she tried to place the source of the voice, but no matter how hard she tried she couldn't tell.

"So you're Chane. The Twins have told me all about you," it said. It sounded like an older woman, husky and seductive, but Chane gave it no regard.

There was always the chance, after all, that the voice was merely talking to try and distract her before it struck.

"You look like you have something good going on with red-headed Mr. Handsome over there. But you do know that we're working on Master Huey's behalf, right?"

Chane hesitated, then quietly nodded. It was forbidden for her to lie when it came to matters regarding her father.

"So tell me. Humor me for a moment. Say that Master Huey ordered you to kill him... Who would you chose? Him, or your father?"

Outwardly, Chane seemed as glacially calm as ever. Inside, though, her emotions were like a roiling, stormy sea. The dilemma posed by the disembodied voice was one that had haunted her for quite some time, and truth be told it was the thing she feared most in the world.

The question shook her to the core, and perhaps because of that she forgot—for just an instant, but she definitely forgot—that she was in the middle of a fight. And as though to capitalize on her mistake, four rings cut through the air at once.

Chane came to with a start, raising her knives and deftly blocking all four... but she failed to notice the fifth ring that came at her a moment later, cunningly timed to strike just as she cautiously lowered her own weapons.

The spinning chakram came within a hairsbreadth of tearing out Chane's throat, but Vino's hand nipped in neatly from behind just before it made contact and plucked it straight out of the air as though it was little more than an oddly shaped frisbee.

His fingers clamped down on the flat surface, stopping the deadly spin cold. Vino turned, completely ignoring Christopher for a moment as he replied to the strange voice—no, to Chane.

"You can follow your orders and still pick me."

"...What in the world are you talking about?" Liza asked, clearly angered, but Vino ignored her.

"If your father orders you to kill me, then you don't even need to think twice about it. Try as hard as you can. I'll just avoid everything, and we can just keep on loving each other. Ahhh, this must be what they call true love."

Chane stared up at him as though he'd grown a second head... and then smiled, the curl of her lips so subtle that only her fiancé could see.

Energized by his beloved's smile, Vino raised his voice in a jovial shout.

"Right! And the source of that mysterious voice must be... *you!*"

He spun and hurled the chakram in his hand at Christopher with all his might.

Christopher jerked his body to the side and frowned as the missile whizzed harmlessly by, saying, "...What was that supposed to be about?"

"...Err. Haha. I thought you might've been a ventriloquist. Or, since you talked about experiments and all, maybe you had a second face in your stomach or something..."

"And the chakram?"

"I dunno. Flew in from somewhere by chance?"

Vino took another step up the stairs they'd been fighting on and realized that there were no more to scale. He'd reached the top of the building. Somewhere between flurries of violent fighting and lulls of meaningless banter, they'd conquered the Mist Wall.

Not, of course, that that actually meant anything at all.

— —

She'd lost count of how many times they'd clashed.

White sparks illuminated Maria's face as she sprang away, desperate for space.

Unlike the narrow hall she'd fought in before, the wide open restaurant gave her plenty of room to maneuver.

Unfortunately, that also meant Adelle also had plenty of room to swing her spear about as she pleased.

"Things'll just end up like they did yesterday if you keep this up, amigo," Maria muttered to herself.

Perhaps if she went in prepared to go down with Adelle, she could land a decisive strike.

But that would be a draw with both parties dead, not a victory for her. She'd promised Eve that she'd come back alive.

"I need to beat her and stay alive..."

Come to think of it... How did I lose my swords yesterday, anyway?

She'd completely forgotten, the memory lost in the face of the shock that had enveloped her the day before, but now she remembered that the fight had had a completely abnormal outcome.

And she also remembered the man who'd been responsible for it all, and realized that he was sitting not ten feet away...

Before she could act on her newly remembered knowledge, the elevator chimed once again, the doors opening and discharging a flood of security guards. All of them had Nebula name badges pinned to their breasts, but it was hard to tell whether they'd come in response to the commotion or if the guards on the first floor had finally come back to life.

Catching sight of Adelle swinging a bladed weapon immediately upon exiting the elevator, the guards reached for the guns holstered at their sides, advancing slowly toward her.

"Please... don't butt in."

Adelle moved before any of them could react, her spear coming up and around to stab one of them in the heart. He slumped immediately and fell to the floor, sliding off the blade. The rest froze with fear, unable to react as Adelle stepped forward, intent on making short work of them as well.

But that meant that Maria finally had a moment to think.

She inhaled and exhaled slowly, bringing her breathing back under control, and looked to Ronnie.

The Martillo Family's *chiamatore* had exuded a stifling aura of awe the day before, but now Maria could feel nothing strange about him at all. The only thing that was out of the ordinary about him was the fact that he seemed utterly calm despite the chaos taking place around him. It was as though he was absolutely certain that no matter what came to happen, he would walk away completely unscathed.

"...Yes?" Ronnie asked, gazing neutrally back at Maria.

"Ah..."

"If you're curious about what happened yesterday, I think that now might not be the best time to discuss it. Though, if you want to borrow my power, I would be more than happy to oblige..." Ronnie began, replying casually to the question in her heart as though he'd read her mind. He paused.

"But would you be able to keep hold of your swords, if you had to rely on my help to defeat her?"

Maria flinched, the question striking her like a physical blow.

What... what was I thinking?

She hadn't been planning on actually asking for his help. She'd just wondered if perhaps she could get some sort of hint from hearing him explain what had happened back at the Genoard manor.

Did I? Did I, really? Or was I hoping, deep inside, that he'd help me out because it looked like Tick knew him?

If that's true, then... then I don't deserve to hold Murasamia anymore...

Someone approached the two of them, breaking into her thoughts.

"Hey, Mr. Ronnie."

"Tick?"

Tick Jefferson gave Ronnie an innocent smile in greeting. It was neither the time nor the place for such cheeriness, but the corners of Tick's eyes were always crinkled in levity. Even as Maria trembled, on the verge of being consumed once more by doubt, he smiled as though he had not a worry in the world.

"Maria won't throw away her swords."

"Really. Care to explain why?" Ronnie asked, honestly curious.

"Because she's not going to ask for your help, Mr. Ronnie. And even if she did, she wouldn't feel bad because of it. Maria's strong, you see!"

"Really... I see. My apologies for making you doubt yourself," Ronnie said, looking down, and fell silent.

But on the other hand, each and every word that Tick spoke battered at Maria's psyche, making her feel more and more inferior.

She couldn't even believe in herself.

Ah, that's right.

That's why I moved to save that tattooed boy. Because Tick was watching me.

He hadn't been looking at her beseechingly. In fact, he hadn't looked like he expected anything

from her at all. All that had happened was that their eyes had met, by chance, for just an instant.

But that moment had been more than enough to shame her.

He had told her that he believed she would prevail, smiling innocently at her.

His gaze had spurred her into action, her body moving on its own in a desperate effort to run from the shame that burned her heart.

She'd run away from that smile, choosing instead to fight.

I need something more.

I need just one more thing to help support me. I know it's wrong to depend on these crutches. But I don't have a choice. I need someone to tell me that they believe I can win.

Before she knew it, Maria was holding Murasamia out to Tick.

"Tick... I'll do it. This time, for sure, I'll beat her. I'll win."

"Wow, that's great."

"So... Tick... Can you just tell me that you believe in Murasamia for me?"

"Nope."

Maria actually reeled, caught completely off guard by the unexpected reply.

"B-but Tick! You..."

A desperate, almost pleading note entered her voice, but Tick shook his head and continued before she could beg.

"I believe in *you*, Maria. Not that sword..."

"What...?"

Maria's eyes widened in shock.

"I've told you before that I can only believe in what I can see. So I can't believe in the bond you have with your swords, or your determination, or what you believe in. But I want to believe that you'll win, so I decided I'd just believe in you, yourself."

He was telling the honest truth. Every word that passed his lips was something that he truly thought, simply converted to sound and passed on to Maria.

"I saw you practicing all the time with my own eyes. You trained every chance you got, whenever you weren't on a job. You trained really really hard, harder than anyone else I know. That's why I believe you'll win, Maria."

"Tick..."

"How about we do this? You know that sword much better than I do, right? So you can believe in the sword, and I can believe in you. That way, nobody will be lonely," Tick said.

Maria stilled, lost in thought. She stared at the swords in her hands.

How well do I really know this sword?

How well do I know my own strength?

Wasn't I fighting to get the answers to those questions?

Maria tightened her grip on her swords, searching inside herself.

"I'd lost sight of Murasamia... All I was thinking of was myself..."

"Hmm?" Tick said, curiously.

She was still staring at her blades when the weepy voice of a man simultaneously shouting and crying his eyes out interrupted her thoughts.

"W-w-what're you people *doing*?! Tho-those people're dying over there and you're just standing there *chatting*?!"

Jacuzzi's wailing dragged Maria back to reality, and she looked toward Adelle to see that she'd already dispatched all of the guards. In fact, it looked like she'd finished some time ago; already the blood she'd spilled was beginning to squirm, flowing across the floor back to its source.

Adelle had her hands full fighting Ennis and Firo. Ennis had intervened to try and stop her massacre, and Firo had joined shortly after, but neither of them seemed to have much experience against a spear wielder. Even outnumbered two to one, Adelle was easily standing her ground.

Finally able to observe from afar, Maria marveled despite herself at the way Adelle's self-taught style flawlessly protected her from harm.

"...She's strong..."

A chill ran down her spine, but the crippling fear from just a moment ago had vanished.

"But I'll just have to be stronger."

Silently she gripped her swords, their points facing the floor as she faced Adelle. She looked almost like a gunslinger from the wild west, except that she held in her hands blades instead of guns.

"...I'm sorry, Murasamia. I've been making you work alone all this time. I just depended on you for everything, all my victories and all my defeats..." she murmured, pressing her lips lightly to the flat of her blade.

"Murasamia, you aren't a tool to me. You're my *compañero!*"

She nodded once to Tick and then raised her head, clearing her throat.

"Hold on, amigo!" she called to Firo and Ennis. "She's *mine!*"

The two of them paused, surprised by her sudden declaration, and even Adelle turned to look at her, vague astonishment written on her features.

"Ah... I didn't think you'd still be here," she said, subtly insulting Maria. She took a step back from Firo and Ennis, focusing entirely on the Mexican swordswoman once more.

"Don't you understand yet? I told you, didn't I? You'd have to be... at least three times stronger than I am, just to stand a chance at defeating my spear..."

"Of course I heard, amigo. I'd wager I'm about twice as skilled as you are, easy."

"...Right. That may be true, but-"

Maria grinned like a child.

"See! That means I win!"

"...Excuse me?" Adelle said, utterly baffled.

The rest of her impromptu audience also frowned, waiting for her to explain.

Her grin grew mischievous.

"Because I've got two swords, and two times two equals four, amigo!"

Awkward silence blanketed the restaurant, the only sound the howling of the wind and rain from outside.

At length Adelle shook her head, looking irritated, and Maria raised her swords as well, but before they could begin a great shout of surprise came from the direction of the kitchen.

"She's absolutely right, Miria! Two times two *is* greater than three!"

"That means that the girl with the swords is going to win, right, Isaac?"

Tick, too, looked up from counting his fingers and exclaimed, "Wow! You're right, Maria!"

The rest of the onlookers, possessing a little more common sense, looked as though they wanted to object, but the sheer conviction in Maria's voice simply left them speechless.

As for Ronnie, he seemed to find the situation immensely amusing. His shoulders shook with soundless laughter.

"...I see what they said about fool's courage was right," Adelle said coldly. From the tone of her voice it was apparent she thought she was being mocked, and both surprise and anger were clear on her features as she hefted her spear and took a step forward.

It was a single step, one taken thoughtlessly because she underestimated her opponent.

But Maria didn't miss that instant.

She dashed forward just before Adelle's foot made contact with the floor...

...and *threw* her beloved Murasamia up into the air.

"Ack?!"

Shocked not only by Maria's sudden advance but also, more importantly, by the sudden transformation of sword into missile, Adelle floundered, utterly confused.

The sword rose and fell in a lazy arc, the blade level with the ground, the point directly facing Adelle.

She threw it at me? No, there's no way it can reach me when she threw it like that!

Her eyes flicked to Maria and she saw that the Mexican assassin had grasped her other sword

with both hands, holding it level to the ground at about neck height, right around her left shoulder. It was a stance that would never be taught by any master of the sword, one that would never be found in any swordsmanship manual.

She threw away one of her swords so she could move faster? Does that mean the thing she just said about two times two was a bluff?

Adelle made a snap decision and revised her assessment of Maria to account for the loss of one weapon.

But the next moment, Maria stabbed forward with Kochite, the point making contact with the bottom of Murasamia's hilt. She continued the thrust, the swords connected like a pair of batteries, and now Murasamia headed the charge toward Adelle.

With her two swords linked end to end, Maria's reach far surpassed that of a spear, if only for one moment.

Your tricks won't work on me!

Adelle swept up her spear from above, bashing away Murasamia with the shaft before it could pierce her throat.

And that sealed her fate.

The trick had, in fact, worked on her the moment Maria had tossed her sword.

Normally, Maria's swords stood no chance against the spear, and if Adelle had waited and let her come then Maria would have been doomed.

But surprised by the thrown sword, Adelle had panicked and let her instincts take over on seeing Maria's sudden reach advantage. Her brain automatically calculated the weight of Maria's two swords as one long weapon, and she brought up her spear to block accordingly.

Murasamia went flying up toward the ceiling.

But Kochite continued toward Adelle, its course unchanged. Driven by the strength of both of Maria's arms, the keen blade advanced unerringly toward Adelle's chest.

All of Maria's strength and heart came together in the slender edge, moving with single-minded purpose to cut her enemy.

By the time Adelle realized her mistake...

...She was already staring down the length of the sword.

Ah...

It was already too late to do anything. Left overextended by her needlessly forceful parry, Adelle could do nothing but watch as the sword sped toward her.

She's too fa...aaaaah!

Maria's blade came like a bolt of lightning, moving at a speed that defied Adelle's comprehension. Kochite buried itself deep into the flesh of her shoulder. Silver sunk into soft pink flesh, so different in shade from Maria's own dusky beige.

Fast,

and sharp,

and deep,

and decisive...

The sword came up and forward in a blinding thrust, splitting Adelle's skin.

"...Ah..."

"...Aaaaah..."

Skin and muscle split apart, a space that should not have been there being torn into her body. A deep sense of loss and pain enveloped her and seized hold of her brain in the space of a single breath, leaving her unable to even scream.

The wound was in her shoulder, but electricity ran down her body and through the nerves of her knees, driving the strength from her legs.

For an instant, a flash of white could even be seen in the dark red gash in Adelle's right shoulder. She reeled from the shock, her heart beat once...

...And blood burst from her shoulder in a crimson fountain, as though the liquid was a living thing that sought to escape her body.

"Ah..."

But still, Adelle did not scream.



She slumped, slamming the butt of her spear to the floor and leaning heavily on it as though to support her consciousness as well as her body. Her legs had betrayed her.

She sank to her knees and tried to catch her breath, but even that proved impossible for her, her breathing coming in short hitching gasps. Any attempt to slow down and exhale properly simply failed. Her breath caught in her throat. It felt like her lungs were in spasm, the wound in her shoulder spilling more blood with each roiling quiver.

Then a long, slender silver blade came from behind and stopped lightly against the skin of her unharmed left shoulder, making her flinch in fear of another attack.

"...Is this the first time anyone ever cut you?" Maria asked, more curious than anything now that her victory had been assured. Adelle did not reply.

Perhaps she wasn't willing to give Maria the satisfaction, or perhaps she was simply unable to think long enough to form the words.

Her wounded right arm hung limply, and she didn't even look toward Maria, instead directing her gaze to the floor.

"...Whoa, it really must've been your first time, amigo."

Over the course of her job Maria had met killed countless people, and naturally, some of them had refused to go quietly into the night. There had been a man who kept coming even after both his arms had been severed, his teeth gnashing madly as though to tear out her throat. Another had continued to move long after a stab had skewered his heart, fighting past his last breath.

Those experiences kept her from relaxing completely even after landing the decisive blow, but the sorry state Adelle was in convinced her that at least she could lower her guard.

Maria took a deep breath and turned to Tim, sheathing her swords.

"...You know, if you stop the bleeding right now she'll probably make it, amigo."

Tim started as though coming to from a deep trance and darted to Adelle's side, calling her name. He grabbed a nearby tablecloth and ripped off a piece to serve as a makeshift bandage.

"...I thought you'd kill her," he said frankly.

"I would have if this was a contract. But it's not, and she had me dead to rights yesterday, so I figure we're even now."

She walked over to Tick and the tension finally drained from her body, her face lighting up with a radiant smile.

"I won, Tick!"

Tick welcomed her with a smile that was the same as ever. "You know, Maria, you look like you feel-"

"I don't need to hear it, amigo! All you need to do is just laugh together with me!"

The expression wreathing her face was not a childlike grin like usual, but a warm, somehow gentle smile.

Then it vanished, replaced by her usual mischievousness, and she puffed out her chest proudly.

"Thanks, Tick. I'm so happy right now, and it's all thanks to you! I feel like I could cut God right now! I could slash through steel, and wind, and even these annoying rain clouds!"

She strutted over to the broken window and fell to one knee. In one smooth, swift motion, she drew her sword.

The blade slid from its sheath with a sound like a bell...

And a miracle happened outside the window.

"Holy..."

"Wow...!"

The clouds parted exactly as Maria drew her sword, a blinding curtain of sunlight spilling forth from behind them.

Maria seemed to accept the miracle as nothing less than her due and stood up proudly, the sun's warm light wreathing her like a halo.

"...See?"

Even as the people left in the restaurant broke into excited clamor at the impossible miracle, Ronnie remained seated alone, a smile playing about his lips.

"Of course it wasn't coincidence. A miracle? Preposterous."

He tapped his temple with his forefinger, satisfied at a trick well executed.

"Think of it as congratulations."

— —

While the rest of the people in the restaurant were occupied with the sight outside, Tim finally succeeded in staunching the flow of blood from Adelle's shoulder.

"Are you alright?"

Adelle looked up at him, finally gathering her wits enough to speak.

"Tim..."

"I don't have any painkillers on me, but I'll get you to a doctor as soon as I can. Just bear with it till then, okay?"

"Am... am I a failure?"

The pain must have been excruciating, but she kept talking regardless, her voice quaking with fear.

"I... I've never been cut... before... This is the first t-time I, I ever... ever... The blood... his fingers are so strong... I can't move my spear..."

The shock had affected her badly. It seemed like her memories of Claire and Maria had been jumbled together.

"It's alright now. That doesn't matter anymore. Just calm down."

"I... I...!"

"I said, calm down!"

Tim managed to get Adelle up and on her feet, one arm looped around her to keep her from falling.

Adelle tried her best to stand on her own, holding her spear as an impromptu staff with her good hand.

"Dammit, we'll just have to leave Christopher and Chi behind and let them join up with us later." Tim cursed under his breath and turned to leave the restaurant.

He found the way blocked, however, by a familiar face.

"...Yo."

"Genoard! Where the hell have you been?! No, never mind. Here, help me get Adelle..."

Tim trailed off, swallowing hard.

He saw the naked malice in Dallas' baleful glare.

"Hold on..."

"I didn't think I'd get my chance so soon. I was gonna try and use those punks to get to you... but I don't need 'em anymore. Looks like this is my lucky day."

Dallas slowly advanced on them, drawing his favorite knife out from inside his jacket.

He'd had it on him when he'd taken his trip to the bottom of the Hudson, and so the entire blade was red with rust, but that just meant that any wound caused by the jagged blade would be sure to hurt even more than normal.

"I gotta say, I never thought you'd just fuck yourselves up and make it easier for me to... Huh?"

Dallas suddenly felt something cold pierce his chest as he raised his knife to strike, and looked down to see two silver-white prongs lying flat against his shirt.

The point was nowhere to be seen, already buried deep in his flesh.

"What?"

He finally made the realization that Adelle had stabbed him with the spear in her left hand, and as the knowledge washed over him he coughed up a massive gout of blood.

"One... one hand is more than enough for someone like you, Mr. Genoard..."

"Looks like I underestimated you... Go to sleep for a while, will you?"

Tim took out his pistol and raised it to shoot Dallas in the head, but paused, suddenly unnerved.

Dallas was smiling, his teeth stained red with blood.

"But y'know what's luckiest of all for me?!"

Those who'd been staring out the windows looked back to see what the shouting was about.

"Yesterday, I met that crazy bitch with the bomb fetish!"

And as Dallas finished, Tim distinctly heard a strange noise. It sounded almost like some sort of... hissing?

What the hell is that sound?

"What?" Nice blurted as she looked toward Dallas. She hadn't the faintest idea of what Dallas meant when he said that he was lucky to have met her.

But then she caught sight of something sputtering fitfully underneath Dallas' jacket, a light that seemed somehow familiar. It was unmistakable—white and yellow and red sparks all together, bringing to mind a firecracker...

The blood drained from her face as she realized just what she was looking at.

"Hit the floor!"

Those're the high-yield explosives we stole from the train...!

"A blood rain? No way. I no see anything."

"But I was certain I saw it, Fang..."

Eve and Fang were still waiting under the arch of a nearby building, looking up at the top floors of the Mist Wall.

"And even if something bad happen inside, why would blood go over outside?"

"You're right, but..."

Eve trailed off, looking troubled, and Fang made an effort to cheer her up, inserting false levity into his voice.

"It's okay! Vino and Chane are up there. As long as building stays standing, no need to worry!"

Fang smiled reassuringly, and as though to prove him wrong a gigantic cloud of scarlet fire billowed outward from the Mist Wall's top floor.

A second later the dull sound of the explosion reached their ears, followed shortly by an immense shower of glass that lasted for several seconds, peppering the ground in front of them.

The fragments sparkled in the light of the newly revealed sun, shining innocently as the two stared at them aghast.

And some of those fragments were stained with tones of scarlet...

What was even more shocking was that some of that red liquid climbed back up the walls, ascending with incredible speed back to its source, but unfortunately nobody was around to see it.

— —

"I thought lamia were supposed to be vampires. Shouldn't you be turning to ash already?"

"You've been watching too many movies."

"Well, technically even a human would turn into ash if you chucked them into the sun. Wait, no, they'd evaporate, wouldn't they?"

Vino and Christopher continued their small talk as they fought for their lives, though neither looked fatigued in the least.

Both were soaked to the bone, but almost none of the liquid clinging to their clothes and skin was sweat.

The clouds had split for some reason, and though the rain still fell, now they were bathed in sunlight as well as water.

"Don't you love how capricious nature is?"

Christopher paused and threw both arms wide, grinning under the rainy, sunny sky.

"What, you're trying attune yourself to nature by loving it, to try and make up for the fact that you're not natural at all?"

Christopher scratched his head, his smile turning distinctly sheepish.

"Pretty much."

Just then, the windows beneath them suddenly burst outwards, followed by a billowing cloud of orange-red flame.

A moment later, the boom reached their ears and the metal they stood on shuddered.

"What was that...?"

Christopher looked down at the still expanding fireball curiously, but Vino seemed to find it more familiar than surprising.

"Ah."

That's the stuff that was being smuggled on the Flying Pussyfoot...

The two of them quietly watched the explosion dissipate, their fight temporarily forgotten. Chane, too, paused to look down for a moment, but the chakram that came spinning at her a second later told her in no uncertain terms that it wasn't the time for sightseeing.

Vino stared thoughtfully downward, and at length muttered, "Chane, sorry about this, but could you go down and make sure everyone's alright down there?"

Chane nodded and ran so quickly down the pyramid it almost looked like she was falling, deftly deflecting chakram as she went.

"Oh? Are you that confident in your skills? You think you can face both me and Liza alone?"

Christopher shook his head in mock despair at his opponent's foolishness, but Vino paid it no mind, stretching lightly before standing straight. The look in his eyes seemed a little different from what it had been a moment before.

"All right, then. Since the sun's shining and everything... *I guess it's time to get serious.*"

"Ahahahaha! How droll! I applaud your wit, sir," Christopher said, watching several chakram close in on Vino's back.

It seemed Liza had given up on Chane and had instead decided to devote her energies entirely into helping Christopher.

"Okay," Claire said, "here I come!"

And the next instant, six silver rings should have buried themselves deep into Vino's body.

But instead, Christopher beheld something that he could hardly believe.

"What...?"

"Heh. These're pretty nice."

One moment, Vino's hands had been empty. The next, they held six chakram.

They had come from different angles, all completely outside his field of vision, and Vino *hadn't even turned around*.

"What just happ-"

Vino hefted the bladed rings and sent them all spinning toward Christopher before he could finish.

"-ened?"

Each chakram drew a beautiful arc through the air, coming together toward where Christopher currently stood.

By the time conscious thought reached Christopher's mind his body was already leaping away, and he looked back to see six rings bury themselves in the ground just behind where he'd been standing.

"How-"

He straightened, taking just an instant to get his footing, but it was long enough. He looked up to see Vino already there in front of him.

"Checkmate."

Vino grinned, his right hand closing around Christopher's throat.

"I was going easy on you 'cause I wanted to fight together with Chane for as long as I could, but it looks like things're getting messy down there."

"Wha..." Christopher gasped, utterly defeated before he could resist or even surrender. Vino's strength had caught him completely off guard.

"Impossible... How did you catch Liza's chakram...?"

Another ring came spinning through the rain, flashing in the sunlight as it sped toward the back of Vino's head.

But the hitman merely reached back with one arm, not even bothering to break eye contact with Christopher, and plucked the chakram clean out of the air.



"You... you didn't even look..."

"I did, actually. Oh, don't worry. I don't have eyes in the back of my head or anything. I'm still human, y'know."

"Then what the hell did you see?!" Christopher gasped. "There isn't even anything that you could have used as a mirror..."

He trailed off as Vino raised two fingers and poked Christopher lightly just below the eyes.

It can't be.

"You just thought, 'it can't be', right?"

Christopher couldn't reply.

"Didn't think I'd see them coming reflected in your eyes, did you?"

That's impossible... what kind of eyesight would it take to do something like that?

Is he... Is he really human?

Christopher realized that he was sweating heavily.

"Truly... the strongest human on the planet..."

"Aww, you're embarrassing me."

Christopher fell silent for a moment, then smirked. It looked like he was laughing at himself.

"You truly are blessed by God."

"God doesn't exist in this world. He's only in my head. To you, he's in yours. You get what I mean?" Vino said quietly, and something that looked to Christopher like anger began to seep into his eyes.

"You know what really pisses me off? It's when people think that my power is some sorta miracle, or a gift from God. D'you really think that I just sat there and had this strength handed to me on a silver platter?"

His grip tightened, slowly blocking off Christopher's airway.

"I call up the God in my mind and make him do what I say. That's what's called effort. I do that every day, every week, every month, every year. That's all. So. You admit defeat, right?"

The sudden question came completely out of left field, and in reply Christopher only smiled and grabbed one of his guns, swinging the blade on the end toward the side of Vino's head.

"Fine, then."

Vino lifted Christopher off the floor and swung his entire body around in a half-circle through the air, bringing him down headfirst onto the white cement that made up the pyramid of the Mist Wall.

"Gah..."

Just before he lost consciousness, Christopher was able to make out Vino speaking to him in a low voice.

"Don't worry. Compared to me, you're about as close to natural as it gets."

Christopher tried to reply, but if he said anything at all, it was so quiet that not even Vino could hear it.

— —

Babel

"Ugh... Are you alright, Ennis?"

"...Yes, I'm fine."

Those left in the restaurant picked themselves up one by one from where they'd been flung by the explosion, calling to each other to make sure they were unharmed.

"Nice, Jacuzzi, you okay?"

"...think so..."

"Aagh..."

Jacuzzi and Nice had made it through unharmed thanks to Donny, who had shielded them with his broad back, but the force of the explosion had knocked him over and onto them. Needless to say, they were still a little out of it.

Maria had swung Murasamia sideways in a keen arc to slice through the firestorm, and had indeed succeeded in diverting some of the onrushing torrent of air. But then the shockwave

had, of course, knocked her off her feet, and she lay flat on her back in a corner along with Isaac and Miria.

"The hell was Dallas thinking...?"

Firo looked around as he got to his feet and saw that the tables had all been blown away by the force of the expanding fireball. Some of the tablecloths were still burning fitfully.

He thought that the explosion would have almost completely vaporized Dallas, but perhaps something about the way the explosive had been made had left the man sprawled next to one of the elevators, his body nearly intact. Emphasis on nearly; it looked like he would still be out of it for some time as stray pieces of him came back together.

Next to the windows on the far side of the restaurant, Firo could see two people slumped on the ground.

It looked like they were Tim and Adelle, but before Firo could approach to make sure, Tim slowly sat up of his own accord, propping himself up gingerly on his elbows.

"Dammit... Genoard, you bastard..."

His entire body throbbed painfully in time to his heartbeat, making it hard to even breathe.

He was sure he'd taken the blast full on, but despite the pain he could see no burns on his body.

Did I just get lucky?

Tim placed his palms flat on the floor, trying to stand up, but his legs refused to listen. It seemed he'd have to remain sitting for a while longer.

Most of the fire from the explosion had been blown out the windows, and though Tim could see parts of the carpet and some scattered tablecloths burning, it seemed like there was no real worry of a real fire breaking out.

"Adelle... Adelle, are you alright?!"

Tim sucked in a pensive breath as he looked to the slender woman lying next to him. Parts of her clothing had flaked away into black ash, and he could see what looked like severe burns on her back and arms.

"Shit... And she's already hurt bad, dammit..."

He paused, wondering him why Adelle had burns when he himself didn't.

Wait... Did she take the brunt of the blast for me?

His question was answered as he leaned in closer and heard her talking quietly to herself.

"Am I... am I not a failure, anymore? Did... I... help..."

"You fool..."

Though officially under Larvae jurisdiction, the Lamia more often than not operated independently of Tim's group, and the only one among them who could really be said to be working under him was Adelle. This naturally meant that they'd worked together for quite some time, but that didn't mean that she had any reason to have shielded him with her own body.

She'd probably gone through some kind of traumatic experience during her time with the Lamia that had compelled her to protect him.

At least, that was what Tim thought, but to be honest that wasn't really important to him at all at the moment.

He had to get to Adelle and then get them both out of the building. He began to make his way over to her, crawling arm over arm, his legs still aching and unresponsive.

Then someone stepped hard on his wrist.

"Gah... Genoard!"

Tim looked up and locked eyes with Dallas, registering the burning animosity in the man's expression.

The front of Dallas' upper body was nearly bare, his clothes blown away by the explosion, and even his pants were blackened and burnt in places.

"You know what, Tim? This immortality thing really comes in handy sometimes. See? I'm already up and on my feet, and you're still crawling around on the floor like a fucking worm."

"I take it you didn't appreciate how we treated you?"

"I don't give a flying fuck about what you did to me. But I told you that if you laid a hand on Eve—you even *thought* of laying a goddamn hand on her—I'd make you regret it. That's all there is to it."

"...Then why in the world did you even come back here? I realize this may be hard for you to comprehend, but you could have just taken your sister and run away," Tim commented, uncowed. Dallas grimaced and looked away.

"...This is the only way I know to keep her safe."

"Genoard, your depravity continues to astound me in new and interesting ways."

"Shut up," Dallas spat, and kicked Tim hard in the stomach

"*Gah...!*"

Grabbing hold of Tim and Adelle by their arms, Dallas turned and began walking toward one of the shattered windows, dragging them along the floor.

The window had been a single pane of glass, and now that it was gone there was nothing separating the inside of the restaurant from the open air. Dallas plodded forward, step by step, dragging the both of them slowly but steadily toward the sheer drop.

— —

"Christopher!" Chi cried, sprinting over to his unconscious partner.

His expression grew cold as he faced off against Vino, unperturbed by the strange mix of rain and sunlight that fell about them.

"That's enough."

"You didn't join the fight, did you? I kinda thought you'd attack along with those rings or something."

"...If this were part of the mission, I would have. And I will attack, if you're intent on finishing Christopher off."

Chi showed no fear despite the fact that he was clearly outclassed, his voice cold and his gaze sharp as he stared Vino down.

Vino, for his part, was wholly unconcerned by Chi's murderous glare, and merely chuckled.

"Calm down, man. Trust me, if this was a job, I'd have finished it, but, well... You guys work for Chane's father, right? Don't think he'd appreciate his future son-in-law going around killing his employees."

"What...?" For once, Chi looked surprised.

Chane walked up the slanted walls and back to Vino while Chi hesitated, running over Vino's words again in his head.

"Hey, Chane. How were things going down there?"

Chane, of course, kept her silence, merely tilting her head once.

"Huh, really? So Firo and the kids are fine? Alright, that's good."

Satisfied with the knowledge that his friends were safe, Vino stooped and hefted Christopher's unconscious body, tossing him easily over to Chi.

Chi caught the limp body with practiced ease and heaved him over his shoulder.

"...Who the hell are you people?" he muttered under his breath, staring absently into Chane's eyes.

Suddenly, he remembered where he'd seen eyes like that before, gold and deep and clear.

"I see, now... I knew I'd heard the name 'Chane' somewhere before."

Then assuming the information from the Twins was accurate, that must be Vino.

"Mmm..."

The mystery of Christopher's defeat was solved. Chi turned his back on the most dangerous man in North America and walked away.

Whirling in his head were thoughts of how to kill him should they meet again.

Vino watched Chi leave for a while and then turned to Chane, grinning.

"That weird voice is gone, and I don't see any rings flying at us either, so I guess it's over."

He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Chi was gone and said, "Y'know, I made an important realization today, Chane. I thought I'd seen everything the world had to offer, but I was wrong. There's still a ton of stuff out there I don't know about."

Chane looked up at her fiancé.

"If that guy just now had actually used a proper weapon..."

Claire Stanfield looked thoughtfully back to where Chi had taken Christopher, and bestowed upon his fallen adversary the greatest praise he could offer.

"...I might've even felt threatened for a second there."

— —

"C'mon, Isaac. Get up already."

"Are you alright, Miria?"

Firo and Ennis knelt and lightly slapped the robber couple's cheeks, bringing them back to consciousness.

"Hmm? Huh? What was that? Did someone pull off an explosive disappearing act?"

Miria coughed. "It must've been the greatest explosion on Earth..."

Having made sure that the two were fine, Firo looked around and gasped, shocked by what he saw.

Dallas?!

Dallas should've still been out of it, but not only had he already finished regenerating, he was awake and on his feet, dragging Tim and Adelle toward one of the windows. It was clear he intended to throw the both of them out to their deaths.

"That bastard!"

Firo didn't know Tim at all, and Adelle only barely, but he couldn't just stand by and watch while Dallas murdered them.

He tensed his body, getting ready to run over and stop him, but before he could properly begin to run he saw someone else walk up behind Dallas.

"Huh? Wait, that's the guy with the scissors who's just been watching all this time. Didn't Claire know him?"

And then, as Firo watched, the man raised a large pair of wickedly sharp scissors high in the air, and drove them slowly but surely into the unprotected skin of Dallas Genoard's back.

Hell of a way to go.

Tim had mostly resigned himself to his fate, and perhaps that was why it took him a moment to realize that the hand grasping his arm had loosened, letting it fall back to his chest.

"Huh?"

"Gurgh... Ah... Guh..."

"...I'm sorry. So you're Dallas Genoard. Hello," Tick said. The normal levity in his voice was gone, replaced instead with sudden gravity.

He held a pair of scissors in his right hand, keeping them firmly embedded directly in Dallas' spine.

"Thi-this doesn'tevenhave a-anything to, to do with you you bastard..." Dallas managed to say, his voice ragged and stifled with pain. He could barely form the words properly.

Tick just smiled, seeming somehow sad.

"...I'm sorry. I understand how you feel. I know that you love your little sister so much that you could never forgive anyone who tried to hurt her, that even the thought of it makes you so angry you can't even think straight."

"Then... then why..."

"That's why *I* can't forgive *you*. How could I stand by and watch you *murder my little brother*?"

Tim—no, Tack Jefferson—gasped audibly, his eyes snapping wide open.

"Tick... How?! You knew?! Since when?!"

"Since yesterday," Tick said calmly. "I recognized you the moment I saw your face at the Genoard manor."

"Then... Then why?!"

"Do-don't ignore me, you fucks..."

Dallas slowly raised his right hand, grasping at the scissors stuck in his back.

Tick deftly grabbed another pair of scissors from his belt and stabbed them into Dallas' right shoulder.

"Ah... ah... a-ah..."

He twisted, once.

Dallas' arm went limp, hanging uselessly at his side.

"I'm sorry. Hate me, if you have to."

Tick took one step forward, toward the window, and Dallas had no choice but to do so as well.

"When I saw you, Tack, I wanted to say hello. But you said you were someone named Tim, and when I saw the way you were dressed, I thought to myself, 'Ah, I think he wants to throw away his past'. I didn't want to hold you back. I was going to pretend I didn't know until you left, but..."

"...You're just interfering with my life again. All I wanted to do was get away from you all."

Tick smiled sadly.

"That's the opposite of how I am. I tried so hard to learn about the things that bind people together, about the thing they call family... But the only things I could find..."

Tick left the scissors stuck in Dallas' right shoulder and took out yet another pair, ramming them into Dallas' left side.

"A-a-a-a-ah..."

Dallas' lungs were shutting down; his breath came in short pants, and strange, strangled noises escaped his throat.

"The only thing I learned were things like, 'If I cut here, then this part stops moving'."

Tick took yet another step closer to the edge and moved to stand next to Dallas. With one hand he reached out and turned Dallas' head so they were facing each other.

"Please look at my face," Tick said, slowly and deliberately. Sunlight filtered down from the clouds, illuminating his face. His features, tinged with both sadness and happiness, were unforgettable.

"I'm the one who's putting you in so much pain right now, and I'm the one who's going to push you out this window. Tack... *Tim* has nothing to do with it. My name is Tick. Tick Jefferson. I want you to direct all your hatred at me."

He fell silent for a moment, then continued.



"If you're still determined to go after Tim, just remember one thing. *I know what your sister looks like, and I know where she lives.*"

Dallas' expression transformed in an instant.

In the span of a heartbeat the anger drained from his features, replaced by pure black murder.

Tick nodded, satisfied.

"I'm sorry. Thank you for understanding," he said, then paused. "Oh, that's right. I think there's someone waiting for you down there."

Tick removed the scissors from Dallas' back and gave him a slight nudge forward.

"When I look at you, it feels like I can understand what the bonds of family mean. But I'm going to have to use them against you..."

"I'm sorry."

— —

"I'm going to go up there!"

"Wait wait wait! You can't go! Too dangerous!"

Fang tried desperately to deter Eve from going up and investigating the sudden explosion.

"Don't worry! Your brother is fine! He can't die, remember?"

"But... But still..."

Fang glanced up at the Mist Wall again. It seemed like the explosion hadn't caused a fire; he couldn't see any smoke coming from the shattered windows.

"See, look. Everything is okay now. And police are not coming either. Calm down, please."

Eve bit her lip in dismay but seemed to accept Fang's words, following his gaze to stare pensively up at the building.

Perhaps thirty seconds passed in silence.

Then something detached itself from the building's silhouette.

"What's that?"

Whatever it was, it was falling fast, rapidly growing larger as it plummeted toward the ground.

Fang stared hard at the dot and suddenly drew a startled breath. The falling object had arms and legs.

"Oh no... No, Miss Eve! Don't look!" he cried, and drew her close, stepping in front of her as though to shield her from the sight with his body.

A few seconds later, a wet, dull boom filled the air, followed shortly by piercing screams of fear from nearby pedestrians.

Eve trembled, unsure of what had just happened, and slowly eased herself out from Fang's embrace.

What she saw was...

— —

Just as Tick pushed Dallas out the window, Chi came in through another, still carrying Christopher over his shoulder.

Christopher sported no obvious wounds, but he was still unconscious, and it looked like it would be some time before he was moving around on his own. Chi gave the room a cursory glance as he entered and then stopped, his eyes widening as he took in Tim and Adelle's sorry states.

"What happened to you two?!"

"Never mind me. Take care of Adelle."

Chi stared pensively at them for a moment, as though making a decision in his head, then yelled, "Sham! Hilton! I don't care which of you answers! Is either of the Twins here?!"

Someone answered Chi's desperate call. Nobody was sure where he'd been hiding, but a man came out from the kitchen and walked over to Chi.

"Huh? Wait, didn't that guy run away earlier?" Jacuzzi asked as he caught sight of the man. It was the waiter who'd asked him if he'd mind sharing a table.

"Ah... *Sham, huh*. Sorry about this. Help me with Adelle."

The waiter nodded wordlessly and hoisted Adelle up on his shoulder, taking the elevator down to the ground floor with Chi.

Vino and Chane came down from above as though to replace them, their arrival more or less signaling the end of the situation. Vino looked around absently and said, "Hmm? What happened to Dallas?"

"He had to go," Tick said.

"Ah, okay."

Those who had seen what had happened shivered at the dark meaning hidden in those words. They thought that maybe there was something more sinister lurking inside Tick Jefferson. What made it all the more chilling was the fact that Tick was technically telling the truth.

But Tick had already returned to what passed for normal with him, the grave air from before nowhere to be seen.

With nobody left to formally wrap things up, the people left in the restaurant slowly went their own ways. Everyone who might be accosted by security had already left, and so those left behind were more or less free to leave at their leisure.

That didn't mean, of course, that everyone was happy with how things had turned out.

"...Ennis. Do you think what they said back then was true?"

"What who said, Firo?"

"You know. The thing about everyone working here being..."

"...There's nothing that we can really do about it even if it is..."

Firo and Ennis shared an awkward conversation as they took an elevator down.

"And those Lamia guys. We were lucky that Claire was around to chase 'em off, but... D'you think they'll come again?"

"My siblings..."

"Hey, don't let what they said get to you."

Ennis smiled reassuringly.

"I won't. I already have two fine brothers, Firo. You and Czes are all the siblings I could ever ask for."

Firo fell silent and bowed his head, suddenly unable to reply.

Brother, huh... So that's what Ennis thinks of me... dammit...

— —

"You're not hurt, are you, Chane?" Vino asked as the elevator doors closed.

Chane nodded, and a short silence fell over them as they descended.

They were about halfway down the building when Vino opened his mouth, looking oddly thoughtful.

"...Huey Laforet and Nebula..."

Chane looked to her fiancé. It looked like she was asking him a question.

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing. Just... Well, I was thinking that there's so much about this I don't know. Like who that vampire and his friends were. It makes me mad, this feeling that I'm stuck outside the world as it moves without me," Vino murmured, looking quite put out as he held a conversation with nobody.

"I think it's about time I made my way back into the world."

Realizing just what those words meant, Chane's eyes widened slightly.

"...If something strange happens again, I'm gonna go have a talk with your father," Vino said, as though Huey Laforet lived next door instead of inside the bowels of the most impenetrable prison on Earth. But Chane seemed to take it in stride, and merely nodded.

"...Wait a second. It feels like I'm forgetting something..." Vino muttered, a rare look of confusion crossing his face, but Chane could offer no answer and just shook her head, equally unsure.

— —

"Whew... It feels like I just woke up from a nightmare."

"Tell me about it. I'm so tired right now... I just hope everyone got out of the building alright."

"Yeah."

Jacuzzi, Nice, and Donny boarded one of the elevators, the tension finally draining from their bodies. Soon, they would make their way out of the building and to the rendezvous point they'd agreed on in advance with the rest of the gang.

"Feels like we're forgetting something..."

"That's right, what happened to Fang?"

"Yeah."

"...You lot are even more carefree than Tick, in a way. *Well, no matter.* Let's get down to business."

They froze, the blood turning to ice in their veins as the voice spoke from behind them. Such was their surprise that they didn't realize they could still make a run for it until it was too late.

The elevator doors slid smoothly shut, and they slowly turned around to face the man who had not been there when they'd gotten on.

And so began the long, long trip down to the first floor.

Tim kept his silence, supported on both sides by Tick and Maria.

Even the normally brash Maria seemed to sense the charged air, cautiously keeping her mouth shut, but unfortunately Tick possessed no such instincts.

"So what're you going to do now, Mr. Tim?"

"You can call me Tack, you know. I'm your brother, for God's sake."

"What?! You two amigos are related?!"

Tick filled Maria in on what had happened while she was out and once again asked, "So what're you going to do now, Tack?"

"I'm... I'm just going to keep on going like before, working under Huey. I might be just a puppet dancing on his strings, but... But someday, I'll defy my fate."

"You can't do that, Tack," Tick said, still smiling. "Nobody's fated to spend their lives being used by someone else. How would you defy something that doesn't exist?"

Tack stared silently at his brother, almost led to believe that the man next to him was an entirely different person from the one who had pushed Dallas Genoard out a window.

He remembered something, though, that drove him to speak.

"Hey, Tick..."

"Hmm?"

"Why did you kill Jimmy?" Tim asked, determined to finally lay that mystery to rest.

But the answer he got was one he'd never have imagined.

"Oh, Jimmy? I didn't kill him."

"...What? Wait. Hold on. If you didn't kill him then why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I'd just look more suspicious if I said I didn't do it, right?"

Tim mulled over the answer for a moment. "Then why didn't you say anything when I screamed at you to give him back?"

"Oh... I was just thinking how good it would be if I could grant your request."

Tim felt his head beginning to ache, but even then his sharp mind was awl with thoughts.

"Then... It really wasn't you?"

"Mhmm. I came home that day and saw the scissors already stuck in his back."

"I don't get what's going on, amigo. Who's Jimmy?"

Tim blocked out Maria and Tick as they began to talk, crazy theories and conjecture blazing through his head.

The elevator reached the first floor before he could come to a definite conclusion. The three of them stepped carefully out into the lobby and found a bizarrely normal world before them.

The two women at the information desk smiled their plastic smiles, and the security guards lounged about, gazing absently at the posters on the walls with expressions that declared to all

and sundry that they were bored out of their minds. The employees gossiped idly about what they'd had for lunch as they walked to and fro.

It was as though the events of that morning had never happened.

There was a police car parked near the entrance, but from what Tim overheard as he passed carefully past them, it seemed like they were only there to investigate the explosion on the top floor. He didn't hear a thing about a Chinese man with bladed gauntlets, or a lunatic with red eyes and razor teeth.

Quite a few civilians must have escaped, both from the first floor lobby and the top floor restaurant, but there was no sign of them, either. Tim wondered just what sort of pressure must have been exerted on the police and the people to make them shut up like this, then he remembered what Senator Beriam had said to him and shivered.

Every Nebula employee in the lobby was an immortal.

Tim could detect no visible difference, but that just made the knowledge all the more chilling.

Huey had wished to have many incomplete immortals as well—could Nebula possibly have created their immortals for the same purpose as his master?

No matter how many times Tim thought it over, he could reach no clear answer. The only thing he gained was an increasing sense of unease.

It felt as though a thick fog had fallen, smothering and hiding all the abnormal things that had happened that day from sight...



Little Italy The Alveare

"I'm telling you, it was amazing! Astounding! The Mexican magician actually cut through the clouds with her sword!"

"The sun shone through them and everything!"

Isaac and Miria waxed lyrical about the magic show they'd seen that morning, regaling the members of the Martillo Family with their story as they dug into a late lunch. Sadly, though, most of the camorristas seemed inclined to dismiss them out of hand.

"Sounds t'me like you're making it all up!"

"You guys fell asleep somewhere and dreamed it all up, didn't ya?"

"These magicians musta pulled a disappearing act on your brains, you numbskulls!"

Isaac turned to his partner, aghast.

"Look at these poor souls, Miria! They don't know the power of magic!"

"Someday a magician will make the Statue of Liberty disappear, and then you'll all be sorry!"

"Hahaha! Yeah, the day that happens'll be the day I swim a lap around Manhattan!"

A few decades later, David Copperfield would make Pecho dearly regret his thoughtless words, but that is another story, for another time.

Maiza leaned over to Ronnie and whispered, "It was you, wasn't it?"

"Mmm?" Ronnie replied, keeping his eyes fixed on his chicken sandwich. "What're you talking about?"

"I did think it was a bit strange how that downpour suddenly stopped, you know."

"...There must have been some pretty amazing magicians up there, then."

Maiza sighed, rubbing his forehead.

"I thought the crafty cat was supposed to hide its claws."

"Hide them too much, and you'll forget how to bare them. Better to keep your touch, I'd think."

"I've never heard of a demon using its powers so frivolously."

"I enjoy breaking the mold."

Just then, Firo and Ennis walked into the restaurant, interrupting their idle conversation.

"Ah, if it isn't Mr. Prochainezo, the man who didn't spare me a glance when a bomb exploded not ten feet away from where I was sitting."

"Aww, Ronnie, don't be like that. I'm sorry, okay?! I... Err. Uhh, anyway! How did things go with those kids from Chicago?"

"Oh, them. They don't want to work for us, but they agreed to give us a cut in exchange for working on our turf."

"Huh, really? Didn't they work together with Dallas to kidnap you and Ennis, though?"

The Martillo members eavesdropping on the conversation turned to each other and sniggered.

"Hey, I think Firo still doesn't know that Isaac wrote that letter."

"Haha, yeah, looks like it."

"Man, it's gonna be hilarious when he finds out..."

"Huh?" Firo looked around at the chuckling audience, confused. At length he shrugged it off and went over to the counter, ordering a sandwich for himself and another for Ennis.

Ennis took her seat beside him and whispered, "Firo... I don't think we need to tell Mister Maiza about the Lamia, or what Nebula did..."

"...Yeah, let's keep it to ourselves for now. Szilard's mess is ours to clean up."

"Right..."

"Dammit, twelve hundred of 'em, huh.... This is gonna be a pain..."

Isaac and Miria suddenly butted in on the conversation, banishing the somewhat despondent atmosphere in an instant.

"Twelve hundred what, Firo? Twelve hundred enemies waiting in ambush?!"

"Or maybe twelve hundred servants, waiting to serve him!"

"No, perhaps he means he has that many relatives."

"Or lovers! Eeek! Firo, you playboy!"

Firo smiled awkwardly, unsure of how to approach the slightly unhinged couple.

"Heya, you two. Today was kinda rough, wasn't it? Err... Oh, yeah. I'm. Umm. Sorry about the dominoes."

"Dominoes? What dominoes?"

"Oh, you want to play dominoes, Firo?"

"Christ, you both forgot all about it?!"

Firo blushed beet red, wishing he could crawl into a hole somewhere and disappear.

"Oh, that's right," Isaac said, snapping his fingers. "Firo! We've got something to ask of you."

"Huh?"

Isaac pointed dramatically at the youngest Martillo capo.

"Say uncle!"

"That's right, say uncle!"

"...Uncle?" Firo asked, wondering what was going on, but Isaac and Miria were already far too busy celebrating their success to explain.

"We did it, Miria! We really did it!"

"Mission complete, Isaac!"

"...Y'know, talking to you two's given me a lot of resistance to weirdoes," Firo commented, thinking of Christopher as he took a bite out of the sandwich that had just arrived.

"Firo, we heard the news. You ran around in that pouring rain without even an umbrella when you heard Ennis was missing, didn't you?"

"We heard you were even calling her name as you ran! 'Ennis! Ennis!'"

Assorted bits of sandwich forcefully exited Firo's mouth.

Isaac and Miria, merciless and cunning, took up positions on either side of Firo and began to poke him slyly with their elbows, eyebrows fiercely waggling.

Firo ignored the two for a moment and chanced a peek at Ennis, and saw that she looked utterly surprised at the news.

...*Shit.*

"Who told you that?"

"Tsk, tsk, Firo. We promised Czes very solemnly that we wouldn't tell!"

"It was a very manly oath!"

"...*Czeeeeeeeees!*"

Firo dashed out of the restaurant in search of his diminutive flat mate, his sandwich forgotten.

Watching him go, Sena the store owner simply shook her head in disbelief and said, "Honestly. The two of you're peas in a pod. Didn't you go running out into the rain calling *his* name, too?"

"P-please stop..."

"Actually, now that we're on the topic. Just what does Firo mean to you anyway?"

It was a blunt question, but Ennis only smiled softly and answered with the truth.

"Firo is very precious to me. He's... *family.*"

The Manor

It's like I'm dreaming.

Like I'm floating in the clouds.

Where am I now?

Back in the water?

Or did I fall from somewhere again?

Dammit, all these memories're fucking terrible.

But I remember this feeling.

I remember it, but I don't remember what it is.

Funny, how that works. I could never forget what the inside of that barrel was like, or the feeling of free falling from a skyscraper. But this, I can't remember.

Well. I guess anybody'd remember falling from the top floor of a fucking skyscraper if they lived to tell about it, especially since it was only a day ago.

It was him.

That squinty-eyed bastard.

Yeah, you.

Don't even think of laying a hand on Eve!

Dammit, who is it? Who's the asshole who made you cry, Eve?!

Tell me who the bastard was who made you look so worried!

C'mon, Eve. Tell me. Who is it? Who made you cry?

I promised you, didn't I? I promised you I'd keep you safe.

Tell me who did this to you.

Tell me who made you cry!

"Dallas!"

I only realize I'm not dreaming when Eve buries her face in my chest, throwing her arms around me.

I'm in a fancy bed. Man, how many years has it been since I slept in a bed this soft?

Hey, look. This sort of bed ain't for people like me.

Look at you, Eve. You look like you haven't slept a wink for days. Shove me out and get some sleep. God knows I don't deserve this kind of luxury.

"Did... did you know how worried I was?!"

Ah... So it was me. I was the one who made you cry.

"Dallas... I'm... I'm so glad!"

I really am a terrible human being.

"Ah..."

Good. I can talk.

"Yes, Dallas?"

"Sorry. I broke the promise I made with you. I got into another fight."

She doesn't say a word.

"But look, I kept the other promise. I kept you safe, didn't I, Eve?"

Don't cry, you dummy.

...Don't cry.

If you start crying because of me...

That means I'll have to go and beat myself up.

So don't cry.

Stop crying, dammit.

It makes me wanna cry myself...

Somewhere in the Dead of Night

"What did Master Huey say?"

"We're safe for now. Tim's taking all the responsibility for what happened."

"Mmm. Remind me to thank him next time I see him."

"Did you get any news on Adelle?"

"We didn't want to leave a paper trail, so we moved her to a small hospital in New York. It was a funny little place, run by a funny little man wrapped from head to toe in grey cloth. Just the right sort of place for strange ones like us, I'd say."

"I see... Do you think she'll be back anytime soon?"

"I think she remembered a little too much of her past. Tim said he'd take care of her, so she's more or less in his hands now."

"Hmm... I can see how that might break her. Our time in the laboratory was hell on Earth. Mmm. What are you going to do now? I've already got a mark to take care of while I wait for orders. Do you want to come along?"

"I'll... Well, I'll think about it."

"...You were just outmatched back in New York. This is the second time you've lost, right?"

"Mhmm... The first black mark on my record in four decades. The only one before that was the one who broke all my teeth. What was his name again? It was the name of some river..."

"Hmph. Don't let it get to you too much. It's not even your first defeat. Bounce back."

"Right, of course... I think I'll go out for a walk, try and touch nature a little..."

"Ah, what a beautiful flower," Christopher murmured. He was back among the warehouses of Chicago, squatting again in front of the small but hardy flower that had sprouted from a crack in the concrete.

"I didn't expect you to still be here. I thought you'd have dried up and rotted away a long time ago."

It had been a week since he'd visited, stumbling upon the flower by chance during a side job, and the sight of it still clinging gamely to life was a pleasant surprise.

"Haha, look. You can still see the bloodstains here."

"Beautiful..."

So entranced was Christopher that even when something slammed into his back with enough force to make him rock forward, he didn't immediately realize what was going on.

"Oh?"

He felt intense heat spreading across his spine and reached back, trying to make sense of the situation. Something wet touched his fingertips, but before he could tell what it was, a second shock ran through his body.

The heat finally turned into pain, and Christopher sprang to his feet and spun to face his assailant.

"Ack!"

He knew that face, staring back at him in a mixture of hatred and surprised fear.

"Oh, it's you. You're the fellow who looked so good kneeling next to this flower, aren't you?"

It was the undercover agent who'd called on the Lamia to cover his tracks, and had in the end been double-crossed and ruined by Christopher's whims.

"Y-you bastard..."

"Were you hiding from the police? Fancy meeting you here."

The former officer was breathing hard, his knees knocking together, and he held out his bloody knife with shaking hands as though to ward Christopher away.

Christopher stared thoughtfully at the blood—*his* blood—staining the dirty blade and said, "You know, the color's exactly the same, isn't it."

"Die, you fucking monster!"

Christopher casually sidestepped the desperate stab and grabbed the druggie's wrist. He twisted hard, once, and the man's arm snapped backward at an unnatural angle to drive the knife straight into his own throat.

"Guh... Guhkkk..."

Christopher glanced at the blood on his hands and then back at the scarlet liquid gushing from the dying man's throat. "See? It's the same color. What's so different about us?"

He snatched the knife from the other man's numb hands and plunged it into his heart. His expression as he stared at the blood staining the druggie's chest was somehow sad.

"I can't see any difference, but everyone tells me there is. Isn't that strange, how simple superstition can influence people so much?"

He stabbed the man again, and again, and again.

"We're the same."

"We're the same."

"We're the same."

Christopher came to and realized that somewhere along the way, the blade of the knife had broken off in the man's chest.

"Oh, sorry. I think we might actually be different after all."

He tossed the broken hilt into the lake and turned away from the already cooling corpse.

"I'm not as frail as you are."

He didn't know how long he'd been walking, aimlessly wandering among the empty warehouses. He reached behind himself absently and touched a hand to his back.

"Oww."

There was a wet squelch, and a fresh coat of crimson joined the crust of drying brown on his hand.

"Hmm... This really hurts. What should I do?"

Slowly, he knelt, and then slumped on his side. He chuckled then, a little ashamed of himself.

"What should I do? I really am in dire straits right now. Hahaha."

"Ah... What do I do? I don't want to die. Here lies Christopher Shouldered, stabbed while looking at a flower. How embarrassing."

"I wonder who's more unnatural... Me, or the twelve hundred immortals working for Nebula..."

The light slowly faded from Christopher's red eyes.

"What's so different about me? I just wanted to live a normal life... And just like everyone else, I don't want to die. Someone, tell me... Tell me what's so different..."

Christopher tried his best to stave off his fear of death, muttering aimless nothings to himself.

Then someone came to a stop beside him.

Christopher looked up at the silhouette, and smiled gently.

"Hello. Would you like to be friends?"

Somewhere in the Darkness

"...'and I know better than anyone that your track record up till this point has been flawless. There is also my fault to consider, for I did not tell you of this possibility, and instead left everything up to the Lamia. Your disposal is deferred, for now.' ...is what he says."

"Sham... Tell Master Huey there's something I want to ask him."

"...'Oh?' ...is what he says."

"Huey... Huey Laforet. Were you the one who killed Jimmy?"

"...'Whatever could you mean?' ...is what he says."

"The only people who knew about Jimmy were my stepfather, Tick, and.... and you. The clockmaker would never have the guts to kill a living thing, and Tick told me he didn't do it. That leaves..."

"...'If that is what you believe, then that is your world. Think what you will.' ...is what he says."

"I see..."

"...'Even though you suspect me, you are still unwavering in your loyalty. I believe that this event was a truly important learning experience for you, and that makes me happy as well.' ...is what he says."

"Just remember this, Huey Laforet. The world that I wish for no longer has any room in it for you."

"...'Haha, that doesn't matter to me.' ...is what he says."

Sham took his leave, and Tim began to walk.

I will not be a butterfly. I will not be a spider.

I refuse to be the puppet, or the puppeteer.

I just... I want a sword that will slash through the spider's web. I don't want to become that blade myself...

But I want a world where such a blade exists.

And to get that world, I'll do anything.

Anything.

— —

The Gandor Family

"So I told her right then and there, amigos! I've got two swords, so that makes me four times as strong as you!"

"Whoa!"

"What an idiot!"

"Awesome!"

"I'd never be able to say something that dumb with a straight face!"

"You really told her, didn't ya!"

"Amigo!"

Buoyed by the cheers of the Family's more fun-loving members, Maria gestured flamboyantly as she told them what had happened the past two days. She had just jumped up onto a table,

her hands grasping an imaginary sword as she prepared to reenact the events of her final climactic battle, when someone noisily cleared his throat and everyone fell silent.

"Miss Maria," Luck said, smiling, "a moment of your time, please."

Maria followed the Gandor boss into his office and found Tick already there, sitting at one of the chairs in front of Luck's desk.

"Wow, what's the occasion? You want to congratulate me over my victory too, Luck? Thanks so much, amigo!"

The smile on Luck's face stayed fixed there like a mask. "Mister Tick tells me that the two of you went through quite a lot these past two days. It must have been very demanding."

"Nope! It was a piece of cake, amigo!" Maria replied, grinning rakishly back. She was so excited that she didn't notice how Tick's ever-present smile looked a tad strained.

"No, no. It must have been *very* demanding."

"I'm telling you, it was easy, amigo."

"Oh, yes, of course. Very easy, Miss Maria," Luck said, and only then did Maria see the vein pulsing on his temple. "Very easy indeed, compared to the job I entrusted to you..."

"...Huh?"

"I just got off the phone with Ronnie Schiatto, the Martillo Family's *chiamatore*. We hammered out everything regarding Mr. Splot's gang and their business on our turf. We, as in Mr. Schiatto and I, from the ground up."

Maria opened her mouth to try and get a word in edgewise, but Luck ignored her and just kept on talking.

"The revelation that they were on close terms with Claire also caught me completely by surprise. I am told that he, too, will be representing their interests in their dealings with us and the Martillos. In fact, I received a call from him as well, telling me as much."

Luck Gandor paused.

"Strange, isn't it, how I had to get all this information about the matter from other sources, instead of from the very people I sent out to take care of it."

Maria finally realized what was going on, pouted, and looked away.

"Hmph..."

"What do you mean, hmph?!"

An hour and a very long lecture later, Luck finally dismissed Maria and Tick with an exasperated, "If you're expecting to get paid for this, then you're sadly mistaken. If you need money, go sell some information to the Daily Days."

"Hey, Maria."

"Hmm? What is it, Tick?"

"I think I can understand how you feel right now."

"You're probably thinking right, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't say it, amigo. You'll just depress me more."

The rain had stopped, and Tick happily snapped his scissors together as they walked, but Maria only sighed and looked down at her feet.

"Aaah... You know, I really thought I'd done well this time around."

"Well, we did mess up, so we don't have room to complain."

They kept going for a while, until Maria looked to her partner.

"Are you okay, Tick? You didn't really even get to say goodbye to your brother, did you?"

"It's okay."

Tick realized suddenly that his heart was surprisingly barren. He'd sent off his brother without a single moment's hesitation.

I didn't even cry, after all these years without having seen him at all.

Tick revealed none of what was going on inside on his face, his smile the same as ever.

"Tack looked like he was doing just fine. He's a lot smarter than I am. He can see all the things I can't."

"But I think he made a lot of enemies too, amigo. There's that Dallas guy, for one."

"He can look after himself. I think Mr. Genoard is going to go after me now, anyway."

"And I'll keep you safe, so you can rest easy!" Maria said, the smile finally returning to her features.

"I've broken the relationships of dozens, even hundreds of people, so being hated is nothing new for me," Tick said. "I've had people curse me more times than I can remember. Maybe I'm already cursed. Maybe that's why I'll never be able to form ties with other people..."

"...What're you talking about?" Maria asked, and Tick stopped, looking curiously to her. He seemed surprised, but Maria paid it no heed, bulling ahead with a peculiar sort of confession.

"You and I have been together for a while already, right? And we'll keep being together in the future... though it's entirely up to you whether you'll stay my *amigo* or become my *novio*²!"

"Huh...?"

Uncharacteristically serious, Maria turned to face Tick, looking him square in the eyes.

"You still can't believe it because you can't see it?"

"Well..."

Maria grinned.

"Then let's make it so that you can see!"

"What?"

Before Tick could react, Maria reached out and grabbed his hand with her own, then turned and dashed headlong toward their destination.

"Wait, Maria! You're going too fast!"

"C'mon, don't fall behind! If you can't keep up then this connection between us might just break, *amigo*!"

Tick blushed beet red, but pumped his legs furiously to keep pace, as though determined to keep hold of the bond he'd managed to form.

Maria drew her sword and held it high. This time, it really was coincidence, but the clouds split where she pointed her blade, revealing cerulean behind white.

² Spanish for "boyfriend."

The autumn sky peeked out from behind the clouds, deep and blue.

Oh so blue...



BACCANO! 1933 FIN

Author's Midword

There, the second half. The end of Tick and Maria's story.

It ended up pretty long, but thankfully I was able to wrap up Tick and Maria's story with this book.

So, umm, those of you who sort of peek ahead at the afterword might be sort of confused, so... Umm. Well, things just sort of ended up like this. Anyway, *Baccano!* is heading into a long storyline now. Here's what happened.

One day back during spring...

My editor: I think it's about time we wrapped up the 1930s.

Me: Whaat?! It's being canceled?!

Editor: No, no, I just mean, why don't we do some more stuff like that 2001 book you did? I just think it'd be easier to expand your horizons if you finished the 1930s arc.

Me: Whaat?! So you're just saying it's being canceled in a roundabout way?!

Editor: I told you, no. But there's a limit to what you can do with the 1930s, isn't there?

Me: Oh, I see what you mean. But I've actually still got a ton of stuff I want to do with that time period.

Editor: How many arcs?

Me: Oh, about ten... Ack?! I don't have enough years!!

...and therefore (?) we're heading into the heart of the 1930s, Huey Laforet's story. Well, actually, we're already there. Chi and Liza and Beriam, who you've already met, will have big roles in the upcoming story. Well, no, they might not.

In the future, I'm thinking that I might want to have self-contained episodes like this mixed in together with a longer overarching arc for the rest of the 1930s. You'll see a lot of new faces along with the old, so I hope you'll stay with me for the ride.

And if you're reading my other projects—*Durarara!!*, *Vamp!*, the *Etsusa Bridge Series*, or anything else—thank you so much for following them! Yup!

Anyway, my editor had the idea that this volume's afterword could stand to be in a very strange location, so here we are. Somehow, though, I don't think this is going to catch on.

So I asked this person, a known master of afterwords, for his opinion!

Hello, everyone. My name is Shigusawa Keiichi (仕草沸けいひ). Actually, I'm Shigusawa Keiichi (時雨沢恵), but this computer refuses to give me the right characters, so what can you do?

First off, I want to express my undying rage at having the prestigious title of "First Midword Ever Published in Dengeki Bunko" stolen from me.

I'm going to challenge Mr. Narita to a duel now, and maybe if I beat him hard enough this book won't be published.

Root for me, everyone. En garde, Narita!

Huh?

Thank you. This is Shigusawa Keiichi, signing off.

Wha?

Well, that was a little awkward, but anyway. What is a midword? Who knows! It's a mystery. A mystery that you, dear readers, will have to solve!

You might be wondering just what in the world I'm thinking, writing an afterword-cum-midword like this, but, uhh, well. Please keep reading. The book's not over yet!

And thank you very much, Mr. Shigusawa Keiichi!

Oh, and as for the author's picture this volume, I must thank Mr. Mizuki Shoutarou of Fujimi Mystery Bunko for taking a picture with me. Mr. Mizuki's newest work is going on sale on the same date as this volume: November 10th! This is the first author's afterword collaboration (what?) between Dengeki and Fujimi Mystery! Thank you very much to everyone involved! Our

objective? Increased sales, of course! So anyway, please buy Fujimi Mystery Bunko's *In Search of the Half Dollar* as well.... Wait, am I allowed to do this?

Of course, the most heartfelt thanks to my editor and the rest of the staff at Dengeki Bunko; everyone who lives in the city of S; all of my friends and acquaintances; Mr. Enami Katsumi, who has produced excellent illustrations for me despite a grueling schedule; and of course, everyone who's reading this at this very moment. Thank you very much!

September 2004

Suspiciously looking at suspicious pictures of suspicious movies and suspicious anime while chuckling suspiciously,
Narita Ryohgo

**REMNANTS,
OR NEW
PROLOGUES I**

**THE MAN WHO
LIVED FOREVER**



There was a tiny island off the coast of San Francisco Bay, made up mostly of foreboding boulders and sheer cliffs, topped by a small cluster of inelegant concrete buildings.

Unlike its namesake, the pelican, Alcatraz³ Island was a grim and dreary place.

Originally uninhabited, the island had been converted into a fort to protect San Francisco during the California Gold Rush. Its formidable defenses were then bolstered even more during the Civil War, and when all was said and done the naval fortress boasted an impressive battery of one hundred and five long-range iron cannons as well as four fearsome Rodman guns, at the time the pinnacle of military firepower.

The island became a prison for military criminals, holding them during the Civil War and continuing to do so even after its role as a fort became obsolete. The fortress that had been made to keep people away became a jail to hold them inside, housing prisoners from the war, Confederate sympathizers, and even some Native Americans. By the turn of the twentieth century, few remembered that it had once been a fortress.

In the year 1933, Alcatraz was deactivated as a military prison and then reborn as the most formidable federal prison in the United States.

The prison building boasted a long hallway that would later come to be known as Broadway, one of Alcatraz's most famous tourist attractions. Deep below that hall was a former storage basement that had been modified to serve as a solitary confinement area. And deeper, yet deeper still, in the very bowels of the prison, there was a small room that had never been drawn on the building's blueprints.

He existed there.

It was a special cell, made specifically to house one person. Him.

Actually, it seemed a trifle large, considering it was a prison cell. It was wide enough that it would not have looked too out of place as a hotel suite.

But any illusion that it was a place of luxury would be swiftly dashed upon taking a look around. The room boasted no decorations, only the barest of necessities. A small, threadbare bed, a naked sink. A single bar of soap and an aluminum cup. The size of the cell actually made it seem even more desolate, not less.

The prisoner held inside the cell spent his time there quietly, his very existence going unnoticed by all but a select few of the prison guards. He sat wordlessly on the edge of his bed, gazing at walls that had never been touched by the sun's rays.

³ "Pelican" in Spanish around the 18th century. In modern Spanish, the meaning is different.

It was not a blank gaze, the look in the man's eyes. He stared purposefully at one spot, looking at something that only he could see.

"I've been keeping a journal inside my head," the man suddenly said.

His gaze did not waver, and it seemed like he was talking to nothing. Perhaps to the room itself.

There was no guard standing outside his cell.

Nor was there anyone in the cell with him.

"I used to bribe the guards to bring me books and newspapers to read... But recently, the rules were revised—quite strictly, may I add—and they were all taken away."

He kept talking, the purpose in his voice making it clear that he was directing his words at someone or something, obviously expecting an answer from the empty room.

"The new warden who came after the federal government got hold of this island, James Johnston, is a talented man. He goes to great lengths to make sure the inmates are clothed and fed well, but in exchange he is fearfully strict when it comes to keeping them in line. If I were a betting man, I would bet that this island will go down in history as inescapable."

"I didn't come here to listen to you whine," a voice said from where *no voice should have been*, the very air wavering and warping.

"...But no matter."

The formless presence that had filled the room began to come together, gathering in one spot before the man on the bed.

The man blinked, once, and when his eyes opened again there was a sharp-eyed man in a business suit where no man had been there before... Ronnie Schiatto.

"...It's certainly been a while, Huey Laforet. If I'm not mistaken, we haven't seen each other face to face since our first meeting back on the boat."

Huey looked up at the mention of his name, looking the tall man in the eyes with a sincere smile.

"Ah. So you remembered my name, though I do not recall ever telling it to you."

"Maiza told me all about his friends, of course. Seeing as how you aren't surprised at seeing me, I'm guessing that you've been keeping track of me, as I've been of you."

"At first, I had only planned on observing Maiza. It is purely coincidence that I happened to stumble upon you as well, demon... Or do you prefer Ronnie Schiatto? Is that your true name? Immortals cannot use false names when talking to one another, but I would have only your word that the same law applies to demons as well," Huey said lightly, though his voice held a tone of respect now that he was face to face with the demon.

Ronnie only stared back at him, then said, slowly and deliberately, "My name is Elmer C. Albatross."

For the first time, the smile on Huey's face faltered. The name was one he knew well, for it was the name of his only friend in all the world, but he knew for a fact that the being he currently faced was not that man.

A smirk crept onto Ronnie's features, as though to replace the one that Huey had lost.

"...There's your answer."

"Ah."

"If you want my word, I will tell you this: Ronnie Schiatto is my true name, in a way. It's one that I gave myself. Assuming that you believe me, of course."

Huey offered Ronnie an amused smile, as though to say that he understood, but the cold light of animosity in his eyes lingered nonetheless.

"...I would very much appreciate it if you refrained from using Elmer in your experiments like that, even if it was only his name."

"A strange request, coming from someone who doesn't hesitate to use up the lives of others for his own tests."

Huey ignored the other man and instead asked, "Setting that matter aside, may I know why you decided to visit today? I'm afraid that conversation in the cells is strictly forbidden. If one of the guards happened to see us right now..."

"Nothing would happen, because those rules don't apply to you. And even if they did, I would take care of it."

"I see. Omnipotence is truly a grand thing. Though I must say that all things considered, you are surprisingly human," Huey said jestingly, the last of the anger draining from his body.

Ronnie, too, accepted the peace offering for what it was, and moved on to the real reason why he'd come.

"I'll cut to the chase. Huey Laforet... *what is your ultimate goal?*"

"...My goal?"

"What are you thinking, setting yourself against Nebula, gathering up the incomplete elixir of immortality?"

Huey cocked his head curiously, as though it puzzled him to be questioned by a being he had called omnipotent.

"Why do you ask? It would be the work of a moment for you to read my mind, would it not?"

"Hmph. Where's the fun in that? Do you want me to die of boredom?"

For once, Huey was struck silent as he reminded himself he was facing a demon.

I see now why he offered us immortality for no cost.

"And it is fun," he said, letting none of his thoughts show on his face, "to appear out of thin air in the cell of a maximum security prison on the other side of the continent, to ask me yourself?"

"Certainly. There's a lot of fun to be had in talking with someone as unique as you, and I didn't have the time to take the train. Visiting hours are probably over, anyway."

"How terrible. You're simply bending the rules to suit your whims," Huey said, and though he shook his head in mock despair, his voice was bright with excitement. "Your very existence is... cheating. Yes, that is the word. Simply by walking this earth, by living and breathing and acting, you warp the rules of the universe and bring them to their knees. The laws of physics do not apply to you; you break them so easily that to you, it is second nature."

Huey's breathing quickened with excitement and he leaned forward, lowering his voice as he answered Ronnie's question.

"My objective is to find out what exactly immortals are capable of. And as for the final result, I want you." He paused. "Not you, yourself. But I want to create a demon with power such as yours with my own hands... or, perhaps, become such a being, myself."

"...Jealous of my good looks?" Ronnie said teasingly, but Huey paid it no heed. The corners of Ronnie's lips rose in an amused smile and he said, "Well then. How goes the scientific process?"

"I... I have a theory about your true nature."

"...Didn't I tell you that myself? I'm not actually a demon. I'm simply an alchemist, just like you... One who's lived for far too long."

"That is the truth, but not the whole truth. Am I not right?"

Ronnie replied with silence.

"You are not a demon, and not a god. But you are not a simple alchemist, either... Ah, but I must finish my tests before I give you my conclusion."

Silence fell over the room for a few minutes.

"You know," Huey said, breaking the ice, "I was actually very surprised. I did not truly believe that Nebula would do something so brash..."

"You set your guinea pigs on that building just to make sure?"

"I was almost certain even before I sent Christopher, I assure you. The Twins' reports are almost always accurate."

Huey chuckled.

"I wonder. Will Nebula be able to keep them in check? Those people have not learned of immortality as a concept—no, instead they have experienced it themselves, felt the life come back to their bodies. And not just one or two. Nearly half their employees tasted that forbidden fruit in one fell swoop. And besides, it wasn't a failed endeavor, despite the fact that Tim failed to retrieve the elixir. I was able to amuse myself a little, observe Dallas Genoard—fascinating specimen, might I add—and more than anything, Tim has matured greatly through this series of events. Enough to make his latent animosity toward me come to the surface."

"You planned everything?" Ronnie asked, for once sounding genuinely surprised. Huey nodded.

"Naturally. Most of the events unfolded according to either my plans or Nebula's, but there were a few random factors that neither of us could account for. For example, there was Claire Stanfield, the former Felix Walken's faction, and... and, you, of course."

"The only thing I've done recently was frighten a few restaurant patrons by putting on a little show for a Mexican girl."

"Omnipotence certainly has its benefits, does it not," Huey said teasingly, seeming to enjoy the situation.

"I took a look at Christopher Shouldered and his friends," Ronnie said, abruptly changing the subject. "At those Twins of yours, too. Looks like you put Szilard's research to good use."

They both knew what Ronnie meant by that.

Huey smiled. "Are you going to turn me in for corporate espionage?"

"I wouldn't be able to wring much money out of a broke man in prison."

"Prison... Ah, yes. I have been locked in a prison for centuries now."

Huey rose and turned to stare at the stark walls, his eyes losing focus as he looked at something only he could see.

"Back then, on the boat... You placed us all in the prison known as time. Ah... There is no past in this place, no present and no future. Just a swirling maelstrom of time."

Ronnie kept his silence and waited.

"What can immortals achieve? What is the limit of our capability, our true potential? That has been the thought that has held me in its thrall all these years. You see, no amount of wisdom or compassion can make a mortal man the God who will cure the world of its pains. Countless sacrifices are necessary to save even one person. That is the limit of humanity."

"You're underestimating what humans can do."

"My, my... I can't say I ever expected to hear that from a demon..."

At length, Ronnie decided to give Huey one last piece of information before he left.

"Wouldn't be fair of me to take without giving, would it. I'll tell you something I'm pretty sure you don't know."

"What is that?"

"Do you know of a man named Ladd Russo?"

"Ah, yes, of course. He was one of the... random factors, during the Flying Pussyfoot experiment."

Huey pursed his lips with disdain as he said the words, as though he found the idea of anything that could potentially throw a wrench in his experiments to be distasteful.

"He declared he was going to kill you someday, and now I hear he's being transferred to this island. A stroke of good luck, wouldn't you say?"

"Not at all. What's fortunate about a man coming to kill me?"

"Because at least you won't be bored anymore."

By the time Huey opened his mouth in protest it was too late. The heavy air in the room returned to normal, the small cell once again empty of anyone save the inmate who lived there.

— —

An hour had passed since Ronnie's sudden visit and equally sudden departure, and now another being shared the cell with Huey. It was not, of course, Ronnie Schiatto.

"Aren't you bored because they took all your books, Daddy?" it asked, its high, childish voice sounding distinctly out of place in a prison cell.

"No, dear. I even get visitors from time to time to keep me company," Huey replied, stroking the figure's hair softly.

Just like Huey himself, the figure—the girl—had black hair, and bright golden eyes peeked out from behind her raven bangs. She was about as tall as Huey was, though Huey was still seated on his bed, and that coupled with the sound of her voice made it clear that she was just a young girl.

No amount of bribing would have gotten a child into any cell in Alcatraz.

In other words, the situation in Huey's cell was taking place unbeknownst to the island's staff.

"Daddy, Daddy! Guess what! I went and saw *Chane*!"

"That's nice, Liza," Huey said, and the girl's eyes lit up with childish joy as her biological father called her by name.

"And you know what, Daddy?" she chattered, her voice completely different from the one that she'd used with Christopher and his companions. "I'm a lot stronger than she is! I'm really really strong! If that Vino guy hadn't been there then I'd've killed her for sure!"

Huey smiled awkwardly and tapped Liza lightly on the nose with one finger.

"Didn't I tell you not to kill your sister *yet*, dear?"

His voice stayed completely calm and even, but the girl immediately bowed her head, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I-I'm sorry, Daddy! I won't do it again, promise! Are you mad at me, Daddy? I didn't mean it!"

"Haha, of course I'm not angry, Liza."

"Really?"

Liza looked up hopefully, and her father smiled and softly stroked her cheek with one hand.

"Really. Don't worry."

"You don't hate me, right?"

"How could I hate my own daughter?" Huey said. The smile on his face died far before reaching his eyes, and he sounded like he was reading from a script, but Liza noticed none of that. She blushed and smiled, looking shyly up at her father.

"Daddy? Who's more important to you, me or Chane?"

Huey's smile grew even gentler as he heard the note of uncertainty in the girl's voice.

"You, of course, Liza."

Liza cheered and jumped into her father's waiting arms.

Such was her joy that she didn't even notice that Huey hadn't even been looking at her when he spoke.

He stared instead at a single point in the air, gazing at something that only he could see...

The immortal deceived everything around him.

He lied to his guinea pigs. He lied to the world around him. He even lied to himself.

An old memory came to life in his heart.



"Huey, there's nothing in this world but *love and justice*. And that includes the love people have for themselves, and the justice they uphold in the name of their own desires. So what to do, to make everyone in the world smile? I've got an idea, myself, but while it's easy enough to say, the doing would be a different matter."

"Interesting."

"...You have to become a villain."

"A villain?"

"If everything in this world is just a conflict of people's individual justices, and it's impossible for everyone to be saved... Then you can become the only evil in the world. Show them something that goes against all their rules, something that goes beyond all their justices."

"...A laughable suggestion."

"Makes you smile, doesn't it?"

"Elmer," Huey murmured, remembering his old friend, "Do you think I am laughable right now? Would you smile, if you saw me?"

His voice was so quiet that not even his daughter heard him, though she yet clung to his waist. The words went unheard, disappearing into the darkness of his prison cell.

Quietly, and yet more quietly...

**REMNANTS,
OR NEW
PROLOGUES 2**

**THE SLAVE
TO WEALTH**



"...Who's there?" the man said, seemingly to himself. By all appearances he was alone in the large study.

Then a shadow detached itself from the darkness and walked into the light of the single lamp, as though in response to his question.

"You don't need to know," the slender silhouette said, stepping closer to his target. It was Chi. "You'll be dead soon, anyway."

"A-an assassin? Who hired you?"

The steel claws attached to Chi's arms glinted cruelly in the light, and his gaze was already fixed on the other man's throat.

"Wait! I, I'll pay you! Twice whatever you were offered! Three times! You don't have do this!"

"I've heard that spiel more times than I care to count. Maybe my partner would be swayed. He's a whimsical man. Not me."

Chi shook his head, slowly, as though pitying his mark, but he did not stop his slow advance.

"Buh, but but wait! Let's talk this over! A-arent't you interested in money at all?!" the man cried, hastily rising from his chair as though to flee, but Chi was even faster. In an instant he went from a slow walk to a blinding dash, eating up the distance between them in a flash.

"Hmph. Nothing but a slave to your wealth," Chi muttered, raising one arm in preparation to tear out the man's throat as he passed him by.

"Is that a no, then? I see."

The terrified look in the man's eyes drained away in an instant, and his voice turned cold as ice.

"Pity."

A tremor ran through Chi's body.

Just one more step would have put him within reach of his target, but Chi stopped dead in his tracks as something burst in his shoulder, fierce agony following a moment later.

"Guh..."

The force of the blow sent him reeling backward, and even as he struggled to keep his footing against the pain he saw something strange. There was a small hole in the window behind his target, a fine web of cracks spreading outward around it.

A sniper...?!

Before Chi could do more than take a step backward, an ebon shadow fell over him.

"What-"

Before he even saw who it was, the shadow's hand closed around his arm. He tensed, trying to shake it off, but the strength in his unknown assailant's grasp was like that of a mechanical vise.

Wha... what's wrong with my legs?

The hand had grabbed his arm, but the strength drained out of his legs instead. He lost his balance as his knees buckled underneath him, and before he knew it he was lying flat on his back on the floor, staring at the ceiling.

Something pressed lightly against his neck.

The sword-shaped letter opener that had been resting on the target's desk had somehow found its way to rest point first against Chi's throat, held precariously in place by the black shadow's shoe resting feather light against the handle.

So delicately was it balanced that the point didn't even dimple Chi's skin.

But Chi knew that if the man above him put even the slightest pressure on the letter opener, the dull point would slide into the soft flesh of his throat as easily as a sharpened blade. He froze, barely daring to breathe.

He was not afraid of dying, but the thing on the other side of the letter opener exuded an overwhelming sense of presence that cowed him.

A moment of silence passed, and then the man he'd come to kill, Senator Manfred Beriam, opened his mouth.

"Don't kill him, Mr. Walken."

"That's 'former', sir," the shadow replied casually. "I told you, I sold the name to someone else a long time ago."

"Then get a new name."

"I've been forsaken by God and betrayed by my country. I don't need a name."

"You need one so I have something to call you."

A light knock against the window interrupted their conversation.

Beriam looked back and saw a man holding an almost comically long rifle. A trenchcoat covered most of his body from view, and a black piece of cloth covered his eyes, decorated with the design of a rifle's reticle. What little of his skin was visible seemed to be heavily scarred.

"Well, sir? Good job, eh?"

"...Mmm. Indeed. Thank you, Mr. Spike."

"Heh, you can keep the thanks. I'll take money instead," the seemingly blind sniper said, a nasty smile stretching the scars on his face.

Beriam paid his hired hand no heed and instead walked up to Chi, looking down at him.

"What do you think? Money can't do everything, but it can certainly do quite a lot. For example, the power that my wealth gives me has allowed me to hire help such as this."

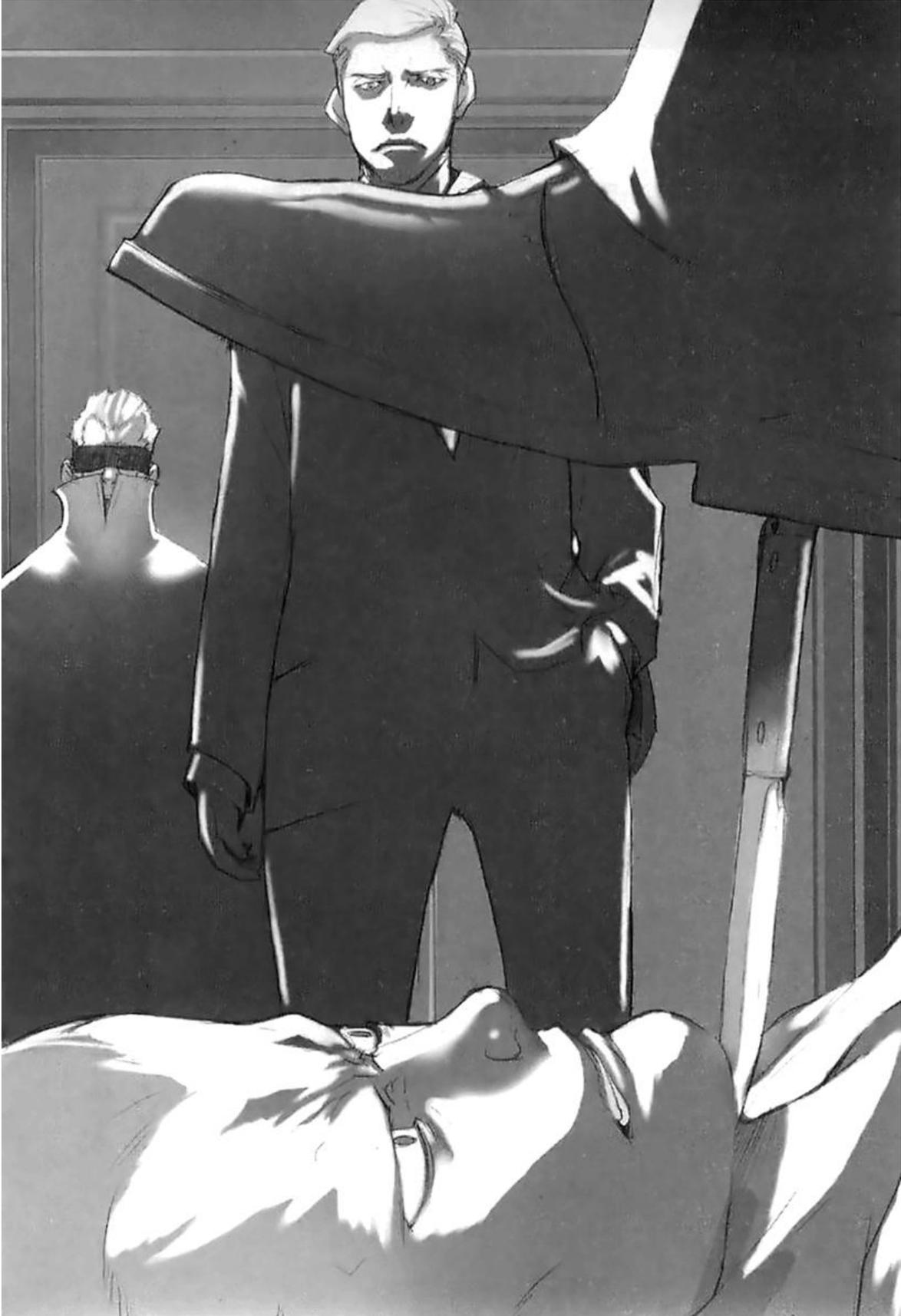
Chi kept his silence and waited for the end, but Beriam was not in the mood to grant him the death he expected.

"You are Hong Chi-Mei. A member of the Lamia, I believe?"

Chi sucked in a surprised breath despite himself as his target spoke his name, his eyes widening. He'd known that Senator Beriam was no ordinary man—he'd had a hand in the events at the Mist Wall, after all—but he hadn't expected that Beriam would know who he was.

"I don't know whether you came here on Huey Laforet's orders, or to fulfill a contract on my head, and I don't particularly care. I want you to take a message back to your creator," Beriam said, glaring so coldly down at Chi that it almost felt like the very air was freezing.

"Tell him this: This nation is not a playground for *monsters* like you."



The former Felix Walken and Spike dragged Chi out of the study, leaving Beriam alone.

"If Laforet wanted me dead," he mused aloud, "Hong wouldn't have come alone. Hmm. Perhaps it was Homer, the head of the New York branch. He's certainly enough of a coward."

Beriam sank into the expensive leather of his chair, looking up at the ceiling.

"Huey Laforet... Victor Talbot..." he murmured, and though he said the words to himself, it was as though he was talking directly to the men themselves. "How much wealth have you gained in exchange for selling your souls to the devil? How much power? None. You have gained nothing. All you have done is forsaken your own deaths."

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

"Father? May I come in?"

"Of course, honey. But shouldn't you be in bed?"

The door swung open and a young girl hesitantly poked her head inside the study.

"I heard a crashing noise from the study that woke me up. I was worried something had happened to you."

"Haha, it was nothing. I pulled out the wrong book and brought down a few more than I'd intended, is all."

The girl smiled, relieved that her father was unharmed. She didn't even notice Chi's blood staining the black carpet as she ran across the room and into Beriam's arms.

Beriam held her lightly, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

A slave to wealth? A fitting epithet, perhaps.

But I will show you, Huey Laforet.

Though money and authority are base things, the power they hold will not bend to you, a man who has forsaken his humanity.

They are the most basic, the most primordial symbols of power that man has created through civilization.

Yes, I will show you. I will show all of you, you who felt the limits of mankind and sought to throw them away.

I will show you the power of humanity.

That of mortal beings, though we may be small and frail, fated to short lives and final deaths.

Beriam reaffirmed his resolve and drew Mary closer, as though attempting to shield his beloved daughter from the storm that was to come.

Quietly, and yet more quietly...

to be continued in *Baccano!* 1934