

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

BACCANO!

バッカーノ!

1934 獄中編

Alice In Jails

電撃文庫

Baccano! 1934
Alice in Jails - Prison Episode

Written by Narita Ryohgo
Illustrated by Enami Katsumi



BACCANO!

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Ryohgo Narita

イラスト●エナミカツミ
Illustration Katsumi Enami



フィロ・プロシエンツォについて――

ガンドール三兄弟思フママ語ル

「フィロですか？ どんな奴かと急に言われましたも……。同じ赤ロアパートで育った幼馴染みとしか言いようが無いですね」

「まあ、頭は良くねえわな」

「ベル兄に言われるお終いだよ……。まあ、頭が良くない、というよりは、不器用と言った方がしっくりきますね」

「ああ……。もう4年だろう？ あのエリスと女と一緒の家に住んでからよ」

「エリスだよ、ベル兄……。まあ、あの子に惚れてるといっちは見え見えですよ。でも、未だに手も握ってない。クシアじゃないですけど、本当に同じ人間なのか疑わしくなります」

「ありゃ、くつつくまであと50年はかかるぜ、ガハハ」

「ただ……。まあ、彼の不器用さは筋金入りですが、決して単なる内気なグズというわけではありません」

「どっちか、つーと、いつまでもガキみてえな熱血漢で感じたよな」

「彼は他者に対して非常に不器用です。愚直なままでね、ですが――だからこそ、フィロが人を裏切る事もできない」

「それは、誰かの為に泣く事も、誰かの為に悲しむ事も、誰かと共に笑う事も、そして、自らのファミリーの為に冷酷にもなれば命を投げ出す事もできる……。まあ、ギヤングには向いていますが、悪人は」

「は向いてない。一律背反する性質を持つ不器用です」

「人生まで不器用でこったな」

「……。」

「そうだ、キー兄も何か言ってくよ」

「なんだ兄貴、いたのか、ガハハ」

「……。あいつは、不器用だ」

「おいおい兄貴、それ今俺らが言っ……」

「……。奴は自分を偽れん程に不器用だ。見たままのあいつが、そのまま奴の全てだ。俺達が何を語ろうが、全く無意味だ」

「ちよっ……。キー兄、たまに長く喋ったと思ったら、僕達の長話を全部無に!?」

「ひょっとして、兄貴を無視して今まで話してたのを怒っ……。ちよっ……。解った悪かったよ兄貴、だからそんな怖ま目では」

(以下、凍り付くような空気が続く)

Regarding Firo Prochainezo The Gandor Brothers Make a Frank Assessment

"Firo? Firo Prochainezo? What's he like? A strange question to ask out of the blue, isn't it. He's a childhood friend. We grew up together in the same run-down apartment. That's about all there is to it. "

"Mmm. Can't say he's that smart."

"I wonder what Firo would have to say about that, coming from you of all people, Berga. I think it'd be better to say he's simply brash, not stupid."

"Yeah, yeah, guess you're right. What else? Oh, right. Come to think of it, he's been shackled up with that girl for four years now, ain't he? What was her name again? Alice?"

"Ennis, Berga. And yes, it's quite obvious that he's fallen head over heels for her. But seeing as how they have yet to even hold hands, I sometimes find myself wondering if he's even human. Granted, I wonder that about Claire as well, but in a different way."

"Hah! Betcha it'll be another fifty years 'till they marry. Bahahaha!"

"But let me make this clear. Though at times, he comes across as embarrassingly naive, I must make it clear that he's no fool."

"I'd say he's like a kid. A kid with a temper."

"He doesn't quite know how to deal with people. He's naive in that sense. But that very naivety means that Firo is loyal to those he holds dear, that he can cry for his friends, be sad for them, laugh with them, that he can become cold for the sake of his Family, and that he would give his life for them. He's something of a logical contradiction; someone who is perfectly suited to being a camorrista, and incredibly unsuited to being a criminal."

"Just say that he's a dreamer."

"..."

"Oh, Keith. Say something too, will you?"

"What the hell, Keith. You were here all along? Bahahaha!"

"...He's naive."

"That's what we just sai-

"...He's so naive he can't even lie to himself. With him, what you see is what you get. It's pointless for us to try and explain him."

"You broke your silence just to refute everything we just said?"

"Keith, are you mad that we went on talking without asking for your... err... I mean, sorry! C'mon, don't be like that! Don't glare at us like that aww crap Keith you're bein' scary again-

(An awkward silence falls over the brothers)

い出した思い出した。これほど楽しい話
もねえ!

ラッドの兄貴はさ、ただの解体技師だ
つた俺と星二つ無いスリリングなアジャ
ラスな夜に出会った! ラッドの兄貴は、
俺がボクサー崩れのチンピラどもからリ
ンチに遭ってた時にフラッて現れて、さう
きの俺と同じように「星が無くて絶望
したねえ。いそ殺せ」て言ったんだよ。

チンピラどもが顔を見合わせた瞬間、
ラッドの兄貴の拳がチンピラの歯を丁寧
に力強く確実に解体した。それで、兄貴
はなんて言ったと思う?

「……人を殺すときは、相手に殺されて
も仕方がないって良く言うよな」

「つまり俺が殺せ」て言ったつ事は、
それを言われたお前は俺を殺す権利が
生じると同時に、俺に殺される権利も

生まれながらて事さ。そうたる?」

それがラッドの兄貴の理屈さ! 狂
おしい程にハッピーに素敵にアジャラス

でハカでアホで最っつうっつう高たら?
急に楽しくなった俺は、呆氣にとられ
てる他のチンピラの関節をレンチでぶっ
壊して、ラッドの兄貴と仲良くなったの
さ。

俺はただ小器用なだけの馬鹿だけど
よ……ラッドの兄貴は不器用な天才
さ! 生きていく上で不器用としか言
えない部分に、自分の全ての才能を注
ぎ込んでしまってる。

だからこそ、ラッドの兄貴は最高の
さ。
最初から粉々にぶっ壊れるのに、あ
んなにも輝いてるんだからな! そうた
ろ?

……悲しい話だ。

こんな悲しい話が存在しているのか?
俺がラッドの兄貴と会ったのは、星の
無い夜の事だった。……だめた。星の無
い夜。星が無い。この時点で既に悲しい、
悲しすぎる。考えてもみる! 星が……
星が無いんだぞ! こんなに悲しい事
あるか……? 駄目だ。もう悲しすぎて
話にならない。俺とラッドの兄貴の出会い
は、そんな悲しさから織られる。駄目
だ。全てが気だるい。殺せ、いっそ俺を殺
せ。この星の無い夜にラッドの兄貴みたい
に超絶的に超越的に超人的
……あああああ……あああああ
……んー、あー……

……YES!

その通り、その通りだよ! ラッドの
兄貴は超絶的に超越的に超人的だ。思

ラッド・ルッソについて

クラムル
グラハム・スベクター 狂々ト語ル

Regarding Ladd Russo Graham Specter Waxes Lyrical

...Lemme tell you a sad, sad story.

Ain't a sadder one in the world, no joke.

It was a starless night, black as ink, the night I met Boss Ladd. Wait, hold up. No stars? At night? Now that's sad. This yarn's already too sad for me to bear. I mean, think about it! No stars! No stars at all! Can you think of a sadder thing in all this wide world than a night with no stars? We're done for. We're finished. Kaput. I'm so sad I can't even speak anymore. That's how sad it was, the night I met Boss Ladd. No, I can't go on. I don't have the will to keep on living anymore. Kill me! Give me stars, or give me death! How could there be no stars on a night when I met someone as awesome, as incredible, as astounding, as ab! so! lute! ly! out of this world as Boss Laaaaaaaa.... La? Laaa... Yes! Yes, that's right!

Yeah, that's it! Ladd Russo's an awesome incredible astounding absolutely out of this world guy! Make no mistake! I dare you to come up with a happier story'n this one!

That's right. Back then I was nothing but a common mechanic, just a run-of-the-mill Joe Schmoe who made a living taking things apart. But that's when it happened! It was a night without a single star in sight, a thrilling, dangerous, spectacular starless night! There I was, down on my luck, surrounded on all sides, taking the beating of a lifetime from a buncha has-been boxers turned gangsters!

But then, bam! Outta nowhere appears Boss Ladd, and you know what he says? I'll tell you what he says. He says, "It's pretty sad, a night with no stars. Kill me."

Then the thugs turn and look at each other like they don't know what's going on and before you know it bam, again! There's a crack and a tinkle, and the boss's fist dismantles the goons' teeth. And then y'know what he says next?

"...They say it's self-defense if someone kills you while you're trying to kill them."

And *then* y'know what he says?

"In other words, when I tell you to kill me, then sure, you've got the right to kill me. But at the same time, it means I've got the right to kill you, too. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

Does it ever! Philosophy 101, taught by none other than Professor Russo himself! Ain't he the best happiest awesomest most dangerous idiotic dumbass ever? Ain't he the *greatest*?

I was so happy that I took my wrench and took apart the rest of those goons' joints while they were still trying to make sense of what Boss Ladd'd said, those maroons. Then I made friends with Boss Ladd.

I'm just an average Joe, an idiot whose only claim to fame is being good with his hands, but Boss Ladd! He's a genius! A clumsy genius! You know why he's so awkward when he's so smart? It's because he took all his talent and poured it into places that have nothing to do with living a normal life!

And that's exactly why Ladd is the best.

He's broken to pieces—he's been like that right from the start—but even then he shines so brightly! Don't you agree?

ヒューイ・ラフオレットについて

エルマー・C・アルハトロス愉快物語

んー。そっだね。ヒューイと初めて会ったのは、まだ15ぐらいの時だったかなあ。

あいつは世の中全部憎んでるって感じで、何をすることも一歩引いた目で周りを見てた。

俺にも最初はきつくあたってたけど、話してる内に段々笑ってくれるようになった。

だから、ヒューイはいい奴さ。みんなヒューイの事を避けてたし、ヒューイの奴もまともに話すのは俺と錬金術の先生ぐらいだったけど……でも、俺には解る。あいつはいい奴だよ。今でも俺の一番の友達だ。

あいつは、普段は作り笑いばかりしてる奴だけど……たまに、本当に笑うんだ。

そんな時だけ、ヒューイは本音を漏らす。「俺は、この世界を全部滅ぼしたい。お前も俺も先生も含めて、何も残さず」

それが、最初に聞いたヒューイの本音だったよ。俺と会う前に色々辛い事があつたみたいだし、それかもしれないと思う。俺から言う事でもないから詳しく言えないけど。

で、俺は「それは困る」って言ったんだ。もしお前のその夢が叶ったら、お前が「夢が叶った」って言って心底喜んでいる顔が、

お前のハッピーエンドが見られないって。

俺は、あいつのハッピーエンドを一番見てみたいんだ。……ま、ハッピーだろうバッドだろうが「終わりを見たい」なんて身勝手に失礼な話だと思うけどね。

だけど——マイサー達と初めて会って、ちよつとした冒険をした後ぐらいかな……。

「俺は、やっぱりこの世界を滅ぼしたい」って言ったんだけど……その時は、作り笑いだった！ 本当に良かったよ。

でも、人を人と思わないで実験する癖はまだ直つてないかもねえ。あれは、あいつの生き方なんだと思う。

不器用な奴なんだ。だけど、幸せになつて欲しい。いや、だからこそ幸せになつて欲しい。

不器用なら不器用なりに、絶対にみんなと幸せになる方法はある筈だからさ。



Regarding Huey Laforet

Elmer C. Albatross Explains With a Smile

Mmm. Yes, that's right. I think I was about fifteen, the first time I met Huey.

He had a look in his eyes that told you he hated the whole world, and the way he looked at you made you feel like there was a wall between you and him, like one those one-way mirrors that don't let you see what's behind them.

At first, he gave me the cold shoulder, but we talked, and I joked, and eventually he started to smile for me.

That's why Huey is a good man. Everyone else avoided him, and the only people he ever really talked to were me and our alchemy teachers, but still. I just know that Huey Laforet is a good man. Even today, I count him as my best friend.

Normally he fixed a mask on his face that just looked like a smile, but... from time to time, he'd let a real one slip.

That's the only time he ever lets his true self show, you know.

"I want to destroy this whole world. You, and me, and our professors. Everything and everyone, without exception."

That's the first time I ever heard him speak what was really on his mind. He went through a lot of misfortune before we met, so I suppose it's understandable. Mind, I can't explain too much. Not my place to spill his secrets, what.

Anyway, I told him, "That'd be bad.

"Because if that wish came true, I wouldn't be around to see your face, your satisfied smile as you said, 'My wish came true'. I'd never be able to see your happy ending."

That's what I want to see most. His happy end.

Well. I suppose it's a bit rude to say I want to see his end, happy or otherwise, but the truth's the truth, eh?

But then we met Maiza and his lot, and we had a bit of an adventure together, and I think that's around when he said to me, "Yes, I still want to destroy this world."

But do you know what? It was a fake smile he showed me then! I say, I can't tell you what a relief that was.

I think he's still got that nasty habit of experimenting on people and treating them like animals, though. I suppose that's just his way of living.

He has trouble getting along with others, you see.

But I'd still like to see him happy. No, that's exactly *why* I'd like to see him happy.

Surely, you know, there's a way that even the most naive person can find happiness with other people.



ヴィクター・タルボットについて――

21世紀ノ世ニテ、ナイル奇々ト語ル

あえて言おう。
奴に対して言う事など何もない。恨み
言以外はな。

昔から規律には厳しい奴だった。厳し
ぎる奴で、自分の感情よりも規則だの契
約だのを優先して口にする奴だった。

だが、あえて言おう。
奴は別に規則通りにしか動けない堅物
というわけでも、人を規則で縛り付ける
のが大好きな独裁者というわけでも無か
った。

ただ、みんなができるだけ平等に幸せに
なる為に必要なのが法であると判断した
だけなのだろう。

ヴィクターは頭のいい馬鹿だからな。
世の中全員が幸せに暮らせる方法など無
いと理解していた。互いの考えや価値観、
感情の違いを調整するには、法である
程度の不自由を与える事が一番の解決策
だと判断した。

そこまではいい。それは普通の考えだ。
だが、あいつはそうした規則からくる不

満を一手に引き受ける為に、自分から憎ま
れ役を買って出た。その上で、あいつはど
うしようもないひねくれ者だからな。他
者の目には横暴な独裁者と映っても仕方
ないだろう。

あえて言おう。奴は最高に不器用な男
ではあるが――錬金術師連中の中では、
特に人間臭い男だった。斬九郎と並んで
な。

他の連中は、エルマーにしろヒューイにし
ろラフロにしろマイサーにしろセラードにし
ろ……その他の連中にしろ、どこか人
間的に壊れていたからな。ヴィクターも馬
鹿ではあるが、ある意味では一番他人思い
かもしれん。

とんだ協悪者だ。
今は、かつて錬金術師のグループを規制
で縛ろうとしたように、アメリカという国
に対して同じ事をしている。

余程好きなのであるうな。あの国と、
あの国に住まう国民の事が。
まったくもって――不器用な奴だ。

**Regarding Victor Talbot
In the 21st Century, Nile Rants**

I say this.

I have nothing to say about him, save the most vehement complaints.

He was always one who had to see rules carried out to the letter, even back then. So strict that he placed the rules and regulations before his own feelings.

But I say this.

That does not mean that he clung to the rules as his only truth, or that he was a dictator who enjoyed trapping people in a web of laws.

I say that he most probably thought that law was the only way that things would be fair, the only way everyone would be happy.

Victor was a smart fool. He knew that there was no way everyone in the world could be happy. He decided that to bring their individual thoughts and values into line, in order to minimize the effect of the difference in mentalities, that a certain amount of control would have to be given over to the law.

That much, I say, is all well and good. A common school of thought.

But he placed himself in the villain's role, the great figurehead of evil, bearing alone all the scorn that detractors of those laws heaped upon them. He is a volatile one, too, hard to like at first glance, and so I say that he fit his chosen role well.

I say this. Victor Talbot was clumsy, and foolish. But I also say this. Among all the alchemists I knew, he was one of the most human.

Almost as much as Zankuro.

As for the rest... Elmer, Huey, Lavreau, Maiza, Szilard... each and every single one of them was broken, somehow. Victor is a fool, but in a way he worries most for the sake of others.

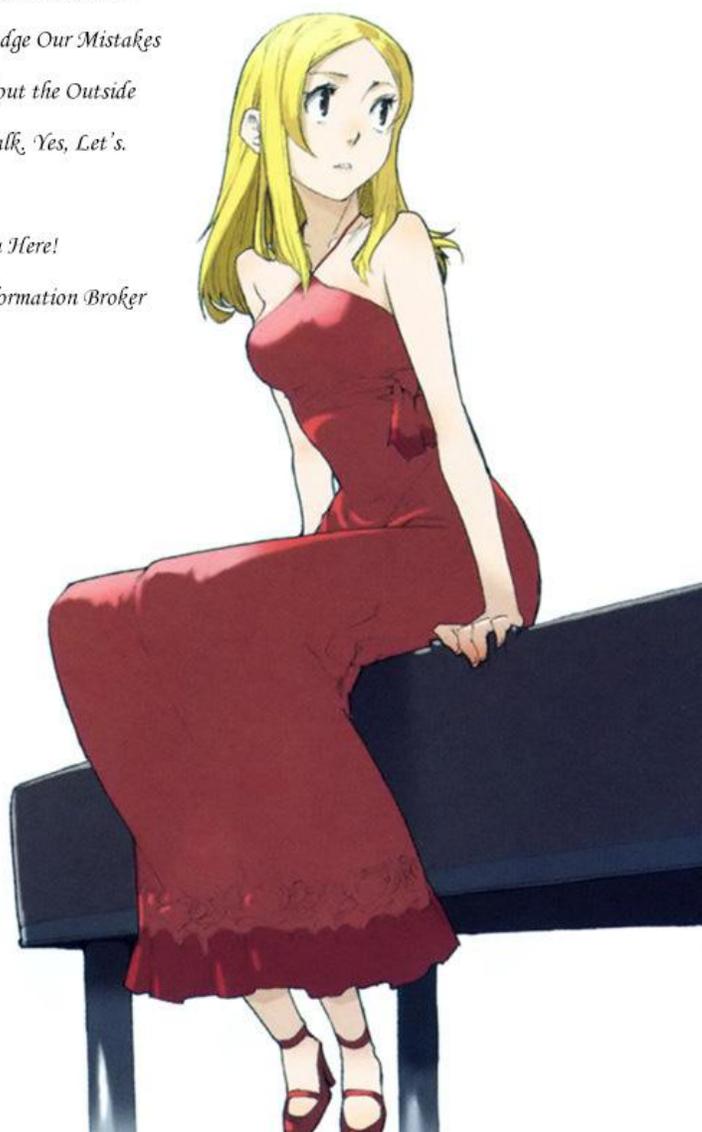
A more preposterous villain, there could not be.

He tried to bind our group of alchemists together with law in the past, and now he is doing the same with the United States of America.

I suppose that is how much he cares, both for the country and her people.

Truly. A naive fool.

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<i>Prologue I</i>	<i>The Camorrista</i>
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<i>Prologue III</i>	<i>The Assassin</i>
<i>Prologue IV</i>	<i>The Same as Ever</i>
<i>Chapter 1 Front</i>	<i>Let's Go to Jail</i>
<i>Chapter 1 Back</i>	<i>Let's Pick a Fight</i>
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<i>Chapter 4 Back</i>	<i>Let's Have a Talk, Yes, Let's.</i>
<i>Chapter 5</i>	
<i>Front & Back</i>	<i>Let's Get Outta Here!</i>
<i>Connecting Chapter</i>	<i>Visit to the Information Broker</i>
<i>Remaining Chapter</i>	<i>Free!</i>



Design Yoshihiko Kamabe

Dramatis Personae

Firo Prochainezo

Young capo of the Martillo Family. Worried about his youthful looks.

Ladd Russo

Nephew of Placido Russo, don of the Russo Family. A crazy serial killer.

Huey Laforet

Immortal, and Chane's father. Currently incarcerated, but...

Renée Palamedes Brinvilliers

A Nebula executive. *****'s *****, an *****, and a truly *** *****.

Felix Walken

A legendary hitman, based in New York. But...?

Isaac Dian

Same as ever.

Miria Harvent

Same as ever...?

Detective Edward Noah

Representative of the Department of Justice. Dislikes Firo. A model agent.

Victor Talbot

Immortal. Edward's boss. Potty mouth.

Ennis

A homunculus made from the flesh of an immortal. Immortal herself, but otherwise indistinguishable from an ordinary human.

Maiza Avaro

Capo of the Martillo Family. A gentle immortal who looks like a young man, always smiling.

Czes

An immortal boy. Sly and conniving despite his looks, but easily gets caught up in the mood.

Ronnie Schiatto

Capo of the Martillo Family. Has a gangster's stare. Demon.

Misery

A man working at Alcatraz Prison. Technically not an employee there, but instead affiliated with the Division of Investigation.

Jacuzzi

Leader of a gang of young misfits. Crybaby. Almost twenty, and finally starting to worry about his future.

Nice

Jacuzzi's girlfriend. A lover of bombs large and small. Wears glasses over an eye patch. Currently engrossed in the study of Japanese fireworks.

Chane Laforet

Huey's daughter. Deadly with a knife. Rendered mute at an early age, so she mostly communicates through writing.

Vino

Claire Stanfield. Something of a wandering hitman. Strong. Really strong. Enough said.

Epilogue I

A Visit to the Information Broker

— —

Where should I start.

You see, it's a bit unclear where exactly the information I'm about to disclose with you begins, and ends. Technically speaking, this *whole mess* has been going on since before I was born, and it might still be going on as we speak.

What's that? You don't want me to taint the information with my opinions?

Just the facts? Hah! Are you serious?

Look, pal. I ain't doing this 'cause I need the money.

I just... mmm. Yes. I want to complete the information regarding this. That is all.

And gathering everything there is to know about these goings-on is outside even my admittedly prodigious ability.

See, what I think is, you've gotta gather up every scrap of info there is to know about something, every little bit scattered all over the goddamn place, and only when you put them pieces together do you get a decent idea of what's going on.

Yeah. This information is a single piece of truth, made up of a million opinions.

It is up to you to cull what is unneeded and construct an objective image, is it not? I would even go so far as to say that it is your job, as collectors and traders of information.

Yes, of course. I'll make it clear, right here and now.

What I'm sharing is entirely subjective info, gathered by me, gathered *for* me. Stuff that's known only to me, myself, and I!

What? Don't get so excited?

Man... You just don't get it, do you?

Ain't the fact that I'm so excited just another piece of information?

Learn to read people, geez. The way people tell you stuff tells you just as much as the words themselves.

I mean, for example. How could you imagine the scene I'm about to share with you without this excitement I'm showing to go along with it?

Eyewitness reports're always gonna be packed with emotion. It's your job to sort that shit out, not mine. Then we'll see what you've come up with and make new conclusions of our own.

...Yeah, that's it. The past is all about emotions.

And that's exactly the sorta thing that you people feed on, ain't it?

You take other people's blood and sweat and tears and wisdom and courage and shame and dreams and strength and emotions and pasts and hopes and then you jumble 'em all up together and swallow it all up and then throw it back up, warped and changed, for all the world to see.

...Aww, don't look at me like that. I meant that as a complement, honest.

Man, you're just impossible.

Go on, get out. Scram. Bring the vice-director. Bring Gustav Saint-Germain.

Him and his boss're two of a kind. They're the only ones who laughed when I told 'em what I just told you, and told me, "Please, enough with the flattery. You're embarrassing me."

Mr. Saint-Germain's easy to talk with. The director is, too, but he's never gonna make it out from behind that pile of papers, is he?

...I'm telling you, don't look at me like that. Yeesh. You really can't take a joke, can you?

Of course I know he's not here. Mr. Saint-Germain's in Chicago right now, isn't he? He stayed the night at the Gunslack Hotel in Chicago along with that little pipsqueak of a camera girl, and for breakfast today he had ham and eggs.

...What? How do I know that?

'Cause I was there, of course.

I was the waiter who poured a mug of our hotel's special bitter black coffee for the girl as she tried to thank me through a mouthful of scrambled eggs. You shoulda seen the way her eyes snapped wide open when she took the first sip, but she still managed to finish it all. Cheeky little thing.

...Look, I know it doesn't make sense. What do I look like, a dumbass? Of course it's impossible to make it here from Chicago in just a few hours.

Whew. Man.

You really don't know a thing about me, do you?

Me?

Well, damn. What should I say to introduce myself?

I've got a few hundred names too many to give you one and have it stick, you see.

Ah, no. Don't get me wrong. They're not pseudonyms. I've got that many real names.

And real bodies to go along with 'em.

But only one mind driving them all. Just one.

...Actually. I wonder about that sometimes. Is consciousness a thing you can count?

It's a funny thing, really. I can think so clearly, I know I've got a mind, but when you try and sit down and count it, well, damn, you know? How do you count minds? Do you say that you've got zero minds left when you die, or before you were born? What about when you fall into a dreamless sleep? When you're just sitting there staring at nothing?

Well, no use philosophizing over it, is there? It's just something we have to accept.

How would we even go about proving that your consciousness and mine are alike in the first place?

...Oh. Right. Of course. I'd completely forgotten.

My name. Yeah, yeah, sorry 'bout that.

And don't let the way I keep changing the way I talk get to you.

My mind still isn't sure, you see. About how to treat you, that is.

I come from as many different walks of life as I have names and bodies.

But I still have a common name. One I share across all my bodies.

We might be seeing a lot more of each other in the future, so I'll let you in on the secret.

The name's Sham.

Ah, don't worry about remembering it. Think of it as a formality. A perfunctory introduction, if you will.

That's about all I feel like telling you in advance. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance.

Now, then. Back to the matter at hand.

Where should I begin?

I was there for some parts of this, and absent for others.

And I must make one thing clear.

This event I'm about to describe to you is already over.

If you think of it as merely one part of a much longer, much larger story, then no, nothing is over yet... But for this particular arc, yes. It's over.

It was a single event that took place simultaneously in New York, and in Chicago, and on a small island just off the coast of San Francisco.

Again, I feel I must remind you.

I was there for some parts of this, and absent for others.

What I want in exchange for the information I am about to share with you is an account of what happened in the parts I did not see.

...Well. That can wait, can it not? Let's see. Where should I begin. From the beginning, I suppose. As good a place as any.

But *which* beginning, is the question...

Ah. Yes. That does mean that there are multiple beginnings to this story. Quite a few prologues, if you will.

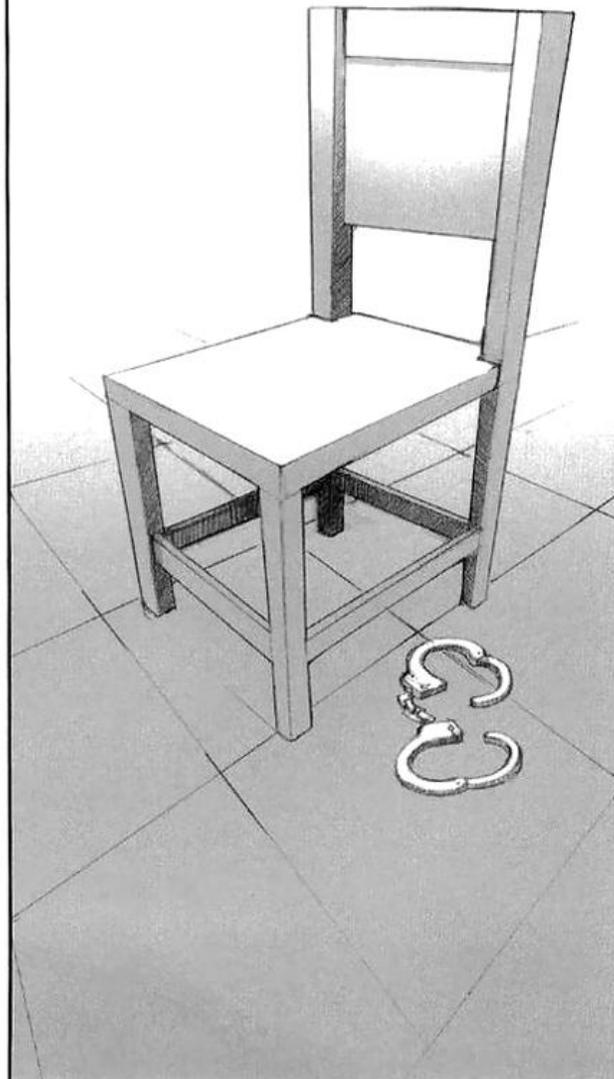
I don't know which one is the right one to start with, but I think I'll start with the simplest one.

The story of a camorrista, locked in an interrogation room.

Not a member of a mafia, our young man.

But mafioso or camorrista, I suppose the FBI didn't care either way, once they had their hands on him. His name? His name was...

**PROLOGUE I
THE CAMORRISTA**



1934

A Basement Somewhere in Manhattan

"Firo Prochainezo."

It was a name. His name, actually. The name his parents had given him.

He didn't reply.

The man sitting across from him seemed to take it in stride, even chuckling good-naturedly.

"Look at you, Prochainezo. You could pass for the star of a Broadway musical. A comedy, that is."

"...If you're that envious of me, you and me can switch anytime, Detective Noah," Firo replied, a complex combination of anger and disdain flashing across his face as he raised his head.

It was a young face—an observer would have paused, unsure of whether to label him man or boy. Dull silver handcuffs encircled his wrists.

His hands weren't the only part of him held captive. He looked around again, taking in the room he was in. It wasn't hard. It was a small room.

He couldn't tell what the room was for, or even the purpose of the structure that housed it, for that matter. He'd gotten off the car and found himself staring at a building that could have been any one of the dozens like it dotting the outskirts of the city, and what's more he'd been hastily shoed inside and into the room before he could do more than take a quick glance around.

A single mirror hung from the wall. There were no windows, and the only door was on the far side of the room. Blank concrete and red bricks came together to form the walls, seeming oddly out of place in the light of the naked bulb that illuminated the interior.

Motes of dust drifted lazily through the light, and Firo unconsciously began to breathe shallower as he imagined the fine granules filtering into his lungs.

"...Your new office is kinda crummy, if you ask me, though on second thought I guess that means it suits you just fine. You sure your bosses didn't get tired of you being a pain in the ass and send you here just to get you out of the way?"

Edward Noah just shrugged and grinned, ignoring the clear note of derision in the young gangster's voice.

"You've got my most sincere apologies, Prochainezo, but this place's a bit special, so I'd be obliged if you could just grin and bear the shabby interior decoration."

"...Huh. You've changed, Detective."

"What do you mean?"

"The old you would've gone red as a tomato already. Never could take a joke," Firo said, the maturity in his voice belying his youthful appearance.

If anything, Edward's grin widened. "You've changed too, Prochainezo."

Firo kept his silence.

"The old you would never have come with the cops so quietly."

Firo looked away, unwilling to meet his old adversary's gaze.

"...I didn't wanna make trouble for the Family."

Edward snorted. "Well, if that doesn't bring a single tear to my eye, I don't know what will. Understandable, I guess. I suppose that tiny little organization's the only home a sewer rat like you's ever known."

"I'd appreciate it if you left out the part about tiny and little. Though then again, I guess that to the almighty U.S. Bureau of Investigation, most any Family'd look small. Or wait, what do they even call you these days? You guys just can't make up your mind, can you," Firo shot back.

Edward spread his arms wide and nodded. "I know exactly what you mean, Prochainezo. The Division of Investigation doesn't even have the authority to arrest suspects. But that's all going to change next year. We'll be the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Though personally, I suspect most people'll just call us the FBI."

"...Sounds pretty fancy. But in the end, isn't it just another name in a long line of 'em?"

What Edward called the FBI had originally been created as just a single office of the United States Department of Justice, but less than three decades after its inception it had grown far beyond its humble roots, expanding into a sort of national police force that spanned the entire country.

The current head of the bureau, J. Edgar Hoover, had taken the director's seat in 1924 and had immediately set about bolstering the strength of his new responsibility, transforming the then-obscure Bureau of Investigation into a household name. Soon enough the bureau was tasked

with fighting the rapidly proliferating gangs of the Prohibition Era, becoming one of the Department of Justice's greatest tools in the war against organized crime.

"It's gonna be a hard year for thugs like you," Edward said smugly, leaning forward to look Firo in the eye. "The Firearms Act'll make sure of that. Does it piss you off, knowing you won't be able to hold fireworks shows like you used to?"

"...I don't use guns, so it's no skin off my back."

The National Firearms Act of 1934 was actually a law that had been passed specifically to bring the violent activities of America's organized crime families under control. Designed to restrict access to the weapons favored most by gangsters, the law placed heavy taxes on guns such as the iconic Thompson submachine gun and the deadly short-barreled shotgun, as well as on the various extensions that would normally accompany such firearms.

"I didn't think the law'd even place restrictions on silencers. What, are you trying to drive all the innocent civilian gunsmiths in the country out of business?"

"Can't say I know any innocent civilian gunsmiths who make a living off of devices designed to help assassinate people," Edward retorted lightly, chuckling. "Speaking of making a living, how's life treating you? Must be hard making ends meet, since you can't squeeze people dry in exchange for illegal alcohol. Isn't that how your 'Family' operates?"

"Sorry to disappoint, but we're doing just fine without the booze."

"And that little playground they've got you running?"

"Look," Firo said, the muscles in his jaw twitching, "I know you really wanna enjoy your once-in-a-lifetime chance to gloat, but give it a rest already."

Edward opened his mouth to shoot back a reply, but the sound of the door opening stopped him short.

"Ah. I see you're getting along nicely."

A man stepped inside, and then another, and then another, making the already small room feel even smaller.

"Hum. Nice to meet you, would be the polite thing to say, I guess. I'm Bill Sullivan," the first man said slowly, and together with his droopy, half-lidded eyes, the way he spoke gave the impression that he was perpetually on the verge of falling asleep.

"Mmm. This big fellow over here is Mr. Donald Brown. The one with the glasses is Mr. Alan Becker. I can see you're already acquainted with Mr. Noah. We're all, hmm, coworkers, I suppose, yes," the man said, and though he seemed friendly enough, the two men standing behind him might as well have been carved of stone for all the warmth they showed.

"Hmm... Don't let them get to you, they're like that with everyone," Bill said after a moment of silence. "We need hard men, sometimes, for hard work."

Bill moseyed over next to Edward and leisurely cleared his throat, then opened up the folder he held and began to read aloud in measured tones.

"Ah, let's see. Firo Prochainezo. Age twenty-two. Single. Born in Hell's Kitchen. Born to an Italian immigrant father and an American mother, and, oh. Both parents deceased, of tuberculosis. My condolences. Mmm. Left Hell's Kitchen upon the death of his mother, wandering the streets of New York. An unspecified amount of time later, through unknown means, followed in his father's footsteps and entered a mafia organiza-

"It's not a mafia," Firo said. He hadn't even flinched at the mention of his parents' deaths, but now he looked up and fixed Bill with an icy glare.

"It's a camorra."

— —

Firo Prochainezo was not exactly what one would call an upstanding human being.

He was a gangster, a living symbol of what the 1930s would come to represent in American history.

But he wasn't a part of a mafia, not a member of the great criminal families of the Cosa Nostra that held the United States in their thrall. Instead, the organization he pledged his loyalty to was called a camorra.

Unlike the mafia, who hailed from the island of Sicily, the camorra came from the mainland, from the Italian city of Naples. Their hierarchies, methods, and even the businesses they employed to make money often varied quite markedly from those of the mafia, but in the United States—particularly among civilians, who had only the vaguest idea of the workings of the criminal underground—the two words were more or less treated as synonyms.

Firo Prochainezo was a capo, or officer, of one such camorra. It was called the Martillo Family, and it was a very small camorra. Indeed, Firo was a capo, but so were almost a dozen others; truth be told, a full quarter of the Martillo Family members shared Firo's title.

As the Family's youngest executive, Firo had been entrusted with a small underground casino, and he took his job seriously. He would not hesitate to give his life for the Family in case of an emergency, and likewise, he was fully prepared to take the lives of others if they proved themselves a threat to his brethren.

Even when Edward Noah had taken him in with the excuse of obtaining an eyewitness report, he'd taken care to keep from mentioning anything that might possibly reveal anything about the Martillos. He was probably had faith in his ability evade any questions about the Family or the small casino he ran.

Behind Firo's youthful teenager's face lurked a mobster, a man familiar with violence and the dark alleys of the city. That man now came to the fore, shedding his boy's guise to glare coldly at Bill Sullivan.

It was the face that Firo Prochainezo hid from the light of society.

— —

"Ah. Yes, of course. Camorra. My apologies. I got it wrong on purpose," Bill said, and smiled. Firo bared his teeth in an answering smile, and inside, he designated the man as an enemy.

"Just be careful not to get caught alone on our turf at night, pal."

"Duly noted." Bill seemed to take the warning at face value, and then continued as though nothing had happened. "Now, as you already know, we've called you here tonight to, hmm. Let's see. Oh, right. We wanted to ask a few questions about the *vandalism incident* that took place at the Mist Wall last year. Oh, and don't worry, we don't have a warrant for your arrest yet. Mr. Noah, please don't bait the young man, okay?"

Firo frowned and glanced surreptitiously at the two men Bill had called Donald and Alan, then looked again to the man standing before him.

This guy rubs me the wrong way.

Bill's last throwaway comment made no sense, unless one presumed that he'd been listening in on the conversation. The room was probably under surveillance.

"Bill, be serious." It was the stocky man Bill had called Donald.

Edward seemed to take Bill's jab in stride and merely shrugged, unconcerned, but the man wearing glasses chuckled and patted Firo lightly on the head.

"Don't let him get to you, kid. He likes to poke fun at youngsters like you."

"Hey! Hands to yourself," Firo snarled, shaking off the hand and turning to glare at its owner. "And don't call me kid."

The man was definitely not young, but on the other hand the words "middle-aged" seemed far too stodgy to describe him. He was a man who seemed full of energy, one who truly gave off the impression of being in the prime of his life.

He shrugged off Firo's deathly glare and took the seat across from him, and then deliberately leaned backwards, the chair creaking as it supported his weight on two legs.

The animosity in Firo's eyes turned to confusion as he tried to process the man's strange behavior.

Alan Becker, was it?

He seemed extremely self-assured, almost arrogant. Firo wondered who he was and why he was acting this way. Was Becker just lording his position of authority over him because he was a suspect? His brow furrowed with concentration as he tried to make sense of the situation, but then he took a sharp breath and looked at him anew.

What the hell?

For a moment it had felt like he knew the man sitting across from him.

But he knew for a fact that they'd never met before, not once in the twenty and some years since he'd been born. He knew that, and yet...

And yet, the face was in his memories.

Wait...

The man grinned, as though he could read Firo's mind and see the understanding slowly dawning within.

"You should be more careful, Firo Prochainezo," he said. He raised his right hand, opening and closing it before Firo's eyes. "Why, if I'd been feeling hungry... You would've been *lunch*."

Those words served as the final catalyst, and Firo finally remembered for certain who the man in front of him was.

His memories hadn't lied to him.

He'd never met the man lounging in the chair before him in his life.

But at the same time, he remembered him clearly.

To be accurate, the alchemist he'd devoured with his right hand, Szilard Quates, remembered him.

— —

Firo Prochainezo was not exactly what one would call an upstanding human being.

Actually, it would be more accurate to say that he might not be a human being at all.

Four years ago, he and his companions had gotten caught up in a struggle between alchemists, and had come out of the experience as immortals.

Unlike normal humans, any wound Firo received would heal instantly.

The passage of time had no effect on his appearance.

Regardless of his own intent, he was now fated to live forever.

He could not die, unless another immortal placed their right hand on his head and devoured him.

He could be stuffed inside a barrel and thrown into the sea, or chopped into pieces and mixed in with molten iron, and still he would live.

That was the kind of being Firo Prochainezo was. It was his third face that he hid from the light.

— —

"The demon's rules had a few loopholes, you see," the man who'd been called Alan said, shaking his head ruefully. "I can't give a false name, but someone else can certainly introduce me with one. Neat, isn't it?"

"Victor... Victor Talbot."

Firo sifted slowly through the memories of another man, trying to remember.

Victor Talbot was an alchemist. He'd been there along with Szilard Quates and many others when Maiza had summoned the demon and received the elixir of life.

It seemed, however, that he hadn't been all that friendly with Szilard or any of the alchemists Szilard had devoured, for their memories seemed to peter out after that point.

He couldn't blame them. He wouldn't want to be friends with an arrogant sleazeball, either.

The thought made Firo pale, as he realized just how close he'd come to death.

"Heh." Victor seemed to find it amusing, if anything, when Firo said his name. "So the information's true, huh?"

He stared straight into Firo's eyes, grinning fiercely, and said, "You really are the one who ate that fucking geezer."

Firo didn't reply, but in his head he sighed.

Dammit, he knows who I am. What kind of information is he talking about?

As though he'd read Firo's mind, Victor slapped the table with the palm of his hand and began to lay down his cards.

"You know that girl, right? Ennis, I think her name was? That girl the old man made."

Firo took a sharp breath despite himself as the name passed Victor's lips. His entire body tensed like a tightly coiled spring, the only outward sign of the turmoil that gripped him inside.

"...What about her?" he said, neutrally. He knew he couldn't afford to play Victor's games, but on the other hand it wasn't like he could just ignore the man after an obvious jab like that.

Ennis had once stood against him and Maiza as Szilard Quates' underling. Quates had held her very life in his hands, but with his passing that power had been passed on to Firo. Though of course, he couldn't very well do anything with it, since he'd fallen head over heels for her at first sight.

"Haha! Relax, buddy. I'm just saying, she was always at his side; we knew she literally couldn't live without him. But one day, the old man disappears and she turns up living with someone else. You. When I first heard about Szilard's death, I figured Maiza'd finally grown a pair and decided to get some revenge for, you know, the murder of his goddamn brother, but alas, I was gravely mistaken. So I did my homework and what do you know, your name came up."

Firo scoffed. "Musta been hard. I'm guessing you don't do that often."

Naked disdain suddenly made itself clear on Victor's face. "What was that, punk? Where the fuck do you get off, thinking you have the right to fucking talk back at me like that? Mafia,

camorra, I don't give a fuck. You're all a goddamn menace to the United States and that's all I care about."

Victor's rimless glasses gave him an intelligent air, but the way he spoke wouldn't have sounded altogether out of place in a back alley. He slapped both hands down on the table and leaned forward, glaring at Firo.

"Listen up and listen good, street trash. You think I'm being an asshole now, you're gonna be crying like a baby when I really get started on you. Let me tell you what kind of guy I am right now so that we don't have any complications down the road."

Victor smacked his palm with his fist and burst into a heated tirade.

"You know what I think about punks like you? About you gangsters strutting around in your fucking fedoras and fucking trench coats like fucking kings of the fucking world, like you honestly believe you're fucking, I dunno, kingpins of crime? I'll tell you right here and I'll tell you right now, I hate *gah-*" Victor stopped, coughed, gasped for breath, and continued without missing a beat. "Hate hate hate hate hate hate *hate* you all, got it? Some of you might be nicer than others, some of you might only steal from the rich and give to the poor like Robin Fucking Hood, and some of you might just be poor schmucks who got dealt a bad hand by fate and you're just trying to make a living the only way you know how, but you know what? *I don't fucking care.* I'll treat you all the same, because I hate *gah-*"

Firo stared at Victor as he hacked and gasped for breath, looking at him as though he'd grown a second head.

"Sheesh, don't rant 'till you run out of breath, dumbass. And twice? What are you, twelve?"

"Don't call me a dumbass, dumbass! And what does that make you, since a dumbass has you at his mercy?"

"You know I'm an immortal, right? Did you ever think I might've tried to put my right hand on your head while you left yourself wide open?" Firo asked. He'd calmed down enough to gather his wits once Victor started ranting, mentally reassessing the situation. He'd been caught off guard before, but now that he knew what Victor was, he felt that the playing field was more than even. He might even have a chance of bluffing his way out of the mess he'd found himself in.

There was about a yard between him and Victor. If he kicked up the table and darted in underneath it, he figured he had a pretty good chance of getting his right hand on Victor's head in the confusion, cuffs or no.

He would decide what to do depending on how Victor replied.

Victor, though, only snorted derisively, showing no surprise and no revealing openings.

"Are you fucking joking? Look, kid. I know you think you're a real hotshot, but are you seriously trying to go head to head with me as an immortal?"

"What?"

"How are you being any different right now from a goon who threatens a detective with 'I'll gouge out your eyeballs with my thumbs'? You honestly think that sort of small-time threat would work on a representative of the nation's judicial system?"

Damn. Looks like he's not totally an idiot.

It wasn't that Victor's retort had shut him up with sound logic. It was the fact that sometime during Victor's rant, the other agents in the room had surreptitiously moved into position around him.

What sort of signal Victor had given them, Firo didn't know. But while Victor had held his attention, Donald Brown and Edward Noah had stepped to the sides of the table and now stood flanking it, while Bill Sullivan had leisurely wandered behind Firo and now stood smoking a cigarette behind his back. Victor himself had shifted his center of gravity so that he sat poised to spring to his feet at a moment's notice, his right hand straying close to his waist.

"Are you serious? If I make a move for you right now, they'll end up shooting you too," Firo said, but Victor just sneered back at him.

"That's the plan, idiot. It'll hurt like a bitch, but I can just take it out on your hide once I saw off your arms and legs and lock them in a safe so they can't get back to you, and then we'll see who's the sorry one."

"...Point."

"It's not like immortality actually gives that many advantages. Might as well make the best of 'em," Victor sneered, and Firo decided then and there that the time for words was over.

It was time to show them what he could do.

Thought became action, and in one fluid motion he gripped the table in his cuffed hands and surged to his feet, the muscles in his legs and arms working together to send the table flying. All four legs left the ground as it rose into the air.

The fact that it was made of wood didn't mean that the table was light, and the act of lifting it perfectly counterbalanced the force with which Firo had sprung to his feet, keeping him from lifting off, himself. The table was still in the air when he crouched, looking under the airborne appliance and toward his target.

Who wasn't there.

The only sight that greeted his eyes was the chair and the wall behind it. Victor was nowhere to be seen.

Where the hell is he?!

He couldn't do more than glance wildly around once before the table came back down upright, having done a full flip in midair to land squarely on its four legs once more.

A distinct *click* reached his ears.

A black hole yawned wide before his eyes. It was the muzzle of a gun.

"Sit back down, why don't you."

Firo slowly looked up from the muzzle and saw Victor squatting on the table, staring back at him down the length of the barrel.

The fed smirked and said, "Yeah, you're just like our info said. You're impatient, impulsive, and confident to the point of folly in your ability to just fight your way out of most sticky situations."

"...Is this what they teach you in the Bureau, or did you go out and find a circus to teach you those acrobatics?"

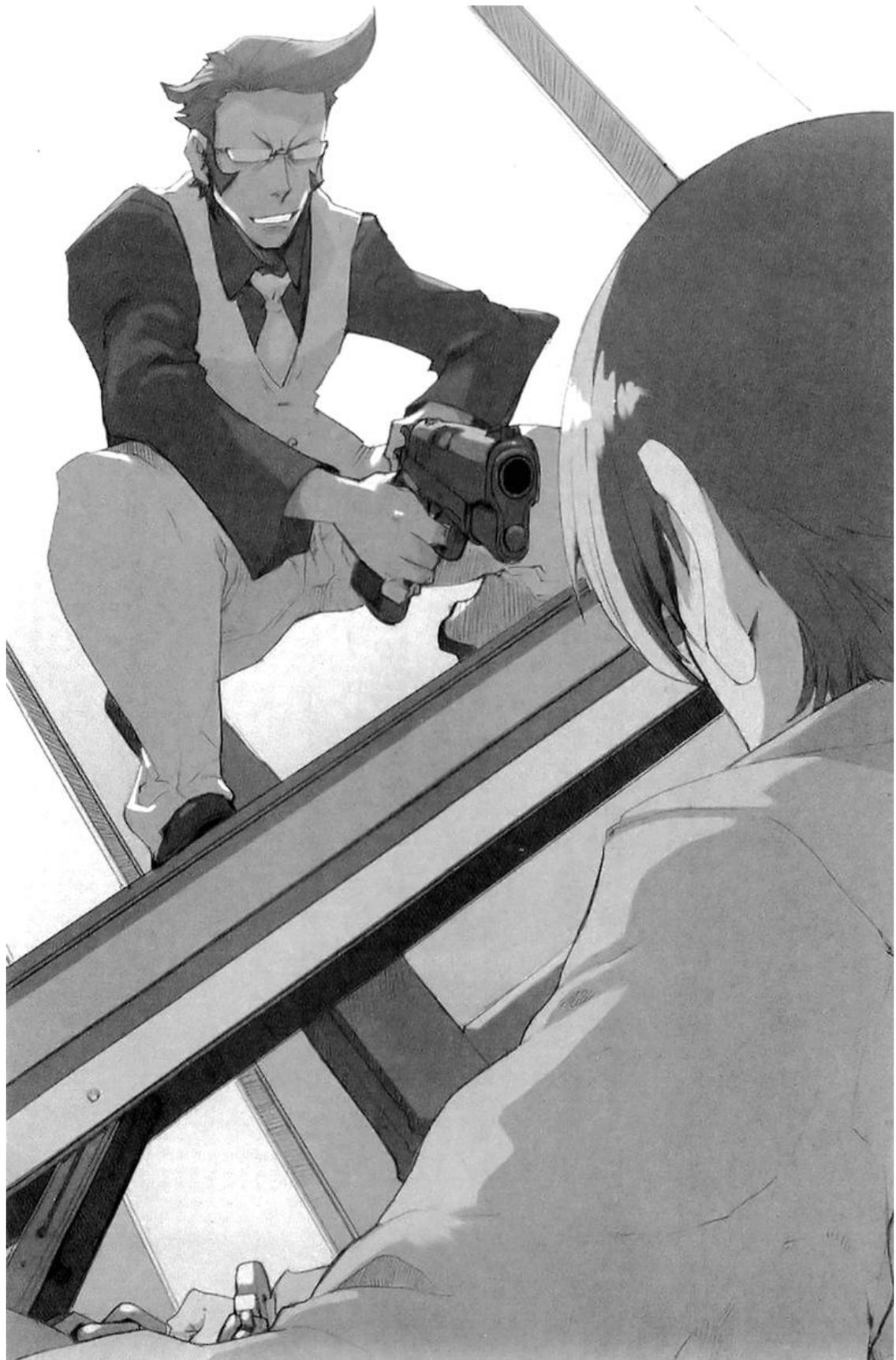
"Hah! That was the bare minimum of what we learn to chase and arrest nefarious enemies of the state like you. Any detective who's gone through basic training could do what I just did without even breaking a sweat, as graceful and beautiful as a swan in flight!" Victor cried, puffing out his chest proudly.

His underlings, however, didn't appear to share the sentiment.

"Err. I'm sorry, sir, but I don't think anyone in our department can do what you just did."

"We'd never get any new people in the department with minimum requirements like that."

"Sir, please come down from the table. You're going to get it dirty."



"...Fine, dammit. I've got half a mind to fire you all for failing to support an agent in need," Victor muttered, and holstered his gun, clambering down to the floor. "And if you must know, well, I meant to jump up all along, but the landing on the table thing was luck."

"...I see."

An odd and awkward silence fell over the room.

At length Firo sighed and opened his mouth. "Alright. Whatever. We both know that the 'vandalism' at the Mist Wall or whatever is bullshit, so let's get down to business. What is it you want me to do?"

Certain events that had taken place last year had led Firo to a skyscraper called the Mist Wall, and eventually he'd gotten involved in a grand ruckus that had ended with most of the top floor getting blown to smithereens.

It was a long story with many parts that came together as one whole, the machinations of multiple organizations, people, and immortals coming to a head in one complicated and dizzying whirl of action and violence. It had been a grand but secluded event, one that had revealed many truths and hidden away twice that number.

Ennis and Firo had gotten dragged into it mostly on the whim of a man known as Christopher. They knew, of course, who had actually been behind the bombing as well, but strangely the police hadn't seemed to consider it a pressing problem at all. In fact, they'd seemed mostly content to leave him alone, and pretend the explosion had never happened.

When Firo mentioned offhand how strange it was, Maiza had just shaken his head and said, "I've heard a senator who's working with Nebula did some work behind the scenes and made sure it got covered up."

And so a year had passed without incident, and just when Firo had been least expecting it, the police had shown up on his doorstep.

Dammit, I should've made the first move instead of letting them come to me.

He berated himself for his foolishness, and Victor grinned as though to agree with Firo's self-assessment.

"Oh, we don't want anything, really," Victor said, making a show of looking innocent. "I just thought I'd offer you a vacation."

"A vacation?"

"Yup. I'm talking about a resort on the west coast, near the glorious city of San Francisco. It's a relaxing island getaway, nothing there but the sky and the waves. Tempting, isn't it? Who knows, you might even meet one of the movers and shakers of your world there, and you'll be able to enjoy as much peace and quiet as you want, because nobody there's allowed to talk."

A bad feeling started to creep up on Firo.

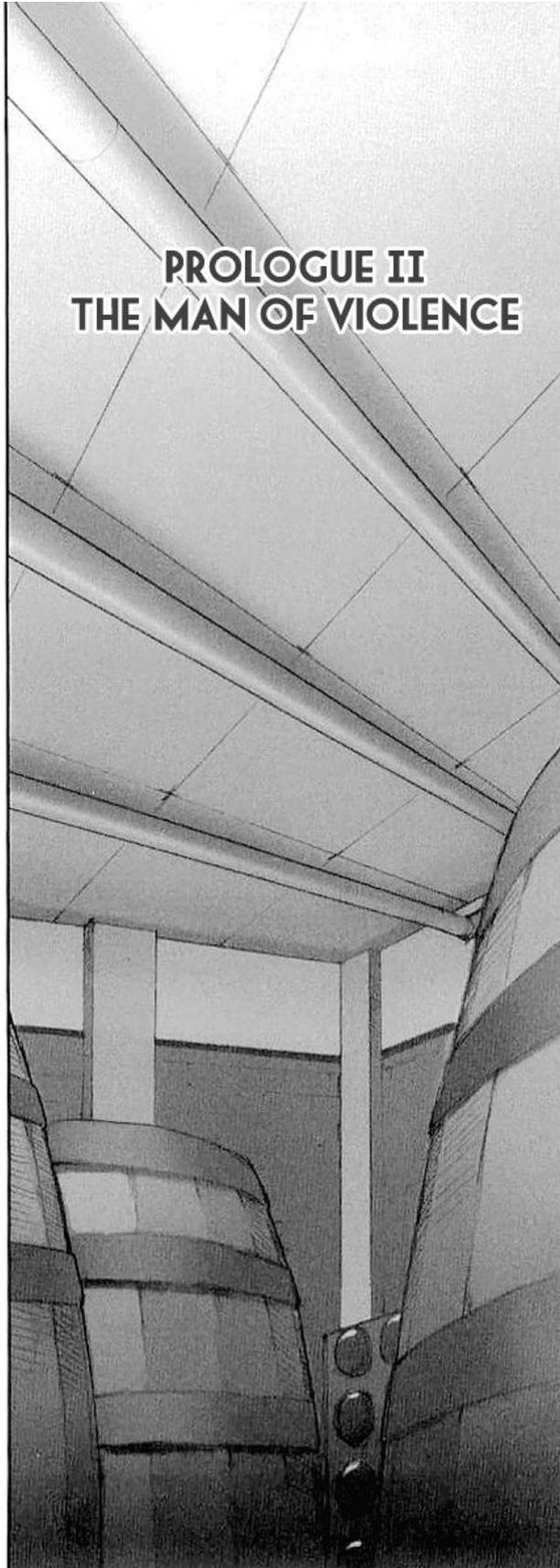
The words Victor had deliberately chosen had special meaning to Firo, a member of the criminal underground. Double so considering they'd come from the mouth of a federal agent. And the last part had been too blatant to be ignored, even if Firo had wanted to.

The pieces of the puzzle came together in his mind, leading him inevitably to one location.

And as though to confirm the feeling of foreboding that had overtaken him, Victor smiled brightly and uttered the four words that sealed Firo's fate.

"Ever heard of Alcatraz?"

**PROLOGUE II
THE MAN OF VIOLENCE**



A Bar's Underground Suite

You wanna know about a prisoner who moved from the joint I worked at to Alcatraz?

Aha, I see. Yeah, I guess you wouldn't want to talk about something like this in public.

...But I have to warn you, I wasn't anything special, just a normal run-of-the-mill prison guard. You can't expect me to remember all the schmucks we watched over. We used to call them by numbers, you know, not names. But... I guess if it was someone who was bad enough to take a trip to the Rock, I might be able to remember...

What? 302010?

Oh.

Heh. Haha...

Ooooooh!

That bastard, you mean! Yeah, of course I remember him. His number was easy to memorize, and besides. Between you and me, I don't think I could forget him if I tried.

Yeah, I know his name. It bothered me, see.

It was Ladd... Ladd Russo, I think.

They say he's Placido Russo's nephew. Yeah, him, the don of the Russo Family over in Chicago.

I think he was brought in for murder, or robbery... I dunno, something like that, but honestly it doesn't matter to us. To us guards, prisoners are just a string of numbers. Don't matter if you were a mass murderer or a petty thief or some king of the underworld outside. Inside, you're just a number... Well, that's how it's supposed to be, anyway.

How was it really? I dunno. That's different from prison to prison, and it's something I'm none too eager to stick my nose into. See no evil, hear no evil, right?

But you don't really care about that, do you?

You called me here to hear about 302010... about Russo, right?

Aah, you're thinking to yourself that I'm too bright an' perky for my own good, aren't you?

Back when I was still a guard, I tried to be the kinda guy who's silent and efficient. The menacing, grim kind, you know? Buh-but, I'm so different from what I was like then especially because we're talking about him right now, got it? Yeah?

When, when he first came to jail, I gave him a rough checkup. Yeah. It's meant to drive it home that they're criminals, that they're not anything special anymore. To teach 'em that from that moment on they need to beg forgiveness for the crimes they've committed against society.

Uh, no, the other guards don't go that far. Though it is important to make sure the prisoners know their place.

I kinda strutted around a little more than the others. Just a little.

You understand, don'tcha? I just thought it was pretty neat that no matter how bad you were on the outside, once you stepped past those gates, I was the boss. A guy can be forgiven for showing off a little, right. It's not like the prisoners could say anything about it.

Anyway, so, yeah.

I told you before, but I'll say it again. The reason I'm being so breezy right now is to try and get as far away from the me of back then as I can.

You don't understand?

...No, well, yeah. I'll tell you later. Later.

So yeah, about Russo.

He was unusual in a lot of ways.

The look on his face when he stepped through the door right then made you think he was walking into a hotel.

I thought for sure that he was some sorta big cheese who'd slipped some money to a lawyer and thought he'd be in and out in a flash, or maybe he'd got into some trouble with another family and he'd gotten jailed on purpose to hide from them.

Well, yeah, I guess you could hide in jail for a while. Though if you pissed off someone powerful enough, I think he'd just send an assassin in to slit your throat while you slept or something. Ain't like we have any way of telling that sort of thing, y'know.

But anyway. I asked the other guards and it turns out, he ain't like that. He just felt suspicious, you know? Not the guy himself, but all the details on him just didn't match up somehow. They said he started something on some train... but in the end, they covered it up so that nobody even knew it'd ever happened.

Nah, I dunno either. I'm telling you, I don't know a thing about what brought him to us. If I had to guess I'd say there was even someone high up in the government try to hide everything about what happened on that train from the rest of the country, including Russo. But I never thought to look into it deeper, and he didn't exactly come up to us and offer to tell us his story.

Yeah, he was a quiet one.

I mean, he looked lively enough, but he didn't talk much. We let him make calls outside from time to time, and even then he didn't really say much that could be a problem.

He did what we told him to do. I guess you could've called him a model prisoner.

He had bandages wrapped all over one arm, like he'd gotten hurt bad... Well, it was actually a prosthetic. We checked it carefully, to make sure he didn't have some sorta escape tool in it or something, but there wasn't much to it. The joints didn't move. It was a pretty simple thing. The only thing about it that was strange was that it was connected directly to his upper arm, to his bones or something... Nah, that's the first I've heard of something like that, too, but from what I hear they just riveted the damn thing straight onto the exposed bones. One of the guys who gave him a medical checkup said it gave him the willies.

I thought maybe it'd get infected and he'd die, but somehow he managed to stay healthy.

He didn't make any trouble, just spent the days as a prisoner. Actually, he even volunteered for prison labor. Yeah, a real model inmate. I know he didn't start anything because we kept close watch over him, just to make sure he didn't use a screw from his fake arm to pick a lock or something.

But he really didn't do anything to stand out, and time passed.

...Until then.

It was just a few months ago when he changed... no, I guess it'd be better to say that he showed his true colors.

It was right around when Alcatraz was changed from a military prison to a normal one.

I think you know about it, so well, yeah. Not much to say, is there?

It ain't a normal jail.

Nobody ever goes to the Rock straight from the street.

That place is a jail for people already in jail.

An island escape on the west coast, specially set aside for the worst inmates of every other prison in the nation.

Anyway, the worst of the worst at the joint I was working at then was... yeah, this guy called Gustavo. Gustavo Bagetta. He was the most dangerous guy in there, no question.

You know the Runorata Family, right? They're one of the bigger organizations around these parts.

Bagetta was one of the higher-ups there... but he musta caused some trouble and got himself arrested.

He had this huge scar around his neck, big enough that you'd think it shoulda killed him, but just like Russo, it seemed a wound like that didn't bother him one bit.

And he was a troublemaker, too. If the guards even tried to rough him up a little he'd snap his goddamn cuffs in two and calmly say, "Oops, they just came apart. Could've hurt somebody. Gimme a new pair, why don'tcha."

And then the big goon would just smile at them.

Of course he stirred up trouble in there a buncha times, and I can't tell you how much of a headache it was cleaning up after him every time.

Tell you the truth, there wasn't an inmate in the place who could beat him in a fight, and they were all so scared of him they couldn't tell the guards about the shit he pulled. I guess he was sorta like a king behind those bars...

Until one day.

Bagetta started a ruckus in the mess hall. Said the guy sitting in front of him had laughed at 'im or something. Started a fight over that.

We took our clubs and surrounded him and he calmed down. Not that he was scared of us, but there were warders stationed at the firing windows behind him with their sights on his back, so of course he'd simmer down.

I decided I'd say something.

I know I was being an asshole, but what the hell. Ain't like they pay us to be nice, right? So yeah, anyway, uhh, I kinda swaggered up and talked down to all of 'em, feeling pretty good inside.

"You want to take a trip to Alcatraz? Any of you guys wants to run wild on an island with no books, no newspapers, then be my guest. Keep on exercising all you want, and I'll personally see to it you're sent on a one-way trip straight to Frisco."

Yeah, like that.

Anyway, I'm betting Bagetta knew the rumors about that place. Some of the others who'd been watching did too, I think, 'cause they shut right the hell up and went pale as sheets.

Yeah, up till then I was walking on clouds.

It was great. I almost felt like the world was my oyster.

And then it happened.

"Alcatraz...?"

A man started walking toward me.

Yeah. It was Russo.

"What would you have to do to get carted off there?"

I was actually a little surprised. I didn't even think a model prisoner who always kept his mouth shut'd suddenly decide to chat it up with a guard who had his club out.

See, usually we tried to keep talk between guards and inmates to a minimum. Some prisons banned conversation outright. But I gave him a reply. Russo looked like he didn't know what Alcatraz was, and I thought it'd be a great chance to scare some of the dumber inmates who didn't know either.

So I told him. About what a scary place Alcatraz was. I exaggerated a little.

I'm telling ya, I was still feeling good then, watching how he shut up...

"So anyway, we're thinking of sending the worst inmate over there. It's nothing that cowards like you need to worry about—just keep your heads down and stay model inmates, got it?"

That's what I told him.

And then...

And then, well... umm... what happened was...

He grinned.

It was a real ear to ear thing. Like this, like he couldn't keep the excitement inside him...

The hell is this guy? I thought. The moment I laid eyes on that smile, I got a real bad feeling.

He wasn't even looking at me anymore. He turned around without a word and went back to his seat, finishing up his food like Bagetta'd never started that trouble.

I tell you, right then, I felt something... a real bad feeling, in my heart. Really, it was like... I can't even describe it. It was just a bad feeling inside me. Like that feeling you get when you're standing on a really high bridge and suddenly think, "Shit, what'd happen to me if this bridge suddenly disappeared?" The way your whole body kinda shrivels up on itself.

But I wasn't on a bridge, not standing on a roof. Just inside a prison. He was an inmate. I was a guard. I shouldn't have felt scared like that, but...

No doubt about it, I felt terrified, seeing his smile.

It was that night when the terror I'd felt turned into reality.

I heard there was another big fight in the mess hall, so I grabbed my club and ran over.

Whaddya think I saw?

...He was just sitting there.

...Eating his food.

Russo was sitting there quietly, eating his food. It was mealtime.

I thought I'd go crazy right then and there, I was so scared.

What was so scary?

Well, you see... what I'm trying to say is...

He was eating his food.

Russo was eating, alone, surrounded by dozens of inmates, *all of them laid out and moaning in pain!*

The hallway connecting the mess hall to the cell block was filled with the inmates who'd known to get out of the way, all trembling with fear.

The guys who'd been standing guard were all frozen where they stood, just staring at Russo like they'd seen something outta this world.

"Hey! What the hell happened here...?!" I shouted to the other guards.

You can laugh at me if you want, but I didn't wanna talk to Russo himself. It was too scary... The sight of that guy just sitting there eating in a situation like that gave me the creeps.

There were already guards who'd come after hearing about the fight like me, standing at the firing windows with rifles ready... but they were just looking at each other. Can't blame 'em. I mean, who were they gonna shoot?

Usually, when there's a big prison fight, the guys who win beat it to their cells and try to come up with an alibi or something. Say that that was how it went down, and Russo just came in after the fight was over and decided to start eating, 'cause he was slow in the head, 'cause he didn't get what'd happened... Yeah, wouldn't it be great if that was the case?

But think of it. To beat up dozens of inmates like that, you'd need more'n one or two on your side, too. And it didn't look like they'd all beat the shit outta each other and everyone knocked everyone else out at the same time or something...

Yeah, I know. I know whatcha want to say.

I thought the same thing the moment I saw it too, see.

I thought, for just a moment, that Russo, the guy who was sitting and eating his food just as calm as you please, had clobbered all the rough-looking guys scattered around him.

I told myself there was no way that could've happened, over and over, but the scene before my eyes just didn't change. No, not just the sight in front of me. That smile he'd shown me earlier that day made that impossible conclusion float up in my head. I couldn't help but imagine that smile on his face as he beat up everyone else by himself.

And then... something happened that only served to support that crazy thought.

Suddenly, a huge shadow burst up from among the fallen prisoners.

"Rraaaaaaaaaaagh! You fuckin' brat!!"

Didn't even need to look at 'im. Wasn't an inmate in the place big as that, except for Gustavo Bagetta.

He was huge, but still fast, and strong as an ox too.

Seeing him running at Russo, I couldn't imagine a scarier sight. A charging bear would've been cuddlier than Bagetta right then.

He lifted a nearby table with one hand as he ran.

Can you believe it!

A table, I'm tellin' ya! A goddamn *table!*

You call a guy who can swing around a chair one-handed strong. But what the hell do you call a guy who can do the same with a table? The bastard just grabbed a long table made for seating four, and waved it around like a stick!

"Imonasmashaaaaaa!"

I could hardly make out what he was yellin', but he lifted that table and then swung it down straight at Russo, just as he finished the last of his soup.

Then Russo's head would crack open like an egg and that'd be it for him. All that'd be left was for the guards at the windows to shout a warning, and once Bagetta stood down we'd beat him up with our clubs. If he resisted we'd give him a few more breathing holes and that'd be that.

...That's what I should've been thinking, but try as I might I couldn't even start to imagine it.

Besides, that isn't what happened, anyway.

I heard this splintering noise. The table in Bagetta's hand snapped in half, like a pencil. Clean in two in the blink of an eye as it hit the floor.

But Russo wasn't there anymore.

He'd darted in... between Bagetta's body and the table. Getting hit by that table would've been deadlier than taking a bullet, but he just smiled that smile he'd shown me earlier that day and dodged it like it was child's play.

And then, he... he grinned.

What? Wasn't he grinning before? Well, yeah, but...

What I mean is... his grin started getting wider.

Bagetta stopped dead, surprised at seeing Russo suddenly appear right in front of him.

It was a golden opportunity for Russo to put him down, but he didn't take it.

He just shrugged, palms up, and looked over to us.

"This counts as self-defense, right?"

After that... well, tell you the truth, it was over in an instant.

Bagetta must've taken it as a personal insult. He raised his other hand—I can still remember the veins pulsing clearly on the back—and at that moment, Russo's fist found its way to his solar plexus.

And just like that, he *belted* Bagetta.

Bagetta must've weighed at least twice what he did, but Russo punched him square in the stomach and, just like that, he sent him flying.

I'm not exaggerating. Bagetta actually flew.

He went shooting a few yards through the air and came crashing down, and then he threw up a ton of blood and stayed still where he was.

I'm telling you, he didn't move.

That guy was built like a bear, and Russo knocked him down and out with just one hit. Just one punch.

At first I thought for sure Russo'd used his metal arm. Then we could take it away from him and the world'd make sense again.

But... but, goddammit.

He hit Bagetta with his right hand. The normal one, not his prosthetic... Now that I think of it, there's no way he'd be able to hit someone like that with a fake arm. He would've dislocated his shoulder.

Yeah, so then what happened was...

He walked slowly up to me, as I stood there dumbfounded, and said, "Life is long."

He said it like I was a friend he'd known for years!

According to the rules, I should've raised my club and shouted at him not to move. If I had a gun I might've drawn it. Yeah, I know, even though all he'd done was walk up to me.

"Life's a long thing! You think so too, don'tcha?"

I couldn't understand a word of what he was saying—no, shouting, in a voice that echoed in the hall.

I wondered what he was trying to say. I wasn't curious, though. I was scared out of my wits, and it scared me even more because Russo wasn't acting like I expected. If I had to describe it, it was like a primal instinct inside me was warning me to be afraid of this man.

Run away, it told me. Run away run away run run run run run run run run.

"I've seen a lot of guards around here, and I've got to say. Out of all the guards in this prison, you're the one farthest away from death. Wouldn't you agree?"

He talked slowly, his words creeping over me.

Every time that voice made my eardrums vibrate, the warning alarm inside me rang right along with it.

It kept telling me to run run run run run run away! Run away, or you're gonna die!

The guards around me looked like they were waiting for my signal. Dammit, like I'd have the composure to do that! *You chumps with the rifles, shoot already!* That's what I was thinking right then, but I know that all he'd done was walk to me. If they shot him there'd have been news articles all over the place about human rights or something.

...But y'know, even now, after all this time... I think that it still woulda been better if someone had just shot him dead right then and there.

...Shit, take that part just now out of the recording.

Mmm, where was I... Oh yeah. So he walked up to me and started analyzing me aloud.

"No, don't think I mean you're destined to live the longest or anything... What I'm talking about is your state of mind. It's like the thought of dying is really far away from your brain... You think you rule this place, don't you? You think you hold the lives of the prisoners in your hands, never thinking that the same might apply the other way. You think you're safe. You think you won't die. The other guards look like they're constantly on edge. Like they know they might die at any time if the prisoners start a riot or something. But you. You walk around this place like you own it. You deserve a commendation!"

He didn't hate me. He wasn't angry with me, but... dammit, he wanted to kill me.

I felt it in my bones, that murderous feeling.

"You know what my hobby is? It's waking up people like you."

I'm gonna die. He's gonna kill me. My head was filled with those thoughts, but I couldn't do a thing, not a single thing! I was so scared! I couldn't... couldn't move! My legs wouldn't listen!

As I stood there, unable to move a muscle, he smiled again.

He, he leaned close and whispered in my ear, all friendly!

"It's teaching people like you... that death is a lot closer than you think..."

...Ah, sorry. I lost it for a bit there.

I still can't stop trembling, whenever I think of it.

If you just hear about it, it sounds like a stupid threat from some goon, nothing to be worried about. Normally I would've dismissed it without a second thought. But coming from his mouth it was... well. It felt real. Yeah, that's it, it felt real.

It was like he wasn't saying it to scare me. He was just saying what he honestly thought was true. Like a kid would.

Huh? So what happened?

Of course he went to solitary. Solitary punishment, that is, stuck in an empty room with nothing behind the door except a toilet. No blanket, of course. Compared to other jails, our solitary was on the comfortable side—it even had electric lights. But that didn't mean it was a hotel suite or anything. A week in there'd have you climbing up the walls.

Ladd Russo spent ten days there.

But I quit my job before he got out.

Almost like I was running away from him. It usually ain't so easy to quit being a prison guard, but I told 'em I'd been sick for a while and argued my way out.

I wanted to get the hell outta dodge before Russo got out no matter what it took, see.

Him? I hear he ended up getting shipped off to Alcatraz, just like he wanted.

You know about Al Capone? Yeah. Russo entered Alcatraz almost together with him, so I guess you could say he's an old-timer there... though it's only been a few months, even then.

I don't know how much time he's got left in there. If he doesn't get any murder charges added onto his sentence, he might be out on the streets in just a year or two!

So that's, that's, why.

That's why I'm so scared.

Hey, do, do I, do I look a little s-s-scared?

D-do I look like I, I'm scared of dying?

I-it, it, it feels like he, him, that guy, Russo, he's c-c-c-coming, coming for me...

Look, answer me!

I'm-I'm scared, ain't I!

I mean, who knows? I might die tomorrow! Isn't that scary? No, wait, I might die right this moment. I look like I'm scared I might die right now, right?!

If I don't think like that then he he'll come he'll come for me he'll appear in my goddamn dreams with that goddamn smile and he's gonna smash my right eye! My left eye, too, dammit! My legs! Arms! Body! My head! Even when there's nothing left anymore he won't be satisfied he'll crush something! Something that don't even have a form anymore though my body don't even exist anymore he'll smash it and smash it and smash it and what the hell is he hitting anyway! Please forgive me I'm scared I'm scared I tell you I'm gonna die I'm scared I'm scared I'm scared an' no matter how much I scream and scream and screamscreamscreamhiseyeshisvoicewontleavemyhead-

Aaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaah!

...Yeah. I've calmed down. Sorry about that. I'm okay.

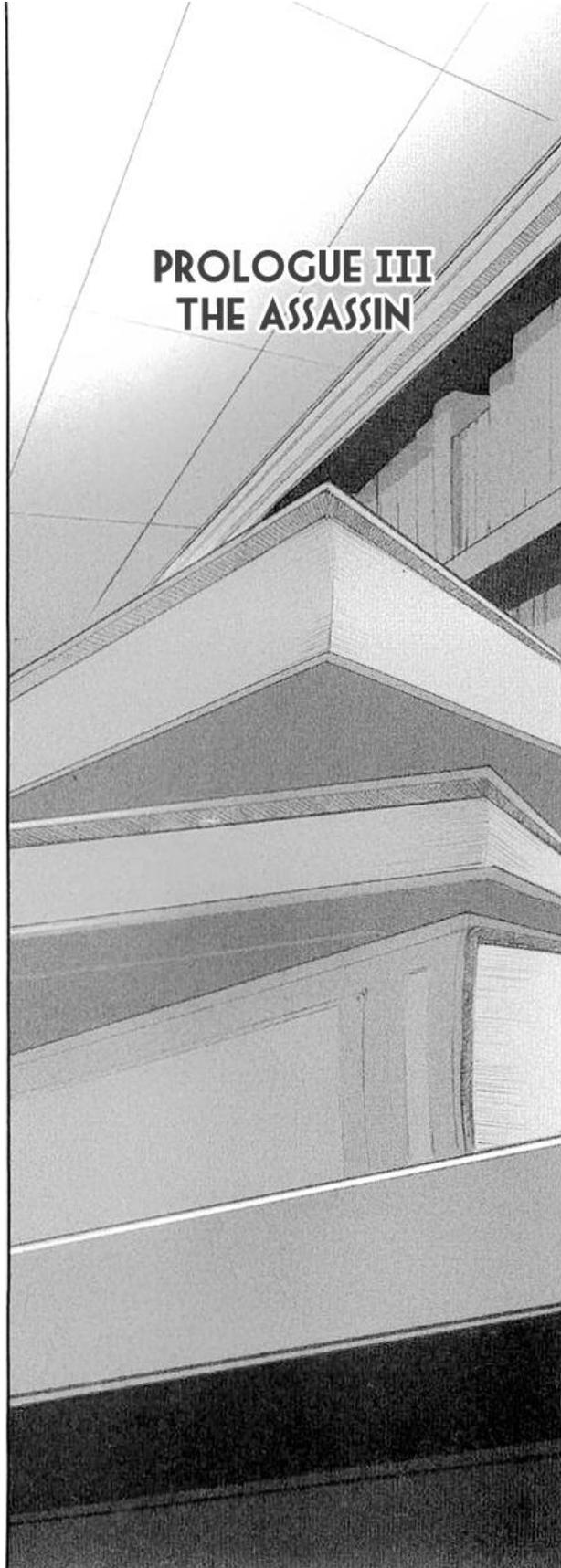
Booze. Gimme some booze.

What? Come on. Read my lips. I need booze. Alcohol. Liquor. Booze, booze, booze booze
booze... booze... what? Too much drinking is bad for me? You goddamn idiot, there's no way
drinking could ki-

...No, you're right, it could kill me. No, I mean, I'm sure it'll kill me.

Yeah. Death is terrifying. I'm scared of dying, I'm so fucking scared... I'm fucking terrified. Aren't
you? You are, right? Right?

PROLOGUE III
THE ASSASSIN



Chicago
Nebula Corporation Headquarters
Underground

It was a strange room.

No, to call it a mere room would be doing it a disservice. It was a facility.

Countless documents and books lined one of the walls, and several untidy piles of the same littered the wooden work desks as well. Even the floor had been decorated with books loose sheets of paper.

A microscope peeked out from under a small mountain of paper; a closer look would reveal that many other peculiar instruments lay scattered about, giving the room the appearance of a laboratory and a reference library that had been violently smashed together.

If the room had been deserted, it could easily have been mistaken for an abandoned facility, but that was not the case. Several men and women in white coats ran busily to and fro, frantically jotting down notes on any sheet of paper that came to hand, answering phone calls, and altogether giving off the impression of getting great amounts of work done while not actually doing that much at all.

"Umm... Oh, no. What do I do? What do I do?" one of the scientists said to herself, raising one hand to adjust her glasses as she shuffled around. She was so preoccupied with whatever had her attention that she didn't notice the book at her feet and stepped awkwardly on it, and with a great crash she tripped and fell to the floor in an inelegant heap.

"Eep."

A small cloud of scattered papers rose into the air. The woman's coworkers looked at her incredulously.

The farcical atmosphere would have easily led one to believe that the lab was located in some college or university, not deep within the headquarters of one of the most powerful companies on the planet.

But that sophomoric air only extended halfway across the room, up to the thin cubicle wall that cut off the rest of the room from view.

A young man dressed in a business suit sat there, his hands folded neatly on the desk.

He looked to where the curtains had been drawn—more accurately to the shadows there. The silhouette of a man stood there, stiff and silent, as though to trying to erase his very presence

and become one with the darkness. The man in the business suit, however, didn't much seem to care.

"Do you really need to hide your face here?" he asked, sighing. "I understand you have a reputation to keep, but honestly, it's sort of awkward talking to a shadow."

The silhouette did not reply, and it did not move.

The man sighed again, shrugged as though to say, "Fine, have it your way," and moved on to the order at hand.

"Well, whatever. Our job for you this time is very important, and it's also pretty much impossible. Well, normally it would be, that is. Of course, that's why we called you."

The silhouette kept its silence, ignoring the man's attempt at initiating a conversation, but seemed to take it in stride and continued for his mute audience.

"The target's name is..."

Silence.

"...Huey Laforet."

If the shadowy figure recognized the name, it didn't show it.

"He's currently staying at Alcatraz—you've heard of the place, I'm sure. And not just in any cell, either. He's getting the VIP treatment, I suppose you could say. And, well... Alright. I'll be honest with you. He can't die."

For the first time, the silent silhouette showed emotion. It frowned, and a shadow passed over its face.

Now it was the man's turn to ignore the shadow, and he continued talking calmly, without regard for its confusion.

"...I'm not joking, I assure you. You've been working with us for quite some time now, so I trust you understand what I mean when I tell you that Laforet can't be killed. You have seen some of our experiments, right?"

Now the faceless figure's silence seemed somehow curious, as though he wanted the man to continue.

"Of course you have. But I must warn you. Laforet is a bit different from our specimens. He's been alive for over two centuries... In other words, he's a true immortal. His intentions are

inscrutable, and he has countless underlings, many of whom he has brought up himself from childhood. He orders them around even now, from safe inside his cell."

Again, expectant silence.

"Well. Hmm. We have our reasons for asking you to go after an immortal target. Oh, no. Don't get me wrong. We're not asking you to kill him, of course. Heavens, no." The man paused. "At least, not this time. What-"

"Excuse me, I hope I'm not interrupting," a woman's voice said, just as the man prepared to move onto the real reason for the meeting. "I made some tea for the gues- *Owww!*"

The voice's owner was a woman in a white lab coat, the one who'd tripped on a book earlier. She yelped as she struck her little finger against the edge of the cubicle wall and reeled backward, throwing up her arms and sending black tea and tableware flying everywhere.

"Ack?!"

Both the man in the business suit and the dark silhouette noticed the accident at the same time, but they reacted in distinctly different ways. The man yelped and shrunk away, still seated, and took a flying tea tray to the temple for his efforts, while the shadow silently slipped to the side, away from the spray of boiling hot tea.

"Agh! Oww! Jesus!"

"Eek! I'm so so sorry! Are you alright?" the woman cried, tears welling up in her eyes as she apologized frantically.

The woman wore a pair of black rimmed glasses, her pretty face twisted with a combination of exhaustion and guilt. Her bangs were scattered haphazardly over her forehead, while the rest of her long hair had been pulled back from her face. In contrast to her rather disheveled looks, the body hidden behind her lab coat was so voluptuous that in another time, another place, she wouldn't have looked altogether out of place in the pages of Playboy magazine.

Even her loose lab coat proved unable to hide her curves as she stooped to pick up the fallen tableware, and the way her cleavage came enticingly into view would have been more than enough to catch the eye of any red-blooded male. The young man in the business suit, however, merely glared at her and shifted in his seat, coughing ostentatiously as though to pretend that the accident hadn't happened.

"...She'll fill you on the rest."

"Hmm? Fill who in on what?" the woman asked, looking up curiously.



The man sighed and slapped a hand to his forehead. "Fill *him* in on the job that *you* request *this very morning*, Director Brinvilliers!"

The woman clapped her hands together, scattered cups forgotten as her *subordinate's* exasperated complaint jogged her memory.

Renée Palamedes Brinvilliers turned to the shadowy figure standing in the corner of *her* office, blinked rapidly as though seeing it for the first time, and said, "Oh! Oh my! It's been so long since last we met, hasn't it? You really should've told me you were coming. I would have prepared some better snacks for you."

She sounded more like a lackadaisy housewife than a scientist, and apparently her absentminded musing was the last straw for her harried underling. All pretense of composure left him and a vein began pulsing where the flying tea tray had struck his temple as he threw up his hands in exasperation.

"...You told me to call him this morning, Director! This! Morning!"

"Eep. I'm sorry! I just didn't think he'd come so quite so quickly..." she admitted, looking quite apologetic. The man only let slip a sigh that sounded more like a sob and cradled his head in his hands, while the shadow merely kept its silence as always.

Hesitantly confirming that no more yells were coming her way, Renée turned to her lackey. "Mmm... How much did you tell him, anyway?"

"Just that we wanted him to go to Alcatraz and go after Huey Laforet," the man muttered gruffly. Renée didn't seem to notice his surly tone, and instead clapped her hands together once more as she turned to the shadow.

"Oh, of course! Mmm... What I'd like to ask for you to do is to go and meet Mr. Laforet," she said brightly, just as chipper as when she'd been offering the figure snacks.

"And then I'd be ever so grateful if you'd gouge out one of his eyeballs and bring it back to me!"

— —

"Bye, *Mr. Walken*! Good luck!" Renée said cheerily, waving to the figure as it walked away.

Her underling in the business suit sighed. "Don't call out his name like that, Director!"

"Eep! I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!" Renée squeaked, clapping both hands over her mouth.

The shadow finally broke its long silence and sighed once.

"I've told you time and time again, Ms. Brinvilliers. I gave that name to someone else a long time ago," it said over its shoulder, its measured pace not slowing in the least as it walked away.

"Oh! Right! Silly me! I'm sorry, Mr. Assassin!"

"Don't call out his occupation like that, Director!"

"Eep! I-I'm sorry!"

It was the ninth job the shadow had taken from the scientist and her department, but despite its frequent visits, it had never once asked just what went on in that strange, haphazard mishmash of laboratory and library.

Nebula was a huge conglomerate with a hand in many different businesses—one of the United States' largest, in fact—and any normal person would most surely be curious as to what went on in Renée's section upon stepping inside. Perhaps they would even wonder why it had its own separate area, completely isolated from the rest of the building, but the silhouette had never asked a single question regarding that, either.

Today was no exception, and the shadow let the sound of squabbling scientists wash over it and fade away as it walked, silently judging its client.

Renée Brinvilliers was not a consciously evil being.

The silhouette that had once gone by Felix Walken judged that she had no idea that the acts she performed were evil, but from an objective standpoint they could be nothing else.

Granted, not many people did evil while being fully aware of and accepting their heinous acts, but even taking that into consideration, she was special. Unique.

The shadow decided that she was a completely *innocent* woman.

That she meant no harm, but all the same she cast people down into the depths of Hell without a second thought.

The shadow had, once, walked in on her as she performed an experiment on a human being.

It had asked her where she'd kidnapped the girl from, and Renée had replied without hesitation.

"What do you mean? I didn't kidnap her!"

Renée had smiled, deftly plunging a needle full of some unknown liquid into the half-conscious girl's veins.

"I paid exactly what they asked for her," she'd said, and her smile had not lessened in the slightest.

The scientist—the *researcher*—did not doubt. She did not falter. She asked no questions. All she could see was her own work.

The man who'd once been called Felix Walken walked away from the sound of her voice. He, too, did not falter, and he, too, asked no questions.

It was as though to him, such insanity was nothing more and nothing less than the natural way of the world.

**PROLOGUE IV
THE SAME AS EVER**

ALWAYS

**New York
The Alveare**

The thick, cloying scent of honey permeated the restaurant, for once forced to jockey for attention as the raised voices of a man and a woman also filled the air.

"And *that's* when I said it! Romeo, oh Romeo! Whyfor art thou, Romeo!"

"It was Romeo and Hamlet!"

"But do you know what the security guard said to us then? He told us his name was John, not Romeo. So of course, we apologized for the case of mistaken identity, turned, and left."

"What a false alarm!"

The odd couple had gathered a small audience in the middle of the room as they proudly expounded on another one of their exploits.

"What? That's it?!"

"You're tellin' me that guard was as empty-headed as you two?!"

The restaurant's patrons made their displeasure known with complaints and insults, but the couple's bright mood didn't falter in the slightest.

"Hah! Of course he came after us as we ran, but we were much faster!"

"The joy of youth!"

Most of the members of their audience were in various states of inebriation, but even then they had enough of their wits about them to find fault with their story.

"Don't you just mean you ran away?"

"That's certainly one way to put it! Isn't it amazing, Miria dear? All we did was run in one direction, but in reality we were deftly evading the long arm of the law!"

"It was natural talent! Beginner's luck!"

"...Yeah, alright. Whatever. Just pretend I never said anything. You two are really something else," one of the guests said, chuckling and shaking his head as he raised his hand, signaling one of the waitresses to bring another round of drinks. The odd couple's antics made no sense to

normal people, but all the restaurant's regulars knew that there was nothing more entertaining to listen to when one was slightly tipsy.

It had already been close to a year since the Prohibition was abolished.

Public opposition to the Prohibition had intensified in the year 1929, after the Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression that followed it. Voices rose in complaint across the country, accusing the government of withholding jobs from the people, and soon enough a movement was started to lobby for the revival of the manufacture and trade of liquor.

The Prohibition had had more unintended side effects than simply depriving the needy of jobs. Criminal organizations all over America took advantage of the absence of legal alcohol and the unchanging demand for it, and the mafias grew strong off the illegal sale of liquor. In a sense, the growing anti-Prohibition sentiments happened to coincide with the efforts of the nation's government to hamstring the power of its enemies.

Various other opinions also came together to bolster the movement, and finally, in the year 1933, the Prohibition was officially abolished. The speakeasies, illegal pubs and bars that had sold alcohol during the Prohibition years, finally came above ground, openly selling their wares in the light of day.

There were, of course, countless speakeasies that had only made a living thanks to the fact that normal stores and shops weren't allowed to stock alcohol. Once that arbitrary limit was repealed, those unfortunate establishments were forced to close their doors.

The Alveare, however, had come out on top of that harsh struggle for survival, and was now more or less an established part of the neighborhood. It was popular among the locals not only for its liquor, but also its food, notable for the strong, sweet taste of honey that permeated all the dishes.

Using that increase in revenue, the Alveare's owner had renovated the interior, replaced the cheap tables, and generally made it a much more respectable establishment than it had been when it was a speakeasy. Sena had also hired more staff members, and now four more waitresses ran frantically to and fro among the tables along with Lea, who'd been there since the beginning.

Another one of the Alveare's attractions was the peculiar couple who couldn't even be called regulars any more—they were more or less squatters who lived in the restaurant.

Their names were Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent.

Most of the restaurant's patrons knew their names, but the strange thing was, that was all they knew. They knew Isaac and Miria's names, and they knew that the pair were fine tellers of strange and outlandish stories, but that was all.

Even among the staff and the camorristas who gathered in the restaurant, there were few who knew of the couple's past. And those select few didn't treat them differently because of it, and instead let them be, allowing Isaac and Miria's tall tales to become one of the restaurant's staple attractions—though in quite a different way than Isaac and Miria themselves had probably intended, for most of the people who came to hear them talk were looking to laugh and be entertained.

"Well, doesn't that beat all. I wouldn't mind hearing more of your stories," a man's voice said. Isaac and Miria paused, putting down their glasses of honeyed juice and looking toward the unfamiliar voice. It belonged to a middle-aged man, an easygoing grin showing flashing white teeth beneath a bushy mustache.

"I've been coming here for the past few days, and every day it seems like you're telling a different tale of robbing another place somewhere in the country. I reckon you two must be famous with the police," he said teasingly, but Isaac and Miria seemed to take the mocking complement at face value, and puffed out their chests proudly.

"Not at all! Our costumes are absolutely impenetrable masterworks of misdirection, you see! In fact, I bet you that no law enforcement agent in the country knows who we are!"

"It's the perfect crime! We're like Edgar Allen Poe!"

Trying to make sense of their outlandish chatter would have been cause for a migraine in most people, but the man only smiled and gamely kept up with them.

"Haha. Costumes, eh? Now hold on just a second, you two. I remember an article in the papers a few years back about a pair of robbers dressed up as Egyptian mummies. That wouldn't happen to have been you, would it? If my memory serves me right, that article was about a man and a woman, all wrapped up in bandages, and I think the woman had on a dress over that. They broke into a bank and made a run for it with all the tissue boxes they could carry."

Isaac and Miria gasped dramatically and turned to each other, their eyes widening.

"Oh, no, Miria! The newspapers know about us!"

"Now I remember! There were all those people taking our pictures!"

"Incredible! I thought they were nothing but passing cameramen out for a stroll, but it seems they were actually news reporters! This is terrible, Miria. We face masters of disguise even more skilled than we are!"

"They must be expert thieves! Modern day Arsène Lupins!"

The middle-aged man paid no heed to the unfolding drama, however, and instead continued to pursue the topic of the odd couple's exploits.

"And what about the incident a few years back, when a pair of bandits broke into the Genoard Manor over in Newark and stole every single penny from the family safe..."

"Hah! Can't tell you about that one!"

"We have the right to remain silent! And the right to an attorney!"

"Hmm... Then setting aside the matter of whether or not you stole anything, what were you wearing at the time?" the man asked, still smiling.

Isaac's brow furrowed in concentration and he frowned, turning to Miria.

"Say, Miria. What *were* we wearing back then?"

"We were Indians! Native Americans!"

"You're absolutely right! We were Indians!"

"Following the will of Mother Earth and Father Sky!"

The pair smiled, satisfied, and so did the middle-aged man.

Well. It would be better to say that he smirked.

"And when you threw money all over the streets of New York?"

"Ah! I remember that one! I was dressed as a priest..."

"...And I was dressed as a nun!"

"Hahaha, is that so. Is that so..."

The mustachioed man continued to ask them questions for quite some time, coaxing out tale after tale from the couple. That one time they'd stolen the doors to a museum, the incident

where they'd robbed all the chocolate from a chocolate store. The one where they'd stolen as many pairs of men's underwear as they could carry, and the time they'd hit home runs on the heads of the Chicago mafia, and made off with all their money. Story after story, theft after theft...

And throughout it all, the man kept his smile fixed firmly on his face.

Well. It would be better to say that he smirked.

"Amazing. I'll be damned. Absolutely incredible," he said at last, clapping admiringly. Isaac and Miria blushed and hemmed and hawed.

"Hahaha, don't be like that, mister. You're embarrassing us! Now come on, tell us a story or two too, would you?"

"It's give and take! Supply and demand!"

The man laughed, clapped his hands together once. "So it is, so it is. Tell you what. You two come over to my store and I'll tell you all the stories you want," he said, so amicably that one could have been forgiven for thinking that he and the odd couple were fast friends, and not total strangers.

"Oh ho! So you have a store of your own, my friend!"

"Amazing!"

"Shucks, now you're the ones embarrassing me. It isn't much, but I call it home. Won't you come with me and take a look?"

The conversation was subtly taking on a strange turn, but neither Isaac nor Miria seemed to notice.

However, some of the customers sitting in the vicinity, especially those who gave off a slightly different air from normal law-abiding citizens, did take notice, and they surreptitiously turned in their seats. Just enough so that the middle-aged man with the mustache happened to fall within their fields of vision.

All of this went unnoticed, however, as Isaac instead began to feel around inside his coat and frowned.

"Ah, I think I must've left behind my wallet back in the warehouse when we were helping clean up earlier today."

"Oh no! We're bankrupt?!"

"No, I think it'll still be there. Would you be a dear and go fetch it for me, Miria?"

"Of course, Isaac! I'll be right back!"

Miria jumped to her feet and ran off, disappearing behind the door at the back of the store.

The mustached man watched her go, his smile souring a little.

"You could've gone and gotten it yourself. You're lazier than you look, friend."

"Maybe," Isaac said shortly, uncharacteristically terse as he, too, stared toward where Miria had gone.

A few seconds passed in silence, and then Isaac cleared his throat and turned to the man.

"Alright, then. Let's go and see what you've got in your store."

"Hmm? What, you're not going to wait for your lady friend?" the man asked, clearly taken aback, but Isaac only grinned and amicably patted his shoulder.

"Of course not, silly. Why would I want to bring her along to the *police station*?"

"Wha-!"

A hush fell over the entire restaurant the moment the words passed Isaac's lips, as though the Alveare itself had gasped and fallen silent. Every gaze in the restaurant snapped to Isaac and the man who sat with him. The man froze, because he hadn't expected in his wildest dreams that Isaac could have seen through his cover. The camorra froze, because though they had figured out the undercover agent's intentions a while ago, they hadn't expected in their wildest dreams that Isaac could have done the same.

"...So you knew."

"Well, it's not my first time being interrogated by the police. Not by a long shot. Normally I'd have given you a pepper bomb to the face and made a break for it, but I don't really want to cause trouble here. It'd be a shame to repay their hospitality with a commotion, you see."

"I do see. I do indeed. Seems it wasn't just dumb luck that kept you two safe from the law. So tell me, what *did* send your lady friend to go and fetch? Some of those pepper bombs you mentioned? Or maybe a gun?" the man asked suspiciously, throwing away all pretense of friendliness.

Isaac looked around pensively, as though deliberating on what exactly to say. He was saved the trouble as a very fat man and a very thin man came swaggering up to him from the back of the restaurant, subtly positioning themselves so as to stand between him and the undercover cop.

"Say, Isaac. You and Miria didn't happen to have an argument, did you?"

"She just went running out the back door without even looking back."

"Shit!"

The expletive came from a young man who'd come in alone, some time after the mustached officer. He'd been sitting at a table by himself, a fair distance away from Isaac, but it seemed that he too was a member of the police. He sprang to his feet and turned as though to pursue Miria, but his older coworker shook his head sharply and made a negative motion with his hand. The young cop sat back down, a sour look on his face.

The mustached man shared that look as he turned to Isaac, brushing roughly past Randy and Pecho to clap a pair of handcuffs onto the former thief. He, too, was just realizing that he'd vastly underestimated Isaac, and from his expression it was clear he was none too happy with being made to look the fool by someone he'd thought a mere simpleton.

The men of the camorra smiled, seeing the complex play of emotions flash across the police officer's face and easily discerning the reasons behind them.

Well. It would be better to say that they smirked.

The mustached man was no fool. He sensed the stares of the camorra on him and wisely began to hurry out of the Alveare, dragging Isaac with him as he went.

"Hmph. Your lady friend might have gotten away," he spat, "but we'll have you telling us where your hideout is soon enough."

A few minutes after the police left with Isaac in tow, Miria came in from the back, looking more puzzled than anything.

"Isaac, I couldn't find your wallet anywhere. Do you think maybe someone stole... Huh? Isaac?"

The gangsters played dumb, and the normal guests and the waitresses looked guiltily away. None of them could bring themselves to meet her gaze.

"Hey. Hey, everyone. What's wrong? Where's Isaac? Did he have to go to the bathroom?"

Miria seemed to have noticed that something was off, and she looked uncertainly back and forth around the room. The smile slowly faded from her face, replaced with a growing expression of worry.

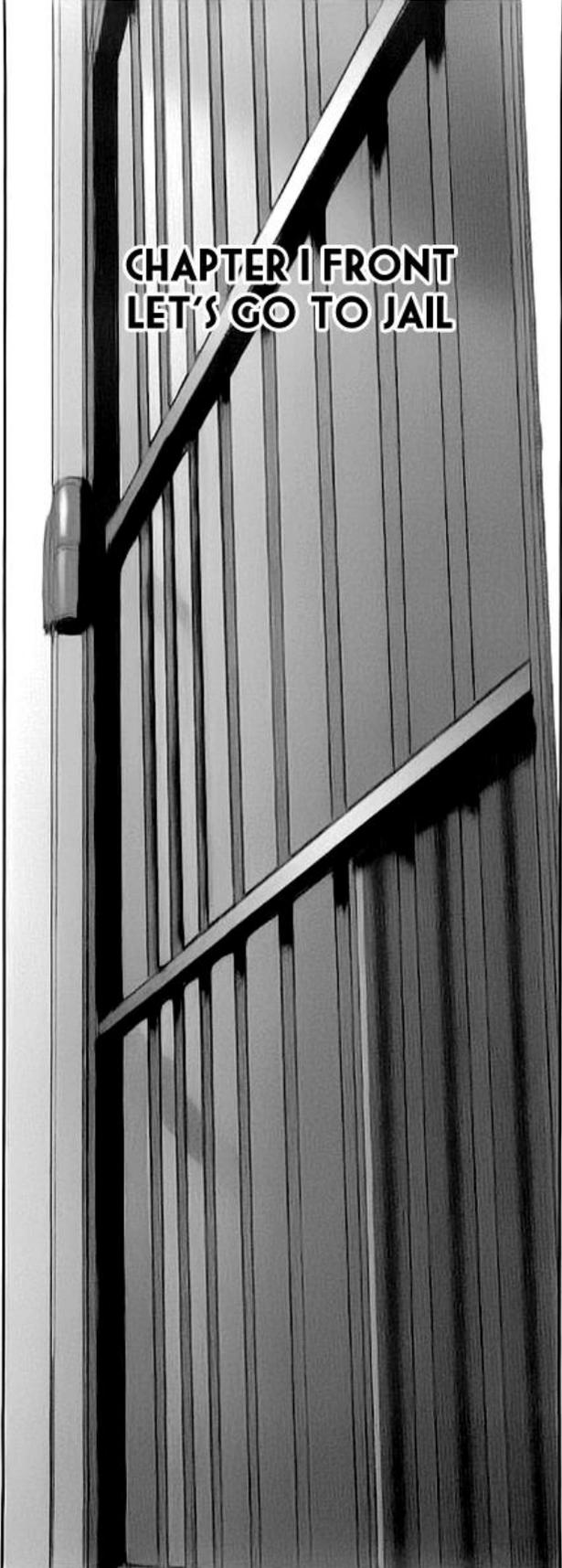
"Isaac? Where are you, Isaac? Isaac?"

Isaac Dian was arrested that day.

He was taken in by a plain clothes cop who'd followed the rumors of a strange couple who told tall tales of being master thieves. But strangely, the news of his arrest did not make the papers in the days that followed, nor did any news of a trial reach the ears of the Martillo Family. Time passed, as it was wont to do.

His arrest came about a month before the day Firo Prochainezo was also taken in on charges of vandalism.

And so did it all begin.



**CHAPTER I FRONT
LET'S GO TO JAIL**

It was an island that had once been a fortress.

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, Alcatraz 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.

They called it "inescapable."

It was a blunt and unyielding word, just like the island prison with which it was so often associated, and it made the inmates tremble with fear. To the people of America, however, the concept of an inescapable prison represented something else, something that had never existed before. To them, Alcatraz was a place that existed as part of the world, and yet at the same time existed completely isolated from it.

For years, even decades to follow, people would make movies and write books about the tiny island off the coast of San Francisco. The word "inescapable" represented the one and only concrete fact that civilians knew about Alcatraz Island, and it captured the imagination of millions.

Then in August of 1934, the man who had filled an entire nation with fear, and dread, and even a strange sense of admiration, was transferred to the island. Al Capone added his legend to that of Alcatraz, and it welcomed him with open arms.

A few months later, another boat much like the one that Capone himself had taken began its trip to the island, this one carrying with it a great deal of despair and a fair amount of ambition.

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December 1934

An Escort Ship in San Francisco Bay

"...This is the pits."

"No talking allowed," the guard who stood over Firo said sharply, not even deigning to glance in his direction.

The reality of what was happening had hit him like a brick once the boat began to move, gently rocking back and forth with the waves.

The place where Firo was headed was, of course, infamous for being inescapable and impregnable, but the mystery surrounding it had given birth to a wide variety of other rumors as well. Firo recalled hearing that every inmate who ever stepped past the gates of Alcatraz inevitably went insane, that the military secretly performed inhuman experiments on the prisoners, and countless other outlandish stories about the place that would come to be known as Devil's Island.

Firo had laughed them off as preposterous flights of fancy at the time, but suddenly, as he caught side of the island far off in the distance, the rumors didn't seem quite as ridiculous as they once had.

It wasn't because Alcatraz looked frightening. Quite the opposite, in fact.

From the docks of San Francisco, all Firo could see of Alcatraz were the natural cliffs and the prison building jutting from the top, with various other buildings that he surmised to be its facilities surrounding it. The natural colors of the rock and the manmade colors of the brick came together perfectly, and together with the light blue of the sky and the darker blue of the sea, it almost seemed like a landscape drawn by a painter.

That was exactly why the thought of what might be going on behind those innocuous looking walls refused to leave Firo's mind. It felt like inside that place, almost unreal and fantastic in its serenity, anything could happen.

After all, he himself was an immortal, a being that would have been right at home in the pages of a storybook. Considering that fantastic entities like Firo himself walked the earth, he wouldn't be altogether surprised if it turned out that an honest-to-God dragon had made its lair on the dreaded island.

It'd be just his luck.

I'm really in it deep.

Unable to voice them aloud, Firo thought his misgivings to himself as the boat rocked fiercely to and fro. It wasn't even going that fast, but it seemed to roil back and forth, right and left, without any rhyme or reason. It seemed the rumors he'd heard about the waters of San Francisco Bay being unusually rough and choppy were true.

He'd given some thought to making a break for it and leaping into the sea, even if it meant taking a few bullets—he could afford to, after all. But from the look of the churning waves, Firo decided it was all too possible that he'd lose consciousness and sink to the bottom of the sea, never to rise again. The distance from the boat to the shore looked laughable, but in reality the ocean's waters were a barrier even more impenetrable than the walls of Alcatraz itself.

Firo frowned, remembering the events and the people who had led him to where he was now.

— —

A Week Ago

"Hahah! What do you say? Almost too good to believe, isn't it? I had to pull a lot of strings to make this happen, you know. Normally, you can't get incarcerated in Alcatraz right off the streets. It's meant for troublemakers from other prisons, after all. But never fear, because my elegant machinations have rolled out a red carpet that leads from here directly to a little island off the coast of San Francisco. Now, normally I would never a two-bit thug from a tiny gang like you to even think of it, but considering the momentousness of this occasion, I think I'll make an exception. I graciously allow you to thank me."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on just a second. Shut up and let me just say one thing," Firo said, waving his cuffed hands. "I'm gonna say this slow, and break it up into parts so it'll have a better chance of making it through your thick head. One, why do I. Two, have to go. Three, to *goddamn Alcatraz?*"

Victor snorted and shrugged, as though he thought it was more than obvious. "I thought you'd be a little more enthusiastic about this. Don't you want those bragging rights?"

"What?"

"I mean, an Alcatraz sentence is something like a badge of honor among criminals like you, isn't it? For people like me, a stay in Alcatraz might be nothing but a mark of shame, but I imagine things're different in your world, if you get what I mean."

"...Maybe, but not this time. Getting shunted off to some jail without a trial just 'cause some feds thought I should go is nothing but a black mark on my record, and on the Family's," Firo snapped, feeling his tenuous grip on his temper starting to slip again.

If anything, though, his ire seemed to amuse Victor.

"Well, what if I told you you'd be popular inside? You're pretty enough I wager you'd be a minor celebrity there in a matter of days. Then again, I suppose the warden over there has things locked down tight enough that nothing like *that* would really happen, so you don't have to worry."

"...Noah, mind if I kill your boss."

"You're welcome to try, but something tells me you're gonna have trouble killing an immortal."

Firo settled for glaring daggers at Victor as the detective threw back his head and laughed, a wave of irritation washing over him. The old him would have already followed his brash impulses and made a dash for Victor, placing his hand on the other immortal's head and making him beg for his life.

He paused, going back over his thoughts for a moment.

The old me, huh...

It was true. He was a lot softer than he'd used to be.

Save his childhood friends, the Gandor brothers and Claire Stanfield—and to be honest, they were more like family than friends to him—he'd spent his life with his heart closed off to the world.

Then one day he'd picked a fight with an old Japanese immigrant named Yaguruma and found himself tumbling bodily through the air. One thing had led to another, and he'd been introduced to an organization called the Martillo Family.

The Family, a criminal organization known as a camorra, had provided Firo with a home, a place where he could relax and let down his guard. Come to think of it, perhaps his time in the Family had been when his hard edges had begun to smooth out, and the fangs he'd always bared openly at the world had slowly been sheathed.

And the one who had tamed him completely had been...

Ennis, I guess. Or maybe it was Isaac and Miria.

None of those three could really be called upstanding citizens, but then again nor could they be quite classified as criminals. He smiled as he recalled their faces, but Victor cleared his throat noisily and hauled him back to reality.

"Alright, I think that's enough bullshit. You wanted a reason, and I'll give you one. Think of this as a plea bargain."

"A what?"

"You heard me. Remember the girl I mentioned earlier? Ennis?"

"...What about her?" Firo asked, feeling his pulse quicken at the mention of the woman he'd been thinking of just moments before.

"She devoured an alchemist, a long time ago. Do you remember that?"

Firo didn't reply, but he had a feeling he did indeed remember. It was something he'd asked Ennis herself, and the stolen memories inside of him backed up the answer he'd received then.

A long time ago, when she had still been nothing more than an emotionless puppet, Ennis had devoured an immortal who had come to take Szilard's life.

That unthinking action had been the turning point of her life. Knowledge she'd never even imagined could exist had surged through her, birthing inside of her emotions—guilt and regret foremost among them—that would go on to form the backbone of her current personality.

Firo himself had long forgotten about the incident, but perhaps Ennis herself still struggled with the guilt caused by the sins of her past. He shot Victor a fierce glare, wondering what the other immortal was after, why he was so intent on picking at old scars.

But instead of flashing him a smarmy grin, Victor instead leaned back a little, and closed his eyes.

"He was my friend."

Firo had nothing to say to that. He looked away, the four words weighing down on him heavily. The somber mood had no time to settle, though, before another thought occurred to him and his head snapped back up.

"Hold on... You're not saying you want to get revenge on her or anything, are you?" he said, and the tenseness in his voice made it obvious that he was more than ready to bring back the

animosity he'd swallowed at a moment's notice. He took deep, measured breaths as he waited for Victor's reply, prepared this time to really follow through on his threat and devour Victor, if need be.

Victor made a show of thinking the matter over.

"I don't want to have to do that, any more than you do," he said, choosing the words carefully. "If I thought that could solve everything, I'd have eaten you a few minutes ago, and I'd have done the same to Huey the moment we got our hands on him... but I'm not Szilard Quates, and I'm not gonna become anything like that fucking son of a bitch anytime soon, either."

"...Really."

"Really. But that doesn't mean I can just laugh off the death of a friend and let bygones be bygones. Logically I know that she was nothing more than Quates' puppet, but in my heart I can't just let it go. And besides, if I have to, I can press all sorts of conventional murder charges on her."

"...What?"

"My friend wasn't the only person she killed following the old bastard's orders, Prochainezo, though he was the only immortal. We've found several bodies rolling around in Quates' old hideouts. Now, we don't have conclusive proof that she was the one who killed them, but *if* she did, then... Well. How would you go about putting a woman on trial, when in the eyes of the law she doesn't even exist?"

"You son of a bitch..."

Victor only smirked and shrugged, enjoying the sight of Firo grinding his teeth.

"Moving along, though. Since technically you're Ennis—or rather, she's a part of you—I thought I'd negotiate a plea bargain with you."

"...Well?"

"If you do what we ask you to do, then we can close the books on the crimes she committed. We'll look the other way."

"Funny. I thought you'd be above dealing with 'punks' like me," Firo snorted, but Victor only answered with a heavy glare of his own.

"Stand down, kid. I'm not going to tell you to betray your Family. All I'm going to ask is for you to go and, well, spy a little on someone who might turn out to be a mutual enemy. I'll give you the specifics when and if you agree."

"...And how'm I supposed to believe you on this deal when you said a few minutes ago that you hated my guts?"

"You've got my word. Take it or leave it, but it's all I can offer," Victor said, the smile vanishing from his features as he leaned in close.

Close enough that Firo could easily have lifted his arms, cuffed though they were, and placed his right hand on Victor's forehead.

But he couldn't. He couldn't move.

He found himself up against a sense of quiet pressure, much like the air he felt sometimes from Maiza, or Ronnie, or Yaguruma, or his leader, Molsa Martillo. It was an aura that came only with years of experience, and before that firm and unyielding force, Firo could do nothing but swallow his anger and wait, frozen in place.

"I'll cover up the crimes Ennis committed," Victor said, and Firo felt a fine sweat break out on his forehead as the centuries-old detective gave him his tarnished promise.

"I swear to you by every law this nation possesses that I'll keep my word."

— —

He'd thought it over for about three days and then reluctantly accepted Victor's offer.

He felt a little angry at himself that he hadn't made the decision right then and there, for Ennis' sake, but he'd held out for three days in the hope that the Family would pull some strings and get him free.

Three days had passed, and nothing had happened.

Firo wagered that it had something to do with the isolated nature of Victor's department; they'd probably kept his presence there tightly under wraps.

Perhaps Ronnie, who had a way of seemingly pulling off the impossible from time to time, could have done something, but Firo wasn't the type to cling to such faint hopes.

Every moment he spent sitting on his ass was another moment he spent worrying both Ennis and the Family.

I can't afford to waste time like this.

Firo had finally taken up Victor's offer, if only to get himself out of the stalemate he'd found himself locked into, and...

And, well, that had led him to where he was now, on a boat rocking back and forth in San Francisco Bay.

He hadn't voiced his misgivings because he was angry about giving into Victor's requests, though.

"We want you to keep an eye on Huey Laforet," Victor had told him.

It made him blanch—moving on Victor's orders made him feel like he'd really become a pawn of the government. Well, it was true, but Firo wasn't moving solely just to please the federal agent; he did have some personal interest in the matter.

It had all started with the Lamia, the mysterious group of homunculi who had contacted him and Ennis about a year ago.

They'd called Ennis a sibling, and had revealed that Huey Laforet was their creator.

Ever since then, the name had stuck in his mind.

Huey existed in his memories—in Szilard's, to be precise—but even there, he was a mystery. It seemed that he'd only been on good terms with one of their group, a man named Elmer C. Albatross, but aside from that, there was almost no knowledge of him in the minds of the alchemists inside him. Unlike Victor, who had simply isolated himself from the others, it almost seemed like Huey had taken care to be noticed as little as possible.

Firo had chosen to stop there, unwilling to delve into Szilard's memories any more than he already had. Instead he'd chosen the most direct path, taking advantage of the situation to go and meet Huey Laforet uninfluenced by the memories inside him.

"He won't know anything about you, since he's been stuck in Alcatraz for the past few years. You know a hell of a lot more about him than he does about you. Remember, you've got the advantage.

"Some of the guards are going to work with you on the inside. They'll fill you in on the situation once you're there, and try to make sure you and Huey get some time alone. Good luck."

And with Victor's last words of encouragement still ringing in his ears, he'd been shipped off to San Francisco. He didn't like the man, and he trusted him even less than he liked him, but considering the situation he was in, he was grateful for the pep talk. He needed all the support he could get.

Half eager, half filled with misgiving, he'd started the journey that had led him across the country, and before he knew it he was looking up at the boat that would take him to Alcatraz.

And then, just as he boarded the ship, a guard had sidled up behind him and discretely whispered in his ear, "Welcome to Alcatraz, Mr. Prochainezo."

"Ah, so you're..."

...the Department's guy on the inside?

The words died in his throat, though, as the guard continued to speak.

"Master Huey is waiting for you."

A chill ran down his spine, and he broke into a cold sweat at the sound of the man's voice, flat and emotionless.

"He says he's been looking forward to meeting a fellow immortal..."

"...Hey..."

"No talking allowed," the man said tersely, his emotionless façade melting away, replaced in an instant by the visage of a stern but otherwise unremarkable prison guard.

It was as though Firo had daydreamed the entire thing, and in reality nothing had happened. As though the world itself was trying its best to convince him that nothing out of the ordinary had taken place at all.

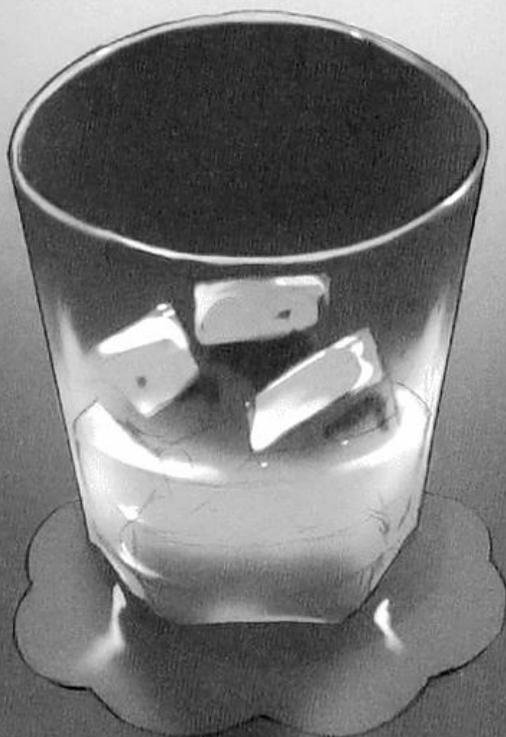
He won't know anything about you, my ass. Useless asshole of a cop...

Firo snapped back to the present as the ship continued to lurch erratically, carrying him slowly but surely toward his final destination, but his foul mood remained. No matter how he looked at his plight, he could arrive at only one conclusion.

He turned the matter over and over in his head, each time voicing his unease out loud, or silently in his mind.

This is really, really bad...

CHAPTER I BACK
LET'S PICK A FIGHT



New York The Alveare

It was just before opening time in the restaurant. A woman sat alone inside the serving area, looking oddly lost and sad despite the sweet smell of honey filling the air.

The waitresses and the store's owner bustled around her, getting ready for the breakfast rush, and a few members of the Martillo Family, who also called the restaurant home, sat at tables nearby, talking quietly to each other. But the woman seemed somehow isolated from them, as though the morose air about her had cut her off from the rest of the world and its untroubled thoughts.

A few traces of girlhood still lingered in her soft features, but her clothing was anything but girlish. She wore a business suit and dress pants, clothes that were not, at the time, considered all that appropriate for women.

She was named Ennis, and she had no family name. She was a homunculus, created by an alchemist named Szilard Quates.

After years upon years of unthinking servitude, she had turned on her master, and as punishment for her betrayal, Szilard had cut the bonds between him and her that provided her with life. She'd fully expected to die that day, but a young immortal had devoured the ancient alchemist, and in doing so had found himself holding Ennis' life in his hands.

"Firo..."

Though at the time they were enemies, the young man had not only saved her life, but graciously provided her with a place to live.

He was the first family she had ever had.

At first, she hadn't quite known how to treat him, but the passage of time had let her adjust, and she'd adapted soon enough to the new experience of having family.

But that young man was no longer with her.

About a week ago, he'd been escorted away by men who looked like they worked with the government.

When she'd heard the news of Firo's arrest, Ennis had been surprised to find herself greatly shaken.

She knew very well that Firo was a capo of the Martillo Family, a criminal organization, and also that by affiliating himself with the Family, Firo had implicitly accepted his status as a man who stood on the wrong side of the law.

But to Ennis, Firo was simply an oddly generous and good-natured young man, always eager to please, and though he'd rarely had cause to show her the side of him that made him a camorrista, that didn't mean that he had ever tried to hide anything from her, either.

And more than that, he was family. Ennis had searched for a reason to exist, but he had given her a place where she belonged.

Only now that he was gone did she quietly realize just how much he'd meant to her.

But she couldn't just sit there moping forever.

Firo hadn't been the only one taken away.

Isaac Dian had also been arrested by a plainclothes police officer, in the very restaurant in which Ennis currently sat, and had not returned. They hadn't heard from him at all after that, so it was a safe bet to say that he'd probably been quietly locked up in a jail somewhere.

When they told his partner the news, everyone had expected her to start bawling like a child or throw a fit.

But instead, Miria had merely fallen silent and left the Alveare. She hadn't come back since.

Ennis hadn't been there in person to see it herself, but when she imagined Miria's face at that moment, she couldn't help but feel like a vise had clamped down on her heart. She owed her continued existence to Firo, but Isaac and Miria had also been responsible for much of her new life, and she thought of them as precious friends.

But she hadn't been able to do a thing. Not for Firo, not for Isaac, and not for Miria.

Ennis was frustrated beyond words at her own powerlessness, but she'd realized that it would be no use to continue wallowing in her depression. Instead, she'd decided to try and think of something—anything—that she could do to make things better.

That had led her to today, where she faced yet another long day of asking herself questions that had no answer.

"Are you alright, Ennis?"

Today, though, she was broken out of her thoughts by the voice of a young boy. It was Czes, the boy she lived with and whom she treated like a younger brother. He looked worried, most probably because he'd seen the way she'd been brooding for the past few days.

"Oh. Czes. I'm fine. I'm just a little under the weather."

"If you're worried about Firo, you shouldn't be."

"Was it that obvious? I'm sorry. I really shouldn't let it get to me so much, but..."

"No, that's fine. It's only natural. But I'm telling you, you don't need to be worried. I mean, you've got *all the time in the world*, don't you? Firo might have been arrested, but even if he's carted off to prison, you don't need to worry about him dying *at all*," the boy said frankly, and Ennis replied with a soft smile.

"Yes... Yes, you're right. You would know, wouldn't you, Czes? It took you more than a hundred years, but you finally had your reunion with Mr. Maiza..."

"Uhh... right..." Czes murmured slowly, looking away, and the smile fled from Ennis' face as she wondered if she'd made some sort of mistake.

Before she could ask, though, a commotion from the front door drew their attention.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we're not open yet."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just let me in. I've got business with one of the Martillos."

Ennis looked over and saw Sena, the Alveare's owner, talking to a dangerous looking man with a low, rough voice.

"Oh, alright. Did you make an appointment?"

"What are you, their secretary? Look, cut the bullshit and just tell me if Maiza's here. You could say me and him go way back..."

At the mention of Maiza's name, the camorristas seated at the tables also turned to look at the man at the entrance.

Maiza Avaro was the Martillo Family's bookkeeper, one of the Family's highest ranking officers. At first glance he was merely a kind looking, unassuming sort of man, but in reality he hid a

sharp mind behind his friendly smile, and it was no exaggeration to say that the reason the Martillos were still around despite their tiny size was mostly due to him.

To Czes and Ennis, though, there was something else to add to that...

"Bah. Move it, I'm going in anyway."

"Ack! Sir, don't!"

Ennis and Czes shared a quizzical look and then turned to look at the man as he shoved past Sena and stepped into the restaurant.

Now that they could get a good look at him, they could see that he wore a thin coat, and square-rimmed glasses were perched on his nose. His sharp eyes darted back and forth over the room; perhaps a sign of caution, perhaps a sign of hostility. Either way, the moment he stepped inside, the warm and friendly air in the restaurant abruptly plunged below zero.

The memory of Isaac's arrest was still clear in everyone's minds, prompting the men of the camorra to wonder if the unknown intruder was another representative of the law. And indeed, the stranger couldn't have seemed more like a lawman if he'd come in with his badge pinned to his breast for all to see.

But though the Martillos tensed and prepared for the worst, there was one person in the restaurant whose anxiety surpassed theirs by far.

"...Czes?"

Czes had gone white as a sheet the moment he caught sight of the man's face.

Ennis could tell that something was wrong just from the boy's expression, and she looked to see what had dismayed him so much...

She saw his face and recognized him.

She'd never met him before, but the man's face was in her memories.

She had no way of knowing it, of course, but her reaction was much the same as Firo's had been, the first time he'd met the man.

He's... Ah, that means he's...

She remembered something she shouldn't have remembered. Ennis shuddered, shaken by a sudden wave of regret and guilt, by pain she knew she couldn't—and shouldn't—forget.

And the only person who could have lessened the pain she felt... wasn't there anymore.

The tempest of emotions raging inside Ennis slowly began to show on her face, but the stranger didn't seem to notice at all, instead opting to glance around the interior of the restaurant. He spotted the boy sitting next to Ennis, the one staring back at him like he'd seen a ghost, and the hard lines of his face softened just a tiny bit.

"Hey, Czes," he said quietly. "How long has it been? About *233 years* now, I think?"

The man spread his arms wide, remembering a time centuries past, but Czes didn't let down his guard in the slightest as he uttered the man's name.

"Victor..."

— —

"Ah, no, you don't have to. Just pretend I'm not here, okay? Sorry for barging in like this before you guys opened up."

Victor waved away one of the Asian waitresses as she approached with a glass of water, striding boldly over to Czes's table and seating himself without asking.

"It's been a while, Czes. Good to see you're doing alright."

"Umm... Yeah, you too, Victor..."

In contrast to Victor's bright and jovial demeanor, Czes was clearly terrified. Even the way he edged away in his seat, ready to bolt at a moment's notice, made it obvious that he was trying to get as far away from Victor as possible.

Or rather, as far away from Victor's right hand as possible.

Czeslaw Meyer was also an immortal, the thought of being devoured frightened him more than anything. Granted, most of the immortals did fear the only thing that could bring them true death, but in Czes' case it was nearly on the level of a phobia.

To make things worse, he'd once been betrayed by the person he trusted most, and the experience had left him deeply jaded. Put those two together, and it was easy to see why he was so unsettled by Victor's sudden, utterly unannounced visit, especially considering that centuries had passed since they'd last seen each other.

"Why are you..."

"Oh, nothing much. Had something to talk to Maiza about."

"You weren't very surprised to see me... That means... You knew I was here?"

"Huh? Yeah, of course I did."

Victor had tracked him down.

Czes suppressed a shudder, ignoring the faint chill that washed over him and focusing all his attention on the other immortal.

"Did you ask an information broker about me? Or did Maiza tell you?"

"Information broker? You mean the Daily Days newspaper? Pfft. Getting info from them is like pulling teeth; their lips are sealed when it comes to selling to the government. Oh, and I didn't ask Maiza, either. It's been, what, six or seven years since I last saw him?"

"Then how..."

"I've had my people watching you all this time," Victor said casually, shrugging.

Czes' brow furrowed in concern. "Your people?"

"Hahaha. What's with all the questions, Czes? We haven't seen each other in over two centuries and this is the welcome I get? Would it kill you to smile a little?"

"...Was that a question you don't want to answer?"

"Jesus Christ. You're really going in on me, aren't you? Normally I don't like to answer questions with questions, but I think I've earned one, wouldn't you say? There's something I've got to ask you, too," Victor said, the smile abruptly slipping off his face. Czes tensed, the feeling of unease that had been hanging over him since Victor walked in seizing hold of him.

"Wha, what is it?"

"Czes... *What happened to Fermet?*"

Czes gasped aloud, the blood draining from his face the moment the name passed Victor's lips. Up till then he'd been more or less holding his ground despite his fear, but Fermet's name defeated him completely, and he seemed to shrink in on himself so much that even Ennis couldn't help but notice, lowering his gaze to stare down at the table.

Victor, of course, noticed as well, and he moved in relentlessly.



"You remember Fermet, don't you? That guy who left with you for the west when we all parted ways. You know what's funny, though? My men tell me that he's not here. Only you. I wonder what that means..."

"S-stop..."

"...See? Everyone's got things they don't want to be asked. Now, I'm gonna leave it be, and I'll ask you to do the same," Victor said, suddenly smiling again.

But the color did not return to Czes' face.

Ennis would have butted in on Czes' behalf, especially since he seemed so obviously distressed, but every time she raised her eyes to Victor's face, she couldn't help but back down again.

His face was crystal clear in the memories of the alchemist she'd devoured. To him, Victor had not just been a traveling companion, but also a fast friend.

Faced with the knowledge that the man before her had been friends with the man she'd killed, Ennis found it hard to think straight.

Perhaps he'd come to kill her, to get revenge for his friend's death.

Or perhaps he'd come to get his friend's memories back.

Ennis could only wait for Victor to speak, as rigid and tense with suspense as Czes was.

Victor glanced sidelong at her and seemed to notice her unease, and opened his mouth to say something.

But the voice that spoke next was not his.

"Victor?" It was a young man who looked to be in his mid-twenties, his voice a complicated mix of surprise, joy, and even a tiny hint of hostility. "What brings you all the way here?"

Like Victor, he too wore glasses, but aside from that they were utterly different. The tall man who'd called to Victor had a soft, warm expression on his face, his eyes narrowed not in suspicion but in good-natured cheer. His rounded rectangular glasses gave him the appearance of an affable scholar.

Victor, on the other hand, gave off the air of a cold and calculating carnivore, but his features, too, softened just a bit as he raised his right hand in greeting.

"Hey, Maiza! How's life been treating you? Man, reunions are great, aren't they? Sometimes, the feeling you get when you meet a friend and find they've changed completely in the time you were apart is even better than the one you get when you first meet. You get to wondering, was it them who changed so much, or was it me? I was trying to teach Czes here about that, but he's really giving me the cold shoulder. Help me out a little, would you?"

"Has the end of the Prohibition made you so happy that you've gone and replaced all the blood in your veins with liquor in celebration, Victor? You're drunk on yourself, and you don't seem to realize how much you're aggravating everyone else."

"Ugh... Looks like you're not all that happy to see me, either. Maybe I shouldn't have come."

"...You do know where you are, and what that means in the context of who you are, right?" Maiza asked, sighing and shaking his head. "What business does an assistant director of the Department of Justice have with our tiny Family?"

A multitude of tiny clattering noises filled the restaurant as chairs were turned in Victor's direction.

Most of the people currently in the restaurant were affiliated with the Martillo Family, and it went without saying that they were not on friendly terms with the Division of Investigation. Firo and Isaac's arrests had left them sore, and the glares leveled against the detective were even more hostile than normal.

"Haha. Look at all these idiots. Don't they know that reacting like that to a mention of the Department is like holding up a sign saying you're a criminal? Eh, Maiza?"

Victor seemed unperturbed by the animosity directed his way, and Maiza only sighed again before saying, "Have you just come to pick a fight, or was there an actual emergency that warranted this house call?"

"Well, sort of. Whether it's an emergency or not depends on what Huey does."

"Huey?" Maiza asked, taken aback by the unexpected mention of his old companion—very old indeed, for Huey Laforet had become an immortal aboard the *Advena Avis* just like Victor, Czes, and Maiza himself. He looked doubtfully at Victor.

"Didn't you arrest Huey a few years back?"

"I arrested *him*, but the problem is that he's still got an army of cronies working for him on the outside, and they're starting to get restless. The way I see it, this could easily end up becoming another Flying Pussyfoot."

Maiza had heard the rumors, of course, that terrorists had hijacked a train with that name three years ago. But he'd only heard them because someone he knew had actually been on the train at the time; the story had never made it to public.

Perhaps someone in the government had exerted their influence, for the news never reached the papers, and though there had been many fatalities, the truth of what had happened that bloody night never saw the light of day.

To people like Maiza, who lived on the wrong side of the law, the meticulous perfection of the media blackout was chilling. They knew better than anyone just how hard it was to cover up something out of the ordinary.

Simple crimes were hard enough to conceal, but the hijacking of a transcontinental train? It was not only almost impossible, but unthinkable. The very fact that someone had actually thought to bury an incident of that magnitude was staggering.

"Don't tell me that you were the one who kept that from reaching the papers."

"What? Us? You're overestimating us by a mile, Maiza. Even we don't have enough muscle to pull off something like that. I'm guessing there's someone else up there who doesn't want news involving immortals to reach the public."

Victor frowned, perhaps a little put out for having to voice the weakness of his department's influence. "Someone high up, I guess... Dammit, why're they working against us when we're trying to do the same thing? Fucking retards..."

"So, what's happened to Huey?"

"Huh? Oh, damn, sorry about that. Got carried away for a bit. See, the problem is that we're pretty damn certain that Huey's calling the shots from inside Alcatraz, but... We have no fucking clue how." Victor sighed. His voice grew louder as he complained, which meant that the Martillo Family members around him got an earful of what he said next.

"That's why we sent your boy in after him."

The noise of moving chairs was like a small earthquake this time, as the men in the restaurant rose to their feet.

Maiza fixed Victor with a sharp glare, his voice turning cold. "What did you do with Firo? Choose your words well, Victor, because depending on your reply, you may become our enemy."

Even Victor couldn't help but look away from that frigid gaze, and he raised his hands meekly in surrender. "Whoa, whoa. Calm down, Maiza. I may hate gangs with a passion, but I'd rather not have a war on my hands. That's why I dropped in today. Christ, I don't want to fight you. I just wanted to clear things up, okay?"

Victor got to his feet, rambling on in a wounded voice as though he was the one who had the right to be offended.

"Look. He didn't spill anything about your Family, and of course he didn't betray you. He's not working for us because he wants to, believe me."

He looked over to Ennis, a complex mix of emotions flashing across his face, and when he spoke it seemed somehow like he was hiding his feelings away.

"The kid took the fall for this young lady here. Ennis, was it? We made an agreement that he'd do a job for us, and in exchange we'd erase your crimes."

"What...?"

Ennis started at the sound of her name, looking Victor squarely in the eyes for the first time.

Victor held her gaze as he began to explain, keeping his face carefully expressionless—not derisive, or angry, merely blank.

Calmly, steadily, he talked.

He talked, not slowing in the slightest even as Ennis began to pale.

It was as though he was pouring the resentment he felt toward her into the words.

"Victor..."

"Don't look at me like that, Maiza. From the looks of it, I'm guessing both Ms. Ennis here and the fucking gangster trash listening in have something they'd like to say, but I'm a busy man and I can tell I'm overstaying my welcome here. I think I'm done for today."

His explanation finished, Victor raised his hand in farewell and began walking toward the exit.

"So what is it that Huey's thinking?" Maiza said from behind him urgently. "I know everything is just an experiment to him, but what is he after? Do you think that isolating him from Elmer might have made him even more volatile?"

"That's what I want to know."

Victor cut the cryptic exchange short and frowned, brushing imaginary specks of dust off of his coat.

"Anyway, according to my sources, Huey's apparently going to start a fireworks show right here in New York, sometime in the next few days. Listen, Maiza. Even if that freak of a mad scientist comes to you, *don't take part in his festival*. There's nothing good in it. Not for you, and not for your Family. Got that?"

"...Is that warning the real reason you came here today?"

"Yeah, it is. I still count you as a friend, Maiza. All I ask of you is to keep from becoming my enemy. Actually, while we're on the topic, why don't you quit this gang business?" The federal agent flashed a rare open smile, his voice mellowing with nostalgia as he murmured, "Then we can go have a drink together, like we used to."

Then he began to shout over his shoulder to the gangsters gathered in the restaurant, as though to erase the sentimental words of a moment before with intimidation.

"Got that, Maiza? I still think of you as a friend, but that doesn't change the fact that I hate all gangsters, whether they call themselves mafia or camorra or fucking 'ndrangheta! I wish they'd all die! Writhing in pain! Slowly, wishing for death! Ruining the day they were ever fucking born! Keep this in mind, Maiza. You keep rolling around in the mud like this, nobody'll be able to tell you apart from these fucking swine!"

His piece said, Victor immediately began to walk briskly toward the exit, not even pausing to catch his breath.

"Oh, excuse me," an old man said as he brushed past Victor on his way in.

"...Hmph."

Victor ignored him, continuing toward the outside.

That was when he felt something strange near his feet.

Huh?

Maybe he'd caught his foot on a chair leg on his way out. He looked down at his feet to see what was wrong, and realized that something was definitely out of the ordinary.

He wasn't standing on anything.

What was more, he couldn't see the floor beneath him.

...What?

He barely had time for one confused thought before a dull thud shook his body and drove the breath from his lungs. He opened his eyes and found himself staring directly at the floor; the only conclusion his addled mind could come up with was that he'd somehow been thrown bodily through the air.

What the hell? Did I just fall over or something?

He hadn't felt anything at his feet, nothing to suggest that he'd tripped.

A wrinkled hand appeared in his field of vision as he struggled to come to terms with what had just happened, extended palm up as though to help him to his feet. It was the old man he'd bumped into on his way out.

"Is something the matter, young man?"

Victor looked up and recognized the Asian man's face.

Kanshichiro Yaguruma...!

"...Was that you, old man?"

There was nothing on Yaguruma's file that indicated he was skilled in the martial arts, but that was the only explanation that Victor could think of to explain what had just happened. He snarled irritably, raising one hand to bat away Yaguruma's own as he got to his feet.

But Yaguruma's hand flashed out and grasped hold of Victor's wrist, the heavy calluses on the old man's wrinkled skin making Victor feel like he'd been caught in the rubber grips of a mechanical vise. Yaguruma only gave a light tug, but Victor's momentum worked against him and he practically flew up into the air once again.

A small shock hit his waist, and before he knew it he was seated in a chair at the counter somehow, his head colliding roughly against the varnished wood. He shook his head groggily, disoriented at the second rapid change of position in the space of seconds, and heard the sound of shattering glass from somewhere nearby.

"You should be careful."

He looked toward the noise and saw a man with sharp eyes sitting next to him, slowly gathering together the pieces of a shattered bottle.

"Doesn't matter whether you're an assistant director, or J. Edgar Hoover, or the President himself. Imagine if you'd happened to hit your head on this shattered glass when you fell over."

Victor met the man's sharp gaze and finally got a handle on the situation.

It seemed the Martillos had taken offense at his parting comments, and decided to show him they weren't to be taken lightly. He frowned, irritated at having been manhandled so casually.

"...Is that supposed to be a threat?" he snapped, trying to hide his anger behind a façade of calm. "It's not going to work on me, so-"

Victor stopped mid-sentence as the man with the sharp eyes leaned in, his voice lowered in a whisper so that only Victor could hear.

"While your body worked the shards of glass out of your face, *someone might just happen to put their right hand on your head.*"

"Wha-"

"Just like Szilard Quates did, back aboard the Advena Avis in 1711."

Who the hell...?

Victor looked closely at the man again, concentrating hard this time, but try as he might, he couldn't remember anyone who'd looked like him among his alchemist companions. And he couldn't imagine that Maiza would have shared the knowledge of what had happened aboard the boat so freely.

Who the hell is this guy?!

As Victor floundered, struggling to make sense of the situation, the man smiled and placed his hand over the pile of glass shards.

Then he raised his hand, and the bottle appeared underneath, unbroken, as though it was sprouting straight out the surface of his palm.

"What the fuck..."

"Well? Scariest than you'd think, isn't it, having a mystery appear where you thought you knew everything."

Victor slowly looked over to Maiza, but the mafioso just glared back, offering no explanation for the impossibility that had just taken place, or for the man who had done it.

"A magician? No, never mind. It'll all come clear when I run a background search on you."

The federal agent grit his teeth and rose from the counter, still angered and bewildered at having so suddenly lost his advantage.

"We'll see who gets the last laugh... Wait and see. Your petty threats won't work on us."

The Martillos' hostile glares followed him as he walked, but he did not slow his pace.

It was as though he knew that looks alone would not be enough to kill him, and he held his head high, taking their animosity without fear.

"Mr. Yaguruma. Ronnie. You went a little overboard," Maiza sighed, taking a seat at the counter next to his fellow capos.

"Hah, did I? I thought I was going easy on him. If I'd been serious I would've dislocated one of his arms for good measure," Yaguruma said, chuckling.

Ronnie Schiatto, on the other hand, stared down at the bottle he'd created, his expression inscrutable.

"Ronnie? Is something the matter?"

"It's nothing... It's just, I think he doesn't remember me at all."

"Is that what worried you."

Maiza shook his head in exasperation, and Ronnie looked to him with a frown.

"Well, no matter... Maiza. I've made a decision."

The man who'd once been called a demon set his jaw, looking oddly purposeful.

"The next time I'm summoned, I'll have to make a stronger impression."

— —

Once he was outside, Victor hurried over to the car that was waiting for him and promptly took off.

"Hmm. Did it go well, sir?" Bill Sullivan said over his shoulder as he guided the car through the streets.

"Ugh... Like hell it did! Tell you the truth, they scared the shit out of me! Maiza's never glared at me like that before... I thought he was gonna really try and kill me for a moment there! And the rest of them... Fuck, I don't know. There's just too much I don't know right now. Fucking Maiza. He's really gone and become a goddamn gangster!"

"Err. Sir. I don't think it's my place to ask, but, uhh. I am a bit curious about something."

"Huh? About what?" Victor snapped, already fed up with his subordinate's roundabout manner of speech.

"Well, if I recall, you asked me to drive you here so that you could, and I quote, 'Warn an old friend not to fall for Huey's bullshit'. So, sir, how exactly did you go about that warning to warrant such hostility that your knees were knocking as you got in the car?"

"Err. Well, uhh, what do you think happened, Detective Sullivan?" Victor asked, looking to dodge the question, but he couldn't have foreseen the reply he got.

"Hum. I think you probably went and did something stupid, sir."

Victor opened his mouth, then closed it, sitting back and crossing his arms with a huge frown on his face. He had nothing to say to that, and leveraging his authority to shut Sullivan up would be no different from admitting defeat.

He idly thought back to the conversation he'd had with Maiza, then suddenly cursed and snapped his fingers.

'Shit. I forgot to tell him one thing."

"Dare I even ask, sir?"

"I was gonna tell him about that other weird immortal. Isaac, I think his name was."

"His involvement in this mess just came completely out of the blue."

A vertical black and white illustration of a door. The door has a handle and a lock mechanism. The text is overlaid on the upper part of the door.

CHAPTER 2 FRONT
LET'S ENJOY A GREAT MEAL

San Francisco Bay Alcatraz Island

"Get off."

The guard's flat voice prompted Firo to open his eyes.

From the way the boat wasn't rocking quite as much as it had been a moment ago, it seemed the boat had finally docked somewhere.

The single naked bulb flooded the hold with light, and Firo took advantage of the opportunity to look around.

There were three people on the boat with him.

He couldn't exactly start up a conversation, what with the guards standing nearby, but their appearances told him their stories in a way.

The first was an Asian man with dragon tattoos on both his arms. He wore long sleeves that hid most of the tattoos from view, but the dragon heads on his wrists and the twin tails peeking out from under his collar easily let Firo imagine the bright array of colors twisting underneath the clothes. From the look of his face, he was still a fairly young man; Firo wagered he was probably somewhere in his late twenties.

The next was a hulking black man. From the sparse white hairs in his thick hair and the wrinkles on his face, Firo placed him at somewhere around his forties. He looked calm and mellow, but the deep scars all over his face and body told a different story altogether. Firo's experienced eye told him that the scars weren't from a work-related accident or an attempted KKK lynching. The scars told him of fights with fists and fights with knives, fights that had ended in broken bones and lost lives.

The last was a Caucasian man, his head bowed and his back hunched as he sighed constantly to himself, mumbling to himself under his breath. From time to time his voice grew louder, earning him a sharp reprimand from the guard standing over him, and then he quieted down again. He looked to be somewhere in his thirties, but the defeated air about him made him look older than his appearance would suggest, and Firo would easily have accepted it if someone had told him the man was actually in his fifties.

Firo sighed again, glancing at his three erstwhile shipmates.

Together with these three motley criminals, Firo had finally arrived at the most impenetrable—and, to the inmates, the most terrible—prison in history.

He'd accepted his fate a long time ago, but that didn't make the reality of it any easier to swallow.

It was dusk outside when Firo finally stepped off the boat and onto the island proper.

He looked up, and the first thing he saw was an observation tower.

As buildings went, it wasn't all that tall, actually. But on the island, which of course had no skyscrapers to speak of, it seemed like an all-seeing and absolute symbol of vigilance, looking down on the inmates from high in the sky. The guards armed with sniper rifles stationed at the very top of the tower only made it seem more foreboding.

This place is pretty big.

Firo couldn't help but be a little surprised as he looked around.

From San Francisco Bay the island had looked like a tiny, inhospitable crag, but now that he was actually standing on it, he saw that the area around him was much wider than he had first surmised. At the same time, though, the rocks jutting up around him now seemed to fence him in, making him feel a faint sense of claustrophobia.

He chanced a look back, taking in the skyscrapers of the San Francisco skyline. They looked so close, as though he could just reach out and touch them, but their small size told him that that was nothing more than a pipe dream. He looked again and now the buildings seemed far away, like he was peering across a great distance at a faraway country.

"Walk."

The guard's voice snapped him out of his thoughts, and together with his three fellow inmates, he began the long trek up to the upper part of the island.

The stone island jugged upward from the sea like a huge boulder; Firo judged that the highest part of the island was maybe fifty yards or so above sea level. The island might be about five hundred yards lengthwise, but the width of it was probably less than half of that.

Somehow it really does feel like Arsène Lupin or Professor Moriarty might've made their hideouts here.

Firo realized that he knew almost nothing about the island save the rumors that everyone else had heard, and he cursed his lack of knowledge. He probably could've stood to read some newspaper articles about the place before coming, at the very least.

There was a white building in the center of the island that seemed to loom up before him as he walked, which he surmised was probably the prison proper. A few more buildings dotted the land around it, giving it the feel of a fortress in the middle of nowhere.

The metal of the docks had been so severely rusted that Firo almost thought that they'd made it that way on purpose—perhaps to impress upon new inmates the age of the place—but the building in the center of the island was so obviously new that it was even a little unnerving, giving the onlooker a sense of twisted utilitarian beauty.

Yeah, somehow I don't think escape's gonna be an option.

Alcatraz was fully furnished with tall observation towers and other defenses that had served to keep invaders at bay when it was a military installation, and now they came together with the prison's natural location to form a truly inescapable barrier cutting the prisoners off from the outside.

Firo had heard tell of the lethal currents and biting cold that prevented any attempt at swimming away, but truth be told, when he looked up at the vigilant guards and their long rifles, constantly looking this way and that, he wagered that any escape attempt would probably be stopped by a well-placed bullet long before the inmates reached the sea.

They're more like soldiers than guards, aren't they.

A fine sweat dotted Firo's brow as he walked onward, new portions of the horizon slowly coming into view. He could see the blue ocean, the great bridge spanning San Francisco Bay, the civilian buildings on either side, and all of these looked even more beautiful and vibrant than they had before.

...I wonder what's taking so long. If these were stairs, we'd probably be on the tenth floor by now.

The incline was steeper than he'd thought. It made the walk up to the prison building a bit taxing, especially with his hands bound as they were.

The sea breeze had just begun to cool the sweat on his brow when Firo and the others finally came to a stop.

The guards who'd made the trek with them made a signal toward the door. A bell sounded from inside, and the door built into the stone wall opened.

The first thing that greeted his eyes were rows of steel bars, and past that was what Firo thought was probably the administrative office. He could see guards looking back at him behind the glass windows.

Firo and the other inmates began to walk forward on the guards' orders, looking around uncertainly, but stopped as one of the guards stepped forward and culled Firo from the rest.

"You're going this way."

The prisoners who'd come with him stared at Firo strangely, but the other guards urged them on, and soon enough they disappeared around a nearby corner.

"Why'm I—"

"I don't recall giving you permission to speak," the guard who'd remained with Firo said curtly, and Firo shut up and instead looked at the man's face. At least it wasn't the same guard who'd talked to him about Huey back on the boat, and Firo allowed himself to relax just a little.

The guard led Firo to a room at the end of the hall and opened the door, revealing a man sitting inside a sparsely decorated room, the humble desk and bookcases giving it the feel of an everyday office.

The owner of the room looked up and saw Firo, then shifted his gaze to the guard. It must have been a silent signal, for the guard nodded once and excused himself immediately.

Left alone in the room with the man, Firo let his gaze wander over to him.

He wore a crisply pressed business suit, a marked departure from the drab guard uniforms he'd seen on the island so far. From the looks of his receding hairline, he was already starting to go bald, and the wrinkles on his face gave him a sharp, wizened appearance. But contrary to his intimidating looks, the aging man smiled warmly as he rose to greet Firo.

Firo thought at first that he might be the warden, but the man himself soon proved him wrong.

"Hello, Mr. Prochainezo. I'm Misery, the special administrator here at Alcatraz."

"Special?"

"Well, technically, my official position is 'vice-warden's assistant', but seeing as how I and a select few of the guards are going to be administrating a special being—that being you, of course—in Warden Johnston's stead, I thought I'd try and live it up for once."

"Are you working with Victor Talbot?" Firo asked cautiously, mindful of the fact that he was in someone else's territory, but Misery only smiled, as though relieved that Firo knew what he was talking about.

"Hmm. Yes, I've heard about you from Mr. Talbot. I just want you to know, Mr. Prochainezo, that I was against this plan from the start. You are an outsider and an immortal, just like the

very special guest we have staying in this prison, and I strongly advised against using you like this."

"I sorta wish you'd try'd to persuade him a little more forcefully, if you get my drift."

"Oh, believe me, we tried. We beat him and stabbed him and kicked him and shot him, but he's more bullheaded than you'd believe. We tried to hold his family hostage as a last resort, but alas. Mr. Talbot is single."

Huh, so he has a sense of humor.

Firo let some of the tension in his body slip away as he settled back, listening to what Misery had to say.

"I assume that Mr. Talbot has filled you in about the reason for your visit here, of course. About Huey Laforet."

"Yeah, kind of."

"Mmm, good. I'll get straight to the point, then. The important thing is that Laforet has several organizations under his direct control, and according to Mr. Talbot's sources, some of them are beginning to move. It seems that they're going to start something over in New York, sometime in the next few days. Something big."

"In New York?"

"In New York. So Mr. Talbot came up with the idea to send you here, since not only are you immortal, Laforet has no idea who you are, so he won't be able to prepare for your arrival."

It was unwelcome news, but not entirely unexpected.

Come to think of it, the whole start of this mess had been with the ruckus at the Mist Wall a year back, and that had been mostly the fault of Huey's lackeys as well. When he thought back to how strange they'd been, he could easily see them being volatile enough to be cause for concern.

And they tried to get at Ennis too, didn't they...

Firo grit his teeth, thinking of one of Huey's men in particular—a tall, grinning man with sharp teeth and red eyes. But it wasn't like he could go back to New York and act on his new found knowledge. It made him so anxious he couldn't think straight, thinking that perhaps Victor had withheld the information from him on purpose.

He couldn't solve anything by going on a rampage now. The only thing he could do was work on the inside to stop Huey Laforet.

"...So. Sorry if this comes off a little blunt, but..."

"Yes?"

"What you're telling me is that if I want to save my friends in New York, I might have to devour Huey Laforet? Is that what you want me to do? And the reason it has to be me is 'cause Huey would be on guard if Talbot came himself, but I can sneak up on him and eat him before he realizes I'm an immortal?"

There was a short silence as Misery thought it over. At length, he shook his head.

"...No. No, I do not think that even Mr. Talbot would be so cold."

"You think, but you don't know."

"Hmm... All I can tell you is that I, personally, would not wish for that outcome. Regardless, until the time comes, I must inform you I can't afford to treat you any differently from the other inmates. Don't expect any special privileges. The guards working with me will contact you when the time is right. Until then, do try not to do anything that might alert Laforet to your nature."

Firo just had to smirk and shake his head at that.

"Sorry, but I think that cat's already out of the bag."

"...What?"

"He already knows. He knows that I'm coming, and he knows that I'm immortal," Firo said, launching into an explanation about what had happened on the boat, and though his voice was calm and steady, inside he was cursing his luck and shaking his head in resignation.

"I see..."

Misery slumped and put a hand to his forehead as Firo finished telling him about the guard who'd been working for Huey, looking resigned and tired.

"You look like you were expecting this."

"Oh, I was. It's one of the things about him that confounds us most."

Misery explained that Huey was somehow not only obtaining information from the outside, but he also seemed to be able to give orders to his cronies across the country while still inside his cell, cut off from all outside contact.

"As you already know, a very small number of the guards are working for him. But we have no evidence, and they refuse to talk when we question them, and their backgrounds, when we study them, are entirely ordinary. When the warden moves them to different prisons, only a few days pass before more guards turn up in his employ."

"Sounds like he really makes you earn that paycheck, huh."

"It's not a laughing matter, I assure you. What's most disconcerting about it is that Laforet's ability to gather information simply cannot be explained, even taking the double agents in our staff into account."

"Yeah, I can see that."

Only a select few outside of Firo's friends and Family knew that he was an immortal, after all. The Daily Days knew, and Firo was certain that the information brokers would probably be more than happy to sell the information for the right price, but somehow he doubted that Huey had access to a phone that'd let him call the newspaper in New York.

Maybe Misery himself was working for Huey.

Firo gave it a moment's thought and dismissed it. It was an unlikely theory at best, and besides, he had the feeling that Misery would've revealed it once they were alone had it been true.

Damn. I guess I just have to make do with what I've got.

It seemed that Victor had sent him to Alcatraz to try and find out just how Huey was getting his information. But contrary to the federal agent's intentions, Firo was going in not with an advantage, but a severe handicap. Firo sighed deeply once more, realizing just how much the odds were stacked against him.

Misery shook his head pityingly, then suddenly snapped his fingers as though remembering something.

"Oh, that's right. One last thing before I send you on your way."

"Yeah?"

"What do you think of the inmates who came in with you?"

"Huh?"

Was he talking about the three men who'd been on the boat with him? Firo thought it a strange question to ask—he hadn't been allowed to talk to them at all, so what could he say? The most he could offer regarding them were his thoughts on what they looked like.

"Why do you want to know?" Firo asked at length, answering the question with a question.

"Oh, no reason. It's just that yours was the only name on today's list, you see."

"What?"

"What, indeed. Things have been exceedingly busy these past few days here at Alcatraz. So busy, in fact, that someone apparently misplaced a scheduling order, and three men who were supposed to be transferred here next week were mistakenly placed on the boat with you."

It was a strange story. It didn't strike Firo as particularly sinister, but something was definitely up. He'd figured that Victor's people had done the fixing to make Firo's sudden transferal to the island seem less suspicious, but it appeared that wasn't the case.

"Did any of them feel different? A little out of the ordinary, perhaps?"

"No, not really... I guess the white guy kept talking to himself, sounded a little funny in the head, but nothing much besides that."

"I see... Perhaps... No, no. Forget it. They're going to be your neighbors, so try and get along with them. Though I must inform you, chatting among inmates is strictly forbidden."

What, am I supposed to know sign language or something now?

Firo grumbled to himself as he shucked off his clothes, getting ready for his physical examination.

Naked as the day he was born, the young gangster frowned as he glanced sidelong at the guard stationed at the entrance. The doctor he could understand, but to be quite honest it was a little embarrassing to have the guard watching as well.

With swift, practiced motions, the doctor examined his nose, mouth, and ears, making sure Firo hadn't hidden anything inside. Then he gave a quick tug and ruffle to make sure that Firo's hair was indeed his own, and moved on to a basic physical checkup and cavity search that managed to be both blindingly quick and exceedingly thorough.

Having to endure an invasive cavity search before someone else's eyes would normally have had Firo blushing scarlet and vowing to get revenge on whoever had subjected him to such an

ignoble disgrace, but the search was over and done with before he could even get properly angry.

Huh. That was something else.

Firo reached for his clothes, shrugging tiredly to himself, but the guard who'd been watching him apparently had different thoughts.

"Hands off the clothes."

"What?"

"We've got the latest in fashion waiting in your cell. Guess who gets to walk naked all the way there?"

Surrounded by uniformed guards, Firo made no effort to hide the fierce scowl on his face as he walked the halls of Alcatraz without a stitch on. Unable to take out his foul mood on the men around him, he had no choice but to turn his anger inward at himself.

They turned the corner, and Firo found himself looking down a long hallway.

He could hear noises all around him—not a cacophony of voices as might be expected, but enough to give him an idea of just how many people were there.

So this is where we stay in this place, huh.

Iron bars lined the walls, as far as he could see. Behind them were tight rows of cells, just large enough to house one person each, giving Firo the feeling that human beings had been packed into the building like sardines.

Looks like it's two... no, three stories high?

Firo saw that the cells were stacked atop one another as well, and Firo amended the image in this head to that of a beehive, though of course there was no way the inmates could enter and exit as freely as actual bees might.

Bad enough we're stuck on this island. Did they really have to make the cells this small while they were at it?

Sadly, he didn't really have the presence of mind to think beyond that, given his current state of dress.

A few of the inmates looked up as Firo walked past, scoping out the new fish. Most of them took a perfunctory glance at his face and were done with it, but a few of them stared at him hungrily, their eyes roaming up and down over his body.

"Welcome to Broadway, *doll*," someone whispered.

Firo looked toward where the sound had come from and saw a short man with heavy jowls leering back at him, blackened teeth peeking out from behind cracked lips.

I got your face, asshole.

Firo snorted and moved on, musing darkly about what he'd do to the pudgy bastard when he got the chance, but one of the guards motioned for him to wait, coming to a stop himself in front of the short man's cell.

"Shut up," the guard said.

He hadn't even raised his voice, but the two words reverberated through the hall, seeming to fill the very air with their presence.

"Next wise guy who wants to try and be funny gets to practice their repertoire in the Hole."

Silence fell like a blanket over the long hallway.

Inwardly marveling at the way the guard's words had worked their magic, Firo kept walking with the guards until they were about halfway down the hall, still on the first floor. One of them motioned him to look to the left, and Firo found himself staring into a vacant cell.

A guard standing at the end of the hall flipped a switch and the heavy cell door swung inward. Another nudged him inside and raised a hand, signaling the guard manning the switch to close the door.

"Let me give you some advice," the man said in a low voice, his tone sympathetic but stern. "I know that bastard just now must've pissed you off, but don't try and take matters into your own hands. You try it, and the rules say we have to send you to the Hole—that means solitary confinement in the dungeons under Alcatraz.

"On this island, prisoners aren't allowed conveniences like revenge."

"The latest fashion, huh," Firo mused to himself, holding up the clothes that had been left on his bed.

They were rugged work clothes, made to last rather than to look pretty, colored in drab tones of dark navy blue. Most of the prison's population probably wore similar clothing.

Firo didn't really care to think about it any further. Glad to have anything to cover himself, he quickly put them on and then took a more careful look at the clothes on his bed, surprised to find that he'd been given quite a few articles of clothing.

They'd only given him one pair of pants, but he had a spare shirt and spare underwear as well. Six pairs of socks were arranged neatly on the bed, next to a hat, a handkerchief, and even a belt. They'd even given him two pairs of shoes, one pair for casual wear and one more sturdy pair for working.

And the most welcome surprise of all was the wool coat hanging from a peg on the back wall of his cell.

Hmm, at least I won't have to worry about freezing to death.

His own immortality slipped his mind for a moment, and he looked curiously around his new home.

The bed was connected directly to the wall, supported by iron chains. In the far corner was an open toilet, and next to that was a wash basin. Firo gave one of the knobs an experimental turn and made a small noise of surprise as clear water gushed out, far more forcefully than he'd expected.

On the wall opposite of his bed was a folding desk and chair to go with it. Even more unexpected was the fact that he'd been provided with a wide variety of supplies, with toiletries on a shelf near the sink and various other necessities on the desk.

A razor.

A metal cup.

An eye mask.

A comb.

Soap.

A toothbrush, and toothpaste to go with it.

A nail clipper.

A roll of toilet paper.

Shoe polish.

There was even a small broom for sweeping the floor, propped up in the corner.

A thin pamphlet had been left on the desk as well, labeled "Institution Rules & Regulations." Firo flipped idly through it as he gave his cell another quick once-over. To be honest, he hadn't been expecting so many commodities in Alcatraz of all places, and for a moment he even allowed himself to think that perhaps things wouldn't be so bad after all.

Then he looked up at the ceiling, and his rising spirits fell once more.

The ceiling was abnormally low, making Firo feel like it might come down and crush him at any moment, and the harsh light from the single naked bulb hanging from it stabbed at his eyes and sensitive skin.

He glanced over to the cell across from him and saw that the man there was currently squatting near his toilet.

Firo looked away, snarling as he realized what that meant. The fact that he could see right into the cell across from him meant that the same also applied in reverse, and the knowledge made him wish he could leave as fast as he could.

— —

Firo's first roll call after his incarceration informed him that the hulking black man and the lean Asian man from back on the boat were his cell neighbors. Perhaps the three men who had originally been held in the cells had been released recently, or perhaps they had simply been "removed" by other means to get Firo and the others together. Either way, the constantly mumbling white man who'd also been with him on the boat seemed to have been put somewhere else.

Now what do I do?

Firo decided to look on the bright side of things instead of continuing to mope about his plight. He thought to himself that at least he didn't need to worry about the ceiling and walls collapsing around him, as had been the case in his boyhood when he'd often lived in shoddy, rundown buildings.

The problem was the food.

He'd heard plenty of horror stories about prison meals.

According to Randy and Pecho, who'd served prison sentences themselves in the past, prison food was so terrible that even liquor made from diluted industrial-grade alcohol was better. So bad, in fact, that they'd solemnly sworn never to get caught ever again. The fact that they hadn't actually been inclined to clean up their acts despite their horrible experience had been cause for many laughs among the Martillos at the time, but now it just depressed Firo to think about it.

After all, if things had been that bad in a normal prison, what kind of slop would they serve in a place that even hardened criminals called Hell?

The thoughts refused to leave his head, and Firo naturally found his feet dragging as he headed to the cafeteria for his first ever prison meal.

The first thing he noticed as he entered the cafeteria was that it felt entirely different from the long rows of cells.

Where the cell blocks, affectionately called "Broadway" by the inmates, had felt crowded and claustrophobic, the cafeteria felt somehow wide and open. Even the blasé walls and ceiling, just as inexpressive and flat as those of his own cell, didn't feel quite as oppressive.

For a moment, he even felt free.

Firo would have liked to stop and take a deep breath, but the long line of people urged him on, and he had no choice but to keep his place. One by one, the inmates were given their metal trays, and one by one they held them out for their food, and one by one they left, dispersing to sit at the tables they chose.

Looking around again as he stepped out of the line with his food, Firo saw that the cafeteria was already filling up with people, banishing the sense of freedom and openness that he'd felt a few moments before.

It seemed that the inmates were expected to take seats at the far side first and move in from there in order, but despite that Firo could spy a few groups forming naturally among them.

The whites and blacks sat apart from one another.

He didn't know whether someone had invited him or he'd made the decision himself, but Firo saw that the black man who'd come in with him had already taken a seat together with several other blacks, and even the lean Asian had found one of the few Asian groups and now sat with them, wordlessly shoveling food into his mouth.

The white man been on the boat with Firo was seated at the far end of the cafeteria by himself, shivering and shaking, but Firo couldn't be bothered to go that far. He decided he'd just take a seat nearby and eat.

According to Misery, any one of those three—or perhaps even all of them—might possibly have an ulterior motive in entering Alcatraz.

At first, Firo had thought of it in simple terms, the Department of Investigation versus Huey, but now that he gave it a bit more thought, he decided that there might be other factions, other interests taking part in the situation.

Maybe Huey had called them in to help him escape.

The only thing he could confidently say was that they probably weren't on his side. Misery would have told him if they were; the FBI agent had no reason to hide that sort of information from him.

Whatever. Everyone here's an enemy anyway.

He had to watch his back at all times. Everyone was a stranger, and he could afford to trust no one.

Steeling himself mentally, Firo prepared to flip the switch inside himself that would tuck away his emotions, leaving him cold and ruthless.

"Huh?!"

A loud squawk suddenly rose above the quiet murmur in the cafeteria, naturally leading all the inmates to look toward where it had come from. Just the sound of it was like a bucket of cold water to Firo's face,

"Firo? Firo, is that you? It is!"

His shoulders slumped, the dark musings of a moment ago promptly exiting stage left.

Wait wait wait wait wait. Hold on just a damn second here.

He recognized that voice.

This time it was a voice that came from his own memories, not ones that had belonged to Szilard Quates.

*What the hell is **he** doing here?!*

Slowly, reluctantly, he looked up to the voice's owner, and saw a very familiar man waving vigorously at him with both hands, a huge grin plastered on his face.

Isaac!

Firo shook his head fiercely, willing himself to wake up in case he was dreaming, but the man who'd been arrested a month before him stubbornly refused to disappear.

Y'know, I thought it was a bit weird we never heard what happened to him after the cops got him, but I didn't think he'd be here of all places...

...Wait, huh?

The other inmates just groaned and shook their heads when they saw who'd caused the commotion, turning back to their meals and lifting their utensils again as though nothing had happened.

What's up with them?

The guards, too, merely sighed and looked meaningfully at one another, walking up and falling into position around Isaac as though this sort of thing happened all the time. They moved like a well-oiled machine, surrounding him from all sides in an instant.

"You again?"

"Hmm? Me again?"

Two guards reached up and snatched Isaac's hands mid-wave, and two others stooped and grabbed hold of his legs.

"Yeah. You again."

"I'm sorry, sirs. Is this some sort of joke?"

"The only joke around here is the one you're making of the rules. No talking among inmates, remember? Well, I guess your tenth visit to the dungeons will refresh your memory. We'll even throw in an extra pair of chains free of charge, just for the occasion."

The guards lifted Isaac bodily up into the air as though he was some sort of bizarre household appliance, swiftly carrying him through the cafeteria toward the door on the far end.

Firo found himself at a loss for words at the bizarre sight, and all he could do was idly spin his spoon around as he watched.

His hands and feet now bound, Isaac could only squirm feebly as he raised his voice in complaint to the guards around him.

"Ack! What are you people doing? That wasn't a joke at all! I was just giving a New York style hello in celebration of a long overdue reunion! Unhand me!"

The guards ignored him, hoisting Isaac up higher as they carried him away, their easy practiced trot making it clear it was far from the first time they'd done this sort of thing.

"Yeah, yeah, we've heard it all before."

"Shut up and get ready for your stay in the Hole."

"Sorry, pal, but this isn't New York."

"Look on the bright side, you get to enjoy another round of our Alcatraz style hospitality."

"Shh. Come on, champ, upsy daisy. We're moving you over to a nice dark room so you can get some rest all by yourself. Man, I'm so jealous."

The guards approached the cafeteria exit with Isaac in tow, quipping snidely at him as they left.

What should I do? Should I even do anything?

Firo twiddled his thumbs idly, wondering if he should try and help, wondering if he could change anything even if he did try and help his friend against the guards. His train of thought was rudely interrupted as Isaac actually replied to the guards carting him around like a sofa.

"You're jealous? Why? They don't even give you as much food down there, and the chains make it so hard to move!"

"You can lose weight thanks to your new diet, and pulling on the chains'll give you free exercise."

"Hmm. You make a compelling point. Alright, everyone, to the dungeons we go! But wait, am I really that fat?"

"You've got a fat head if that counts. Now shut up."

Err... Well...

Eh. Whatever, I guess.

Firo gave up and shrugged, deciding to take the situation in stride.

At least I know I can trust him...

He had to admit he could breathe a little easier, knowing that there was at least someone on the island who he could confide in...

"Hey, you know that idiot? It looked like he was-"

"Never seen him before," Firo replied smoothly, cutting off the guard mid-sentence. He turned away and sighed, smirking bitterly.

...Though I don't know how much I can depend on him.

— —

It had been just for a moment, but the air in the cafeteria had deviated from the norm.

Now, though, things were quickly going back to normal, the cause of the disturbance carted off to solitary confinement. Firo watched Isaac disappear through the door out of the corner of his eye and turned to look at his food, intent on shoveling it all down while tasting as little of it as possible.

Huh?

He'd been expecting to see something resembling pig slop, which made the sight that greeted his eyes all the more surprising.

He'd only given his tray the most cursory of glances before he sat down, distracted by the complicated thoughts running through his head. Now that he took a closer look, though, he was mildly shocked to see an array of dishes on his tray that actually seemed quite appetizing. Steam still rose lazily from the hot food, and even the amount of it wasn't much different from what he was used to.

He could see chopped carrots and greens floating enticingly in the creamy soup, and the garlic rice looked like it had been carefully fried to keep any of the grains from cooking unevenly. Next to the soup basin on his tray was a slot for a fresh-looking green salad and another that housed the main dish: a hefty Salisbury steak, generously slathered with thick, savory-smelling brown gravy.

What the hell?

Maybe it just *looked* good, though even as he thought it Firo wondered why anyone would go to the trouble of making bad food at that merely looked delicious. He looked suspiciously down at his oddly appealing food and gave the steak an experimental press with the back of his fork.

It wasn't quite on the level of what he'd expect from a restaurant, but the mouth-watering smell that rose from the meaty juices as they welled up between his fork's slender tines was more than enough to elicit a hearty grumble from his stomach.

Cautiously, he took a bite, and his eyes widened as his taste buds welcomed a taste far richer than what he'd imagined. It caught him completely off guard, all the more so because he'd been dreading a terrible meal all along.

The soup, too, was thick and creamy, much better than the stuff he made himself at home. The vegetables floating in it were still firm and flavorful as well, and their crisp crunch as he bit down was almost enough to make him forget he was on an island prison off the coast of San Francisco, boxed in on all sides by drab walls of concrete.

This is really weird. This stuff's...

"Pretty tasty, isn't it?"

He'd just finished spooning the last of the vegetables into his mouth when the inmate sitting next to him chose to start up a conversation.

"I know how you feel. I probably had the same look on my face when I took my first bite, too."

Huh? Wait, am I allowed to talk?

The memory of Isaac being put in solitary for raising his voice still fresh in his mind, Firo hesitated, wondering if he should risk replying.

"Don't worry about talking," the man beside him said, smirking. "The guards used to come running the moment a guy opened his mouth at first, but now they'll let you talk here in the cafeteria as long as you don't get too loud."

"Huh. Why'd they loosen up the rules?"

"The warden who runs the place is smart, see. He knows that if he keeps the inmates cooped up too tight, they'll get mad. And mad inmates are a hell of a lot harder to deal with than happy ones. It's not like the guards want to deal with a riot any more than we really want to start one. You can bet the news would be all over that kind of thing."

"Yeah, I can see that," Firo replied softly, glancing toward the guard standing nearby as he spoke. Sure enough, the guard didn't even glance in his direction. Firo listened carefully and realized that he could actually hear the quiet sounds of low conversation everywhere in the cafeteria.

"Though calling us happy inmates would be a stretch. Prison is still hell, and boring hell at that, after all. Look around you. Most of these goons are already dead on the inside, just waiting for their bodies to catch up. The lights are on but nobody's home."

"That's a shame, I guess."

"Hey, actually, you're new here, aren't you? Tell me, how'd they ship you here?"

"Me? I got on a train that took me to San Francisco, and then the boat at the docks took me the rest of the way."

The man sitting beside him nodded, smiling broadly, and said, "I was one of the first guys in this place. They shunted us down here twenty, thirty people at a time. I spent three days cuffed on a train with two dozen other guys, and you know what? We never got off that train 'till we got here."

"Huh?"

How could he had gotten to an island by train? Firo looked askance at the inmate next to him, but the man only grinned back.

"They put the whole damn train car on a boat and shipped us over."

"...You're kidding me."

"Hah, of course I'm not. Us Americans, we like to do things big, you know? And hell, it worked, didn't it? It's actually kind of impressive, to be honest."

Firo gave a low, appreciative whistle at the other man's story, then noticed that something was different about his impromptu conversation partner.

"You're not like the others, are you? I don't think *you* look like you're dead on the inside."

"Huh? Oh, me? That's because I have something I want to do."

Firo took that to mean that the man had some sort of goal waiting for him outside. He didn't know how long the other man's sentence was, but he had to respect the kind of mental fortitude that kept that cheeky smile on his face despite his bleak conditions.

The man gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Well anyway, worst comes to worst we'll be seeing a lot more of each other for years to come, so if there's anything about this place you don't know, you can just ask me."

"Yeah, thanks. I'm Firo. You?"

Firo offered his left hand for a handshake, then hastily drew it back as he realized just why the other man's left arm had barely been moving as he ate.

"Hey... Your arm..."

"Oh, this?"

The man lifted his limp left hand with his right and let it drop.

A dull thud came from the table as his hand made contact, and the sturdy wood even shook slightly.

"It's a prosthetic. Pretty well made, don't you think?"

"Whoa... Is that made of metal? How'd they even let you keep that thing?"

"Special permission. This thing's actually bolted straight to my bones, so they don't know what might happen if they tried to take it off. I don't even know myself. Maybe it'd kill me."

At first Firo thought the man was joking, but he let it go without asking any more questions. It wasn't like he could actually think of a good reason why the guards would let him keep a metal arm, so he shrugged and put it out of his mind.

The man with the fake arm grinned and held it out for a handshake.

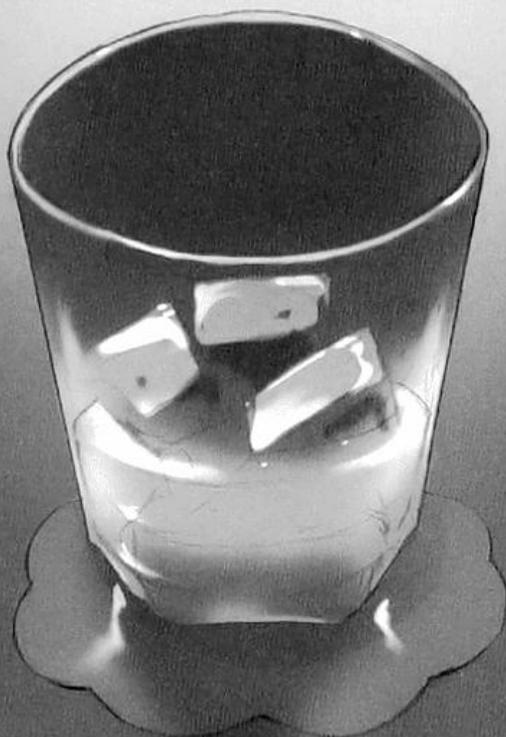
"The name's Ladd. Ladd Russo. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The man's smile was feral, somehow. Wild and savage. Firo mused to himself that if a wolf could smile, that might be what it looked like.

The thought lingered for some reason, refusing to leave Firo's mind as he took hold of the cold metal and shook.

And through it all, he remained blissfully unaware of the strange connection that linked them together...

**CHAPTER 2 BACK
LET'S TRY AND START
A CONVERSATION**



New York Millionaire Row

It all started with Carnegie.

In the year 1901, Andrew Carnegie built a mansion on 5th Avenue, setting in motion the process that would transform the largely ignored street on the outskirts of Manhattan into a place of dreams. In the present day it was known as Millionaire Row, and it was filled with fantastic houses built by those who had gathered there, following the steel baron's lead. Most of them came from similar backgrounds as Carnegie himself, their immense fortunes built on a single generation's worth of shrewd business.

The street, like those who now lived on it, embodied the American dream of rags to riches. It became a part of that vision itself; those who dreamed of becoming rich and famous told themselves that one day, they too would build houses of their own on Millionaire Row.

Even those who argued that money wasn't everything had to acknowledge that there were indeed people who had found happiness through wealth, and that such people could be found living on 5th Avenue.

And in this place of fabulous riches and dreams come true, someone was crying.

It was a young man, the sad expression on his face quite the opposite of what one might expect from someone living in the lap of luxury.

"Oooh... Oh no, oh no..."

"C'mon, Jacuzzi. Stop that. You're crying so much you're making me sad too."

"Oooh... B-but... Ack... I mean, I-I-I'm so, sorry, Nice..."

The young man had his cheek pressed against a marble pillar, tears dripping down to soak the red carpet.

The fearsome tattoo on his face, shaped like a wickedly curved sword, might give a casual observer the impression of a hardened man, one who had little use for tears. But a closer look would reveal that he still possessed many traces of boyhood, and the weepy droop of his eyes made it easy to envision him crying his heart out.

The woman kneeling next to him, trying her best to stop his tears, also looked quite peculiar.

She was young, perhaps around the same age as the crying young man. She was pretty enough, but her looks were marred by the scar that ran down her face and over her right eye, and the black eye patch she wore over that. The scars and eye patch clashed with the smart pair of glasses she wore as well, giving her an appearance that was neither here nor there when all was said and done. Certainly not what one might expect to see on Millionaire Row.

And they weren't the only ones. Quite a few people were gathered in a loose ring around the strange couple, and they, too, looked like nothing less than a gang of malcontents from the wrong side of town.

"B-but, Nice, think about it... Mr. Graham, he's... he's..."

"Don't be so sad about it, Jacuzzi. If you keep on crying like that, he won't be able to move on."

The onlookers turned to each other, holding a whispered debate over what they'd just overheard.

"Hold up, what's going on?"

"Huh?"

"The hell happened? Someone died?"

"Don't ask me. Jacuzzi was already crying when I got back."

"Speaking of which, don'cha think he gets worse with that crying the older he gets?"

"You think he might run outta tears soon?"

"Where do tears come from, anyway? I think I heard somewhere that they come from your brain."

"Ugh, Jesus. So it's like brain snot? That's creepy."

"Jacuzzi, talking about dying, crying. Cry... die. Mmm... Is someone dead?"

"Hyaha."

"Kihya."

"Dammit, I dunno what the hell's going on. Hey, John, what's he crying about this time?"

"Oh, umm, well. You remember Graham Specter?"

"Who?"

"You really don't know about him? Well, he's something like the boss of the punks around this neighborhood, and back when we first came to New York we had a bit of a scuffle with him. Then he helped us out once, and we had a bit of an adventure together, and now he's sort of backing us up. Turns out he's a good person, and a fast friend."

"Huh, never knew about that."

"Well, you should. You know the warehouse at the docks we use as a hideout? Graham gave that to us... though, then again, I suppose the land technically belongs to someone else, so we're using it without permission anyway."

"Wow, I never knew that either. So why's he crying? This Graham guy dead?"

"Hyaha."

"Of course he's not. If this was actually something serious Nice would've given him some time alone to deal with it."

"Wha? He's still alive? But didn't Nice just say something about him 'moving on' just now?"

"She meant 'moving on' to Chicago, silly."

"Chicago?"

The rest of the gang suddenly gathered around John, inviting themselves into the conversation as the name of their old haunt passed the Irishman's lips. They still thought of it as their home; they'd only been forced to leave because of a conflict with the local mafia there.

"What'd you just say? Chicago?"

"Wait, *that* Chicago? The Windy City? Hey, I think I've heard about that place."

"Maybe 'cause we used to live there, dumbass."

"Man, I miss it already."

"You think they remember us?"

"You think the Russos're still around?"

"I wonder when we'll get to go back."

"Why d'you wanna? You ask me, I'm fine with living it up in this big house for good."

"Heheh."

"Hyaha."

Jacuzzi heard none of what was going on around him, still preoccupied with the matter that weighed on his mind.

"But Nice, it's all my fault! Mr. Graham had to expand because we took up part of his turf! And that made him move in on a big gang's territory, and nuh, now they're after him and I dunno what to do and-"

"That's why he hoofed it over to Chicago, and now that he's there he's safe. I told you, don't worry about it."

"B-but he said he was going to help these mafia guys he knew... and then he, he told me to take care of myself because he might never be coming back, and, and, I couldn't stop him, but I can't go back to Chicago to help him either, and, but, and, what am I gonna *do*..."

Jacuzzi continued to sob pitifully, running himself ragged and talking himself into a corner.

The rest of his gang sighed and settled in for the long haul, waiting for Nice to finish the arduous process of getting Jacuzzi Splot out of a proper crying jag.

There was one person in the house, though, who wasn't content to sit and watch. She strode up behind Jacuzzi and bopped him smartly on the head with the book in her left hand.

Jacuzzi started and looked up, tears still flowing down his cheeks, and saw a blonde woman frowning sternly down at him.

"What're you thinking, Jacuzzi? If you keep crying so much, you'll wipe out that pretty painting on your face!"

"Mi, Miria?!"

Caught completely flat-footed, Jacuzzi reached up to feel his tattoo despite himself, his breath catching in his throat. His fingers came away unstained, but he couldn't help but turn to Nice and make sure.

"I-is it still there? Did I smudge it?"

"Don't sweat it, Jacuzzi. I don't think I've ever heard of anyone crying off a tattoo."

"Whew..."

The tattoo meant a lot to him, and Jacuzzi put a hand to his forehead and breathed a huge sigh of relief once he was sure it was safe and sound, his face lightening as though a great weight had been lifted from his chest.

Miria smiled and said, "See? Doesn't it look so much prettier now that you're not crying anymore?"

And how could he keep crying in the face of such a sunny smile?

Miria was actually a little older than Jacuzzi, but her carefree cheer made it honestly hard to tell who was older between her and the members of Jacuzzi's gang.

Jacuzzi wiped his tears away and smiled back at her. "Of course! What was I thinking, sitting here crying over something like this when Isa-"

He froze like a rabbit caught in headlights as his friends transfixed him with heated glares, their gazes chastising him in lieu of words.

Jacuzzi sat there with his mouth hanging open for a moment, realized just what he'd been about to say, and gasped, glancing at Miria's face.

"Umm.... Err... Miria...?"

Her hair hid her face from view, making it impossible to read her expression, but from the slump of her shoulders it was obvious that the sunny disposition from a moment ago had vanished.

"Isaac," she whispered, so low that it would have gone unheard, if not for the sudden silence.

The name, spoken like a plea, went unanswered. Perhaps that was too much for her to bear, for a choked noise escaped Miria's throat, and her shoulders began to tremble.

Ack, she's crying.

The teenagers around her looked away and shuffled their feet awkwardly, holding their breath and waiting for what would happen next. She'd probably burst into tears soon, her face crumpling with grief.

But instead Miria swallowed hard, forcing down the sob that threatened to escape. Biting her lip, she turned away and grabbed a nearby doorknob.



"...I won't cry."

"Miria..."

"No, I'm fine! Sorry for making you worry. Not like I could solve anything by crying, right?"

She whirled in place to look at them, and the smile on her face then was the same as ever. But the way she talked more rapidly than usual, almost tripping over the words, made it clear that even the brave front she put on was a precarious thing at best.

"Isaac said he likes me more when I smile, and when Isaac's happy, I'm happy! So I'm not going to cry! So there!"

And with that she flung open the door and dashed out, slamming it behind her as she left in a flurry of frenetic energy.

The rest of Jacuzzi's gang exchanged uneasy glances.

"'I'm not going to cry'? Didn't she cry for like three days straight when she came here last month?"

"Yeah, I remember that. And then Jacuzzi went an' started crying right along with her. Yeesh, what a headache..."

"That's enough out of you all!" Nice snapped, and the chuckles died quiet, abrupt deaths.

"H-hey, easy, Nice. It was just a joke."

Jacuzzi watched his friends backing off, their hands raised to placate Nice, and a cloud passed over his face once more.

"Oh, I shouldn't have gone and said that. I-I'm terrible.."

"Jacuzzi! You stop that, too! You're just gonna start crying over nothing again!"

"S-sorry, Nice... B-but... oooh..."

And so it all started again, like a comedic farce. John sighed and shook his head, turning to the Asian man standing next to him.

"Come to think of it, Fang. It was Chane who stopped Miria's crying, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, was surprising. They never saw much of each other before then, yeah?"

"Mhmm. Where is Chane, anyway? I haven't seen her all day."

"Ah, Chane? She went out today."

John opened his mouth to ask where she'd gone, then closed it, arriving at the most probable conclusion on his own. Still, Fang chuckled and told him anyway.

"She go on date with Mr. Walken."

— —

New York Madison Square Park

The young woman sat on a bench in the park near 5th Avenue, lost in thought.

Madison Square Park was like a splash of green in the middle of the slate grey city.

If one were to look up through the naked canopy of trees, the steel silhouettes of the Empire State Building and other skyscrapers of New York peeking through the leafless branches would have provided a fantastic, surreal sort of backdrop to the park's tranquility.

It was much smaller than Central Park, but that only made it feel even more like an oasis in a desert of concrete, attracting the attentions of pedestrians as they passed by and soothing their worries when they entered.

Chane Laforet sat alone in this verdant shelter, absently watching neighborhood children playing baseball in the last of the snow that had fallen the day before.

She was thinking of the events that had taken place a month ago, when one of Jacuzzi's friends had shown up on their doorstep.

Chane hadn't known Miria very well at the time, to be honest. All she knew was that the woman came to visit Jacuzzi and his gang every once in a while. Sometimes she would make mischief, and at others she would help out with whatever the gang happened to be doing at the time, basically maintaining a more or less affable relationship with her friends. Chane had heard that she'd once saved Jacuzzi's life, and the gang obviously seemed to find them welcome. Chane herself had no personal grudge against the woman either way.

But when she'd appeared at their door alone, Chane had immediately felt that something was wrong.

The man who'd always been by her side hadn't come with her. Chane wasn't that well acquainted with Miria or Isaac, but somewhere along the way she'd come to unconsciously think of the two as one being, only complete when they were together.

She'd thought to herself that maybe they'd had into a fight.

In that case, it was probably none of her business. Chane had turned away then, putting the matter out of her mind, but a couple days later she'd happened to overhear Nice discussing it with Jacuzzi.

"I don't think anybody's heard from Isaac since the cops got him..."

Jacuzzi practically fell apart upon hearing that, and Chane paused as well, stopping to listen.

She gave it a moment's thought and went to the room where Miria was staying.

Miria turned as she opened the door, her eyes still red and bleary. She'd obviously been crying recently.

"Are you alright?" Chane asked. She couldn't speak, but she carried around a notepad to write on that let her communicate her thoughts clearly enough.

Miria read the slip of paper she was offered and managed a weak smile.

"I'm fine... Sorry for being such a bother. It's just, someone told me our apartment isn't safe anymore, and I needed a place to stay. I'm sorry."

Chane just shook her head slowly. She herself hadn't thought of Miria as a nuisance at all, and she knew for a fact that Jacuzzi and his gang didn't see her as a burden, either. Nice often had her hands full with Jacuzzi, for the young man would hear Miria crying and burst into tears himself, but that was Jacuzzi's fault and not Miria's.

Chane peered cautiously at Miria, making sure that she was relatively stable, then wrote, "The police have someone very precious to me as well."

"Oh... Oh, I see. Is he your boyfriend?"

"My father."

It was the first time she'd "talked" with Miria, but the other woman adapted to the quaint method of communication much faster than even Jacuzzi had, striking up a natural rapport with

her near instantly. Miria's face was still wet with tears and she sniffled from time to time, but Chane paid it no attention, instead finding a great fondness growing within her for the woman who'd so readily accepted someone as abnormal as herself.

"...Then it's already been years and years since you saw him?"

"Almost four years."

"Wow... Weren't you sad, Chane?"

The movement of Chane's pen stopped for a moment as she gave it some thought.

It would be a lie to say that there had been no sadness in the space of those years.

But when her father had been taken from her, the only emotion that had boiled up inside her had been pure fury.

Rage had filled her, directed toward those who would dare take her father away. It had even led her to join forces with a group of terrorists who followed her father in an attempt to get him back.

Perhaps she'd only felt true sadness, and true loneliness, after she'd gotten to know Jacuzzi and his friends.

Their camaraderie had taken the edge off of her anger, and sadness had rushed in to fill the space left behind. But soon enough even that feeling of isolation had faded away, erased thanks to her new companions.

So unlike Miria, she had never sobbed into a pillow, soaking it with her tears. Perhaps if her father had been taken from her now, after she'd learned how to open her heart, things might be different. Perhaps if she were to lose her father for good, or if Jacuzzi, or the man to whom she'd given her heart, were to disappear from her life forever...

She didn't even want to imagine it.

Chane hesitated, wondering what to say, and in the end wrote a reply that wasn't much of an answer at all.

"Being sad would not bring him back to me."

"You're right... You're so strong, Chane!"

Chane couldn't bring herself to agree.

Was she truly strong? She'd never thought of herself that way. In fact, she thought to herself that people like Miria, who could cry freely when they lost those they held dearest, were much stronger than she.

Perhaps sensing her hesitation, Miria offered her a soft smile, comforting Chane despite the tears still streaking her own cheeks.

"You're waiting for him to come back, aren't you? Just like I am."

This time, Chane nodded immediately.

"That means we're friends!" Miria said, and a hint of emotion colored Chane's normally expressionless face.

Chane realized that she was even a little interested in hearing Miria's story. She thought it over for a second, then wrote her thoughts onto her pad in neat letters.

"Could you please tell me what he's like?"

"Of course!"

Chane talked with Miria through the small hours of the night. Somewhere along the way, she realized that she was smiling.

The next day, Miria had ventured out of her room, offering the same bright smile to Jacuzzi and his friends as always.

Of course, sometimes she found herself thinking of Isaac, and she did cry when that happened, but she was still much more stable than she'd been at first.

And so Chane sat alone on the bench, thinking back and breathing a silent sigh of relief at Miria's recovery.

To be honest, there wasn't much that Miria could actually do at the moment. The police had Isaac, and the best thing to do would probably be to wait for his release. From what she'd overheard, it didn't seem like the crimes he'd committed were that severe, so perhaps he'd be out soon.

The same couldn't be said for her father.

He'd been arrested on charges of plotting acts of terrorism, but the truth of the matter was somewhat different. Nearly everything about Huey that the papers had reported, from his age to his exploits, had been faked.

As an immortal, her father was unable to lie about his identity, but other people had no such restrictions on lying about him, whether he wished it or not.

She knew that the people who'd arrested her father were probably interested in immortals like him.

It might be years before he was released.

Another immortal might even devour him, and then she'd never see him again. She didn't know.

The only information she had came from a group of people she'd met last year during the Mist Wall incident, a strange band who she'd been told worked for her father.

According to them, her father was not only alive and well, but able to give orders to his subordinates on the outside. It had definitely been cause for relief, but there was no guarantee that her father's relatively favorable situation would last forever. What was more, she had no idea what her father meant to do with his experiments.

Still lost in thought, Chane looked up, taking in the leafless branches, the glass and steel buildings that peeked out past them, and the cerulean sky that completed the image.

What should she do now, with her new knowledge of how the world worked?

Maybe it is my turn to ask them for advice.

She thought of Miria, and Jacuzzi, and Nice.

She thought of the person she was waiting to meet, the one who had first shown her how wide the world really was. The man she loved.

A good half hour still remained until the time they'd agreed to meet, and Chane spent the time staring absently at the tranquil sights around her.

The next moment, a flurry of motion caught her eye, as the birds that had been wandering around the entrance to the park suddenly took flight. Someone had arrived.

Perhaps it was *him*.

Rationally, she knew it probably wasn't, but still she couldn't keep down the expectation that made itself apparent on her normally expressionless face as she looked toward the entrance.

But instead of joy, tension seized her body when she saw the man standing there.

The black coat that covered his body could not hide the fact that he was obviously someone out of the ordinary.

He wore a black eye mask with a white aiming reticle stitched into the center, and he held two long canes in his hands as he walked leisurely toward her.

She'd thought him blind, but there was an odd sureness to his steps as he made a beeline for the bench where she sat.

Who?

She didn't know anyone who wore an eye mask like that, but for some reason she found the man familiar. Desperately she sifted through her memories, trying to remember who he was. The old wound in her right shoulder, long since healed, began to ache, and her brain warned her to be careful.

She wanted to do something—*anything*—but she knew that it would be the height of folly to act rashly when she still couldn't remember who the man was.

The danger signals her instincts sent her, though, had her slowly reaching toward her waist, her expression blank and cold despite the sirens going off inside her.

The distance between them now was only about five yards. Even if the man had a gun, she could cover the gap and take care of him before he could draw and fire.

She sized him up carefully, trying to predict his next move, but she wasn't prepared for him to suddenly stop, his face twisting in a derisive sneer.

"You reached for your knife just now, didn't you?"

How?

"Heh! Heheh... heeheehee... haw haw haw!"

The sound of his braying laughter filled the gap in her memory, and finally she remembered him.

How... He should be dead...!

The man rubbed his goatee thoughtfully and grinned toward Chane, hurling insults her way.

"Well I'll be damned. Who would've thought a fanatic bitch like you'd be sitting here in this park, all lost in thought, pretty as you please like a goddamn painting?"

Spike!

Spike had been a member of Huey Laforet's Lemures, a sniper who preferred lurking in the shadows to strike from afar.

Chane didn't even know if Spike was his real name; everything about his past was a mystery. All that the Lemures knew about him was that he was a crack shot with his sniper rifle, and in truth that was all they really needed to know. All that mattered to them were the results brought about by his bullets.

They'd worked together in taking over the Flying Pussyfoot, but in the end the Lemures had betrayed Chane, and Spike himself had left a bullet wound in her shoulder as a parting gift.

"Hmm, I wonder. What sort of expression could Huey Laforet's daughter have as she stares at me like a goddamn idiot? Maybe she's fallen in love with me at first sight, a delicate blush on her cheeks and tears in her eyes? Not that frigid bitches like you are my type, mind. Me, I like a doll who squirms when I hold her."

Chane held a hand to her right shoulder and wondered how she should react to this specter from her past. It was possible that he'd come on her father's orders, and in that case she couldn't exactly cut him down no matter how repugnant she found him.

"Whoa, whoa there! Hands off the knife, please! I mean, yeah, I know we had our problems in the past, but can't we let bygones be bygones?" Spike spread his arms wide in a sign of peace, but the words coming from his mouth told a different story. "It's not like I'm here to kill you, you know. Not today, at least."

Chane paused, wondering just what he was after. Maybe he had guns hidden inside his canes. She waited silently, her body still rigid with tension and ready to move at a moment's notice.

"Sheesh, would it kill you to trust me a little? Well, whatever. I don't care. I'm here on my boss' orders today. He wanted me to ask Huey's daughter a few questions and come back with answers."

Chane narrowed her eyes, going over the words in her head.

He just called me "Huey's daughter."

And he talked about his "boss."

Logically speaking, it wasn't very probable, then, that Spike's boss was Huey himself.

That meant that he wasn't moving on her father's orders.

And that means I can do what I want.

Chane took a deep breath, deciding to first cut the tendons on his wrists and ankles. She tensed, waiting for the right moment to put her grisly plan into action.

If Spike knew what she was thinking, it didn't show on his face as he continued rambling on blithely, a huge grin creasing his face.

"Come to think of it, how the hell am I supposed to get answers from you? You can't talk, and I can't see. How're we supposed to communicate, eh?"

Chane paid no more attention to his words; the time for conversation was over. She saw him take a breath to continue talking, his lips pursing to voice his next sentence...

"I guess we could go with braille or something, but I think the easiest way to do it'd be..."

Chane kicked forward off the ground, rocketing toward Spike like a cannonball. With her first step she drew her right knife, with the next she drew her left, and with the third she drew them back with blinding speed, prepared to cut Spike's tendons. Having friends had not made her soft.

"...To call an interpreter, right?! Haw haw haw haw!"

And then she was flying.

What...?!

To say she hadn't seen it coming would have been an understatement.

She hadn't even felt anything touch her; one moment she was on the ground and the next she was spinning through the air. Hastily she twisted in midair and managed to right herself, landing on her feet. She'd lost her balance, and the easy rhythm of her breathing had been broken, but her desperate contortion had kept her from landing flat on her back.

She whirled around to face Spike and found him standing exactly where he had been a moment before. He hadn't moved a step.

The only thing that was different was the ebon shadow standing beside him.

All Chane could tell was that it was a man with blond hair. Everything else about him was hidden behind a veil of pitch black: black shoes, a black coat, a black suit and pants that wouldn't have looked altogether out of place at a funeral. Even his face was mostly obscured by the bill of the hunting cap he wore, pressed down deep to hide his features.

Unlike Spike, the man in black was someone Chane didn't recognize at all, but from the looks of it he was probably the one who'd sent her flying through the air.

She grew even warier, but Spike didn't seem to notice. Instead he just gave a low whistle of appreciation.

"Whew. Did you just throw that little rascal right over my head? I gotta say, Felix my friend, you're really something."

Felix?

She knew that name.

In fact, she heard it every day.

Felix Walken was the other name of her beloved, Claire Stanfield, the one he used when he was talking to people other than herself.

But the man standing before her was not Claire. The only thing the two had in common was the dangerous air that surrounded them like a tangible aura, quiet and menacing.

The man in black sighed and shook his head.

"...How many times must I tell you?"

"Huh? Oh, that thing about you selling that name to someone else? Well what the hell'm I supposed to call you then? Think of other people, too, would you? I mean, you probably sold that name 'cause you wanted to put your past behind you, but look how well that turned out. Eh? Am I right or am I right?" Spike chuckled.

The man ignored him and turned soundlessly toward Chane, his voice brusque and businesslike.

"We've only got one thing we want to know, Ms. Laforet. As soon as you answer, we'll let you go-"

"And we'll turn a blind eye to your friends, too! Hahahaha!"

My friends?!

"Y'know, I couldn't believe my ears myself! Who would've thought you'd've thrown in with that tattooed brat who threw a wrench into our plans a few years back? Though I mean, it's not like I've got a grudge against the runt myself. Thanks to him I found a boss who pays a hell of a lot better than Huey did!"

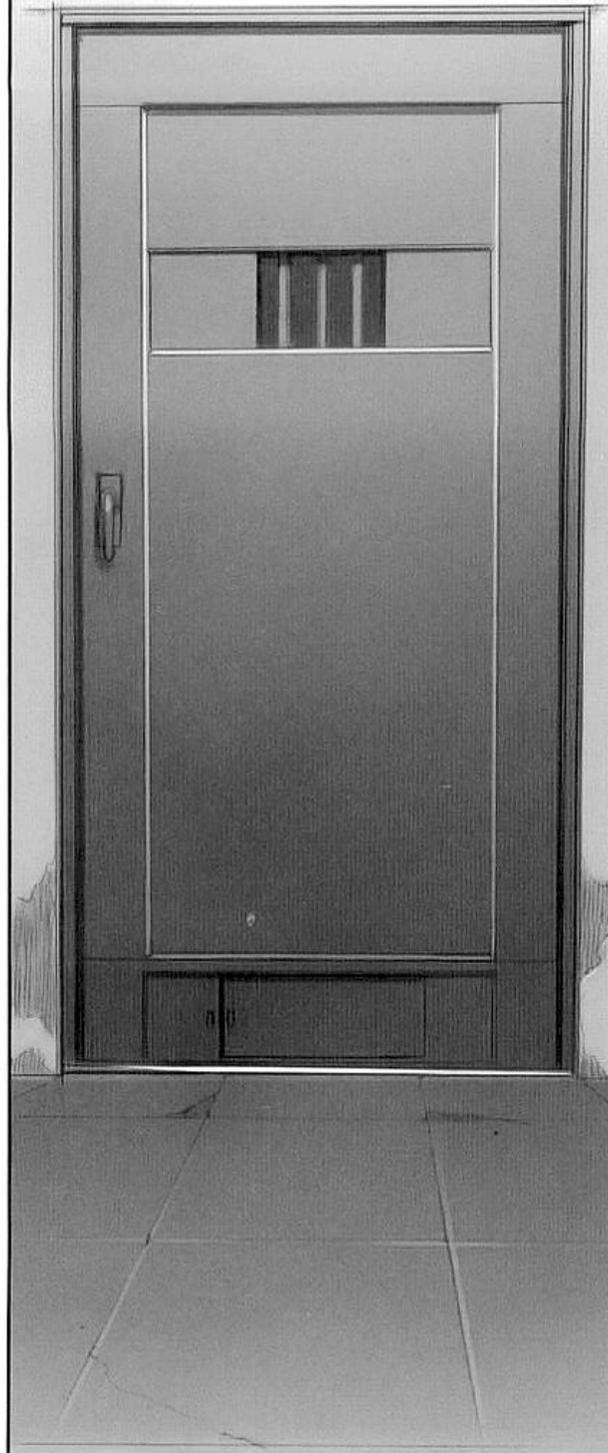
"That's enough."

The man in black cut Spike off and continued as though nothing had happened.

"This is our question, Ms. Laforet."

"What is your father going to attempt here in New York?"

**INTERLUDE I
IN THE DARKNESS**



Alcatraz Island Underground

Deep within Alcatraz Island was a place set aside for solitary confinement. The inmates called it the Hole.

Even the most hardened criminals, banished to Alcatraz as a last resort by normal prisons that could no longer keep them in line, shivered with dread when the Hole was mentioned.

It was located deep in the bowels of the prison, below the long hall that most of the inmates called home.

The rooms of the Hole were actually modified storage rooms, leftovers from when the prison had been a fortress. There were no electric lights down there; inmates who caused trouble were thrown into total darkness. The walls were made of brick, not concrete, and to prevent the inmates from attempting to tunnel through and escape, they were hobbled with iron chains during their stay.

In the years to come Warden Johnston would denounce the practice of chaining the prisoners as inhumane, and construct a new area called D Block to serve as the new solitary confinement zone. But that event was still far in the future; for now, the threat of the Hole was still a very real thing, always present in the minds of those inmates who got it into their heads to start trouble.

But below even the darkness of the Hole, in a place that wasn't in the blueprints at all...

In a separate cell furnished just for one person, *he* existed.

There were those who said that the room had originally been a secret storage area, or maybe a temporary hideaway for noncombatant VIPs, but nobody knew for certain.

It was too large to really be called a prison cell. More the size of a hotel room.

But though the room itself was large, it was furnished the same as any other cell in Alcatraz. A bed and a sink were the only fixtures, and just like the rest of the inmates, the man had been provided with only the barest necessities—a bar of soap, an aluminum cup, a shaving razor, and so on. The only reprieve was that unlike the rooms of the Hole, this particular cell was lit by a single electric bulb. At least the darkness wouldn't drive one mad, even if the isolation did.

And inside that secluded chamber, its very existence a secret even to most of the guards, the man spoke.

"What is the situation?"

Two men stood illuminated in the naked bulb's light.

"The other immortal, Isaac Dian, recognized him and caused a small commotion. After Dian was removed from the cafeteria, he had a short conversation with Ladd Russo, but was otherwise careful not to attract attention."

One of them sat inside the cell. The other stood outside it.

The one standing outside was a guard, his crisp uniform dimly illuminated by the light filtering out through the cell window. The door was closed, but his voice carried through the meal slot located below the bulletproof glass, easily reaching the man sitting on the bed against the far wall.

"And what of the three inmates who came with him?" Huey Laforet asked.

"We have almost no information on them. For now, though, none of them seem that suspicious."

"...No information? They fall outside even your network?"

"We know who they are, and what they've done to get here. We just haven't been able to produce any information on them that strikes us as out of the ordinary. The only thing of note that has happened recently is the fact that my bodies in D.C. and Chicago are being systematically erased. It happens while they're sleeping, or through chance accidents, leading me to believe that whoever is behind it knows and understands how Hilton and I operate."

The prisoner made a noncommittal noise and decided to end the conversation, dismissing his guard.

"Very well. Please continue your vigil and keep me up to date, Sham."

"Yes, Master Huey."

The guard nodded respectfully to his master and turned away, briskly heading toward the stairs that would take him back to the upper floors. Soon enough he disappeared from view, and only the fading echoes of his footsteps remained to prove that he had ever been there at all.

Huey listened to the footsteps fading away and gently shook the still form lying on the bed beside him.

"Liza. Liza, it is time to wake up."

"Oooh..."

The voice that answered him, still groggy with sleep, was that of a young girl.

She sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes. But strangely, when she opened her mouth a moment later, her voice was bright and chipper, as though she'd been awake all along.

"Good morning, Daddy!" she chirped, offering her father a sunny smile that seemed to light up the drab room.

Huey replied with a wan smile of his own and said, "Good morning, dear. How is the situation?"

"It's going really really well! I caught a lot, and I think Sham's doing good too! Oh, umm, but there's some weird ones, too."

"Weird ones?"

"Umm, I can't talk about it much because the others are still looking into it, but... But don't worry, Daddy! If they're enemies, we can all get together and kill them, no problem!"

She had the voice and appearance of a child, but the words that passed her lips were anything but childlike.

Huey took it in stride, the calm smile never leaving his face as he thought it over, absently stroking his daughter's hair with his left hand.

"Very well. Please tell me if you find something."

"Okay, Daddy! I'll keep to the plan until then!"

The girl nodded and smiled, happy to do her father's bidding, and trundled off toward the corner.

"Ah," Huey said from behind her, a shadow passing briefly over his face. "Liza. One more thing. I don't expect he'll be able to interfere this time, but nonetheless... do try and watch out for Victor."

"Okay, Daddy!" The girl turned to him, emotions flashing across her face as she thought of the other immortal. "I'll be extra careful! I know that Victor's a big fat meanie!"

"Haha... Yes, I suppose he is," Huey replied absently, thinking back to a conversation from the past.

He remembered the talk he'd had with Victor before he'd been consigned to his underground prison.

— —

"Time for you to weep with joy and throw yourself at my feet, Huey. I've got a special suite ready in Alcatraz, just for you."

"Oh, dear. Are you planning to cut me up and experiment on my body? Or perhaps it will be torture. I do not suppose that anyone will hear my screams on such a lonely island, nor that any information about me will ever make it across the bay to reach anyone's ears."

"Make up more bullshit, why don't cha. Some of the higher ups in the government'd probably like nothing more than to do exactly that, and I think the bastards over at Nebula are dying to ask you some questions too, but relax. And despair. If you've got any time left over after that, you can use it to thank me, 'cause where I'm taking you, nobody's gonna lay a finger on you."

"...Despair?"

"Listen up, asshole. You're an idiot who can't understand other people's feelings and the pain you cause, but you're still a genius and dangerous and crazy and too goddamn handsome for your own good, so whatever you do you always turn heads. You're a master actor and you'd die every day for 364 days out of a year without turning a hair if you knew it'd get you results on just one of your experiments on the 365th damn day. And you've got a gift for using people, too."

"Ah."

"Imagine what'd happen if I let someone like you loose on a buncha politicians and scientists. You'd have them brainwashed in three days flat. First you'd whisper your promises into their ears, getting them interested, and before they knew it they'd be eating your of your goddamn hand. One of those scientists'd say, 'Hey, this Huey fella, I think he's a really swell guy. We should talk to him and see what sort of information he might share with us'. And you can bet your ass by that point his brain'd already be dribbling out his ears. Then oh, look, a strap on your straightjacket came loose, and oh, the next day they walk in and find out everyone in the lab is dead, and oh, Huey fucking Laforet is nowhere to be fucking seen! Oh no oh what ever shall we fucking do Mr. Talbot please do something even though you told us this exact thing was going to happen and we ignored you like the fucking idiots we are... and then they'll try and get me to find you, but you know what? I'll say no! Lemme say that again! No! Once more for good measure! Read my lips! Enn! Oh! No!"

"You overestimate me. Your boundless imagination never fails to amaze."

"Hah! No way I'm smart enough to understand the things you do! I bet nobody can! That's right, I bet even you can't think of a single person in the whole world who's got a perfect read on you!"

"Well, Elmer, for one. And Denkuro, too..."

"You're not supposed to take me up on that bet, dumbass! Do you have any idea how stupid you're making me look? You must really hate me to humiliate me so much, eh?"

"I do not hate you, Victor. And I must insist that I cannot deceive people as easily as you seem to think."

"Wanna bet? Look, Huey. Us immortals, we're like poison to normal people. We hurt them just by being around them. I stoppered myself in a bottle of my own accord, but you, you're fucking flammable and contagious and how the hell do you expect me to leave you be like that?"

"Then why have you not devoured me?"

"Cause knowing you, you've probably installed traps in your memories or something. Imagine if one of your memories was actually a kind of hypnotism, and it made me think I was you. I'd let my guard down for a moment and then bam, I'd lose everything. Your memories would be preserved perfectly inside me already, so it'd just be a matter of changing who's controlling the body. Damn, you're a sneaky one."

"Ah."

"What? Speechless? I was right, wasn't I?"

"No, I was merely marveling at your ingenuity. I had not considered that possibility at all. Victor, I do think that you might have some talent as a playwright, a teller of stories. Truly, interesting."

"Yeah, whatever. Think it over in your cell."

"I must admit, I was hoping to have a somewhat more logical conversation."

"Keep hoping, then. I know you can talk circles around me when it comes to logic. Good thing for me that I caught you, so I don't have to convince you of anything. I don't want to hear anything from you, either. In other words I'm refusing to talk with you at all and imprisoning you without fair trial."

"Brash and one-sided as ever, I see."

"Well, I'll be honest. You're not gonna be seeing the sun for a while, and I have to admit I pity you for that. But don't worry. I don't know how many years it'll take, but... once we've taken care of Nebula, I'll let you out."

— —

Huey stared absently at the walls, remembering the proud look on Victor's face. Slowly, thoughtfully, he continued the conversation, though Victor was not there to reply.

"It does not pain me so much, not being able to see the sun..."

He spoke the words alone, and they went unheard.

"But... I do find myself missing the starry night sky."

The man chuckled and slowly rose to his feet.

"So I think I shall be taking my leave of this place, Victor.

"Liza," he said, turning to the girl who'd been sitting beside him on the bed, swinging her legs back and forth over the edge. His voice took on a purposeful air. "Please pass the word on to all of the Twins."

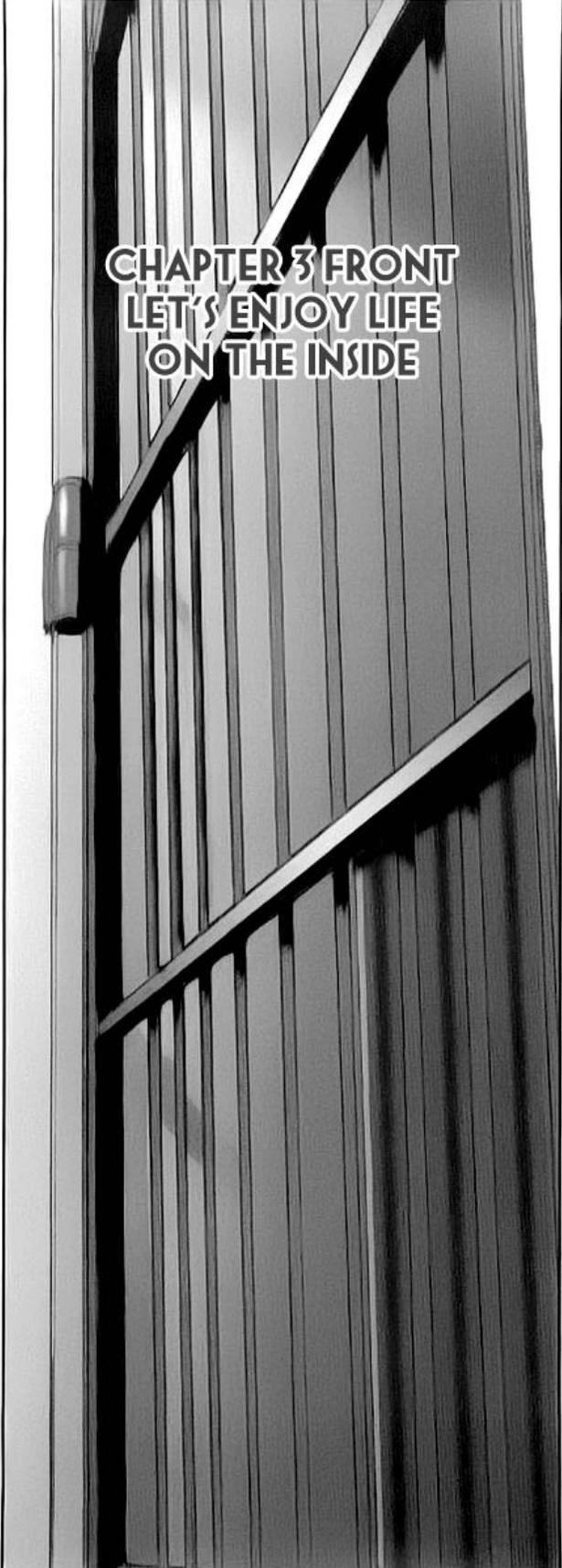
"What is it, Daddy?" the girl asked eagerly, practically leaping off the bed to stand beside him.

"As of this moment, the following areas and individuals are to be designated my specimens."

He did not say it with relish, or with sadness. There was no note of grim determination in his voice.

Calmly, quietly, he gave his orders, as though to him, such things were merely part of a day's work.

It went without saying, of course, that the wishes of his future specimens were not something he considered at all.



CHAPTER 3 FRONT
LET'S ENJOY LIFE
ON THE INSIDE

**Alcatraz Island
Broadway
Night**

"Psst. Hey. Hey, neighbor. You awake?"

Firo heard a whisper coming from the cell beside him and propped himself up on his elbows, cocking his head toward the voice.

"You were on the boat that brought me over too, weren't you?"

Whoever it was, it didn't sound like he was talking directly through the wall. More likely he had his face to their bars of his cell, letting his voice carry over to Firo's cot.

Naturally, it was forbidden for the inmates to talk after lights out, but they could hold nighttime conversations as long as they didn't get too loud since there weren't any guards actually posted in the long hallway. And thanks to the way the halls conducted sound, the inmates could easily hear the ringing sound of an approaching guard's footsteps; as long as they stopped talking then and crawled back into their beds, the guards couldn't prove anything.

Let's see... The guy on the side of my cell with the bed was... the Asian guy with the tattoos, right?

"Hmm... Yeah, I think so," Firo replied cautiously, thinking back to what Misery had told him when he first arrived. He couldn't let down his guard around the three inmates who'd come with him, not when he didn't know what they were after. Still, as long as he was careful to keep on his toes...

"I noticed you got the special treatment when we got here. What gives?"

"...Eh, it was nothing. They asked me some questions about some people I knew on the outside. I think they think I'm from the mafia or something. Well, I let 'em think what they want."

"Heh. So, what're you in here for?"

"Huh? Oh, uh. I messed some people up bad."

Carrying on a conversation with someone he couldn't see was harder than he'd expected. Quite different from talking over the phone, that was for sure. And it certainly didn't help that the Asian man on the other side was a complete stranger.

Firo himself wasn't exactly an innocent civilian, but nevertheless he couldn't help but feel a bit nervous, knowing that his conversation partner was responsible for *something* that'd warranted

an Alcatraz sentence. He wondered how he sounded to the other man, and how the Asian would react.

"That's not what I'm talking about, buddy," the man said, chuckling. "That's not it at all."

"Huh?"

"What I mean is, what happened after that? You had to have done something after that to get yourself a ticket here."

Oh, yeah.

He'd forgotten that nobody came to Alcatraz straight from the streets. Well, outside of special cases such as Huey Laforet or Firo himself, that was.

Wait, then what the hell did Isaac do to get himself shunted here?

The question bothered him, but he had more pressing matters at hand.

"Oh, uh. I messed some guards up bad, too."

"Huh..."

"What, you don't believe me? You don't think I could do it?"

He'd been trying to gloss over the details, but perhaps he'd been a little too evasive.

Well, if he says I look like a kid who doesn't have it in him, I'll just give him a taste of what I can do tomorrow, I guess.

But the Asian man just sniggered and said, "Hah! You too, eh? Yeah, I get whatcha mean. You're in here for the same thing as me."

"...You too?"

"Yup. Well, in my case, there was this guard who pissed me off, so I gave his neck a little chomp. You understand, right?"

...Chomp?

Firo shivered a little as the scene sprang to life in his mind.

"Heheh! Hey, ever heard of *odorigui*? It's this way of eating the Japanese have—you bite down on your food while it's still alive and moving. The feeling of something live squirming against

your tongue, against your teeth as you bite down... It just all comes together with the salty taste of blood and makes it so incredible!"

"Yeah, okay. I think I've heard enough."

"Whoa, whoa, hear me out here. I mean, I think about it right now and... Damn, that feeling! That tearing sensation as my teeth snag against skin! The taste of iron flooding into my mouth! The sound of the guard screaming and the pain of the clubs hitting my head making the perfect seasoning... Delicious! It was so great I thought I'd died and gone to heaven!"

The man on the other side ran roughshod over Firo's protests, chattering away to his now unwilling conversation partner.

"You're crazy," Firo said, frankly.

"You really think so? I dunno, isn't hunger a natural human instinct? I was just following the will of nature, you know..."

A moment later, a sharp clack came from over the wall, followed by another and then another, the steady staccato beat of teeth coming down on teeth forming a chilling melody that rang in Firo's ears.

What a freak. Almost sounds like he's got a mouth full of fangs and nothing el... huh.

Firo paused, his thoughts going to someone else altogether. He remembered a man with a mouth full of pointed teeth, and eyes stained bloody crimson. A man who looked like a monster.

I guess compared to him, this guy's not so bad... Wait, no, maybe not...

Firo thought it over for a moment and decided maybe it'd be a good idea to get a little closer to his cell neighbor, if only to learn more about him.

"Hey, what's your name?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah... Well, you can call me Dragon, after these tattoos on my arms. My real name's Ryujiro, but Americans can never get it right."

"Alright, Dragon. Nice to meet you. My name's-"

Firo paused. He'd been on the verge of offering a fake name when he remembered that immortals like him were forbidden from lying about their identities.

Thankfully, Dragon neatly solved his dilemma for him. "Yeah, I know already. Firo, right? That's what the idiot back in the cafeteria called you."

"...Yeah."

"Man, that dumbass was still talking while the guards dragged him away, wasn't he? Hey, did you know him? Were you cellmates or something in the last jail you were in?"

"...Uh, yeah, sorta. It's a long story."

Firo floundered for a moment, wondering how he'd go about explaining his friendship with Isaac. A sudden noise from outside, though, broke into his thoughts and scattered them to the four winds.

It was a sound that instantly set him on edge, one that he knew well.

"A gunshot...?"

"Huh? Yeah, sounds like it."

More sharp reports tore the night, dry cracks rending the silence asunder. Firo frowned, a sudden sense of unease overtaking him.

The voice from the cell next to him, though, seemed to have no such misgivings.

"Maybe someone tried to escape. Tried. Heh. Or maybe your friend the numbskull made one last mistake. Hee hee."

— —

"Oh, the rifles? You hear 'em every night. Don't pay too much attention to it. I've seen guys go crazy obsessing over them."

"Really? What's it all about?"

It was the morning of Firo's second day at Alcatraz, and the first thing he'd done upon sitting down across from Ladd in the cafeteria was to ask the more experienced inmate about the mysterious gunshots from the night before.

But Ladd hadn't seemed surprised at all, waving Firo's concerns away with a careless flick of the spoon in his right hand.

"It's just the guards doing target practice, making sure they can shoot escapees or invaders during the night."

"Huh, yeah, guess that makes sense... Wait. Invaders?"

"Think about it. They've got a lot of powerful men locked up here. Who's to say some Family or another won't decide to launch an attack to free their boss?"

"Hope it never comes to that," Firo commented briefly, looking to end the conversation. But Ladd had already stopped eating, and instead looked thoughtfully around at the guards.

"You know, I respect these guys. They're really something."

"The guards? Why?"

"You can tell they're always ready. They're ready to kill or be killed."

A smile crept onto Ladd's face, the same feral predator's grin that he'd shown Firo the day before.

"These men working in this prison are ready to kill the inmates if try to escape," he said calmly, "but it's not just that. They're not just prepared to kill, they're prepared to die, too. They're not taking this lightly. People like that really interest me. It almost feels like we're friends, me and these guards. Me and you, too."

"Me?"

"Yeah. The first time I saw you yesterday, you were looking around the cafeteria like someone'd try and murder you at any moment. You had this look on your face saying that to you, everyone was an enemy."

"Did I?"

Was it that obvious?

If so, then maybe the other inmates had noticed the tension in his body as well. Or, even worse, perhaps Huey himself had taken note.

Firo frowned, worried by the unwelcome possibility, but Ladd seemed to pay it no heed as he kept talking.

"And you know what I hate? I hate people who don't really live. You know, those guys you see who just exist, who go on with their lives with this look that tells you they're thinking they'll never die. I hate 'em so much, it almost drives me crazy... Get what I mean?"

"...Sort of."

"And finally, what I like is taking people like that and waking them up. I like to teach them how their entire existence is always hanging from a thread, and then carve that knowledge into their bodies and their souls and their whole lives. Well. That's what landed me here."

"Yeah..."

I get it. This guy's some kinda assassin, then? He does feel a bit like Claire.

Firo sat back, remembering his childhood friend from New York.

The man who'd been sitting next to him finally finished his meal and took advantage of the sudden silence to launch himself headlong into the conversation, rubbing his fully belly with no small amount of satisfaction as he offered his thoughts.

"Phew! That was delicious! My compliments to the chef! Hey, Firo, did you know that you can ask for seconds here, and even thirds? It's amazing. I thought the pay here was a little on the low side, but it turns out they make up for it by covering the meals!" Isaac exclaimed, grinning widely. Apparently prison hadn't changed him at all.

Firo heaved an exasperated sigh, but he couldn't keep the bemused smile from his face.

Hard to believe he spent the night in solitary...

"Did you sleep alright, Isaac?"

"Hmm? Oh, they scolded me a lot and locked me up and put chains on my feet, but I'm used to it by now!"

Firo frowned.

"Used to it?"

Ladd chuckled and shook his head, offering some explanation.

"Your friend the genius gets dragged off to the Hole all the time for stuff like what he pulled yesterday. Shouting in the cafeteria, making a commotion, that sort of thing. It's never anything serious, so he's back out in no time, but... Still, most people quiet down after their first visit to the Hole."

Firo nodded, then asked the next question that occurred to him.

"Have you been there too?"

"My longest was ten days. It's a real bad place to be, make no mistake. It's pitch black in there, so you can't even tell what time is, and they even skipped some of my meals. Only found out I'd been down there for ten whole days once I got out and asked someone else. And it's deep underground, so you can't even hear anything. Not even those gunshots we were talking about earlier."

Ladd paused, thought it over for a moment.

"That actually makes it harder. Think about it, you're tied up in the darkness. You can't move, you can't see, you can't hear. Just a minute down there'd be enough to bore you out of your mind. I hear there was another guy who went in around the same time I did, only he got to stay for two weeks straight. He came out raving and muttering, tearing himself up. They sent him to the hospital and he still hasn't come back."

Firo swallowed hard, Ladd's harsh description bringing the Hole to life inside his mind. He turned to Isaac and patted him on the shoulder.

"Isaac... I gotta say, I didn't think you had it in you to make it through something like that. Even if it was just for one night."

"Huh? It wasn't so bad."

"Whatever you say, buddy. In my book that's still something."

"Well, if you say so. The fairy kept me company last night, so it wasn't even all that boring."

The fairy?

Firo paused with his mouth open, taking a moment to process the word. Then he shut his eyes and sighed, shaking his head.

"...Here we go again."

"No, I'm serious! I heard a little girl's voice yesterday and we talked all night long!"

"Poor Isaac... All that time away from Miria finally got to you, huh..."

"Well, I can't deny that not being able to see Miria makes me lonelier than anything... but that voice was real! She asked me all sorts of questions from the darkness. I bet she must've been Tinker Bell, come to visit me all the way from Neverland."

"...I'm serious, Isaac, that's enough," Firo sighed, trying to cut off his friend's raving before it got out of hand.

"She asked me all sorts of questions, you know. Like how I knew you, and if I'd *drunk the liquor* too... Not very Tinker Bell-ish at all, now that I think of it."

"What?"

Firo froze.

The question about liquor would've meant nothing to someone like Isaac, who didn't know a thing, but to Firo it meant a lot.

Was she talking about the Grand Panacea...?

If so, that meant that Isaac's fairy really did exist. After all, it wasn't like Isaac knew about the elixir of immortality, and even if he did, there was no reason for him to lie about it.

Maybe this fairy is someone working for Huey...?

It bothered him a lot, he had to admit, but it wasn't exactly like he could start asking Isaac questions with Ladd eating right in front of them.

He resolved to ask later when he had the chance, and for now to try and brush off Isaac's flights of fancy as always.

"Alright, alright, whatever."

"You don't believe me, do you?! You know what they say happens to people who don't believe in fairies!"

"I don't, actually."

"What?!" Isaac cried, then quieted down, staring thoughtfully up at the ceiling.

"Well, you know... They say... err. Hmm. What *do* they say? Firo, any opinions?"

"What're you asking me for?" Firo retorted, looking to end the conversation, but Ladd took up his slack and kept it going.

"Well, we're talking about fairies here," he said. "Wouldn't they just make people happy, even if you didn't believe in them?"

"Hmm! I think you're right! Good news, Firo! You're not in danger after all!"

"Quiet down already!"

"Shut up and eat."

A blanket of hushed silence fell over the cafeteria, the last scraps of conversation fading to nothing as the guards gave their warning.

Firo hunched over his empty soup bowl and made a show of eating, trying not to attract attention. Making sure that the guards weren't looking his way, he glanced over at Ladd and hissed, "Hey, come to think of it, isn't Isaac the kinda guy you said you hate? The kind who think they'll never die."

Ladd only grinned.

"Nah. I've been keeping my eye on him for a few weeks now, and... Well, let's be honest here. There's something wrong with the guy's head. Getting mad at him'd be like getting mad at a puppy. He honestly doesn't have enough brains to know any better."

The news eased Firo's worries, and he even relaxed enough to joke around a little back at Ladd.

"...Yeah, I guess you're right."

"What? What's that about my head?" Isaac whispered from beside them.

Firo couldn't help but smirk and tap his friend on the head with his spoon.

"We're saying there's nothing in it that'd make Ladd here angry."

"What's that supposed to mean? Oh! Oh, I get it! You're saying you're willing to forgive me? Thank you, sir! You're a fine fellow!"

It was a little off the mark, but close enough that Ladd and Firo shrugged and let it go.

Mealtime in Alcatraz wasn't that long, but there was still enough time for the inmates to chat a little after they were finished eating.

"Huh, so you two're from New York."

"Yeah."

"I've traveled all over the country! It'd be better to say that I come from America!"

Ladd smiled a little wistfully, a faraway look entering his eyes at the mention of the Big Apple.



"Heheh... New York, huh. I know someone who lives over there. He's a crazy guy, but I still think of him sort of like a little brother. He's a little strange in the head too, goes practically insane unless he takes something apart every day. There was this one time he used this wrench as long as my arm to dismantle a car, and you know what? He had that thing down to nuts and bolts by the time I was finished beating up the driver."

"Sounds like a weirdo, alright... Wait, what was that?"

"What's wrong, Firo? Aha, I get it. You're afraid that our friend here might beat up Ennis, since she can drive too? Don't worry! He's a good man, I promise!"

"Wha?! Wait. Never mind. Ladd, this guy you know, does he wear blue work clothes? And by blue I mean really blue, not like this dark stuff we're wearing."

Isaac clapped his hands together as though Firo's description had jogged his own memory.

"Oh, I think Miria and I've seen someone like that before! And I've seen him talking with Jacuzzi too!"

"Whoa, whoa, hold on a second here. You guys're telling me you know Graham?"

"Yeah... I heard he tried to butt in on the Runoratas' turf a while ago and now he's on the run," Firo said.

Ladd leaned back and looked absently at the walls, for once uncharacteristically serious.

"...Graham's in trouble, huh," he murmured, more to himself than to Firo and Isaac. "Then maybe I'll go help him out a little once I'm out of here. Yeah, I think I'll go do that. Maybe visit my fiancée too while I'm at it..."

"Your fiancée?" Firo blurted, looking aghast at Ladd. "You have a fiancée and you did something that'd get you in here? What the hell were you thinking?"

"I told you. I have something I want to do."

"Huh? Oh, so that's what you meant... You want to get out of here and meet here again? Yeah, that sounds nice."

"I'm going to see Miria again, too!" Isaac cried, utterly failing to read the mood as he butted in again. The thought of his partner seemed to have unduly excited him, his voice easily rose above the quiet chatter in the rest of the cafeteria and attracted the attention of the nearby guards.

"I thought I told you clowns to shut up and eat," the guard closest to them growled, drawing his club and advancing menacingly toward Firo and Isaac as they hurriedly ducked their heads.

And that was when it happened.

"You think I'm funny, shrimp?"

There was a raucous clatter as utensils and metal trays fell to the floor, instantly shattering the subdued atmosphere that had previously dominated the room. Everyone, guard and inmate alike, turned to see what had caused the commotion.

What they saw was a thin Caucasian man kicking and struggling as a huge black man lifted him up into the air with one hand. He gasped and picked feebly at the hamlike hand locked around his throat as it effortlessly raised him higher and higher, finally stopping at a prodigious height of almost seven feet in the air.

"Gaah... Guh... Ack..."

Wheezing and coughing, the man clawed at the hand around his neck and tried his best to escape, but the viselike grip didn't weaken in the slightest even as the man's nails carved slender furrows in the skin of his assailant's arm.

"Hey, those two're..."

Firo recognized them the moment he caught sight of their faces. They were the other two inmates who'd made the trip to Alcatraz along with Dragon and himself.

"You don't think I heard you muttering at me in the boat yesterday, you little asshole? You don't think I saw you snorting at me just now? These scars look funny to you? Huh?"

"I-I-I didn't la, ack, laugh at- grrk..."

The black man paid his target no heed, slowly tightening his grip.

"Jesus, Gig. Calm down, man!"

The other blacks who'd been sitting with the scarred giant tried to get him to calm down, but he ignored them as well, his thumb pressing slowly and surely down onto the smaller man's carotid artery.

"Hey! What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"Stop that!"

The guards rushed over, hastily drawing their clubs, the tense expressions on their faces a complete turnaround from the almost comedic air of the day before, when they'd carted Isaac out of the cafeteria. Everyone in the room, Firo included, could only hold their breath and watch the drama unfold.

Everyone, that was, except for one man.

"Ah, looks like today's my lucky day. What do you think, Firo?"

"What?" Firo blurted, turning away from the spectacle to look at Ladd. The other man was slowly getting to his feet, unnoticed amidst the commotion at the center of the cafeteria.

"How does a guy know that it's his lucky day? It's a pretty iffy thing, don'cha think? I mean, a man's luck changes every day, according to his physical condition, the weather, his mood, the presence or absence of his close friends, of his hated enemies, of the weak who have to die and the strong who have to be obeyed. And then be killed anyway. So when a guy says, amidst all those changing conditions, that it's truly his best time, his really lucky day, I think that means something. I think that's something worth putting your life on the line for... right?"

Firo had only known Ladd for a day, but he still knew enough to tell that the other man wasn't normally so talkative. He felt a sudden chill run down his spine, though he couldn't say why.

"Well, then. *See you later.*"

"Hey, Ladd, wait. Where're you..."

"Going? A good place. Just following the road ahead of me, toward the two I need to kill more than anyone else: that red monster, and Huey Laforet."

"Huey? Wait, Huey Laforet?!"

That was certainly a name he hadn't been expecting.

If Ladd noticed Firo's surprise he didn't show it. Instead he smiled fiercely, directing his gaze toward the hulking black man, the one they'd called Gig. He cracked his neck from side to side, looking as though he was about to have the time of his life.

"Something about the fairy your pal mentioned got my attention," he said, absently. "And I can't think of a better way to let off some stress and get myself a trip to the Hole all in one. Two birds with one stone, yeah?"

He left Firo and Isaac sitting at the table without a backward glance, stalking toward the center of the room.

"This really is my lucky day," Ladd mused as he went, leaving behind nothing but a lingering feeling of cold malice that made Firo shiver.

"Don't move!"

"Stand down!"

The guards had their clubs drawn and ready as they surrounded the huge black man in a loose ring, and there was a rush of footsteps from behind the firing holes in the walls as more armed guards hurriedly fell into position.

Some of the inmates stared raptly at the drama unfolding in the center of the room, while others looked pensively up at the small vents that had been installed in the ceiling. The ceiling vents were made to expel knockout gas in the event of a riot, but word among the inmates was that they had nerve gas in stock at Alcatraz as well.

"What? I ain't moving," Gig said, smiling easily. "Oh, wait. You must mean him."

His grip tightened around the white man's throat even more, cutting off his airway completely.

"You heard the man. Don't move."

"Guh... grrk..."

All the Caucasian could manage was a choked rattle as his face turned blue, the feeble movement of his limbs growing weaker and weaker. It was only a matter of time before he died, though whether it would be of asphyxiation or a broken neck, nobody could say for certain.

The guards tightened their grips on their clubs, steeling themselves as they prepared to intervene.

But before they could act, a shadow flitted through their ranks, penetrating the loose ring of prison personnel. The guards couldn't afford to take their eyes off of Gig, but they glanced at the shadow as it passed and saw its eager smile.

It was the smile of something that had found its prey, but it was not that of a hunter.

Nor was it the smile that Firo had seen before, the predator's smirk.

It was not an expression senseless delight.

It was not one of mindless rage.

It was a twisted thing, driven not by instinct but by vicious intelligence...

The cruel grin of a murderer.

"Heya."

"Huh?"

Gig grunted, looking down at the strangely gleeful voice that had butted in on his rampage. He managed to catch a short glimpse of a man who barely reached up to his shoulder.

Before his eyes could track up to the man's face, though, a shock ran through his abdomen and he felt something inside him creak in protest.

"Fuh..."

He'd been prepared for the pain of clubs against his skin. It couldn't be all that bad compared to what he'd been through before.

But the tremor that ran up through his body, rising up from the bottom of his ribcage, was far beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

Gig's fist went slack, sending the white man crashing to the floor as he instinctively doubled up on himself. His side went numb; all he could feel was pain and something hot spreading across his belly.

For a moment, he thought he'd been shot. He'd thought himself safe, surrounded by too many people to afford the guards at the firing holes a clear shot, but apparently he'd been wrong.

But the impact that shook his body hadn't been caused by a bullet.

Through the red haze of pain he could dimly make out someone talking to him.

"Now we can see eye to eye," the unknown voice said casually, speaking to him as though he was an old friend.

"Makes it easier to get a clean hit on you."

Gig raised his head a little, taking in the man's left hand hanging limply at his side. It was an unwieldy and inelegant thing made of iron, only a little more advanced than Captain Hook's

iconic weapon. Gritting his teeth, Gig raised his gaze higher, determined to at least see the face of the man who'd put him in such pain.

What he saw was the back of a man's head, his upper body twisted around so far that Gig couldn't see the man's face at all.

"I think I'll explain a little more. It makes it child's play. Like taking candy from a baby. Couldn't get any easier than this. The way you are right now, it's incredibly, ridiculously, unbelievably..."

Gig moaned.

"...easy to hit you."

Then the man's body whipped around like a tightly coiled spring, his right fist drawing a keen arc through the air and smashing into Gig's face before he could even see the man's face.

Gig lost consciousness before his body registered the impact, his huge body lifting briefly off the ground and dragging a guard and a table with him as it crashed to the floor.

The thud seemed unbearably loud in the ensuing silence, an almost unnatural hush falling over the cafeteria.

The next instant, the black iron barrels peeking through the firing holes in the walls swiveled to point at Ladd. Reinforcements burst in through the doors a moment later, their clubs held ready as they locked down the room completely.

"You again?" one of the guards said, frowning, and Ladd just answered with a grin and a shrug.

"Hey, hey, what's with the dirty look? I was just defending myself against a dangerous criminal. You guys should be thanking me, and maybe chopping a good half year off my sentence while you're at it."

The guards just glanced at each other, nonplussed, and slowly closed in on Ladd. Perhaps they'd had some trouble with him in the past, for they didn't rush him all at once like they normally should have. Instead, they advanced cautiously, treating him as though he was holding a live firearm.

Ladd seemed to pay their caution no heed and instead pointed at the Caucasian man sprawled at his feet, still shivering and gasping for breath.

"The big lunk was about to throw this guy at me. Would've killed me for sure. Can you really blame me for protecting myself? I was scared out of my mind! Whew. You know, if I'd acted just a second later you guys would probably be carting my dead body out of here right now."

"...You honestly expect us to believe that?"

"Nah. I don't believe for an instant that you guys are anywhere near dumb enough for that excuse to work. And besides, the last time I tried it you chained me up hand and foot and dragged me down to the Hole. Don't worry! I believe in you guys! I know you all put your lives on the line every day you work here, and it's thanks to you and your resolve that I can subdue and control these emotions bubbling up inside of me... and focus them on just one person."

Ladd grinned widely and ignored the grim glares directed his way, instead looking over to Isaac and Firo and offering them a nod.

"Take care, New Yorkers. See you again sometime. If we're all still alive then, that is."

"Wow," Isaac exclaimed as he watched the guards escort Ladd out of the cafeteria. "So that's what happened! I didn't even know that big guy was trying to kill Ladd! Someone could have gotten hur-rrmph."

"Sssh. Quiet down," Firo hissed, holding a hand over Isaac's mouth. With hooded eyes he watched Ladd go, studying the face of the man with whom he'd been chatting amicably just a few moments ago.

What the hell is he thinking?

Firo had already realized that Ladd was quite possibly insane the moment he saw him going off to start trouble based on nothing but Isaac's flight of fancy. But the way he'd moved, and the impossibly powerful blow he'd delivered with nothing but his bare hands... These told Firo that the man he was watching was far from a mere maniac.

Suddenly, he remembered where he was.

I'm in Alcatraz.

It was a place where the most volatile criminals imaginable were gathered from all over the country, the absolute worst of the worst. Firo felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead as the true weight of his mission finally sank in.

"Isaac... Seriously, how the hell did you end up on this island?"

True, he thought his robber friend was something of a simpleton, but he didn't think Isaac was crazy, and he certainly didn't think that Isaac Dian was dangerous enough to warrant an Alcatraz sentence.

But Isaac merely looked oddly at him, as though curious what had taken Firo so long to ask, and began to explain as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Hmm? They just told me that I couldn't go to a normal prison, so they'd put me here in exchange for shortening my sentence. Can you believe it? They took it all the way down to just fifty days!"

"Fifty what...? That's it? Who told you that? Who's 'they'?"

"Hmm. He looked like he was someone very important. I think he said his name was Victor."

Firo gave a resigned sigh and nodded; he'd been half-expecting that answer. Victor's bespectacled features rose up in his mind's eye, already calling up strong feelings of resentment within him.

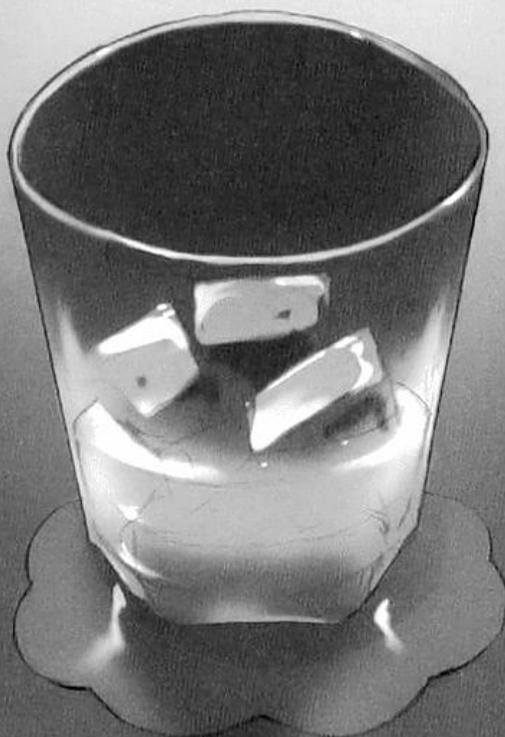
I guess Isaac was his Plan B in case Ennis wasn't enough to persuade me, huh.

Perhaps Victor had been planning it all along in case Firo didn't follow his orders, plotting to take Isaac hostage in order to capture Ennis, and then holding her hostage in turn in order to control him.

Firo balled his hands into fists as he deduced Victor's plans, his face twisting with anger. So tightly were they clenched that small droplets of blood dripped down his legs. A moment later, though, the droplets ran up his body and disappeared back into his fists without a trace.

Goddamn police asshole...

**CHAPTER 3 BACK
LET'S ACKNOWLEDGE
OUR MISTAKES**



Somewhere in New York
Division of Investigation Temporary Office

"Alright, my faithful underlings! Let's hear whatever scraps of information you managed to scrounge up while I wasn't there to babysit you!"

Victor clapped his hands together as he returned from his catnap, announcing his intent to get back to work.

The ponderous voice that greeted him as he strode into the old office, however, almost seemed intent on putting him to sleep again.

"Sir, if I may. We do most if not all of the work here, so why are you taking all the credit?"

"Now, now, Detective Sullivan. I know that you want to feel appreciated, but I believe in giving credit only where credit is due. Keep it up, though, and someday you'll be as talented as I am."

"Whatever, sir. The report's right there, on your desk."

Victor nodded shortly and sat down, silently flipping through the word from Alcatraz. At length he set the papers down and looked toward Bill and Edward, looking for once serious and grim.

"Looks like the time for fun and games is over, gentlemen. Huey's cronies are poised to make their move. Be ready for anything. I wouldn't be surprised if everyone in New York disappeared overnight."

"Hah. Wouldn't that be something, sir."

"That wasn't a joke, detective," Victor snapped, cutting Edward off mid-chuckle. "That mad scientist is an anomaly even amongst us immortals. He doesn't care about other people at all. Nothing catches him off guard. He'd use himself as a specimen for his own experiments if he deemed it necessary. He's just like Maiza, dabbling in magic along with alchemy."

"Ahh. Does that make Mr. Laforet a magician, sir?"

"Nothing quite so fantastic. He's a hopeless researcher, a madman with an insatiable appetite for knowledge! The moment he reaches a goal that goal becomes nothing but a stepping stone! For Huey Laforet, the ends always justify the means, because to him they're the same thing! You can tell what he's thinking but you can't tell how he'll do it! If you try to cut him off, he'll

just note it in his experiments and account for that factor the next time around! Dammit, I can't tell whether he's insanely creative or just insane..."

"Hmm... Sorry, sir. Were you cursing him or admiring him? I can't tell," Bill remarked dryly.

Edward seemed to take his boss' words more seriously, though.

"But sir, there's nothing we can do when we don't even know what he's after right now. Did the report from Alcatraz say anything? Did Prochainezo come up with something?"

"No, no. I don't think he's made contact with Huey yet..."

Victor frowned briefly as the camorrista's name brought up unwelcome memories of his visit to the Alveare, then shook his head and put it out of his mind.

"Doesn't matter. The brat was never anything more than a gamble; I didn't expect anything from him. If he even finds out how Huey makes contact with the outside I'll consider it a rousing success... But now that you mention it, Misery did say that a few prisoners made the trip with him. Looks like someone else is interested in this business too."

"Someone else..."

"Ah. Nebula, again," Bill sighed, and Victor nodded wearily.

"They're probably looking to get something from Huey, by force if necessary Either way, we'll try to do whatever we can to stop them, but... Hmm? What is it, Detective Noah?"

Victor adjusted his glasses and looked toward Edward, noticing that the detective seemed rather nonplussed.

"Looks like you have something you want to get off your chest."

"Err, no, sir. It's just, you said that you didn't expect much from Prochainezo..."

"Huh? What, are you about to tell me that you're feeling sorry for him because you know him and we're just using him as a distraction?"

"No, no, that's not it. Just-"

And then, before Edward could make his case, the phone rang and stopped the flow of time dead in its tracks.

The Same Time
The Alveare

Half past noon in the restaurant meant the lunch rush, and the Alveare's waitresses darted to and fro amongst customers from all walks of life. The members of the Martillo Family, who more or less owned the place, retreated discretely to the shady corners of the restaurant in deference to the incoming flow of normal civilians.

Sitting alone at one of those secluded tables was a man who gave off an air decidedly different from those who walked the straight and narrow, absently holding a glass of liquor in one hand as he lost himself in reflection.

...I have to say I'm surprised. I didn't expect that you'd even figure out what I am.

*This is why choosing **not** to know makes life so interesting sometimes.*

Hmm? No matter. I was just talking to myself.

...So that's why you're asking me for aid.

Are you sure about that?

I have to remind you that there's nothing actually keeping me from exercising my power.

That's why I decided mostly to use it only for the Family. To keep things interesting.

And, well. I've never quite broken the rules on this scale, even for them.

A few tricks with the clouds, and maybe finding some people, certainly, but...

Breaking somebody out of prison? That's breaking the law, no doubt about it.

Granted, I've visited the place in secret to meet an acquaintance, but that's that, and this is this.

No matter. Just know this. Rescuing him using my power means that he'll truly cross the line and become one of us.

Are you prepared to accept that?

...You're not, are you. Hah. No matter.

I'm guessing that he's everything to you...

But that's exactly why you're hesitating, wondering if it's alright for you to decide his fate for him, isn't it?

I'll give you some time to think it over. I've got all the time in the world.

...What's that? You're not going to do it after all?

I see. So that's your decision. That's fine, too. Believing in him and waiting is alright.

It's man's lot in life to decide his own fate, after all, though others may try and lead him astray.

One last thing before you go. A word of advice...

Something tells me that the police may have staked out your apartment.

It might be wise for you to stay with someone you know for a while.

Maybe cry a little, or a lot, to let it all out.

True, what he did might have been selfish...

But that's part of what drew you to him, isn't it?

Don't smile like that. You're even making me embarrassed.

"Hmph..."

Ronnie Schiatto found himself smirking as he recalled the events of a month before.

Maiza stared at him, looking quite taken aback for some reason.

"Dare I ask what's going on, Ronnie? It's a bit unnerving to see you smile like that all of a sudden."

"Hmm? Oh, this. It's nothing. No matter."

"No, no, I think it very much does matter. It's not like you to get lost in thought like that."

"I was just pondering human love for a moment."

The word "love" sounded so strange coming from the mouth of such a man that Maiza actually flinched and sat back, blatant curiosity making itself apparent on his features.

"From that look on your face, I'm guessing you're itching for a fight, Maiza."

"N-no, of course not!"

"Hmph. No matter. Anyway, it looks like you're worried about Firo."

"...Well, yes. I've heard my share of rumors about Alcatraz, just like everyone else." Maiza glanced around and took care to lower his voice, whispering so that nobody but Ronnie could hear him through the ambient chatter. "Even immortals aren't immune to death of the heart, after all..."

"Don't worry. He'll be fine."

"Well, yes," Maiza said pensively. "I do believe that, but still..."

Perhaps allay Maiza's fears, Ronnie offered his own appraisal of Firo Prochainezo. Not through the eyes of a demon, or the eyes of an alchemist... but through the eyes of a gangster, a member of society's underworld.

"Firo is a camorrista of the Martillo Family before he's an immortal. Our *capo-società* didn't choose him on a whim."

Maiza nodded and smiled bitterly at his old friend's words.

"Ours is a demanding business, is it not."

"Do you wish you were still an alchemist?"

"...No. No, I don't. There was a time when I regretted ever summoning you on that boat... but I do not for a second regret my place here right now."

"Hah... The same goes for me."

They stayed there for a while, talking amicably and taking sips of their drinks.

Around when the rush of customers coming in for lunch had slowed to a trickle...

Something out of the ordinary happened.

The radio set on the store's counter brought them sudden and strange tidings.

"...bzzt... zzz...erefore...vestigati...ossible links betwee..."

"...police have...ese acts are...ly the work of a criminal organization..."

"...Huh?"

A number of the men left in the restaurant stopped what they were doing and looked up, suddenly concentrating on the words that filtered through the static.

One of the nearby waitresses caught on to the radio report's urgent tone and turned a knob on the radio, adjusting the frequency.

"...Once again, authorities suspect that Mr. Placido Russo may have had a hand in the explosions and mass kidnappings in the Elsen's Hill, Illinois area, and are currently investigating..."

Randy and Pecho continued wolfing down their lunches even as they turned an ear toward the words coming from the radio.

"Elsen's Hill? Ain't that near Chicago? Explosions and kidnappings, eh? Nasty business."

"Wait a sec... Placido... That's the Russo Family's don, right? He's not even famous like Capone, and they're mentioning his name on the radio?"

"Yeah, it's strange. It's been a while since the name Russo meant anything, even in Chicago. Wonder why they decided now to talk about 'em. And they're supposed to be automobile dealers, dunno why the news'd pick now to let the cat outta the bag."

"Yeah... Still. Explosions and kidnappings... Wonder what's gotten into 'em."

They shrugged and moved on, already putting it out of their minds.

But then the radio came on with a new report, and the air in the restaurant froze solid.

"Authorities are as yet unable to give an estimate on casualties from the approximately three hundred explosives detonated in the area. The unexplained disappearances in and around the

Chicago area, however, have been estimated to number approximately two hundred people, and the people of Illinois continue to express their concern regarding..."

"Three hundred bombs?!"

"Two hundred people?!"

"Senator Manfred Beriam, who is currently visiting Chicago, released the following statement regarding these troubling events..."

The voice from the radio droned on, but the people in the Alveare were no longer paying any attention.

Maiza frowned, ignoring the excited chatter that had suddenly filled the restaurant.

"Seems something serious is going down in Chicago."

"Mmm."

"...Elsen's Hill... Isn't that Nebula's town?"

Nebula was a huge conglomerate, one of the country's largest. Though the company had its headquarters in Chicago, it also held many offices and factories in the nearby town of Elsen's Hill.

"It's a strange place. I've heard rumors that even the mayor there is working with Nebula."

"And I've heard rumors that over half of the townspeople there are connected to Nebula in some way or another. Hmm. Something tells me that this isn't just a matter of a small argument with Mr. Russo..."

The news of explosions and kidnappings in Chicago did nothing to affect the New York camorristas directly, but nevertheless the sharp light of anxiety seeped into Maiza's eyes. If Placido Russo and his Family really were behind the attacks, there was a chance that the government would pour more resources into stamping organized crime. And in that case, small Families like the Martillos would no doubt be deeply affected.

Maiza focused on the words coming from the radio, but beside him Ronnie merely raised a finger to his lips, his eyes growing unfocused as he thought the matter over.

Hmm... I'd thought it'd be either there or New York, one or the other...

Perhaps Ronnie suspected something, for he sat there for a while, matching the information from the radio to the knowledge in his head. At length, he seemed to come to some sort of conclusion, and he smirked as he threw back the last of his liquor in one gulp.

"No, I think this actually might be... Hah. Well. No matter," he murmured quietly.

"Show me what you've got, Huey Laforet. And the same goes for the rest of you... the mortals involved in this game."

— —

Madison Square Park

"So now that you know how things are, Miss Chane," Spike said, "we'd much appreciate it if you would follow us without causing any trouble."

He leered at her, and Chane grit her teeth as she reevaluated her situation.

Alone, Spike would have posed no problems. She didn't think for a second that the blind, unarmed sniper could overcome her.

But the man who'd showed up to aid him was another matter entirely.

The man who Spike had called Felix Walken was obviously on a different level from that of normal human beings. She didn't know whether it was natural talent or the product of practice and effort, but the tremendous sense of presence that rolled off of him like a palpable thing and the way he'd effortlessly thrown her through the air had Chane's nerves on edge. And then, most alarming of all, was his name.

Felix Walken.

She'd heard from Claire, once, that the name he'd taken had once belonged to another assassin.

Said assassin had been one of the greatest even in the dangerous streets of New York, practically a legend of the underworld. She also remembered that even Claire had acknowledged that Felix Walken was the strongest person he'd ever met. After Claire himself, of course.

If the man standing before her now was indeed that Felix Walken—the *original* Felix Walken—then she was probably in very, very dire straits.

Still, even as she processed the fact, fear never entered her heart.

It never occurred to her, even for a second, to run away. In fact, the thought of losing track of the two men before her, perhaps leaving them free to cause harm to Jacuzzi and the rest of her friends, worried her more than anything. It would be faster to beat the name of their employer out of them before they could do something harmful. And besides, even setting all of that aside, there was no way she could possibly ignore or run away from people who obviously meant her father harm.

"...Defiant to the bitter end, I see," the former Felix sighed, and removed both hands from the pockets of his coat. He rolled his shoulders lightly and took a single step toward Chane.

Here he comes.

Chane tightened her grip on her knives and tensed, prepared to burst forward and take the initiative. Several dark shadows entering her field of vision, however, made her hesitate.

Who?!

She focused on them properly and saw that the shadows were in fact men—roughly ten of them, in fact, walking toward her from the entrance to the park. Half of the men were burly and heavysset mountains of muscle, while the other half appeared at first glance to be normal, but all of them were dressed in dour black suits that wouldn't have looked out of place at a funeral, and all of them were glaring in Chane's direction. Perhaps it was the black suits, but they reminded her of the Lemures.

"Oi, over here. She's the one we want," Spike called. He'd probably heard the sound of their footsteps as they approached.

Spike's grin widened; he was probably feeling even better with the arrival of reinforcements to back him up in an already advantageous situation. But the new arrivals, didn't seem to share his good humor for some reason.

"Mr. Spike. There's a bit of a problem."

"Eh? A problem?"

"We heard on the radio that—"

"Hold that for a sec." Spike held up a hand, the smile now completely gone from his face as his brow furrowed in consternation.

"That's one pair of feet too many."

The former Felix was the first to realize what that meant, casting his gaze about to the shadows.

His cold eyes settled on a man soon enough.

He was standing in their midst. Had been, actually, for some time.

It was just like when Chane had noticed the former Felix. By the time they caught sight of him, he was already among them, standing beside Chane as though he'd always been there.

Spike was the next to notice, and he frowned at the unexpected intruder.

"Who the hell are you? You're not on our side, are you?"

The man merely opened his mouth to reply, totally unconcerned.

"You want to know who I am? Sure, I'll give you an answer."

The man looped an arm around Chane's shoulders and spoke, his voice overflowing with confidence.

"I'm... *me*."

Silence fell over the park.

So brazen and yet so unexpected was his answer that Spike and the rest of his men were momentarily struck dumb.

"...Who the hell does this joker think he is? You think you're some kinda hero from a movie, dashing in at just the right moment to save the damsel in distress?"

Spike sneered, looking to get a rise from the unknown man.

It seemed to have no effect. The man just looked to Chane and smiled sheepishly.

"Well, of course it was the right moment. I was watching this whole time."

"What?"

"You see, I actually looking forward to this so much that I got here early. Real early. But then I saw Chane lost in thought, illuminated in the sunlight filtering through the trees, and she just looked so pretty I couldn't butt in on that."

Chane glared him, blushing bright red.

"Hahaha. Aww, don't say that, Chane. I swear I'm telling the truth. You were beautiful, honest."

If anything, Chane's glare just intensified.

"This isn't the time for that? What're you talking about? There's no way schmucks like these'd be more important to me than how pretty you are."

Spike strained his sense of hearing to the limit, but of course there Chane's voice didn't reach his ears. He knew that she'd never put her knives away, so it wasn't likely that she was using sign language, either. He decided that he was being toyed with and bared his teeth in a snarl.

"This really isn't the time for that, dammit! Hold on and stop talking for just a goddamn second, you asshole!"

A vein stood out on Spike's forehead as he forcefully slammed the cane in his right hand against the ground.

"Who the hell *are* you? You know what'll happen to you if you don't scam now? This ain't a matter of a few bruises and wounded pride, asshole. We'll kill you!"

"Whoa, whoa, buddy. I know you're angry but now you're tripping over your own words. You meant to say that *I'm* going to kill *you*, right?"

"The hell..."

Goddammit, who the hell is this guy?

Spike grit his teeth and would have glared toward where the man's voice had come from if circumstances had permitted. He wasn't used to being matched bluster for bluster.

But... That's not everything. I don't know what it is, but... He's dangerous. I hear fucking sirens in my head just at the sound of his voice.

He waited for the others to make the first move for him, feeling himself break into a cold sweat...

But the former Felix only stayed where he was, his eyes cold and sharp, and the others around him seemed to hesitate, waiting for orders.



Spike decided that he would have to calm down and take the initiative. With a massive effort he pushed down the unease he felt and spoke to the intruder once more.

"Fine... Whatever, I don't even care anymore. At least tell me your name so we can talk."

He wasn't really expecting a straight answer, but the man surprised him by promptly replying.

The answer that came from his mouth, however, only served to confuse everyone even more.

"My name's Felix. Felix Walken."

"...Huh?"

The completely unexpected answer had Spike and his underlings all turning to stare at the man that *they* knew as Felix, but the man only frowned and looked away, refusing to meet their eyes.

The intruder—Felix Walken, also known as Claire Stanfield—continued to speak calmly and confidently.

"I'm Chane Laforet's fiancé."

— —

Division of Investigation Temporary Office

The phone rang.

"...Brown?"

Victor paused, staring at the phone. The call had come at a strange time, and he hesitated a moment longer before exhaling deeply, once again becoming a calm and collected professional as he picked up the receiver.

"Talbot. Ah, so it was you, Detective Brown. What is it?" Victor said, relaxing slightly as Donald's voice came over the receiver.

He tensed abruptly the next moment, though, as Donald gave his report.

"What...?"

Victor stood up, his ear still to the receiver, and with his free hand he pointed once to Edward and then to the radio, making a turning motion.

Reading the gesture for what it was, Edward hurried over to the radio and turned it on, reaching over to adjust the signal.

He needn't have bothered, for the radio immediately launched into an emergency broadcast, the sound coming through loud and clear.

"Authorities are as yet unable to give an estimate on casualties from the approximately three hundred explosives detonated in the area. The unexplained disappearances in and around the Chicago area, however, have been estimated to number approximately two hundred people, and the people of Illinois continue to express their concern regarding..."

Edward froze as he processed the words, his expression twisting with shock and dismay, and even Bill stopped what he was doing to listen, his normally droopy eyes wide and alert.

"So... tell me," Victor managed to say, his shoulders shaking with ill-concealed fury. "How the fuck were we completely in the dark about this until a goddamn public news station saw fit to tell us?"

He paused, listening to Donald.

"Ah... Alright. Fine. I understand, detective. I'll call you back right after I talk to headquarters and find out what's going on."

Victor set the receiver down slowly, almost delicately. It looked like he was exercising the utmost control, and if he let it slip for even a second he'd probably end up breaking something. His normal cold and arrogant façade had vanished, replaced by quiet rage.

"So us Bureau agents aren't even worth your time, huh, Nebula."

The eerily calm tone of his voice had his subordinates subtly shying away.

"And Huey Laforet... Were all those underlings you had moving in New York just a ruse?!"

Just then, the doorknob turned, and the door opened, and a man poked his head inside the office.

None of them had ever seen the man before. From the manner of his dress he appeared to be a vagrant, jobless and homeless thanks to the long depression, but the sharp, lively expression on his face was so at odds with his appearance that the detectives had to hesitate.

What sort of homeless man would have entered their office, anyway?

"Who are you?"

It wasn't like they had anyone standing guard outside, but still. Nobody could have entered by accident...

"Greetings," the homeless man said, before they could gather their wits. His cultured tones once again threw them off, being so completely at odds with his looks. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. Again, perhaps I should say. Well. I must say it's a pleasure to meet the esteemed detectives of the Bureau of Investigation... Though I see that there are only three of you here at present."

"Wha... Who *are* you?"

"It seems you've heard the news over the radio, so without further ado, allow me to pass on Master Huey's message to you."

The detectives tensed, the unexpected name more than enough to have them on edge.

"Ahem. Master Huey says, 'I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you, Victor.'"

A messenger?!

The way the man had suddenly appeared at just the right moment, together with the words coming from his mouth, made it clear that this was no joke. It meant that a vital clue to Huey Laforet's intelligence and communications network had just shown up on Victor's doorstep, right when he needed it most.

But even as he processed that fact, Victor could hear warning klaxons going off inside his head.

Why now, of all times, he asked himself.

"Well... Alright, then. I don't know what you're talking about... But stay right there and don't move a goddamn muscle."

Victor fixed the man with a glare that was positively glacial, but he shrugged it off easily, even smiling slightly as he continued.

"Master Huey also had this to say: 'I'm also sorry to burden you with this when you're already busy, but since I can't drag you into this fight between Nebula and I...'"

"'Forgive me for occupying you just a little bit longer,' is what he says."

A small thud alerted them to something falling at the man's feet.

It was a small sphere with a dull copper shine, a thin length of what looked like string protruding from it. Fitful hissing filled the suddenly silent room as the small flame on the end of the string continued to burn down, emitting tiny wisps of smoke as it went.

Victor blanched as he realized just what it was.

"Everyone get dow-"

Bill and Edward dove behind nearby desks before he even finished his sentence.

"Ack! You dirty coward-"

Again he was cut off, this time by a flash of light from the sphere. He didn't have any time to run.

And the office shook with a thundering roar.

A black and white illustration of a window with vertical blinds. A horizontal bar is attached to the left side of the window frame. The text is centered over the window area.

**CHAPTER 4 FRONT
LET'S THINK ABOUT
THE OUTSIDE**

**Alcatraz Island
Broadway
Night**

"Hey. Hey, neighbor. Psst! Over here. You awake?"

Ladd Russo had bought himself a ticket to solitary, but that didn't mean that time stopped for the rest of the prisoners. Eventually night fell, and the prisoners were locked in their cells to wait for lights out once more.

The sound of someone's voice prompted Firo to open his eyes.

It wasn't as though he had anything better to do, so he'd switched off the light inside his cell himself before the guards turned it off from outside. He'd actually been dozing fitfully when an excited voice had called him from the next cell over.

"...Dragon?"

"That's what they call me. But hey, never mind that. I wanna talk about that guy! You know! The one from this morning!"

"Huh? Oh, uh. You mean Ladd?"

"Of course I mean Ladd! Damn, man, that had to be the strongest punch I've ever seen!"

"Aahh..." Firo yawned, not sharing his neighbor's enthusiasm. "Betcha Jack Dempsey'd hit harder."

He couldn't say he was altogether interested in the conversation at hand, though it did serve to remind him that the events of that morning hadn't been caused by a dream. He wished halfheartedly that his entire sentencing to Alcatraz had been a dream, actually, but unfortunately reality was a harsh mistress.

"But yeah," he mused, rubbing at his eyes and sitting up. "He surprised me, too. Not his punches. I just didn't think he'd be so crazy."

Dragon seemed to pay his blasé comments no mind, still chattering excitedly from the other side of the wall.

"He was amazing! Hey, did you see how his left hand was a prosthetic? How do you suppose he lost it? You think maybe he lost it to a man-eating bear before he put it down for good? Or maybe a crocodile over in Neverland ate it... Hahaha. Must've tasted good, I bet you that. I'm a little jealous, actually."

Firo frowned, imagining Dragon licking his lips with relish, but said, "So who's the Peter Pan who cut it off then?"

Even as he said it he knew that it was a lame joke, and Firo grit his teeth irritably. Perhaps in an attempt to deflect attention from his sense of humor, he tossed a question over the wall.

"Gotta say, I didn't think you'd know what Peter Pan is."

The English novel *Peter and Wendy* had been a great hit in its home country, and once it crossed the ocean to the United States it proved to be a similar success there as well. Firo had read Claire's old copy when he was a kid, but he didn't think Dragon would have had a similar opportunity.

An eternal child, huh... Yeah, come to think of it, Claire said that Peter was his role model.

Firo himself, on the other hand, had wanted only to grow up as soon as he could and gain some respect. He smirked slightly as he thought back on his past.

Never thought I'd be the one being an eternal... well, young man, I guess.

Maybe next time he saw Czes he'd tease him and call him Peter Pan. His thoughts drifted in that vein for a moment before he started, realizing that Dragon hadn't replied for a while.

"Hey, something wrong?"

"Oh. Uhh... Well, you know." Dragon sounded uncharacteristically unsure, though Firo couldn't see his face to be sure. "I used it to practice reading and writing English, yeah?"

"Huh. Hey, speaking of which, you're actually really good at English, you know that."

"I guess. It's not like I grew up with other Japanese people or anything."

Huh, interesting... Strange, though. It sure looked like he was talking to those Asians he always eats with just fine.

Firo frowned, opening his mouth to question Dragon's denial...

But crisp footfalls suddenly echoed down the hall of Broadway. The sound of it coming through the iron bars lingered in the prisoners' ears like the scythe of Death itself.

Firo shut his mouth and laid back, throwing his blanket up over his head, quietly waiting for the footsteps to pass him by.

But instead of continuing on, they came to a stop in front of his cell.

"Hey, you. Did you try to hide something from me just now?"

...Huh?

He wasn't hearing things. The guard was speaking to him.

Still, it wasn't like he had a clue what the guard was talking about. He kept quiet under the covers, waiting to see what would happen next.

There was a moment of silence, and then Firo heard the sound of his cell door sliding open.

The soft scraping of metal finally prompted Firo to poke his head out from under the covers. He looked up to see a young guard stepping into his cell, and before he could even utter a word of protest the other man strode up to him and ripped away his blanket.

"What the hell? What's going on?"

Firo bolted upright, surprised, but the guard cut him off coldly.

"What's going on? I don't know. You're the one who should be telling me."

There was a knife on the guard's upturned palm. It was a small shining thing about the size of Firo's palm, and from the silver sheen of it Firo could tell that it was probably brand new.

"...Wha?"

Firo, of course, had never seen the knife before. Before he could explain, though, the guard smirked nastily and seized his arm.

"Think you're so clever, huh."

Firo stumbled after the guard as he was dragged outside, still half asleep and groggy. He shook his head, half-expecting to wake up and find out it was all a dream, but the click of cuffs closing around his wrists dispelled that notion soon enough.

It wasn't yet time for lights out, and he looked around and saw that everyone in the nearby cells come to their doors, staring at him. Dragon in particular grinned back at Firo from his cell, and only then did Firo truly realize his plight.

He sighed, accepting what he was in for, and as though to drive it home the guard shook the "confiscated" knife threateningly at him.

"I don't know how you managed to smuggle this thing in," he said.

"...But don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to explain during your stay in solitary."

— —

"So you're working for Misery, huh."

Several guards had surrounded Firo as he was led down the stairs and past a heavily guarded door, but they left as he passed through into a long hallway, leaving only the guard who'd first "found" the knife in Firo's cell.

Firo waited until he heard the door close behind him and began with a leading question.

The guard didn't flinch or even turn around as he led the way down the hall.

"Glad to see you're sharp on the uptake."

"Have to say, I didn't think he'd call me up just two days after I got here."

"There's been a bit of an emergency."

Firo frowned at the guard's flat explanation. "An emergency?"

"Prisoners don't need to know about the outside world."

Then why the hell did you even mention it, asshole?

Firo opened his mouth to give the complaint voice, then closed it with a scowl as he decided to just ignore the guard's obvious baiting.

"So what's this all got to do with me?"

"You realize Huey Laforet knows about you already, right? There's no use pussyfooting around the matter anymore. We've decided to let you just talk to him personally. You can ask him whatever you want, and in turn he'll probably ask you some things as well."

"...Sounds kinda reckless to me. You're sure these're Misery's orders? He didn't come off to me like someone to be that impulsive," Firo commented offhand, but frowned a moment later as the guard's shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"Of course they're not."

Just four words, but they stopped Firo dead in his tracks.

"...What?"

"I *am* working for Misery, and I *did* receive orders to take you down to solitary tonight and see what you would do."

"Wait..."

A chill ran down Firo's spine.

He felt the contents of his stomach churning uneasily, a definite feeling of foreboding overtaking and surrounding him. Unwillingly he cast his thoughts back to his time on the boat that had brought him to the island, and despite himself he opened his mouth. He had to see if his hunch was right.

"So... you're working for Misery, *and also* working for Huey," Firo sighed, half resigned already, and the guard grinned and nodded.

"Glad to see you're sharp on the uptake."

— —

The guard led Firo into the depths of the underground prison.

Past a secret door, down flights of stairs walled with bricks and mortar, deeper and deeper, farther and farther...

There was a room.

As he descended the stairs, Firo had felt like he was being transported into the island's past, going back in time as he walked down, but as he finally reached the bottom he found that feeling shattered into a million pieces.

Three massive doors made of reinforced concrete and steel blocked his way, opening one after another as the guard led him through. There was about a yard of space between each door, and all three had sturdy looking locks holding them closed.

The guard unlocked the last door and revealed a long hallway, at the end of which waited yet another sturdily constructed door.

Unlike the three Firo had just passed through, however, this one had a window, and a small slot at the bottom that looked like it was used for passing food trays in and out.

...So that's why it's got so many doors blocking the way, huh.

He didn't think anyone could possibly grind themselves into something that could pass through that small slot, but perhaps, if an immortal were to put their very life on the line, then escape might be possible. Maybe there were even similar gates blocking the air vents, to prevent that sort of thing from happening.

It occurred to him that they could've just cut off the air entirely and left Huey eternally suffocating, but he soon realized that that would be no different from just dropping Huey into a river somewhere, perhaps in a barrel filled with concrete. Firo thought to himself that Victor was an unexpectedly humane individual, compared to the company he himself kept.

Heh. Still, all that security doesn't mean a thing when there are traitors among the guys posted here.

Firo smirked, and as though his thoughts had been broadcast for all to hear, the guard turned and smiled at him.

"The guard who talked to you on the boat was transferred to the mainland. He didn't answer any questions, of course, and it wasn't like they could torture him for information. I hear they have him under surveillance right now. Quite strict."

"I see... So what you're saying is, if I squealed on you, then you'd be out of a job too, eh?"

If the guard felt threatened, he didn't show it at all.

"Of course. But someone else would take my place soon enough."

"...You know, if you just told me how you'd do that, I could be on the streets a free man by this time tomorrow."

"Well then. Perhaps Master Huey will deign to tell you if you ask nicely," the guard said, chuckling lightly as he led Firo down the hallway.

"Even with the help of turncoats like me, escaping this island is far from easy. You saw the security standing at the entrance to this place, right?"

"...Yeah. Yeah, I did."

Even if Huey somehow made it past the three reinforced doors, there were probably only a few paths leading to the surface and freedom. He'd heard that the warden was a smart and resourceful man, so unless Huey somehow managed to get over half the guards on his side, he would be hard pressed to escape.

"Still. It seems he's planning on leaving soon."

"...Leaving? You mean he's gonna escape?"

"For Master Huey, nothing is impossible."

Whoa, whoa. Hold on a second.

Firo had only been a prisoner at Alcatraz for two days, but even that short amount of time had been more than enough to impress upon him the extremes the staff went to when it came to security. Even if Huey did somehow get past security, and even if he was immortal, would he be able to swim across the sea, through rough currents and past the hungry sharks that patrolled the bay? No, escape would surely be nearly impossible.

But that wasn't the reason for Firo's alarm.

After all, it didn't matter *how* he did it. If Huey Laforet really did manage to escape...

...Then what happens to me?

He'd entered Alcatraz to find out the mystery behind Huey's information network, but if Huey up and vanished from the island before Firo managed to find out...

They wouldn't lock me up in this place instead of him, would they?!

The thought flitted through his mind and he felt his stomach lurch uneasily.

He was so wrapped up in that unwelcome thought that he didn't even notice that they'd reached the end of the hall, the guard raising his keys.

The man unlocked the complicated series of locks on the door and took one step back, gesturing toward Firo and urging him to enter.

"...I don't suppose someone's right hand might come shooting out right as I open this door to land on my head, would it?" Firo asked, raising an eyebrow.

"If that had been Master Huey's intent, I would have waited until you were all chained up and slipped some drugs into your next meal," the guard shot back at him, and Firo could only glare at him and carefully ease the door open himself.

Once the door was open just a crack he peeked inside. He saw someone sitting on a chair a distance away from the door and relaxed, swinging it open fully.

But then...

"Why, Firo! What brings you here? Did you get an invitation too?"

"What the..."

Isaac?!

Firo took a step back despite himself as he realized the person sitting on the chair was none other than Isaac Dian.

A mere moment later, a hand flashed out from the shadows and passed through the air where he'd been just been standing.

He gasped, then forced his breathing to even out and tensed his body, ready for action. Everyone was an enemy. He couldn't let his guard down for a second.

But his cold assessment of the situation paused for a second, and then he relaxed minutely, the air of hostility radiating from him receding just a little.

He'd realized that the hand from the shadows was someone's left hand.

There was a pause, and then a right hand joined the left, and they began to clap.

"Excellent speed, I must say. Your reflexes and situational awareness are also commendable. Hmm... Perhaps even on par with the likes of Nile and Denkuro."

The first half had been lavish praise.

The second half, however, had been absent appraisal, like the unseen man was talking to himself. He walked out from the shadows a moment later, still musing to himself.

Unlike the dark blue clothes that Firo and Isaac had been given, the man was wearing a strange, ivory white prisoner's uniform.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Firo Prochainezo. I believe this is the first time we've met... Or, perhaps, if we were to count the memories in your head, this would be a reunion many, many years overdue," the man said, his calm tone markedly strange considering he was a

prisoner as well. He offered Firo a smile that revealed absolutely nothing of what he was thinking.

Firo kept up his guard as he matched the man's face to one held in the memories of the many alchemists inside him.

"Hope you don't mind if I don't share your enthusiasm... Huey Laforet."

— —

"Hmm... You look like you're quite curious about something."

Just thirty seconds had passed since Firo's first meeting with Huey.

Huey had walked back into his room and invited Firo inside, and the young camorrista had cautiously entered, looking around. Once inside, though, he found that aside from the size of the room, there was little to distinguish it from his own cell.

Huey remained standing against the far wall, and Firo took up a spot opposite to him with Isaac in the middle. He didn't bother to hide his anxiety, glaring at the older immortal.

"You look like the kinda guy who thinks he knows everything, who likes playing God. So yeah, I'm curious about why you'd want to talk to someone like me. I'm curious about what you think I'm gonna ask you."

"Ah, I see. I think that you would first ask why exactly Mr. Dian is here together with us," Huey replied amicably, offering Firo another enigmatic smile.

Firo's senses told him that Huey meant him no harm. They told him that Huey was no liar.

And yet, Firo couldn't bring himself to like the man standing on the far side of the room. As for *why* he didn't like him, however? He couldn't say for certain. There was the sudden attack that had marked their first interaction, of course, but that wasn't it. It was his instincts, the experience of all the years he'd spent as part of the underbelly of society, that rejected the man before his eyes.

A strange, tense silence stretched between him and Huey.

The guard who'd led Firo to the cell was still standing outside, so only Isaac bore witness to the strained atmosphere. Predictably, he didn't seem to notice it at all, only perking up at the mention of his name.

"What? What's that? Was it something I did?"

"No. Yeah. Wait, well... Ahh, never mind. What're you doing here, Isaac?" Perhaps wishing to gather his wits instead of dueling verbally with Huey, Firo deliberately turned to Isaac and asked him directly.

"Oh, me? A guard called me a while earlier, so I was talking with this monster man when you came in."

"...Monster?"

Firo couldn't deny that Huey wasn't exactly human, but still. He didn't exactly look the part.

Isaac smiled knowingly at Firo's puzzled expression and puffed out his chest, launching into a fundamentally flawed explanation.

"Listen closely, Firo. In the Orient, they call men who live in secret rooms like this 'the shikiwarashis.' If you chase them out, bad luck falls upon you, and then when you meet them in the street you have to put your shoes on your head and prostrate yourself on the ground before them! That'll turn all the bad luck into good fortune, so be sure to practice your bowing!"¹

"...Right. You know, it's actually a nice change of pace not to have Miria egging you on, but for some reason it just makes me wanna beat you up even more."

Perhaps sensing Firo's frustration, Huey stepped forward to defuse the situation.

"Mr. Dian. Thank you for your time today. I very much enjoyed all the stories you had to tell me, but now I am afraid we must part ways once more. I have to discuss very sensitive secrets with Mr. Prochainezo, you see. I hope you understand."

For just a moment, a regretful look crossed Isaac's face, but it was there and gone in an instant, the smile soon returning to his face.

"Oh ho! Secrets, eh! I understand. Alright then, I'll be leaving. But before I go, could you do a favor for me and make the people here happy? I noticed that they all look sad for some reason. I bet they all have tragic pasts!"

"Oh, yes. Their happiness is indeed important, is it not. And remember, Mr. Dian, everything we talked about must remain a secret. It would not do for our good fortune to run away, you know."

¹ A play on "zashikiwarashi." The English "the" is pronounced as "za" in Japanese. Zashikiwarashi are childlike monsters in Japanese myth, said to hide in homes and bring good fortune if respected, but misfortune if chased out. Both the reference to shoes on heads and prostration are references to Buddhist stories and practices.

"Of course! Your secrets are safe with me! I might not look like it, but I've got a knack for keeping secrets!"

If that was true then you wouldn't be here in the first place, Isaac.

Firo kept the thought to himself; voicing it would have no effect on the former thief.

Blissfully unaware of Firo's musings, Isaac jumped to his feet and followed the guard outside. Huey watched him go, a gentle smile fixed on his face. More than likely, Isaac would spend the night in solitary and then be ushered back to his cell the next morning, joining the rest of the prisoners once again as though nothing had ever happened.

Firo kept his own gaze fixed on Huey as he heard the sound of the door shutting behind him.

He couldn't be sure, but the smile Huey presented to him seemed a tad colder than the one he'd shown to Isaac. The older immortal gestured to the now empty chair.

"Please, sit."

"You sit."

"Very well."

Firo paused, nonplussed, as Huey simply nodded and did just that. The feeling of unease that had pestered him since he entered the room only got stronger.

He exhaled deeply, trying to push down his irritation, but his efforts were for naught as Huey chose that moment to start talking.

"My apologies for earlier. Sometimes the urge to play childish pranks overtakes me. I do hope you understand."

"Huh? Oh, that."

Apparently to Huey, pretending to make an attempt on Firo's life counted as a "childish prank." Firo frowned and set his jaw, assuming a façade of cool composure.

"...It's nothing. Victor did the same thing when we first met."

"Ah, yes, that does seem like something he would do. Strange, though. You seem a trifle irritated considering that it was 'nothing.'"

"...I thought you called me because you wanted to talk. If you're just gonna be an asshole, I'm leaving."

To be honest, Firo would lose out on far more than Huey if the conversation ended there, but still he found himself hoping that Huey would call his bluff.

He knew that he was just playing into the older immortal's hands by talking with him, but it wasn't like he really had much of a choice.

"So," Firo said, "why'd you call Isaac here?"

"Mmm. I had heard that he was an immortal as well. I merely wanted to talk to him. He was quite amusing. Interesting, in fact."

"...And you 'merely wanted to talk' to me, too?"

"Well, I cannot say that that is not part of it, but..."

Huey crossed his legs and appeared to think the matter over for a moment.

"But there is something I am slightly curious about. And you, too, must have things that you wish to know from me as well, do you not? Things besides what Victor has tasked you to find."

"...Can't deny that, I guess. But I don't really want to ask you anything. Just wanted to tell you something."

Firo leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, glaring at the man sitting before him.

"Don't mess with Ennis... or my friends and family," Firo said flatly, thinking back to the Mist Wall incident of a year ago.

"Look. It's none of my business what you do, and it's not like I want to eat you or something, either. I don't think Maiza's holding a grudge against you, so you don't need to worry about that. Honestly? I don't care whether you become Public Enemy Number One, or you decide to try and take over the world, or whatever, as long as you leave us alone. Don't try and drag us into your shit, is what I'm saying. Don't try and test me. I'm already pissed enough as it is 'cause I got dumped on this godforsaken island."

"Aha, I see. So you are fond of Miss Ennis."

"...What's it to you?" Firo asked, looking away.

"I have heard, last year, that individuals in my employ made untoward advances toward you and Miss Ennis. Christopher and the others must have strong feelings regarding her."

"So what?"

"I merely wish to make it clear that I myself have no intention of harming or otherwise approaching her."

The smile on Huey's face seemed to grow colder as he leaned back in his chair, the rickety wood creaking just a little.

"...No intention, that is, as long as you cooperate with me."

"Cooperate?"

"You, and also the memories of Szilard Quates, are most precious to me."

Firo frowned openly, his brow creasing with consternation.

He'd half expected it, to be honest, but Huey's words more or less confirmed that he knew—or at the very least had enough evidence to assume—that Firo had devoured Szilard Quates.

"Dunno what you're talking about... Besides. I don't see what's so precious about that at all."

"No, no. To me, you see, the memories of Szilard Quates—the information he held regarding the creation of Miss Ennis and the incomplete Grand Panacea—are quite invaluable."

Firo's frown deepened, but he didn't comment.

"And furthermore, you yourself are also most intriguing to me. You see, I myself have yet to actually devour another immortal. But Szilard Quates feasted upon dozens of people, and the opportunity to observe what effect devouring such a man may or may not have had upon your psyche is... Well. Simply put, your experiences, both of the past and of the future, are of great interest to me."

Firo grimaced and snapped, "What, are you flirting with me or something? Shut the hell up. There's nothing interesting about it, because nothing happened. I'm myself, end of story."

"...But there was a time when you could not have said that so confidently, was there not?"

Firo opened his mouth to voice a denial but stopped, suddenly speechless.

He couldn't actually say that there wasn't. Huey chuckled softly and continued to lay out his theories.

"The memories you gained from Szilard were not just knowledge, I think. I don't know if you have ever tested it, but I am almost certain that if you were to try to, for instance, drive an automobile, you would find your body rising to the task quite readily even if you did not deliberately reach for the information.

"So tell me. Can you say for certain that these memories and experiences of the past—these things that are not of you—slowly but surely mixing with your self have not influenced you whatsoever? That you are still yourself? Have you not wondered, even for just a second, whether you are truly the same person you were before you took his knowledge?"

Huey wasn't saying these things to threaten Firo, nor to make him doubt himself. He just asked question after question, his eyes cool and calm. They weren't meant to railroad him, these questions. They were truly nothing more than pure expressions of curiosity, neutral requests that demanded neutral answers.

Yet Firo shivered, feeling a deep chilly abyss yawning endlessly within that icy gaze. A cold sweat broke out across his forehead?

"What do you want?" he blurted.

Huey thought it over for a moment before replying.

"What do I want? My ultimate goal is to create a demon, I suppose, but... Hmm. Perhaps that is merely my objective as of present. No... However..."

He trailed off, sounding more like he was just talking thoughtfully to himself. At length he looked once again to Firo and opened his mouth again, though even then he didn't sound entirely sure.

"I think... I think that I wish to know of the end."

"The end...?"

"I merely wish *to know*."

Firo frowned, unsure what was being said.

"Know what?"

"*Something*. Anything. It does not matter what."

Huey uncrossed his legs, then crossed them again, launching into a thoughtful reflection that was meant for himself as much as it was meant for Firo.

"Why was I born? What is the meaning of life? Why is it wrong to kill people? You know of people who ask such questions, matters that have nothing to do whatsoever with the natural course of life. When I was young, like a philosopher I too asked such questions, but at length I tired of them. It was not that the answers eluded me. It was that I found too many answers. Even without consulting others, I found that I could produce any number of conclusions to each question, twisting words and meanings to arrive at any answer, and this could not hold my interest. The answers were in my heart, yet I could not derive from them any revelation, any catharsis. But instead, I found that I enjoyed learning the conclusions reached by others, the act itself of extracting the thoughts of others than myself. From innocent children, from old men, from the cruel, from the kind, from the twisted and the foolish and the wise... It is nothing less than natural that everyone finds their own separate meaning from life, their own truth of the world, but yet... I wish to know. All of those things. I wish to know everything."

"...Everything?"

"Those who live in the present, those who have lived in the past, those who will live in the future. Those who were never born, but nevertheless might have been born. I wish to know the hearts of these people, these *others*. And that is just one thing, one example. But there is more, yet more knowledge I wish to make my own. What exists at the end of the universe? Is the smallest form of matter the particle or the string? Is it possible to travel through time? Do parallel universes truly exist? And then there are questions about people, about human beings. What really happened in the recent robbery I saw on the news? Who was Jack the Ripper? What was the true identity of Ice Pick Thompson, the serial killer who made headlines in New York several years ago? What is the ideal amount of time to cook a whitefish? Do psychic powers exist? What lies over the rainbow? Even these things, I wish to know. Everything. Yes. *Everything*."

The man in white's voice waxed strong with madness as he spoke, rising with excitement.

"What will I think when I know everything? What lies at the end of that path? Ennui? Or shock? Or perhaps there will be a new riddle there, one revealed only to those who know all? I merely wish to reach that vaunted plateau myself."

"...What's the meaning in that?"

"There doesn't have to be one. Perhaps the result, the fact that I reached that ultimate resolution, will be the only meaning to derive from it. The answer to that, too, lies in the darkness. But that is why I exist, to know everything. I love knowledge, the fact of knowing, so much that sometimes I think that if this world would not allow absolute knowledge... I would rather see it destroyed."

"In other words, though, doesn't that mean you'd destroy the world for knowledge?"

"If necessary."

Firo had nothing to say to that.

He's crazy. Totally crazy.

He shifted uneasily, wondering how he'd escape the obviously insane man in front of him.

"...Hah..."

Huey looked at him and suddenly began to chuckle.

"Hahahahaha! Ahahahahaha!"

Firo took a cautious step backward.

He really lost it?!

Apparently noticing his anxiety, Huey stopped laughing just as suddenly as he'd started. The man in white offered him a childlike smile and shrugged slightly.

"...That was a joke."

"...What?"

Firo's jaw dropped open as the emotion vanished from Huey's voice as though it'd never been.

"Did you truly think that such pathetic thoughts were my motivation? Preposterous. I have not dreamed of bringing about the end of the world since I was a boy."

"What?" Firo managed to say, more confused than ever.

"You see, I have noticed from time to time that people tend to see me as someone with many secrets, ones I hold close to my heart, and I thought that perhaps you might be one such individual. Please, don't take me so seriously."

Only then did Firo realize that Huey had been *toying* with him, and he flushed with equal parts fury and embarrassment... and a little relief.

"You asshole..."

"I did tell you that sometimes I get the urge to play childish pranks, did I not?"

...If I beat the crap out of the bastard I'll only be playing into his hands!

Firo ignored the clenching of his fists and tried desperately to rein himself in and prove that he had the situation under control.

"...You weren't very popular with the other alchemists back then, were you."

"I only had one friend."

"Yeah, that one friend must be a saint, or maybe he just pretends he is. Either that or he's a goddamn idiot, or maybe just a crazy masochist."

"No. He is insane, yes, and a pretender, yes. But he does not pretend he is a saint. Quite the opposite," Huey murmured, looking away. He wasn't avoiding Firo's eyes, but instead it seemed like he was looking toward someone who wasn't there, and for a moment he even seemed lonely.

"...He is totally insane. He only thinks of how to please the entirety of the world that he beholds. He searches for a way to make every single human being in the world happy, regardless of their views, regardless of their religions, regardless of whether they are good or evil."

"...Well, he sounds pretty strange when you put it like that, but I still bet he's a lot better than you."

The face of an alchemist rose unbidden in Firo's mind, coming from Szilard's memories, but he ignored it and nudged it back down for the moment.

At length Huey slowly rose, looking for all the world as though he hadn't burst into manic laughter just a moment before.

"But setting that aside for now," he said, signaling the end of that discussion, "I wish to work together with you. Just a few questions from time to time is all I ask. If you wish to 'sell' the results of Szilard's research, then I am prepared to pay you whatever you wish, as long as it is within my power."

Firo hesitated, looking unsure.

"Think of it. With the knowledge you hold, I would have no reason to pursue Miss Ennis. And needless to say, I would make sure that Christopher never showed himself to her again, either."

It was the first concrete offer that Huey had given so far. Firo gave it some thought, but before he could arrive at a conclusion, Huey gave him a deadline.

"I will be staying here *for a few more days*, and before I leave I will call you here one last time. I would appreciate it if you had your answer ready by then."

He'd more or less just told Firo that he'd be escaping from Alcatraz in a few days, but Firo couldn't find it in himself to be surprised anymore.

"If you agree to cooperate with me, then as a sign of trust—an advance payment, if you will—I will tell you how I communicate with those outside these walls, and how I turn the guards to work for me. That is what Victor wishes to know, correct?"

A thousand questions rose up inside Firo, things he desperately wished to ask to this man who seemed to see everything, but in the end he only came up with one question.

"What the hell are you?"

Huey tapped his lips thoughtfully with one finger as he considered the blunt question, and finally just gave to Firo the easiest answer.

"I am nothing but a researcher," he said, simply.

"Though it seems like Victor and *the senator* do not like what I study."

— —

A moment passed after Firo followed the guard out of Huey's cell, back to his own.

Then a young girl's voice came from on top of the bed.

"Good work, Daddy!"

"Ah. Thank you, Liza. How did things go on your side?"

"Umm... There's someone really really scary and he's getting in the way! He's got this wrench and it's huuuge! Big as his arm! I bet he's crazy or something! But the bad part is that he's really really strong too. Even the Lamia can't beat him... Oh! But don't worry, Daddy! I studied him so it's not going to be a problem anymore! I found a *good hostage* so he'll be taken care of in no time, you'll see!"

"Indeed. That is a good thing, yes," Huey murmured, smiling gently. He paused for a moment, though, realizing that the expression on his daughter's face was a little different from normal. "Is something the matter?"

Liza's voice held a mix of surprise and jealousy as she exclaimed, "I've never heard you laughing like that, Daddy. You looked like you were really happy when you were talking with that Isaac person, and even with that spy Firo!"



Huey chuckled lightly. "Hahaha. Are you jealous that I enjoyed myself with people I'd just met, Liza?"

"Uh huh! I'm super jealous! Those two can just go die for all I care! Can I kill them, Daddy? Pleaaaaase?"

"No, dear. And both of them are immortal, anyway, so you could not kill them even if I gave you permission to do so."

"Ooooooh..."

Liza hung her head, but she couldn't keep the worried, questioning tone from her voice as she spoke.

"But you really *were* different from normal today, Daddy!"

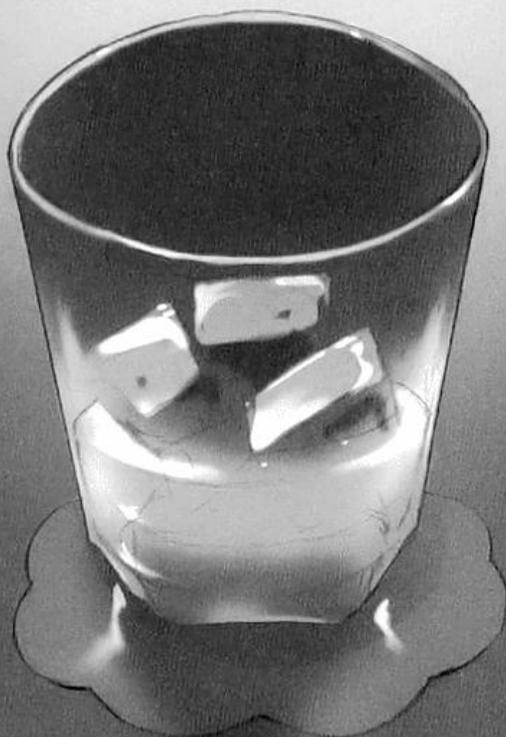
"Talking with Mr. Dian just reminded me a little of the past," Huey explained quietly.

He thought of his old friend, and of himself, all those years back...

"Those two are very alike, you know... Both of them with similar personalities, and both of them not quite right in the head."

**CHAPTER 4 BACK
LET'S HAVE A TALK**

YES, LET'S



Madison Square Park

"You really went and made Chane cry, huh."

The young woman in the black dress and her redheaded companion stood completely surrounded by dangerous looking men in black coats.

In any story this situation would have spelled grave danger, but the goons might as well have not been there at all for all the reaction the young man showed.

"I'll just have to punch you all in the eyes until you cry just as much as she did. Consider yourselves warned."

"What the hell are you talking about? Who's crying?" Spike blurted.

The young man merely shook his head sadly.

"Listen. Can't you hear that? That's Chane's voice crying out, filled with sadness. She's asking for help. Still can't? Here, let me give you a hint: only I can hear it."

"Are you ever gonna say anything that makes sense? How much opium did you smoke today, pal?"

"What are you, stupid? Why would I need drugs for this? All I need to do is believe to sharpen my senses, and then I can hear Chane's voice loud and clear."

Spike scoffed. "Hey, Felix. Not you, the one on our side. You really sold your name to this wacko?! Wait, wait, hold on a sec. Does that mean he's an assassin too?"

But instead of replying, the former Felix Walken only sighed deeply and looked away, refusing to answer.

As for the young redhead, also Felix Walken—though he sometimes went by Claire Stanfield—stared curiously at the blind man.

"Oh, hey. Now I remember you."

"Huh?"

Spike's brow furrowed and focused his keen sense of hearing in the direction of Claire's voice. The young man had been bothering him for some reason from the moment he opened his mouth, making warning bells ring loudly in his head for a reason he couldn't fathom. But the next words from Claire's mouth definitely helped him remember.

"You're that sniper from the train."

The klaxons in his head rose to a fever pitch as Spike froze, the confidence he'd gained from his numerical advantage crumbling in an instant, folding like a house of cards.

"Huh. Gotta say, even in my business it's not every day you see someone make it after they get dropped face first off a train."

— —

Somewhere in New York
Division of Investigation Temporary Office

Even as the men in black coats shuffled awkwardly with confusion over in Madison Square Park, there was a place in New York where yet greater chaos reigned.

Thankfully, the explosion in Victor's office hadn't started a fire, but thick black smoke still filled the small room, and the coughing man who gingerly rose to his feet could only be made out as a hazy silhouette. Victor had been sent flying by the force of the explosion, but somehow he managed to keep his wits about him.

"Dammit... Is everyone alright?" he called, looking around. He noted absently that the papers on the desks had been sent flying, and the wood was blackened and smoldering, but that the sturdy desks themselves had barely budged.

"Ah... Well, physically, I think I'm unharmed, sir."

"Christ, what the hell just happened?"

Victor heaved a quiet sigh of relief as his two subordinates peeked out from behind their desks, looking shaken but otherwise uninjured.

"Whew. Thank God the two of you are fine."

"Hrrm..."

"Sir..."

"Huh? What is it?" Victor asked, looking askance at his two subordinates.

"Well, uhh, sir. I think this is the first time you've ever worried for us like a normal human being."

"Hmm. I have to agree with Edward. I've worked for you for a long time, sir, but this is something quite new. Permission to shed tears of joy, sir?"

"...You smartass bastards..."

Victor grit his teeth, flushing with chagrin. Much as he would've liked to chew out the two of them, he instead walked to the soot on the floor that marked where the small bomb had exploded, looking down at it.

"Hmph. You think a bomb'd be enough to keep us down, Huey? You thought this'd be able to control us? Hah. Haha. Fat chance." He paused, looked around. "Huh. What happened to the messenger? Ran way, I guess?"

There was nothing left where the stranger had been standing before. He'd probably made a break for it just before the bomb went off.

"Erm... sir," Bill said, sighing. "Actually, I think Laforet's messenger succeeded quite admirably."

"What? What's that supposed to mean?"

Victor turned around to see Bill at the window, looking outside. The room was located on the first floor, and the window opened directly out onto the street.

Following his subordinate's gaze, Victor looked out and saw that the messenger was lying in a bloody mess on the sidewalk, probably blown out the window by the force of the blast.

The man's arms and legs were bent at unnatural angles, and his neck had been twisted in a direction that no normal neck would ever move. He lay completely still, and from the amount of blood splattered on the pavement, it was a safe bet that he'd stay that way.

Even worse for Victor, nearby pedestrians had come running at the sound of the explosion, and now dozens of them stood gathered in a crowd, staring right back at Victor as he peered out the window.

From far away he could hear the clip-clops of mounted policeman drawing near, and he clenched his teeth even harder. A blood vessel in his brain gave way and burst, but it healed in an instant before he could suffer a stroke.

"So this is how it's gonna be, huh, Huey?!"

He glared heatedly at the silent mass of meat lying on the pavement and snarled.

"I knew it... I knew I should've just *eaten* the goddamn bastard the moment I got my fucking hands on him...!"

— —

Millionaire Row
The Genoard Manor

"Aaaaaah! Nooooo! Mr. Graham! Noooooo!"

"Come on, Jacuzzi, calm down. No more tears, okay? I'm sure he's just fine."

Jacuzzi had heard the emergency broadcast on the radio and immediately fallen into hysterics.

The rest of his gang had actually turned it on in an effort to find something soothing—Jacuzzi had been in the middle of another, completely unrelated crying fit—but the news from Chicago had put a stop to that in an instant, and now even they stood silent and tense, almost as uneasy about the news as Jacuzzi himself. Only Nice smiled comfortingly, continuing to comfort the tattooed youth.

"B-but Nice! You heard the radio! They blew up three hundred buildings! Three hundred! Who even has that many bombs?! It's insane! Chicago's gonna disappear off the face of the earth any minute now!"

"It's fine, Jacuzzi. Lighten up. I mean, three hundred isn't so bad," Nice said soothingly, and Jacuzzi looked up at her with wide eyes.

"I-it's not?"

Nice's smile took on a distinctly dreamy quality as her single eye lost focus. "Nope, it's not. I've got two hundred more than that stashed away just in my room alone..."

"Aaaah! No no no don't say anything more that's enough I'm sorry that's terrifying please don't say any more!" Jacuzzi shrieked, clapping both hands over his ears and shaking his head from side to side.

In other words, business as usual at the Genoard mansion, but the atmosphere took a distinct turn for the worse as the doorbell rang suddenly.

The youths stared uneasily at one another as the chime faded, unsure of what to do.

They almost never got any mail, and most of the people Jacuzzi knew didn't actually bother to knock or ring the bell when they visited.

"Who d'you think it is?"

"Ever notice how nobody who visits when Jacuzzi's crying is ever good news?"

"Dammit, Jacuzzi! Now look what you did!"

"That's enough crying, you dumbass!"

"Ain't you ever considered that your tears might cause even more sadness for other people?!"

"Think a little before you go wasting your tears, you idiot!"

"Stop it!"

"Hyaha!"

The doorbell momentarily forgotten, the youths crowded around their leader, heaping insults on him, prompting him to actually stop crying and look up.

"What?!" Jacuzzi yelped, looking quite offended for once. "Why's this my fault all of a sudden?!"

He got to his feet and trudged over to the door, still grumbling half-heartedly under his breath as he wiped away his tears.

"Where are your manners, you guys? Geez, you'll annoy our guests yelling like that."

Fixing a bright smile on his face that looked quite at odds with his red-rimmed eyes, Jacuzzi swung open the door to greet his visitors.

"Hey. Long time no see."

A young man with tattoos over his shaved head stood in the doorway with one hand raised in greeting.

"...Tim!"

"You don't know how relieved I am that you're alright!"

It turned out that Jacuzzi's gang would only have to entertain two guests that day.

One was a bespectacled man wearing a bandanna over his shaved head—Tim.

The other was a timid looking woman with something that looked like a staff strapped to her back—Adelle.

Jacuzzi knew them both, and truth be told they hadn't exactly met or parted on the best terms. They'd been the reason that Jacuzzi and his gang had been swept up in the Mist Wall incident a year ago, after all. But Jacuzzi himself seemed to have forgotten all about it. At least, that was how he acted, showing not a hint of animosity toward them but instead nothing but pure relief at their good health, as though they were good friends he'd known all his life.

"And Mi-Miss Adelle! You're all healed up now! What a relief..."

Adelle, who'd been doing her best to hide herself in Tim's shadow, paused awkwardly in the face of Jacuzzi's smile.

"Umm. I... I... Err... Well, I..."

"Oh? Is something wrong? Was it something I said?" Jacuzzi blurted, looking toward Tim. The other man just sighed and shook his head, equal parts resignation and surprise stamped on his features.

"You're really something, you know that," he said. "How can you care so much about someone who almost killed you?"

"Huh? Oh!"

Jacuzzi paled slightly, as though he'd just remembered the events of the past year, but he swallowed hard and kept the smile fixed firmly on his face.

"S-still! I, I mean, everything was such a mess back then, and you were both hurt, so of course I was worried! And... and, we've killed people too, so it's not exactly fair of us to hold a grudge for something like that..."

Jacuzzi trailed off into a whisper as he went, finally falling silent, but shook himself as though snapping himself out of a funk and looked to his guests again.

"S-so. Umm, what brings the two of you here today?"

That was more like what Tim had been expecting, and he calmly began with the reply he'd prepared beforehand.

"You guys know Graham Specter, right?"

"What?"

"Know" would be putting it lightly; Jacuzzi had been crying with concern for the man just a few minutes ago. Before he could even begin to worry about why the name had come up, Tim pushed onward.

"And of course you know about our organization."

"Oh, umm, you work for Chane's father, right?"

Tim nodded, though he didn't look altogether happy about it.

"Yeah. There's a group working on his orders over in Chicago, and I think they've gotten into a little... argument... with your friend Specter."

"With Mr. Graham?!"

Jacuzzi couldn't stop the surprised yelp from passing his lips, and even the rest of his gang, listening in from the hallway, exchanged uneasy glances.

"B-but why! An argument?! What kind?! D'you mean an *argument* argument? What're they gonna do to him?!"

"What's he going to do to them, you mean. From what I hear, they've got their hands full just trying to break even against him. They sounded like they were being run ragged, to be honest."

"Oh."

"So the Lamia used their heads for once. They came up with a plan, you see, to *take someone he knew hostage and force him to back down...*"

A sudden chill fell over the manor.

Jacuzzi felt cold sweat trickling down his back as he looked hesitantly toward Tim.

"Erm... I... I have to advance the opinion very very strongly that taking people hostage is a terrible terrible thing to do and you shouldn't do it if you can help it at all and with that firmly in mind I have to ask... umm... wh-who are you planning on kidnapping?"

"We hear you're on pretty good terms with him."

"Aaaaaaaaah! Noooo! I knew it!"

Jacuzzi took a few steps backward, wailing. Behind him, his friends tensed and readied themselves to fight, reacting to their leader's agitation.

Immediately Tim raised his hands in a placating gesture, smirking as he said, "Whoa, relax. I can't speak for anyone else, but I'm not planning on dragging you into this, at least."

"Huh? Really?"

The smile returned cautiously to Jacuzzi's features, but the next thing Tim said wiped it right off his face again.

"The bad thing is that I'm not in charge this time, so I can't say for certain that the Lamia won't set their sights on you."

"No way!"

"Well, no. You guys seem to have a lot of powerful friends, and Liza did say something about *having found someone easier to kidnap*, so... you can probably rest easy."

Honestly it came off like he'd just come to make them worry rather than warn them, but either way, his business was done, and Tim turned to leave.

"I have to warn you, though," he said over his shoulder. "Even I can't say for certain what's going to happen, but whatever the case, don't get involved. *The Twins are always watching*. Even on the off chance they aren't, you don't want to risk it. Act like they're there all the time.

"Whatever one of the Twins sees makes its way to Huey. They might even be on your side, and stay on your side, but that information will still leak out. That's just the way Sham and Hilton work."

And with those last cryptic words, Tim walked out of the Genoard Manor.

"Umm... Mr. Jacuzzi, I'm, umm, really sorry... about what I did back then..."

Jacuzzi had been standing with his mouth hanging open, watching Tim leave, but he snapped to with a start.

"Huh? Oh. Oh! No no no, it's fine! I'm totally alright," he cried to Adelle, waving his hands about energetically to show just how fine he was. Adelle managed a small smile and turned to follow Tim, leaving her own puzzling words behind as though in apology for the things she'd done.

"The Twins are... they're very strange. One name commands a thousand faces, and one face controls a thousand names."

"The Twins aren't strong... and they aren't weak. They don't work like that. Not I... or even that monster you call Felix... could kill them, *even if they could.*"

**CHAPTER 5 FRONT & BACK
LET'S GET OUTTA HERE!**



**Alcatraz Island
Broadway
Nighttime**

"Feels like tomorrow's gonna be a bad day, for some reason," Firo muttered to himself, gazing blankly into the darkness. Lights out had been some time ago, and now he lay on his cot in his dark cell with his blanket pulled up over him.

A few days had passed since his impromptu meeting with Huey.

Firo continued his life as a prisoner more or less without complaint.

The low ceiling pressed down toward him when he laid down to sleep.

Roll was called sixteen times a day.

The tasks they had him do were simple and boring.

The rules were strict.

Firo was already tired of Alcatraz, of every single aspect of it. He found himself honestly pitying those prisoners who were actually serving life sentences in the island prison.

He'd spent the night after his talk with Huey in solitary, and quite frankly, he thought the experience was a lot like what a slave might feel, locked in the lightless hold of a slave ship. To tell the truth, he had no interest in trying it out again.

The only small comforts he'd managed to glean from Alcatraz—aside from his quiet conversations with Isaac during meal times—were the tiny periods of free time set aside for the prisoners, and his chance meeting in the library one day with a huge yet amicable Italian who'd told him about Naples, his father's hometown.

He'd thought about telling Misery about the double agent in his employ, but soon discarded the thought. It wasn't like he had any way to contact the old man anyway. And for his part, Misery had surely judged that calling upon a supposedly normal inmate like Firo too often would be dangerous, and so the camorrista found the days slipping meaninglessly past him one after another. Firo was seized by the helpless feeling that his life was passing him by, but he could do nothing but stand by and watch.

Time had passed, day by day, until he came to where he was now, once again at the end of an uneventful day, idly listening for the sound of crisp footsteps echoing up the hallway.

His head drooped and nodded as he muttered to himself, half-asleep.

"Musta been... I think... maybe one of those three... musta, must've been sent here on someone else's..."

Sleepy as he was, he forgot to keep his voice down, and his words were loud enough to carry over to the cells on either side of him. Firo paid it no heed, his eyelids continuing to flutter hazily.

He knew, after all, that there was nobody in the cells neighboring his own.

Even Dragon, who had held whispered conversations with him between cells from time to time, had been escorted to solitary that afternoon.

In fact, Firo had been present for the event that had bought the Asian man a ticket to the Hole. Not only had he seen something he could've done without, he'd experienced the rare but still unpleasant sensation of having someone else's blood splattered on his skin.

They'd been out on the exercise grounds during the afternoon.

Firo had spotted the fat man with the gap teeth who'd leered at him and called him "babe" on his first day, and he'd been idly fantasizing about what to do to the bastard when it happened.

The fat man grinned an ugly grin and sauntered over to Dragon, clearly looking to pick a fight. They exchanged a few words.

Dragon's long face split in a grin, and he leaned over, his lips almost touching the man's ear.

The fat man's own grin widened and became yet more unlovely as he stood and waited; perhaps he expected Dragon to whisper something to him.

And then Dragon bit off his ear.

"Muh! Uhh? Wha...?"

The fat man gaped, his mouth open but no words emerging as sudden shock and pain washed over him. He stared dumbly at Dragon as though asking for an explanation, but the only answer he got was his own severed ear spat into his face.

"Aagh!"

Fear of the fleshy red thing before his eyes kept him from realizing it was his own ear, and the man with the gap teeth unconsciously raised his arm to bat the thing away.

Then Dragon ripped a chunk from that arm as well, and soon pained shrieks and sprays of blood filled that part of the grounds.

The other inmates milled about uneasily, staring warily at Dragon, but the man himself only chewed thoughtfully and mused to himself, "Well, not bad, I guess, but... Hrrm... The thought of where it came from sort of gives it a nasty aftertaste."

With little fanfare he spit out the masticated chunk of flesh and grinned toward Firo as the young camorrista walked closer, irritably wiping away the drops of blood that had splashed onto him.

"Hey, Firo. Oh, no, did I get some on you? Sorry, that's totally my fault."

"I dunno what the hell you're thinking, man..."

"Well, see. That pervert over there grinned at me and said something about Asians looking like kids even when they grow up. Shitty way to break the ice, if you ask me."

"So he's that sorta freak, huh," Firo sighed, but he didn't look altogether surprised as he shook his head. "I was thinking about sending the bastard to hell myself, y'know."

He was only half joking.

Dragon grinned knowingly at him, blood still staining his teeth pink, and patted Firo on the shoulder.

"Yeah," he said. "But to tell you the truth, anyone else would've done just fine, too."

"Huh?"

Firo opened his mouth to ask Dragon what he was talking about, but before he could speak the guards finally reached them and forced them apart. The fat man with the gap teeth was taken to the prison ward, and Dragon was led straight to solitary.

Firo thought it over quietly, casting his mind back to the bloody violence that had taken place that afternoon.

So of course Dragon wasn't there in the cell next to his own. And Gig, the hulking black man who'd been occupying the other neighboring cell, hadn't come back from solitary either. According to the rumor mill his stay down there would last at least ten days, considering the way he'd behaved when the guards told him to stand down.

There was one more strange thing, too.

He hadn't seen it happen himself, but Firo had heard that the diminutive Caucasian man who'd come to Alcatraz with him was also down in solitary.

Apparently he'd foolishly attempted to make a break for it, screaming that Gig would murder him if he didn't escape.

A few warning shots had made him faint, and in an ironic twist the unconscious man had been transported down into the Hole, closer to Gig than ever.

Still, it wasn't like the black man would be able to reach him through the thick walls that separated the cells. Even supposing that those walls didn't exist, Gig would probably have more pressing problems on his hands than a sickly schizo. Namely, Ladd Russo.

*Huh, come to think of it, all three of the guys who came here with me **and** my first real acquaintance on this godforsaken rock are all down in solitary, aren't they.*

On the one hand he thought it a bad stroke of luck, but on the other he had to wonder if it really was just coincidence.

If one of those three who came with me really does have an ulterior motive... I wonder what he's after?

Firo turned over the matter in his head as he drifted off, but the sound of footsteps echoing down the halls yet again—Firo had lost count of how many times it'd been that night—broke into his muddled thoughts. The crisp footfalls fell in time with the faraway sound of rifles firing to form a harrowing duet, the sound seeping insidiously through the bars and eating away at the inmates' peace of mind.

But then, just like that, the infernal orchestra came to an end.

The faint crack of gunshots still came from afar, but the footsteps slowed like the winding down of gears, finally coming to a stop completely.

"...You again."

Firo looked blearily toward the man who'd been walking down the hall as he motioned at the guards standing at the far end, telling them to open Firo's cell.

The door slid back with a dull clang, and moments later someone tore away his thin blanket.

It was the same way he'd been rudely awakened just a few days ago, repeated once again. Firo blinked slowly, shaking his head, and looked closely up the man who'd just entered his cell.

It was the same guard it had been back then, drawing another silver knife from the folds of his blanket.

With his back toward the outside, only Firo could see the guard offer him a sardonic grin, and when the man spoke he sounded for all the world like a stern enforcer of the law.

"You're going to be staying down there for a while this time."

— —

Alcatraz Island Solitary Confinement

Ladd opened his eyes wide in the total darkness and felt the chains around his ankles. They clanked and clinked slowly as he slid the links this way and that.

The only thing inmates in the darkness of solitary could do, other than sleep, was make that noise.

But the monotonous sound had a way of ringing and echoing off the bricks of the thin walls. And in the lightless world of the Hole, hearing those reverberations tended to play havoc on the inmates' sense of distance.

Some prisoners went insane after as little as one week in solitary, but Ladd had spent nearly half his stay at Alcatraz down in the darkness, alone.

Most of the inmates just shook their heads in wonder at him, thinking the way he remained alert and sane despite his frequent visits to the Hole to be a sign of incredible mental fortitude.

But a few, those experienced men who had lived long enough in the criminal underworld to tell... they recognized exactly what kind of man Ladd Russo was in an instant.

They knew that he didn't go crazy because he'd always *been* crazy, right from the start, and they knew that the darkness didn't affect him because he'd never looked toward the light in the first place.

And they knew that the twisted thing inside Ladd was something far beyond the mere madness that darkness and loneliness had to offer, that people like him were so snarled and tangled and broken that nothing could possibly make them any worse anymore.

For his part, Ladd kept his silence.

Only the slow clinking of chains kept the madman company, just as always.

But that day, a bright voice suddenly came from the darkness.

"Hey!"

Ladd did not reply.

"Hey, you. You're Ladd Russo, right?"

Stopping his rattling of the chains, Ladd looked up and realized the voice was coming from right outside his cell.

"...So you're the Tinkle Bell that Isaac was talking about."

"Tinker Bell? Oh, that's what he called me? You know, I *thought* he looked a bit stupid, but wow. What is he a kid? That's so funny."

"I don't really care either way. What I do care about is what you want with me."

A girl's voice in Alcatraz?

Most people would have feared for their own sanity. But Ladd had been sure of one thing since the moment he stepped foot on the island. He'd known that if the man he'd come to kill really did exist, then nothing that happened on Alcatraz could possibly be deemed "out of the ordinary." Such rules would not apply on the island.

As though to reward his unyielding belief, there was the impossible voice outside the door, and there was the sound of a key turning in a lock, and there was the door slowly swinging open.

He started rattling the chains again.

The open doorway revealed a small hand, faintly illuminated by the dim lantern it held. Ladd paid it no mind.

"One of your best friends is a guy named Graham Specter, right, mister?" the black haired girl asked, her golden eyes dancing above an impish smile. It just made what she said next seem all the more shocking in its callous cruelty.

"I'm gonna kill him soon, so could you do me a favor and be my hostage?"

"Oh, oh! And after that! I'd really really appreciate it if you'd let me kill you, too!"

— —

"Ah, welcome. You're late."

Once again, Firo found himself in the depths of the island, in a place below even the Hole.

Once again, he faced the man in white.

Huey Laforet sat on the single chair, wearing the same clothes he'd worn before. As he caught sight of Firo he smiled and folded the newspaper he'd been reading, putting it away.

"Ah, this? As you no doubt know very well, the warden here is very strict, and very good at what he does. Unfortunately for me, his skill meant that I was deprived magazines or newspapers for some time. But then Mr. Misery, who I am sure you know already, came to supervise me directly. I must say I am quite grateful for his provision of entertainment."

Firo could make out the name "Chicago" printed in large block letters on the discarded newspaper, as well as other interesting words such as "explosions" and "kidnappings," but he ignored it and instead focused his attention fully onto Huey.

Huey stared back, seemingly interested by Firo's behavior, before finally moving onto the real reason he'd called Firo to his cell.

"Mmm. So, I trust you have given the matter some thought."

"...Yeah. Yeah, I did. I've just got one condition."

"A condition?"

"I already swore everything I've got, my life and my past and my future, to my *capo-società*, Molsa Martillo. If you decide to do business with the Family, then I'll follow his decision without question. But I can't sell what I know to someone else on my own discretion," Firo said tersely, and Huey hummed thoughtfully and gave it a moment's consideration.

"Are you saying, then, that it was not your personal decision to come to this island in order to save Miss Ennis?"

"She's family," Firo said immediately, as if that explained everything.

Huey seemed to take it in stride and said, "I see, I see... The prospect of business with your Family is indeed intriguing, I must admit, but... Considering Maiza's personality, I wager the chances of successful negotiation to be slim at best."

"Yeah, probably."

"Then you have no need for my information?"

"...I can guess at it well enough," Firo said, his lips stretching in a humorless smile as he accessed the foreign memories in his head.

"Your guy, Christopher, he told me something pretty interesting last year. Something like, 'We were created using knowledge that was stolen from Szilard Quates.' Ring a bell?"

"...My. Quite the gossip, young Christopher."

"So I got to thinking, looking at the guard standing outside right now and all the others you've got working for you. What if your communication network is nothing but--"

But before Firo could finish, the door behind him swung open. Reflexively he turned to see who it was, his nerves on edge.

The guard who'd led Firo there collapsed into the room, and a man peered inside, poised as if to step over his body.

Huey caught sight of the man and only nodded once, his expression not even flickering.

"Oh? I don't remember calling you here..."

Then a smile ghosted across his features as he understood.

"Which means that you must be the assassin in Nebula's employ. A my information is correct, then... Mr. Felix Walken, I presume?"

The diminutive Caucasian man only smirked, paying the suddenly chilly atmosphere no heed.

"That name doesn't belong to me anymore," he said. "I sold it to someone else a long time ago."

"Now... Now, I'm just a man with no name."

New York
Madison Square Park

Moving back a few days in time , the scene shifted to a park in a city many miles away.

"Wha... Wait, wha... Shit, dammit, I-I, I need to think... Shit! Fuck! Y-you're lying, aren't you, you dirty bastard!"

Spike finally knew why the warning bells in his head had been ringing, but he had no time to revel in his knowledge. Tightening his grasp on the canes he held in both hands, he gestured to the men in black around him.

"Dammit! Retreat, retreat!"

"Huh...?"

They hesitated, looking at each other as if they couldn't believe their ears. As far as they could see, they clearly held the advantage, vastly outnumbering their two targets. They looked to their leader for confirmation.

Perhaps hearing the confused rhythm of their breathing, Spike half-turned and shouted over his shoulder.

"You all deaf or something, you retards?! I'll explain later, just run! Fucking run away!"

Spike bolted away with speed that belied his blindness, and the men in black dutifully followed despite the confusion clear on their faces. Claire sighed as he watched them go, gave his neck a few casual cracks, and started after them.

"Hey, not so fast. I'm not done with you ye..."

And then suddenly he was floating, not running.

The man in the long coat—the man who'd once called himself Felix Walken—had suddenly appeared at Claire's side, his body bent forward. With a movement like lightning he grabbed one of Claire's legs and used Claire's own momentum to pull it upward, whipping his upper body back.

Chane gasped as she watched, her mind flashing back to her own experience with the former Felix's technique, but what had happened to her did not happen again.

Still upside down in the air, Claire laid his right index finger against the former Felix's lips, freezing the older man in his tracks. At the same time he twisted masterfully in midair and landed lightly on his feet, right in front of the former Felix.

The man batted away Claire's finger as he landed, but otherwise seemed completely unshaken.

"...I have a question for you."

"...Not bad," Claire said, staring at the older man's face.

It wasn't a glare, for there was no hostility there. Just honest surprise and admiration.

For his part, the man in black just narrowed his eyes and moved to the matter at hand.

"You called yourself Felix Walken. Who did you get that name from?"

"Me? Hmm, well, I can't tell you the specifics, but... I bought it from a really awesome dame, somewhere in her thirties."

Chane's eyes widened.

She'd known, of course, that her fiancé had gotten the name from another assassin, but from the name itself she'd thought that the previous owner was a man.

The man in black's eyes narrowed yet more, and he murmured thoughtfully to himself, "I see... It seems there've been more *new generations* than I expected in such a short time."

That said, he turned his back on Claire and began heading toward Spike and his cronies, who were just now starting up the engines on their cars.

"...You'll see me again, soon."

"Hey, wai..."

Claire stretched out his arm to stop him, but Chane grabbed his arm and he stopped to look at her.

"Huh? What's wrong, Chane? Are you hurt?! Did those bastards do something to...?!"

Chane shook her head and only looked at him urgently.

"Oh, you're worried about Jacuzzi and his friends? Oh, oh, yeah. I see. Okay. Got it."

Claire raised his hands in surrender, then wrapped his arms around Chane's shoulders.

"Hey!" he called to the former Felix, pulling Chane close. "Give your boss a message from me, will you?"

"...What is it?"

"Tell him to be a little more careful picking his fights from now on."

"...I'll let him know."

The former Felix raised one hand in farewell as he left, but the present holder of his name seemed to have one more question in mind.

"Hey, one more thing. Who'd you sell the name to, anyway?"

The man's steps slowed, then stopped. He looked thoughtfully up at the sky, as though wistfully thinking of the man he'd once been, and replied.

"I didn't sell the name to one man. I sold it to many."

"To an Asian man, and a black man, and a white man, and..."

— —

A Few Days Later
Alcatraz Island
Secret Cell

Another man stepped up from behind the small Caucasian.

He was of Asian descent, and he had tattoos winding up both his arms.

A hulking black man joined them too, his body covered with scars.

"Hey, Firo. Fancy meeting you here."

"Dragon..." Firo muttered.

Dragon grinned and tipped him a wink.

It seemed Gig hadn't healed fully from his encounter with Ladd, for his face was still a mass of bruised and swollen flesh, but nevertheless he stood and stared wordlessly at Huey.

"...The picture is coming together now," Huey commented, his eyes narrowing with thought.

"So. All three of you, then."

"What?"

Firo looked from Huey to the three men and back again, completely and utterly bewildered.

Ignoring his confusion, Dragon and Gig entered and slowly spread out, surrounding Huey and Firo on three sides. The small white man, who had kept his place at the door, merely grinned and shrugged.

"All three of us? Maybe, maybe not. You don't need to know, that's for sure."

The confident smirk on his face was at complete odds with the shows of cowardice Firo had seen before, but Huey took it in stride and gathered the facts in his head.

"Ah, no. Someone must have led you to this place, so it must be four..."

"They don't call you a genius for nothing, I see," the Caucasian commented, and snapped his fingers once. Another man appeared from the shadows near the door, revealing a man dressed in a guard's uniform who Firo had never seen before.

The rifle held loosely in his hands made the large room seem suddenly stiflingly small.

"I see now. That boat was carrying not only new inmates, but also new guards as well."

A faint smile played around Huey's lips, and the four men reacted to it each in their own ways. At length Dragon clacked his teeth together and stepped forward to represent them, sneering.

"Maybe, maybe not," he said, mimicking his companion from earlier.

"Whoa, wait, hold on," Firo blurted, suddenly feeling distinctly left out. He looked to Huey and frowned, asking, "Who the hell are these people?"

"Felix Walken. You have heard the name, I trust."

"Huh? Oh, umm. Well, yeah, I guess."

Firo's frowned deepened and he looked like he had something to say, but for the moment he just nodded and let Huey explain. The man in white looked calm despite the circumstances, but Firo had the feeling that Huey would have held the same expression had he been hanging precariously from a cliff by a thread.

"They're assassins working for Nebula. I must admit, all I knew about them, myself, was the name. I never even imagined that Felix Walken was in fact a group of four people working together."

"Not exactly," Dragon boasted, grinning and puffing out his narrow chest. "It used to be just a symbol for hitmen, nothing more than a name. We're the ones who made the legend in New York about 'Walken the Cleaner.'"

"You're telling them too much," the man in the guard's outfit snapped. He leveled the rifle at Firo. Like Huey, his expressionless features revealed nothing, but at the same time the air he gave off was of a different sort. "We're asking the questions here. Who're you?"

"...Err, you know, I'm not really sure how to reply to that. Don't suppose you'd give me a minute to think it over?"

"Sorry, but no. It doesn't matter, we'll decide what to do with you later. The mission comes first."

The three unarmed men slowly began advancing on Huey, and though Firo didn't know how good the Caucasian man might be, it was a safe bet that Dragon and Gig, at least, knew how to handle themselves in a fight.

Huey stayed calm, though, and after a moment's consideration simply turned to Firo.

"Sadly, fighting is not one of my areas of expertise. Would you consider lending me a hand?"

"Sorry, but no," Firo said, mimicking the guard, and Huey merely smiled ruefully and slowly placed a hand on his chair.

The hitmen looked wary and tense as they advanced, as though waiting for someone to make the first move before truly springing into action.

And then, a noise interrupted their cautious approach.

It was the sound of approaching footsteps.

Someone was coming, drawing closer from the far end of the hall.

The guard had half-closed the door as he came in, blocking view of the hall outside. The door had a small window at eye level, but the reflected light on the glass made it impossible to see out into the dim hallway.

The footsteps drew nearer, even and measured, regular as the movement of a clock needle or pendulum.

Every flat impact seemed to make the atmosphere ever more stifling, and everyone inside the room turned their attention toward the mysterious footsteps, their gazes drawn as one toward the half-open door.

And then, they stopped.

An ominous silence stretched for long seconds, before a sound like a bomb going off suddenly rocked the room. Everyone shied back at the terrible sound, instinctively reaching for their ears.

As it turned out, the sound hadn't been for nothing. The reinforced metal door crumpled and burst open, the handle going flying off to clatter noisily on the floor.

And in the doorway stood...

"Good afternoon, good evening, good night. Nice to meet you, and goodbye too, come to think of it. I'm looking for Peter Pan in chains. The eternal boy."

A man who belonged there more than anyone.

A man enjoying himself more than anyone.

A grinning murderer more twisted than anyone.

A length of chain was snarled around the hook of metal attached to his arm, and a young girl hung limply on the end of that length.

"Liza..."

The murderer, Ladd Russo, heard Huey's low murmur and knew his target in an instant.

And with the sort of smile normally reserved for men meeting the loves of their lives for the first time—a mad, crazy, infinitely innocent and pure smile—Ladd spoke.

"Tick, tock, Laforet. The crocodile's here, with the Cap'n's hook in tow, and guess what? He's starving!"



Minutes Ago

Solitary Confinement

"Now then! I'm not gonna get too close because there's no telling what you'd do to me if I got too close, so I'll take care of things from here, okay?" the girl chirped from the doorway, taking care to keep out of Ladd's range—not too hard, considering his limbs were chained. She drew out a brace of small discs as she talked.

The discs shone silver, and they had holes in the center, like metal donuts. Their bright shine became keener near the edges, and an observant watcher might have realized what that wicked sheen meant: they were bladed weapons. As Ladd watched, the girl began to spin one around her finger.

It wasn't clear whether or not he realized the danger he was in, considering the dim light. If he did, though, he showed no sign of noticing and kept on rattling the chains at his feet, just like he'd been doing before the door was opened.

"How does it feel to be tied up like that, mister?"

"You know," Ladd said quietly, barely audible over the constant clinking of chains, "I can't really see your face that well because you've got your back to the light..."

"Hmm?"

"But I bet you've got this look on your face that says you think you'll never die."

"Huh? What're you even talking about, mister? You're funny. But yeah, you're right. There's no way you could ever kill me right now. Actually, I'm the one who's going to kill you later."

The girl giggled, but Ladd didn't react. *Clink, clink*, went the chains.

"And I don't know what kinda argument you've gotten into with Graham, but here's a tip. He won't kill people, but... In a straight fight, he'd beat me, so you'd better watch out."

Clink, clink.

"I know that, dummy. That's why I'm taking you hos—"

"But me? Me, I can kill people."

Clink, clink.

"It doesn't matter who, actually. I can still kill."

Clink...

"I can kill women, or even children. Anyone who pisses me off."

Cli-

Suddenly, the sound of rattling chains stopped.

Ladd was only pulling on the chains that bound him, but to Liza it looked like the end of the chain had lifted off the ground.

"Huh...?"

"I can kill."

Then Ladd leaped to his feet, his eyes glinting darkly in the shadows. The chains wrapped around his right hand came loose, falling to the floor.

Then, only then, did Liza realize what was out of the ordinary.

His chains... They aren't connected to his fee-

A length of whirling chain came down, cutting off all thought...

And only the savage words of a killer were left to fill the air.

"I can kill."

— —

Minutes Later Secret Cell

To Firo, Ladd Russo's appearance in Huey Laforet's cell was stupendously sudden, incredibly implausible, and more than anything the air that hung about him was amazingly dangerous, charged and almost buzzing with malice.

Ladd spread his arms wide and grinned, tossing away the girl he'd dragged in.

She hit the wall with a small thud and dropped to the floor, but otherwise didn't move. It wasn't even clear if she was still alive, but Ladd paid her no more heed and instead turned his attention leisurely toward the other people in the room, ignoring the tenseness in the air.

"She pressed my button," he said simply. "That's all."

The prosthetic on the end of his left arm hung awkwardly down from his elbow as he raised his arms higher, but Ladd didn't seem to care.

"Did you know that? Everyone's got a button inside them. It decides whether they can kill another human being or not. That's all that little button does. But if you press it... you can kill. You can kill someone. Anyone. So in other words, your ability to kill another human being is all decided by whether or not you can press that little button. Can you believe it?"

Nobody could make sense of what he was talking about, and as they watched, bewildered, he raised his index finger to his temple and gave it a nudge.

"Like this."

Again, and again, and again, he pressed down on his own temple.

"Like this, and this, and this and this and this and this this this this this. Again and again until you lose count, until it all runs together and you can't tell where anything begins or ends, you press that button. All these buttons inside me, dozens and hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of them! So you see, now, why I can't help but kill people. Right?"

He's crazy, Firo thought, and perhaps the former Felix Walkens around him shared his opinion. Hardened killers though they were, they frowned distastefully as they glared at Ladd.

Only Huey gazed thoughtfully at him, but Ladd himself seemed to find that unacceptable. He shrugged and took another step inside, and locked eyes with Huey Laforet.

"Now that you understand, it's mean a lot to me if you could die for the sake of those millions of little buttons I just pressed. It's alright, though. You only have to die once."

Huey only shrugged back, staring openly at Ladd. His interest had indeed been piqued, but first he wanted to know exactly what Ladd was after.

"...Where are your manners, Mr. Russo? Do you know how rude it is to barge into someone else's room like this?"

"They wouldn't call people like me murderers if we called and asked if it was okay to come ahead of time," Ladd replied, as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. "Why, that'd just be plain crazy."

A hint of amusement entered his voice, feral glee seeping into his voice and spreading his *presence* through the room.

"Whew, finally. My muscles and gray matter're all warmed up now..."

He cracked his neck first left, then right, then pushed his right fist against his limply hanging prosthetic, cracking his knuckles as well.

"Now, then. Well, well, well well well! How do you want to die? I'm gonna kill you until you wish you could die. Oh, don't worry, though. I'll give you a choice. You can die, or be killed. I'd appreciate it if you made up your mind by the time I'm finished cutting you up into pieces!"

He advanced, and perhaps he had no eyes for anyone save Huey anymore, for he looked neither right nor left as he went.

The guard raised his rifle, frowning as he hooked his finger on the trigger.

"Hey, asshole. Who the hell d'you think you... are?"

Ladd Russo was already standing *right in front of him*.

There was a sort of logical disconnect at work. Just a moment ago Ladd had been walking toward Huey, staring straight at him, and then the next he'd turned and stepped lightly over to the guard with the rifle, in the blink of an eye.

"You're annoying."

There was a dry snap, a sickly sort of crunch, and the guard's body went limp.

"You're not exactly standing in my way, but the way you're looking at me, it pisses me off. Your animosity pisses me off. Your voice pisses me off. Your existence, it pisses me off. You're annoying so you piss me off and that makes me mad, you annoying son of a bitch."

Ladd's words reached the guard's ears, and only a moment after that did the pain finally register.

Something was wrong with his arm.

All feeling had rushed from the limb, replaced only with searing agony, but before he could glance down to see what had happened he found a black hole yawning wide before his eyes.

It was the muzzle of the gun that he'd been holding, just a moment ago.

"Oh, but thanks for the rifle. I owe you one."

And only then did the guard realize the dire straits he was in.

Only then did he understand that Ladd had grabbed the barrel of his rifle and torn it from his hands. He looked down and saw his wrist and fingers twisted at unnatural angles, but suddenly he was bereft of even the breath to scream in pain.

"Actually, here, let me repay that right now. Die."

Before he could have second thoughts, before the guard could even begin to feel fear, Ladd pulled the trigger.

A roiling boom filled the cell.

The sound ricocheted off the walls of the enclosed room, and even Firo, who was used to the sound of gunfire, shrunk back unconsciously.

That bastard...

A spray of blood splattered the walls, but it was far less than Firo had expected.

The guard had indeed been hit by the bullet, but he'd only lost his right ear and his consciousness, not his life. Unconscious before he even hit the floor, the man described a short half-circle with his upper body as he spun and fell, slumping bonelessly to the cold floor.

It was pain that had made him faint, nor was it fear. A more direct means had been involved. As it passed the side of his head and took his ear, the bullet had skimmed the side of his temple, concussing the brain inside. Being so close to the muzzle as it fired had also burst his eardrums, and together the sound and the shock ushered him into darkness before he even realized what had happened.

The remaining three inmates warily surrounded Ladd, glancing uneasily to each other and then back at him.

Still, they didn't rush him right there and then, and Firo thought he might know why as he watched the situation unfold.

Yeah, that's enough to make anyone hesitate.

The indescribable feeling radiating from Ladd was twisted but pure. It almost felt as though every atom of the air around him had been inscribed with pure murder.

The strangest thing was that Ladd showed no openings despite his aggressive stance. Firo got the feeling that even if he himself attacked Ladd from his position directly behind the man, he'd be staring down a rifle barrel before he took his first step.

The anxiety ambient in the room skyrocketed, and only Ladd chuckled and kicked the unconscious guard in the face.

"Hah! I was lying, pal. It was a joke. I wouldn't kill a pathetic goon like you. Yet. No way I'd *waste this feeling rising inside me* on something so trivial."

Ladd grinned a feral grin and raised his gaze to the ceiling. Dragon bared his teeth at him in an answering smile, though there was little mirth in it.

"Do you even know what you've just done, you crazy-"

"Right there! That's enough! Shut up!"

Ladd cut off Dragon's bluster before it could even get started properly and lowered his hands, the rifle pointing down toward the ground.

"Alright. I don't even know who the hell you people are, but I understand. Just shut up, don't say a word, close your mouth and get down and kiss the floor."

"What..."

"Let me tell you how important it is to keep your mouth shut. Me, I've seen so many damn people going on and on about 'these will be the last words you ever hear' and 'take these words with you to the afterlife,' and then that gives whoever they're fighting an opening to strike back. Crazy, isn't it? I see it all the time, in books, in plays, even in real life! I don't even know why, but somehow the more comfortable someone is with killing, the more they flap their mouth when it comes time to do the deed, yakking on and on and on. *As you might have guessed, I myself happen to be such a person!* And therefore, as such, in light of that revelation, I'll say that one is enough, and since that one is of course myself, I want you all to shut up. You're boring. Swallow those words and take them to the afterlife yourself if you want them delivered there so damn much."

Dragon's mouth dropped open, his sharp incisors on full display as he struggled to deal with the ridiculously bullheaded speech. Even Firo's eyes widened, while Huey merely smiled and continued to observe Ladd with the air of an intrigued scientist.

But from behind Ladd, slightly to the right, came a deep, low voice as a giant shadow slid forward.

"Dragon. This one's mine," Gig said, moving smoothly and slowly toward Ladd.

"Hey," the hulking black man said, amicably. "Didn't get to show you what I had last time, you know. It'd be rude of me to hold back, don't you think?"

The last words were still passing from his lips when he burst forward in a monstrous display of speed.

Holy shit, he's fast! Firo thought, taken slightly aback. It seemed almost wrong that something so huge could move so fast, flowing through the air like a whisper of wind and drawing close to Ladd. *He's totally different from the way he was back in the cafeteria.*

Even at a glance it was obvious that Gig was skilled in some sort of martial art, his body skimming the ground low like a cannonball headed straight for Ladd's knees.

The rifle stayed unmoving at Ladd's side.

Gig's face creased in an ugly grin, sure of his victory.

The rifle dropped to the floor with a clatter.

"Huh?!"

From his low position, all Gig could see were Ladd's feet, flashing away in a fancy display of footwork.

The next moment, he couldn't see the feet anymore, because his field of vision was blocked by a fist.

By the time he realized it was a low uppercut skimming the ground, Ladd's fist had already buried itself deep into the flesh of his face.

"Holding back or not," Ladd declared, the weapon that had given him such an advantage lying discarded at his feet, "you're already being rude the moment you raise your fists at someone, you dumb bastard."

"You crazy fuck..."

"Asshole..."

The Caucasian and Dragon both muttered disbelievably under their breath, but Ladd only yawned and stretched. As for Gig, he was in no condition to talk, his nose in such a state that calling it collapsed, or caved in, would be a far more accurate description than merely saying it was broken.

"So, back to the conversation. Who did you guys say you were, again?"

"Do you even know who you're dealing with, you luna-"

"Dammit, I thought I told you to shut up," Ladd said. He shrugged casually.

"I don't care who you are, or what things you've done. Just shut up. Even if you're a million times stronger than me, even if you're gods or demons who can make my head explode with a thought, just shut up."

Now Ladd appeared to be full of openings, and both remaining Felixes came at him at once, one from each side.

The Caucasian reached for the rifle at Ladd's feet, while Dragon leaped straight for Ladd's throat, his teeth bared like the fangs of a rabid dog.

"I don't want to hear about your pasts, or your opinions, or what tricks you've got up your sleeves, or how much you hate me, or what you're proud of or about any legends of magic spells you might've heard in fairy tales..."

Ladd moved as he spoke, and though his movements were quick and efficient, each one was still strangely violent. Perhaps beguiled by the slow rhythm of his speech, the white man and Dragon were just a second too late in reacting to Ladd's actions.

Ladd's right fist sped toward Dragon's face, but instead of dismay the Asian man's eyes flashed with glee as he grinned and opened his mouth wide, gaping so far it brought to mind the dislocated maw of a huge snake. As soon as Ladd's fist cleared his teeth Dragon bit down, his jaws snapping together like a steel trap.

A shock ran through the bones of Ladd's hand, followed by tremendous pressure, like the tightening of a mechanical vise.

But the strength didn't run from Ladd's arm; he even smiled ferociously, as though that had been exactly what he'd been waiting for.

He ignored the pain and twisted, a huge motion that used all his muscles, and released the power inside his body all at once.

"...Whatever it is, I'll hear it all out when I kill you."

Clutching the rifle in his hands, the Caucasian looked up to see a dark shadow speeding toward him.

It was Dragon, his eyes wide with surprise and dismay.

Ladd had lifted him bodily into the air and swung his fist with Dragon still attached like some sort of ridiculous boxing glove, bringing him down straight onto the white man's head.

"...Huh. Is that it?"

An eerie silence fell over the room as Ladd looked around, surveying his handiwork. The four former Felix Walkens lay scattered around him, still to the last man.

Huey cocked his head to one side curiously, murmuring quietly to himself as he thought aloud.

"The legendary Felix Walken, laid low so easily by just one man? Well, perhaps in this situation it would be correct to say that their opponent is beyond what one would consider human..."

Ladd noticed and clenched his still-bloody right fist, the crazy murderer's grin once again spreading on his face.

"What're you muttering about? Rehearsing how to beg for your life?"

Huey smiled faintly. "My desire to study you has increased a little."

"Funny you should say that. My desire to kill you's been rocketing sky high since I walked in," Ladd said, giving Huey a raw smile that contrasted with the scientist's reserved chuckles.

No longer in the spotlight, Firo leaned on the wall and decided to just watch them both and see how the situation would unfold.

They stared at one another for a moment, then Huey chose to break the silence.

"You called yourself the crocodile."

"I might've said something like that, yeah."

"In *Peter and Wendy*, Peter Pan represents the mind of the child, innocent yet cruel because of that innocence, ignorant of both good and evil. In contrast, though Captain Hook is evil, he represents the rational adult. What, then, does the crocodile stand for? What is its role? What do you stand for, you who have come to strike me down?"

From his expression it was apparent that Huey probably didn't expect a response, but Ladd just shook his head as though in exasperation and answered.

"Pure power and murderous intent beyond good or evil. Endless hunger. Think of me as a catastrophe, a force of nature."

Huey didn't reply.

"I'm a murderer. I like to kill people. If Heaven and Hell really exist, then I've probably bought myself a ticket to Hell a thousand times over. But I've never wrung my hands and worried about the good or evil of it. Even if an act of murder were committed without the intent to kill, without hatred or even a good reason to take that life, only the victim would care about the good or evil of it. It'd never even cross the killer's mind, though. I just follow my instincts, chewing people up and spitting them out. In other words, all I think about it myself. That's all. So I just thought to myself that if I could kill you, even though I hear you can't be killed, that'd be *barrels* of fun. That's all. That's honestly all there is to it."

Ladd sounded eerily calm as he answered, and Huey's eyes narrowed with admiration.

"I had thought you nothing but a simple and violent murderer, but now I see you are something of a poet," he said.

"Haha! Me? A poet? You're insulting all the real poets out there."

Ladd opened his fist and clenched it, murder rising hot and sticky in his eyes once more.

"I'll just have to defend the honor of all the offended poets of the world, won't I."

"But have you considered this?" Huey asked suddenly. "If that is truly why you want to kill me, then would you not have to divide your murderous intent?"

"Huh?"

"You enjoy killing those who think that they will never die, correct? And that is why you decided to kill me, an immortal. But in that case..."

Huey paused for the space of a breath, as though enjoying the moment, as though gathering his thoughts, and smiled coldly.

"Did you know that Firo Prochainezo, the man currently leaning against that wall, is also an immortal?"

Motherfucker!

Firo gasped, feeling the situation suddenly shift. In an instant he'd been snatched from his position as a third party observer and thrust right into the middle of Ladd and Huey's argument. Huey was probably looking to divert Ladd's murderous intent at least a little, and at the same time force Firo to stand on Huey's side.

All this ran through his head in the blink of an eye. Firo grit his teeth and glared at Huey, then sighed and shifted his gaze to Ladd.

"...Is he telling the truth, Firo?"

Instead of replying out loud, Firo slowly walked over to stand behind Huey, slightly to his right.

And then he raised a finger to his lips and bit down.

The metallic taste of blood flooded his mouth and pain spread from his finger. Blood dripped to the floor, but just a few seconds later it was like the flow of time itself reversed, and the blood taste in his mouth vanished along with the liquid itself, flowing back into the small wound.

Ladd's eyes widened slightly as he saw for the first time what it truly meant to be immortal, but otherwise his expression revealed nothing of what he was thinking inside.

"Yeah, that's how it is. Sorry about that."

It felt like he was betraying a friend, and Firo couldn't deny that it hurt a little. But he had to admit that it was probably better to cut ties with someone like Ladd. The little girl lying motionless in the corner had had him wavering even before Huey's calculated move.

Ladd looked at him for a moment, his expression unreadable...

"Hah."

Suddenly he chuckled, the sound growing louder until soon he was laughing wholeheartedly, his head thrown back with mirth.

"Hahahahaha! I see! I see, so that's it! That's it! Firo! Thanks so much, you taught me something really great!"

I did? What did I say?

Firo hesitated, unsure of what was going on, but Ladd just snapped his fingers and chuckled again.

"I told you, didn't I? I only kill people who're sure they'll never be killed! And don't you remember what I told you along with that? I said you were different from those schmucks!"

"So...? So what's that supposed to mean?"

"Look, Firo. You're immortal, sure, but even now some part of you is still afraid of dying. Your eyes are alive. Even now! Even at this very moment! Look, can't you see you're still on your guard, looking at Huey Laforet? You've got that look on your face that says you think he might try and kill you at any moment! And that. That's taught me something very important."

Ladd took a breath, then grinned an ugly grin.

"That look you have tells me there's still some way immortals can die. *You can still be killed.* Right?"

Firo gasped despite himself.

"Well, whatever. The two of you can team up and try and take me on. That's fine with me. I'll just have to find out how to kill an immortal if I have to beat the knowledge out of you. I'm in no rush."

Ladd began bouncing soundlessly on his feet, shadowboxing lightly.

"I'll give you some time to talk it over."

"Well, then. You heard Mr. Russo. What shall we do?" Huey asked over his shoulder. He didn't sound altogether troubled at all.

Firo just sighed and grit his teeth. "Look, Laforet."

"Oh? Yes? What is it?"

"You asked me earlier if I was afraid of Szilard or some other alchemist inside my head taking over my mind."

Huey glanced back, obviously curious about why Firo would suddenly choose to bring that up again, but he remained silent and let Firo continue.

"It... it doesn't matter to me. As long as that old bastard doesn't decide to do something to Ennis or my friends, it doesn't matter what he or anyone else does with my body."

Huey didn't reply.

"I don't care what happens to me. As long as my world stays peaceful, it doesn't matter who I am—or even if I don't exist at all, even if I'm just some dream that someone I know is dreaming."

...Come to think of it, I used to argue with Claire about this all the time...

Firo smirked, remembering the days of his childhood.

"May I ask why you decided to mention this now?" Huey asked, and Firo just smiled in reply.

"Well, seeing as how I don't know what might happen soon...

"I just wanted to get it off my chest before we part ways."

New York NYPD Police Station

Three men sat and waited in the NYPD reception room, each with a different expression on his face.

The police had taken them in and questioned them about the explosion while they inspected the office, and after many long sessions and hard questions they'd finally been let off the hook. The problem was, they were still more or less tied up in New York until people even higher up in the chain of command than Victor finished shuffling papers.

Victor glared balefully up at the ceiling.

"Dammit. Huey got us, and he got us good. The brat we sent to Alcatraz is probably resting easy in Huey's head by now, or maybe he's gone switched sides on us. Nothing would surprise me now."

"I don't know sir," Edward said in a low undertone.

"What was that, Detective Noah? Hmm, come to think of it, you were going to say something before that suicidal bomber came to say hello, weren't you."

Edward kept his silence for a second, then at length, reluctantly, as though he didn't want to talk but couldn't bear keeping the knowledge to himself, he spoke.

"Sir... Sorry to correct you like this, but Prochainezo didn't get to where he is because he's lucky, or because he knows how to kiss ass."

"...Huh, so you do think highly of him after all. Then do you think we can expect something from him?"

"No. No, I don't," Edward said tersely.

Victor frowned, his brow creasing with concern. "What is it you're saying, exactly, Detective?"

"What I'm saying is that we should hope something bad *does* happen to him."

Edward's eyes focused on something far away, as though he was looking back in time, watching the street rat Firo Prochainezo rise through the ranks of the underworld.

"We shouldn't expect anything from him at all. But we should be careful. We should watch our backs.

"He's a gangster, after all... A villain, through and through."

— —

Alcatraz Secret Cell

"Oh, and while we're talking, I thought I might mention one more thing."

'Yes?' Huey asked absently, mostly ignoring Firo in favor of Ladd, who was watching impatiently.

"You said that Felix Walken was a group of four people, right..."

"Yes." Huey didn't take his eyes from Ladd, and Ladd stared back, murder in his gaze.

A small sound reached his ears, the sibilant whisper of flesh parting from flesh.

"Hmm?"

Then came the sharp cold, sinking into his back.

"Ah?!"

Then the cold transformed into heat, and heat into pain, making his breath catch in his throat.

The shock felt like it was piercing his spine, spreading from there to his entire body. Then, just as suddenly as it had come, it vanished.

He noted faintly that he could no longer move his arms and legs.

As he pitched forward, his eyes caught sight of Ladd staring back at him. The murderer's eyes were opened wide, animosity momentarily vanishing in the face of surprise. Huey knew then that whatever had happened to him had nothing to do with Ladd Russo.

His body hit the cold floor, and from behind him he could hear Firo's icy voice.

"...Actually, *it's five.*"

Firo moved his right hand toward Huey's head, looking to cut off his consciousness for good.

Even as Firo's shadow slowly darkened his entire field of vision, Huey's mind was awhirl with excited thought.

I never even dreamed of this possibility.

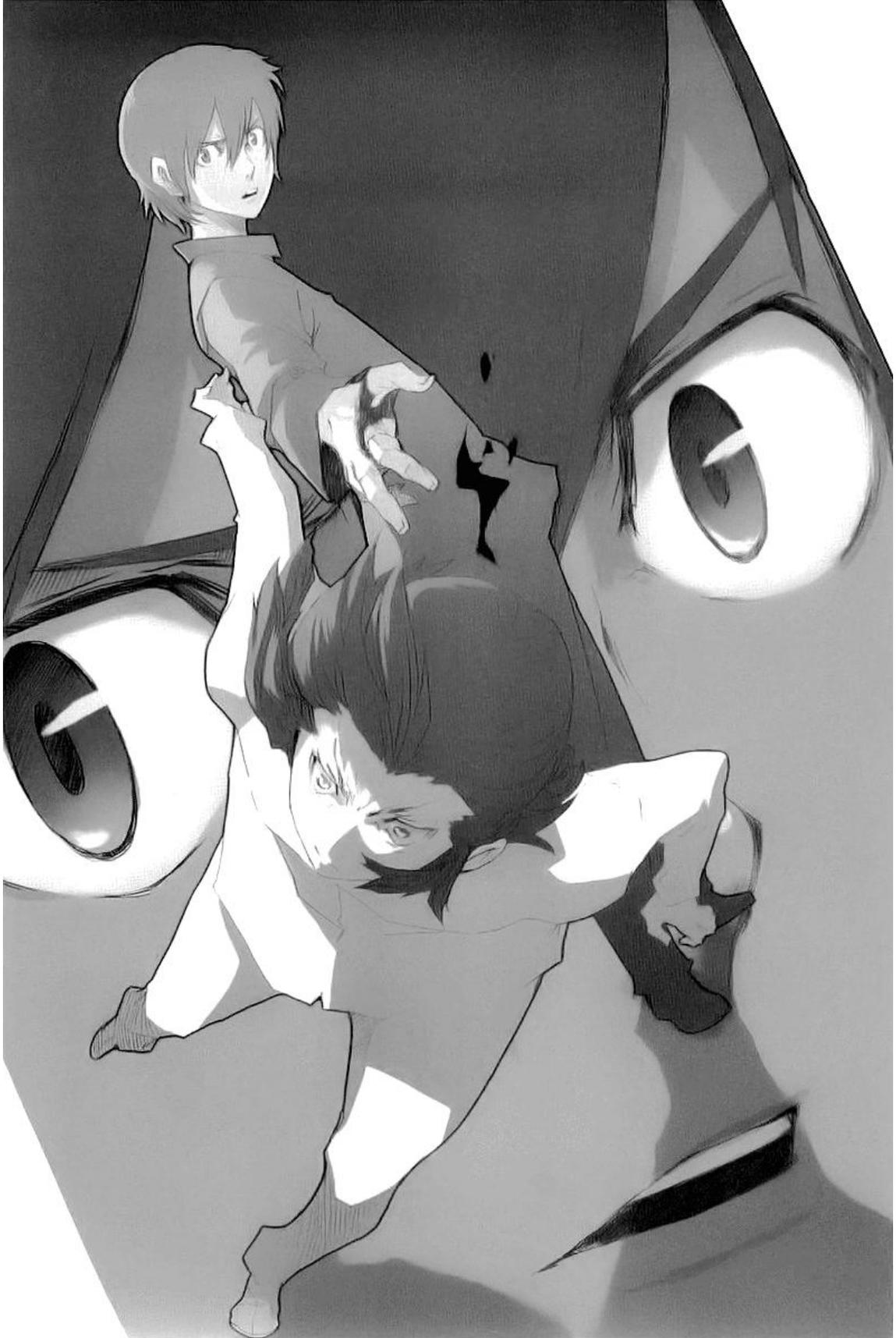
I thought I had hold of the situation to an extent, and look. See how such uncertain elements rear their heads before me.

It became painful to breathe, and Huey felt his consciousness fading fast.

Huey smirked wryly, the face of his old friend floating to the forefront of his mind.

Look, Elmer. It's just as you said.

"This is why... the world is interesting."



Silence and stillness reigned in the cell.

The tiny silhouette that had been lying still in the corner suddenly trembled.

"Mmm.... Ooooh... Oh!"

Just like when she woke up after a night's sleep, Liza snapped to full awareness as soon as she regained consciousness and bolted to her feet.

How long had she been unconscious? She only wondered for a moment.

"...Oh no! I've been out of it for a whole hour and twenty-seven minutes...!"

There was no clock in the room, but still she knew.

"Daddy!"

Realizing she was in her father's cell, she looked wildly right and left, searching for him.

The first thing she saw was that the door was hanging ajar, and a familiar guard was lying face down just outside.

But none of that mattered to her. She spun in nearly a full circle and suddenly froze, the sight of something dressed in white lying limply on the floor shaking her to the core.

"Daddy!"

Liza rushed to her father's side.

There was a knife stuck deep in his neck. From the looks of it, the blade had completely severed his spine.

"No... *Nooooo!*" the girl shrieked, grabbing the knife in both hands and tugging as hard as she could.

There was a sickly crack of breaking bone as the knife left the wound, blood spurting in all directions.

An even greater shock than before shook the girl's heart as she saw the blood flowing from her father's body, but she relaxed, just a little, as she saw it stop and change directions, flowing back into his body.

...He's alive. He's alive!

Rationally, Liza knew that her father was immortal, and that he would recover from any injury as long as he wasn't devoured by another immortal, but the sight of the knife in his back had distressed her on a level below rational thought.

"Ah..."

"Daddy! Daddy, wake up! Wake up, Daddy! Please!"

"Oh... Liza? Where is everyone else?" Huey managed, slowly sitting up.

Liza flinched with surprise and looked around again, but there was still nobody around except the one fallen guard near the door.

"It's okay, Daddy! You don't have to worry! There's nobody here anymore!"

Gingerly, Huey got to his feet, clinically checking the state of his own body as he rose. Suddenly he realized something was wrong and he turned to Liza.

"Oh? How strange," he said softly. "I can't open my left eye. Would you mind taking a look for me to see what's wrong, Liza?"

To tell the truth he already had a good idea of what had happened, but still he asked his daughter, spurred only by pure curiosity. He wanted to learn what Liza, who thought of him as nothing less than perfect, would think of this.

"Da... Daddy..."

Hesitantly, fearfully, Liza reached up and touched her father's closed left eye...

The eyelid pulled back, revealing nothing but a dark red pit.

The eyeball that should have been there was not, and so the girl found herself eye to eye with a terrible red-black darkness.

Huey forgot even the fact that he'd lost his left eye as Liza's shrieks filled the air, intent on recording his daughter's reaction into his memory.

He reviewed his actions.

He reconfirmed that he was a terrible human being.

And he smiled gleefully, making the decision to recommence his experiments as soon as possible.

**CONNECTING CHAPTER
VISIT TO THE
INFORMATION BROKER**



New York
The Daily Days

And that is where I think I will stop for today.

Think of it as a deposit.

I told you, did I not?

I was present for some things.

But I was not, for others.

I have told you most of what went on in the prison during those days. But I did not tell you everything. A select few important matters remain yet untold.

They are rather closely related to certain things that happened on another stage, you see. Things that happened in Chicago. It only makes sense in context.

Now, I would very much appreciate it if you told me what you know.

You do know, don't you?

What I have told you—my side of the story—is only a single part of a greater whole, of something that can only be completed with the knowledge of what happened in Chicago.

What kind of person is Graham Specter?

How did that madman Ladd Russo break the chains binding his feet?

Why did the brat, Firo Prochainezo, pluck out Huey's eye?

What happened to Firo and Ladd after Huey lost consciousness?

How exactly does Master Huey contact the outside world... Well. I suppose you can figure out the answer to that particular question already.

But the answer to all those questions, and more, can only be revealed once I know what truly happened in Chicago.

My apologies. To tell you truthfully, I do want to tell you. But more than that, I want to know what happened where I was not there to see.

I wish to take the information that only information brokers such as yourselves possess, and perhaps even obtain from it new assumptions that even you do not know, and fill in all the missing pieces of this puzzle.

In that way, I suppose, I am much the same as Master Huey.

...Whoa. Closing time already, eh?

Well, guess I better be going now.

When I come in tomorrow I might be someone else, or maybe I won't come at all.

You might be a little confused, but this'll all be taken care of if I can meet Mr. Saint-Germain.

Yeah, yeah. I'm always watching. I'm always seeing something.

Like it or not, I have to watch more things than other people.

That's the fate of the Twins. My fate, and Hilton's.

And in that case... maybe I can change this fate into money, at least.

Well. Anyway, I look forward to doing business with you again in the future, Mr. Information Broker.

I'll believe, for better or worse, that all that knowledge will complete this world of mine.

**REMAINING CHAPTER
FREE!**



**San Francisco
Alcatraz Island**

"Ah, today's your last day here, isn't it. Congratulations."

Isaac smiled sheepishly back at Misery.

"Well, err. I don't know what to say. I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused!"

"...You know, you're the third person whose entry I've supervised myself. The other two came in, but haven't yet been released."

"Amazing! Then you mean I'm the sole survivor?! No, wait, I can't be that amazing, since I did get caught... In that case, you must be the amazing one, Mr. Warden!"

"What? No, I'm not... Well, I suppose Warden Johnston is quite amazing, but still..." Misery muttered under his breath, confused. He shook his head to clear it and gave Isaac some advice.

"Nobody's ever left this island as quickly as you have—while still alive, that is. Of course you've atoned for your crimes here in prison, but only your life outside, in society, will tell you for sure whether you've truly repented. So let me tell you this: From now on, put your criminal ways aside and live for society, for America. Live for the people you love."

"Got it! I'll do my best, just you wait and see!" Isaac cried, puffing out his chest proudly like a child.

Misery could only grin despite himself as he drew an envelope out from inside his suit.

"Hmm. You know, I never thought the day would come that I'd say these words, but here. This is your pay for a month's hard labor, so take it proudly. And between you and me, I added a little extra as a farewell gift."

Isaac took the paper envelope and gave Misery a sunny smile.

"Thank you so much! Wow, you have no idea how much this means to me! Thank you and thank you again, Mr. Warden!"

"I'm telling you, I'm not the warden..."

"Then, err, Boss?"

"...Well, I suppose that works."

Misery waved him away, still smiling, and Isaac smiled back and left the office.

Just like when he'd come, a guard led him to a boat that was waiting at a dock, and then...

Isaac Dian left Alcatraz.

The light of the setting sun dyed the jutting cliffs a deep, warm shade of orange, the hues of twilight transforming the normally foreboding island into a thing of breathtaking loveliness.

"Beautiful..."

Isaac thought back to his past, of how he'd looked upon the very same island so many times in his youth...

And suddenly, even more than he wanted freedom, he wished to see Miria.

— —

"Oh, no... This isn't enough to get me back to New York."

After a long series of procedures at a Division of Investigation office, Isaac was finally free.

Most inmates were sent to serve the remainder of their sentences in normal prisons even after being released from Alcatraz, but Isaac had never actually been tried, and so he went straight from the Rock back to being a free man.

Apparently, Victor had been scheduled to meet up with him, but he'd run into some problems over in New York and Isaac had instead talked to a man who introduced himself as Victor's boss before being let go.

From here and there in the streets, Isaac could hear radio broadcasts, something about trouble brewing in Chicago, but he paid the urgent voices no heed.

The moment he got back the clothes he'd been wearing when he was arrested, he fished out his wallet and pooled the money inside together with the small sum that Misery had given him, then turned and headed straight toward the train station.

All he wanted to do was meet Miria again as soon as he could.

The problem was, no matter how he turned the matter over in his head, he didn't have enough money to take a transcontinental train all the way back to New York. Prison labor didn't exactly pay well, and he'd only done month's worth of it at that. Even together with Misery's

"severance payment," and the few bills left in his wallet, he'd run out of money well before he ran out of miles.

Normally this wouldn't have been a problem at all—he'd have just stolen some money from a passing villain and liberate it for a better cause, but Misery (the warden-*cum*-amazing person-*cum*-Boss, in Isaac's mind) had told him to put his criminal ways aside, and to live for the people he loved. With a great effort of will, he set the option of thievery aside.

For just an instant, he thought of his home, so close he could walk there, but then Miria's face rose in his mind and he discarded the option of home without a second thought.

"And besides, if they caught me... they might kill me..." Isaac murmured quietly to himself, and with those mysterious words he instead turned to a nearby telephone booth.

The operator connected him to the Alveare, and with Sena's help and Ronnie's advice, he got the number of the place where the person he wanted to talk to was staying and made another call. Once again the operator helped him make the call, and a familiar voice answered. It belonged to one of his friends, a young man with a fearsome tattoo on the side of his face.

Jacuzzi sobbed and blubbered over the phone, repeating over and over how glad he was that Isaac was safe...

And then, he heard the voice he'd been dreaming of.

The voice he'd wanted to hear most.

She sounded so happy, even through her sniffles, even through her sobbing laughter, that before he knew it Isaac found himself smiling as well.

What should he say? What could he say?

He hesitated, wondering how he should begin.

Suddenly a thought occurred to him, and before he could think it over it passed his lips, sounding just as brash and confident as ever.

"Sorry, Miria! Turns out my wallet was in my pocket all along."

It wasn't a joke or bluster, just an honest apology that came from the heart. Miria's voice came from the speaker immediately, chiming in right after him like always.

"It's alright, Isaac! I forgot all about that!"

Isaac breathed a sigh of relief, and then spoke slowly, as though hesitant to continue.

"Well, you see, Miria... As it so happens, I don't actually have enough money to get back... so... If you could, err, take enough money for my train ticket from my stash and come to see me, that would be great..."

From the eagerness of Miria's reply, it was a safe bet that she'd have dashed across the country to him on foot if that was what he'd asked.

Isaac frowned as he held the speaker to his ear and listened to her talk. It occurred to him that it wasn't fair for him to make Miria come all the way by herself, and he decided to go as far as he could and meet her halfway.

He glanced at the schedule in his hand and settled on a station he remembered.

It was a city where he and Miria had once dressed up as baseball players and taught a bunch of gangsters the error of their ways.

"Then... How about Chicago? I think I can make it that far with what I've got!"

Miria agreed wholeheartedly, and Isaac grinned, the great journey east already unfolding in his mind.

"Alright. I'm going to go get a ticket for Chicago, then. Where do you want to meet?"

He wrote the time and place on a small scrap of paper and stuffed it into his pocket, his head filled with hope as he thought of tomorrow.

The sun set to the west, but Isaac Dian's heart was headed east.

The free man spoke into the receiver, his words short and simple.

The only thought in his soul was of seeing Miria again.

And perhaps his intent shone through his words, for simple though they were, they were more than enough to set Miria's heart at ease.

"Alright, then! See you in Chicago!"



**TO BE CONTINUED IN BACCANO! 1934
ALICE IN JAILS - STREETS EPISODE**

Author's Afterword

Hello, hello. Pleased to make your acquaintance, for those of you who I'm meeting for the first time. And for those of you (I suspect you're the majority) who're coming back, long time no see! Sorry to have kept you all waiting!

Whew, this volume of *Baccano!* was nearly two years in the making. Well, there was the drama CD and the novella that came along with it, of course, but all in all it's been so long that even I'm nervous.

Well. The prison talk ends with this chapter, and now we're moving on to the streets.

I'm thinking of a format that's a little different from what I did with 1931's Local and Express Episodes. It might take me a while to get to the end, but I'd very much appreciate it if you stayed with me for the ride.

Anyway. It really has been a long time, hasn't it.

I found all sorts of details I'd completely forgotten, a total basket of surprises, and I wrote this stuff! All my memory went into remembering useless details like Turner's lines.

So, it's the first *Baccano!* in nearly two years, and...

I have something to tell you, dear readers.

Mmm... Well, those of you who've seen the advertisements might already know, but *Baccano!* is actually getting a manga adaptation in *Dengeki Comic Gao!*

Heh... heheheh... Mwahahahaha!

It's been almost half a year since the idea was first proposed. Since then, every time I saw posts on the internet saying things like "Narita's stuff just can't be made into a manga," and "He'd have to sell more to even think of it," I had to fight the urge to plaster the news all over my homepage, complete with a declaration saying, "Hahaha... How the times have changed, pitiful humans!" But alas, the contract made it clear I had to keep it a secret. Thinking back on it, it would have been pretty immature of me to do that. So thank you, contract.

So anyway, the manga will begin serialization in the issue of *Gao!* that comes out late this December. Unfortunately, I have yet to actually meet with Mr. Gin'yu Shijin, who will be doing the art and story. Instead, I was able to meet with Mr. Ogino, who's in charge of the manga project.

It's my first time having my work adapted into a manga, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little nervous. Still, I thought of you all, you fans of the original work, and so I grit my teeth and sallied forth into the MediaWorks office, prepared to maybe smoke a cigar or two and drawl, "You'd better stay faithful to the original if you know what's good for you... if you know what I mean."

So, our first meeting. The moment we sat down Mr. Ogino opened his mouth and said...

Ogino: So about *Baccano!* Would it be alright to change the general atmosphere of the work? Really shake things up, you know.

Me: (Aha! So you've already shown your true colors! But beware, I'll never let you carry out your dastardly plans!) Haha, do you have anything specific in mind when you say that?

Ogino: We were thinking of making it a little more like *Weekly Shonen Champion*.

Me:

Ogino: Or maybe like how Nanjo Norio's *Suruga-jou Gozenjiai* was turned into *Shigurui*.

Me:

Ogino: We already sent complete sets of *Hellsing*, *Shigurui*, and *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* to Mr. Gin'yuu Shijin.

Me: ...Good!

I shook hands with Mr. Ogino and then we had a long discussion about the great manga serialized in *Champion*, until finally Mr. Wada, my editor for the novels, butted in with an exasperated, "I'm sorry, I don't understand a single word coming from your mouths."

...But anyway. I feel a little guilty for getting so excited when I haven't actually even met the mangaka yet. And Mr. Ogino expects him to blitz through three series at once! Isn't that a bit much...?! Why am I worrying so much for someone I haven't even met yet...?! Mr. Gin'yuu Shijin! Don't give up in the face of Mr. Ogino's ferocious assault!

So as you can see, I too am very much looking forward to the new serialization in *Gao!*, and I hope that at least some of you will share my enthusiasm!

So, our next volume will be the Streets Episode, and it'll be fast and furious. I'd like to try something fancy and lively, something completely the opposite of the heavy air that pervaded the Prison Episode. I can't make any promises, seeing as how I'm still writing it out...

But anyway, thank you for reading, and I hope you continue to enjoy *Baccano!* in the future!

From here on are thanks and acknowledgements, like the last volume.

My eternal thanks to Mr. Wada, my editor, and Mr. Suzuki the editor-in-chief, and of course the rest of the editorial department. Thanks to my proofreaders, who I can never look in the eye because I never meet a single deadline, and of course to the designers who make sure my books always look neat. Thanks to the marketing department, the publishing department, the managerial department, and everyone else at MediaWorks.

Thank you to my family and friends and acquaintances, in particular those who live in the city of S.

Thank you to Mr. Enami Katsumi, who's brought the world of *Baccano!* to life with his art despite the ridiculous schedule I've pressed on him.

And of course, to you, the readers...

Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

August 2008

Full of drive after buying a new car yet unable to actually drive anywhere because of the chaos,
Narita Ryohgo