





Baccano! 1935-A
Deep Marble

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Report on Firo Prochainezo



A: Firo Prochainezo. If I had to say anything about him, it'd just be he looks extremely normal. at least according to our recent investigative reports.

Of course, he *is* an immortal, so he's unusual in terms of his physical characteristics, but...setting that aside, the most unique feature I can think of is the fact that he looks like a kid.

His way of thinking is more common-sense than your average gangster, but even then, that's only if you compare him to the people around him.

I don't think we need to worry about him as a major player. In fact, he should be an easy piece to move if we need to deal with others that are more dangerous.

Firo's weak point is how much he adores his boss, Molsa Martillo and the *conta é oro*, Maiza Avaro. Plus, it looks like he's quite taken with that girl Ennis who lives with him. He has plenty of weaknesses we can take advantage of.

B: I disagree with what you judge to be “weaknesses.”

To him, those things are at the same time weaknesses and potential triggers of a

powerful rage. *Gekirin*, to use a word from the Orient¹.

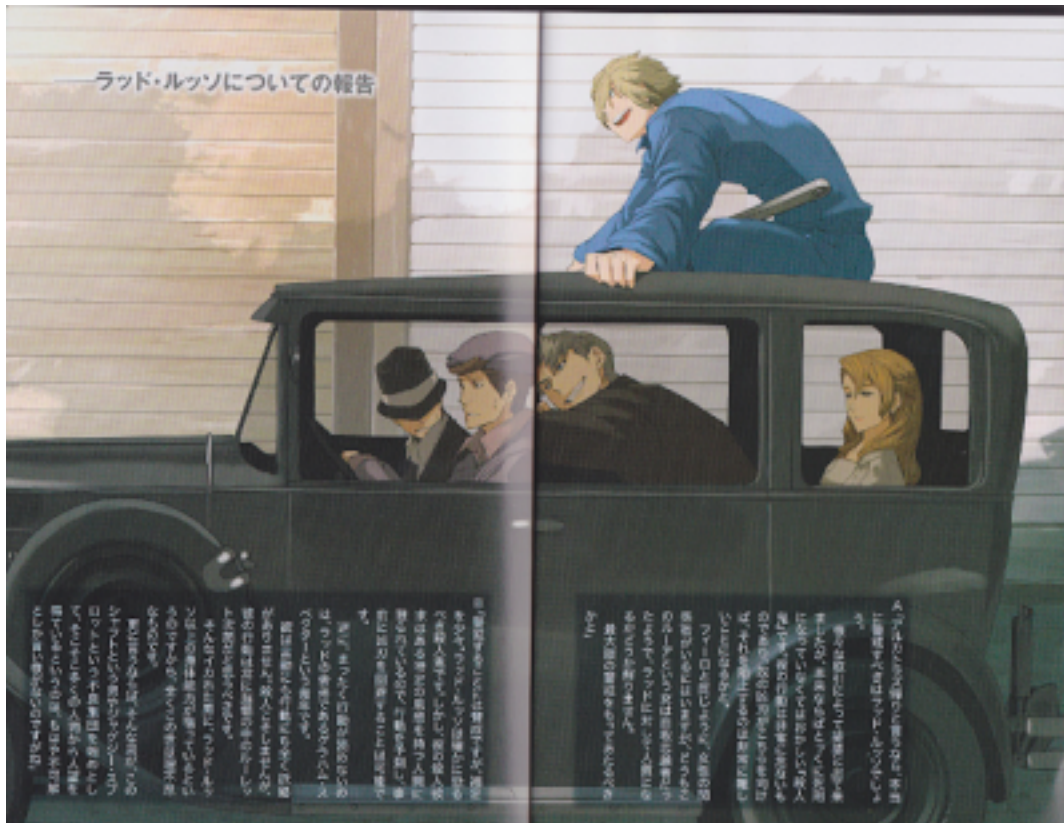
What is special about Firo Prochainezo? First, there is the fact that he has been to Alcatraz and back. Even more, there is the likelihood that he possesses the knowledge of Szilard Quates inside of him.

In no way is he someone we can ignore.

I ask that you remain thoroughly cautious.

¹ Gekirin: Literally, the single scale a dragon is said to have on its throat. If it is touched, the dragon

Report on Ladd Russo



A: Speaking of people coming back from Alcatraz, the one we should really be worried about is Ladd Russo.

He's back due to some dealings here and there, but he's such a homicidal maniac it's strange he didn't get the death penalty to begin with. His behavior is incredibly dangerous, and if he decides to come after us it would be extremely difficult to stop him.

He has a woman close to him like Firo, but she seems suicidal, so I don't know whether we could use her or not.

I strongly believe that we should be as cautious as possible when it comes to him.

B: I am in agreement that we should be cautious, but I would like to supplement your analysis a little. Ladd Russo is certainly a terrifying murderer. However, his desire to kill is limited to those with a particular mindset, so it is possible to avoid his madness if we predict his actions beforehand.

On the other hand, the one who is completely unpredictable is the young man named Graham Specter, who is like Ladd's younger brother.

His words and actions lack any kind of coherence. He will not commit murder, but one should consider every action aside from that as decided by a roulette inside his brain.

And the fact that such an insane man possesses physical strength even greater than Ladd's is further evidence that this world is truly perverse.

On top of that, he appears to have grown rather popular lately with quite a few people, including Shaft and Jacuzzi's gang. "Inexplicable" is the only word to describe it.

Report on Victor Talbot



A: It was surprisingly easy to find information on Victor Talbot, like he has no mind to conceal his existence.

On the other hand, there was an extremely secure wall around information about the organization he belongs to, and their intelligence reaches extremely far. Even if they aren't dangerous now, they could find one of our weaknesses and use it against us if we move carelessly.

Although, I got the very strong impression that Victor himself is an idiot.

B: He is certainly an idiot, but Victor is far from incompetent. Perhaps it is best to think he makes up for his stupidity with his own plans.

A: Isn't that a little inconsistent with calling him an idiot?

B: Yes. I agree with that completely.

Report on ???



A: Who is that man next to Ladd? Well, looking at the documents, I don't think he's someone Mr. Bartolo wants us to observe, do you?

B: I agree. I do not think he warrants any discussion in particular. Like Who, he is likely just one of Ladd's followers.



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—When I grow up, I'm gonna be a hero!
—Like Wyatt Earp and Jesse James!
—You watch, I'll become super strong! You'll see!
—And when I do...can I protect you, too?

—That's amazing!
—It's incredible! You're so cool, _____!
—You can do it, _____! I know you can become super strong!
—It's a promise, _____!

Introduction

“Well, then, it's time to gamble and choose where to place your bets.

Gambling may look impartial and fair, but it's not.

In the end, the system is made so that those with money or intellect are the winners.

Even more important, it's made so the house can ultimately win. That's how it is.

Don't talk about the ups and downs of fate now.

Those with truly good luck are already swimming in it, even if they don't gamble, and the ones who thrill in risking utter ruin as they gamble only have poor luck when it comes to the minds they were born with.

In any case, it's time for you to gamble, even with your poor luck.

So, what will you wager?

Money? Your life? Your pride? Your family? Your friends? Your lover?

Make your choice wisely.

More carefully than the choice of your roulette number.

It's time to place your bets.

What you choose as your stakes is another risk you must take.

I'll say it again.

Choose carefully when it's time.

Even if you choose the right roulette number—

Your own situation and the fact that you are standing on the edge of this all-important precipice does not change.

Once you've changed it into chips, you'll come to place them lightly. Far more than

you think.

The second time, you may place your bet more carelessly.

The third time, you may even begin to think that it's okay if you lose once or twice. That it's okay if you lose your deep conviction, perhaps everything you own, perhaps your family, or your own life.

Well, then, it's time to gamble and see if fate is on your side.

Your respectable life was stolen away by a demon, and your skills at gambling are lacking.

Now, what will you place on the table before you, immortal?

Extra Chapter—There is No Prologue

2003
Some time
In a corner somewhere

—Rosetta, is it?

—I'm not sure whether I should be happy to see you again, or greet you as if this is our first meeting.

—No, perhaps things like greetings themselves are meaningless to begin with.

—Well, no matter.

—It doesn't matter whether this meeting is a coincidence or the inevitability you hoped for.

—But, if you want to chat, I'll play along.

<=>

—The events of 1935? Yes. Of course I remember.

—It was the kind of incident that leaves a deep impression, although you were unable to experience it firsthand.

—Or rather, I should say you evaded it.

—So, you should have **seen** only one part of the things that happened then.

—You look like you regret it.

—Whatever you think now, we had to make a choice. **To come out of the bottle**, we had to become incomplete.

—I chose the world, you chose the world to come.

—But, because we have become incomplete, as it is, we are enjoying this world. Isn't that right?

—Well, no matter.

—If you get bored, you can enjoy things happening in places your own strength cannot reach through television or newspapers.

—For me, not being able to read the future is like...enjoying a work of fiction.

—Even if I can read the mind of an author, that is all I can do, and the work itself they create does not always turn out the way they themselves expect.

—Yes. I remember every detail of **that incident** from 1935.

—The world you don't know that has passed you by is like a story to you.

—What?

—How did that incident begin...hm. That's an interesting proposition.

—But, there is no clear "beginning." Therefore, if I turned that incident into a story, there would be no prologue, either.

—If for argument's sake we say a prologue does exist, it would be the events that happened up until then...

—For example, the turmoil surrounding the elixir of immortality that fell into the hands of Firo and his companions.

—Or, the incident aboard the Flying Pussyfoot, or the tumult at the Mist Wall.

—And the things that happened at Alcatraz and in Chicago.

—But, even before that...perhaps the time that Maiza and the others met me aboard the ship.

—No, from the time I was born...

—To take the argument to the extreme, you could even say that the prologue is the beginning of the world itself.

—I'm not making fun of you.

—In reality, the events of 1935 occurred when all kinds of pasts became tangled into one.

—Do you understand that there is no beginning to this incident?

—But, if we were to say there were...yes.

—I'll pretend to be a reporter for a tabloid and make this incident into a newspaper column.

—In that case, we should start from the disaster that happened around Firo.

—Why Firo, you ask?

—Hmm, certainly, there were many episodes, major and minor, that happened to others at the same time,

—After all, it was an incident that involved an unusually high number of people.

—There are incidents that involve many people at the center, as well as others that would be left out.

—But, well, if we place Firo at the beginning that just makes the story easier to tell.

—That apprentice reporter girl Carol said something once...ah, my apologies, now she's a famous reporter from the annals of history, isn't she...

—She told Gustave once that Firo Prochainezo was "main-character-ish."

—Honestly, it's an interesting way of looking at it. It sums the matter up perfectly. Although I believe what she was trying to say was that he is charismatic.

—Certainly, he has a charm that draws people to him, and of a different kind than Isaac and Miria.

—Mm...do you know them? If not, I'll explain afterwards.

—Hm. You don't know Firo that well, either. That's troublesome, then.

—...Ah, certainly, as one of his friends I am quite biased.

—As the Martillo Family's *chiamatore*, I have a high opinion of Firo.

—Although that's from the standpoint of one called a "demon" by ordinary people.

—Don't look at me like that. I understand your doubts.

—It's because I taught him how to fight with a knife, after all.

—Just let me be a little partial.

Chapter 1: The Youngest Brother Cannot Get Excited

"Hey, Isaac!"

"What's that, Miria, my dear?"

Two carefree voices echoed through the streets of New York, the clear afternoon sky peering down on them between the gaps in the skyscrapers.

"Guess what! I just realized something amazing!"

"Really? You're incredible, Miria! I had no idea!"

People who didn't know the couple would pass them by, only sparing a suspicious glance and wondering what was wrong with these idiots. On the other hand, those who lived in New York and knew them well would pass with warm smiles despite themselves, thinking that some things never change.

Still others would think it had been a while since they'd seen the pair, but that was to be expected, as the man had been in prison until a short time ago.

Although, if they heard he had been held in the infamous Alcatraz, people who knew them well—or even those who didn't—would laugh at such a ridiculous idea. Alcatraz was known as the inescapable prison, where only the worst criminals in America were incarcerated. This man was definitely not one of those, to say nothing of the fact that he was released after only a few months, and could carry on such an easygoing conversation after all that.

But no matter how much people doubted it, Isaac was a man released from Alcatraz, God's honest truth.

Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent were a pair of outlaws who traveled all over America, committing all kinds of strange thefts, major and minor; troublemakers who had stolen anything from chocolate to a millionaire's inheritance, and had investigators tearing their hair out as they tried to figure out what the two were ultimately after.

Now, they had left their life of crime behind and were living normal, upright lives.

Thanks to a deal with the police, Isaac's record was squeaky clean, and so was Miria's. He was enjoying his freedom with her, but...

"So, what is so amazing, Miria?"

"Right! So, Isaac, we have no more money!"

...their freedom might have been better described as unemployment.

"Hahaha! I see, I see, that certainly is amazing! ... What?!" Isaac frantically turned to face Miria, his eyes growing large.

His panic was only natural, but the reasoning behind it was not.

"Didn't Yaguruma say that having no money was the same as having no head?! H-hey, Miria, does that mean that everything above our necks is going to disappear?!"

"Like Sleepy Hollow! And the Headless Horseman!"

"The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" was a folktale about a headless horseman from the days when settlers were pioneering to the West, told in the northern part of New York. When a writer named Washington Irving put the story to paper, the story experienced an explosion of popularity that left it as one of the biggest legends of the eastern US, even today.

"You, you don't think the headless horseman is going to come chop off our heads because we're broke, do you?!"

"That's so scary! Wha-what do we do, Isaac?"

"Come to think of it, Yaguruma said something else...'Even Satan needs money in Hell.' ...Does that mean that if you have no money to bribe Satan he'll cut off your head...?! Wait, hasn't this happened before?"

"The more it happens, the bigger a problem it is, Isaac!"

The last time funds had run short, they had stolen money from the Mafia. However, ever since they had decided to walk the straight and narrow, they didn't even think of doing such a thing again.

"Hmm. A job...if we got a job, what do you think we should do, Miria?"

"Umm...well, we should make money, right, Isaac?"

They had almost no experience in working an honest job, only as far as Isaac had worked in Alcatraz.

A few years ago, the two had gone gold mining, but they didn't think of it as a job,

but rather "stealing from the earth." For one thing, they had never had an actual employer, and for another, everyone just thought that they were digging in an abandoned mine for fun.

"I see...we would need a job where we could make money and earn a salary...What about a bank?"

"It's a money game! Like Monopoly!"

"But, what would we do at a bank? I don't know how to count money."

Apparently Isaac had realized (albeit faintly) that it was necessary to be able to count as he thought about what he could do at a bank.

"Maybe we could beat up bank robbers, Isaac!"

"Of course! That's a great idea, Miria! We know a lot about stealing! There's a saying in the Orient that goes...let's see...'if you know your enemy like you know yourself, yesterday's enemies will become tomorrow's friends'!"

"Taking no sides! Like friendly fire!"

The pair gallantly headed towards the nearest bank, making declarations that only got them more worked up, but they were chased out of every bank in the area in an average of half a minute each. Afterwards, they went to a nearby park and sat on the lawn to discuss.

"Hmm. All the banks we went to said 'We'll make it just fine without you.'"

"But we didn't make it in time, did we?"

"I guess it's true that time is money."

"We lost to the thief of time..."

Some who knew them happened to pass by and saw the couple sighing gloomily and muttering that they needed work. The passers-by sighed, as if they were tired themselves.

—"I never thought anything could get those two down, happy as they are year after year. These really are hard times."

It had been some time since Prohibition was lifted. The Great Depression that had originated at Wall Street in 1929 had left deep scars on not just America, but the entire world, and even now continued to claw at the world economy and everyone's

lives. Many people had lost their jobs and their homes, and more and more were looking into less legal ways of making a living.

Illegal organizations felt the weight of the depression too, but the masses still flocked to them, criticizing the government's powerlessness. No doubt the claws of the depression were even blurring the line between good and evil.

However, the year 1933 marked a turning point. President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in March and fought against that clawed monster with every last trick in the book. The moment he was sworn in, the government closed all of the banks and began a thorough internal investigation. You could say it was the USA's official declaration of war on the Great Depression.

And thus began the long fight with an invisible enemy.

The repeal of Prohibition.

Abandoning the gold standard in favor of a government-managed monetary system.

Creating the Tennessee Valley Authority for the public works construction of a dam on the Tennessee River.

Training those who had lost their jobs to find new ones by the Civilian Conservation Corps (also known as the CCC).

Along with these measures, there were even policies that seemed a little underhanded at the time, and in fact were later labeled unconstitutional.

And thus America took up the "New Deal" in hand and crossed swords with the menace of the Depression.

Later in the year 1935, a large-scale association called the WPA would be formed to facilitate public works, and millions of people who had lost their jobs would finally be able to find work.

Regardless, right now it was still only February, and those millions who were destined for work later in the year were still currently unemployed. The Depression continued to claw away at America, America continued to fight back, and the battle would continue until World War II changed the world forever.

This period was the climax of the fight between the two enormous powers, and whether or not the sun would ever rise on the masses struggling in the darkness could be called the crisis of history.

Such was the age of 1935.

Although—there were also drifters, blown by the wind of the times wherever it went, never realizing they were in the height of the depression.

And this pair of wayfarers always smiled hopefully, no matter where the winds of the depression blew them.

"Alright, Miria, it's decided! Let's go look for a job!"

"A journey to find a job! It's the start of an adventure!"

"We'll go to everyone we know, one right after the other, and have them give us work. All we really need is friends, right, Miria?"

"Yesterday's friends are friends today, tomorrow, and forever!"

Would their optimism pay off?

Nobody could know...

At least, not yet.

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The same day
Night
Somewhere in New York
An underground casino

The atmosphere was, in a word, magnificent.

It was still some decades before Las Vegas would turn into a neon-lit Shangri-La.

Even as the unprecedented depression rolled through America like a dark cloud, the aforementioned New Deal was a ray of hope that broke through to the masses, even if only a little. During this age, gambling was heavily restricted in many states.

In fact, it remained quite restricted even into the 21st century, but with no way of knowing the future, the guests who stepped into that spectacular milieu were dazzled en masse.

Not because of the glittering decorations, but because they had stepped into the realm of "gambling."

Emotions ran high, both at the excitement of breaking the law and the thrill of leaving success and utter ruin to a mere throw of the dice.

This was a casino, where even the gambles you took was a gamble itself.

There were no other words necessary.

"Gambling" was the only word for the absolute existence that filled the place where winners and losers were born and lives completely reset.

Even "fair" and "unfair" changed places according to fate in this island from the outside world. That was true of any casino, regardless of its size or scale.

This was a small casino in a corner of New York.

It was, of course, unauthorized, and no one would mistake the customers inside for good people.

And even though rich-looking patrons appeared from time to time, the rather small room was wrapped in an atmosphere of indescribable chaos.

In the midst of all this, a young man stood in a corner with a sour expression. Most might label him a kid from his boyish face, but he was actually already over twenty.

Firo Prochainezo.

He looked too young to be entrusted with much, but he was an executive officer of an illegal organization called the Martillo Family, and responsible for managing this casino.

But the most puzzling thing about him was that the gap between his apparent and actual age would only ever widen—so much so that those who didn't know him would easily mistake him for one of the young delinquents gambling in the casino as customers.

Although, if anyone thought they could win some pocket change from him based on that impression, they would lose more than just their money.

Be that as it may, even the regulars that knew him well were looking at his corner with a different gaze than they would have not too long ago.

The reason was simple.

It had been two months since Firo had been here, and a rumor had started to circulate through the community during his absence.

—*"Hey, did you hear? Looks like Firo got pinched by the FBI."*

Many thought they could make some easy money and started coming every day, figuring the casino would fall into a state of confusion while the young manager wasn't there. Ironically, the casino earned more money than it ever had before because of his absence. The manager in question could not hide his displeasure at this fact.

The regulars didn't notice Firo's sullen look, but kept stealing dubious glances at Firo. "I heard they sent him to prison. How did he get out so fast?"

As if to dispel the tension building in the bright atmosphere, a man called out to Firo.

"Should I congratulate you, Firo?"

His actual age was not that different from Firo's, but the sharp aura around him gave the impression that he had more experience in the criminal underworld.

Luck Gandor.

He was the youngest of the three brothers in charge of the nearby Gandor Family mafia.

"I didn't know you were here, Luck. ...And what are you congratulating me for?"

"Your safe return from Alcatraz, or the assignment you received from your Family recently. Either one."

Firo sighed at his old friend, a *capo* of another organization. "You sure hear about these things quick," he replied.

"A small organization like us can't survive if we don't even have good ears."

"Either way, I don't need any congratulations for something like that. It's just gonna end in tears." Firo's shoulders slumped as he looked back out over the casino.

The gamblers who surrounded the baccarat and blackjack tables, as well as the royal-looking roulette only appeared to be calm as he carefully watched their eyes. Along the opposite wall from Firo and Luck, a number of people stood one after the other before the reels of the slot machines, eyes darting about furiously.

"Oh, isn't that the Liberty Bell?"

In those days, slot machines decided who went home rich, and who left empty-handed. Luck noticed the unusual models and stared at the machines intently.

Firo's attitude brightened, and he started telling him about the machine with a bit of pride in his voice. Luck seemed to know everything—perhaps Firo was happy to know something his friend didn't.

"It's a new machine that isn't available on the market yet. It almost looks like a prototype. Ronnie brought it in from somewhere for me."

"As congratulations for your release?"

"Cut it out." Firo stepped forward, sighing again.

"There's a special instrument or something inside, or that's what it sounds like. Whenever someone wins, it makes a racket," Firo explained, casually crossing the casino floor. "Everyone loves it. People even start clapping when someone hits the jackpot."

Luck followed him, listening to his friend, but somewhere in the middle of the room he realized Firo wasn't paying attention to him, but to another point on the casino floor.

"Then, the guys around the winner want to get applauded too, so they put money in, and the one who already won wants to be famous again, so they put even more money back in the machine."

"I see." Luck replied normally, although he was watching to see what his friend was going to do.

At that moment, Firo suddenly whirled towards Luck and seized the hand of a man on the other side of the blackjack table. Luck hadn't even seen him.

"Gah!"

A few cards fluttered from the man's sleeve as Firo spun him around.

"This is a problem, sir. Outside cards are forbidden at this establishment," Firo said courteously, applying his weight to the man's twisted arm. "I believe you were banned, sir, after you did something similar three years ago? I hope you didn't think we would let it slide after only three years..."

The cheater shouted back, even as his eyes watered from the pain of his wrist, which

was making an uncomfortable creaking noise.

"Sh-shut up! Y-you bastards are the ones cheating! Mafia casinos are—
ah...ughguh...rk"

The man's tear-filled shouts were brought to an abrupt halt, and he slowly lost consciousness with liquid oozing from his nose and mouth.

"We're not Mafia. We're Camorra."

At some point Firo had taken the man's neck in his other hand, and pushed his Adam's apple deeper and deeper into his throat with his thumb.

Imagining the pain, Luck unconsciously rubbed his own throat.

The other people there held their breath as they watched, and time seemed to stop for a moment within the casino. Luck wondered if this would throw a wet blanket over everything. After all, if the ebb and flow of fate came to a halt, the customers might wake up from their dream and leave.

But Firo seemed used to this sort of thing.

"I apologize for the disturbance! Please accept a free round of Alveare's special honey liquor as an apology, and please continue to enjoy yourselves."

As one of his subordinates carried out the unconscious man, the manager smiled reassuringly.



"If any of you lost money to our magician here, tell me your name sometime within the next five minutes. We'll consult his wallet, and however much is there is guaranteed to be returned to you!"

His words were lighthearted and joking.

Granted, it wasn't a particularly good joke, but it did dispel the tension from a few moments ago, and about half of the customers even chuckled a bit.

Luck watched Firo with admiration as he addressed the casino in a completely different tone than his usual one, then turned to him and spoke normally.

"Sorry about that, Luck. Things got a little out of hand there."

Firo checked to make sure everything had calmed down and turned towards his office in the back.

Luck followed spoke to him quietly, a hint of a wry smile in his voice.

"...Looks like the same thing happens every time I come here."

"That's 'cause a lot of dumbasses think that just because we're smaller they can do whatever they want. 'They can't go to the police if I break the rules anyway' or 'I can

get away because they're small.' You know."

Once Firo had closed the door to the room, Luck asked him jokingly, "So, is it true you've never cheated anyone?"

"There's no need, is there? It's rigged so the house wins even if I don't do anything."

Not many people in America actually thought that the house cheated even in underground casinos. Unsurprisingly, nobody would want to go to a casino rumored to cheat. Instead, they would go casinos that were more on the level.

In reality, Firo's casino didn't just use dice made of glass and crystal. Even on the roulette customers could place their bets after it had begun spinning. But—

"...Well, if someone is winning too much, I might recommend a card game or two."

Firo's implicit admission held a less agreeable meaning, and his face clouded a little as he continued.

"Actually, I tried that back when Isaac was winning so much. But the dealer screwed it up and he hit the damn lottery. Honestly." Firo shook his head tiredly and continued grumbling to his friend. "Ever since Prohibition ended, Alveare's just a popular store where we can do legitimate business, but this place is still a hangout for all kinds of nutcases."

Even though Firo didn't seem particularly unhappy with this state of affairs, he started to talk about the casino, with a hint of self-deprecation. "Casinos have been legal in New Jersey for five whole years now, but New York hasn't done a thing. What the hell."

"Isn't that a good thing? You make money because it's illegal, Firo." Luck let his friend grumble with a small smile, and chided him gently.

"Or, do you think you could compete with legal casinos and win over their clientele? Customers like the champions of Wall Street or Millionaire Row?"

Firo thought for a moment. "...Well, no, I don't know about that." Even if Firo was able to strategize for a turf war himself, he had to admit that he couldn't compete fairly in terms of sales.

And, as if to gloss over his embarrassment, he shifted the conversation to something else.

"Anyhow, since it is illegal, I don't have time to let my guard down when I'm always wondering when Edward and those guys are going to come barging in here. Of course, I'm here because I want to be, so I'm not complaining."

"Edward...seems he's become rather well-recognized now, thanks to being in the FBI."

"Any detective who gets his mug famous is just shooting himself in the ass."

Firo took a shot at the expense of the absent lawman and reached toward the shelves of the office for a drink of some sort.

But Luck asked him a question, looking more serious.

"This is getting to the real reason I came but...did something happen during those two months?"

"...What, didn't you come to congratulate me?"

"I was going to do just that without asking you anything, but, like I thought, you don't seem yourself."

"You think so?"

Firo played dumb, but Luck continued.

"Under normal circumstances, you would have signaled to your subordinates about that cheater earlier and let that be the end of it. But you went yourself to shake him up, like you were particularly tense. Like you're on the lookout for something."

"..." Firo remained silent.

"If it's personal, it would probably be correct of me to be more sensitive as an outsider to your affairs. But the organization in my care is doing business nearby. If there's any situation that could bring harm to us, I need to press the issue with you. Even if you are my friend and my brother."

"...You always were the model Mafia boss."

"I already told you. A small mafia like ours should at least be armed with sharp eyes and ears."

Luck grinned broadly as he answered, but there was still sharpness left in his eyes.

Firo yielded with a sigh and began his halting confession.

"I understand. Just...don't get mad when I tell you. I don't completely understand what's going to happen. But, it seems like something's going to happen. ...I'm positive."

"Such as?"

"I guess I need to give you the simple version of what happened during those two months," Firo said, although from Luck's perspective he still wasn't making much sense. "Argh...there's a lot of things I still don't understand, and you don't need to hear about the personal stuff, because that's embarrassing, so bear with me. It's not anything that would make the situation hard to understand, anyway."

"Yes, that's fine."

"Okay...where should I start? I guess when Edward hauled me in for interrogation, and I met this real asshole of an immortal."

Immortal.

The moment he heard that word, the air itself surrounding Luck took on a keen edge.

It wasn't that he had been listening carelessly until now. He had been listening quite seriously, ever the model Mafia boss, but upon hearing the word "immortal" his caution took on another dimension.

For one thing, he himself had that peculiar, inhuman characteristic of immortality.

On top of that, Luck had one more concern.

If an immortal was involved, even if it had nothing to do with immortals at first blush, the possibility crossed his mind that the leading Mafia family in the East, the Runorata Family, could become involved as well.

"I see. That was certainly worth coming out off our own turf."

Luck leaned against the wall of the office and automatically looked around the room.

Firo did the same. After he was sure that there was nobody else listening in the office, he turned his attention back through the window to the inside of the casino.

And when he opened his mouth to continue speaking in a slightly calmer tone, a man caught his eye across from the office, descending the staircase from the street to the entrance of the casino.

Firo went quiet for a moment and observed the man's face at a distance.

A first-timer.

Due to the nature of his business, Firo instinctively kept a special eye on any new faces to the casino. Since it wasn't strictly invitation-only, it was only natural for many newcomers to come and go. Still, Firo watched each and every one of them just in case. To him, this was the least of precautions for a casino manager.

Although, simply due to the timing, he was a little more wary than normal.

But the newcomer didn't seem particularly suspicious, so Firo decided to continue his explanation to Luck and just keep an eye on him from the office window.

Firo had no idea.

This man, whose face he was seeing for the first time, had also taken the first step into the incident that would envelop both him and the immortals—or to be precise, he was a puzzle piece that had stepped into this incident some years ago.

His name was—

Chapter 2: The Investigators have no Rest

**Some days ago
Somewhere in New York
Victor's investigation headquarters**

"What the hell is this 'I don't know' bullshit? Don't *tell* me you don't know! Goddammit."

On the outskirts of Manhattan, in one of a cluster of brand-new warehouses was a simple arrangement of desks, piled up with communication equipment, papers, and all manner of official-looking chaos.

In the simplest "investigation headquarters" imaginable, a man wearing glasses raised his voice in irritation.

"How many weeks has it been since that bastard Laforet escaped from prison? It's already a new year! Can't you do anything? No! No, you fucking can't! Although to be fair, I can't do anything, either. Ahh, shit! We haven't been able to do a damn thing about that damn terrorist or any of his goddamn flunkies!"

The veins in his forehead twitching dangerously, Victor Talbot berated himself for his own powerlessness as much as his subordinates. One of them, Bill, scratched his own temple as he languidly admonished his boss.

"Ahh, well, I understand you're upset with Laforet, but would you mind continuing with what you were going to tell us, Vice-president?"

"...Oh. Right. Sorry about that." Victor's apology was surprisingly frank.

The vice-president of this special department within the Division of Investigation turned to face the rest of the investigators in the warehouse. Along with Bill and Donald, who had been his subordinates for some time, Edward Noah, now a veteran himself, was visible in the ranks.

In 1933, the name had changed from the Bureau of Investigation to the Division of Investigation, but that didn't affect the position of Victor or those under him. There were rumors that the name would change again to the Federal Bureau of Investigation this July, but Victor and his department's special status would probably not change.

What had changed were the unfamiliar faces surrounding the faithful subordinates who had accompanied him for many years. They nervously eyed Victor's expression and their documents.

They were new recruits to this post—investigators added to the force in response to the terrorist Huey Laforet's recent jailbreak.

At any rate, their leader was rapidly destroying any preconceived notions they might have had about what immortals were like, and his way of thinking and personality strictly separated the men from the boys.

But that wasn't the only problem.

"Just in case, how much do the rookies already know?"

"Ahh...what do you mean, 'know'?"

"Alright, I have a question! You over there! Who are we up against?"

The recruit answered the sudden question without a moment's hesitation.

"Enemies of the state."

"Damn...that's correct." For some reason Victor cursed at the correct response.

But Edward knew Victor's personality well.

He actually wanted them to say "Huey Laforet" so he could say "Not even close, you moron!" and let them know who's boss.

Edward sighed mentally at his superior, who made no attempt to hide his flaws. In fact, he had a strange tendency to show them off.

Victor coolly continued his lecture, oblivious to his subordinate's opinion.

"Our enemies are not just the ones connected with the elixir of life. Immortals, demons, or average Joes, we'll make use of anyone and anything we can to keep this country safe. Naturally, it's pointless is to wait for most complete immortals to do much of anything."

It's often said that people live to die, but Victor was expecting that those who had attained eternal life would become lazier and lazier. No matter what the task, they could easily put it off until later, since for them there was no limit on when that "later" might be.

In fact, he had known a number of immortals who had withered away into a lethargic heap thanks to their overabundance of time, finally disappearing forever.

Although, they didn't disappear by their own volition—they were all "devoured" by Szilard Quates' right hand.

Immortals.

Just as the term described, immortals were those who had escaped from the irreversible fast-flowing river of life to death, and obtained the privilege of eternity at their disposal. Thanks to the alchemists' elixir of life, they had obtained bodies that would never age, and that would always return to their original state, no matter whether they were stabbed, set on fire, crushed, dissolved in acid or subjected to any other injury. According to the demon who had given the wine of immortality to Victor and his companions, there was only step to take if they ever tired of life, or the prospect of eternity had lost everything but despair. Immortals, and only immortals, could kill one another.

Not so much "kill," but "absorb"—in other words, they could "devour" one another, simply by placing their right hand on the others' head and wishing strongly that they wanted to. With just a thought, an immortal who could survive falling into a volcano or being beheaded would vanish from the world in the time it took to take a breath.

And all of the knowledge and experience they had taken in during their long life would be absorbed into the other immortal.

Victor continued, under the assumption that the recruits took all of this at face value.

"Even if they aren't interested in eternal life for themselves, terrorists and mafiosi are very interested in flunkies that can't be killed. You all need to be on the lookout for the influence of the underworld, or an enemy country's spies. Especially spies. For example, if they forced someone with top-secret information to drink the wine of immortality and then devoured them, they could get their hands all of that classified information."

"Are you saying that immortals themselves could be spies?"

"Exactly. Don't gauge immortals by your common sense. Not only can't they die, but they've lived for centuries. They're like vampires. Don't think of them like regular people. They use a different common sense. *Especially* the ones with nothing to do," Victor said, gritting his teeth and thinking of Huey.

"You should know the name of Szilard Quates, if you've been paying attention at all. That old bastard was greedy. Money, power, yadda yadda, he was the type who wanted all of that but...more than anything, he wanted knowledge. Most alchemists do. Limitless knowledge. There were some who would kill their friends just because they wanted to know."

The recruits listened to Victor obediently, but they looked like they still had a lingering doubt.

Sensing this, Donald spoke up hesitantly. "I think they want to know if you have that same desire, Vice-president."

"Ah...well, I understand their concern, too. The desire to take control of everything is hard to resist," Bill added.

"..." Victor scratched his head wordlessly.

The recruits looked away, unable to meet his eyes.

"...Breathe easy, kids. I can only ask you to trust me on this. I'm a scholar by nature. Of course I want to know things more than your average person. But I'm not like old man Szilard. I'd never kill another person over something like that." Victor somehow held back his irritation and clicked his tongue. "Plus, I hate getting other people's leftovers."

He stared back at his documents and continued talking to the new recruits. "Even if there wasn't anything like immortality or the power to devour others, people will still fight their way towards truth."

His manner wasn't exactly appropriate for briefing recruits, but the investigators who were newly assigned to this post listened seriously.

Perhaps, they already actually felt it, through any number of ways.

That immortals were not fairy tales or some crazy delusion, or even a means of disguise. That they actually existed here, on this earth, walking among them.

"Have you ever thought that those suits you're wearing now could be made by immortals? What about your shoes? There's even a rumor that the man who designed those Colt pistols was an immortal."

"Ah...with all due respect, my gun and Donald's are S&W," Bill interjected.

"Don't interrupt me!" Victor's blood pressure rose even more. Then he reached under his jacket and placed his gun on the desk. "Look, you can't kill an immortal

with a gun, but you can stop him in his tracks. If you get 'em in the head, immortals are unconscious until they revive. But if you're up against a regular mortal, like the mafia or terrorists, a bullet to the head would be enough to kill them. On the other hand, keep in mind that they're much more used to gunfights than we are."

Then, looking down at the gun on the desk, he began to speak in a voice that resonated through the whole warehouse.

"The biggest weapon we have is not our guns. It's the fact that we're fighting for the good ol' US of A. You're fighting for justice, and America is right there with you. And I'm there with you, too, as long as your work is honest. You're the same as any other investigators, this country's backup, an essential line of defense. One of these days, your guns won't be a burden, they'll be your bread and butter."

Adding one extraneous topic after another, Victor continued.

"Well, nobody here should have been bribed into being a Mafia lap dog, but...I'm praying all of you will continue to live in justice from now on."

"And if any of you end up wanting to become immortal, I won't stop you or anything, but...do everything you can not to become an enemy of the state."

<=>

10 minutes later

Having finished his general briefing, Victor and the others switched to the task of summarizing the status quo. He etched letters with chalk onto the blackboard nailed to the warehouse wall.

"Alright. Next I'll give you the rundown on the filthy trash heap we have to deal with here."

The first name he wrote was "The Martillo Family."

"Basically, you should keep an eye on these guys. They'll start crying and whining if you call them Mafia because '*technically* we're Camorra,' but shit is shit no matter what you call it, am I right?" Victor snorted with laughter. "They're a tiny little group of criminals with some turf in Little Italy and Chinatown, but they're not worth

getting too worked up about.”

His face darkened a little. “That is, if you ignore the fact that there are some immortals among them.”

He began to pin a number of photos to a cork board that hung next to the chalkboard as he introduced them one by one.

“This guy is the boss, Molsa Martillo. It looks like he emigrated from Naples, but we don't have any evidence that he was connected to immortals while he was still in Italy. And...”

Victor looked at the next picture, of a young man wearing glasses, and shoved his own glasses up on his nose.

“...this is Maiza Avaro. He was also born in Italy, in a town close to Naples called Lotto Valentino. That's most likely how they hit it off.”

Lotto Valentino.

Maiza Avaro.

At those two names, a thrill of nervousness ran through the recruits.

They had seen those two names here and there in the documents they had received earlier.

Just the frequency of appearance was enough to have driven the words into their memory, but once they actually read the material, it was safe to call that place and that person the start of everything related to their work here.

Nowadays, the city of Lotto Valentino was just a tourist trap, but it had once been a “research town” where alchemists gathered from all over Europe. Maiza was the oldest son of an aristocratic family living there. One thing had led to another, leading him to study alchemy and eventually leave his homeland.

In addition, many other alchemists had gathered in Lotto Valentino and left for America on a ship—the Advenna Avis. Both Huey Laforet, who would later become a terrorist, and Victor Talbot, who would later become the detective chasing him, were passengers on that ship along with Maiza.

Meaning, Maiza was the one most deeply connected to Victor himself.

“We're not 100% sure whether Maiza ended up spreading the knowledge of immortality or not. But, we definitely know he got his hands on the elixir of life that

Szilard Quates made, although we haven't figured out how just yet. And we also know what happened to Szilard..."

Victor put up another picture, this time of a young man with a boyish face who looked only in his mid-teens, wearing a pale yellow-green suit.

"This punk, Firo Prochainezo, devoured him."

"Why is he so young? Did Maiza force him to drink the elixir or something?" The recruit's doubt was only natural.

Victor shook his head and shrugged.

"No idea. I don't know the details of how that happened. Probably some others in the Family drank it too. The important thing isn't why they're immortal. It's what they plan to do now that they are. Anyway, we made Firo cooperate with us once before, but that doesn't make him any less of a pain in the ass."

The next picture on the board was a woman in a men's suit, with relatively close-cropped reddish-brown hair.

"And this is Firo's servant. She's a kind of doll created by old man Szilard. It's called a homunculus, but the details of that are in the appendix of your documents so I'll leave that out for now. The important thing is that she's like a weapon, knows every kind of martial art out there. If you go easy on her just because she's a girl you'll get your head bashed in, so be careful." The recruits weren't quite sure whether he was joking or serious.

Victor introduced each member of the Martillo Family one after another as he stuck their pictures to the board. From the big shots like Ronnie Schiatto and Kanshichirou Yaguruma to the less-important Randy and Pecho, he presented picture after picture, fact after fact like a triumphant display of their power.

How there was nothing that could be hidden from them.

Or so it would have been, but—

A voice rang out in the warehouse, easily destroying any pretense of that.

"I see you've done your homework."

The voice resounding through the warehouse sounded as if it had come from above. All of the investigators instinctively looked towards the ceiling.

However, the ceiling was still the ceiling, nothing out of the ordinary.

The investigators tilted their heads in confusion, but the moment their gaze returned to Victor, they saw who had spoken.

"You've done a fine job, even if the information itself is all superficial. That deserves some praise," muttered a man closely examining the documents stuck to the corkboard.

"The hell—!!" Victor yelped.

His objection was perfectly natural, given the fact that an unfamiliar man was suddenly beside him, even though until a moment ago he had been alone in front.

"You, you son of a...!!"

"Calm down. I'm unarmed. If you start a shootout here without knowing what you're doing you'll only kill each other by mistake. If that happened I would feel quite guilty...well, no matter." A number of the detectives had reached for their waists, but the man responded in a somber tone.

That was when the detectives realized that the man who had suddenly materialized was in one of the pictures affixed to the corkboard only a few minutes prior.

"Ronnie...Schiatto," Victor rasped.

Ronnie took off his hat and responded drily.

"Hm. I thought I might leave it alone, but I have one correction to make. Look at the twelfth line on the third page, in your report on our *capo societa's* personal history. His name is written as 'Malsa Martillo.' You should pay more attention to your spelling, or you might end up falsely accusing a real 'Malsa Martillo,' yes?"

The man was clearly just messing around with them, but for some reason nobody had a mind to oppose him. Instead, the recruits obediently turned to the aforementioned place in their files.

There was indeed a spelling error.

The documents must have been leaked. That was the only explanation. The warehouse filled with a suffocating tension.

To begin with, they needed to take care of the man before them. The investigators tensed and reached for their guns, and waited for a command from their leader.

The leader himself, Victor, raised a hand to hold them back.

"Calm down, all of you. Don't touch your guns unless he tries something funny."

He deliberately observed Ronnie's face, then abruptly twisted his own into a frown.

"I remember now...you're that bastard who tried to threaten me once with your shitty party tricks."

About 2 months ago, after he had made his bargain with Firo Prochainezo and sent him to Alcatraz, Victor had proceeded to go see the Martillo Family. Things had not gone well, and after Kanshichirou Yaguruma had flipped him ass over teakettle this enigmatic man had shown him a magic trick.

Or so Victor had decided, but, having lived in New York as long as he had, he just couldn't satisfy himself with cheap party tricks as an explanation for how Ronnie had appeared here at that exact moment.

Restraining his subordinates, Victor himself glared at him with naked hostility. Ronnie only sighed as his expression clouded a little.

"You even have photos, and you still haven't figured it out...did I really leave such a shallow impression?"

Ronnie was being serious about his feelings, but Victor could only imagine that the man was trying to get him stirred up. Even so, Victor resisted the urge to get angry and settled for a sarcastic response.

"Yeah, it was hard to find much of anything on you. We could find anything we wanted about your relationship to the Martillo Family, but your past was a complete mystery. ...Anyway! After we arrest your ass for trespassing, we'll find out everything we need during the interrogation."

"That would be a problem. If I were to tell you everything about my past, it would take several years at the very least. Have you considered providing compensation for damages my company would suffer by my absence?"

Victor knew Ronnie spoke of a "company" as if he only worked for a legitimate business, running the Martillo Family's legal restaurant. However, he also knew that they were able to skillfully enter the marketplace in this Depression only due to the connections they had amassed during the age of speakeasies.

"You think you have diplomatic immunity or something? What, now you're the goddamn President?"

Victor's response was only natural, but Ronnie "hmm"d and rubbed his chin—

"Was I trespassing?"

"What? Are you fucking—"

He was about to say "Are you fucking stupid," but at that moment something strange happened.

A sudden wind blew through the warehouse, and the documents on the desk scattered every which way. All of the detectives were momentarily blinded by the smokescreen of paper.

The next instant, when their vision was clear, the investigators looked out the window to see Ronnie Schiatto standing in the street behind the warehouse.

"...Huh?" Victor let out a cry of surprise despite himself.

Bill and Donald kept their cool, but Edward's eyes widened in shock, and the recruits couldn't quite keep their doubts in check.

At some point Ronnie had moved outside of the window.

That was strange enough, but—

"Uhh...**has that window always been there...**?"

When Bill said this, the recruits all stiffened simultaneously.

But Victor calmed himself in the midst of this bewildering turn of events and glared daggers at the window.

"What the fuck did you just do?"

"Can we just say it was...a party trick?" Ronnie proposed expressionlessly.

Victor couldn't respond to that one.

Without waiting for an answer, the Martillo Family's *chiamatore* spoke to the new recruits in the warehouse.

“Well, no matter. You newcomers should know that this is the world you have stepped into.”

Ronnie’s enigmatic words echoed clearly through the warehouse, despite the glass of the closed window between them.

As if he had spoken directly into their minds.

“Welcome to the other side, I should say, although perhaps I should just **deal with you** here. ...Well, no matter.”

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2 minutes later

After Ronnie Schiatto had vanished, the interior of the headquarters had finally calmed down.

The new window was covered by a spare corkboard, and the scattered documents were also neatly collected again.

It was a testament to their high caliber as investigators that it had taken a mere two minutes for them to regain their composure after seeing something out of their wildest dreams. Another was how aware they really were of the truth that they had fallen down the rabbit hole into a wonderland of immortals and other extraordinary beings.

Victor was proud of them, but he spoke as harshly as ever.

“Still green after all. You should take no more than 5 seconds to recover from something like that. And when you become like me, a shitty little show like that shouldn’t even faze you.”

And so the meeting reconvened with this show of fortitude. The next exhibit was a picture of a small boy.

“Czeslaw Meyer. He’s an immortal who came with us on the same boat to America. I don’t know how, but now he’s a dependent of the Martillo Family...there’s something shady about him, too.”

He stuck Czes’ picture to the blackboard with a piece of Cellophane Tape. It had been only 5 years since its creation, but the ground-breaking invention had spread

throughout the world. Even in the midst of the Depression, some people took the success story as a sign that things might be looking up again.

“That’s right. This Cellophane Tape isn’t an immortal. This little marvel was created by humans. There’s no reason to be scared of that magician from earlier. Or this kid Czeslaw, for that matter.”

When he had first seen the tape, Victor, ever the alchemist at heart, had wondered regretfully why he didn’t think of it first. The thought left as quickly as it came, though, and he began using it in his everyday life.

The new investigators were still regaining their composure from the incident a few minutes ago, but they relaxed even more thanks to their superior's rare show of positivity.

But they immediately tensed again when they saw the next two pictures.

“The kid had some connection to this guy until a few years ago. Keep in mind that it wasn’t firsthand, but we know that he was in contact with various people under his patronage.”

One picture was an older man wearing glasses—Bartolo Runorata.

Victor didn't have to tell them that he was the head of the Runorata Family, one of the five biggest Mafia families in the East.

“Bartolo is connected with this guy, too, not just immortals.”

The other picture was a middle-aged man with a mild smile on his face—Karl Muybridge.

Of course, he was also famous enough they didn’t need an explanation. He was the icon who had founded the Nebula Corporation in New York and was currently serving as its CEO.

“On top of that, when we looked into the connection between Bartolo, Nebula and the immortals, one more name came up.” Victor sounded especially irritated as he held up a picture of Manfred Beriam.

The air around the investigators grew very tense at seeing the face of a senator in the midst of this kind of meeting.

Victor nodded with satisfaction at their reaction and tapped the picture of Czes on the blackboard with his finger.

“What do you think? You flip over one little rock and you never know what kind of worms are crawling underneath. All we did was dig a little around this immortal who looks like a kid, and you've got borderline conspiracy. Are you starting to understand what kind of a war we're in the middle of?”

The recruits all agreed wordlessly as Victor continued.

“You never know. This angelic-looking brat is probably cooking up some underhanded plot as we speak.”

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Meanwhile
New York, somewhere in Little Italy
The restaurant Alveare

“So what are you planning this time, Czes?”

“C'mon, son, let us have a piece.”

An unusually skinny man and an a fat man conversed with a young boy in a corner of the bar.

The boy who looked only around ten years old, Czeslaw Meyer, answered with a grin.

“Weeeellll, for the next one, I'm thinking about hiding Firo's change of clothes the next time he takes a shower. Then, while he's looking all over for it, I'll have Ennis take it to him.”

The men in the shop guffawed at Czes' plan.

“That's great! He'll turn bright red, open the window and jump right out!”

“Nah, he won't even take the time to open the window. He'll just dive through the glass, for sure!”

The boy planned a pointless practical joke on his innocent friend, and the executives of a small Camorra were right there along with him. It couldn't be more peaceful.

As they made their plans, a man's face appeared in the entrance to the store.

"Oh, Mr. Ronnie. Where have you been?"

Czes suddenly changed from a mischievous boy to a polite one. Ronnie answered without expression.

"Hm...there was a mistake in some documents. I went to fix it."

"It's unusual for you to make a mistake, Mr. Ronnie."

"No, it wasn't my...ah, no matter. Anyone can make mistakes."

Ronnie sat down at the counter next to the table where Czes, Randy and Pecho were sitting, and muttered to himself.

"At least, I don't want to make any mistakes in the near future."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Czes asked, confused.

Ronnie ruffled Czes' hair with his left hand and showed a hint of a smile.

And, he said something that Czes couldn't imagine was anything other than a joke.

"Well, even I can't turn back time. I was just hoping nobody will have to die."

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**Meanwhile
Somewhere in New York
Victor's investigation headquarters**

After making sure that the recruits were quiet, Victor returned to the matter at hand.

He put one more picture below Bartolo's, labeled "Begg Garott."

"This is Begg. He was an immortal dependent of Bartolo's, but now he's nothing more than a lowlife spewing his drugs all over the place. Of course he's an enemy of the government, but he isn't a criminal mastermind or anything. Be that as it may, don't get caught off guard."

Edward thought that Victor himself was the one most likely to be caught off guard, but he didn't dare say it out loud. He had come to the decision that compensating for his boss's weaknesses was part of his job. Instead, he closely observed the information covering the corkboard.

Currently, it was organized into a number of groups.

① *Huey Laforet*

The central figure of the meeting. You could even say he was the main culprit behind everything.

Lemures. Larvae. Rhythm. Time. Sham. Hilton.

He had all kinds of units under his control that he moved to carry out various acts of terrorism all over the country.

Until a few days ago, he had been incarcerated in the depths of Alcatraz, in a special cell that wasn't even supposed to exist, but using Hilton's particular abilities, as well as his own as an immortal, he had successfully broken out and was currently unaccounted for. He was last seen in Chicago, but had now completely disappeared.

Worst of all, he was still in possession of his unique intelligence network called "Sham" and "Hilton." According to what Firo had told them after his infiltration mission, they had been forced to come to the conclusion that blocking that network would be almost completely impossible.

Consequently, in addition to taking into account the inevitable information leaks about themselves, they would have to take the utmost care in outsmarting it.

② *The Martillo Family*

Their importance had already been explained in detail before. The only difference was that the words "**PROCEED WITH CAUTION**" had been added in big letters to Ronnie Schiatto's picture.

③ *The Gandor Family*

They were a New York mafia family rumored to have some involvement with a few events related to the immortals, and on good terms with the Martillos.

The three brothers, Keith, Berga, and Luck managed the rather unusual family as the

top three executives. Even though their territory was small, they had not come under the umbrella any of the larger families and continued independently.

Witnesses had also seen a girl with katanas who looked more like she belonged in a saloon out West, and a man who carried scissors around with him everywhere together with the family. They were certainly different from normal mafia, shrouded in an air of mystery.

④ ***The Runorata Family***

On top of their connections to Czeslaw and Begg, they had also had some trouble with the Gandor Family in the past, so the investigators had many different leads to get information. There was even a rumor that they had raised a bear on the grounds. They were ripe for trouble.

Violence was their specialty. They were so powerful that they had no use for cooperation or exchanging information to resolve conflict, even with immortal organizations.

However, since other departments were investigating them, Victor's policy was to give priority to their movements related to immortals so as not to get in the way of their colleagues.

⑤ ***Nebula Corporation***

Nebula was a business created by Karl Muybridge as nothing more than a tiny company that planned events and made things for amusement parks. Now, they had successfully grown into a truly multifaceted global corporation with hands in grocery sales, the chemical industry, the steel industry, and insurance. Recently they had begun branching out into publication, and even developing types of small weapons.

At New York's Mist Wall in 1933, there had been an incident connected to immortals. Victor and his department didn't want to believe it without more evidence, but they estimated over 1000 employees had become incomplete immortals, who would regenerate from any injury while still aging normally.

Furthermore, Nebula owned the train that served as the stage of Lemures' hijacking of the Flying Pussyfoot in 1931, connecting them to that incident as well.

Finally, it appeared they were deeply connected to the events that had taken place in Chicago only 2 months ago, and currently a more focused investigation was in progress.

⑥ *Senator Manfred Beriam*

Even among the senators, Beriam was an influential man. His political power notwithstanding, he also held economic power, and even had a private army of dependents. There was intel that he was employing a man named Spike, originally one of Huey Laforet's subordinates, and his relationship with Huey was currently under investigation.

If the information about Spike and Huey checked out, he would have won over **one of the terrorists who had taken his own wife and daughter hostage**, and that alone would warrant caution when dealing with him.

However, the man's position being what it was, the investigation would need to be very discreet.

In addition, he was on good terms with Nebula, and his economic power had helped in covering up the Flying Pussyfoot hijacking.

⑦ *New York delinquent gang*

A gang of young men and women, led by a young man named Jacuzzi Splot.

They didn't look like they were connected to the immortals at first glance, but they had been spotted at the aforementioned incident in Chicago last year, the Mist Wall incident, and even the 1931 transcontinental express in 1931. Unsurprisingly, they had become a target for surveillance.

Also, for some reason they were serving as housekeepers in the Genoard villa on Millionaire Row, and were using it as their base of operations. Their connection to the Genoard family was currently under investigation.

⑧ *The Russo Family*

A Chicago organization thought to have connections with Nebula.

The don Placido Russo was currently missing, and it was safe to say that the family had been scattered.

Placido's son and his wife had already passed on, and their grandson Ricardo Russo was also missing. All the young delinquents in the lower ranks had all disappeared from Chicago.

There was only one more who bore the Russo name.

"Does it look like Ladd is going to take over?"

Bill rubbed his temple at Victor's question.

"Hm...I can't say anything about that. He's certainly dangerous."

Ladd Russo was Placido's nephew, and the Family's hitman. He was never indicted for murder due to the lack of evidence, but he had been arrested for assault aboard the Flying Pussyfoot in 1931.

Although, the incident itself had been covered up, so he had actually been imprisoned for various minor offenses, and since they had no evidence for any murders committed by Ladd personally, his sentence was only a few years.

Nevertheless, not long after there was something that concerned Victor's department.

For some reason Ladd Russo was fascinated with Huey Laforet and had revealed to some of the other prisoners that he intended to kill him.

"Ah...certainly, he was interested in Laforet back when we secured him next to the tracks."

"But why? What started it? What is the connection between this hitman and Huey? They shouldn't have ever met face-to-face. The Lemures got in the way of their train robbery and even killed some of his goons. Does he just hate their boss because of that?"

Victor stuck a piece of paper to Ladd's picture that said "Surveillance Needed."

"In any case, he's being released tomorrow."

That was unexpected. The investigators looked at each other.

"There's a possibility that he'll try to find Huey. Huey might also make the first move to contact him, seeing as Ladd is trying to kill him. Tomorrow, a few of you will go watch him." Victor let out a small "mm" as if he had just remembered something. "And even if he doesn't, remember this guy is a hitman. Even if nothing happens with immortals, keep an eye out and make sure he doesn't try anything. And don't let him see you if you can help it."

With that, Victor was about to move on to the next topic, but Donald interjected from the side.

"Excuse me, Vice-president. I have one more thing to add."

"What is it?"

"There's **one more person**...someone else who's going to be released from prison tomorrow."

"...Who?" Victor had no idea. He sounded unsatisfied.

Maybe he couldn't stand the idea of someone having some information he didn't. Donald just optimistically took it as enthusiasm for information instead of thinking poorly of his boss. He gave his report calmly.

"Well, it's a coincidence that he's being released at the same time as Ladd Russo, but..."

A few minutes later

Victor thought for a moment after hearing the report.

Perhaps the man being released had some connection to Huey's coming experiment.

Unfortunately, their numbers were limited. Of course, it was necessary to take into account all the possibilities, but they could only follow so many of them.

After thinking for a while, Victor made the decision to ignore him for now.

"...All the same, Huey wouldn't go after him now. But watch him for the first three days anyway.

"And **keep him safe, too.**"

Chapter 3: The Lowlife has no Welcome

The next day
Somewhere in New Jersey
In front of a police station

"I know it's a little cliché, and saying it to you lot is probably pointless anyway, but don't ever come back here again." A guard stood in the light drizzle seeping into their clothes with the two prisoners he had escorted from to a nearby police station.

"...I couldn't agree with you more," said a still-young man with a shrug. The pale roots of his hair suggested that he had dyed naturally blond hair black, but he gave off a vaguely dark aura that matched his hair well. Plus, he was wearing a hat that hid his roots, making the color look completely natural.

The other was a confident, hearty man, his left hand hanging loosely at his side. "Yeah, I wouldn't need your help. Next time, it'll just be the axe, eh?" he said carelessly, as if to annoy the guard.

With those words of farewell, the two men turned away from the police station and became free men.

The plan was for them to take the handful of money they had earned during their labor in prison, and set out on a new life after finishing their sentences. But the misty rain trickling from the ash-colored sky didn't seem to send much of a blessing on their future prospects.

"So, what's your plan, kid?" asked the more robust of the two.

The man with the dyed hair stole a glance at the prosthetic arm and looked around at their surroundings restlessly.

"Well...I don't have a plan, exactly."

The confident man thought his companion was a little strange, especially how he looked every which way but forward. "I don't remember seeing you around in prison."

"...Maybe you just don't remember. I saw you plenty."

"Really? Don't lie to me, now. If you saw me the whole time, that means they threw

you in Alcatraz too, right?"

Alcatraz.

The instant he heard that word, the man's face hardened.

This guy...is coming back from "the Island."

The name was enough to have most prisoners shaking in their boots, the island that housed the worst criminals that were too tough for regular prisons to handle. Which meant the man standing here was a troublemaker himself.

"...Sorry. I did lie, but I have my reasons. Some...circumstances."

"Nah, don't worry about it. Everyone's got some kinda secret, 'specially if you're in prison. Anyway, let's be pals until we end up parting ways, since we both got released on the same day. Maybe it's fate, haha!" He casually raised his left hand for him to shake with a surprisingly refreshing smile.

The man with the dyed hair widened his eyes in surprise. Instead of a hand, a crude steel model glinted at him dully in the rain.

"I'm Ladd, Ladd Russo. Nice to meetcha."

<=>

The guard watched the two from the station window and let out a small sigh.

"Man...to think both of them would be released on the same day. Maybe it's fate or something."

However, the guard didn't think it was anything worth worrying about. He didn't know much about Ladd's past at all, and he only recognized the man with the dyed hair.

"Eh, they only have one thing in common, anyway."

And that was where his interest ended. The guard turned away from the window and began to make preparations for returning to work at the prison.

But if he had stayed at the window a moment longer, he would have seen it.

How when Ladd offered his hand to the man with the dyed hair, he fell to the ground

and crawled away towards the wall in terror.

<=>

"C'mon, what's the matter? What are you so scared of?"

"R-ru...Russo...?"

"Ah." Ladd looked down at the man on the pavement. He had probably heard of the Russo Family. Maybe even the rumors about Ladd himself.

I don't care what he's heard, I've never seen someone shit their pants like this. Certainly, many people were terrified of mafiosi, but the man's fear was strangely over-the-top. This is getting interesting. What's wrong with this guy?

Ladd crossed his arms and stared down at the man with renewed interest. He smiled a little and waited for the man's response.

"I, I see...you've come to kill me."

"Oh?"

"I never thought they would pull something like this to take me out...shit! How did they bribe the prison *and* the police?!" The man's legs were shaking as he shouted one nonsensical accusation after another. "I'll do anything! Anything, do you understand? If it's money you want, you can have it! Just don't kill me! There's someone I still have to see again before...No, no there's not! There's nobody! I don't know what I'm talking about! A-anyway, killing me now won't do anyone any good, right? Right? Hey, I'll tell you whatever you want, just let me go!"

The man rambled on, digging his own grave with his back to the wall of a bar next to the street. He pressed his hand against the wall, still shaking in fear, and slowly stood up.

The sight was completely pathetic. Ladd was thoroughly enjoying it all until suddenly he had a strange feeling that something was off. He looked at the man's movement—or specifically, his hand's.

And, the moment he realized what was the matter, the smile on Ladd's face grew even more twisted.

"Hey, buddy, pull yourself together. If you don't, I'll kill you right now, you hear?"

Ladd grabbed the man's wrist in his right hand and effortlessly pulled him to his feet, easy as picking up a paper doll.

His strength...it's overwhelming.

The man's power was monstrous, plain and simple. He had felt it firsthand. It took only a second for the man with the dyed hair to come to a hopeless conclusion.

I can't run. I'm going to die here.

The man's knees were knocking. "I, I'm begging you. Please, just spare my life. I'll do anything! I'll do anything, as long it's somethin' I can do!"

"Got it, got it, you'll do anything. Calm down." Ladd completely ignored the man's fearful groveling with a pat on the shoulder. "Is there anyone comin' to take ya home?"

"H-home? I don't...there's no one like that. No way anyone would come to see me."

"Fair enough. If you were a big shot in the Mafia or something, they'd have a fancy car waiting for you the moment you stepped into the free air." Ladd chuckled and put an arm around the man's shoulders, as if he'd known him all his life. "Now me, I may be a Russo, but I'm just small fry. The boss has always treated me like I'm some deadbeat. A parasite. You see? The Russos hate me, too! Like I said, we oughta be pals! Whaddaya say?"

"..."

"What was your name again?"

Ladd asked an extremely ordinary question, but the man took a long time to answer before finally saying a name.

"I'm—"

Unable to hide it, the man said his real name. He could have given a false one. But he didn't dare.

He knew there wasn't much difference between a lie or the truth before such overbearing power, and he didn't have a single iota of his own to put up any kind of a fight.

After hearing his name, Ladd thought for a moment, then spoke.

"Never heard of ya."

"...?"

"That's good. I don't know if you did something to the Russo Family or what, but you don't have to worry about me killin' ya."

"...Oh." It looked like his life was safe for now. The man sighed with relief. "Really... Well, I'm sorry and all, but could you let me be? I'm very grateful to you for letting me go, but if I stay with you I might run into people from the Russo Family."

The man's voice was still clearly fearful, and even as he talked he was glancing this way and that like a cornered animal.

"That's pretty good, that fear you have. You don't know when you're gonna die. It's in your eyes. Yeah, you know how easy it is to die. You remind me of Who."

"Who's Who?"

"Who's who. My friend. He's a coward who'd give even you a run for your money."

"I see...you have friends, huh. I'm jealous," the man confessed without a hint of sarcasm. He looked down, still shaking with fear. Still, that fear had dissipated a little so that he was somewhat calmer than before. "Is he not going to come and see you?" he asked.

"Nah. I don't even know if he's alive or dead...almost all my buddies bit it on that train. Maybe he's in prison."

"What train?"

"You ever heard of the Flying Pussyfoot? It looks like what happened got covered up, but have you at least heard the rumors?"

"Flying...Pussyfoot?" The man's face paled once again, although he remained on his feet this time.

"Looks like you do know something."

"...N-no..."

But he quickly averted his eyes from Ladd, and muttered as if to himself.

"I don't know anything..."

"Then what did you mean 'I'll tell you anything you want, so just let me go!'? Or

whatever it was you said back there."

"..."

It's no use.

His face couldn't hide the truth deep down.

It wasn't that it reminded him of something painful.

He hadn't been threatened.

But, as one who had escaped from the clutches of death, he understood instinctively what it was about the man before him.

A little guy like him couldn't hope to go against someone like this. He knew it from sheer instinct. His head drooped like a well-trained dog.

"...I understand. I'll talk, I'll talk. Shit, why couldn't you just leave me alone?"

"Well, I just thought I needed to know a little bit about you."

"Huh?"

With his arms around the shoulders of the doubting man, Ladd smiled as if they had been friends for years.

And, as he grinned in pure, absolute delight, he leaned over and whispered into his ear.

"We're being followed."

"...!"

"Don't turn around. Leave your head right where it is, okay?" They continued walking together and turned left at an intersection, out of sight of the police station. "There's two guys in the car, and three guys at the corner pretending to talk to each other, so that's at least five. There might be more who can actually tail a man worth a damn."

"How...how do you know?"

"My uncle's asked me to do it before. I don't like it. Feels like I'm playing dirty, but I'm pretty sharp when it comes to things like this."

His uncle? ...Placido?

The man with the dyed hair didn't dare voice his doubts. He was so fearful he began to breathe in ragged gasps, thanks to both Ladd at his side and their mysterious followers. Somehow he kept his feet moving forward.

"That's why I want to know if these rubberneckers are following me, or you."

They continued farther and farther, one step after another down the deserted street. When the street was completely abandoned, Ladd stopped and removed his arm from the man's shoulders.

"Ahh, you know, I was thinking, while we were walking. Time can really do a number on ya if you aren't careful. Like if you go for too long without killing people, you get soft. Lose your touch. Maybe I shoulda just killed that little girl after all, whether Firo wanted me to or not."

"...?"

Firo? Who's that? And killing little girls isn't funny, even if it is a joke, the man thought. After a moment, it occurred to him.

...My instincts are really out of whack today.

I knew this guy was a damned menace, but how did it take me this long to realize he was totally out of his mind?!

"Honestly, I'm happy no matter who they're after."

"Eh?"

Ladd picked up a piece of brick lying on the ground nearby.

The next instant, a black car slowly appeared around the corner.

They couldn't see the driver. But even the man with the dyed hair could tell just from how the car moved that it wasn't a normal car that just happened to be driving along the same streets as them. It was the movement of a car tailing them.

"This is bad. Maybe we can lose them for a bit in a speako or something around here."

They're being really obvious, so they're probably still new to this. If we could just find a crowd, maybe we could lose them. And he could kill two birds with one stone and get away from Ladd, too.

The man with the dyed hair formulated his plan. "It's drizzling, but if they take out

an umbrella we could use it to our advantage...hey."

But Ladd couldn't hear a single syllable of it.

"...Hey..."

When he turned to face Ladd, the gangster was already winding up for a pitch worthy of the Major Leagues.

"Whatever, I'll beat the shit out of 'em first, then ask 'em face-to-face. Or kill them. Either way...!"

Ladd threw his fastball with unbelievable speed through the air, shattering the car window—

And the sound of glass breaking was like a gunshot signaling the start of the *baccano* that was about to take place in that little alleyway.

<=>

Somewhere in New Jersey In front of a police station

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

A melancholy voiced echoed through the misty rain over the city, as if to match the grey sky.

"Just a little while ago—so close to this very moment! Boss Ladd! Has already made his way into the world without us! ...I've never heard such a sad, sad story! Sis never told me about this...can't be...we can't have reached the very limits of humanity! Could we? How? How can life be such agony!"

"Uh, anyway, boss, shouldn't we go try and find him? He might be in a bar around here, or walking to the station. It wouldn't be hard to catch up," replied a bewildered voice.

But the lament wouldn't end anytime soon.

"Ah...why, why do man and man pass each other by? In the end, every man is but a lonely island... Person and person, man and man stand forever separated by a wall of rain, formed of water in the very air we breathe, imprisoned in the husk of the individual! That barrier stands in their way so that the two may never meet!

Damn...but on the other hand, if I myself were Boss Ladd, I would never miss him in passing! Can there be a sadder story?"

The young man continued his siren song of nonsense. The men walking down the road near him hid their faces with their umbrellas so as not to meet his eyes, and some crossed to the other side of the street. However, they weren't so much afraid as concerned. It's not everyday someone delivers an address to the world from the top of a car parked in front of the police station.

It looked like the car belonged to one of his comrades. A man wearing a hat was collapsed over the steering wheel in total exhaustion.

A few delinquent types were standing around the car, listening to the man on the roof and getting wet from the rain.

The man giving the speech appeared to be in his early twenties. His workman's clothes were dyed an impossibly vivid shade of blue, standing out in sharp relief from the mist that darkened the city.

And, the most noticeable thing about him was the gigantic wrench he was playing with as he talked.

He wasn't a large man himself, but the wrench he held in his hand was about the size of a woman's arm, less a tool and more like a knight's mace from the Middle Ages. Underneath his disheveled, glossy blond hair were a pair of dull blue eyes.

He continued his speech anew.

"Jun-Jun says that humans are all unconsciously connected to each other...but...why unconsciously?...does that mean that we're only disconnected when we're awake? In the East, you can use this Sen or Zen meditation—something like that, to reach a state of complete emptiness...wait! I see, Asians meditate to fuse together...the thousand-armed *Senjukannon* is actually just five hundred people fused together! Five hundred...five hundred?! Oh my God! Asians are amazing!"

The man spun the wrench this way and that, around and around and around in a dance that made him look like he had a few hundred extra arms himself.

His languid face suddenly lit up, although, his eyes remained hollow.

"Let's make this a fun story! It's amazing, really amazing, Shaft! I have reached enlightenment on the mysteries of the Orient! Five hundred people fuse together, with only their arms remaining separate...there's no real point to separating their legs, but with a thousand arms there's nothing they can't do! The mysteries of Jun-Jun's collective unconscious are being revealed, Shaft! His logic is flawless!"

The man's train of thought was unique, to say the least, yet shouted it as if it were the meaning of life itself. The young driver, Shaft, stuck his head out the window and yelled up at him.

"I have no idea where to start with you...first, the idea of 'collective unconscious' doesn't just mean that people can communicate with each other telepathically. And anyway, is 'Jun-Jun' supposed to be Jung, the psychologist? You haven't actually met him, have you? Just use your head for once and don't call people you've never met by a nickname."

The driver picked on every nonsensical aspect of the speech he could, but the man on the roof, Graham Specter, only took it as a springboard to launch a new tirade.

"Nicknames...yes! If two people want to fuse together, they should start with their names! Alright, my nickname is Shaft, and Boss Ladd's nickname is Graham! And yours is Boss Ladd! What an incredible system! I've just ended the world and brought a new one to light!"

"Hello, Graham, would you mind coming back to earth with the rest of us, please? Graha—m!"

"I can drink to that! Cheers, Shaft! No, wait, I'm Shaft. Cheers, Boss Ladd! Now, we should hurry and find Boss Graham! Oh, wait. My real name is Graham! I was here the whole time...in other words, I didn't miss myself at all! Should I even be here!?"

"No, you shouldn't. We should hurry and find Ladd." Exasperated as he was, Shaft patiently continued talking to Graham.

They were a gang of delinquents originally from Chicago, and Ladd treated the one who brought them all together, Graham, like a brother. However, Graham's personality being what it was, he always abused his power as the leader, and restoring order was left to the unofficial vice leader, Shaft. This was a daily occurrence.

Shaft tried to live up to his name as the essential axis of the machine, but no matter how hard he tried, Graham's torque as the engine was so tremendous it threatened to break him.

And today Graham's brain was at full throttle, with no sign he could even hear Shaft.

"So you're saying Boss Ladd should go find Boss Ladd....I see! He's going on a journey to find himself! Don't worry Sha—Boss Ladd! Now, if I change my second nickname to Boss Ladd, I can find myself..."

"Aaargh, I give up. You've always been hopeless, but you're especially bad today. This is getting ridiculous." Same as always, Shaft held his head in his hands and

slumped back over the steering wheel.

However, there was one thing about today that was slightly different than normal.

"Graham," echoed a transparent voice.

If the dreary mist had a voice, this would be it: softly, gently, little by little soaking into their hearts.

"If you stand out here in this rain...you might catch a cold. ...Please get inside the car."

The young woman sitting in the backseat of the car wore a gentle smile.

"...Okay. Thanks, Miss Lua."

Graham nodded obediently and cheerfully jumped down from the roof. He opened the passenger side door and climbed in.

"...Why do you only behave for Miss Lua?"

"Well...whenever I look at her, I suddenly feel like apologizing for being so loud... Aaah, I really am no good, ain't I...can't talk, can't understand anyone! Doomed never to understand what I'm doing until it's too late, hopeless, hopeless, hopeless..."

Like a marionette whose strings were suddenly cut, Graham covered his face with his hands and and curled into a ball in the passenger seat.

A voice spoke to him from the back seat. "Don't worry, Graham. I'm actually...quite jealous of your energy—"

"Uhh 'scuse me Miss Lua but he's just calmed down so please please please don't say things like that."

"Oh...I'm sorry..."

Her voice was filled with kindness, but it sounded like it would fade away at any moment, like a phantom into the night.

But her voice resounded deep within the hearts of those who heard it; small, but whispered in sincerity.

As Shaft thought, he looked at the backseat in the rearview mirror.

Lua Klein.

She was the fiancée of the ex-con they were going to find, Ladd Russo. The homicidal maniac had declared that she was the one he would kill last.

She was certainly beautiful, like the fairy-tale princess who slept in a lake². One might think she was as weak as they come, but Shaft knew the truth.

She had her own kind of strength.

It was directly connected to her meekness, but—

This girl can take anything. No matter what.

Even in the face of Graham's crazy ramblings, she remained completely calm.

Since she did everything her way, Graham didn't really like her, saying things like "Whenever I look at Miss Lua, I realize I can't understand what's going on around me." Shaft really wished he would figure that out when he was with them, too.

Whether having a murderer for a fiancée or being captured by the Mafia—she could take in anything and everything without batting an eye. Apparently she had once been suicidal, but given how calm she was about everything else, you had to wonder what could have happened to make her think about killing herself.

It wasn't that she had lost herself to despair.

She didn't just take everything in. She confronted it head-on.

Shaft had once casually praised her for this, but she had slowly shaken her head.

—"Even I...get scared sometimes... I realized it, on the train...That monster...the Rail Tracer...I wasn't afraid of the Rail Tracer, but Ladd...I was so afraid that he would kill Ladd..."

Shaft thought this was a little melodramatic, but comparatively speaking, Ladd was even more strange for making her think that way.

The homicidal maniac and the suicidal lunatic. If anything, the pair was almost comical. But if anyone laughed at the relationship between the two, it would only take a second for them to regret ever being born.

Regardless, Shaft wanted to get Lua back together with Ladd as quickly as possible and return to their home base in New York. Graham may be calm now, but knowing

² I think this is a reference to "The Light Princess," a story about a princess who was cursed to have no gravity so she would float away in the wind. As a result, she lived in a lake, which was the only place she could have gravity.

him he would still find a way to go crazy despite Lua's influence.

"Well, let's drive to the station for starters. I don't think even Ladd would try to get back to New York on foot."

"...Shaft, Shaft, Shaft...you're so naive! Of course Boss Ladd wouldn't try to walk back to New York! ...But Boss Ladd is by far and away so much greater than I could ever be! Who knows how he'll travel? Maybe it's beyond our comprehension entirely..." Graham muttered through his hands.

"Yup, I bet he's flying there as we speak." Shaft started the engine, gentle as if he were rocking a baby to sleep.

The rest of their friends around the car had also come by train, so they started towards the station.

Shaft started to drive away onto the main road towards the station, but thanks to sheer coincidence, he noticed something only a few seconds later.

A car had appeared at the corner just ahead, weaving up the road towards them.

"What the hell. That's dangerous. Already drunk at this hour...hm?"

And then he noticed something else.

The car's windshield was shattered, and something was clinging to the roof.

And that "something" on the roof was rather *someone*, and someone he knew well.

Shaft couldn't help but frown.

Ladd Russo's metal arm had punched clear through the roof of the car, while his other hand pulled a slender man up with him by the wrist.

The driver panicked at the steel arm coming through the roof next to him, shouting and trying to draw his gun from his jacket. Equally frantic, the man in the passenger seat did the same.

But the next moment, the arm suddenly disappeared from the roof. And the moment after that, they looked to see why just as the car crashed through a wall in front of a house. Both passengers were knocked out on impact.

Shaft stared in shock at the wreck that had just occurred right next to them.

Ladd had jumped off of the car right before it crashed and was heading towards

them with the other man still in tow. He peered at Shaft and spoke.

"Hey, there. I need a ride to New York, you got a seat to—" He cut himself off abruptly the instant he saw the backseat.

"...Lua?"

Good, he finally realized who we are. Shaft sighed thankfully at Ladd's expression of disbelief. And it looks like he doesn't recognize Shaft—or me. That's good.

"...Ladd?"

Even Lua seemed surprised at the sudden reappearance of her lover, but Shaft knew they didn't have time for emotional reunions.

What the hell was the accident that just happened, who the hell was the man Ladd was dragging...Shaft had so many questions he didn't know where to start, but he decided that their first priority was to get Ladd in the car and get the hell out of there.

"Alright, alright, lovebirds, let's save the greetings for later! We need to get away from here before the cops...get...here?"

As Shaft was about to continue, something outrageous happened.

At some point Graham had gotten out of the car and was swinging his gigantic wrench down at Ladd's head.

The hell is he doing?!

"BOSS LAAAaaaaaAAAAADDD!!!"

The wrench came down along with the shout.



But Ladd turned around at the last second, let go of the man he was dragging, and caught the wrench in his right, human hand.

As the wrench trembled between them, Ladd looked up at the young man holding it and laughed in surprise.

"Well, well, if it isn't Graham! Long time no see, kid!"

"What a fun story...! It is you! Only the one and only Boss Ladd could stop a fatal blow like that single-handedly! Without breaking a sweat! It's really you, Boss Ladd!"

"Hey, if you were wrong, you mighta killed someone!" Smiling brightly, even cheerfully, Ladd jerked his right arm back with enormous strength and twisted his body into the middle of the street.

Graham didn't let go of his wrench, either, and Ladd swung him around in a giant arc.

"Hahaha! Amazing, this is amazing! Isn't Boss Ladd incredible, Shaft?!"

"Shaft...? Oh, right, Shaft, Shaft! The driver!"

Ladd spun around a few more times, still grinning, and carelessly tossed Graham across the road.

Graham tucked into a skillful roll as he landed on the roof of a one-story house before springing to his feet. He held his wrench high above his head with a battle cry.

Am I in the goddamned circus or something now? As always Shaft was completely dumbfounded by his companions, and, as always, he was terrified of Ladd's monstrous strength.

He wasn't the only one. The unfortunate passersby had fallen down in fear at the incredible display, but Lua got out slowly from the backseat as if this was perfectly normal and brought with her a sense of calm.

She had believed without a doubt that Ladd would return safely. Even now she accepted everything the way she always had, never batting an eyelash at Ladd's imprisonment or the wild reunion before her. She looked as if she had been separated from her lover only a day, not years.

"Welcome back, Ladd," she said with a delicate smile.

"Sorry I took so long, doll."

Ladd took her stiffly in his arms, as if to make sure she was really there.

If you ignored their personalities, the reunion made a beautiful scene. However, all Shaft could think of was getting out of there as fast as humanly possible.

But before he could, the familiar blue jumpsuit reappeared.

At some point Graham had come down off the roof, and was nudging a man collapsed on the pavement with his wrench.

"Hey, Boss Ladd, who's this guy?"

"Mm? ...Oh, I completely forgot! He's my new buddy. We were released together, and we just hit it off. Guess we're birds of a feather, heh heh."

"I find that hard to believe, considering he's completely unconscious. His eyes are rolled up in his head and everything..."

Shaft figured he would stuff the unconscious man in the empty seat in the back of the car, but—

Huh?

When he got out of the car, Shaft realized something.

The man's face was covered in natural makeup, but the rain was gradually washing it away to reveal faint burn scars, as if he had been involved in an explosion of some sort.

And on top of that, **the man's hand was a prosthetic one.**

It was made to look more natural than Ladd's left hand, but on closer inspection it was clearly fake.

The man's face looked like one he may have seen before. Or maybe not. Shaft paused for a moment, but Graham asked the question in his mind before he had a chance to remember.

"So what's his name, Boss Ladd?"

Ladd replied easily.

The name he said was definitely within Shaft's "knowledge," although Shaft didn't fully remember it until later.

"This is Neider. Neider Schasschule."³

"It looks like Uncle Placido has it in for him, so I thought I'd hide him for a bit."

³ Thanks to kalina for the romanization of "Schasschule," which can mean "kicked out of school" if you twist German a little bit and squint.

Chapter 4: The Boys and Girls have no Tomorrow

Let's turn back time a little and take another look at Victor's briefing.

Even though he was still quite young, Neider Schaskul was originally a trusted member of the Lemures, an organization under Huey's command—or so it seemed.

After their leader Huey was arrested, Neider devised a plan to betray the Lemures, kill their new leader Goose Perkins, and join the Russo Family instead. Not long before the Flying Pussyfoot incident, he set it into action.

However, his scheme was discovered, resulting in a catastrophic failure.

The Lemures cut off his right hand as punishment for treason, then locked him inside the old hideout they were about to destroy. He was to die in the explosion among the corpses of the other traitors, disappearing without a trace.

Neider had shielded himself from the blast with the corpses of his former comrades and barely managed to escape with his life. However, he had still suffered severe injuries that would have been fatal were it not for a doctor that happened to see the explosion. His survival was nothing short of a miracle. Afterwards, he had made a deal with some of Victor's subordinates who were chasing the Lemures, and his record was wiped clean.

But his story didn't end there.

Neider disappeared after the storm died down, saying he would go back to his hometown and take over his father's corn farm, but only a few days later, he reappeared at their office, saying that someone was stalking him.

He wanted their protection. He didn't care where they hid him, as long as he was safe—even if it was in prison.

"So we felt bad for him and said we'd protect him. Ended up usin' our own money to get him put away for three years. Come to think of it, there was a report on that, wasn't there. Right, right. Neider." Finally remembering clearly, Victor shrugged and continued speaking. "And then we got him to leave since we shielded his ass for three whole years...I see."

"Mm...it looks like his release along with Ladd Russo was a complete

coincidence." Bill handed him another report.

Victor studied it for a few moments, but—

"Well, Neider's a nutter, anyway. Ain't worth our time right now."

And with that, he sighed deeply as if to say the matter was off the table for now. He returned his attention afresh to the items on the board under heading number 7.

"Alright. This here is just a bunch of New York delinquents, but there is one thing that's worth our attention."

"Just one?" questioned one recruit.

The delinquents were certainly connected with quite a few of the major incidents, but they didn't seem to have any other organizations backing them. In fact, they didn't seem to be involved with Huey's "experiments" at all.

"They're just under observation for now, so don't do anything yet. The problem is this girl here with them," Victor said with irritation as he posted another picture on the blackboard.

They had already seen the picture in their files, but when they saw it again the recruits, especially the younger men, inhaled sharply. Even though the picture was from a distance, the beautiful woman's glossy black hair and brilliant golden eyes were the unmistakable features of the source of all their troubles, Huey Laforet himself.

Chane Laforet.

Huey's daughter, as a long-time member of the Lemures, worked with unbelievable efficiency.

It had been four years since the Flying Pussyfoot.

Chane could cut another human to pieces without changing her expression a single bit, even as a young girl. Now an adult, the investigators were concerned that she had grown into a truly fearsome woman, but instead she was apparently working with a gang of delinquents. Everything was turning into one big question mark.

"There wasn't anything about her in the documents you gave us beforehand, sir..."

"And how did you get this picture, anyway?"

The recruits asked one on top of another. Victor pushed his glasses up and answered them.

"We thought she could be connected to another one of Huey's organizations, so we let her go. But now she's walking around in broad daylight with Huey on the loose, too! What the hell! What kind of stupid shit is this?!"

"Hm...honestly, you *have* lived for three centuries, sir. Three years probably seems pretty short to you. Kind of like your temper," Bill replied, a little sarcastically. "And as for the picture, that's a reprint. The gang took a picture together for themselves, and we just used the negatives."

Victor turned away from Bill and looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling and continued.

"Quite an age we live in now. Y'know, back when the photograph was first invented, nobody could have imagined something like a reprint. And it's all thanks to William Henry Fox Talbot. He created those negatives—the whole talbotype process, really, so we can get that exact same picture the same way. He's a great man. Be grateful to Talbot, all of you."

"Ah...I think you just happen to have the same last name, sir. You're not thinking that you're related to him, are you?"

Victor stubbornly ignored Bill's jab and returned the topic to Chane.

"Remember, Huey Laforet doesn't see his daughters as his children at all. They're tools at best, like flasks or burners for his goddamn experiments. If he needs Chane for whatever shit he's planning this time, he'll go get her back. If not, he wouldn't even send a postcard, much less go see her." Victor slammed his hand into the blackboard. "But she sees it totally different. Huey is everything, like her god or somethin'."

They had gathered only a little information about her beforehand, but according to their analysis so far it was safe to treat her as a religious fanatic. It was actually very strange that she had made no attempt to rescue Huey, but they eventually decided that she had been unable to determine the location in Alcatraz where Huey was being held, and hadn't been able to make any moves as a result.

"Actually, given what we know about Sham and Hilton, I'm surprised she didn't try to go after him. Maybe Huey's little minions aren't so invincible after all."

"I actually have one other concern, sir." Donald suddenly interrupted.

"What?"

Donald pointed at part of Chane's picture—specifically, a man's hand.

"There's a man standing next to her with his hand on her shoulder. We've seen him few times before with Chane, but we have no idea who he is."

"One of Huey's?"

"We can't rule that out, but we can't confirm it, either. All we know is that he usually goes with Chane whenever she goes into the city away from the gang. Of course we investigated him, but we couldn't turn up a single thing on his identity, except that the gang calls him 'Felix.' Even that's not saying much since it could be an alias. A few of my boys have tried tailing him more than once, but he always manages to shake us off. We don't even know where he lives."

"...I know your boys aren't morons, Donald, so I'm not gonna chew you out for being useless. If he managed to lose them more than once, he's probably some kinda pro." After thinking a moment, Victor muttered to himself. "If we're talking Felixes from New York...there's a 'generalist' named Felix..."

Edward reacted hopefully. "Do you know him, sir?"

"...No, not really. There's just a rumor floating around New York about a jack-of-all-trades who will help with anything from assassinations to smuggling people out of the country. In the past I've had some contact with him—well, 'her,' actually. The one I met was a woman using a false name. Obviously."

"Oh..."

"It's probably a coincidence. Sorry for getting off-topic." Victor turned his gaze to Chane's picture and observed the smiling man at her side, grinning brightly, as if the world itself was in the palm of his hand.

"Doesn't look like much, does he. He doesn't look like a Mafia goon, but...he could be a runner or something. He's got some relationship with Chane—we just need to look into what it is."

"Ah...maybe they're lovers?" Bill suggested. It certainly looked that way in the picture.

"No way in hell!" Victor snickered. "That woman is so insane her father is the only thing that matters, got it? To her, this loser is worthless garbage! Yeah, so it kinda looks like they're into each other, but she's just playing him for a fool. Usin' him as a cover. Honestly, if this blond...er, uh, what color *is* his hair?"

He couldn't quite tell, since the picture was black and white.

Donald had seen him in person before, albeit from afar, and answered. "Bright red,

sir. It's hard to miss."

"Right. Like I was saying, if this carrot-top is Chane's lover, I'll take a swan dive off the top of the FBI headquarters. Didn't some of you want to see how I come back to life?"

Victor rambled on, and Bill let out a sigh of disbelief.

"Ah...you shouldn't get carried away and make promises like that, sir. Hm...if anyone outside of this department sees you, there'll be a lot of trouble. Why don't you just treat us to a round of drinks instead?"

"Ok then, how about the finest La Tâche for everyone? Straight from Romanée-conti," Victor scoffed. But the next moment he reverted back to his normal, serious self and gave them all a warning.

"Just don't lie to me because you want some fine wine, boys."

Victor was flexible enough to joke around a little for the sake of clearing up some of the lingering tension, but, in the end, he had no idea what he was talking about.

It would have been impossible for him to notice on the black and white photograph, after all.

But at the moment that picture was taken, with the man's hand on her shoulder, Chane's cheeks had flushed a slight shade of pink.

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The next day New York Millionaire Row

In the middle of Manhattan, not far from Central Park, was a high-class neighborhood with a particularly good climate, where only the successful gathered. An uplifting breeze blew down the street lined with mansions and estates, but one of those grand houses echoed with a wail that could not have been more out of place.

"...sniff...hic... I-I'm trying to tell you...you c-can't drink it!"

The source of the cry was Jacuzzi Splot.

Even more inappropriate in such an elegant house, a number of rough voices replied to the tear-filled voice.

"Why the hell not."

"Yeah! That was a special gift!"

"From Miss Eve, no less!"

"Hyaha!" "Hyahha!"

Everyone had their own objection, and in the middle of it all, a tattooed boy cradled a crate of wine close to his chest, like a mother holding her child.

About three years and two months ago, he had been involved in a mysterious incident aboard the transcontinental express, the "Flying Pussyfoot," and had successfully carried out an impressive train robbery, even amidst the rampant violence and bloodshed between the terrorist group in black and the homicidal group in white.

Anyone who knew of his courage back then might think his tears now were a clever act, but they would be wrong. Jacuzzi was genuinely terrified at the angry outcry of his comrades.

It all started ten minutes ago.

Eve Genoard, the current head of the Genoard family who was allowing them to stay here, had shared three bottles of wine with Jacuzzi's gang, saying she had received it from a wealthy Italian who had been friends with the family since her grandfather's generation.

Jon had brought out the corkscrew so they could drink it on the spot, but Jacuzzi had snatched the box from him and scurried away to the nearest corner with it. "Ju-just wait a minute! Let's not drink it right now, okay? Alright?" he said, huddling over the box.

The rest of his gang wanted to enjoy the expensive wine, and began their verbal assault. It was only seconds before the young man who was their leader began to tear up.

"We understand. We understand, Jacuzzi, so just calm yourself down now. And that goes for the rest of you, too," said the bartender Jon, hushing the angry outcries of the delinquents. After making sure everyone was calm, he stepped towards Jacuzzi and sighed. "Well? Why can't we drink the wine, Jacuzzi? Do you want to wait until a

proper mealtime?"

"Uh, n-no, umm..."

"Then what are you planning to do with it?" Jon pressed.

"Umm...I was planning to find someone who would buy it. For a lot of money," Jacuzzi timidly replied.

The angry voices redoubled.

"WHAAAAAAAAAT?!!!"

"Hey, hey, I think there's something wrong with my ears."

"Yeah, it totally sounded like Jacuzzi said he wanted to *sell* that wine!"

"No way!"

"No way *in hell*, you mean!"

"You want to sell a gift from someone who's been so good to us?"

"Come on, we musta just heard wrong. Does our Jacuzzi look like such an ungrateful tightwad to you?"

"I'm disappointed, if he really does mean it!"

"More like despair."

"Looks like we've been thinking too much of Jacuzzi all this time."

"Hmm—? Jacuzzi, you've been quiet for a whole 43 seconds—!"

"Hyahha."

"Hyahaa."

Each member of the gang had some sort of rebuke. Jacuzzi trembled slightly for a moment before—

"I, I, I get it! I know! I'm the worst of the worst, and I know it more than anybody! Ugh...*hic*..."

Jacuzzi frequently launched such verbal attacks at himself when he was crying, but this time he was so emphatic that the other delinquents fell silent for a moment.

They knew Jacuzzi might lose it if they didn't.

When Jacuzzi was completely cornered, he was capable of committing the most outrageous acts, crying all the while. The last time Jacuzzi snapped, he had ransacked the Russo Family casinos, Tommy gun in hand and screaming like a distraught banshee.

Thanks to that whole incident, they had fled from Chicago and begun their new life here in New York.

"...We understand, alright? Let's just take it easy, Jacuzzi."

"Yeah, we were too hard on ya. We know you're not the worst of the worst. You're just...terrible, at best."

"That's not helping." "Just shut up!"

"Hyahha!" "Hya—"

Sweating a little, Jon sighed again in disbelief. His comrades never changed. "It's nothing to cry over, Jacuzzi. Just start over and tell us from the beginning."

Jon was calm because he knew Jacuzzi wasn't greedy, and he certainly wouldn't sell a gift. He figured everyone else understood this as well, but they wanted to drink the wine themselves, so their more sadistic tendencies prevailed.

Jacuzzi slowly came to the point, interrupted periodically by hiccups.

"Actually...*hic*...our, our money is...*hic*...is all gone."

Our money is gone.

It was so simple, and that's what made so disconcerting. The delinquents suddenly became restless.

Jon couldn't hide the cloud that darkened his face. "Gone? Did you spend it on something?" he asked.

"N-no! It's this depression...*hic*...everyone's having...having trouble finding work, you know? S-so naturally all of our odd jobs are going away, too..." Jacuzzi's tone gradually calmed, until at the end of his explanation he even hid the tightness in his voice. Still, he turned his face away from his friends when he got to the heart of the matter.

"...So this month...we're not...going to be able to pay the Martillos...*hic*..."

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The same mansion, second floor Bedroom

Nice could hear the angry shouts and crying downstairs from one of the number of guest rooms the girls were using as a bedroom. But instead of getting up, she just lay back down on the bed.

As soon as she did, a knock sounded on the door, and Nick's voice a moment after. "Hey, Boss, uh, I think they're making Jacuzzi cry again downstairs."

"Yes, that's certainly what it sounds like."

"And, it, uh...sounds like it has to do with money..." Nick sounded half unsure of the situation himself.

Nice's light smile held a hint of weariness. "I guess it's because we can't pay our tribute to the Martillos."

"Huh?! Wha—Boss, you can't just blow it off! This is serious!"

The gang was a band of freeloaders who were living in Eve Genoard's house. Jon and Fang were working as housekeepers for the Genoards, but of course their pay wouldn't be enough to take care of such a large number of people. So, they all did odd jobs here and there, some legal, some not, to earn enough pocket change to support everyone.

The problem was that they had been doing this on the Martillo Family and the Gandor Family's turf without their permission, and had unfortunately caught the attention of both. After one thing led to another, in the end, they ended up paying a fixed monthly tribute to the Martillo Family, but—

"Thanks to the Depression, we haven't been able to earn much money for a while, Nick. Ever since Prohibition was repealed we can't bootleg liquor anymore. Both sides of society can get hit by the Depression, I guess."

"I guess?! What are we going to do, Boss? If we can't pay them, that...that magician is going to do something, and..."

Nick was talking about an executive of the Martillo Family, Ronny Schiatto. Ever since the incident in 1933, they knew him as the scary magician, even though they couldn't put their fingers on exactly what it was about him that was so scary. They had managed to stay in total peace for now, but if they were ever unable to pay their tribute, they didn't know what would happen to them.

They were between a rock and a hard place, but Nice didn't look especially upset.

"It's alright. If it comes down to it, I'll think of something."

"Think of what?"

"...It would be tough, but I'm prepared to sell myself if necessary."

At that, Nick frantically burst into the room. "Wha—you can't do that! Anything but that, Boss! I mean I guess if you're into that sorta thing...but those guys go right for your throat, Boss! If you fall in with the Mob doin' stuff like that, you'll never be able to get out..."

"Hm? What are you talking about, Nick?"

"Huh? What are *you* talking about?" Nick raised an eyebrow, and Nice tilted her own head in confusion.

"I was just saying I would sell some of my handmade explosives..."

"Whaaa?! C-come on, you said you would sell yourself..."

"My explosives are a part of my own self...no, like my children!"

"Please don't talk about blowing up your children, Boss." Nick responded forcefully, and then started uneasily. "Uhhh...I have to ask. How much could selling your explosives really help? Would you have enough?" he asked hesitantly.

He knew that Nice normally carried all kinds of explosives on her person, but it was worth peanuts at best. He had an idea as to the answer, though, and an uneasy feeling stirred in his chest, but he had to know.

Hold on, come to think of it, the closet in this room is really big,... and Nice doesn't seem like the type to collect so many clothes....no. No way. There's no way... Nick stared at the closet uncomfortably.

Nice got up from the bed, eyes sparkling, and yanked the sheets, along with the thin mattress pad, off the bed.

"Gyaaa!!" Nick's instincts took over as he let out a yell and threw himself towards

the wall.

Under the bed was a crowded pile of all kinds of explosives.

"Wha...wh-wh-what is all this, Nice?!"

Nice looked away sadly and answered, half to herself. "...I'm sorry, Nick...storing them this way will damage the powder, but...I...I couldn't resist the temptation. I just wanted to sleep with them..."

"No! *How* you're storing them is not the problem here! It's *where*!" Nick was so confused he was barely holding onto reason. "You...you're unbelievable, Boss. I was positive they were just in the closet...!"

"Of course I can't leave them there. Chaini, Melody, Rail, and Chane all put their clothes there. Plus, closets aren't for blowing up, Nick, they're for holding clothes."

"I know that!" Nick dropped his face in his hands and continued his attempts to apply common sense to the situation. "And if a fire broke out in here, it would blow everything to smithereens in 5 seconds flat! Including you! You'd be the first to go!"

"My children...would blow me up...?" Imagining the moment of her death, Nice looked down and blushed, ever so slightly.

"The hell are you blushing for, Boss?!"

At her core, Nice Holystone was a very normal girl.

For the most part, she had the most common sense of the gang. Normally she ended up as the voice of reason calming her friends when they ran rampant and Jacuzzi when he was flustered.

But despite this, she had a side to her that was the most logic-defying of anyone in the gang. Specifically when it came to explosives.

They were a tool created by humans for absolute destruction.

Nice was a natural-born bomb freak, who found bliss in the shock, the light, the sound, even the acrid chemical smell of an explosion. It was safe to say she had a few screws loose when it came to anything bomb-related.

Nick had known Nice for many years, so he should understand her unique preferences better than anyone (except her childhood friend Jacuzzi), but it was still impossible for him to stay calm at the mountain of bombs before him.

"This is crazy...I can't believe you still have so many of those things! Does Jacuzzi know about this?"

"If he did, he wouldn't be in this house right now."

"I don't really want to be here either, to be fair." Nick had finally calmed down a little.

Nice replaced the mattress pad and asked Nick a question. "By the way, what was the matter, Nick? Was there something you needed to tell me? I don't think you would come all the way up here just to tell me Jacuzzi is crying again."

"Huh? Oh, right! That's the thing, Boss! You need to stop Jack!"

"What's wrong with Jack?"

Jack had been in the gang a long time as well, about as long as Nick.

What in the world was he going to do? Before Nice could ask further, Nick answered.

"He's going to get himself killed, that's what!"

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Some minutes later Another room in the Genoard manor

"You can't stop me. I'm serious." Jack didn't turn around to face his friends or break the rhythmic *thud-thud-thud* of blows landing on the punching bag dangling from the ceiling. (It was stuffed with cloth, although in Japan most punching bags were filled with sand. That's why the Japanese adopted the word "sandbags" instead.)

"Are you going to do this no matter what, Jack?" Nice asked gravely.

Jack didn't turn around. "Yeah. I can't rest until I beat that bastard Ladd Russo to a pulp."

Ladd Russo had a certain connection to this band of misfits.

Of course, since they were enemies of the Russo Family, they were connected from the beginning, but thanks to the incident on the Flying Pussyfoot, another kind of connection had been formed between them.

When Jack had been taken hostage by the "orchestra" in black suits, Ladd Russo had beaten him within an inch of his life on a whim. Jack should have died, and had only survived because of a doctor who had been aboard as well.

Jacuzzi had officially declared war on Ladd when he told him "I'll make sure you pay for this," but before he could make good on his promise, Ladd and all of his "white suits" had mysteriously disappeared from the train.

They all thought the Rail Tracer had taken care of the white suits, but things had gotten even weirder lately.

"I know how you feel, but Graham said he would mediate between us..."

Graham Specter was like a little brother to Ladd. He had taken a liking to Jacuzzi's gang and had been looking after them here and there when he could. According to him, Ladd had been taken in by the police those three years ago, and his prison sentence ended today. Graham had gone along with Ladd's fiancé to pick him up. They were probably coming back from New Jersey together as they spoke.

Graham knew all about the issues between the Russos and Jacuzzi's gang, so he had offered to serve as a mediator in typical Graham fashion: "Alright, I understand! I'll introduce you to Boss Ladd as friends of mine! Don't worry, Boss Ladd won't kill anyone he's decided is a friend. Usually. But it can't do any harm to ask, right?"

But no matter how hard he tried, Jack couldn't accept this arrangement.

"I don't care how much Graham likes him, that's that and this is this! He tried to *kill me*, and don't you think I've forgotten that for an instant!" Jack was beginning to lose his temper.

Nice continued. "Of course I understand how you feel, Jack. To be honest, I can't stand the thought of having anything to do with someone like that, even if Graham is mediating for us."

"Then why are you tryin' to stop me?"

"I told you, I hate having *anything* to do with him. As a friend or as an enemy."

Nice's logic was sound. Jack couldn't even grunt in disapproval and drove his fist into the punching bag. "...You and Jacuzzi can stay out of it, then. Nick and I will take care of it."

"Don't drag me into this!"

"You were there, too, ya know, but you got away without a scratch!"

"Don't tell me you're just jealous!"

Jack smiled. "I'm kidding. I'll do it on my own."

"What do you mean 'kidding'?...Ha, no, no, no, come on, Jack, you might as well say you're kidding about your revenge on Ladd! There's no way you can beat that crazy bastard. You know that! Right?"

It was true. From the first punch, Jack couldn't lay a finger on Ladd.

Even more true, it didn't matter how much he trained, how many years. Victory would never be certain for someone starting virtually from scratch. And Jack hadn't even been training for years. He had only started with the punching back when he heard Ladd Russo was going to be released—only a few days ago.

"Whether I *can* win or not ain't the point. What about my pride?! If I can't get that back, I can't fight again."

"What, so now you're a prizefighter all of a sudden? You can brag all you want, but I don't care. Just say you're taking revenge on a crazy murderer who came by and socked you before we robbed the train. Guess that doesn't sound as good, but..."

"Sh-shut up!"

Jack had always been aggressive and short-tempered. Nick's version of events was much closer to what Jack was actually like, but it was for that very reason that Jack couldn't let it slide.

"Nick, go call Jacuzzi, Donny, Jon, and Fang."

"Hm? Sure." Nick dashed out of the room.

Jack watched him go and furrowed his eyebrows.

"H-hey, what is this. Don't tell me you're calling in the big guns to tie me up or somethin'."

"If we were going to do that, I wouldn't call Jacuzzi. He wouldn't be much help." Nice said casually. She sighed and continued. "They're the ones who were on the train with us. I wanted to call Chane, too, but it looks like her relationship with Ladd is pretty complicated."

Nice remembered the fierce battle between Chane and Ladd on the roof of the train. She hadn't dared to ask Chane what the connection was between them, but she knew that Chane had been acting strange from the moment she had mentioned Ladd's name a few days ago.

Jack isn't the only one. I need to talk to Chane after this, too....And before Graham comes back with Ladd, Nice decided. She continued talking to Jack. "Okay? We were all on that train, so we're all in this together. That doesn't change just because we're not there anymore."

"..."

"If you're going to take your revenge no matter what, we'll help you. Maybe we'll all go down in the attempt. We'll probably destroy Graham and Jacuzzi's friendship."

"W-well, like I said, this is my business, so..." Jack looked away and replied hesitantly, but Nice cut him off and said what he really wanted to say.

"You want us to leave you alone? Me, everyone? And Jacuzzi, of course."

"Uh..." Jack looked down awkwardly as he thought of their leader.

"He'll be against it from the beginning, but Jacuzzi would end up joining you in your revenge no matter what. Even if it's ungracious towards Graham. And even if his own life is in danger."

"So what are you gonna do?"

"I want us to discuss what we're going to do together, as the ones on that train."

"...That's dirty, Boss. You're just gonna talk me into bringing you along, aren't you?"

Jack insulted her lightly, and smacked the punching bag.

At some point, Nice had pulled out a bomb and was playing with it with one hand, and smiled warmly.

"Don't worry, Jack. If Ladd decides to ignore Graham and comes after us, I'll be the first to blow him sky-high." Her warm smile was also a little dark. Nice certainly wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty for her friends, but she was also a bomb addict who looked forward to any chance she got to blow something up.

Jack knew this and muttered wryly. "That makes me worry even more..."

Nice noticed the rage was little by little draining from Jack's face, and thought with relief that if he could just talk to Jacuzzi everything would be alright, but just then Nick returned to the room with another problem.

"They said Jacuzzi went out with Rail, Boss."

"He left? Where?"

Jacuzzi had been crying until a moment ago. Where could he possibly have gone?

"That's the thing. Isaac and Miria came by, it sounds like." Nick's expression was a mix of confusion and worry. "They said they were going to see someone named Molsa to get a job or something like that...and I know I've heard that name before. You remember, Boss?"

Nice stiffened and dropped the bomb she had been holding.

"Ack!" Jack caught the bomb right before it hit the ground.

"That's..."

Nice was sweating nervously as she answered Nick's question.

"That's the name of the Martillo Family's boss...isn't it...?"

<=>

**A few minutes ago
The Genoard Manor
Entryway**

"Jacuzzi, my boy! How've ya been? Why are you crying?"

"Sparrows' tears! Even ogres cry!"⁴

The pair that had appeared in the doorway were Jacuzzi's friends Isaac and Miria.

"By the way, Miria, do you know why sparrows and ogres cry?"

"Maybe they're meeting their long-lost children!"

"I see! So sparrows and ogres are related! Of course, I heard that somewhere in the far reaches of the East a black kite gave birth to a hawk...so it wouldn't be that strange for a sparrow to give birth to an ogre. It's great that they can see each other again." Isaac nodded in approval of his own analysis, and asked the haggard Jacuzzi.

"So, Jacuzzi, who were you reunited with?"

⁴ These are both Japanese sayings, I believe.

"Huh? Um, I-I guess I'm planning to see someone tomorrow...I guess..."

If they did see Ladd on the day of his release, and if Jack insisted on having his revenge, of course Jacuzzi would be there to help him. And if they didn't see Ladd, they wouldn't.

Jacuzzi sniffed. *I told someone like that that I'd make him pay...Wha-what do I do if he remembers...* he thought uneasily, looking like he was going to cry again.

Isaac and Miria peered at his expression and gave a big nod.

"You must be really happy to see him again, if you're shedding tears of joy. Excellent!"

"Celebrations all around!"

"Let it all out!"

"Like money falling from the sky! Rolling the dough!"

Isaac and Miria rambled cheerfully, completely unaware of Jacuzzi's feelings.

"I think you mean 'rolling *in* the dough'...and, a-anyway, I'm sorry Isaac, Miria, but we don't have any money left..."

Jacuzzi sensed that if he didn't say anything they would start planning a party, so he decided to share his problem straight out.

"What, you don't have money? Perfect! We don't either!"

"A perfect match!"

"It's about as far from perfect as you can get..." Jacuzzi sighed deeply, almost wishing he could be that oblivious sometimes as he remembered the mess he was in. "But I don't know what to do...At this rate, I really won't have any money to pay the Martillo Family..."

Jacuzzi was only mumbling for his own benefit, but Isaac and Miria heard him.

"Martillo Family? Did you borrow money from the Martillos, Jacuzzi?"

"Huh? Ah, n-no...w-well, kinda. I guess." Jacuzzi didn't want to get started on the tribute and just accepted their version of the story.

"I see, I see," Isaac laughed. "We came to see if you had any jobs to give us, but

you're in the same boat as us...!"

"Rampant unemployment! The New Deal!"

"The New Deal must be having a hard time finding work, too!" It was unclear whether or not they actually understood what the New Deal even was. Regardless, after a moment of silence the couple's faces suddenly brightened again and clapped their arms around Jacuzzi.

"Well, then, come with us!"

"Huh? Uh, what do you mean? Go where?"

Jacuzzi stared blankly as they dragged him along, but Isaac just raised his voice confidently.



"We know a restaurant owner named Molsa! That kind old man is also a member of the Martillos, so we'll just ask him to give you more time for your debt!"

"He might even just forgive it for you!"

"And if he does that, he might give us a job, too!"

"Wow! We'll become rich!"

Isaac and Miria continued chattering as they dragged Jacuzzi out the door.

What?! One of the Martillos?! W-wait, didn't Isaac and Miria know Ronnie, too...?

"B-but Isaac! If you do that, then I'll just cause trouble for you, won't I? Even if you do know him, he might get mad at you if you take me along to talk about money..."

It was only natural for Jacuzzi to voice his concerns, but Isaac and Miria just looked at each other, mystified. "Why's that? If you can get a job to work off your debt, Molsa will be happy, too, won't he?"

"Happily ever after! With money!"

Isaac was serious, without a trace of uneasiness, and Miria was the same as always.

"B...but..." Jacuzzi was over a barrel, but—

"It's fine, Jacuzzi. It's a special opportunity to talk to him!" said a child's high-pitched voice.

It was a boy who looked in his early teens, his body covered in countless stitches and scars from his face to the tips of his toes. It looked like someone had used his body as a canvas for some grotesque picture. But although the child looked like a young boy at first glance, *she* looked at Jacuzzi innocently.

Her lips were pulled up into a smile by the scars, but her eyes were expressionless.

"Rail? Y-yeah, maybe it'll turn out that way, but..."

"You're the only one who's nervous here, Jacuzzi....Guess that means I have to go with you." Rail trotted along behind Jacuzzi without revealing a hint of her actual feelings.

"Hey, hey, if Rail's coming, I can call Nice and we can all go together..." one of the boys said, but Rail shook her head.

"If we all go, they'll have their guard up. He'll be nice to a kid like me right? Especially one all scarred up like me! Haha!"

<=>

20 minutes later

A room in the restaurant and bar "Alveare"

"He...he-he-he-helloni-ni-ni...nice to me, me-me-meet you sir...hic"

Jacuzzi tried to introduce himself, but he started hyperventilating as soon as he began.

The man before him replied with absolute calm. "...Are you alright, son?"

"Y, ye-ye-yessir!" Jacuzzi was shaking and his teeth were chattering. In contrast, the man on either side of the round table in the middle of the room radiated an even deeper sense of calm. That perfectly composed, imperturbable attitude showed that he was the master of this room, and the king of this building.

The man was likely somewhere in his 50s, head covered in slightly greying hair. He "hmm"d and nodded, then addressed Isaac and Miria next to the shaking Jacuzzi.

"Isaac. It sounds like you have something to discuss with me, but who is this young man?"

"Oh, this is our friend Jacuzzi! From what I understand, he borrowed some money from one of the Martillos, but doesn't have enough to pay it back!"

"Bankrupt! Vanished like magic!"

"So, we'd like you to help him find a job! And us, too!"

His answer was extremely simple.

It was slightly different than the story Jacuzzi had told them earlier, but just hearing it made Jacuzzi's tattooed face blanch more than it ever had before.

"I see, so it's a problem of money..." The man's voice, aged like fine wine, was filled with gravity. He laced his fingers together and rested his arms on the table.

"Before we get down to business, I should introduce myself. I am Molsa Martillo."

A thrill ran down Jacuzzi's spine at the name.

Th-that's right! I remember now! Why did I have to remember now! Mo-Molsa is the name of the Martillo family don, isn't it? Ho-how do Isaac and Miria know someone so important?

Oh, what does it matter? I-I'm going to die anyway, aren't I? Th-they made Rail wait outside, so...

S-somebody help meee!

He fought the urge to faint with what little strength of will he had, and spoke in a barely audible whisper.

"I'm Ja...Jacuzzi Splot."

"I see. Nice to meet you, Jacuzzi. Isaac and Miria have done a lot for my boy Firo, so any friend of theirs is a friend of the Martillos."

"O-oh."

What does he mean "done a lot for"? What in the world have they been up to? Jacuzzi wondered.

Molsa's voice brought him back to reality.

"But I can't condone failing to pay back money you owe. Who did you borrow it from?" He spoke calmly, but the whole room could feel the weight of his voice.

The man standing behind Molsa spoke. He was responsible for half of Jacuzzi's terror: Ronnie Schiatto.

"Sir. If I may speak, he is referring to me."

"You, Ronnie?"

"He is the leader of a gang of delinquents working on our turf. Two years ago, we agreed that they would pay a fixed sum as tribute every month, but...this is the Depression, after all. Earning money is more difficult now, so this is likely why they cannot pay." He laid out the situation plainly.

Jacuzzi hung his head in apology.

Molsa answered, now grasping the situation. "I see. And so now you're looking for work."

Ronnie lowered his eyes. "I'm very sorry, sir, to bother you with the dirty details of something that was my responsibility."

Aaaaaaaaah, he's apologizing?! Ronnie, that terrifying monster is apologizing?! I, I-I knew it! Molsa is even worse!

"Don't say that, Ronnie. Getting dirty is our job. Just seeing the faces of the kids on the streets is a valuable experience, I think."

"If you say so, sir." Ronnie took a step back.

Molsa turned his attention back to Jacuzzi. "Well, then...I hope you aren't thinking we can just let a tribute slide because times are hard, Jacuzzi Splot."

"Eep...y-yessir!"

"Then, what are you planning to do? Will you have one of yours settle—"

"I'll settle it." The boy who had been crying until now suddenly interrupted Molsa and answered him without any hesitation. "I will take full responsibility. I'll earn all of it so please just...don't hurt my friends...please...and if, if you can manage it, I'd rather not, uh...die...um..."

The tears came back during the second half of his speech, but Molsa sensed for a moment the strength in Jacuzzi's eyes. "Hmm..."

His expression changed a little, and he looked at Jacuzzi with renewed interest.

Isaac and Miria watched the exchange between the two and whispered among themselves.

"This looks more complicated than we thought, Miria."

"Politics, huh!"

Molsa heard their conversation. His expression lightened, looking as if he were enjoying himself.

"You're right, it is a political issue. Jacuzzi here might become a very fine statesman in the future."

"Wha—?!" At the sudden change in topic, Jacuzzi let out a cry of surprise and glanced around wildly.

Isaac and Miria agreed.

"Oh, I see! That would be fantastic! Jacuzzi has so many friends he might even become President!"

"Like Abraham Lincoln! Or James Garfield! Or William McKinley!"

"I, I'm not...I mean, um...haha..." The light conversation cleared the tension in the air, and Jacuzzi began to relax unconsciously as it appeared that there was no ill will towards him. At least, until Ronnie spoke.

"...All of those Presidents were assassinated."

Thanks to Ronnie's input, Jacuzzi paled and went right back to trembling.

But Molsa responded peacefully. "Don't worry. Since you pay a tribute to us, you're under our patronage. We have a responsibility to protect you, and that includes from the Depression."

"Huh? Th-then..."

"I'll give you all a job. If you do it well, it will cover your tribute for half a year."

"R-really? Thank you so much, sir!" Jacuzzi thanked him frantically, then suddenly became nervous.

W-wait. What kind of job could I do for a gang that would earn that much money? N-no...do they want me to shoot somebody...or bury bodies...or assassinate someone?!

The more he thought about it the more terrible the potential jobs became.

Sensing his uneasiness, Molsa smiled and continued. "Relax, son. We may be criminals, but we *camorristi* have our standards. We won't make anyone outside the Family do anything unreasonable...although you could say your job is a little unusual."

"What will you have them do, Boss?" Ronnie asked.

Molsa replied with the mischievous smile of a much younger man. "We have a special event coming up next week, don't we?"

"...I see. So they'll help with that?" Ronnie nodded, satisfied by the mere mention of this "event."

Jacuzzi was left completely in the dark. His eyes wandered around the room.

"Do you know the rules of poker, Jacuzzi Splot?" Ronnie asked.

"Huh? Um, well...sometimes we play cards together..."

"Do you have any experience with a roulette? Craps? Blackjack? What about slots?"

"U-um...no...barely. Casinos are kinda scary, so..."

"Hm...no matter. How's your luck?"

"Bad...I think my luck is actually pretty horrible...ah, but...I think bad luck is stronger anyway, so..."

"Do you own any formal wear, like tuxedos or dresses? Not just you, anyone in your gang."

"I-if we had any of that, we would have sold it by now..."

"Hm...then I'll tailor some for you."

Once Ronnie had finished drilling Jacuzzi, he paused for a moment, then nodded towards Molsa.

"Well, they should do. It's excellent that they aren't members of the Family."

"But, if we can't trust them, then they aren't fit for the task."

"Do you trust them, sir?"

"Only this young man here. Although if you look at the leader, you can learn a lot about his companions."

Jacuzzi listened silently, now completely lost. Finally, he couldn't stand it anymore and asked timidly.

"U-um...what do you want us to do?"

"Something very easy." Molsa's answer was quite simple.

"I want you to gamble."

<=>

A few minutes earlier
Alveare
A seat at the counter

During the days of Prohibition, Alveare had been a speakeasy specializing in honey-flavored liquor, and even after the law was repealed the concept remained the same. The only difference was that their main attraction was now out in the open.

The sweet smell of honey lingered in the air, seeping into the large tables and floor. Pale white incandescent lights shined on the golden honey used in the food,

making the large room look like the glittering, gold-filled hold of a pirate ship.

Some customers felt a little ill from the thick, sweet smell, but most just tasted the smell as part of the food itself.

In the midst of the honey-laden atmosphere, a proper-seeming young woman sat at the restaurant's counter. Ennis had been helping carry some things in at the back of the restaurant.

At this point in America's history, it was unusual for a woman to wear a man's suit, but thanks to her rather androgynous beauty it didn't make people particularly uncomfortable.

Everyone in the restaurant seemed to tacitly understand that the seats at the counter were for those directly related with the Martillo Family, as there were very few regular customers around her.

But, at that moment, Ennis was a little perplexed, as she noticed an unfamiliar child looking at her.

He looked about the same age as Czes, sitting quietly next to her.

His face and hands were covered with scars, but his face appeared calm and amicable enough.

This boy...no, I think it's a girl, actually...

At first, Ennis was interested in the child's gender, but after a bit she began to wonder why the girl was staring at them so intensely.

At first she thought it might be her unusual clothing, but the girl seemed more interested in Ennis herself than her clothing. She didn't seem like she was saving the seats at the bar, and she didn't look like she would be involved with the Martillos, either.

Ennis wasn't sure how to deal with the gaze boring into her. She took a sip of her herbal tea, still confused, when the girl suddenly spoke.

"Hey, miss. Your name isn't Ennis, is it?"

"It is, but...who are...?" Ennis turned around, head tilted to the side, and met the girl's eyes.

The girl didn't answer the question, just searched Ennis' face, and then twisted her lips into a provoking smirk.

"Hmm...you're different than I was expecting."

"I'm sorry?"

"I thought you'd look a little rougher, like old man Szilard! Ahaha!"

"...!"

Szilard.

The moment the girl said that name, a chill ran down Ennis' spine.

And another thrill of nervousness ran through her whole body at the girl herself.

If this girl had something to do with Szilard Quates, she had probably come with some sort of purpose in mind. In the worst case scenario, the girl had come to "devour" her. Ennis tensed her muscles to jump back at any time.

But even though Ennis was on edge, the girl smiled and muttered.

"Oh, come on, you're making me feel bad. Don't look so scared. I'm a homunculus, same as you. We're on the same side."

Ennis was the only one who managed to hear the words, which struck her heart again with a powerful shock.

"...!"

"Although, I'm...we're a little different from you. We're incomplete. ...Haha!"

"You..."

"I heard you were somewhere with the Martillo Family. I never thought I'd meet you somewhere like this. Oh, and I'm Rail. Nice to meet you."

The tension between the two was only natural.

The customers around them didn't notice the strain, and the lively atmosphere continued noisily as ever. In fact, Ennis and Rail didn't notice at all when a new pair entered the restaurant.

"Excuse me."

One of the newcomers called out to Sena behind the bar. This time it was Rail's turn to freeze.

"I heard I could come here to talk with someone from the Martillo Family?"

Ennis, troubled at the sudden lack of expression on Rail's face, turned towards the source of the voice.

He was young, about a year or two older than Rail.

Ennis was going to observe Rail a little more, but Rail had already completely lost interest and turned slowly away.

"Why...why are you here?" Rail asked from the side.

The newcomer turned towards Rail and blinked a few times before answering blandly.

"Oh, it's you, Rail."

Rail ground her teeth in frustration, looking like she was going to let her true feelings be known, but she froze completely when she saw the man who entered the store behind the young boy.

And Rail wasn't the only one. The cheerful atmosphere throughout the entire restaurant evaporated instantly.

A sonorous voice rang out, carrying words of admiration.

"My, this shop is spectacular! Marvelous, even, or should I say peerless! Yes, Lady Luck smiles on me today!" the man declared dramatically, as if he were on stage. Rail stiffened. "Why do I say this? The sweet scent of honey, naturally! That sweetness beyond compare, born of nature itself! Everyone, are you grateful for the bees who brought such a gift to you? I certainly am, and I'll be sure to thank them from now on!"

The man's teeth were all sharpened into sharp canines, like the maw of a dolphin, while the whites of his eyes were stained a crimson red.

The man behind the boy Ricardo was obviously unusual. Every single one of the customers froze to stare at him. Ennis recognized the man and stiffened as well.

Is that...the man from two years ago...?

Remembering the incident at the Mist Wall, she thought he might have come to harm the patrons of Alveare. She stood up from her seat. But the instant before she charged forward, a voice from below held her back.

"Chris..." The voice was filled with all kinds of emotion, mixed with

dismay. "Christopher..."

The air of composure Rail had when she was talking with Ennis was completely gone. From the moment she saw the man's face, Rail had dropped her façade, and her eyes were unmistakeably filling with tears.

Seeing those simple tears, Ennis could only be more confused.

Meanwhile In the room

"Gamble...? Um...what do you mean?" Jacuzzi asked nervously.

Molsa smiled. "Hm, well, as for the details...who should I have explain it to you...?"

Molsa thought for a moment, then gave a name. "There's a man in our family named Firo Prochainezo. He's a few years older than you."

"O-oh..."

During the Mist Wall incident, Jacuzzi had actually met Firo in the restaurant at the top of the building, although they hadn't talked to each other or even said their own names. Jacuzzi had no memory of him, but the name rang a bell.

Come to think of it...Isaac and Miria talk about someone named Firo sometimes, too...
Jacuzzi wasn't able to ask Isaac next to him about it, however, and Molsa continued.

"Right now, he's going to a gambling party that will be held in a certain place, but...to put it briefly, I want you to help him."

"...Help him how?"

Perhaps as a dealer? But Jacuzzi couldn't even shuffle cards reliably, much less wield them with the skill of a dealer.

P-plus...what if someone loses and accuses me of cheating and makes a big fuss...?

Jacuzzi imagined a big man like Donny with his hands around his throat. The blood drained from his face, and he felt weak all over.

"It's nothing terrifying, if that's what you're thinking. You, or rather, you and your friends, will just enjoy yourselves gambling. Of course, gambling is illegal, so there is a risk of getting arrested if the police show up."

"..."

The more he says, the less I understand. How is having fun and gambling a job?

He wanted to know more before he agreed to take this job.

Jacuzzi opened to ask Molsa more before he met this Firo, whoever he was, but he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Excuse us."

"We have something to tell the *capo societa*."

Two men entered, one fat and one unusually skinny.

"What's the matter?" the boss asked calmly.

"Well, we have a coupla unusual customers, boss," answered the skinny one. "Said they're Mafia, but they got chased out of their home turf somewhere else, and now they want us to take 'em in..."

"A tiny camorra like us?" Molsa furrowed his eyebrows.

The Martillo Family was unusual for their era, a small organization with only a little bit of territory, not part of any of the major Families. If someone wanted to join an organization like theirs, perhaps they were greatly indebted to the Martillo Family specifically. On the other hand, they could be also be aiming for something higher, trying to infiltrate them and steal their territory from within.

"Who is he, and where is he from? Did he say why he's here in New York?"

Why had they been chased out of their previous territory to begin with? If they were enemies with a larger Family, the Martillos had no choice but to proceed with caution. To accept a new member was to take on any ties, debts, or enemies they may already have had, after all.

"Uh, well...it's a little screwy, Boss... y'see, he says he's the don of the Russo Family."

"Ru-Russo?!" Jacuzzi screeched.

The boss of the Russo Family was Placido Russo, who had put a bounty on Jacuzzi's head. He was also the boss of the Family that had killed a number of Jacuzzi's friends. He was seized by an instinctive urge to make a break for it, but a deeper urge rising from the depths of his heart held him in place—the urge to end it all right here and now. The two conflicting impulses threatened to crush him with the overwhelming pressure of indecision.

Molsa didn't know the relationship between Jacuzzi's gang and the Russos, but he certainly noticed Jacuzzi's cry and subsequent facial expression. He sighed deeply, and spoke to his young dependent.

"Don't worry, I won't let anything happen to you." He glanced at Ronnie.

As if that was all he needed, Ronnie answered respectfully. "Understood, sir."

After hearing the *chiamatore's* response, Molsa gave his orders to the other two camorristi. "Bring them in. I'll let him bring one person as a bodyguard, but take their weapons away outside."

"Yessir! And uh, well, I don't think you'll have to worry about the numbers."

"What do you mean?"

"Y'see, there's only two of 'em to start with."

Isaac and Miria had left after that, saying they would wait outside while the new customer talked to Molsa, but Jacuzzi remained inside. He had decided it would be better to face him here rather than run into him in the hall unprepared. The wait was only a minute, but to him it felt like a long, long hour of preparation to meet his own death.

But when Jacuzzi saw the Russo Family boss who appeared in the room, he could only stare blankly, eyes wide. Molsa also appeared a little surprised at the unexpected appearance of the boss.

"Uh...huh? I feel like I've seen you..."

Jacuzzi had seen the boy about two months ago, but thanks to all of the other memories from that time he had forgotten most of the details.

The boy ignored Jacuzzi and nodded respectfully toward Molsa in the center of the room.

"Thank you for allowing me to meet with you, Mr. Martillo." Standing in the doorway was a pretty young boy, who looked only in his early teens. However, he spoke like an adult and looked at Molsa with eyes that were straightforward and honest. "...I am Ricardo Russo, entrusted with the Russo Family."

"...I see. I apologize. I was a little surprised, but I can tell from how you talk and your eyes that this is no prank." After a slight pause, Molsa gave a gentle apology and slowly asked the obvious. "The Russo Family...I remember. At the end of last year, I

heard on the radio...back then, the boss was Placido Russo, am I right?"

At the end of last year, Placido's various crimes had caught up with him, and he had finally disappeared from Chicago entirely.

The surrounding organizations gathered like a school of sharks waiting for a seal to fall into the water. It was only a matter of weeks before they had taken all of the Russo's territory, or so the rumors went. Molsa's doubt was only natural.

Ricardo answered him smoothly. "My grandfather Placido completely abandoned all of his responsibilities when he disappeared. He is likely no longer alive. Even if he were, it is impossible for him to continue as the don of this Family. My parents passed away some years ago as well, so as the next direct descendent, I am his successor." Ricardo coolly explained his position, then glanced down a little and continued somewhat self-deprecatingly. "Although, I am also officially confirming that the Russo Family has been destroyed."

"I see...I haven't met them in person before, but I wish your family the best of luck in the next life."

"...Thank you, sir. The organization may have been destroyed, but for the sake of the few remaining members of my 'family,' I would be very happy if you would graciously sympathize with us as ones seeking only to survive, although I am well aware how shameful it is to ask for charity."

"You're very direct, aren't you. But, why us? If you're looking for a job, it would be better to go see a family like the Runoratas." Molsa's misgivings were a matter of course.

Ricardo answered without hesitation. "A bigger organization would just treat us like garbage and end it there. However, the Martillo Family has maintained its independence, small as it is. My hope is that I can find the key to rebuilding the Russo Family here."

"...You're quite direct. In other words, you're planning join us to earn money to survive, but also steal our expertise?"

"Yes. If you only treat us as delinquents on your turf, that will be enough. If you decide it's not worth it to let the Russos come back...well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Ricardo looked as if he had already considered the long-term ramifications of his plan. Molsa looked at him and replied, looking a little sad. "What a time we live in. A young man like you shouldn't have those eyes, not yet. If you do undertake jobs for us, you can't accept death so easily. That will only cause trouble for us."

Half of Molsa's words were for Ricardo, who had lost his childlike innocence, but the other half was nothing other than a declaration of intent to allow Ricardo to work for them.

Ricardo silently took these words in and finally responded slowly. "Honestly, I had a sense that you would laugh at me the moment you saw my face. If you thought it was just a childish prank, that's as far as it would go. But, Mr. Martillo, you listened to me as an equal. Just for that, I'm extremely grateful that I was able to meet you."

"You overestimate me. When you reach my age, you don't care as much about the difference between children and adults. But, are you sure this is where you want to be? There's the Gandor Family, too. They're very similar to us, and Keith Gandor is a wise man. I guarantee he won't make light of you as a child."

Actually, it might be easier for them to enter a mafia like the Gandor Family rather than a camorra, which had a different way of doing business.

But Ricardo shook his head. "...Actually, I have one more reason for choosing this Family in particular."

"Oh?"

"I only found out a few days ago, but...my bodyguard said he had a friend in the Martillo Family," Ricardo said, glancing behind him.

Together with that, Molsa and Jacuzzi turned their attention towards the shadow in the doorway.

"Huh...?" Jacuzzi squeaked.

He remembered the smiling man in the corridor perfectly, with his red eyes, teeth like a killer whale and archaic manner of dress that made him look for all the world like a vampire from centuries ago.

Jacuzzi had met him more than once—on the top floor of New York's Mist Wall, in a restaurant in some corner of Chicago, and on the roof of the Nebula building—and in every one of those places, the man radiated a single feeling, summed up in a single word.

Danger.

"Hello, hello. I'm Christopher, Ricardo's best friend and bodyguard."

"Don't speak without permission," Ricardo said coldly, then turned to Molsa.

"I apologize. As you may be able to see, he has an unusual way of thinking...However,

I guarantee that he's extremely useful when it comes to anything violent."

"I see. Earlier when I glanced out at the hall I thought I was getting old and seeing ghosts...Well, I'm relieved that he's at least human," Molsa said with a shrug, apparently joking. He looked at the incredibly strange-looking Christopher, and asked. "So, who is your friend in the Martillo Family?"

Christopher smiled innocently, and looked like he was enjoying himself as he answered. "Firo...Firo Prochainezo. He's the best of best friends, and a great man! He taught me the ways of humanity, and how to be one with nature!"

Wait, did he say "Firo"? The Firo I'm going to meet now?

Jacuzzi was even more confused at hearing the name he had just now learned.

A puzzling part-time job where all he knew was that he was supposed to gamble.

The appearance of the Russo Family, and the fact that the boss of said Russos had suddenly become a child.

The appearance of Christopher.

So many things had happened in such a short time. Jacuzzi began shaking as he thought.

Huh? This is so strange... Had he somehow fallen asleep when he entered the room? Was he dreaming right now? Of course, it wasn't so much a dream as a nightmare.

I just wanted to earn some money... He never thought he would fall into so much trouble just trying to earn a living. A cold sweat broke out as he tried to organize the flood of information, but he couldn't make heads or tails of any of it.

The man at the top of the Martillo Family rubbed his chin as if he were thoroughly enjoying this. "Hmm...Firo. He's more popular than I thought." He smiled youthfully and addressed Ricardo. "This is perfect. If that's the case, I'll have you help Firo, too."

Aaawawawawait! Hold on! I'm going to work with Christopher?! B-but, he killed people on the roof back then... Ah, but he was nicer in the restaurant in Chicago... If only I could talk to Tim...

All kinds of information was spinning in Jacuzzi's head, but in the end it all boiled down to intuition: he was way in over his head, and he was going to be in a lot of trouble soon.

He even thought about just making a break for it, but—

"Ronnie."

"Yes, sir."

"Since you've heard the whole story, bring them along with Jacuzzi to Firo's casino."

"Understood, boss." Ronnie nodded and glanced at Jacuzzi with a smile. Little by little, Jacuzzi decided to resign himself to his fate. What else could he do?

He was about to be thrown in the middle of more trouble again.

And his "gamble" had already begun.

Chapter 5: The Girl in Black has no Regrets

Meanwhile
Somewhere in New York
An apartment

I wonder if I can kill him.

The woman's violent thoughts didn't match her elegant black dress at all.

Words weren't necessary to understand her thoughts, however, thanks to the crude knife in her hand, polished to a mirror-like finish.

Her eyes glinted back at her in its surface. *Have I changed?* she asked her reflection.

She fell deep into thought, looking back on her past.

She had sacrificed everything for the sake of her father, Huey Laforet. She had fulfilled his every wish, no matter what it was, up to and including murder. She had been raised from childhood to fulfill his wishes, but perhaps it still wasn't enough. Perhaps she hadn't managed to satisfy her father yet.

No, perhaps she never would. Perhaps such a hope was absurdly presumptuous to begin with.

She mustn't seek her father's love. She was merely her father's tool, and that was all she needed.

Humans cannot live without the sun, but that doesn't mean it loves them.

If, at the moment she was finally used up and thrown away...if he just called her name, then she would have no regrets.

If he just called her name, her life on earth would have a purpose.

And if he didn't...

She would be sad, but it would mean that that was all she could do.

To blame him, to hate him was unthinkable.

Chane made sure that she had not lost a single iota of that resolve and told herself again.

I have to kill that man, that despicable man who claimed that he would kill Father.

Ladd Russo...

...

...But could he kill me?

Doubt crept into her heart. Chane drew a sharp breath and stabbed her knife into the table, as if to pierce her own heart.

The knife sliced through the wooden table, like a hatchet or machete, and the blade buried itself up to the hilt. Judging from the numerous other scars on the table around it, the girl had probably done this countless times whenever she was irritated with herself.

She raised her eyes slowly, returning to the world from her meditation. There was sweat dampening her neck.

"..."

Wordless as always, Chane began to pace.

She normally lived in the Genoard mansion with Jacuzzi's gang, but she often came to this apartment, a secret even from them, whenever she wanted to be alone. It was originally a secret meeting place for the Lemures, but she had never thought she would use it now that they were destroyed.

It was especially strange that she had never gotten any notice from the landlord, but until she did Chane would continue using it as a secret lodging.

The building itself was recently constructed. The color of the stone walls was still new, and there was no damage on the ceiling, but the biggest piece of evidence was the relatively new shower room, which had only become standard around 1920.

Chane could feel the sweat that covered her entire body, even her palms. She tightened her fist around her knife and headed to the shower, erasing all emotion from her face.

<=>

" ... "

Chane didn't usually heat the water when she showered.

Even as the cold water doused her in the February chill, she immersed herself in her own world without any hint on her face as to what she was thinking.

Her muscles were sturdy, but her limbs were still supple, giving her not only erotic allure, but a classic beauty that called to mind the statues of ancient Greece as she stood bare in the steamless spray.

" ... "

As she stood under the cold water, one word burned deep within her heart.

Murder.

She reached deep into her memory for that unmoving intent to kill from years ago and assumed the role of her past self. She looked at the changes that had brought her to where she was now.

I've gotten soft. How many years has it been...since I last killed someone?

She had killed a petty thug in a white suit aboard the Flying Pussyfoot. Perhaps she shouldn't have.

Back then...I...I didn't kill him for Father's sake. Just because of my own feelings.

As she was walking through the train, she had found a man trying to kill the Senator's daughter, the girl her own faction needed as a hostage. They needed the girl for their mission, so she had killed the man in white before he could kill the girl.

But, even if just a little—less than a single percent—she couldn't deny that she had no personal desire to kill the man in white.

She was to kill only for the sake of the mission. If that resolve were tarnished with even a hint of emotion, even a thought like "I wouldn't be upset if I killed him" would amount to nothing less than a betrayal. Wouldn't it?

She couldn't imagine that one act would have changed her heart so much, but perhaps it was the first fissure, the tiny leak that broke the dam.

Right afterwards, she had fought Ladd with anger.

And after that, she had fought the red monster with turmoil.

And after she left the train, she had fought Graham with confusion.

And then day after day went by with no orders. In the blink of an eye, three years had passed without killing a single soul.

She hadn't lost her edge entirely, but the man in white wasn't someone weak that she could kill even in a state like this. Depending on the situation, Graham might even partner up with him, given his infatuation with the man.

Partner up.

The thought brought a man's face to her mind, and her heart fell into more turmoil than ever.

"..."

She turned off the shower. A few drops of water dripped from her skin, smooth like polished marble.

And her face was pure melancholy.

Her eyes were filled with a weariness that she had certainly never shown another person.

She couldn't see her own expression, but she knew the source of the complicating feelings rising in her chest.

Her lips soundlessly formed his name.

...Claire.

How far I've fallen...

The moment she thought of Graham joining the battle to help Ladd, the man's voice from the top of the train filled Chane's mind.

—"Do you want me to kill the guy who wants to kill your family—that white suit back there?"

Even with the train noisily rushing down the tracks, his words reached her ears with perfect clarity.

—*"So I just had an idea. If I marry you, then I'll be Huey's son-in-law. Then, as a member of the family, wouldn't I be able to solve all your problems?"*



It was a ridiculous proposal.

Of course, Chane couldn't understand what he was trying to say at first. She even thought he might be speaking in some sort of code.

—*"Unlike your friends back there, I will never betray you."*

—*"I have no need to betray anyone. The strong never turn against their friends, because there's no point to betraying others. And I am strong. Do you understand?"*

—*"I will never do as you fear and take Huey's secret of immortality. If he offered it to me, sure. But I will never take it by force. There's no need."*

But after a while, Chane had no choice but to understand and acknowledge it.

—*"Immortality doesn't matter to me, because I am never going to die. It's because I believe in myself. So I'm asking you to believe in me, too."*

—*"I am a man who will never die."*

She could remember the Rail Tracer's words perfectly, even now, and she had seen his strength that could make such a claim reality over and over again here in New York.

Claire Stanfield.

He was called Felix Walken now, but Chane was the only one who still called him Claire. Although she couldn't actually speak, and only called him that in her heart.

Even so, Claire could understand more or less what she wanted to say just by looking at her eyes and expression. Chane found this a little strange, but not unpleasant.

In fact, when the words in her heart reached someone, the same emotion welled up in her as when her father praised her.

Joy, pure and simple.

Chane wouldn't force herself to deny that emotion. That would be inefficient. If she couldn't honestly analyze her heart, then she would be of no use to Huey.

I...

I like Claire.

Acknowledging the truth made Chane sad more than anything. She couldn't say that Claire had made her weak.

But in a way, he had.

I'm...really hopeless...

I'm going to end up...relying on Claire...

Because I...trust him...

She wouldn't hesitate to kill any enemy of her father's. But even if she couldn't win, wouldn't Claire do something to help her?

She knew more than anyone that that was no way to think.

But Chane couldn't bring herself to throw out the possibility of relying on Claire, that tiny sliver of trust in him from her heart.

She knew two things: that Claire's strength was absolute, and that he was more trustworthy than any other person she had met.

If she asked him to help with this, she knew what he would say then, too.

"Sure. I'll kill him so you don't have to. Just rest, Chane."

To Chane, it would be half relief, and half bitter agony.

I can't do anything for Claire in return. And if I ask for his help, that means I can't do anything for Father, either.

And if I can't do anything for Father, then I'm worthless. And if I'm worthless, Claire would...

...Claire would just smile at me, the same as always, wouldn't he.

Chane lowered her eyes for a moment to the shower floor. In the end, she couldn't have any help. She would have to kill Ladd Russo with her own hands.

To regain the fangs she had lost.

To face Claire as an equal.

And, more than anything, to continue being useful to her father.

I have to remember. I have to remember when I could hold a knife without thinking a thing...

That's right...like back then...

She made herself remember right before their attack on the train, when that man had betrayed Huey and tried to take over the Lemures. He had quite a bit of leverage for a young man only a few years older than her, but his short-sighted cleverness and reckless audacity only won him a pitiful death.

Chane hadn't felt anything in particular when she had cut off his hand, not even anger at his betrayal. She was crumpling some paper for the others to throw away.

Now when she looked back, a different emotion rose up within her. Not anger, but pity, even compassion for the unlucky, foolish man who had rushed to his death, unaware of his own limits.

She couldn't have that pity now.

Chane looked deep into her heart, trying to regain what she felt at that moment. His

face was indistinct in her memory, but she remembered his name perfectly.

Neider.

Neider Schasschule.

That was the name of the last person Chane had attacked without emotion.

She hadn't killed him directly, but immediately afterwards Goose had blown him up along with their hideout, so he was likely dead. Whether he died from the blast or from blood loss, she had started the events that led to his death.

Emotionlessly, like a cog in a machine, moving forward as her job demanded.

She had to remember how it felt, cutting off the man's hand without a hint of compassion.

Her knife sinking into flesh. Neider's expression of utter despair.

And her own heart, completely unmoved by the bright red blood flowing from the traitor.

Chane bathed in those memories, letting them soak into her. She fell silent for a few seconds and calmed her breathing to a slow steady rhythm. She raised her eyes.

All trace of emotion was gone from her face, and there was no hint of the weakness she had felt up until the moment before.

Just like so long ago—when she had been a knife-wielding machine for the sake of her father.

Emotionlessly, Chane dried herself with a plain white towel.

Chane had heard that Ladd Russo could return as early as tonight.

Tonight, she would settle things with him once and for all. She wouldn't give him time to make the first move.

She was unwilling to cause trouble for Jacuzzi and the others, so she wouldn't return to the Genoard mansion. She would do everything on her own.

The moment Chane decided this—

Her senses, concentrated and honed like a razor's edge, sensed an ever-so-faint creak from the floor.

—!

It came from outside of the bathroom, perhaps from the bedroom.

The sound was faint enough for most people to miss entirely. Chane hadn't heard the door open or close, but she was certain.

Someone is here.

The only one who knew she was using this apartment was Claire Stanfield.

But he had no reason to sneak in, and the moment he heard the shower running would probably ask if he could take a look or something.

Chane silently narrowed her eyes, stilled her breathing, and picked up her knife from the sink.

She wasn't worried about it getting rusty, and she wanted it to be available at a moment's notice. Chane knew her decision to bring it with her was the right one as she slowly opened the door of the shower.

She could see the bedroom down the hall.

She couldn't see the intruder thanks to the door blocking her view, so she couldn't determine anything about him or her. But she did see the shadow on the floor that told her someone was definitely there.

Chane remembered where the window was in that room and calculated the exact location of the intruder based on his shadow.

She erased every trace of emotion from every cell of her body. It was best to assume that it was one of the Lemures who knew this room, and not an unfortunate burglar who had chosen this apartment by accident.

Spike.

The sniper had once been one of her comrades in the Lemures, but she didn't think a sniper like him would come somewhere small like this that would render his own skills useless. Maybe it was the original Felix Walken.

But ultimately, it didn't matter. She couldn't hesitate or pull any punches.

There was no need.

After all, if it *was* Claire, he could stop her knife blindfolded, Chane decided.

And she kicked off the floor, soundless as a cat.

Chane made it to the door in a single leap. She couldn't avoid making a sound as she landed, but she made her next move before her target could turn around, springing from a crouch to unleash an upper strike.

She tightened her grip on the handle of the sharp knife.

She would sink the blade into his neck. That was all.

That was all she had to do.

Without hatred or regret.

She would kill this person. That was all.

And when she did, she could return to her past self.

However—

The moment before her blade reached her opponent, she froze instantly.

Not just her body.

...?

...

...!

"-----!?"

Her mind and her heart also froze, tumbling through all stages of confusion, going blank—completely white, like the color filling her vision, pure white like the man's clothes in front of her—white that struck a conspicuous contrast with his glossy black hair...

"You ought to put some clothes on, at least."

The instant she heard the man's voice, Chane thought she must be in a dream.

How long had she been dreaming?

Was she in the shower? Had she gotten so lost in thought that she had fallen asleep?

Or maybe she was still on board the Flying Pussyfoot. Maybe everything—maybe even Claire was a dream, too.

Anxiety robbed her of reason, filling her mind with idea after wild idea until the man's voice brought her back to reality.

"People will think my child is indecent, Chane."

Even as he looked at Chane's naked, perfectly symmetrical body, the man's face showed not a trace of color. He just smiled the same faint, familiar smile she had known since she was a little girl.

That smile, not of a father towards his child, but of an artisan towards his magnum opus.

And, that very smile, cold and distant, told Chane there was no mistaking it.

The man in front of her was her father, the immortal Huey Laforet, the terrorist who would turn the world on its head.

Surprise took hold of Chane's heart like a sudden, raging storm, in no small part due to the bandages wrapped around one of his eyes.

But, at the same time an endless joy welled up from the bottom of her heart that swept all of her doubts away.

"...! ...!"

Her face was frozen in shock, but her eyes were filled with all different emotions.

Huey only voiced his own desires, cool and calm.

"I need some help for my next experiment," he said, with a detached air that no parent would use towards their daughter. "Will you help me, Chane?"

Right now there was nothing she would refuse.

She would put her own life on the line in a heartbeat.

In fact, if at that moment Huey had said "I want your beating heart," Chane would have carved it out of her own chest without a moment's hesitation.

Chane's eyes swelled with more joy and determination than she had ever felt before. Huey simply smiled and shook his head.

"There is no need for such emotion, Chane.

"This experiment is a bit of a gamble, after all."

**The same day
On the Atlantic Ocean**

"It looks like Master Huey made it into Manhattan safely."

"That was faster than we planned."

The cold February wind blew fiercely. A group of men stood on top of a large transport ship, wearing gas masks and heavy winter gear so that their faces were invisible as they spoke.

"It looks like he went to go talk to his daughter."

"...That's unusual. He talks to Liza a lot, but not Chane."

"Maybe he's planning to use all his pawns this time."

The man seemed respectful enough towards Huey, but he referred to Huey's daughter Chane as a mere pawn in a game of chess, without the slightest hint of respect.

Standing at the edge of the ship, the men continued talking, their voices filled with anxiety.

"...The Lemures are already gone, and we predicted he would call the Larvae and those of us from Rhythm, but..."

"I never thought Time would join us, too."

One of the members of Rhythm looked out into the twilit sea at a number of shadows floating on the water.

There were dozens of seaplanes, and about five flying boats.⁵

Only 30 years had passed since the Wright Brothers' successful flight in 1903. After that historic moment, aircrafts had developed at a remarkable rate, to the point that they were crucial weapons in the Great War. Even after the war, their evolution

⁵ A flying boat is specifically a seaplane that lands on its hull, as opposed to having floats.

didn't slow at all, and expanded on various fronts.

One of the results of the extensive investments in aircraft development was the seaplane—float planes and flying boats that could take off and land on water. They continued to improve and grow in popularity throughout the world.

In later years they would be outstripped by land planes, but in this day and age the area devoted to runways on land was limited, whereas oceans and rivers were a natural source of space for takeoff and landing. This flexibility made seaplanes extremely valuable. All this combined with a speed of over 700 kilometers per hour for the best models made the 1930s a golden era for seaplanes.

The men of Rhythm were looking out over the best of the best seaplane models available—or based on them, at least. They weren't exactly the same, as they had been modified here and there, but they didn't know what exactly the modifications were.

The seaplanes of this age didn't usually have machine guns mounted on them, even in the military, as their primary roles were patrolling, reconnaissance, or to confirm the destruction of a particular target. But this number was enough for a formidable bombing operation, even if the bombs were dropped manually. In fact, only a large aviation company or the army could use this many planes to begin with.

The scale of the equipment before them sent a chill down the spines of the two members of Rhythm.

"...Is the experiment this time supposed to be a war?" He wasn't joking.

The other man shook his head.

"According to Master Huey, it's a 'bit of a gamble'."

"...Is there anything that *isn't* a gamble with him?"

"Exactly. It's no different from usual. Master Huey's experiments are always a gamble, and the results are the only thing that matters.

"This time, we're just raising the stakes."

Chapter 6: There is no Other Path in Life

A street In a car

"Oh, so Uncle Placido skipped town, did he? Haha!"

"I also heard all of the Russo family's territory has been taken over by other organizations..." Lua added.

"Ha!" Ladd cackled. "Just like I said, Uncle was already finished! And he got a whole three years extra! ...I mean, they *say* he's missing, but I bet he's already dead." And with that flippant appraisal, Ladd leaned forward and called up to the man in the passenger seat.

"Looks like you're in luck, Neider. Uncle Placido's already pushing up daisies. I already decided to destroy the family when they kidnapped Lua, but someone beat me to the punch."

"O-oh...I see."

Where did I go wrong? Neider thought, shuddering in the passenger seat. Looking back on his life, one question kept running through his mind.

Where was the point of no return? Where was that critical juncture that had sent him down the wrong path?

Neider had joined the Lemures right after he turned 16, but even as a child he had been a penny-pinching con artist for a few years before that.

He had fled from the countryside where he grew up and made it through all kinds of situations with his silver tongue alone. And he always made the best of the strong people around him.

From the leaders among the city gangs to the *capos* of small Mafia, he leached off of one strong person after another, like a hermit crab changing shells.

And as he did so, Neider's head began to swell up, little by little. As if he himself were becoming stronger.

A fox may borrow the fangs of a tiger, as the saying goes, but the way Neider sought out tiger after tiger was far more greedy than most people. At his core, he was nobody, just a sly opportunist who could change his tune in the blink of an eye to suit his needs. Regardless, his ability to sense strength in someone was the real deal.

Until he finally made a fatal error—trying to borrow the fangs of a tiger called Huey Laforet.

He wormed his way into the Lemures and tried to determine what kind of man held them together, but it only took him a glance to know.

Huey wasn't a tiger. He was something else entirely—a snake, whose fangs were filled with poisonous despair. If he tried to take the man's influence for himself, it would eat away at him from the inside until he rotted away.

Neider couldn't put his finger on what exactly was so terrifying about Huey, but that was his first impression. He took the story about the man's immortality with a grain of salt, but he firmly believed that there was something very wrong with Huey.

That guy didn't look at us as subordinates or comrades. Not even close. Like tools...no, that's not it.

Like he didn't care if we broke or not. Like a kid watching ants drowning in a puddle of water...

A chill ran down Neider's spine at the memory, and he decided to stop thinking about Huey.

...It's all his fault my life is so screwy.

After Neider had joined the Lemures, he had made a huge error in judgment.

Filled with that indistinct fear of his leader, he avoided trying to gain Huey's favor directly and instead waited on Goose hand and foot, just waiting for a chance. That chance came when Huey was arrested by the FBI.

His sense hadn't found his next source of strength the way it always did, but Neider ignored his intuition and made plans to contact his next "tiger," Placido Russo, and bring most of the Lemures with him.

But the price for ignoring his intuition was heavy—his right hand, the Russos' favor, and nearly his life.

He had changed his loyalties many times until now, but this time was different.

He hadn't betrayed them in favor of a greater strength. He had betrayed them because he was terrified of Huey.

Should I have listened to what Goose had to say back then? No...that's not right...

I don't know what happened, but they were almost completely wiped out, and it had nothing to do with me. I don't know what happened on that train, but if I had been on it...

Neider ground his teeth. He couldn't imagine a version of events where he would have survived the carnage.

Perhaps the gears driving his life forward had already been thrown out of alignment when he had joined the Lemures. Maybe the moment he had anything to do with Huey.

When in the world had it happened? He thought on it over and over again, but he couldn't find an answer.

The more he thought about it, the further he went into his past.

He was so depressed at this point he even thought maybe the mistake was his birth itself, but before long, his thoughts arrived at the most important crossroads—the one most normal people would have thought of first.

Why did I even become a con man to begin with?

If he was going for the wrong path that started this whole mess, wouldn't that be it? You didn't have to be Edison to know that entering the criminal world by choice was a bad idea.

But, Neider didn't want to agree, at least not so easily.

I just wanted strength.

It had nothing to do with whether it was legitimate or criminal. He just wanted the strength to do whatever he wanted.

And he had thought that by making use of the strength of others, by taking their skin and wearing it as his own—maybe someday he would find true strength for himself.

Actually, the original plan had been to betray the Lemures and eventually take over the Russo Family for himself.

But that was a bust if there ever was one. I finally got my revenge on that bastard

Goose, but...in the end, I'm just a fuck-up of a traitor.

Come to think of it...I met a real weirdo at the station in Chicago that day. Can't remember his name, but...he caused all kinds of trouble, even though he was weak.

And all to save a waste like me.

Neider lost himself in his memories. At the same time, he remembered one in particular.

Oh, that's right. That's it.

A memory from long, long ago.

I wanted to become stronger...to become a hero.

When he was only about twelve years old, he had made a childlike promise to a girl around five years younger than him.

—When I grow up, I'm gonna be a hero!

—Like Wyatt Earp and Jesse James!

—You watch, I'll become super strong!

—And when I do...can I protect you, too?

The words he had said as a child echoed in his head.

It was all a lie. Just a front he had put up for the sake of a girl like a sister to him.

Moron. Tryna become a hero's what got me in this mess.

Speaking of, I wonder what she's up to these days, Neider suddenly thought as he remembered his friend.

After he had taken his revenge on Goose and the police had let him go, he returned to his family's cornfields, planning to till them for a living, but the girl had already left.

On the one hand, he was sad and a little lonely, but on the other he was relieved that she wouldn't see the loser he'd become. He was completely broken at that point.

But, he had decided to find a new strength, in throwing away his old self and living as a new man. And maybe, when she returned to that town someday, he could smile at her honestly.

But he would soon realize that he was still thinking far too little of Huey Laforet.

Only a day after he returned, the cornfields he inherited from his father, the barns, everything—all of it burned to the ground.

And when he returned to his old room in his parents' house, there was a note waiting for him on the bed.

—*"Why don't you tremble in fear for a change like the traitor you are, dear?"*
—*Hilton.*"

The instant he saw the hatefully scrawled words, everything went dark.

He had heard the name Hilton before. She was the messenger that Goose contacted from time to time. Her appearance changed each time he saw her, so she probably wore disguises or was even a group of women using the same alias.

He was being stalked. They were coming for him. Neider dashed out of the house in a panic, as fast as his legs could carry him.

There would be safety in numbers. He had to get to a populated area. Neider ran to the main street of the town, and looked around at the people there. He breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized them as the same old townspeople. But then—

"Hey there, mister!"

A small girl, less than ten years old, turned towards him with a smile. She reminded him of his childhood friend. Relieved, he smiled back gently, patting her head.

"What's the matter, little lady?" he asked kindly, but the next moment—

The smile disappeared from the girl's face, and her voice filled with hatred.

"...You aren't thinking you'll get away from us, are you, Neider Schasschule?"

His memories after that point were fuzzy. He couldn't remember where he ran or how he got away. Something even worse might have happened, but he didn't remember it.

All he knew was that when he came to, he was pounding on the police station door, begging them to hide him in prison from a girl who was trying to take his life.

Three years had passed since then, bringing him to today.

In all honesty, if the Russos or Hilton did come after him, there was probably nothing he could do. In a way, riding shotgun with Ladd Russo was as good as he could hope for, but—

Instead, I just feel like I'm wading into deeper and deeper shit.

He had realized thanks to the incident earlier that Ladd was dangerous—so dangerous it made him feel ill.

He also knew that he wasn't so much a tiger as a rabid dog. Making use of strength like his was impossible.

If things go on like this, I'll just be dragged deeper and deeper into this mess. I have to do something and get out of here...

Thanks to his confusion, he still hadn't asked about the events aboard the Flying Pussyfoot. There was no harm in asking, but there was definitely harm in having anything to do with Ladd himself.

In the end, though, he had already thrown his dice.

He had been carried from one disaster to another until now, or so he felt.

He had already given up. The thought was calming in a way, and he thought hopelessly that there was no way for him to live anymore. Not even as a swindler.

Neider let out a small sigh, wondering if he could ever break free. He began to listen to the conversation in the car.

"So I'm the only Russo left, huh. Wonder if I'll get lonely, heh heh."

"Ricardo is still around," replied the man in the driver's seat.

"Oh, Ricardo? Ricardo, huh. I remember him. Even as a damn kid, he had that look in his eyes like he didn't care when he died. Not like Lua, though. Can't really explain it." Ladd sounded bored.

"Ricardo became like that...after that wreck, right...?" asked the woman next to him.

"Yeah, my cousin and his wife got in their car one day and boom! Just like that. Car bomb."

It's no good. All they talk about is violence. Neider fought the urge to drop his head into his hands and sat quietly in the passenger seat.

Next to him, Shaft suddenly spoke up, as if he had remembered something.

"Yeah, I heard Ricardo's here in New York right now. He wants to bring back the Russo Family, so he's goin' around to some of the gangs around to see if they'll give him work...I mean, that's just what I've heard, so I can't really say anything for sure."

"Bringin' 'em back? What, that kid?" Ladd was a little surprised. "Well, well, I'm lookin' forward to that. One more thing for me to do here in New York." He crossed his arms in enjoyment, and leaned back into the seat.

There was a tapping noise next to Ladd's head. It was Graham, peering in through the window upside-down.

Apparently, he had decided to allow Ladd and Lua some alone time in the backseat and considerately elected to ride on the roof of the car.

Neider didn't think "being considerate" was an acceptable excuse to sit on the roof of a car going their speed, but he didn't want to get involved and kept his mouth shut.

Ladd opened the window.

"Hey, Boss Ladd!" Graham was lying on his stomach. "There's a huge line of cars behind us. You think someone's followin' you?"

"Hn?" Ladd turned around and saw an expensive-looking car following them. "Nah...doesn't look like a tail."

Shaft glanced in his rearview mirror. The street was wide enough for him to move closer to the curb so the car could go around.

When he did, about eight expensive-looking cars passed them, with one large truck behind them. At the rear were a pair of identical men straddling motorbikes, apparently guarding the truck.

All the expensive cars were perfectly equidistant, like a procession of troops. The feeling was oppressive.

The strange group excited Ladd to no small degree. "Hey, hey, hey, what is this, the circus? Looks like whoever it is has a lot of money...Now there's an idea! We could get a buncha those fat cats and put 'em on a trapeze or make 'em fight lions or something. Sounds like fun, yeah?"

"Lay off the violence for once, would ya? ...That's the Runorata Family, ain't it?"

Ladd's eyes were almost sparkling at Shaft's words. He couldn't control his excitement at being so close to one of the biggest Families in the East.

"The Runoratas...sounds interesting. Let's rough 'em up a little and start a fight! Yeah! Arite, Shaft, step on it! Ram 'em, hard as you can!"

"No way! I don't wanna die just yet, ya know!"

"Hey, come on, not wanting to die is good and all, but this is a special case! You don't wanna miss out on the party, do ya? Well, guess you might lose a lot more if you do."

"Well said, given that Lua's sitting right next to you." Shaft's answer was common sense.

Neider looked at him fondly. At least one of them wasn't crazy.

And then he looked at Lua, who was blushing and mumbling to herself ("I could...die here...with Ladd..."), and finally at Ladd and Graham, who were seriously discussing whether they should attack the Runorata caravan. Neider knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was in a car he should not be in.

But what I want right now is information.

He decided to change the topic, hoping to kill two birds with one stone.

"Those cars just now...it looks like they're going the same place as us... Is the Runorata Family headquarters in New York?" he asked Shaft. Maybe he could get some information *and* keep things from getting violent.

But the answer was in the negative.

"No. They're mainly from New Jersey...oh...maybe they're connected with...yeah..."

"With what?" Neider pressed, although Shaft didn't seem particularly keen to hide the information.

"The hotel," he replied.

"What hotel?"

"They built this giant hotel in New York recently. The entire basement floor is one big restaurant."

"Oh."

"Basically, the owner of the restaurant is one of the Runoratas."

It didn't sound like anything special.

Neider sighed a little with relief since it didn't seem to have anything to do with him, but—

Immediately after, the topic got violent again.

"Well, they're cutting right into a turf war between some of the other families in the area, so they've got a lotta enemies right now. That escort is a bare minimum, given how many people are pissed at them right now."

"..."

"And there's another floor below the restaurant. They're sayin' there's supposed to be a bunch of extra rooms, but it's actually gonna be a great big casino," Shaft continued matter-of-factly. "That's the rumor goin' around, anyways."

Neider wasn't sure how to respond, but Ladd cut him off from the backseat before he had a chance to.

"A casino! Excellent! That's just the kinda place where you find all kinds of dumbasses who think they've got the best luck in the world. Those bastards don't doubt for a split second that they're gonna live forever! There's lots of guys worth killing there!"

"Scuse me, but could you not talk about murder quite so much? I think you're scarin' Neider."

"Oh, really. Sorry, Neider! I'll make it up to ya someday. If I remember."

I don't care if you forget or not, just drop it already! Neider wanted to cry.

Surprisingly, Ladd continued, curious about something himself.

"By the way, Firo said he owned a casino or somethin' too."

"...Owns?"

"No, wait, he wasn't the owner. The manager, maybe? Doesn't matter. Alright, when we get to New York, let's find that casino and bet our life savings to test our luck! It'll be fun! How about it, Neider?"

Wha..I have to gamble? Do I get a say in this?!

The extremely normal complaint lodged in his throat before he could voice it.

In the end, he couldn't even raise a protest.

And so the lowlife made his way to New York, without knowing what numbers his roll of the dice would bring, or what he would win as a result.

Chapter 7: The Rivals Make no Mistakes

Somewhere in New York A major street

"*Sniff...*I wonder if everyone is worried. I should probably call them..." Tears welled in Jacuzzi's eyes as he walked, soaking wet from the rain.

"Pull yourself together, Jacuzzi," Rail teased. "It's over for you if you can't even get a job in the underworld. You don't wanna get snubbed, do you?"

"It doesn't matter how much they make fun of me, as long as my friends are safe. I'll do whatever it takes."

"Well, that's lame. Don't you have any pride?"

Rail herself had been crying not too long ago, but when Jacuzzi returned from the Martillo office she returned to the same old Rail.

At least, until a voice addressed her from behind, evaporating Rail's composure in an instant.

"That's alright, isn't it, Rail? Everyone has to be able to withstand a little teasing."

"You're only saying that because you don't know Jacuzzi, Chris," Rail answered awkwardly.

In the end, the motley band had all headed off for Firo Prochainezo's casino together with Ronnie taking the lead. Isaac and Miria were still in the store getting their own jobs from Molsa right about now.

Jacuzzi was terrified of Ronnie, but Rail didn't know why and just wrote him off as nothing more than a coward.

For his part, Ricardo had made his position clear to Jacuzzi earlier: "The Russo Family holds no hostility towards you. If we pursued you in our current state, we would only be destroyed. Plus, if I wanted to take responsibility for Grandfather's actions, I would at least need a new headquarters."

Jacuzzi had shaken his head frantically: "N-no...we were only on bad terms with your

grandfather, so..." And so they reconciled themselves, little by little.

B-but what are we going to do about Ladd Russo...? There wasn't time to bring it up, but I need to do something about that, too...

If he went through Ricardo and discussed the matter with him first, they might be able to talk peacefully, even amicably. Maybe Jack would even let go of his grudge, if he could bring himself to listen to a child.

Jacuzzi looked at the source of this remaining worries.

Even with that out of the way, why is that guy with the red eyes here...

As if he could hear Jacuzzi's thoughts, Christopher chuckled and turned towards him.

"Hey, do you want to know something amazing? Once upon a time, they used to torture people by having mice lick their stomachs."⁶

Jacuzzi tensed at the word "torture," but when he heard the rest of Chris' sentence he relaxed a little in relief.

"Th-that actually seems like something you could handle...although it would be really ticklish..."

"First, they would put a bunch of mice on the person's stomach and cover them with a pot. They would put honey or salt water—I forget what, something that mice like. Anyway, they would put that all over their stomach, too."

"S-stop...I'm getting ticklish just listening to it..."

Jacuzzi's face was looking more and more upset at the thought of being licked by dozens of mice, but Christopher went on, heedless.

"Oh don't worry, it's only ticklish at first."

"?"

"That just puts them to sleep. Then they put a heated stone or something on top of the upside-down pot. 'Oh, no! It's hot in here!' the mice think, 'I need to hide!' And then all the mice start to burrow into the soft, skin-colored earth beneath them..."

"Gyaaahhhh!?"

⁶ Chris' topic change is less sudden in the Japanese—"to look down on" someone is the same word as "to lick." (舐め—*nameru*)

Jacuzzi let out a cry as the conversation took a turn for the graphic.

"That's horrible. What did the mice ever do to get fried like that?"

"No, Rail! That's not the point!"

"I'm kidding! Geez, you're so gullible." Rail chuckled at the teary-eyed Jacuzzi, but once again she glanced at Christopher and quickly looked away. She had been doing this for a while.

Ricardo noticed and finally said with a sigh, "Would you like to come to our apartment this evening?"

Rail smiled contemptuously at Ricardo. "Haha! Well, aren't you considerate, you creep. Don't make me laugh. What, do you honestly think you can revive the Russo Family all by yourself? A weak little girl like you?"

Rail had developed a kind of enmity towards **her fellow girl pretending to be a boy**. She waited to see what Ricardo would say to *that*.

But Ricardo just looked troubled for some reason, as if she hadn't even heard what Rail had said.

"What's the matter, Ricardo?" Christopher asked, thinking his charge was acting strange.

"Maybe it would be better...if we didn't go to the casino today..." Ricardo muttered half to herself.

Christopher, Rail and even Jacuzzi tilted their heads, wondering what in the world she was saying. She had been eager to go thus far.

Ricardo cast her eyes downward, her expression unreadable.

"...No, it's nothing," she sighed. "Actually, I think it would be wisest to **hurry as fast as we can**."

<=>

Behind Jacuzzi and company was a figure trailing casually along after them—Ennis, who had just finished helping with Alveare for the day.

Concerned about Rail's words and Christopher's reappearance, she had decided to

covertly follow them. When she had heard they were headed towards Firo's casino, she had remembered the Mist Wall incident and decided to watch them carefully to make sure Christopher didn't do anything crazy.

As Szilard's servant, she had done things like tailing and even breaking and entering more times than she could remember.

Unusual manner of dress aside, she hid herself in the crowd perfectly, but—

"What are you doing, Miss Ennis?"

A young boy called out from behind her.

When she turned around, there was the immortal boy who had been her flatmate for some years now.

"...Czes."

"Why are you following those people? Is it for work?"

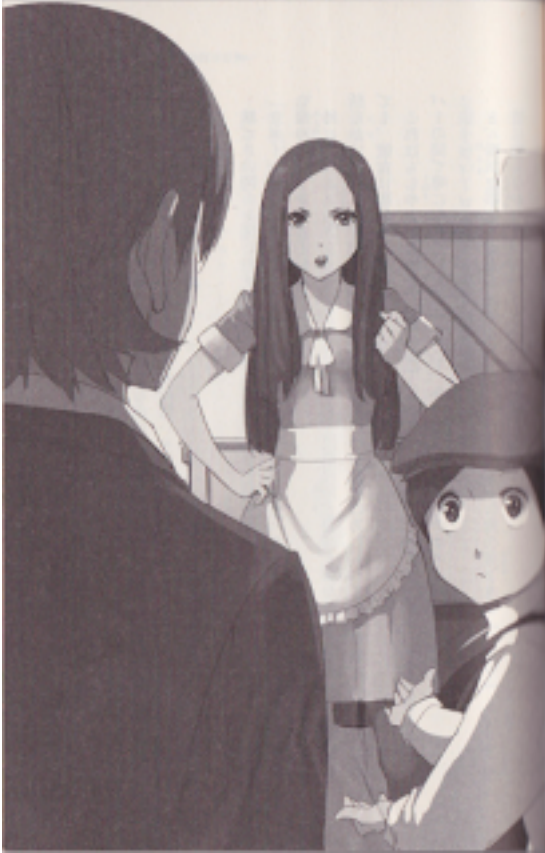
"Oh, no, nothing like that..."

Ennis wasn't sure how to explain, but Czes continued.

"Oh, I meant **both of you**."

What did he say?

Unsure of what he meant by "both," Ennis looked around and saw a truck parked by a corner and the girl hidden in the shadow under its awning.



Ennis recognized her as Annie, a girl who had been working as a waitress at Alveare since last year.

"Ehehe, I guess you found me," Annie giggled, without a hint of shame.

"Why are you here, Miss Annie?" Ennis asked.

"Well, you looked a little upset earlier, so I followed you to see what was going on, and it turns out you were following someone, too, weren't you, Ennis? Kinda like a train!"

"I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble..."

She watched Jacuzzi disappear out of the corner of her eye, but still apologized to Annie.

Annie got straight to the point. "Firo's casino is just up ahead, right?"

"Um, yes, it is, but..."

Ennis knew she couldn't get Annie involved. She bit her tongue and looked away, but Annie was interested in a different line of questioning.

"By the way...what is Firo to you, Ennis?"

Next to Ennis, Czes mentally narrowed his eyes. *Aha. Now it all makes sense.*

This waitress had been acting a little strange for a month now—specifically, since Firo had returned from prison.

She was always glancing furtively Firo's way, and even though she had never shared more than a word here and there with him in the past, she would now go up to him to talk about anything she could. Firo always responded politely, though not enthusiastically, but she seemed perfectly content to continue the flood of special attention, regardless.

In fact, it was so sudden that the members of the Martillo family who hung around the Alveare had started circulating a rumor that Czes was now sure was true.

Pretty smooth, aren't you, Firo, Czes thought carelessly.

He had no idea that Annie had not one name, but three.

Annie, the waitress, Hilton, part of Huey's information network that reported directly to him, and Liza, Huey's own daughter.

On the other hand, Ennis just tilted her head in confusion.

"What do you mean? I suppose he is my family..."

Why would Annie ask her such a question now?

Ennis knew nothing of Annie's true nature, and thanks to her obliviousness towards matters of love, she found it an especially puzzling question.

"Family, huh? Family. Good, good." Annie smiled cryptically.

Ennis just stared back blankly.

"Well, this is an interesting development," Czes muttered to himself.

He didn't know anything about Hilton or Liza, so to him she was just a waitress in love with Firo, starting a one-sided rivalry with a girl so oblivious she didn't even know her own feelings.

Although, complications aside, he was absolutely right.

<=>

Manhattan
Little Italy

—“...No, it's nothing. Actually, I think it would be wisest to ***hurry as fast as we can.***”

I'm not kidding, Ricardo. Whether we hurry or not, things are going to go south, Shaft—or rather Sham—thought nervously, hearing Ricardo's voice in his head.

As part of the network Huey had created, Sham was a single consciousness inhabiting many bodies, a strange existence like the immortals.

He took over the minds of anyone who drank a special water, and they would become a part of him. One could say that water was his true form, but truth be told, Sham himself didn't know his own true form.

One thing led to another, and Ricardo became the only one whose consciousness was not taken over by Sham. They didn't share a consciousness, but they did have access to each other's knowledge and even worked together from time to time, but—

This isn't like that restaurant in Chicago, Ricardo!

The backseat passenger, Ladd Russo, was headed for the casino that Firo was responsible for.

Graham and Christopher were already like water and oil, but if Jacuzzi and Ladd met the situation would get even messier.

Even though the Martillo Family was small, they had power. If they caused a scene in a casino managed by Firo or Maiza, his job as Shaft the delinquent would get much harder from here on out, to say nothing of his operations as Sham.

At this phase of the plan, even if they beat each other up it'll only be more trouble!

In a restaurant in Chicago, Ricardo had been complicit with Sham in getting Graham and Christopher together in the same room in order to orchestrate a certain situation. However, such a thing had to be handled with great care, and this wasn't the time.

And with Huey and Victor here in New York, it's going to be absolute chaos!

Shaft showed no signs of the conflict in his mind and silently continued driving.

He had already tried pretending not to know where Firo's casino was to buy some time, but unfortunately Graham knew where it was.

"The Martillo Family casino is to your right up here, Shaft."

Graham was giving directions from the roof of the car, peering in at the driver. Shaft narrowed his eyes.

"By the way, how do you even know this place?"

"Oh! One time when I was broke, I came here and hit the jackpot!"

"Are you that good at gambling?" Shaft said doubtfully.

"Nope, I just knocked out the guy with the money..."

"I can't believe you! ...No, actually, that sounds exactly like you, Graham. Have you forgotten how Nicola laid you out back then? Fortunately for you he was generous enough to treat you like a kid and let it go at that. You know, if it weren't for him you'd be at the bottom of the Hudson right now!" Shaft shouted.

There was a reaction from the backseat.

"...Eh? Ol' Graham lost? In a fight?"

"Uh...y'see...this guy Nicola from the Gandor Family is pretty tough, and I went to get revenge on him a buncha times, but he'd always take me down instead..."

Graham would continue in this vein from the roof for some time ("...and I lost six times but I won once so maybe the reason Shaft forgot my one win is because it isn't really Shaft because the Martians invaded and took over his body...")

But Ladd just twisted his lips into a smile.

"Heh heh, looks like the world is bigger than I thought. Hope I can enjoy myself a little more than last time I was in New York." Ladd drove his fist into his palm, making his feelings more plain than any words could.

Shaft decided again that he could not let him run into Jacuzzi or Christopher.

But, no matter how determined he was, the car would arrive at Firo's casino, and it

would all be in vain.

It would only be a matter of time until Jacuzzi and Christopher arrived.

He had to get Graham and Ladd away from here. He desperately sifted through the vast amount of knowledge at his disposal and finally hit upon something that just might work.

"Who... That's right! That guy Who!"

"What about him?" Ladd looked at Shaft doubtfully at suddenly hearing his old friend's nickname.

"Uh, well, when you meet up with Firo or whatever his name was, there might be some kinda trouble, so why don't we go see Who first?"

"Hold on...wait. Is Who even in New York?"

"Yeah, I saw him once by accident. Thought that that must be your old friend and just kept it in mind to tell ya later!"

Ladd smiled brightly and perked up immediately. "Oh! I see, I see! So old Who is still kickin'! Well, I guess he always was good at takin' care of himself. Maybe the only thing."

Shaft and Neider thought the same thing at the same time: if he wanted to protect himself, cutting all ties with Ladd was probably the best thing he could have done. Of course, they didn't say so.

"Well, Who is helping out at a clinic a little ways from here. I can drive you there pretty quick, so why don't we go see him before we play a few rounds?"

"Yeah...yeah, let's do that."

Shaft let out a sigh of relief, but—

"Well, Neider. Why don't you go on ahead and warm up the roulette for me?"

Ladd reached into his wallet that Lua had kept while he was in prison, pulled out a thick wad of cash and tossed it at Neider.

"Wha—...ho—...what...!? What is this?"

"You don't know my friend, right? Don't want you to get bored."

Neider looked puzzled, and Shaft was about to go nuts from the additional

complications.

"I'll give ya that money, so just go with your gut and throw it down like ya got nothin' to lose. Anyway, make a killing, lose it all, I don't care, just make a show of it! I wonder what Firo will think when he finds out I'm your sponsor. Ha!"

"...Don'tcha think I might just take your money and run?"

"Take it and run? Doesn't matter to me. That just means I lost my bet on you, right?"

Hearing this, Neider was positive that Ladd was not normal. He was a man who lived purely in the present, for the sake of nothing but his own pleasure.

And that's why Neider was so terrified of him.

He couldn't help thinking that after "Doesn't matter to me" there was an unspoken "If I see you again, I'll kill ya."

Neider would never dream of running with the money in actuality. But if Ladd could throw his money away with such nonchalance, he could shoot him in the face just as easily.

"If you *are* planning to run, there're some things about the Flying Pussyfoot I'd like to ask ya before you go. Well, we'll worry about that when it's time for it. If you run away, I'll leave it alone."

Ladd wouldn't kill someone he considered a friend, but Neider didn't know that. From his point of view, all he could hear was "If you run I'll give up on asking you and just kill you then and there."

Neider curled his fingers around the money. "...Can I keep what I win?" he asked, only thinking about his own profit, even as he realized how deplorable he was.

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A few minutes later

And so Neider entered the casino alone.

He had visited gambling joints in Chicago a number of times, so he wasn't hurting for experience. The problem was that this casino might have slightly different rules, and since Neider took every technicality and loophole into account when he placed his bets, he knew it would be foolish to rely solely on previous experience.

Neider decided that the first order of business was to just look around and get a feel for the place, so he carefully watched the customers around him.

There were all kinds—young, old, men, women. No children, of course.

In fact, the youngest person in there was probably the boy in a suit looking out from the office window.

Neider wondered what a teenager was doing in a place like this, but if he was allowed in the office, he was probably related to an employee.

Maybe if I get him to like me, I could get in with the Martillo Family...

But the instant his lips began to curl into a smile, Neider panicked.

No! No no no no what are you thinking, you dumbass? That's the sort of thinking that got you here in the first place! Neider scolded himself with a smack to the head.

No more. Not after today.

Today, he would gamble to his heart's content, and tomorrow he would leave the world of crime behind. He would blend into the city and disappear. There was no way Huey's minions could find him in a huge metropolis like this. It would be impossible.

Starting tomorrow, he would look for a legitimate job. Definitely.

They had mentioned someone working at a local clinic or something like that back in the car...that wouldn't be so bad.

He reached into his pocket and felt the hard cash at his fingertips, imagining all kinds of "tomorrows" for himself.

But, as it was, he had already entered the underworld. He knew all too well. He knew it firsthand.

People who told themselves "Tomorrow I'll become an honest man" would only say the same thing the next day, and the next day, and the next and the next. For them, tomorrow would never come.

After all, if they were looking forward to an honest future, they would never have come to the dark side in the first place.

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Office

"What's the matter, Firo?" Luck asked doubtfully.

The young manager had been continuously glancing out at the casino floor as he talked to his friend.

"Oh, sorry. This new guy is acting weird. Like just now he smacked himself in the face for no reason. The hell is he doing?"

"Maybe this is his first time in a casino, and he's trying to psyche himself up."

"I guess...yeah, maybe so. You're right, Luck, maybe I *am* just jumpy. This is ridiculous."

Firo sighed and looked at Luck. Finally, he began to talk about the reason for his jitters.

"You got one of those invitations, too, right?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, that's not the kind of thing we can ignore, even if we wanted to. We are connected to them, even if only a little. They sent one to a Family that's completely unrelated to them, so of course they would send one to us."

It all started a few days ago.

Firo had just made it back home, when Molsa Martillo had suddenly called him in to talk about something.

—*"You've heard about the giant casino the Runoratas are building right next to Manhattan, don't you?"*

Firo had heard about it, although it was only a rumor when he was taken to San Francisco.

They were building a multipurpose skyscraper along the coast near Manhattan Island that would host a hotel, commercial center, offices and even a restaurant, among other things. More importantly, the Runorata Family was backing the project.

It was difficult area to build in. For one thing, it was the property of Senator Manfred Beriam, who was well-known for his hatred of gangs, and for another it was sandwiched in between the territory of two of the big Mafia families.

However, under the pretense of a generous election donation, a piece of that land was sold. The rights to the land passed through a number of hands, all of them wealthy, eventually falling into the hands of a business under the Runorata umbrella, and the construction of the aforementioned skyscraper finally began.

The building was constructed with surprising speed, and its modern design ensured that it would be easily recognizable from Manhattan Island, even though it wouldn't break any records.

Unlike Nebula's Mist Wall, it was narrow all the way up, tapering to a point at the top. It wasn't long before it was nicknamed "Ra's Lance" after the Egyptian sun god.

The grand opening had already happened, but the construction of the underground restaurant had been postponed, if Firo remembered right.

Below the restaurant, there were to be a number of special reserved rooms for VIP guests, but the rumor was that those rooms were now going to be turned into a casino instead.

That was as far as Firo knew. Molsa had continued.

—"I won't ask about the police getting off their asses to spread these rumors around—I see it's even reached you. As it is, there's no evidence, but there're probably some bribes floating around."

—"This morning, we got a message from the Runorata Family. At first, I thought it was a joke, but Ronnie took a look at him and confirmed he really was a Runorata."

A messenger from the Runoratas.

What business did they have with such a small family like the Martillos? Had he come to tell them to hand over their territory?

Firo remembered the mess between them and the Gandors from a few years ago. Apprehension tightened around his entire body, but what Molsa said completely defied his expectations.

—"It was an invitation, and not just to us. They sent them to everyone in the area."

—"They're going to turn the underground rooms into a gambling den. It'll open sometime in the middle of February, although the exact date depends on the feds."

—"On the day of the grand opening, with all of the many important people they've sent the invitations to...they'll let each organization have one room. They even wished us luck. It's ridiculous."

—*"My gut is telling me to refuse, but I don't think we have a choice. Right now, Firo, you're the one in charge of our casino. Whether or not you want to take care of this is up to you."*

After a long night of hesitation, Firo told Molsa that he would go.

It would be a lie to say that he didn't want to get back some of his pride, but when all was said and done, Firo took the job so he would be useful to the Family.

If he had turned down the invitation, it would be a slap in the face to the Runoratas.

Molsa didn't seem to care whether it turned into a war or not, but Firo couldn't stand the idea of a rumor floating around that the Martillo Family had run away with their tails between their legs.

Of course it was a trap. Maybe it wasn't, but Firo wasn't holding his breath for that option.

They would have Mafia executives from every family in the area in one place underground. There was no guarantee that a Runorata assassin wouldn't appear with a machine gun the moment they were all assembled.

But Firo wasn't as concerned about that scenario, for obvious reasons. Much worse would be a police raid. If they came in while they were gambling, they could arrest members of every Family in the area.

And if he were arrested legitimately this time, the police might use that to their advantage and try to get a snitch, and at that point anyone could be end up working for the police. The Runorata Family would have already chosen someone to get arrested from their Family, and once the scapegoat just insisted that he didn't know anything, their damages would be kept to a minimum.

"If that happens, the moment I'm thrown in prison, please just insist that I was thrown out of the Family a while ago. I would never squeal on you," Firo had told Molsa resolutely when he said he would take the job.

—*"I don't plan on saying anything from the start, no matter what happens,"* Molsa had replied. *"No, I won't say a thing."*

—*"I'll just slit Runorata's throat myself."*

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"Honestly, screw the Runoratas. 'Look at us, we're the big shots around here, so do whatever the hell we want.' The hell do they think they are?" Firo complained to his friend.

Luck smiled wryly and answered quietly.

"They're not just blowing smoke, Firo. They've made themselves strong so they can afford to indulge themselves like this."

"They're spoiled, is what they are," Firo replied tersely. "Apparently, it's not enough for us to be their bookies. They're tryna make us into suckers."

—"Feel free to bet your Family's assets and territory as chips as well," the Runorata messenger had said. *"The Runorata Family is the best judge available. Of course, if you wish to challenge the Runorata Family itself, all you need is a proposal and we'll take it into consideration."*

Firo sighed and pursed his lips.

"The long and short of it is, they just wanna see how much power they actually have. Right? I mean, if they're going to waste their time jerking us around like this, might as well make the best of it. I'll lose a few rounds to some regular rich schmuck."

"Lose?"

"Yeah. If they think they can win, then they might come here, y'know?" Firo shrugged.

Luck replied expressionlessly.

"...I hope that goes well for you. There's another angle to this, though, I'm sure."

"Yeah. They wanna knock us down a peg any way they can."

"Of course they do. Well, the casino itself isn't technically anyone's territory, so we'll have to take some precautions. The whole thing is a grey area."

"It's not even a grey area at this point, it's all just totally black. Ronnie doesn't even know what's going to happen, and he expressly told me to be careful."

Everyone in the Family completely trusted Ronnie's ability to gather information. He knew everything on all of the executives in the Mafia all the way out on the West Coast, to say nothing of the gangs nearby. Plus, he had never been mistaken once.

Relying so heavily on one person was not very Family-like, but Molsa had once inadvertently let it slip to Firo when they were drinking that there would be nothing they could do if Ronnie betrayed them. *"If Ronnie betrays us, there's not much we can do about it. It would just mean I wasn't the leader I thought."* Even the ever-loyal Firo thought that if Ronnie betrayed them, there would be nothing for it but to give up.

In fact, the members of the Family were a little mystified as to how a man of Ronnie's caliber could be satisfied with working for such a small organization, but he would only reply modestly: "You overestimate me." Firo had decided that it was just due to the don's charisma. He respected Molsa as a man, Maiza as the closest thing he had to a brother, and Ronnie as someone who was just incredible on every possible level.

In short, if *Ronnie* was telling him to be careful, he couldn't afford to let his guard down at all.

And that was also why he had no intention of calling it off.

"Come on. A guy finally gets out of lockup just to find himself in a mess like this. As far as coincidences go, I think this is the worst timing I've ever had."

Firo had no regrets, but that didn't mean he couldn't complain a little.

Luck looked away from Firo for a moment. "Hm..." he muttered, "I pray it really is just a coincidence..."

<=>

Neider stood casually in a corner of the casino, pretending to take a break as he watched the other gamblers there with him.

He thought about playing a card game, but it would be difficult to do with his prosthetic hand. It was a high-quality model from Nebula, so much so that he could hold a wine glass naturally, but he couldn't make the precise movements required for playing cards.

And if he only played using his left hand, someone was bound to notice. For now, he didn't want to draw any more attention to himself than necessary. Some people could keep their cool under observation and match a penetrating gaze stare for stare, but Neider didn't even have the nerve for that, much less the skill.

He stood, just watching and thinking for about ten minutes. Finally, Neider decided

to start off with the roulette, but a voice suddenly reached his ears.

"Is there something the matter? You're acting strange."

Every hair on Neider's body stood on end, and he instantly flung his hands up to protect his throat and chest. He had no idea how long the boy had been there next to him, but he couldn't take the chance that it was a hitman.

"Interesting reflexes you have there."

"Uh, no, I mean, sorry," Neider stammered, unconvinced that the boy meant him no harm.

He looked at the newcomer cautiously.

At first glance, the boy looked a few years younger than Neider. If he had to guess, he was still in his teens, like the boy in the office.

"No, no, it's my fault. I'm sorry for startling you. As an apology, how about I give you one of my tokens?"

And then the boy handed him a slot machine token. It was the cheapest kind, virtually worthless.

"No, it's fine."

"Take it. I insist. Just think of it as your lucky token and give it a spin." His eyes flicked to the machine next to Neider and back again.

"...Well, I guess I'll take it, then. Thanks. And sorry. Again."

The boy could be involved with the casino. If so, it wouldn't be good to stubbornly keep turning him down. He just thought of it as a test of his luck as he put the token in the machine and pulled the lever.

The reels began to spin.

The assorted images blended together to create three side-by-side streams of kaleidoscopic color. Neider knew next to nothing about slot machines and didn't care about them in particular, so he just stared vacantly at the spinning colors and waited for them to stop.

And with a satisfying *ding*, the first reel came to a halt. The bell from the machine was almost soothing, easing Neider's tension. If only a little.

[7]

This is incredible. Slot machines these days....

[7]

Totally different from back when I was swindling people at these kinds of casi—

[7]

...nos.....?

For a moment, Neider's mind went completely blank.

[7] [7] [7]

Neider knew a total of 21 was significant, but before he could remember—

The Nebula-made slot machine changed from the sound of a single bell to an orchestra, and loudly played the song that declared to everyone that he had just won the jackpot.

<=>

"Wh-what's that sound?"

Jacuzzi had just set foot on the stairs. He cringed at the loud noise that sounded from below, even though there was nothing dark or frightening about the music at all.

Ronnie answered neutrally.

"Hm...it sounds like somebody won the jackpot on a slot machine."

"Jackpot?! That's amazing!"

Jacuzzi perked up, eyes sparkling with envy. Ronnie smiled bitterly and continued down the stairs. "It's not a sound the house wants to hear, but...well, no matter."

<=>

"Ah, shit! I knew that punk was up to something!"

Firo recognized the sound instantly. He jumped up to leave the office when he realized the man standing before the slot machine was the newcomer from earlier.

"Calm down, Firo. Coincidences happen sometimes, don't they? Weren't you just saying that it's good for people to win on that model every so often?"

"Well, yeah, but c'mon, Luck! Look at him! He's gotta be hiding something. Plus, that's the sound of THE jackpot! That's only supposed to happen once, *once* every ten days or so, on all of the slots combined! And the last one was only yesterday!"

"But isn't that how the laws of probability work? You can't say that it won't happen two days in a row. You're jumping to conclusions because you've already decided that he's suspicious. If you go out there and it really is just a coincidence, Firo, it's not your reputation that's going to suffer. It's the Martillo Family's."

"...Yeah, I know. I know. I'm not going to knock his lights out or anything."

Firo had regained some of his calm thanks to Lucks advice. He steadied his breathing and headed for the door.

"I'll just congratulate him, and make sure everything's kosher myself."

<=>

"H-hey..."

Neider had never seen this kind of slot machine before, apparently a special model of some kind. The bells played together to create a loud music that was impossible to ignore as a flood of tokens spilled from the mouth of the machine. And not the cheap kind, like the one Neider had put in, but the highest value ones in the casino.

The slot machines of the early 20th century were not electronically powered, but mechanical and complex. Not even the managers of the casinos could tamper with their chances of winning. If you compared them with the models that would come later, the chances were fairly high of winning the jackpot, so it wasn't an especially high sum of money.

Even so, it was enough to feed a man comfortably, though not extravagantly, for a full year. In this Depression, the amount was downright outrageous. Neider was frozen in shock.

"Well, well, congratulations!" The accolade came from the boy who had given him

the winning token, who began to clap. The other gamblers in the gallery (except for those engrossed in a high-stakes game) turned his way together and joined in a big round of applause.

Neider was sweating profusely, caught up in a storm of praise showered on him like he had never had in his life.

This ain't right.

He was a nobody. A loser. A screwup. Even he knew that.

There's no way my luck is this good.

He knew that whatever kind of luck he had, it would never net him a jackpot in a place like this.

That...that brat must've done something...set me up...!

In other words, this was proof that he was undoubtedly being drawn into something bigger, and that the smiling boy before his eyes had led him into drawing the shortest of short straws.

While Neider was still lost in his thoughts, another young man appeared as if to confirm his premonition.

"Congratulations, sir!"

Huh? Is that...the kid I saw in the office earlier? He just called me "sir"....maybe he is related to an employee here. But why would he come and talk to me?

Neider was thoroughly confused as the young man in the pale green suit politely offered his hand.

"I'm Firo Prochainezo, the manager here. We appreciate that you brought such good luck with you here to our establishment. We can only pray that we will share in your good fortune."

Anyone who knew Firo would have exploded with laughter at this point ("What's with the hoity-toity bullshit all of a sudden? Bahahaha!"), but Neider had never met him before and only became more confused.

Huh? Th-this kid is the manager?! ...How old is he, anyway?!

One doubt rose up after another, inundating his mind and threatening to crush him, but Neider barely held his ground and said what he needed to say.

"Uh, no, y-you've got it wrong..."

"What do I have wrong, sir?"

"That kid just now, he—"

Neider turned to point to the boy who had given him the token, but when he turned around, he had already disappeared into the crowd that had formed around the machine.

That—that son of a bitch! I knew it!

That kid...he just screwed me hard, didn't he!

A normal person might have thought he was an angel bearing good luck.

But to Neider, he was the plague itself, bringing the worst kind of unwanted attention. He even began to wonder if whatever trouble he was being drawn into had anything to do with the money he had just won at all.

"Did something happen?"

"Ah, no...nothing happened."

Neider looked a little pale, but Firo continued with a refreshing smile plastered on his face.

"By the way, sir...may I ask you who introduced you to our casino?"

It wasn't completely invitation-only, but nobody just wandered into an gambling den on a lark. For one thing, there were no signs pointing the way, and for another the entrance was disguised to look like the back door of a general store.

As Neider hurriedly thought of how to answer, he remembered that Firo's name wasn't completely unfamiliar to him.

Th-that's right. Yeah. Ladd said he had a buddy named Firo who worked here.

This kid?!

"L-Ladd! Ladd Russo! He said you two were friends!"

Neider gave the name with a wide smile, thinking it would save him, but—

On the contrary, Firo's smile froze, and it was obvious that he was struggling to keep the corners of his mouth where they were.



What kind of a reaction is that?! Aren't they friends?

Neider had a very bad feeling that Ladd's story might not have been entirely true.

"Then...I guess that means he's been released," Firo said coldly. "Is that correct, sir?"

<=>

Casino
In front of the entrance

"What are you going to do, Ennis? Are you going in?"

"Well...I don't want to interfere with Firo's work..."

Ennis stood in the road in front of Firo's casino, hesitant about whether she should go in after all. She looked at the entrance uncomfortably.

Annie pushed her a little.

"It's alright, Ennis! We can just go in as regular customers, so you should go on in!"

"But if something were to happen, it could become dangerous. Czes, Annie, the two of you should probably go..."

But Annie cut her off, grabbing Ennis' face and pulling on her cheeks.

"Hwat are you hoing?"

"Come onnn, Ennis! If it does get dangerous, you'll be in just as much trouble as us, right?"

Annie let go of Ennis' cheeks and put her hands on her hips. "You're just a frail, helpless girl, same as me! So the conditions should be the same!"

"Conditions? What conditions?"

"..."

The wind picked up for a moment, blowing soundlessly between them.

Ennis tilted her head in confusion, and Annie's face flushed a little.

The vague silence was broken when a man dashed between them, disappearing into the casino. Annie took this as an opportunity to speak.

"Argghh! You and Firo just don't care at all, do you?!"

"I'm sorry...I'm not sure what you're talking about, and maybe we've caused some trouble for you...but I know that Firo does care. He's very serious person, and very considerate of those around him."

"..."

The two seemed to be talking on completely different wavelengths. At this rate they wouldn't actually get inside the casino until tomorrow morning, but—

"Hey, you two, I think we have more important things to worry about..."

Czes broke the tension between them with a completely different topic.

"That man who went inside just now looked like he had a really big gun..."

<=>

Inside the casino

Ronnie silently watched Firo and the customer in front of the slot machine from the foot of the stairs.

Jacuzzi and Christopher were clapping in congratulations along with everyone around them, but Firo didn't seem to have noticed them.

The two youngsters just looked at each other soberly, although Ricardo gave a few claps to be polite.

"He won the jackpot! That's amazing! I wish I could do something like that..." Jacuzzi was a little envious.

"Doesn't look too happy about it, though. By the way, is that kid with him supposed to be Firo?" Rail smirked.

Ronnie quickly held a finger to his lips.

"He does have a baby-face, and quite a complex to go with it," he said quietly. "If you don't want a beating, I would advise you not to say that to his face. His temper isn't so out of control that he would seriously hurt a child, but his feelings will be hurt, that's for sure."

"...Hmph. I'll try not to piss him off, then," Rail replied flippantly. However, Ronnie was serious enough that Rail stopped smiling and looked away.

"Wait, so...is he actually older than us...?"

Fortunately, Firo didn't hear the question. If he had, Jacuzzi would have been unconscious before he even had a chance to start crying.

Ronnie opened his mouth, but the answer never came.

That instant, the casino employee who had stood guard at the door fell noisily down the steps they had just come down a moment ago.

<=>

"So Ladd introduced you to this place?" Firo asked, rubbing his forehead.

Neider looked unsure of how to answer, but suddenly there was a violent noise from the entrance. The boy with the tattoo let out a screech.

"What happened?"

Firo looked towards the bottom of the stairs, and the first thing he saw was a strange, red-eyed man. The man bared his teeth in a fiendish smile and waved a hand in greeting.

...

...the heck!? "...Christopher?!"

What the hell is he doing here?

At first he thought his unconscious employees were Christopher's doing, but it looked as if they had been knocked out at the top of the stairs, and sent rolling down them only a moment ago...

And that moment, he saw a man coming down the stairs, clinging a Tommy gun like a man possessed.

Firo recognized him.

It was the cheat he had thrown out of the casino only a little while ago. A few of the *picciottos* were supposed to drag him down to the Martillo family's main office, but it looked like the man had gotten away en route.

"YA FACKIN' MAFYAA BASAAAAAA!!!"

The man's voice was still a little damaged, but his intent was clear as he fired wildly into the ceiling.

At the sound of gunfire, the patrons started shouting in panic, running every which way for cover.

This son of a bitch just doesn't know when to quit!

Tommy guns weren't easy to come by. It was possible he got one so quickly because he was connected with a nearby mafia, but Firo knew better. No mafia would take revenge for beating up a swindler by doing something so incredibly stupid.

Does this guy have a death wish? Did I piss him off that much?

Or...does he think he could get away from us? Doesn't matter.

He'll regret the day he was born when I'm through with him.

"Uwaaaaa!!"

Jacuzzi shrieked in panic at the gunshots immediately behind him.

Rail and Ricardo didn't even move to cover their ears, and Christopher just looked to Firo, eyes sparkling with excitement as he waited to see what he would do.

Ronnie did nothing to disarm the intruder, either, perhaps refraining from revealing his powers in front of such a large number of people.

It didn't look like the man who had fallen down the stairs was shot beforehand, but probably threatened with the gun and kicked down the stairs. He was only unconscious.

Ronnie let out a sigh of relief.

Well then, what to do.

Maybe I should just take him down and disarm him like a normal human.

If push came to shove, he could make the gun itself disappear from the man's hand, but in front of all these customers—especially gamblers—he wouldn't be able to play it off as "sleight of hand" like he had with Jacuzzi's gang.

From time to time, he would act like the knife-fighting expert who had passed his skills on to Firo. He reached in his jacket for his knife, but then he saw something that made him stop.

Well, well. I suppose it's none of my business after all.

No matter.

Ronnie smiled slightly and sighed as a woman, dressed in a black men's suit, came flying down the stairs.

"Ah!" "Ah?" "Aah!" "Uh..." "...Oh."

Including Firo, Neider, Jacuzzi, and Rail, almost everyone except for the shooter let out some sort of cry of surprise.

The man realized instantly that everyone's attention was suddenly on some point above him, but it was too late. Before he could turn his head to see what was the matter, he felt a sharp pain shooting through his shoulder.

The woman had landed with her right foot on his collarbone, and she deftly plucked the gun, still pointed at the ceiling, out of his hand.

The man's collarbone cracked under her weight with an uncomfortable *snap*, and the next instant his shoulder sagged in a way it was never meant to. The man opened his mouth to scream from the pain when the butt of the gun slammed into it, knocking out his teeth.

He was unconscious before he even saw what hit him.

The man was skillfully subdued in the blink of an eye.

The customers who had shouted were dumbfounded for a moment—and in the next, they began to clap enthusiastically for the woman who had saved them, much more than when Neider had set off the slot machine.

Ennis ignored the accolade and looked around the casino restlessly. When her eyes finally landed on Firo, she breathed a sigh of relief.

On the other hand, Firo was wondering what on earth Ennis was doing here, but his first priority was to make sure she was uninjured as well. She appeared fine, however, and he gave his own sigh of relief.

"...Hm? It's over? Already? And here I thought we were going to be treated to a spectacular show!"

Christopher asked, the lone voice of discontent in the room. Firo decided he would ask him all about the circumstances later, and looked over towards the staircase again. He stiffened when he saw Ronnie.

Ahh, damn! Ronnie just saw me screw up big time...

Firo hadn't actually made any mistakes himself, but as the one in charge of the casino, he couldn't think of an incident like this as anything other than a blot on his record. Even if it was a small one.

However, now was not the time to beat himself up. He had to take care of the situation itself first. He raised his voice.

"I apologize for the disturbance, everyone! The police may come thanks to the

gunshots just now, so we're going to exchange all the chips now and conclude our business for today."

Police.

At that word, the customers' faces changed instantly.

"I apologize to those of you on a winning streak or if you were trying to turn things around, but rest assured you will be properly compensated tomorrow. We appreciate your understanding in this matter."

Before Firo could finish his sentence, everyone was scrambling for the exchange counter, pushing each other out of the way, and the ones who had already lost all their chips made a mad dash for the door.

Firo certainly wasn't happy with the situation, but he didn't have time to complain.

He noticed that a lot of customers had decided that it wasn't worth the risk and left some of their chips behind.

Dammit, we're gonna lose half our clientele thanks to this, Firo thought as he tried to keep the fray under control.

Trust was especially important to the underworld casinos.

There were plenty of organizations all over Manhattan with their own casinos. If a customer decided there was anything they didn't like about a particular place, no matter how small, they could just go to any of the other options.

I need to do something to win back their trust...

Firo grit his teeth, when suddenly he heard Ennis' voice behind him.

"Are you alright, Firo?"

Firo decided to play it cool with a line like, *"Save it for later. I'm working and I have to get my customers outta here,"* but when he turned around and faced her, his mind went blank. "Er...yeah. I'm fine. You're not hurt, are you?"

He only realized after he said it what a stupid question that was to ask an immortal.

"I am fine. When I heard the gunshots earlier, I thought someone might have been hurt, so..."

"Nah, he just shot into the air. The ceiling here is a lot tougher than the one at Alveare, so they probably didn't even punch through," Firo said. He turned back to

directing the customers, but—

"Hey, Firo. I must say, that was quite a disaster. Or is this a daily occurrence?"

A familiar red-eyed monster popped out from behind Ennis.

"...Christopher...what are you doing here?"

Firo's deep displeasure showed on his face. He decided to handle the situation properly while he continued to help everyone leave.

Christopher's shoulders slumped dramatically at Firo's attitude. "You're terrible. Is that how you treat your best friend after such a long time?"

"No, because we're not best friends."

"No need to be so snippy. I'll be working with you from now on, after all."

"Excuse me?"

Firo stopped guiding the customers for a moment and turned to face Christopher.

"What are you talking about? Don't tell me you're planning to pull something like that stunt at the Mist Wall again, are you?"

"Oh, that's up to you."

Firo rubbed his temples as Christopher continued to beat around the bush, when a small figure appeared next to him and broke into the conversation.

"It's nice to meet you, Firo Prochainezo."

"...?"

He didn't look much older than Czes.

What is he doing here?

"My name is Ricardo Russo," the boy explained evenly. "Christopher and I will be working as your subordinates by Mr. Martillo's orders. I hope we can be of use to you."

"Huh?"

Ricardo...Russo? The don's orders? And they're my subordinates? Christopher too?

Firo had no idea what was what, but the name Russo reminded him of the man who had just hit 777 on the slots.

"Right, where is he...look, uh, I-I'll talk to you later so just hold on a sec," Firo said to Ricardo, a little flustered. He looked around for the man who had won the jackpot just a minute ago, and found him at the exchange counter, about to get cash for his tokens.

Firo dashed over towards him.

Ricardo watched Firo go. "Talk to me later?" she muttered. Her eyes were slightly glazed, as if she were not looking at the casino, but somewhere else entirely. "We're not going to have time to talk later."

<=>

Outside the casino In front of the entrance

"I wonder if Miss Ennis is okay."

"Well, the gunshots stopped. She's probably fine, right?"

The customers rushed out of the entrance to the casino and scattered every which way.

"But you could hear the shots clearly out here. The police will get here soon."

"Oh, I don't know about that. The police are pretty busy, after all."

"?"

Czes and Annie continued their conversation, when a light, easy voice addressed them from behind.

"Hey there, kid, Miss. I heard some loud firecrackers around here earlier, was that down there?"

"Uh..." Czes turned around and stiffened.

Behind him were a number of men and one woman, one of whom he recognized.

The man also seemed to realize something as he saw Czes. He furrowed his brows and smiled.

"Hm? You look familiar, kid. Have I seen you before?"

He looked at Czes and thought quietly for a few more seconds, but before he could remember Czes completely, he turned towards the casino.

"Well, whatever. Right now I've got a party to show up to."

Out of the corner of his eye, the man noticed Annie glaring daggers at him and paused for a moment.

"I haven't met you before, have I?" he asked.

Annie remained completely silent. She just radiated hostility, as if he was an enemy of not only her, but her entire family.

"What, did I kill your boyfriend somewhere or something? Sorry about that if I did. I'm not gonna think about it too deeply, though."

The man looked like he was enjoying her glare, and headed back toward the stairs with his companions in tow.

"Looks like you really do have some sort of grudge against me. Sorry, doll, if you wanna kill me, you're gonna have to join the party down there with me."

<=>

In the casino

"...You weren't thinking you could leave just like that, were you, sir?"

Neider had just finished exchanging his chips, but when he turned around there was Firo blocking his way, grinning fiercely. Of course, the smile came nowhere near his eyes.

Most of the twenty-some customers had already escaped, and the other employees had carefully tied up the troublemaker from earlier.

Neider cradled his mass of money, and shook his head imploringly.

"H-heh...just wait a second. You can look into it all ya want, I wasn't cheating!"

"Well, let's leave that for now. I'm interested in the one who introduced you to this place. Ladd."

Christopher watched the two from a little ways and shook his head in boredom.

"Well, this isn't what I was expecting. I thought it would be a little more like, hmmm, Russian roulette with gatling guns or something."

"...That's because Firo isn't a complete numbskull."

"When you become the boss, Ricardo, you should make a casino that shows respect for nature. Like a slot machine that's a giant waterfall, or a tornado roulette."

"I don't plan on becoming a numbskull anytime soon either, you know," Ricardo answered moodily. After a moment, she spoke to Christopher again. "By the way, Christopher."

"What's the matter?"

"You may want to turn around."

"?"

Ricardo didn't turn around herself, but Chris did as he was told—

And saw a silver disc spinning toward him with incredible speed.

It was deja vu, the same scene as the one in the restaurant at the end of last year.

Christopher's vision was sharp enough to tell that the object was not actually a disc, but a giant wrench, spinning in a perfect circle so fast that it looked like a solid disc.

At the same time, he noticed a familiar man in blue work clothes on the staircase, grinning madly.

"Hup."

Christopher returned his own fiendish smile at the mass of death flying toward him and kicked the wrench up with incredible power. The dull sound of impact rang out, as the wrench's trajectory changed towards the ceiling.

"What was that?"

"Hn..?"

Firo and Neider noticed the commotion and turned around. Christopher and the man in blue on the staircase stood grinning madly and glaring at each other, with a wrench in midair between them. It was a difficult picture to make sense of.

The next moment, the wrench fell on the bound, unconscious cheater from earlier, bouncing from his back and hitting the floor with a loud clang.

"Guhbwah?!"

The man was still unconscious when he shouted, indicating his spine may have taken some damage in the process.

The few remaining customers turned to see what all the noise was about.

Graham hopped onto the banister and skillfully stood on it with perfect balance. "This is fun...Let me tell you a fun story!" he declared at the top of his voice, heedless of the wary stares of everyone nearby.

"I stepped into this casino today in order to gamble...I once heard a casino is a spectrum of the human experience, a gambling room where humanity comes together to stave off harsh reality for a time, but...if so, what a win I raked in! To think I would reunite with my fated, inevitable, unavoidable rival AKA that red-eyed bastard who just pisses me off for some reason in a place like this!"

As Graham launched into his long-winded tirade, he took out a regular-sized wrench hanging at his waist and juggled it around and around so fast the air sang.

"If reunions are the jackpot, and I just reunited with Ladd again, that's two wins in a row! I'm on a regular winning streak! ...Aw, man, it feels just like I drew two lucky sevens...now all I need is a third...Yes! On the day I'm reunited with my long-lost sister, I'll have my three lucky seven cards and then I'll win at the slots and get a blackjack hand on the first round and can there *be* a story more fun than that?!" Graham shouted, his wrench matching his rhythm as it flew back and forth between his hands.

"In other words, I'll need some chips, so I'm gonna rip out all your teeth and bet them instead! Is that okay with you?!"

With that, he launched off of the banister, heading straight towards Christopher. The astounding power behind Graham's jump covered the few meters between them easily. Graham twisted in midair and brought the wrench down towards

Christopher with both hands, not losing an ounce of momentum.

But Christopher dodged it by a hair's breadth and leapt to the side. "Wow! Your narcissism is almost touching! I don't know what to do!" He kicked off the floor and slanted his body into a diagonal flying roundhouse kick.

Graham dramatically threw himself backwards into a bridge stance and threw a wrench towards the airborne Christopher.

Christopher caught it easily and landed skillfully as a gymnast.

"I guess not. You should stop gambling and take up a more steady line of work. Who knows, maybe your sister will come back!"

"Wha...she would...?! Yes! I understand! I'll turn my life around! I won't gamble another day in my life!"

Christopher was trying to provoke Graham, but the mechanic took him seriously.

Graham threw himself forward from his bridge posture, and the momentum carried him into a completely pointless series of somersaults over to where the giant wrench had fallen. He picked the wrench up and held it in a dual-wielding stance with the smaller wrench.

He clanged them together like a drummer signaling the start of a song and flew towards Christopher again.

"By the way, what do you think I should call my sister when she comes back? She was my first love once upon a time, you know, so should I call her "Sis" or "Boss Sis" or "Sister" or "Honey" or "Old Hag"...? Another gamble, what a rush! If she gets offended, maybe she'll dislocate my neck with her bare hands!"

Graham moved his mouth just as fast as his hands.

Christopher answered with delight, either dodging blows by a hair's breadth or blocking with the wrench in his right hand.

"Wow, you're stupid! But I don't mind! Even with all your wisdom and knowledge, it's the way of humanity to face the consequences of the gambles they take. You can never escape from fate! ...In other words, it's the very instinct of your species, and what can be more natural than that! For humans, this casino is like the forest, the fields, and the great deep of the ocean!"

Of course, Christopher continued to spout his own peculiar theories.

Their minds were equally broken, but in such a way they would always grate against

each other, like a pair of ill-formed gears.

The warped clashes and clangs of the misfit cogs scared all of the normal people, and even those who hadn't gotten their money yet started dashing for the door.

The battle became more and more intense, with the screams of frantically escaping patrons serving as an appropriate background music.

Everyone watching processed the scene in their own way. Ronnie just listened to them with considerable interest. Rail pulled out a bomb from inside her jacket, whispering about helping Chris before Jacuzzi tearfully stopped her. A flustered Ennis was running this way and that, still unable to take in the whole situation.

Firo was completely nonplussed by the whole situation at first, but he came back to himself with a start as he heard his customers screaming and running for the exit.

He still wasn't entirely sure what was going on, but Firo knew the reputation of this casino would go down the drain if he didn't stop this melodramatic wrench fight.

"Hey, hey, hey! Stop it! For the love of God, just stop, dammit!" he shouted.

Whether they could hear him or not, Christopher and the man in blue made no move to end their battle.

Firo decided to stop the fight by any means necessary and reached into his jacket for his knife.

But Ricardo grabbed his arm from next to him and spoke. "I think you should leave them alone. They'll wear themselves out and stop soon enough."

"But if I wait until they stop, they're going to completely destroy the casino..." Firo coolly disagreed with the young man standing next to him, but Ricardo just looked to the top of the stairs.

"More importantly, shouldn't you be worried about him?"

"Huh?" Firo's gaze moved along with Ricardo's.

His face hardened as he saw a much more worrisome source of trouble than the two violent figures in front of him. That source smiled his way happily. Delightedly.

"Hey, there, Peter Pan. It's been two months or so, right?"

"...Ladd. So you're out, are you."

The man he had met in Alcatraz was standing in front of him. It was his first time seeing Ladd out of his prison uniform, but the dangerous atmosphere surrounding him was even more intense than it was when they were incarcerated together.

"Yeah, just got out today. So, this your Neverland? Nice, nice. The kids who never grow up can come here and gamble forever. Pretty interesting! What do you think, Lua?"

"I think it's a wonderful world."

The woman standing behind Ladd smiled softly at his words.

Aah, um....Right, that's Ladd's fiancée. She's prettier than I thought.

When Firo had first heard about Lua in prison, she had been taken hostage by Sham and Hilton. He was a little relieved to see in person that she was safe and reunited with Ladd.

But the next moment, he remembered this was no time to be relieved.

"So, did you bring that guy in the blue there? Make him stop!"

"Hahaha, no can do. When he gets like that, you can't stop him unless you douse him in alcohol. Even though he doesn't kill, he's better than me in a fight," Ladd replied instantly.

Firo held his head in his hands. "Fine, then I'll stop them."

"Whoo! What're you gonna do, stop that spinning with your neck? Pretty rough job, managin' a casino."

Ladd was just enjoying the show from the sidelines. He sighed lightly and looked at the situation again, not knowing or caring that Firo was more pissed off than ever.

They were moving much faster than any ordinary person. Firo only knew five people at most who could stop them directly. Although the fact that he knew five of them at all meant that Firo was practically surrounded by unusual people anyway.

One of them was Ronnie, who was simply watching Christopher's fight with interest. As Firo was the one in charge, he didn't plan to do anything other than make sure the customers could escape safely.

And Firo's youthful pride completely erased any possibility of him throwing himself

at Ronnie to ask for help while Ennis was watching.

Firo cautiously approached the fight. Behind Firo, Neider spoke to Ladd.

"Didn't you go to that hospital to see your friend?"

"They're takin' the day off."

The answer was so straightforward, Neider didn't doubt it for a second. Shaft seemed worn out, but Neider wasn't interested enough to ask.

The next moment, Ladd noticed the cash filling Neider's arms. "...Hey, hey. Really? What the hell happened here! That's at least ten times as much as what I gave ya! Isn't this interesting! The hell, you've been holdin' out on me, Neider, you bastard! You a cardsharp or somethin'? Was my uncle after you for rippin' off his casinos?"

"...Ripping off casinos, huh?" Firo slowly turned back around, his gaze boring into Neider.

"N-no! I'm telling you, I didn't cheat! The big troublemaker in Chicago is Pamela, isn't it?" Neider shouted desperately, just as Graham slammed his wrench into the floor with a violent clang.

Ladd didn't seem to mind, instead focusing on the name "Pamela."

"Hn? Ohhh, yeah! That's right! Pamela, Pamela. Yeah, my uncle put a bounty on her, too, but she ran off somewhere. Wonder what she's doing these days?"

Most of those around Ladd weren't familiar with the goings-on in Chicago, so they couldn't continue the conversation. One person did have an answer, however.

"If you're talking about Pamela, I heard she robbed a museum somewhere and is on the run from the police."

"Yeah?" Ladd turned his gaze to the owner of the voice, and his expression suddenly brightened. "Oh, Ricardo! That you? Hell, I don't see you for a few years and you're all grown up. I heard you inherited the Russo Family. Big job for a kid."

"Did you want it?"

"Nah, don't need it. I never got along too well with my uncle's crew anyways. Most importantly, if I became the boss, I couldn't work as a hitman." Ladd's work as a hitman was more of a hobby to him than a job, and if he was the boss he would be giving the orders, not doing the work. "But, I heard all that's left is you and the red-eyed freak. If you ever need a hit, just let me know. I'll give ya a discount, since we're

family."

"...I don't plan on following in my grandfather's footsteps." Ricardo shook her head silently. In her eyes there was no hatred, but clear denial. Simply put, the Russo Family she would build from here on out would have no need for people like Ladd. Ricardo made her declaration of intent before Ladd himself.

But, Ladd didn't seem particularly displeased and answered with a smile.

"Ha! So you're going for the honorable Mafia, are ya? Well, you're better than my uncle. Here's hopin' I can get some freelance work here in New York," Ladd said, descending the stairs, watching the scene unfold at the bottom, but—

He suddenly noticed a young man trembling in the corner, staring at him with wide eyes.

The instant he saw the tattoo on the boy's face, Ladd remembered him perfectly. "Oh? Jacuzzi Splot, was it?"

"Eep!"

H-he remembers me!

Jacuzzi's face blanched in despair and sweat poured down his back at hearing his name. He had known they would meet sooner or later, but not so suddenly in a place like this.

"Hey, hey, I just came to see my pal Firo! What is this, a surprise party or somethin'? Never thought I'd get to see the don of the Russos *and* our infamous bounty Jacuzzi."

Ladd casually walked down the stairs, and ambled confidently over towards Jacuzzi.

Fi-Firo only seems to know scary people...what's going on?! Jacuzzi himself was the proverbial pot calling a kettle black as he answered, voice trembling.

"Um, he...hello. Long time no see."

"Back on that train, ah—what was it again? 'I'll make sure you pay for this' or something like that? That what you told me?"

"Eeeek?!"

He remembered that, too?!

"So, how're you gonna do that? You gonna do it right here? Right now?" he pressed, trying to get a rise out of Jacuzzi.

Jacuzzi himself began to shake uncontrollably, through his whole body.

Just apologize,
whispered a voice at the bottom of his heart.

But that impulse remained only in his heart. Reason told him that if he threw himself at Ladd's feet, begging for forgiveness, offering to do anything Ladd wanted if he would just forget the whole thing, he may not lose his life.

But the memory of Jack's bloodied face, nearly dead gave Jacuzzi the strength to suppress his instincts with all his might. Jacuzzi's eyes teared up, but instead of crying he shouted back. "I...I'm thinking about it! I hope you're looking forward to it!"

It was a ridiculous answer. Even Firo and Neider, to say nothing of Ladd himself, stared at Jacuzzi in shock, mouths agape.

"Just like I thought. You're interesting, kid, I'll give ya that. I'm glad I let you live back on that train. Aren't you?"

"..."

Jacuzzi had no idea how to respond, but Graham called out to Ladd from his fight.

"Oh yeah, Boss Ladd! I have to talk to you about Jacuzzi later, so don't kill him, okay? He's my friend! ...Wait, what's he doing here, anyway?" Graham stopped his onslaught for a moment and started muttering to himself. "Should I treat this as my third and final reunion? I mean, I *did* just see him recently, but..."

It seemed like a perfect opening for Christopher, but he didn't use the opportunity to attack.

He grinned and raised the wrench in his hand—

And threw it as hard as he could at Ladd, who had his back to them.

"Ah, look out!"

But the one who warned Ladd was his enemy, Jacuzzi. The already-pale young man paled even more now as he shouted.

At his cry, Ladd held up his left arm and spun around.

That moment, a peculiar clang rang out from the impact of Ladd's steel arm and the wrench flying toward his head, muted by the fabric of his jacket.

"Thanks, kid. I owe ya one," Ladd said, cracking his neck.

On the other hand, the wrench Ladd had sent flying was now headed towards Rail. Rail moved to dodge it, but Ennis appeared in front of her and kicked it away.

"..."

"Are you okay?"

"...You didn't need to do that," Rail said moodily.

But Ennis looked at Rail and smiled in relief.

"Good...You're okay."

"...!" Rail's expression clouded.

"Wow, Rail, you're pretty bad at dealing with things like that, aren't you?" Christopher forgot about the mess he had been causing just a moment ago and smirked.

On the other hand, Graham's smile had completely disappeared.

"...Hm? Why did you attack Boss Ladd?" he asked, head tilted to the side.

"I just wondered what you would do if I attacked someone you cared about."

"...That's it?"

"That's it." Christopher smiled carelessly.

Graham was radiating bloodlust from every pore, but—

A chill ran down his back as he sensed an overwhelming bloodlust from behind, enough to suppress even his.

"I see, that's an easy enough reason to understand. I'll bite." Ladd smiled gleefully, ecstatically. "In other words, I can join you two, right?"

"Do whatever you want~ ♪" "Boss Ladd, this is my fight..."

Christopher and Graham both spoke at once, but Ladd didn't hear either one of them.

Jacuzzi, Ennis, and Rail all felt a chill as they looked at Ladd's face—his bloodthirsty smile.

There was no helping the excitement he felt at being able to direct it at someone—his twisted pleasure was self-sustainable.

"H-hey now..."

Firo opened his mouth to stop him, but instead it just served as a signal for Ladd to kick off the ground.

One step.

They were separated by five meters of space, yet Christopher's defensive stance was undone by a single step.

"Hey, there, you red-eyed bastard."

Ladd had approached low to the ground. In the moment it took to wonder if he really just said hello, Ladd launched up a powerful right jab.

"?!"

The first attack was unbelievably fast for a man as big as Ladd.



Christopher instantly drew back, overwhelmed by speed worthy of a professional ring.

But Ladd took another step forward as soon as his right arm was fully extended. In the blink of an eye, he had gone from trying to punch Chris to grabbing his throat with the same right arm.

The image that came to Christopher's mind in that moment was his throat being crushed in a giant pair of pliers.

Hm? Am I going to die? Here?

Christopher kicked upwards to try and release the crushing pressure from his throat, but at the same moment, Ladd kicked off the floor again.

Still holding Christopher's throat, Ladd sprang forward and swung him around easily, like a bucket full of water.

The speed was high enough to dislocate a normal person's vertebrae, but immediately afterwards he slammed Christopher's body into the roulette with all his might, splitting it clean in half.

"*What the hell are you doing you idiot!!!*" Firo shrieked, thinking of the cost and the time it would take to repair the roulette. He didn't seem particularly concerned for Christopher, though. He knew he wouldn't die from something like this.

In fact, even as Christopher's throat was being crushed as he lay between the two halves of the roulette, the smile never disappeared from his face.

Seeing that smile, Ladd asked to make sure. "Hey, you thinking you're not gonna die here?"

"Well, I don't know. If I died, then that would mean I was just a normal human after all, right?"

"Good, you're just as dumb as I thought."

Ladd raised his left arm.

If he just let gravity do its work, the metal arm alone would do considerable damage. Adding Ladd's power behind it would be fatal.

"Chris...!" Rail pulled something from her pocket to save Chris.

"N-no, Rail!" Jacuzzi cried.

For his part, Graham was waving his wrench frantically in protest at his boss and brother.

"Hey, Boss Ladd, stop! Seriously! He's mine! If you take him, I won't have an outlet for my sad story and I'll have no choice but to take apart all the slot machines in the casino!"

What the...why?! Firo thought, although he had already dashed forward to stop Ladd.

And right as he did, he noticed something.

Christopher wasn't going to be done in so easily—he had slowly stretched out one of his hands and seized a splinter of the roulette from the floor. He was probably planning to stab Ladd when he brought his arm down.

No matter who won, one of them was going to die in the next instant.

Firo could never let something like that happen. Even if the nature of their friendship was severely warped, friends were still friends, and this was his casino. If it came down to it, he would throw himself in between the two and take both of their attacks himself, but—

There was a sound.

A magnificent orchestra of bells echoed through the room, stopping time all at once.

Huh?

Firo knew exactly what that sound was.

He had just heard it a few minutes ago. There was no mistaking the jingle of the highest payout on one of the new slot machines.

How many planets had to align to get two of those in a row?

Hell, who had been playing the slots in the casino in the first place?

It wasn't just Firo. Almost everyone left in the casino looked towards the slot machine with doubt after doubt in their minds.

Two men were standing next to the rightmost of seven slot machines.

One had a face that made him look between boy and man, probably around the same age as Firo looked.

Yeah, I've seen him somewhere before, Firo thought suddenly.

He had caught sight of the boy earlier, but he hadn't watched him closely because he looked familiar—

...Hold up. I know I've seen that face before...but...huh...what? He's not a regular, here, is he.

He had dismissed him as just one in the crowd earlier, but now that he was looking directly at him, something about his face nagged at Firo's mind. Something buried in the deepest depths of his heart.

Who is he...? Who is this guy?

Still in doubt, Firo turned to the other man.

The sullen man wore thick, heavy glasses and a hat low over his face so that it was hidden in shadow. Thanks to that and the beard around his mouth, his age was unclear.

Who is this guy? I've never seen him before. Since when has he been here?

He should have at least some memory of someone with such a beard. It wasn't exactly subtle.

The bearded man was completely silent. He didn't even shift as Firo watched him doubtfully.

The younger boy smiled warmly, striking a sharp contrast to his companion as he looked around at everyone else, and clapped his hands as the orchestra of slot machines came to an end.

"Bravo, bravo! What an interesting show!"

The youth called the savage near-fight-to-the-death a "show." The others weren't sure how to react to his strange frankness, but Ladd just smiled and scratched his head.

"Who the hell are you?"

The youth bowed politely, like a butler, and gave his name for the benefit of everyone in the casino, including Ladd. "Pardon me. My name is Melvi."

"Melvi? That's a stupid-ass name. If you enjoyed the show so much, why don't cha pay for it like you're supposed to?"

"Pay for it? Hm...Well, how's this?"

He reached over towards a slot machine to his right and scooped up a handful of the tokens flowing from the machine.

"That's not enough, kid. Pissin' me off ain't cheap, you know. You can't con me with that."

Graham drew a sharp breath and spoke to Shaft and Lua, who were now downstairs.

"Shaft, Lua, this is bad...Truly, exceptionally bad. That Melvi kid is the type Ladd hates the most."

"...It seems so," Lua mumbled. Shaft nodded in assent and held his head in his hands.

The people Ladd hated the most were the type who lived without a thought of the possibility of death, and that their importance would last forever.

And this boy had just stood and watched the violence until now without a hint of

fear or resignation towards his own death, and just called what he had witnessed a "show." He acted as if he were the god of this space, the attitude that made Ladd's instincts as a homicidal maniac throb harder than anything else.

Shaft tried to analyze this boy, but he could find nothing about him, not even within Sham's vast knowledge.

Melvi smiled, a little troubled. He pulled out one of the cheapest tokens from his pocket, put it into the second slot machine to his right, and pulled the lever with one smooth, elegant motion.

"?"

Firo and the others furrowed their brows in confusion as the reels spun.

But, while they still spun, Melvi took out another token and put it into the third machine and pulled the lever the same way. Then the one in the middle.

At that point, the first "7" appeared on the second machine from the right.

The instant he saw it, Firo couldn't help the dread rising from the pit of his stomach.

No way...

The moment the reels on the fifth machine began to spin, the second reel on the second machine and the first reel on the third machine stopped, both at the number "7."

No damn way.

And he realized that something was going to happen with the entire line of slots.

When he had pulled the lever on the fifth machine, Melvi took another step forward, as if he were on stage, and bowed politely for the second time.

But this time, it was not directed towards Ladd. It was towards Firo.

And that moment, the third reel on the second machine came to a stop, with three "7"s in a perfect line.

The machine began to play its mechanical song of good fortune.

A few seconds later, the third and fourth machine began to play one after another, and the songs became a canon.

The sixth machine from the right landed on the three sevens, and Melvi's miracle

was complete.

Namely, including the machine Neider had won from in the left corner, and the one he had used to stop Ladd, all seven slot machines, on the same day, in the same instant, had landed on the highest payout.

But of course, Firo knew better. The only one who would call it a miracle was an complete moron who didn't know the meaning of the word "doubt," a messenger from God, or the person who had done the cheating himself.

"You bastard..."

Ladd wasn't the only one who saw him as an enemy. Firo glared at the boy, surrounded by a razor-sharp atmosphere.

But Melvi returned that glare with an affable smile and spread his arms wide while the machines played their instrumental ensemble, as if to symbolize that he was the master of the huge number of coins spilling from the machines.

And when the noise finally stopped, he addressed Firo amicably. "I wanted to see more of your show, everyone, but...if I let it go on too long, I wouldn't have any time to greet you."

"After all, you'll be coming to see me soon, as well."

<=>

Outside the casino

"It's finally quiet...I should go in now..."

"Miss Annie, you shouldn't. There were some pretty loud noises in there before, weren't there?"

Annie had made to go in after Ennis, but Czes stopped her. Annie was at a loss whether she should go in or not, and periodically muttered things like "If I had a stronger vessel" or "If I lose this vessel..." but half of it never reached Czes' ears.

Thanks to her mumblings, Czes figured she was so scared she was getting confused. In the meantime, he worked his brain to find a plan that would keep her outside on standby.

Ennis, Firo, and himself were immortal, but Annie was not. He didn't know much about her, but he knew that at least. Things that wouldn't be problematic for them would certainly be for her.

And he wanted to watch Ennis and her duke it out over Firo somewhere not quite so dangerous.

As an immortal child, he had no direct experience with matters of love, and probably never would. He wanted to see Firo get dragged around by two girls, as one of his few pleasures in life.

Yes, Czes' nefarious thought process was just that he didn't want to lose a particularly valuable plaything.

However, what goes around comes around.

Czes was looking for a little sadistic pleasure in watching his flatmate suffer woman troubles, but he received a suitable retribution instead.

That is, he himself was about to have his own girl troubles.

"Oh my goodness, Czes! ...Is that you, Czes?"

"Huh?"

Czes reacted instinctively to the voice that suddenly addressed him.

He turned around to see a young lady, a little older than Czes.

"Oh, good. It really *is* you!"

She sounded a little worried that she had mistaken him for someone else. The timid-voiced girl sighed with relief and smiled at Czes.

"...Mary?" he asked automatically.

Mary Beriam.

Senator Beriam's daughter had been taken hostage by the group in black suits aboard the Flying Pussyfoot. Czes played with her on board the train, using her as camouflage, part of his guise as a little boy. The fact that she still remembered him after three years indicated that the deep impact of the incident had left him in her heart as well.

It was too late for him to pretend she had mistaken him for someone else. She took his hands and looked down at the boy, who was now shorter than her.

"Oh, Czes...were you always shorter than me?"

It was a childish, innocent question.

Czes gave an appropriate answer, even as he broke out in a cold sweat. "I-I haven't hit my growth spurt yet! I'll get taller! You'll see! It's kinda embarrassing, so don't talk about it, okay?"

"Ah...I-I'm so sorry, Czes! ...I...I was just so excited..."

Her timidity was the same as it was three years ago, but Mary had grown up, from a little girl to a young lady in her early teens.

"But...I'm really grateful for what you did back then...! If you hadn't given me so much courage, I...I might have died on that train..." With that, Mary pulled Czes into a tight embrace.

A normal boy in his situation might blush bright red, but instead his face went white.

Dammit.

If this girl and I end up becoming friends, she'll find out I'm immortal.

He was so experienced with the trouble that came from being found out by mortals that it made him ill. He would actually rather his fellow immortals like Firo find him than that, to say nothing of the fact that she was the senator's daughter. If she told her father his secret, and he believed it for some reason, the results would be disastrous. He couldn't afford that chance, no matter how slim.

But, why now?!

Czes cursed his fate as Mary held him, but of course, in a country as large as America, running into Mary here was no accident.

Instead of being angry at God, Czes should have been worried about the one behind Mary.

"Is this the boy who saved you on that train, Mary?"

Czes looked over Mary's shoulder at the boy behind her. He looked around the same age as Mary, only just entering his teens.

"Well, then, we're going to visit Melvi, so just wait here for us, okay? If I brought you

into a casino, your father would get really upset."

The boy headed down the stairs with a number of others behind him. Czes watched the group and realized what kind of person the boy was.

Czes was bewildered at his own position as he thought of his flatmate.

Firo...what the heck did you do?

<=>

Inside the casino

"Oh, speak of the devil," Melvi muttered, looking towards the stairs.

Firo's employee who had been thrown down the stairs earlier had already been pulled out of the way into the office by some of his coworkers.

Everyone left in the casino followed Melvi's gaze to the previously empty staircase and heard a number of footsteps coming down. The first one to appear was a young man in a perfectly fitting tailcoat, his forehead covered with goggles and wearing gloves, looking for all the world like a biker.

A biker wearing a tailcoat was a little odd, but the others following him, also apparent bodyguards, made a strange picture inside the casino.

The most noticeable one of the group was a few years older than Czes or Rail—about the same age as Ricardo, smiling innocently. Behind him were a number of lovely women, smiling faintly, wearing dresses with a chic black-and-white design. Behind them were some tall, muscular men in black suits, protecting them further, and finally, the rearguard, a young man with the same face, tailcoat, and biker goggles as the one guarding the front. The two appeared to be twins.

Protected by the twins in tailcoats, the boy, also dressed in all black, smiled innocently and waved as he saw Melvi.

His smile was almost too innocent, making his black clothes even more striking. As one completely immersed in the criminal underworld, Firo found his appearance indescribably eerie.

It wasn't that he could feel malice behind that smile, but rather the guileless innocence made his heart uneasy.

On the other hand, Melvi's smile was obviously fake as he approached the group at the bottom of the stairs.

"My, my, to think Master Carzelio would come in person."

"I told you, call me Cazze."

"That won't do at all. We can't call each other nicknames when we're here to offer a formal greeting."

Greeting? Firo wordlessly furrowed his brows as he listened to them. *Actually, he said that earlier, didn't he.*

As if he had read Firo's mind, Melvi turned around towards Firo.

"So, once again...It's nice to meet you, Mr. Firo Prochainezo," he said dramatically. "My name is Melvi, and I will be serving as a dealer at the Runoratas' casino that will be opening soon." Melvi again bowed cordially.

Behind him, Carzelio's innocent eyes sparkled more than ever as he addressed Firo. "You're Firo, of the Martillo Family, right? I've heard about you! Thank you so much for joining us for the festivities my grandfather is sponsoring!"

"Grandfather?"

"Oh! I'm sorry, I forgot! My name is Carzelio Runorata!"

The moment he heard the name, Firo's expression hardened further. *So he's part of the Runorata line.*

Firo's lips were pressed in a thin line, but Carzelio just smiled happily.

"I'll be attending as a normal patron, but I'm looking forward to seeing how you gamble!"

"...Likewise. It's an honor to be invited." Firo said politely, but only for form's sake. He addressed Melvi and his false smile. "...So does that mean all of this was your idea of a 'greeting'?"

Melvi shrugged.

"I was looking forward to seeing how you would deal with the cheater, my slot machine miracle, and the crazy man with the gun, but the results were downright exhilarating. It looks like you have quite a few interesting friends. That last fight was quite a sight, much more trouble than I imagined. Anyway, I don't have any more

time to talk, so I'll stop for now."

"...!"

Melvi was saying that everything from that cheater on was in preparation for this.

Firo knew it could be a bluff, but it was possible he was telling the truth.

But for argument's sake, even if it was the latter, the "cheater" may not have known the real purpose behind his own actions. It was entirely possible Melvi had just told him some lie to make him do what he did.

And that would be enough for Firo to label the guy a complete and total lowlife, but—

Shit...I knew it...I know I've seen him before...

Who is it...who does he look like?

He's so familiar...so damn familiar...

Thanks to that foggy sense of familiarity, he couldn't completely unleash his hatred on him.

But, there was someone else smiling at Melvi, a smile filled to the brim with utter, unbridled loathing.

"I see, I see...yeah, I see...I get it. I get it deep, deep down. Deeper than the ocean."

Ladd Russo let out a chuckle of pleasure, and slowly ambled toward Melvi.

"The Runorata Family, huh. Pretty good. Pretty powerful, too, here in the east."

"Who is this, Melvi?" Carzelio asked. Melvi answered with a smile.

"He's a homicidal maniac, just a crazy murderer. Nothing to be concerned about, Carzelio."

"A real live murderer? Wow! I've never seen one before!" Carzelio spoke like an artless child, very differently than when he spoke with Firo, but the way his eyes sparkled was enough to make those around him quite uneasy.

But Ladd took the boy's twisted words in stride.

"Oh, so this is your first time seein' someone like me? That's great, kid. ...You might

even get to see the moment this murderer kills someone." Ladd rolled his left shoulder lightly, and turned to Melvi with naked bloodlust. "In other words, you're one of those. You think that since you're attached to the Runorata Family, all you have to do is say their name and nobody will lay a finger on you."

"Of course. You would have to be a complete fool to try," Melvi answered bluntly. The smile never left his face.

You didn't have to be Ladd to understand.

Even in the face of such murderous hatred, Melvi never for an instant, not in the slightest did the thought cross his mind that he might die here.

"In other words, there's no one here is dumb enough to come after you. You're saying that there's no way you're gonna die...that what you're thinkin'?"

"Naturally." Melvi's smile never wavered, as if he was intentionally trying to provoke Ladd. "And I certainly wouldn't be killed by someone like you."

"In other words now you die."

In the middle of his sentence, in the moment between breaths—Ladd had already leapt into the air, covering a distance of a few meters in a moment.

Ladd shifted his center of gravity perfectly and made an incredibly powerful diagonal strike from above with his left arm. If that blow connected, the boy wouldn't even have a moment to regret his words. The upper half of his body would be annihilated, like a tomato hit with a baseball bat, but—

Melvi didn't even try to dodge.

Right before he made contact, the bearded man in glasses grabbed Ladd's arm with one hand and broke his momentum with the slightest of movements.

"...Wha—?" Ladd didn't have time to process what was happening before the power was completely taken from his deathblow and returned in the form of a judo throw.

Ladd's body corkscrewed through the air and slammed into the wall behind Melvi.

"Guh...!"

"Boss!!"

Graham was shocked at the scene before his eyes and sprang to his feet, bewildered at what had just happened. He grinned and glared intensely at the bearded man who had gotten in Ladd's way.

"Ow, that hurt. ...So what are you doing getting in my way, you bearded, four-eyes bastard?" Ladd's murderous intent was like a powerful wave, now crashing towards the bearded man the same way it had towards Melvi.

The bearded man didn't answer, just stood in front of Ladd, as if to protect Melvi.

On the other hand, Firo, who had watched the whole exchange, was hit with a different kind of shock.

"...Wow."

That move just now was the exact same technique as the one Yaguruma had taught him.

But could he have redirected a strike with Ladd's power and speed?

Even if he trained to the point he could, he would have to be Yaguruma himself to pull it off in a real fight.

This guy is incredible. Amazing. Is he one of the Runoratas? Who the hell...

Maybe not even Ronnie could—

He glanced over at Ronnie in the corner of the casino and frantically chased out the idle thought from his mind. *Dammit, you can't rely on him!* Firo chastised himself.

Ladd laughed and approached the bearded man.

This time his steps were even faster, but also more precise as he unleashed a series of lightning-fast punches.

But the man dodged them all easily, like a reed in the wind, and struck Ladd's chest with the heel of his hand. The strike looked light as a feather, but Ladd's torso snapped back as he rolled gracelessly to the floor.

The man was doing whatever he wanted with Ladd. Firo's mouth dropped open, but Luck addressed him, having emerged from the office at some point.

"Firo."

"Huh? Oh, Luck! Look at this guy! He's incredible!" Firo said excitedly, but Luck

responded coolly.

"Where did he pick up that move, I wonder. Well, **he was saying he was into martial arts recently.**"

"Hn?"

It sounded like he was saying the bearded man was someone he knew.

"You haven't figured it out?" Luck muttered, surprised. He raised his voice and asked the bearded man.

"Using that disguise again? Why do you like that beard and glasses so much?"

The bearded man glanced at Luck. "Hey, I even changed my beard and glasses from last time...how did you know, Luck? Well, guess I shouldn't expect anything less from someone like you."

Firo felt a jolt through his body at the voice. "Wha...c'mon, what the hell!"

The voice from beneath the thick, bushy beard was one he knew well.

"I can see your hair from underneath your hat, and it's a completely different color from the beard. You should at least make your hair and beard the same color."

"I see, that makes sense. But I can't. I can't do that, Luck!"

The bearded man shot another glance at Ladd, struggling to his feet. He sighed and answered sadly, taking off the hat, glasses and false beard.

"After all, Chane said this was a nice color..."

"!?"

Firo, Jacuzzi, Christopher, Ladd, and Graham all had the exact same reaction.

The red-headed man completely abandoned his serene demeanor from before, and instead gave off the aura of a young man walking in the park.

"Hey there, Firo."

"F...Felix?!"

"Oh, good, you're automatically calling me Felix now instead of Claire! Excellent! Claire is dead now, and only lives on in the heart of his girlfriend."

"No. No, no, just—hold on. What do you think you're doing, Felix?"

Felix Walken, formerly Claire Stanfield.

Originally the assassin known as "Vino," he had "died" on board the Flying Pussyfoot and taken the name of the generalist Felix Walken and begun a new life.

Thanks to his incomparable strength and reflexes, he had been called a genius, a monster, and the strongest assassin in the world. As far as Firo knew, he was in the same class as Ronnie as someone he never wanted to face as an enemy.

He was one of Firo's friends from childhood and a sworn friend of the Gandor brothers, but—

"Well actually it's, uh, pretty simple..."

Felix looked away a little awkwardly and told Firo with a laugh.

"Sorry, Firo. I'm fighting for the other side this time."

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Somewhere in New York Chane's secret apartment

"By the way, Chane, I hear you have a lover."

Chane continued her emotional reunion in the apartment.

Father knows everything, the same as always. I can't keep anything secret from him.

Chane knew this well. At the same time, however, she felt an uneasiness stir in her chest, on a level she'd never felt. She couldn't put into words where exactly it came from, but she made a small fist and waited for her father's next words.

However, Huey's next words were completely unexpected.

"He is a fascinating individual."

"...?"

It sounded as if he had already met him. Chane tilted her head in confusion.

Huey smiled lightly and told her plainly.

"Before I came here, I saw him for a bit. We talked for a while...and made a little contract."

<=>

"Well, I made a little contract with her father. I'm this creepy bastard Melvi's bodyguard."

Melvi smiled bitterly at the epithet and shrugged.

"So, I felt really bad about fighting against you and put on a disguise so you wouldn't know. But Luck saw right through me, so I guess that's out."

"Wait...I have some questions here. Just hold on a sec."

"Oh, I really am just a bodyguard, so don't worry. Even if it is her father, if he told me to destroy the Martillos or the Gandors or kill you...well. Okay?"

"You didn't finish your sentence! What's 'okay' about any of this?! What the hell is this 'little contract'?!"

Firo was completely lost, asking question after question, but—

"You..."

Firo stiffened at the voice, filled with burning emotion, like a volcano waiting to erupt.

"You shit...I remember you...that voice, that red hair, those fucking eyes...no way I'd forget."

It was Ladd.

The emotions swirling in him at seeing Felix were joy, rage, nostalgia, and—

overwhelming murder.

"What is this...? This casino really is Neverland! Why are so many old acquaintances, friends, and people I want to kill all appearing here?"

His voice, his glittering eyes, his rasping breaths, every tiny aspect of his behavior was dyed with boiling bloodlust, so much so that nobody could hear the words he said, only "kill, kill, kill" over and over again.



The red-haired "handyman" answered good-naturedly. "Oh, so you're still alive after all! And your girl looks well, too. That's good."

Lua herself spared a glance at Felix, and all color drained from her face.

It seemed she had realized from his words just now, too, that this red-haired man was the red monster they had met on the roof of the train.

"Sorry for using you as a threat back then. But I mean, you're in love with *this* guy. I'm sure you're expecting to run into some trouble, right?"

Luck looked at the smiling Felix and the terrified girl. "I don't know the situation that well, but you probably did something horrible to this girl. You should apologize like a gentleman."

"Wha?! You're so mean, Luck! How socially incompetent do you think I am? ...But, maybe I should apologize more properly?" Felix mused lightheartedly, deciding to ask Luck for advice.

And that instant, Ladd picked up one of the halves of the broken roulette and threw it at Felix.

His bloodlust had surpassed its limits, giving him the same kind of extraordinary strength as a person lifting an impossibly heavy object to save a loved one in a fire. Without hearing the screaming muscles in his right arm, he threw the half of the roulette table, weighing at least 50 pounds, like a baseball.

Felix drop-kicked it to the floor and sprang into the air.

A different face appeared before his eyes—Christopher, who also had an axe to grind with Felix.

He had leapt off of the nearby baccarat table and launched a spinning kick towards Felix, but Felix just used Christopher's outstretched leg as a springboard to fly even higher. He grabbed the chandelier hanging from the relatively low ceiling and swung like a pendulum, using the momentum to leap like an acrobat in the circus.

He kicked off the walls in rapid succession, his trajectory taking the form of a triangle that sent him straight towards Ladd.

Christopher had gone to ambush Felix from the side, but Graham cut Chris off with his giant wrench.

"This is Boss Ladd's fight! If you get in his way, the sad story will never end!"

"Oh, come on, *you're* the one in *my* way!"

The two clashed again as Ladd picked up the other half of the broken roulette and spun to throw it at Felix—

Finally Graham and Christopher were caught up in the wild, violent energy, and a small tornado began raging through the casino.

"Waah! Everyone, you shouldn't fight!" Carzelio cried, looking for all the world like a child cornered by bullies. Jacuzzi and the others decided that there was definitely something off about him.

"Wha... hold..." On the other hand, Firo was paler than ever and shouted desperately into the midst of the violence. *"Goddammit, calm the fuck down, all of you!!!"*

"I think you should get your employees outside," Luck said calmly.

Firo signaled to his underlings with a glance.

"Get the kids outside. Ennis, too."

When he looked toward the stairs, he saw a man hurriedly running outside.

The man who had come at Ladd's invitation, and the one who had started everything.

That son of a bitch think he can just run away?!

Firo was about to yell at him to stop, but—

"Does it really matter? Just leave him alone, he's trash."

It was Melvi's quiet voice next to him.

"...?! You little shit, when did you...!" Firo snarled, unable to hide his hatred anymore.

Melvi just drew close and whispered in his ear.

"There you are, that's the real you. That won't do. A dealer always has to keep his poker face, after all."

"I'm the manager. Not a dealer."

Firo answered, eyes narrowed to slits, even as the sound of the roulette being destroyed echoed in his ears. "If you weren't one of the Runoratas, kid, you'd be on your way to the bottom of the Hudson."

"Oh, dear. Was it something I said?"

"Listen up. Yeah, so I didn't see through your little games. Point for you today. But you know, thanks to that I *know* you're a total nutcase. And I'm positive that you're planning something for this opening party."

Without faltering for a moment, Firo made to reveal his enemy's real worth, but that constant sense of familiarity stirred up a slight trembling in his heart.

Shit, who is he...

And where...have I seen him before...?

Melvi just smiled on his own terms. "Well, since we're getting along so well, why don't we play a game on that day?"

"...Oh, so that's how you're gonna play it. What, you wanna steal something from us? Our turf? Our money?" Firo scoffed.

Melvi took a deep breath. He narrowed his eyes ever so slightly and leaned so his face was inches from Firo's. He spoke so softly that only Firo could hear.

"What I want...is the knowledge of Szilard Quates. Nothing more, and nothing less."

"?!"

At the same time, Melvi bit his own lip, still smiling. A small drop of blood fell from the corner of his mouth.

But only a few seconds later, the blood wriggled as if it had a life of its own and was sucked back into the wound, which healed itself as if nothing had happened.

Firo's eyes widened and he fell silent.

"This is only a chip to counterbalance yours, but I think it's enough." Melvi instantly wore his mask of a smile again, and spoke as if it were nothing.

"I'm looking forward to a good match, Firo Prochainezo."

<=>

Outside the casino

I have to get out of here. Fast. Shit, what is wrong with those monsters!

And the Runorata Family to boot...? No way I could stick around with them!

Neider took off his jacket to hold his money, cradling it in his arms as he rushed up the stairs.

But...is this okay?

Suddenly, his childish promise revived in his chest.

Maybe...maybe this is my chance to change.

That "something" in the depths of his heart whispered to stay where he was.

Right now, he wasn't anywhere a normal person should be. But that also meant this very place could give him a chance to rise above ordinary people. Didn't it?

Still at a loss, Neider came to a halt. He could see a pair of small children talking to each other. As he watched the peaceful scene, his childlike promise became even more pronounced in his memory.

A hero...

But...what should I do at this point...

If I give the money back, maybe that'll clear my conscience at least, Neider thought, but as soon as he hesitantly turned around he noticed a girl in her early teens glaring at him.

"...Hm?"

He didn't recognize her.

Maybe he looked a little strange in just a white blouse with no jacket? Neider wondered, but the girl just approached him silently. When she spoke, her voice was filled with a hatred for Neider's ears only.

"...Neider Schasschule...what are you doing here, I wonder."

Neider felt the blood drain from his face, and in an instant his skin was drenched in cold sweat.

He didn't remember the girl's voice. But he remembered the languid, viscous tone that didn't fit her outward appearance.

"You wouldn't have had anything to do with that incident in Chicago, would you, Neider?"

"..."

He had no memory of any incident in Chicago, but he couldn't even object. He was so tense he could hear every muscle in his body groaning.

The girl said her name with eyes sharp as a knife, as if to match the strange noise coming from his body.

"We...Hilton...will never forgive traitors. Not ever."

"Ugh...UWAAAAaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAaaaaa!"

Neider's shriek could not have been more unheroic as he took off down the street at full speed.

There was no time for internal conflict, just pure survival instinct to flee.

Right now, running was all he could do.

A man who had just arrived furrowed his brows and adjusted his glasses.

"...What in the world was that?" he muttered, watching the man frantically flee the gambling den. "Just like I thought, there's some sort of trouble in the casino..." The Martillo Family's *conta é oro*, Maiza Avaro, quickened his pace as he headed for the entrance of the casino.

He had run into a patron running down the street, who had told him someone was trying to rob their casino. Maiza had decided to come see what was going on.

He saw Czes and Annie standing in front of the entrance and asked them without slowing his footsteps.

"Are you two alright? I heard there was some trouble downstairs."

"Ah...Maiza!" Czes exclaimed from next to a third person, a girl Maiza didn't recognize.

"Yeah, there was some loud noise from down there..." Annie's expression had already returned to normal.

"Get away from here," Maiza told them, "and **find shelter as soon as possible.**"

With those mysterious words, he disappeared down the stairs with no idea what he was about to see.

<=>

A few minutes earlier

"We'll be leaving soon, Felix, so let's leave playtime at that for now." Melvi had turned his back to Firo.

Claire sprang into the air, putting substantial distance between him and Ladd and the others.

A number of card tables were broken, and three chandeliers were on the ground.

It had only taken the minute he'd spent talking to Melvi for all this damage, but Firo knew this wasn't the time to be shocked or hold his head in despair.

So he's immortal, but he's got Claire as a bodyguard? That makes no sense.

In other words, there was absolutely no chance of anything happening to him, even in a fight off of Runorata territory.

"Hey...wait a damn minute, kid. We're not finished here." Ladd was gasping for breath, but the still-whole baccarat table creaked in his grasp. He was planning on hurling it at them if they tried to leave.

Graham and Christopher were watching Felix the same way. They had been fighting at one hundred percent, and they were all out of breath, sweat beading on their foreheads.

But Felix Walken, the center of it all, was breathing evenly, as if he were on an afternoon stroll. There was not a drop of sweat on his clothes.

"Come on. Just cool your heads and figure out that there's no way you can beat me. 'It's not over,' is it? Don't misunderstand. It never even started," Felix taunted, calm and composed. He gave a bored sigh and turned away from Ladd, Graham, and Chris. "If you have a problem with that, come at me whenever you like. Bring a friend, or twenty. Try givin' me a challenge, for once."

He paused, then turned back around.

"Since this is my friend's casino, I didn't want to spill any blood. That's all."

His face was an iron mask, and the remaining people in the casino witnessed firsthand the ruthless eyes of the assassin Vino.

When Jacuzzi inadvertently met that gaze, a grey fog crept into the corners of his

vision as his consciousness begin to fade. Even Rail's expression hardened as she felt cold sweat break out.

Felix was intimidating on another level, so much so that a normal person would freeze under those eyes.

But Ladd's bloodlust simply swelled ever larger as he began to laugh. "Haha...hahahahahahaha! Hyaaahahahahahaha! Come whenever I want, huh? Good! Good! That's exactly the kind of bullshit I'd expect from some dumbass who thinks he's never gonna die! Yeah, yeah, yeah! I'll gladly do so!"

His laughter stopped as suddenly as it started, and this time picked up the baccarat table with one hand for real.

"So...you don't mind if we go now, do ya, Rail Tracer...!"

But—Ladd saw something in front of him and froze.

Melvi had pulled out a gun from his jacket and had it aimed directly at Lua.

"...!"

Instantly, the overpowering bloodlust that had been aimed at Felix was now directed at Melvi.

But Melvi just smiled, as if the pressure of Ladd's murderous hatred was a cool, refreshing breeze, and replaced the gun.

"That's a warning. You understand, don't you? I said, let's leave it at this for today." Melvi cocked his head to the side with a smirk.

Ladd's fist tightened, so tight that his nails dug into his palms and a few drops of blood dripped to the floor.

"I had two bastards I swore I was gonna kill once I got free. That red-haired freak, and Huey Laforet."

Ladd's voice was filled with rage. A number of those in the room reacted at Huey's name, especially Rail.

"Melvi, was it? ...You're number three, you little fuck," Ladd spat. His face was turned towards the floor, so nobody around him could see his eyes, but the barely visible fiendish smile on his lips was enough to freeze the air around him solid.

"...Well, do what you want. If you can manage it." Melvi's expression darkened for a moment, but in the next it was right back where it was. He turned back towards the stairs. Felix followed him, then Carzelio.

Suddenly, Carzelio's eyes widened in realization, and he frantically turned back towards Firo.

"Oh, I'm so sorry my dealer's bodyguard destroyed your casino! Just send us an invoice for the cost of repairs and damages, and I promise the Runorata Family will vouch for whatever we can!"

Carzelio's eyes were straightforward and honest.

Perhaps the offer was genuine, but to Firo it was just another form of mockery.

It was all he could do to respond the way he did.

"...Thank you. You're far too generous."

When Melvi walked by Ronnie, his steps slowed, and he whispered with a small smile. "This fight is between Firo and me, as fellow immortals. We have no ill intent towards the Martillo Family, so don't worry, Mr. Ronnie."

Melvi sounded as if he knew what Ronnie really was. The *chiamatore* just answered calmly.

"I wonder. You see, starting a fight with Firo is starting a fight with all of us...well, no matter."

Ronnie left it at that, and watched the various Runoratas make their exit.

And, as Melvi took his first step onto the staircase, a late visitor appeared.

A tall man in glasses appeared at the top of the stairs and found Firo in the midst of the demolished casino.

"Firo!" Maiza called, rushing down the stairs. "Are you okay? What...what in the world happened...?"

But the moment he was about to take the last step into the casino—

He froze, his gaze fixed on Melvi's face.

"...Excuse me." Melvi slipped by Maiza with a light nod, and disappeared up the stairs.

Maiza stared after him, stiff and awkward, but the rest of the entourage blocked his

view so he couldn't get a closer look.

But after Melvi had disappeared, Maiza muttered a single word, as if he'd seen a ghost.

"...Gretto...?"

The instant he heard that name—

Firo felt a sensation deep within himself, like the sound of a door unlocking.

And the depths of his heart had, in a sense, been forcefully unlocked. The memories that normally wouldn't come out flooded into his mind.



Gretto.

Gretto Avaro.

Maiza's younger brother, the novice alchemist. The first one Szilard had devoured.

In other words, Firo saw Gretto's memories as a part of Szilard's.

I see...

Firo was finally able to remember why Melvi looked so familiar.

Szilard hadn't seen Gretto's face before he devoured him.

The familiarity came from Gretto's own memories.

Namely, that Melvi *was* within Gretto's memories—as the reflection of Gretto himself.

<=>

Outside the casino

"Hm? Czes? Where did he go, I wonder..." Mary looked around, mystified.

As soon as Felix had appeared from the casino, Czes had run away at full speed without even taking the time to scream.

The girl who had been with Czes had also disappeared. Mary cocked her head to the side, feeling as if something was very off.

"Thanks for waiting, Mary," Carzelio said. "Well then, I'll take you home."

"Hm? Oh, yes! Thank you, Cazze!"

"It's no trouble. I have a letter from my grandfather I have to give to the Senator anyway," Carzelio said, leading Mary to the car.

A man standing next to the car slowly approached Melvi, as if to take the children's place.

"What were you thinking? Making your subordinates go through all that trouble just to show your face to your enemy."

The man wore glasses and a bandana wrapped around his shaved head.

The twin bodyguards didn't move. Apparently they knew this man.

"Please don't look at me like that, Tim. You might scare someone," Melvi said with a

smile.

Tim wrinkled his face in disgust.

"...Do you even remember what your job is? You're the leader of Time! You know the scale of the experiment this time, don't you?"

"No need to worry. I'll take care of all of my orders, and I won't do anything that's forbidden. As long as do that, I'm free to do whatever I want. Right? That's true for me, for you, for the Larvae, for Rhythm and Sham and Hilton. Everyone," Melvi said with a smirk.

Tim realized that it would be pointless to try to convince him, and instead just said one thing expressionlessly. "I can't stand you. Just so you know."

"Please don't take this personally, but I despise you, too," Melvi replied, and with that walked to his own car.

"I'm following my master's instructions. That's all."

Connecting Chapter -- The Police can do Nothing

Inside the casino

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

Graham was first one to break the silence that had fallen over the casino. "I was at a total loss just now. 'Should me and Boss Ladd team up to beat that Felix bastard? Or should I do everything I can to respect Boss Ladd's right to fight him one-on-one, and devote myself to taking apart that red-eyed bastard who tried to get in their way?' And! Thanks! To! My! Hesitation! Is! This! Heeellll!"

Graham's shouts were in time with his wrench as he spun it around and around amidst the violently destroyed card tables and the chandelier that had shattered when it fell from the ceiling.

"This isn't deconstruction! It's just destruction! Mayhem! Chaos! I can't take it what do I do Shaft help what do I do?! How can I pay for my crimes and put everything back together so I can take it apart properly and achieve world peace?!"

"You can start by shutting your trap for once."

"...Easy, Shaft. Let him vent a little."

Ladd seemed to have calmed down a little listening to Graham's familiar ramblings. He cracked his neck, looking bored again, then spoke to Firo.

"I'll settle the score for destroying your casino. You don't need start owin' the Runoratas anything." He pounded his left hand into his right, and muttered half to himself. "And since I don't have any ties to the Martillo Family, I'll smash that little shit Melvi's head in. That should do it."

Firo was still in shock, trying to process what had just happened. If he even heard Ladd, he didn't show it. Ennis watched him from afar, and Ronnie didn't appear particularly inclined to give him advice, either.

Christopher moved to say something, but Ricardo grabbed his arm. "Wait, Christopher. He needs a moment."

"Really? I'm just trying to be practical. I thought I should ask him about Felix's

weaknesses..."

"Yes, Chris, that's exactly what Ricardo is talking about. You need to cut that stuff out," Rail interjected.

Chris just shrugged and stepped back obediently.

Jacuzzi was staring off into space himself, having (nearly) fainted from Vino's mere presence, but his eyes suddenly widened when he realized something.

"H-hey, w-we should get out of here, quick...there were gunshots a while back, and it was really loud just now too, so the police might come any minute..."

Maiza looked up uneasily, having already thought of this.

"I don't think the police will be coming."

"Huh? What do you mean, Maiza?" Firo asked nervously.

"Well...there was a big fuss about it on the radio, but they're not flying anywhere around here for some reason..."

"Flying...? What are you talking about?" Firo asked, looking even more puzzled.

Maiza answered with some difficulty, as if he wasn't quite sure himself.

"It sounds like a bunch of planes came out of nowhere and started attacking all over Manhattan, so the police have their hands full over there right now."

<=>

Somewhere in Manhattan

The sun was nearly set, and darkness was beginning to fall over Manhattan. As neon signs began to light up the dusky sky, a fleet of planes flew between skyscrapers and buildings, over parks and streets. The drone of engines and relentless report of heavy gunfire echoed through the city as sparks sprayed from the machine guns mounted on the planes.

"Gyaaaaah! M-Mr. Vice President! We're at war! It's hopeless! I may not have been the best, and I never got full points, but I'm glad I got to learn from youuuuwaaaah!" Carol's mad sprint down the sidewalk had been interrupted by a plane that suddenly appeared at the end of the street, and she clung to her boss' leg in a panic.

But her boss—Gustav St. Germain, Vice President of the Daily Days, calmly observed the plane and patted Carol's head.

"Listen quietly, Carol... There's only the sound of gunfire, not the sound of impact. They're only shooting blanks."

<=>

New York In the Gandor Family office

"..."

"Hey, Keith. Sounds like it's gettin' pretty rough out there."

The Gandor Family office was in the lower floor of a jazz hall. Keith and Berga were enjoying themselves with a game of poker with some of the other members of the Family. Tick and Maria had gone outside to see what all the noise was about and came back downstairs with their report.

"Uumm, there are a lo~t of airplanes flying around. They're re~al neat."

"It's amazing, *amigo*! They're flying really low, in between buildings! If I climb up to the third story, I know I could cut one down! Hey, you think I should? Can I, *amigo*?"

Their report rather missed the point. Berga scowled at the pair, but Keith just took another card with the same expression as always. And, seeing which card it was, his face clouded ever so slightly.

"..."

"Whatsa matter, Keith? That's weird, most of the cards are jokers. How'd ya draw that one?"

Looking at the 7s on the table, Keith felt a strange uneasiness in his chest. He stood up from the table and headed towards the outside himself.

He wasn't sure when, but his entire body was filled with the premonition that they were being drawn into something—

As well as resolve to destroy that "something," whatever it was.

<=>

Somewhere in New York Victor's investigation headquarters

"So that's how you're gonna play...you're finally gonna start this shit, huh, Huey?!"

As the sound of airplane engines echoed through the warehouse as they flew overhead, Victor pounded his fist onto his desk.

"They're *blanks*, dammit! Planes or seaplanes, whatever the hell they are, they're just shooting blanks! Don't those morons see this is just a diversion? Fuck! Stop gawking up at the sky and look on the ground, goddammit, on the ground! While the police are running around like chickens with their fucking heads cut off, he's going to pull something huge right under our goddamn noses!"

Victor was mostly correct. The seaplanes were indeed a diversion, but not from a future plan. They were meant to keep the police from the part of his plan taking place at this very moment. In fact, there were quite a few facts he was missing.

For one, that Melvi had planned this so that the police wouldn't interfere with his "meeting" with Firo. For another, that it ultimately had nothing to do with Huey's experiment.

And, that the riotous seaplanes were just a few of Time's planes Huey was using on the Atlantic Ocean.

<=>

Somewhere in New York

"Master, there's a lot of noise outside. Do you think we'll be okay?" asked a boy, a hint of childishness still left on his features.

A man assembling a large gun answered. "Leave it alone, Student Number One. I can tell from the sound. They're blanks."

The man didn't look up at all from the glinting array of parts from various guns. Smith continued coolly.

"More importantly, Graham should be returning with Ladd any time now. Ladd, Ladd, Ladd. That mad murderer is entranced by the same flower of insanity that leads him to such foolish buffoonery as me, but only poisonous insects approach the flower of insanity he wears. On that point, my..."

The rest of his sentence was drowned out by the sound of a plane that passed particularly close to the building.

Smith clicked his tongue in irritation at being interrupted.

"Guh...those bastards have no sense for aesthetics."

<=>

Chane's secret apartment

"Oh..."

One of Huey's subordinates had appeared in the room with them and given him a report. He walked to the window and spoke to Chane.

"Chane, my spy Hilton seems to have found an old friend of ours."

"Old friend"? Spike, perhaps?

That traitor. I never trusted him to begin with, but if he's decided to come after Father, I'll—

"Neider Schasschule."

She had just been thinking about the man, but she never thought she would hear his name here.

"?!"

"He betrayed the Lemures, and you even cut off his hand, yet he appears to be alive and well here in New York."

Huey seemed to enjoy telling her this.

He wasn't trying to manipulate her with these words.

He was simply looking forward to seeing what Chane would do next after he told her. No more, no less.

As her father looked at her, Chane looked towards the floor and thought,

I see. I really have been coming apart since then...since I didn't finish him off.

But that had nothing to do with now. Chane decided deep within her heart.

To get back the edge she had lost—she would kill Neider Schasschule.

If I see him in the city, I'll kill him once and for all. Without feeling anything—just like taking out the garbage.

<=>

Somewhere in New York

"What is this...what the hell is happening...?!"

Neider looked up at the planes flying through the sky and ran for his life with no idea where he was going.

He wondered if he had somehow fallen through Alice's rabbit hole into Wonderland when he had been released from prison.

Or, maybe it was all a dream—a long, long dream that had started back when he had lost his hand and been blown up with the warehouse. Maybe he was dying at the bottom of a pile of rubble even now.

He began to lose himself in his wild delusions. Maybe he even wanted those delusions to be real.

Aaah, if it was a dream from even further back...maybe I could do it all over.

He remembered his promise to his childhood friend, and before he knew it tears were welling in his eyes as he ran.

I don't know. Someone, someone please, just tell me what to do!

How does someone become a hero, anyway?

How could someone...someone like me...ever become a hero...

He had no idea that even now, Chane Laforet had turned her emotionless, mechanical bloodlust towards him—

He just ran, wandering through the city, unable to keep his promise to become a hero. He had used his jacket to bundle up his money, the only strength he had, little as it was.

Even though he had no idea how to use it.

All he could do was run and run, lost in every possible way.

<=>

Somewhere in New York

"Look, Miria! Airplanes!"

"Like Charles Augustus Lindbergh! Lucky Lindy!"

Isaac and Miria were on their way to the job Molsa had introduced them to—

And they ran right into a seaplane heading out of New York, only a few meters away.

The plane wove between the buildings, incredibly close to the ground, then flew up into the starry night sky. Soon the only sign of its presence was the twinkling of the stars as it blocked them from view.

The clouds that had covered the sky around noon earlier that day had disappeared, as if in approval of the planes headed into the sky.

Isaac and Miria watched the almost romantic scene, and spoke to each other excitedly.

"Come to think of it, we robbed a train, but we've never robbed a plane, have we?"

Although we've already washed our feet of the whole business."⁷

"Hey, Isaac, how do you rob an airplane, anyway?"

"Well, you know! You steal the most important thing to it!"

"What's important to an airplane?"

Isaac fell silent for a moment.

"...The sky?"

It was an exceedingly simple answer.

"Wow, that's right! A plane can't fly without the sky! It really is the most important!"

"Yes...so basically, if we take the sky from the whole world...!"

"Magnificent! But, Isaac, where does the sky even begin? Where does it end?"

Once again, the question was very basic, but this time Isaac answered without hesitation.

"Where the planes fly, of course!"

"But that plane just now was awfully low..."

"...Wait, then that...that means we're *in* the sky?! Then you could even say New York is the capital of the sky, if planes fly down here!"

"Like Macchu Picchu! Balnibarbi and Laputa! And Ryuuguujou!" Miria cried.⁸

Isaac didn't realize that not all of her examples were relevant.

"I see...We can actually feel the sky because of airplanes...The Wright brothers really were amazing...Alright! Let's be grateful to the airplanes, Miria! We can't rob them! It would be wrong! Aren't you glad we've already left that life behind? It's the best feeling in the world!"

"Euphoria!"

From what they were saying, it was hard to tell whether they were children or

⁷ The term for "washing your hands" of something is literally "washing your feet" of it in Japanese, but this was just such an Isaac and Miria thing to say I couldn't help it.

⁸ Ryuuguujou: the palace of the dragon god of the sea

adults. They broke off into a run underneath the dark clouds that were beginning to gather over New York again.

They had no idea that they were being drawn into a maelstrom of confusion themselves. They probably never would.

To them, all of life was a new discovery, a kind of chaos that overflowed with both darkness and light.

And, whether they were capable of realizing it or not—

As those planes brought their *baccano*, their stupid commotion, a deep darkness began its descent over the city of New York.

<=>

In the middle of the night In the darkness

In a villa belonging to the Runoratas, Melvi entered a room that faced the courtyard and turned out all the lights before lying on the bed.

His bodyguard Felix only worked when he left the house, so right now his guards were a few dozen members of the Mafia who patrolled the grounds to protect him.

But—

"Well, well. That was quite a dramatic performance today, Melvi."

A voice called to Melvi from a corner of the room, shrouded in complete darkness. From the way the curtains rustled, it was clear that someone had slipped through all of the watchful eyes and snuck into the grounds.

But Melvi answered the darkness with complete indifference.

"It's not a big deal. Don't worry, Master."

"I see, I see. But your bodyguard during the day is pretty incredible. They really can't come anywhere near you."

"I was surprised by his ability, myself."

Melvi's reply was met by a muffled laugh.

"I am about to set my preparations in motion as well, but...the results might conflict with your movements. If that happens, well, it would be nice if you didn't hate me *too* much. Okay?"

"Of course. You're my master. I only listen to your orders. If you told me to die, I would obediently offer you the head and right hand of my corpse," he answered respectfully, still prone on the bed.

"...How like you to do it 'obediently' rather than 'happily.' I'm impressed. Well, my only wish is for you to use your current position to make a mess of things, however you please. Whatever comes into your mind."

"..."

"And I've told you this before, but don't call me 'master.' It's too stiff."

The darkness chuckled and continued gleefully.

"You know my name already. You can give me a nickname, or shorten it. Call me whatever you like, like I told you before!"

"...If that's the case, then I'll call you 'Master.'"

"Haha! You're a spiteful bastard, aren't you?"

And then, silence.

After the quiet peals of laughter had faded, the darkness didn't speak anymore. The curtains fell still, and the intruder was gone.

After Melvi was sure, the smile he had worn for the whole day disappeared from his face, and he fell into a deep sleep.

As if to rest in preparation for another long day of smiling tomorrow.

<=>

New York Fred's clinic

Thanks to their waving and chasing after the seaplanes, Isaac and Miria had gotten thoroughly lost. They didn't arrive at their new workplace that Molsa had introduced to them until the middle of the night.

"Hey, Isaac, it says they're closed today."

"Hmm. Well, Molsa *did* say we could just walk in."

There were lights on in the clinic, even in the dead of night.

The two wandered back and forth in front of the door, wondering what to do, when a young man's face appeared in the glass.

"Oh...the owner of Alveare called earlier and said you two would be coming to help. Sure took your time, didn't cha?" The man paused and looked at them questioningly. "...Wait, have I seen you befo—aah, whatever."

After looking at them intently for a moment, he sighed and continued.

"My name's Who. I know they said you'll be working here, but you won't be treating anyone so don't worry about..."

He paused again, noticing someone behind the pair. "Oh, perfect timing! I was wondering you went. Let me introduce these two, they've come to give us a hand."

Isaac and Miria turned around and greeted the man behind them.

"I'm Isaac! Pleasure to meet you!"

"And I'm Miria! Nice to meet you!" they said eagerly.

The man smiled mildly. "How polite you are. I'm indebted to Dr. Fred as well. My name is Le..." He stumbled over the word and tried again. "...Le..."

It was as if his own mouth were moving against his will. He snapped it shut for a moment.

The man's expression darkened slightly, but he smiled **underneath the bangs that hid his eyes from view**, and said his name again.

"Ah, sorry. My name is Lebreau Fermet Viralesque. Pleasure."

"...Huh? Was that your name?" Who asked.

The man answered confidently. "Yes, I told you before."

He covered the darkness clouding his face with a smile—

And began to draw the two immortals who had suddenly appeared into his plans as well.

Without knowing whether that decision was good or bad, or how twisted their fate would become from here on.

<=>

And so, at the end of the day, each person was drawn into their own whirlpool of confusion.

All standing under the same sky, on the same stage.

The players gathered.

Fate marched on towards its inevitable conclusion along with them.

Who would take hold of the results born by that conclusion in the end?

Or rather, who would serve as whose joker in the hands they had all been dealt?

That was something no one in New York could tell yet, not even the demon.

And, as each one took their chips in hand—

The curtain began to rise, ever so quietly, over the moment when all their hopes and desires would swirl together into the ultimate game of chance.

Afterword

Long time no see, this is Narita.

And so as the *Baccano!* series approaches its 10th anniversary, we only have left this 1935 arc and 2003, which will be an epilogue to the entire series.

Those of you who have read should already know, but Firo and "him" are at the center of the story this time. How will this relatively small character (compared to the others like Ladd and Christopher) move this time?

And this time, one of the strongest characters in the series, right alongside Ronnie, has completely turned into an enemy. Will Firo and Ladd and the others will come out on top?

On top of that, why is a character who is supposed to be new looks so much like someone else.

Will the group that was sketched out earlier here and there make a real appearance?

When will Chi and Adele factor into this?

When will Dallas and Eve get their turn?

1935 has started with some major mysteries still unsolved, but since this time at least half of the characters from before will make an appearance, it may run a little long.

As I write this, I'm not completely certain how it will end. I hope you will eagerly look forward to the stupid commotion of 1935...!

The girl who is the childhood friend of a certain character this time around has actually already appeared in one of the special volumes release with the anime DVDs, which I may turn into an official volume like *1932 Summer*—although I haven't decided yet. Those of you who haven't met her yet, please look forward to it!

As for my plans after this, I honestly have a few swirling around right now...even I haven't fully nailed down a plan of what to write next, but first I'll finish more *Baccano!* and *Durarara!!*, and after that with *Vamp!*, *5656* and *Hariyama-san at the Center of the World*, I have plenty to start with for a new volume, I think.

Recently I was able to write a novel for BLEACH, as well as *Dangan Ronpa IF* from the "omake mode" of *Dangan Ronpa 2*, and participate as a game player in *Red Dragon*, so I've had a lot of work outside of this, but since *Baccano!* was how I

started with Dengeki Bunko, I'll do my best to write the remaining volumes so everyone can enjoy them!

So, as I summon fresh determination, today I'm playing Dangan Ronpa 2 and Dragon Quest X because the air conditioner is broken in a heat wave and I can't work.

Along with saving electricity, I was able to cool down with electric fans and screens, but my computer overheated...in other words, my computer passed out from the heat before me.

And so, as I cleaned my place waiting for maintenance to come, I found a mountain from my dark past. Things I had specially printed out, like "my strongest character" and "my Eva character" and "my strongest pirate character." I don't know how many times I thought I would die in agony while I was cleaning...

Not only that, but even my terrible drawings were attached to them. I couldn't understand why, if the tears were from the dust as I cleaned or a desire to murder my younger self.

But anyway, when I think that everything in my dark past has come together to bring me to where I am now, my dark past is an important memory and the foundation of my work. I think I'm going to end up keeping them as something special. Deep in the heart of storage. In cardboard and sealed with duct tape.

(whispers) ...To be honest, some of the things in my major series, like Nebula and some of the vampires, were actually in those notes as "my strongest corporation" or "my strongest vampire" and I may have used them just as they were *coughcough*

And I am aware I have said some things I should not, but I am well, even with stomach issues thanks to stress and the summer heat. I'm the best I've ever been!

I'm lying.

But, I will finish my cleaning, play video games to relieve my stress, fight off the heat, and bring you more stories in top form!

And so, please enjoy them!

This is about *Durarara!!*, but the newest comic will come out on September 10th, at the same time as this book! Thank you to Mr. Toriki Cha and Mr. Kuma. I'll do my best so you can enjoy *Baccano!* and *Durarara!!* together!

August 2012, Ryohgo Narita

Translator's Notes

First of all, thank you for reading thus far!

This is my first translation of anything this big (and technically my second translation ever), and I am still in shock that I actually managed to finish it. *Baccano!* is not an easy series to translate, particularly the 1930s, but I had wanted to translate something in this series for nearly three years now, and I'm so glad I finally found the opportunity.

My translation style is slightly liberal—I ended up choosing the sound of English over the exact syntax or words of the Japanese in places where the two were in conflict, but I did my best to stay true to the feel of the original.

I'm very grateful to everyone who has worked so hard on translating this series in the past—those at Baka-Tsuki, Anonspore, and Untuned Strings. If it weren't for them I never would have fallen in love with this series in the first place.

And most of all, thank you to everyone for reading and commenting! I'm always excited to see your reactions. I hope you have enjoyed this volume, and I'm honored to have been able to make some small contribution in spreading this fantastic story. I'm looking forward to translating more!

On to 1935-B!