

パッカーノ! 2002 [B side]

Blood Sabbath

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita



電撃文庫



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イラスト●エナミカツミ

Illustration Katsumi Enami



「で、今は傭兵は二人もおらんのだ。数年
前までは、もっとたくさんおったんだが
……。前の社長が、女房が病気で死んだ
のをいい事に裏切りおってな。傭兵をた
くさん連れて、息子まで捨てて行方知
れずになっちまってのお。カカッ！ 全く
もって愉快な男よ！」

「残ったのはわしらのようなはぐれ者の
集団だが……。共通点が二つある」

「誰も彼も、映画と社長が好きっちゅう
事よな！ カカカッ！」

「さて、それじゃそろそろ、あなたの身柄
を社長に引き渡すとするかの。本当に
あなたが記者なのかどうかは知らんが、
ここに潜り込む為にはわしらの仲間を一人
殺しちまったのはまずかったのお」

「社長も、この仕事は嫌いだが」

「この社員達は、結構好いとるよう
じゃからな。カカ、カカカカカッ！ 全く
嬉しい事よな！ そう思わんか？ カ
カッ！」

『仮面職人』達への突撃インタビュー

「ほう……わたしの事がそんなに知りた
いと言うのか？ まあ、聞かされて秘密に
するような事もありやせんかの」

「まあ、わたしらは傭兵集団なんぞと呼ば
れとるが、実際に傭兵の経験や知識が
あるのは『死』と呼ばれとった一人だけよ。
他はほんにどうしようもない。銃が撃て
るだけの烏合の衆に過ぎん。もちろん集
団戦のイロハもなっちゃおらんし、人を
殺せるだけの……まあ、ギャングにも満
たんチンピラの集団よ！」

「しかしの……デスの奴はどのみち長く
生きられん病気じゃったらしくてな。
前々から『次に自分より強い奴に会った
ら——そいつに俺は殺されよう』とか、
そんな時だけ妙に人間臭い事を言っ
ておったよ。せめて戦場で死にたいとな。普
段はそんなロマンチックな事は言わん
だが……ともあれ、その夢が叶ったよう
で何よりよのっ」

A Spontaneous Interview with the Mask Makers

"Well, well... so you're that curious to know about us? I guess it's not strictly a secret, anyway.

It's true we're a bunch of mercenaries, but this guy called Death is the only one who actually had any gigs as a mercenary. The rest of us are closer to a mob of thugs. No organizational skill--a group of people who only know how to kill--in other words, a tiny rabble that barely qualifies to be a gang!

But, see... looks like Death was sick. He didn't have long to live. He'd been saying stuff like 'I shall be killed by one stronger than myself'--some pretty poetic stuff to say for a guy like him. He wanted to at least die on a battlefield. He never used to talk like that... In any case, I'm glad for him--looks like he got his wish.

And *that* is why there are no longer any mercenaries on our team. There used to be a lot of them up until just a few years ago, but the former boss betrayed us and left with a bunch of them after his wife died of illness. He disappeared somewhere and even left his son behind! Haha! What an entertaining guy!

The only ones left here are rejects like me. But we all have something in common.

And that is the fact that we all love movies and the boss! Gahahaha!

I'll be turning you over to him now. I don't know if you really are a reporter like you say you are, but it was a mistake to kill one of our teammates just to sneak in here.

The boss doesn't like this kind of work--

But see, I think the employees enjoy it quite a bit. Gahahaha! What a haul!"



現に、この「SAMPLE」の四
二代目の「道主」は——世界の三大
宗教を始めとして、カルトと呼ばれ
る物から民族宗教に至るまで……
合計で七十三もの宗派に「同時に」
使える徒であつたと聞きます。
矛盾する点は全て無視し、最後
にはこの宗教の「欲望に従え」とい
う教義を守つたと言います。
ですから——
彼らにとつての神とは「痛み」な
どではなく……
もしかしたら、人間そのものなの
かもしれませんね。



赤黒い集団に関するDD新聞記者の報告

得体が知れない。それが彼ら「SAMPLE」に対する、私個人の率直な感想です。

彼らは「痛み」を神として崇めます。

それでいながら、自分達からは「苦痛」を完全に排除しようとする。彼らが言うには、

「神は『己の内』にあつてはならない」

という事らしいのですが、どうにも気味の悪い事に、彼らは本当に苦痛を持たないらしいのです。

いつからそうなったのかは解りません。

ですが——彼らを導いた存在がいるのは確かでしょう。

彼らは世に存在する宗教の大多数から見ても「邪教」と言うべき集団でした。

それでいながら、彼らは他の宗教を拒む事はありません。信者が望むなら、宗教のかけもちすらも認めていたと言いますからね。

A Daily Days Journalist's Report on the Red and Black Organization

Incomprehensible. That is my honest, personal opinion on them--[SAMPLE].

They worship 'pain' as their god.

But at the same time, they try to extricate pain from their own selves.

To quote them,

"God must not exist within myself".

Eerily enough, it seems they truly do not feel any pain.

I do not know how long they have been in this state, but I am certain that there is someone leading their activities.

From the point of view of most religions in the world, they are a group that should be classified as a cult.

But these people do not reject other faiths. If the believer desires it, he can have **multiple faiths at once**.

The 42nd leader of SAMPLE actually believed in the three major religions of the world, and others--including cults and local beliefs...

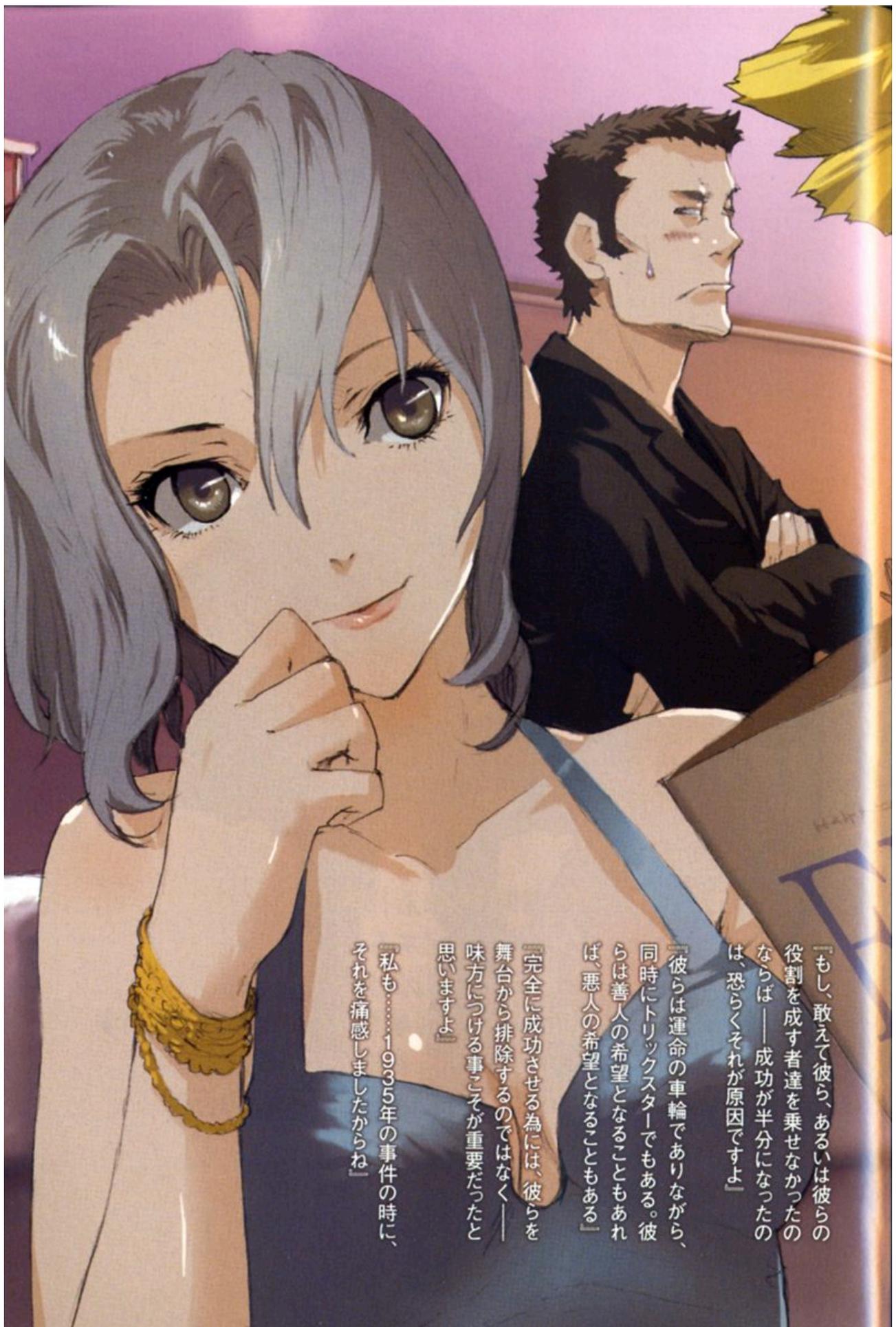
And in total, he counted himself a believer of 73 religions at once.

He merely ignored conflicting ideals, and maintained this group's purpose--"Follow your desires".

And so--

Perhaps to them, God is not something like pain...

But rather, humanity itself.



「もし、敢えて彼ら、あるいは彼らの役割を成す者達を乗せなかったのならば——成功が半分になったのは、恐らくそれが原因ですよ」

「彼らは運命の車輪でありながら、同時にトリックスターでもある。彼らは善人の希望となることもあれば、悪人の希望となることもある」

「完全に成功させる為には、彼らを舞台から排除するのではなく——味方につける事こそが重要だったと思いますよ」

「私も……1935年の事件の時に、それを痛感しましたからね」

模倣犯への電話による忠告

「今回の貴方のもくろみ、半分成功で半分失敗と言ったところですか」

「貴方は実に多くの時間と手間をかけましたね。貴方にとって、これはフライング・ブッシュフト号の事件を模倣したかったのでしょうか？ ベリラム夫人の立ち位置にはシルヴィ

……「線路の影をなぞるもの」の役はナイルか田九郎にでも任せるつもりだったんですか？ だとすると、エルマーは誰の役割だったんでしょう？」

「……ああ、なるほど、エルマーはエルマーでしたか。失礼。失念していましたよ。そして、貴方は貴方だというわけですね」

「では、アイザック・ディアンとミリア・ハーヴェントに関しては如何でしょう？」



A Phone Call Advice to the Copycat

"Perhaps we could call this plan of yours a half-success.

You expended a great deal of time and effort into this incident. You wished to replicate the events that took place on the Flying Pussyfoot, correct? Sylvie was in the role of Natalie Beriam... And were you planning to have Nile or Denkuro take the role of the Rail Tracer? Then what of Elmer? What was his role?

...I see, so Elmer was Elmer. My apologies, it slipped my mind. And you were in the role of yourself.

Then what of Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent?

If you had purposefully excluded them, or the players in their roles, *that* was the critical error that led to your plan's half-collapse.

They are tricksters--the wheel of fate. They are a ray of hope to the good, and yet at the same time they are also that same light to the evil.

You should not have removed them from the stage if you wanted this plan to be successful. Rather, you should have made them into your allies.

After all... This fact was painfully brought home to me during the 1935 incident."



- 11 プロローグ
プロローグ5 公私混同好きな若社長
プロローグ6 彼らは神を否定する
- 73 第四章 不死者達は旅行気分
- 111 第五章 手品師の少年は嘘で他人の笑顔を作り出す
- 159 第六章 老練な狂戦士は絶望を笑い飛ばす
- 217 第七章 血の休息日に入口と出口は重なり合う
- 371 エピローグII
- 391 余章B

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プロローグ 5 公私混同好きな若社長
6 彼らは神を否定する

Prologue 5 : The Young President Who Likes to Make Business Personal

Let me tell you an old story.

It's a story about 'our' origins.

A long, long time ago, before the second of the terrible wars--

A long, long time ago, even before the first great war--

A hundred years before a hero called the Demon of Corsica--or a cannibal, as some called him--was crowned Emperor--

It was a time when Europe was swept in a frenzy of battles in the War of the Spanish Succession.

That is the setting of this story.

Will you lend your ears?

You will listen, won't you?

Are you listening?

You *are* listening, right?

Oh, thank goodness.

I was worried you'd died already.

You wish to live, correct? Then you must listen.

It is said that our organization was first created in the early 1700s.

Its place of origin was a rural village in Italy. Though it was a countryside town, it was still an advanced port city in its own right--

I'm sure you've figured it out. It is this very town in which we stand.

Oh, my apologies. You *can't see* anymore.

What a tragedy. I would have liked for you to take in some of the sights of this place.

If you wish to know why this organization was created, I suppose the best answer would be that it was born of persuasion.

Initially, the Mask Maker was an individual.

When one person persuaded a group of pitiful children, the Mask Maker became a monster.

And as a result of one insane boy persuading this original individual, the Mask Maker went from monster to clown--and once a second boy entered the fray, the clown became an organization.

I don't expect you to understand everything I'm saying to you.

And there is no need for you to understand. After all, this is not the important part.

Having become an organization, the Mask Makers slowly seeped into society.

Yes. It might seem an unusual way to phrase it, but 'seeping' is the right word. How do I put this...

Poison.

Yes. The Mask Makers were at once fragrant lure and lethal poison.

And having slowly seeped into the city, they began to gather power.

There is no way of knowing what this power was collected for. This is because these initial hopes and dreams slowly fell away, leaving nothing but power to be passed down through the ages.

All the way to this generation.

Finances, physical strength, influence... we gathered these things little by little and out of sight.

The organization changed, and its principles slowly transformed--with only the ideal of power held at its core.

And the result of these centuries of change... is us.

This group you noticed and followed--

This humble **company** called the Mask Makers.

... And as for me?

Do I really need an introduction?

I believe you have some **inkling** of my identity.

But I understand.

If you wish to know if your actions were at all meaningful--

I will tell you this as a parting gift.

You see, I told you a small lie in this story.

The Mask Maker had actually left behind more than just 'power'.

If you'll recall, I told you that the original Mask Maker was an individual.

They say that the individual's name was... Monica.

Monica Campanella.

And her true name--Monica Boronial.

A woman.

She was only about fifteen years of age when she became the Mask Maker.

Although she was a daughter of the illustrious Boronial clan, she had lost her name as punishment for a murder that could not be revealed to the world.

The girl loved a certain boy, and the individual of the Mask Maker was born because of this one boy.

And as I told you before, the Mask Maker was reborn as an organization when she fell for the persuasions of two boys.

And in the end--

She was murdered by the one she loved.

Murdered.

Isn't it absurd?

Was my ancestor not a fool?

She was manipulated by the man she loved, and was finally killed by him.

And is my ancestor not a wicked villain?

He made a child with the one who loved him, used her for his own ends, and killed her without mercy.

... Yes, that's right.

Right before her death, Monica Campanella left behind a child.

And that unbroken bloodline has been passed down through the ages, under the protection of the power of the Mask Makers--

And over the generations, the legacy eventually reached this point--myself.

Luchino B. Campanella.

This is the result of your tailing this humble magician--you have finally learned of my true identity.

What kind of a person am I? That is a simple question.

For I am the person who will now silence you forever.

... Please don't be so afraid.

After all, isn't this what you wanted to know?

You wanted to know about me.

An eye for an eye. You've dug your way to the truth, and now you will be taken care of. That is all.

It is quite unfortunate. I thought I had given you ample warning.

I have no interest in you.

Whether you're some local reporter, a member of an opposing organization, or related to someone we killed in the past... And your purpose, whether curiosity, business, or vengeance, has no meaning to me.

It is a sad tale, but you will have to die.

Please don't struggle too much. You will only suffer more should I miss the mark.

Of course, I suppose you couldn't struggle with those broken limbs and back, even if you wanted to.

Allow me to show you a magic trick.

Here I have a stiletto.

And I will make this sharp, glinting blade disappear in an instant.

I'm sure you can figure out the trick quite easily.

It's very simple.

I will be hiding it inside you.

Just like that.

<=>

With these words, he stabbed the man and killed him.

'I killed him.'

There was a simple sinking noise as he pressed the blade into flesh.

'I killed him.'

The blade pierced through, from the man's neck into the top of his head. He could hear a dull thud as something snapped inside.

'I killed him.'

The victim's consciousness had already disappeared before he could hear the sound.

'I killed him.'

A man--still young enough to be called a boy--pulled the stiletto out of the corpse's chin, righted his grip, and turned around with a shrug to the men and women gathered in the room.

'I killed him.'

"I ask that you be quick with the disposal."

'I killed him.'

The boy, who looked to be still a few years shy of twenty, coldly glanced at the corpse and turned around with an uninterested look.

'I killed him.'

He was standing in an underground room, untouched by sunlight.

The fluorescent lights bounced off the concrete walls and floor, creating an atmosphere of coldness.

Multiple men were standing in front of the boy called Luchino. They nodded and gathered around the corpse in a thoroughly practiced manner.

The boy quietly left the room without watching the cleanup job.

Luchino B. Campanella.

Also known as "Rookie".

The representative of the organization called the Mask Makers, and its youngest and most promising member.

In terms of age he was the same as Illness, but she had been with the organization far longer than he.

He was both the boss and a rookie.

Rather than express dislike for his employees' nickname for him, the boy was content to let them call him as they please.

On the surface, the Mask Makers were a team of mercenaries.

Of course, the real face of the Mask Makers weren't much different.

If one had to say, this hidden side worked not in war-torn places or battlefields, but for countries in peacetime. They would take hit requests from places like England or Japan.

In other words, they were organized hitmen. They supplemented individual skills with the organization and financial backing, and would step into any conflict as long as they were paid. They would not hesitate to commit violent crimes if it was for their job.

Their employers ranged from civilians to mafias and corporations, and client secrecy was absolute.

In reality, they had never actually taken any work for their surface job as mercenaries.

This was because they had no experience as mercenaries--soldiers.

This was not an organization of efficient killers. It was a team specialized in the committing of crimes, like bandits or a mafia--and if nothing else, their equipment was state-of-the-art.

They were vagabonds who would go anywhere and do anything to accomplish their goals.

It seemed that they had been working with imitation jewelry and counterfeit currencies until a few decades ago, but the knowledge for that business had been lost. It would be impossible to start it up again now.

And the leader of this violent organization was this vivacious boy with blond hair.

But over his face was a merciless look that positively radiated an icy chill.

As usual, he had personally taken the life of a hapless pursuer, leaving behind the bloodied corpse with a stony, masklike expression.

As usual, he left his subordinates the task of cleaning up after the corpse.

'I killed him.'

As usual, he left the room--

'I killed him. I killed him.'

As usual, he climbed the stairs--

'I killed him. I killed him. I killed him.'

As usual, he stepped into the building's washroom--

'I killed him. I killed him.'

As usual, he locked the cubicle from inside--

'I killed him.'

And with his usual cold expression--

He vomited into the toilet as usual.

"Gah...!"

'I killed him.

I killed him.

I killed him.'

As the digestive fluids made their way out of his mouth, tears began welling up in his eyes--an unpleasant sour taste assaulted his tongue.

'I killed him.

I killed him.

I killed him.'

The silent accusations continued to echo inside his head.

The voice continued to resonate like a curse, threatening to burn the memory of his actions into his mind.

'I killed him.

I killed him.

I killed him.

I. Killed. Him.'

And with each repetition of the voice he was reminded of the feeling--the sharp yet deep, gut-wrenching feeling in his wrist as he pierced through the man's throat.

And that was not all.

The countless people he had killed, just as he had done now--

Their faces all came back to life in his mind at once, their resentful voices assaulting the boy.

'I killed them.

I killedkilledkilledkilledkilledkilled

You

You

You It was you You You

It was you You You You You

You You It was you You It was you You

You You You You

You killed us.'

"Guh... Ugh..."

It was as if his insides were writhing.

He couldn't hold back. The vomit rose up again.

Over and over and over again. After multiple repetitions, once even his stomach had been emptied of even its digestive fluids, the boy began to calm his breathing again.

'How many times did I throw up?'

After flushing and leaving the cubicle, he grasped the edge of the sink to remember.

'Eight--no, nine times.'

The accusations in his mind had already faded by the time he recounted this fact.

And with an icy look, he wiped his swollen red eyes with a handkerchief.

He stood bowed over the sink for several minutes. And once he confirmed that his eyes were no longer bloodshot, he left the washroom.

"Hey. Feeling a bit better, boss?"

The shadow leaning against the wall outside the door spoke to him.

"...Aging..."

He slowly turned to face the shadow.

The figure called Aging stepped away from the wall and walked up to the boy.

At well over two metres in height, Aging towered over Luchino.

This warrior--around late twenties to early thirties--had a look both youth and veteran. Aging chuckled and spoke to the boss.

"This job still too tough for you? 'Course, Illness throws up after killing people, too."

"I don't know what you're talking about. If you don't have anything to do, why don't you just go relax at home?" Luchino retorted--not as a president, but in a tone very much suited to a boy of his age.

Aging gave a hearty laugh--despite the elderly tone of speech, Aging's physique practically radiated vigour and youth. The arms sticking out from under the shirt sleeves were almost bodybuilder-level in thickness. This was not fat--it was closer in appearance to flesh-coloured metal wires bunched together.

The legs sticking out of Aging's shorts looked even stronger--they were reminiscent of greek statues in their build.

The physique resembled Michelangelo's *David*--with 50% more muscle--but there was a crucial difference between Aging and *David*.

The print on the chest area of Aging's T-shirt was strangely distorted by a pair of mounds--softer, supple flesh, contrary to the muscle-covered limbs and stomach.

As an unnecessary side note, Aging was also lacking something that was on *David's* lower body.

The **gigantic beauty** called Aging looked down at the boy, who was barely at her chest-level, and let out an honest laugh.

"Gahaha! Don't be so shy! I'm not calling you an idiot or anything. Some people can tough out living hard lives, and that's just another way of living! After all, can't say it's a good thing to get used to killing people. In fact, I'd say it's pretty normal for someone your age in a country like this to find it difficult!"

Her silhouette alone made her appear as if she was wearing some sort of power suit, but all Aging was wearing were thin clothing. Although she wasn't completely covered in muscle, she resembled a doll made of distorted tires.

Despite her overbearing physique and face, Aging smiled and changed the subject.

"Anyway, are you sure about coming along on the ship too, boss? Best not to do anything rash, y'know?"

"Don't butt into this, Aging. I have to bring an end to this matter personally."

"I commend that decisiveness of yours, but what if something happens to you?"

"It means that if I'm in danger, the Mask Makers are finished, too." the boss glared at his employee. Aging laughed and spoke.

"Now, is that anything a boss should be saying? Anyway, what can I do? It's your decision. No complaints here!" she gave a hearty laugh and continued, "that aside, what're we gonna do about the guy who offed Death? Get back at him?"

"If *you* want, sure. But if you want to use the company's assets, you'll have to pay up and send us a proper request."

"Not like we've got enough time to take care of personal business like that anyway. I don't plan on dying, but I'm already prepared for other people's, my teammates', and even my own death."

"...Are you making fun of me?"

This time, the Rookie properly met eyes with Aging.

"Course not. I'm not saying that getting personal feelings involved is a bad thing. In fact, I think you should feel free to make business personal, as long as it doesn't get in the way! As you can see, I'm enjoying my job to its fullest! Don't tell me you think it's inefficient to get your own problems involved with work?"

"... No." The young president replied, averting his eyes, "That's not it. Unfortunately, I'm different from those people who think that people's feelings and lives can be bought with money. Of course, it's a talent in and of itself to be able to say something like that outright."

Luchino's face was once again covered with a mask of cruelty. The face of the vomiting Rookie in the washroom was nowhere to be found.

"Lives, a sense of security... They're all **assets** that you can't buy with money."

"That so?"

"And I will do *anything* for these assets."

The boy quietly laughed, once again putting on the face of the president of the Mask Makers.

"And this business is all for me. It's just like buying products with an employee discount. ...And that's why I used my personal funds to commission to the Mask Makers an **extra job** on this mission."

"I'm surprised you can hate someone so much without even having met him before."

"..."

"Isn't our mission this time to 'Capture the Immortals'? I'd think that goes against what you're planning, boss."

Aging calmly questioned her employer. The president gave an anxious reply.

"... All we need to do for **their** mission is capture any *one* of the immortals. According to the info, at least three immortals will be on board. They won't mind if I take care of just one."

"Take care of'? Goodness, is that something a kid who throws up every time he kills should even be saying?"

"Shut up, Aging. You 'Four Agonies' are nothing but our tools. You don't have the right to talk back to me, and I don't intend to listen."

"Our boss comes up with the cutest little lies sometimes."

Aging didn't even blink at the president's icy statement--she laughed and poked her face in front of her employer.

"If you *really* considered us your tools, you wouldn't take the time to talk to us individually like this."

"..."

"Why do you always try to act so cold? Responsibility to the 'bloodline' that made you inherit this organization? For revenge against some monster you've never even met? Or are you scared that one of us is going to take over the organization if you show your weakness? You think you're gonna be killed? Or is it self-loathing? Lack of self-confidence? Or is it--"

They were close enough for the breathing from her pretty lips to reach him.

He could feel her warm breath on his face. The Rookie inadvertently looked away from her--

"Boss's orders."

And turning away from her in escape, he spat out an anxious command.

"Don't see right through me like that."

Aging chuckled to herself as the president ran off with words of either childlikeness or forced maturity.

"Forget 'seeing through'--all I see is you showing it all off."

'Or do you just want someone to stop you?'

Do you want someone to tell you, 'You don't need to try so hard?'

"Gahahahaha!"

The 'tool' of a woman, remembering what she was about to tell him, continued her distinctive laugh.

"Let's see here... hope these guys'll keep me as entertained as the boss."

She took out several photographs from her shirt and looked them over.

The photos looked like they had been shot from a covert location in the distance.

Several people had been singled out in particular, and their names were written underneath.

On the picture of a man with a strange grin was the name [Elmer C. Albatross].

On the picture of a man wearing a tribal mask--completely different in origin from that of the Mask Makers--was a short name that looked more like a pseudonym: [Nile].

On the picture of a glamorous silver-haired woman so bewitchingly beautiful that even Aging found herself floored was the name [Sylvie Lumiere].

A picture of an Asian man with a calm appearance. It seemed he had noticed the camera. It looked like his eyes were looking directly at Aging. Written below was the name [Togo Denkuro].

On the final photograph was a red line drawn across the throat of the subject, as if in a comical attempt at a beheading.

This last picture had not been distributed to the employees. Aging had fished it out of the room on her own, and picked out one of the better doodles to pocket for herself.

"...Can't help but still be a kid, huh? And of all the things to be childish about."

Aging sighed and looked at the face of the young man in the photograph.

The man in the photo had sharp eyes, like he could see right through anything and everything.

And the name under the photo--

Was the name of a terrorist who was well known in America over fifty years ago.

[Huey Laforet]

"Hm... He's not really my type, but..."

The woman stared into the photograph, and mumbled to herself--

"I'd have to say... he *does* kind of resemble the boss."

"So I guess it's not completely unreasonable--that thing about **this guy being the boss's ancestor.**"

Prologue 6 : They Deny God

Summer, 2002.

It was a bizarre church.

A group of dozens of people in strange dress, gathered in a circular room.

There were people both male and female, young and old, of many different races. In this sense, it was similar to any old Sunday service, but there was something clearly 'off' about the air around them.

This was because everyone in this room was dressed in exactly the same manner.

The styles of each outfit were different, but it was plain to see that they were all variations of the same 'something'.

These clothes were unified by a red-and-black colour scheme. A young man's jacket, the twenty-year old woman's one-piece dress, a child's windbreaker, and an elderly man's robe--they were all painted red and black.

There were no electric lights in the room.

This was why the moonlight shining down from overhead lit up the room so brilliantly.

In this absolute silence, broken only by breathing--

These people were circled around an empty altar.

The altar was a strange, circular piece at the centre of the room.

The people neither prayed nor kneeled. They merely observed their silence from their comfortable positions.

And when the moon had reached the peak of its brilliance--

The door at the back of the room opened, and multiple men and women appeared, accompanied by about a dozen children.

The man at the head of this group looks somewhat like a research student fresh out of the laboratory.

Moonlight shone off his bookish glasses, hiding the eyes behind the light.

He held at his side what looked to be a binder, and there were multiple pens sticking out of this breast pocket.

But there was one thing that clearly set him apart from a lab technician.

His labcoat was not white.

Just like the others, his labcoat was completely covered by outlandish red and black patterns.

"Oh, sorry about this, everyone! I can't believe I was late! The final boss was much tougher than I'd expected. I had to start over five times!"

In an instant, the man destroyed the air of calm silence in the room and walked up to the altar with a sloppy grin.

"My goodness, shooters these days are so expertly made! To feel the exquisite sensation of bursting through a storm of bullets--and for that moment, it gives me the pleasure of having conquered the entire world! How wonderful. I raise a glass to the technology of these Japanese game designers, and concede defeat."

As the man rambled on, to himself or otherwise, he set down the binder atop the altar.

The children who accompanied him into the room scattered across the chamber, and several adults lined up on either side of him.

On either side was a young woman, and beside each woman were men of strange appearance.

One was a man who had the build and look of a gorilla.

The other man was wearing a black suit, but his face was wrapped in bandages.

This second man was less *bizarre* than he was *off*. The bandages on his face were not white--they were painted red and black, just like the clothing of the other people in this room. In fact, it was hard to say with 100% certainty that they were even bandages at all.

With his face and neck meticulously covered, the man also wore red leather gloves on his hands.

This man of indistinguishable race and age brought a new whole level of abnormality into this already odd room.

And yet the young man in the red-and-black labcoat continued to ramble on without a hint of care in his voice.

"Now, now, now, everyone! Settle down, please! Of course, I'm the only one who needs settling down at the moment! Excuse me! But you see, I'm very much an introvert, so, well, how should I put this? I'm just very, very, very nervous about having to be surrounded by you all right now! That can't be helped, though."

The young man fixed his glasses and looked around, but he did not meet anyone's gaze. He was wearing a sloppy grin, but that look in his wandering eyes was definitely suspicious.

"Also, you see? Well. We have a new face here today! A young lady. What to do? I get so nervous when I talk to women. In any case, a round of applause, everyone! Let's welcome our new friend, Miss Rucott!"

The young man raised his voice so as to cover up his own anxiety.

The tip of his hand pointed towards a lone woman, who had been standing with this strange group of people.

This woman, dressed just like the other members of the gathering, shyly stepped forward and thought something to herself.

'What the heck is this?'

It was a thought filled with confusion and disdain.

<=>

One month earlier, somewhere in Europe.

The life of Silis Artia, an employee at a private investigation agency, was changed forever when her boss finally showed his face and tapped on her shoulder out of the blue.

"An undercover report...?"

As she asked tentatively, her boss nodded as if it were no big deal.

"Yeah. It's a bit of a pain--a religious organization. Seems like they have a lot of things in common with some old cult."

It wasn't a particularly unusual story.

After all, this agency was somewhat different from others--depending on the pay, it was willing to get involved in some particularly dangerous jobs.

They had gathered information on the seamy underbelly of society before. Sometimes they used illegal methods to investigate the mafia or politicians. Silis herself had investigated hooligans and criminal groups.

She also had some experience in investigating religious groups, and there were some occasions when she felt her life was in danger.

But the word "undercover" was unfamiliar to her. There were others here who did this kind of work, so she did not understand why she was singled out for the job.

Despite herself, Silis decided to ask her boss about the specifics.

"An old cult...? How old?"

"Pretty ancient. About three hundred years."

"Pardon?"

"Before... Was it Spain, or Portugal? I don't know where it started, but there was this strange religious group all over Europe. It was less of a religion and more of a group of heretics... In any event, I don't know why, but a group of people who claim to have inherited their traditions suddenly popped up. The details are in the files."

The boss handed Silis a CD.

"Give it a read and tell me if you're going to take the job. It's not the kind of thing I'd be willing to force anyone to do."

The boss left her with these words.

Silis hesitated for a moment, looking at the CD. But she reminded herself that just staring at it would do nothing, and put it into her computer.

<=>

And as a result, she was now standing in this unusual church.

'Is this supposed to be some sort of a joke?'

The religious organization 'SAMPLE'.

'It's called SAMPLE?' It was such a strange name Silis almost didn't even find it funny.

The original branch of this organization was said to have existed in various parts of Europe, several centuries ago.

It wasn't that the branches were split apart--they were literally extant in separate locations.

It was not known if the different branches maintained contact with one another. The only certainty was that they existed at that time, and that their numbers suddenly disappeared in an instant.

During the era of the Inquisition against so-called witches, this group was heretical in the truest sense of the word.

After all, they had not branched off from a greater religious group--they had completely different philosophies and faiths.

However, these people would likely be called heretics--not only by the great religion that had power over the area at the time, but by anyone in the world--by most other religions as well.

Child murder.

This was probably a quintessential component of a typical cult's traditions.

Several religions probably held doctrines about the sacrifice of children, but in this case, the children to be killed were a little different from sacrifices.

When she read that children were abused for religious reasons, Silis had assumed that they were for sacrificial purposes--but it seemed this wasn't actually the case.

They weren't offering a child's blood and soul to a god, nature, or some great power--

It was recorded that they offered up the *agony* of the child, and worshipped their screams of pain--or their death itself.

Silis could not understand.

What kind of religion ends up at a conclusion like this?

Stranger still was the fact that the *reason* for inflicting pain was not recorded in detail.

It seemed that different sects had different reasons. The records showed that one sect claimed that 'devouring the flesh of a child will grant immortality'--something that sounded more like magic than religion.

And from the late 17th century to the early 18th century, the Vatican even sent in a military order to decimate one particular sect, presumably the largest of these groups.

It was said that this sect partook in these child murders in order to "have the child take on all the misfortune in the world".

It wasn't a completely incomprehensible idea, but it was difficult to believe that such ideals would be carried out at a time when even the Witch Hunts were coming to an end.

But it was true that some cults still practised bizarre habits to this day.

So people could turn to murdering their own children when out of sight.

This was strange in Silis's own point of view, but it was probably considered normal in this group's community.

'But still... this religion suddenly revived itself in this day and age. What is going on?'

According to the information, this faith would suddenly appear like this on occasion. One theory went that there was one main branch that had been continued for all this time, with its different branches surfacing to the outside world sometimes.

But was this particular group the mother branch? Or was it just a sect? Or was it an imitation group that was founded upon records of an older cult?

Silis was not without her curiosity.

However, the single biggest reason she took this job was for the massive cash payment.

Of course, this was partially influenced by the fact that her sense of danger did not rear its head out of her sheer incredulity for this cult.

And this was how she went abroad, joining this cult under the name of a stranger named Rucott Diaz.

The mission was simple: the client's son, who had joined this religious group, had stopped regularly contacting his parents. The client became suspicious and requested an investigation.

Without proof of criminal activity, the police would not intervene in these cases because the potential victim had given consent. This was why the client requested an investigation to gather evidence of any criminal activity.

'Cults like this should have been destroyed ages ago.'

This group indoctrinated child abuse and child murder. Normally such a cult would have been long wiped out, but Silis thought for a moment and brought herself to accept their existence.

'If it's a revived belief, I guess not even the police would investigate something from three centuries ago.'

Not only that, it seemed that they did not partake in kidnappings or the like--they gave off the impression of being more harmless than joking Satanists.

The data Silis received from her boss had no information on the current activities of this group. It did not seem they were living in a closed community, nor did it seem they held restrictions on meeting times and locations.

'It's almost like some school club.'

Silis, who then made contact with this group with half-disbelief, had unfortunately missed several details.

One detail being that the information she had received from her boss was all correct, but its source was a professional information broker.

This broker was from a group that could get its hands on any kind of information, even those under the radar--this was one such file.

Another detail was that, because this cult had no meeting restrictions and the police were not after them, she fell under the impression that this cult was well-known to society at large.

A quick look on the internet would have told her otherwise--whether civilians or police, very few knew of this group.

Not even the client--the young man's parents--probably knew of this group's past or origins.

And this complete set of information made her lower her guard.

This information was not the kind that should normally be leaked to prying eyes.

In other words, the information broker her company worked with was much too skilled.

And another detail, unrelated to Silis.

Her boss had failed to give the broker proper payment.

This was why the broker also failed to detail any more specific information--one in particular, which was a piece of data of utmost importance.

"This organization is extremely dangerous. Keep away from them if you value your life."

Information that changed Silis's life forever.

And with no way of knowing any of this, Silis played the part of Rucott, and gave a heavy sigh in her head.

'Is this really some kids' club?'

Contacting this group was surprisingly simple, and the only question they asked was, "Who were you referred here by?".

It had been three days since. She would now be allowed to meet the leader.

'My god, it's all going so well I'm almost scared. A group this easy should be no problem.'

Making fun of them in her head, Silis gave a polite reply to the young man in front of her.

"Thank you... I'm very happy to be able to join you in this faith."

"Oh, please relax! There's no need to be anxious here. You can act however you like!" The bespectacled young man gave a shy laugh.

It seemed that this man was the one in charge, but he looked more like a clumsy lab assistant than anything else. He looked like he was trying too hard by wearing the red-and-black labcoat.

'This guy can't possibly be the leader... I guess he's a secretary.'

Although she was a bit concerned about the inhumanly bulky gorilla-man and the man in bandages, she was little more than slightly bothered by these eccentricities.

'So they're probably not too different from bands who try to act like Satanists.'

Although such groups could become terrifying with the right mix of insanity and fervour, the bespectacled man had turned the air in this space completely tepid.

'No joke. It's practically like they started off as a school club.'

'But with all the little kids and seniors in the group, that doesn't quite seem right...'

Despite this tiny nagging feeling, the bespectacled young man averted his eyes and confidently began to speak.

"I've been told that Miss Rucott grew up in England, and her hobby is baking cookies! I'd love to try some one day! Haha!"

Although he tried to fire up his audience, the fact that no one met his eyes meant his joking fell on deaf ears.

"Well, I can bake cookies, as well! But you see, it's, well... I'm a bit afraid to have other people tasting it. What do I do if they say it doesn't taste very good? In any event... um, what I mean to say is, uh... right! I have to introduce Rucott to everyone."

He forced a laugh, but the room remained as frigid as ever.

'What an idiot.'

Although Silis was making fun of him in her head, she made sure not to show any of this on her face.

"Haha... hah... ahem. So, what I'm trying to say is, well. Rucott is--"

This would be an easy job. Silis would report that there was nothing to worry about this organization, and she would figure out some blackmail material on them just in case.

Silis suppressed a smile, but--

The next moment, she felt her face freeze instantly.

"Rucott is, well... that's right! Rucott graduated from Hillroam University! It's quite a famous place. I'm from a no-name college, myself--I'm quite jealous."

'...What?'

She broke the ice covering her frozen thoughts and thought things through again.

'...What did he just say?'

Recalling the young man's words did not change her reaction.

Hillroam University was not the alma mater of the woman named Rucott Diaz.

It was the alma mater of Silis herself.

"After graduating, she immediately got a job with St. Crystelle Offices. She gained the trust of her employers, taking care of jobs both legal and illegal. Amazing! You can't buy trust, that's for certain."

Her heart was racing.

Her heart was beating like a drum.

Her heart rose up to her throat on the verge of explosion.

St. Crystelle Offices was the name of the investigation agency she worked at.

She had created a false self, buying another's identity and even creating a passport in that name.

'They... saw me through?'

It seemed absurd.

She did not want to believe it.

Silis had some pride in her skills as a professional, even in matters of the legal grey area.

Being found out by a joke of an organization like this should not have happened.

Silis felt sick to her stomach.

Sweat congealed on her skin and evaporated, cooling down her entire body.

Because her cool skin cut off her sense of touch, the only feeling that reached Silis's mind was the knowledge that she was trembling.

But she did not break her expression.

They must be testing her.

This one hope kept her going in this precarious state of mind.

"I don't know what you're talking a--"

Her attempt at calmly evading the topic ended in failure.

This was because the bespectacled man had stopped--or rather, he had never been listening to what Silis was saying, and he did not intend to start.

"And not only that! She's here undercover, all alone, for a job at that office! What a brave soul, fearlessly storming the unknown! A round of applause! Let's give Miss Rucott a welcoming round of applause!"

For a moment, the confused Silis was showered with compliments and adoring applause.

'Huh?'

She did not understand.

What was going on? Why were they clapping for her? None of this made any sense to her.

The people surrounded her from all sides and applauded.

"Oh..."

She started unintentionally, but she didn't even know what she was trying to say.

'What is this?'

'What kind of a joke is this?'

It began to feel like the entire world was a joke.

Perhaps, like Alice, she had fallen into some Wonderland.

She felt like she had been invited to a private party by a complete stranger--all she could do was stand in shock.

"Oh, right! I told you that I'd be introducing you to our leader today. And introduce you I shall! Well, to be specific, it's actually me."

"...Pardon?"

"Whoa! 'Pardon?', she says! How terrifying. As I thought, the scariest things in the world are humans! Saying, 'Pardon?' to a stranger...? In any event, believe it or not, I am Bride, the forty-third leader of SAMPLE. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"..."

Silis's mask of serenity shattered as she looked at the man calling himself Bride.

She looked at him with eyes mixed with fear and doubt, but this young man looked like little more than a melancholy lab assistant. There was nothing charismatic or leader-like in his appearance.

"I suppose 'forty-third leader' is a bit vague. You could say I'm the head of our teachings. We do not worship any individual--even if the leader changes, we continue in our faith with our roots in our holy book. Speaking of, our holy book is still incomplete. In other words, the leader will continue to add to our philosophy, regardless of changes in leadership. Let me show you--"

Bride mumbled quietly, and placed the binder at his side onto the altar.

In the binder were inscribed countless words in tiny lettering. Halfway through, the pages were blank. Upon closer inspection, the earlier pages were made of parchment. Later pages were made with newer paper.

"I guess you could say this holy book is the object of our worship. These days, we're hearing opinions that we put these onto a computer to make it easier to carry around. What do you think? We may be a three century-old group, but aren't we quite progressive? Of course, some of the larger, older religions have already long begun utilizing the fruits of technology. I'm envious."

The man continued to ramble on.

Silis did not understand any of what he was saying.

'The binder's the holy book?'

'It's blank from halfway through?'

'No, set that aside... Is this half-baked idiot really the leader?'

Silis tried to form a question at her lips amidst the confusion, but she could not organize her thoughts--there were just too many questions swirling around in her mind. She couldn't decide what to ask first.

And as if nailing down her confusion, Bride grinned and clapped his hands.

"Now, I shall **temporarily become the leader!**"

"...?"

"Thank the fruits of technology."

Bride spoke, looking up at the ceiling. He slowly spread his arms wide.

The young women at his side each took something in their hands.

'Syringes?!'

They were normal syringes, the type that were used for immunization shots. Inside was some sort of clear liquid--combined, they would perhaps be equal to a tiny energy drink bottle in mass.

The man expertly removed the air bubbles from the syringes--

And stabbed them both into either side of his neck at once.

"--!"

Silis gave out a silent scream.

But the bespectacled man relaxedly continued the injection.

"Oh, please don't worry. This is just dextrose." he smiled sloppily, "I'm afraid I simply can't handle being a leader without my brain being full of sugars."

The muscles in his neck twitched with his voice, and the syringes also shifted very slightly in turn.

The injection ended before Silis could even think it dangerous, and Bride removed the syringes and handed them to the women at his side.

"..."

He then silently turned around and walked up to the altar.

As Silis watched the man turn his back to her and remove his glasses, she realized that the air in the room had completely changed.

"Oh... Ohhhhhhhh..."

Bride leaned back his entire body as he let out a moaning breath.

Silis could hear his bones cracking.

"Oooooohhhhhhhhhhaaaaaahhhhhhhhh..."

The screaming moans stopped.

Silis then fell under the impression that time itself had halted in unison.

It was cold.

The air in the room was strangely cold and terrifying.

The temperature did not change. It wasn't air conditioning.

Silis wasn't shivering.

It was just an utterly chilly atmosphere.

When she looked around, the smiles had been wiped off the people's faces.

They didn't seem to be anxious, but there was a mysterious cold look in their eyes, whether adult or child.

'I messed up.'

The realization finally hit her.

'I messed up.'

I've made a horrible decision!

The realization that she had set foot into something she should not have.

The people around her had most definitely not gathered here for something so petty as some school club. There was something very 'off' about them that set them apart from the world.

The leader, no longer bespectacled, slowly turned around.

"Please... Allow me to introduce myself again."

It was a handsome smile. But his emotionless eyes made it look like his face was decorated with a pair of dark glass spheres.

"Ugh..."

Silis let out a soft scream.

She began to lose her sense of reality.

The man in front of her was the shy young man--he had merely taken off his glasses.

And yet he was no longer the same person.

It looked almost as if he had a split personality, but he had merely give his brain an injection of sugars.

"Welcome, former Silis Artia, now reborn as Rucott Diaz."

But he was a different person.

She *wanted* to think he was a different person.

People can lose themselves temporarily. They can go crazy.

This man was part of the latter.

The young man with the sloppy grin had utterly shattered, the shards reforming into a new shape. It was a great change that made it almost impossible to believe that he had merely taken off his glasses.

It was the feeling of a mixed-up Rubik's Cube putting itself back instantly.

It was a simple change, the kind that might have been accompanied by the click of a button.

He had **become complete** with two syringes' worth of dextrose.

Rather, it seemed like the entire world around him had changed.

What overcame Silis was not fear, but anxiety.

The anxiety that she had just been transported to another world entirely. She was caught up by the kind of unease that felt like she was being rejected completely.

But the world around her was continuing to exist of its own accord, ignoring her plight.

"Well then... let us sing."

Bride, standing with arms wide open, had already closed his eyes.

His calm, concise words--incomparable to the way he was just earlier, raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

The warmth had vanished from the other believers in the room. There was a tense look on their faces--drawn not from fear or unease, but from respect.

'What... is happening?'

The man completely ignored Silis, an outsider to their 'world', and waved his arms like a conductor.

And at that moment--

[Let the answer within us fear death]

A tuneless round began to fill the church.

[Let the world within them fear life]

These voices did not belong to the people around Silis.

[Fear death, fear death
Fear life, fear life]

They belonged to the children who had accompanied Bride in--the children who had retreated to the wall in a line.

[The flesh shall accept death
The heart shall desire death
Yet the exalted ram shall persist in life]

Upon closer inspection, the children all had headphones over their ears. Their eyes were covered with blindfolds.

These children were effectively both blind and deaf, having to observe their surroundings with touch and smell alone.

And in clear tones, these boys and girls sang this tuneless melody.

[Calm the soul to be devoured
Worship death

Our god exists not
Yet we shall affirm god]

Although Silis could feel no emotion from the children's voices, something about them reminded her of desperate yelling--and she came to a realization.

*'That's right. They're **screaming**.*

*These are the **screams of the children**.'*

What sound was being played to them over the headphones? Silis had no way of knowing at this distance.

The children seemed to have their hands behind their backs. Their feet were restrained with heavy chains--their hands were likely bound in much the same fashion.

Silis was overwhelmed by the sight of these children, and she soon realized what they were.

These children were not dressed in red and black like the adults.

They wore pure, pristine white--as if their clothes were made of feathers plucked from a swan.

It was a simple design, but these outfits held a sense of cheer to them. On their own, they were reminiscent of angels, or fairies and elves from cartoons.

But such fantasies had been tainted by reality.

The bound children did nothing but continue their song.

They sang this emotionless melody in their silent screaming.

And Bride elegantly waved his hands, as if he were conducting this eerie song.

The children were merely acting as speakers that spoke in his place, now that he had cut down on his words.

[Death is a neighbour to dread

Life is kin to be feared

Our god

Comes from us

And returns unto the void

Anguish joins with light

Shame conjoined with shadow

I merely stand before the exalted one

And bring a single herb to my lips

Fear god

Fear self

To pity is to--]

'No... stop it.'

The slithering wave of words mired Silis in a fog and began to strangle her.

'What are these bastards... what's wrong with them?!'

Their ideals were clear.

Their malice was explicit.

The 'believers', who stood between Bride and the children, listened to the song with looks of euphoria on their faces.

Bride soon lowered his hands, and the melody disappeared in an instant.

Silis saw something.

She saw that the look on the face of the 'conductor' of this song was that of unmistakable joy.

It was a smile of elation at its peak--greater even than mere happiness or satisfaction.

Bride slowly covered his face with his hands and lowered his head, chuckling.

Silis found everything about him--his every movement and his every word abhorrent.

Yet at the same time, she understood.

That her life was now at the mercy of this loathsome world.

'Please tell me this is some bad joke.'

Pain had not been inflicted upon her.

A loved one had not been taken hostage.

She had not witnessed a tragedy.



Only the unshakeable truth that she had set foot into something she should not have.

Her eyes were fixed on 'something' that had suddenly graced this place with its presence only moments ago.

But this 'something' was neither god nor devil--it was a mere human.

And this was precisely why Silis was so afraid of Bride.

The freakishness inflated her terror to the breaking point.

The bizarre air became a formless shape, silently filling the entire room.

And as the hazy atmosphere enveloped the room, Bride smiled quietly and again approached Silis.

"And as for our verdict concerning you, Rucott..."

Silis found herself trembling at the words of this man, who had even changed his tone of speaking.

Silis was completely frozen by the atmosphere. Bride continued with a heavy tone.

"You will have to marry me."

"Ah... ..?"

"You will only have to endure a short while. We will be divorced once the true bride is found, and then you will be free to die a peaceful death."

"...?"

A terrifying sense of loss hit her like a truck.

The word 'marriage'--something she could not have expected from a place like this.

And the word 'die' that soon followed.

And before Silis could even get her thoughts in order, things became more confusing than she could ever have thought.

There was a loud noise--something was thrown aside, snapping Silis awake.

The church's narrow doors swung wide open, and a group of men ran inside.

'What?! What's going on now?!'

The men seemed to be of Southeast Asian origin, or very tanned East Asian.

These dark-haired men with tanned skin coarsely yelled something in a language she didn't understand.

Of course, more distracting than their yelling were the objects in their hands.

In total, there were about seven or eight of these intruders.

One of them held a gigantic hand-axe about half his own height.

About half of the rest had smaller bladed weapons.

And the remaining three each held dark handguns that glinted in the moonlight.

"Ah..."

Silis let out a quiet scream and collapsed in a heap in the corner of the room.

In contrast, the group--including Bride--was exceedingly calm.

They were standing in silence, heads turned towards the intruders.

Initially, the men seemed to be ready for a shouting match. But as they saw the continued silence of the people here, they slowly lowered their own voices and glanced at one another.

However, they did not seem to want to withdraw their weapons. One of the men with guns began to look for a potential target.

"What in the world... my god..."

"These men are not our allies." Bride explained, standing next to Silis with a smile, "We had some trouble with them before. We are both foreigners in this country... I had hoped that we could get along. It is a pity."

With a sympathetic shake of the head, Bride wiped the smile off his face.

And, as a leader, he gave a command to the silent believers.

"Everyone. It seems that at this rate, we will be killed. How terrifying."

He spoke with a saintlike smile--a smile without malice or greed.

"And as we do not wish to die, we must, by necessity--"

<=>

Thirty minutes later.

The ensuing scene was extremely bizarre and horrifying.

However, it would be another month before Silis could properly go over these events in her head.

This was because she had now been reduced to a trembling shell on the floor, like a blank-eyed, soulless corpse.

Before she knew it, she was being slowly carried out of the church with Bride's help.

Having lost his charismatic attitude from before, Bride was now struggling to meet her eyes as he pulled her along and mumbled.

"By 'marriage', it's not the legal definition. Just in terms of our doctrine. So, um, well. Let's try to get along."

"..."

Silis had been reduced to silence, and it was not clear if she was even conscious anymore.

But Bride continued his one-sided conversation with her.

"Our religion, you see, doesn't deny pleasure." he suddenly began, and signalled to the two women walking with him to take out several photographs.

"So, what I'm trying to say is, uh... I want to have everything I want. That's what it means to be human, after all. Um, so what I'm trying to say is... Miss Rucott. Once I find the true bride, you're, uh, going to be divorced and killed by me to keep you silent. So I thought maybe you'd be able to die happy if you knew what kind of people they were. Haha."

Bride mumbled something that would have put Silis on high alert had she still been in her right mind, and showed her the photos.

The first picture was that of a silver-haired woman who radiated an unearthly beauty.

"This is Miss Sylvie. Isn't she beautiful? My heart is racing. I guess part of the reason is that she's so, so, so, so very much older than me."

The next was a photo of a sickly-looking girl.

"The next candidate is younger than me... Apparently she's called 'Illness'. Isn't it a strange name? I hear she was a distinguished priestess of another branch, but that branch was destroyed. I suppose the name isn't too bad of a fit in this case..."

Bride flipped to the next set of pictures. They were of men of varied races.

An Asian man with narrowed eyes.

A brown-skinned man wearing a strange mask.

A young man with a sincere smile.

A young man with black hair, golden eyes, and a sharp look. A tall man with glasses, an emaciated man with a beard, and others--there was a variety of people.

"As these people are men, they're not bride candidates. But we must **protect them**, as they're considered current gods."

He then picked out one of these photographs and began a cheery mumble.

"Oh, right. This one. It's this boy! This child! In some sense, he's even more important than the bride."

"..."

"It's no exaggeration to say that he has fulfilled every single requirement. This boy will be **a perfect god for us!** His name is... uh... right! Czeslaw! They say his name is Czeslaw Meyer!"

<=>

Bride laid the unresponsive Silis on the back seat of the car parked outside the church.

Behind Bride stood the bandaged man.

"Oh, are you leaving so soon? All right. I'll see you on the seas, then."

The bandaged man nodded at Bride's strangely friendly words, and took the back seat of another car.

As the black car departed, the 'leader' looked around in silence.

The other members of the groups seemed to have already changed out of their clothing. They wore plain clothing as they returned to their own lodgings one by one.

The young leader of this group tried to reassure himself.

"Well... It's been a while since we had such a large-scale service. I'm a bit nervous about being the leader, but... It's okay. I can do it. I can--uh... I'll trust in the power of dextrose."

With a self-deprecating laugh, he took a seat in the back of the car and spoke to the woman in the driver's seat.

"Let's go see Orihara first, so we can return the key. I'd like to thank him personally, since it looks like he'll be taking care of **corpse disposal** for us as a side."

He looked around at the buildings outside his car, and laughed as he looked at the **Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building**.

"What an amazing country we're in. There are arcades everywhere.

I hope the service on the ship will go just as well as one of my games."



第四章 不死者達は旅行気分

Chapter 4 : The Immortals are Ready for a Trip

A certain day in August, 2002. Yokohama Harbour.

"It's the sea!"

Despite having been an adult for a very long time, the young man shouting this with his arms spread wide was truly excited to be here.

"Isn't this amazing? The sea is so vast! It's the best! They compare big hearts to oceans, but that probably doesn't mean the amount of mercy you're willing to expend--I bet it's about being so vast-hearted that the little things just don't bother you! So everyone smile!"

As the man shouted illogically, his travel companions each spoke a line in disbelief.

"You're laughing. At the sea. Are you trying to *advertise* your idiocy?"

"I say this. The ocean will have no trouble accepting you, so allow yourself to become fish food."

"You say that trivialities will not bother the ocean, Master Elmer? Such claims will only damage the environment."

The young man nodded and responded to the three different replies.

"I know, I know. In any case, the ocean's great."

"I say this. Have a listen to what other people are saying."

"I did. And I ignored you."

"I say this. Die, Elmer. No, I will kill you myself."

A brown-skinned man wearing a mask straight out of some South American or Southeast Asian festival took hold of the man called Elmer in one hand and squeezed with all his might.

"Still fussy, eh, Nile...? Gaaak!"

The silver-haired woman in their company smiled apologetically and slicked back her hair, watching the purple-faced man--Elmer C. Albatross.

And from a slight distance away, an Asian man gazed upon her bewitching silhouette and muttered to himself.

"...What enchanting beauty."

"Hm? Did you just say something, Denkuro?"

"N-nay. Pay it no mind, Dame Sylvie."

Denkuro turned his face away. The woman cocked her head in confusion, but convinced herself that she had heard wrong and returned to staring at the ocean.

The four people were all of different races and ages.

Of course, the matter of age difference was, in one sense, a matter of triviality.

After all, they were all in the same age group, considering the fact that they were all over three hundred years old.

Elmer C. Albatross

Nile

Sylvie Lumiere

Togo Denkuro

There were two key things that tied these people together.

One was that they all crossed the Atlantic Ocean by ship in 1711.

Another was that all four of them had the special physical trait of immortality.

The moment they drank of a wine called the 'Elixir of Immortality', their bodies had become something human yet inhuman.

They were immortals whose bodies would heal from any death or injury. Even a single drop of blood, if separated from the body, would squirm like a living creature and make its way back. Yet at the same time, the body would still go through regular metabolic processes--it was a very convenient ability.

The thirty or so people who gained immortality on that ship in 1711 had now dwindled to about a third of the original number. Others followed in the footsteps of immortality in following years, but they were not counted among the original number.

Immortals could only be killed by other immortals.

An immortal would place their right hand on the head of another immortal and think, "I wish to eat". Then the target's body and knowledge would be wholly sucked into the devourer.

It was not known where the physical mass of a devoured person went. One person claimed that the body was converted to the massive amount of energy needed to transfer memories, but this immortal had now long been devoured.

And though it seemed that the immortals would live out their eternity in fear and distrust of one another, these four seemed to be exceptions.

Thanks to another immortal--Maiza Avaro--last month Elmer and the others finally reunited with Denkuro, the last of their fellow immortals.

Maiza had returned to New York with another immortal, claiming that he had accomplished what he had set out to do. But Elmer and the others remained in Japan to enjoy their days of peace.

They were not moving as a group, however. Each remained in Japan for their own reasons.

Elmer was frequenting arcades and toy stores, claiming that "Japanese games are the best!"--having studied the language through games, he was now at a point at which he could finish Japanese visual novels on his own.

But there was a particular reason that these four had gathered together like this.

"Really, what is Huey up to?" Sylvie muttered, and scanned the pamphlet in her hand.

The pamphlet, which looked like some overly opulent leather passport, was actually a boarding pass for a luxury cruise ship.

Huey Laforet.

He was one of the surviving immortals from 1711. At one point in time, he was an infamous terrorist in the U.S.A.

They had heard that he had been arrested in the 1930s, but none of the four had any idea what might have happened to him afterwards.

However--

Several unexpected invitations reached these four, who had been leading their own lives in Japan.

Tickets to a luxury cruise ship, sent under the name 'Huey Laforet', and a message--"Let us meet again on the seas".

"I'll be blunt. I don't get what this is supposed to be."

Sylvie initially thought about tearing the ticket to shreds, but decided to consult the other three first out of a nagging concern in the back of her mind.

And having discussed the matter with the others who had received the invitation, they were all convinced to accept by Elmer's half-joking comment: "If it's really from Huey, we'll just get another invitation if we ignore it. We'll get new ones *every single day*".

As they were busy with things like immigration documents, Sylvie and the others never had a chance to figure out the most important part--just what kind of a ship the *Exit* was.

"...I'd heard it was a luxury cruise ship, but I never expected *this* much." Sylvie mumbled incredulously. She was looking at a dark object out of the corner of her eye.

This object moored at the gigantic wharf in Yokohama Harbour was, more than anything, 'out of place'.

In terms of sheer scale it combined elegance, luxury, splendour, and grandness, but its incongruity was the first thing that came to mind.

The luxury cruise ship *Exit*.

It was a marine fortress that looked like a resort converted into a castle that had been set afloat.

It was one of the top cruise liners in the world, constructed in a joint venture between corporations from America and Japan.

A colossal vessel, filled with every seaborne luxury imaginable.

It was a special ship with a gigantic storage area big enough to drive in, inside which could be held all kinds of events. As international game shows and the like had been held there in the past, the *Exit* was, in some ways, better known as an event hall than a cruise ship.

There was one more unusual thing about this ship.

The sister ship *Entrance*.

It had a twin ship with an identical design. The two ships were named *Exit* and *Entrance*, meaning "Exit from Reality" and "Entrance to Paradise" respectively.

This special feature was used to great advantage in the "Meeting" event during the crossings of the Pacific or Atlantic, where the two ships would pass by one another at visible distance and shoot fireworks to bless the voyage of the sister ship.

"This is incredible! What's going to happen when the black ship and the white ship come together? Maybe it'll end up becoming one of those yin-yang symbols--the ones that look like Emperor Penguins. What if something gets summoned?"

"Hm. This one would rather such a thing does not occur." Denкуро replied.

Sylvie stared up at the hull of the ship.

The sister ships were of identical design, but there was one large difference between them. It was their colours.

In contrast to *Entrance*'s swan-like white coat of paint, *Exit* was painted jet black. It would be difficult to spot on the night seas if all the lights were to be turned off.

A ship of solemn black majesty, and its elegant white sister.

Sylvie once again read over the ship's measurements on the boarding pass.

It was 306m in length, 55m in height, and 52m wide.

Because of the cargo hold and the event stage, the capacity was relatively small in comparison to other ships this size. However, it could still hold over 2500 passengers and over a thousand crew members.

"They even have beauty salons... I'd like to give it a try, but it's probably too expensive..." Sylvie muttered. She seemed to be feeling more and more uneasy, as she once again turned to Elmer.

"Hey, is this really all right? What if Huey set up a trap to turn us into his experiments?"

"I can't say that's not possible. He'd kill his own daughter to sate his curiosity."

"..."

"That's why I'm not going to force you to board. 'Course, I'd go even if I knew it was a trap. It's been a while since I saw Huey."

Elmer was planning on boarding, not out of some sense of responsibility, but just because he wanted to say hello.

Sylvie had nothing to say to this. She sighed.

"You and Huey are really close, huh? Even though it doesn't look like you'd get along at all."

"That so? It's been around three hundred years since we met, but we've never actually had a fight."

"That's what *you* think, right? Huey might not have the same answer to that question."

"Yeah. He told me the same thing, too." Elmer agreed nonchalantly. Sylvie cut off the conversation with a look of exasperation.

She could not bring herself to hate this man called Elmer.

She could not hate him, but she knew--he was completely broken.

That was what she thought of him.

They could carry on conversations together, but sometimes she found herself wondering if she was even talking to someone of the same species. She could never tell what he was thinking.

And yet Sylvie concluded that Elmer was a trustworthy person.

After all, she wouldn't come into the potentially lethal presence of other immortals other wise.

'Of course, I wouldn't really care if it was a trap, myself.'

Previously, Sylvie's sole purpose in life had been to avenge her lover.

It was 1711.

A tragedy in which a certain immortal alchemist began to devour his friends and comrades.

Sylvie was spared from death because she had not taken the drink at the time, but the young man who was everything to her had been taken away.

'Gretto...'

Sylvie quietly clenched her fist, recalling the name, face, and voice of her lover.

The man who devoured him, Szilard Quates, was no longer of this world.

And though Sylvie had completely lost her purpose, she had not lost her desire to continue living.

Although she had almost given in to the despair and emptiness at one point, she was now living on to find a new purpose in life.

'Gretto... I'll always keep you in my heart.'

Someone who had definitely existed in the past. Someone who was no longer in existence.

Sylvie quietly shook her head, lost in remembrance.

'I guess that's just circular reasoning, huh. From now on, I'll start searching for a purpose for myself.'

'I'll live with my head held high, for both of us. Until the day my life comes to an end.'

Sylvie made a quiet vow.

And this was why she did not have any trepidation about this journey, despite not knowing whether or not it was a trap.

'If I die here, that just means this is how my life ends. And if one of my friends from the Advenna Avis is going to try something stupid, it's only right I try to stop him.'

'After all, that's what Gretto would have done.'

In the end, Sylvie was still wrapped up in the shadow of her lover.

But she did not mind this, and looked over at the luxury cruise ship ahead of her with a smile.

It was almost time, so the four of them began making their way to the pier.

Elmer suddenly repeated Sylvie's earlier question to him to the others.

"What about Nin-nin and Nile? You guys worried about it?"

"I say this. I care not. At this point, nothing Huey does will surprise me."

"This one believes it would be best to stay on guard... Wait a moment, Master Elmer. By 'Nin-nin', do you refer to this one?"

Denkuro asked, holding up his hand. Elmer responded with a smile.

"Yep! 'Ninja' is pretty hard to pronounce, so I'll be calling you 'Nin-nin' from now on."

"'Twould be no trouble to call this one 'Denkuro'... And to add to that, this one is not a ninja."

Denkuro sighed in exasperation. Elmer seemed to be a bit unhappy, but settled for calling Denkuro by name.

Denkuro turned his sight back to the ship, but found his eyes drawn to Sylvie, who was likewise looking at *Exit* from slightly ahead of him.

'Truly, she is a lovely sight to behold.'

Although he was teetering dangerously close to becoming distracted, he mentally rang a bell in his heart to discipline himself.

Sylvie's heart belonged to Gretto, and she would love him for eternity.

'Even still, perhaps the flower of the precipice holds a certain charm in and of itself.'

He gave a bitter laugh in his heart and looked up at the ship--

"Hm... Though this one did not get the opportunity to witness them, mayhaps the 'Black Ships' that this one has read of were similar to this. 'Twould not be difficult for a number of these behemoths to drive the people into a frenzy..."

"I say this. Even *those* ships could not have been this large."

"Nay, this one believes the ships would have been alien enough to give the same impression."

"Understandable. In any event, are you all right with boarding a ship?"

"? What might you mean? This one does not recall being seasick on the Advenna Avis." Denkuro replied with a doubtful look. Nile's answer was calm.

"I hear you were frozen solid in the Arctic Ocean?"

"...This one was on foot at the time. Worry not--it is not that this one has an aversion to the ocean itself."

"Good to hear. ...Of course, I'm not too fond of ships myself."

"Might this one ask why?"

'To think even this man would be uncomfortable with something...'

Denkuro asked lightly, this thought in mind.

Nile's reply was just as stoic as ever.

"Because it reminds me of the Advenna Avis."

"...Ah."

It was a tragic incident.

They had lost many friends in the span of a single night.

It was by gaining eternal life that they ended up calling death--calling murder, the worst possible outcome.

"Do you regret drinking of the Elixir, Master Nile?"

"I say this. Immortal or not, I am alive. If I have time for regrets, I will spend it living as my nature desires."

"'Nature', you say! 'Tis a response very much in your element."

As they conversed, they finally reached the terminal entrance.

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The terminal building was packed with what seemed like people bound to board the same ship.

There were very few Japanese people--most were white or black, with very few Asians overall.

"We're not Japanese, but it's kinda weird to see something like this for a ship leaving from Japan."

Elmer gave Sylvie a meaninglessly overjoyed grin.

"Oh well! I hear some people fly over here from the States and go back by ship. It's a pretty hard decision, deciding which trip you want to spend more time on, huh?"

"I guess you're right, with the Japanese economy being this bad. I guess no one would really be up to an expensive cruise like this." Sylvie theorized, and looked around. "Anyway, Nile... Why don't you at least take off your mask here? Everyone's staring--even the security guards."

Nile, who was stubbornly dressed in his usual tribal clothing and mask, retorted: "I say this. I am merely the *cause* of their gaze. Their sights are then drawn to and captured by you."

"..."

Sylvie looked around at the people around them. Men and women of all ages were initially looking at Nile, but they then turned their sights to Sylvie. Of course, the children were exceptions--several curiously waved at Nile before they were dragged away by their mothers.

"Oh... Sorry, I guess you're right."

Sylvie was particularly mobbed by the gazes of men. Although she was completely used to such things, it would be a lie to say she was not embarrassed--after all, she had just tried to blame Nile.

"To be honest, I don't know if I should be happy about this or not." Sylvie sighed. Denkuro merely remained silent, and Elmer just replied like he always did.

"Okay, let's just smile! Smiling will make you even more beautiful, Sylvie!"

It was no help whatsoever.

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"Oh, over there! Over there! She's over there! Look! M-Miss Rucott! That woman--it's that woman over there...! Remember I showed you a photo of her before? That woman is Miss Sylvie!"

"... Yes."

"How radiant... she looks so much better in person! You see, I , uh, thought that perhaps they had picked out a particularly photogenic person! But now I see...! It's almost as if the photograph does not flatter her at all!"

Bride then took the hand of the woman next to him--his 'wife' Silis, currently known as Rucott.

His energetic voice was directed at Silis, but his heart and gaze were captured by this woman in the distance.

The silver-haired woman was wearing a dress that showed off her shoulders and collarbone, and she wore a simple cardigan over the dress. Her arms drew a smooth, thin arc reminiscent of some marble sculpture.

Her figure was like that of an elegant yet dangerous predator.

Her silky bangs hung over her perfectly balanced face, and her short silver hair was somewhat messy--but this only served to highlight her beautiful features.

"Oh no, I'm getting a bit nervous."

"... Yes."

Silis just responded to Bride, eyes empty like a doll's.

But Bride didn't even care for her responses. He was completely taken by Sylvie's beauty.

Normally, Sylvie would be best characterized by the word 'beautiful'.

But this kind of beauty was not natural, like that of paintings of goddesses.

It was as if her bewitching beauty was moulded specifically to match the lust of humanity--like that of a succubus or an imp.

Although Sylvie's looks could even draw in *women*, Silis did not bat an eye. It was doubtful that she was even looking in Sylvie's general direction.

But Bride was undeterred.

He ignored anything Silis might have wanted to say, and continued to ramble about his own opinions, his own feelings.

"Captivating... She is a work of art, the magnum opus of some Italian sculptor--in other words, like some statue. But the model wasn't a goddess, angel, or a saint... It's as if she was moulded after something lustful, like a succubus or a seductress..."

"...Yes."

"Oh, maybe you're wondering why a religious man like myself is referring to goddesses and the like. You see, our faith accepts the mythologies of other religions. Of course, that's as long as they are considered nothing more than stories."

"...Yes."

"What do you think? I doubt you could be a match against that woman."

"...Yes."

"Yes, you're right."

"...Yes."

"Are you envious of her?"

"...Yes."

"Don't you just want to *die*?"

"...Yes."

"Are you even listening to me?"

"...Yes."

"Then that's fine. If things go quickly, I'll have to take care of you during the trip--is there anything you'd like to say beforehand? After all, I'm your husband! Please allow me to at least do this much for you."

Bride was not being sarcastic.

His words sincerely stemmed from his sense of justice and the thought that it was his duty as a husband to listen to his wife's final words.

That was what made it that much more terrifying, but Silis could not make sense of anything.

She was completely out of it.

She was just conscious enough to make it past immigration, but she was obviously not herself--and her response to Bride was the same as always.

"...Yes."

"Pardon me?"

"...Yes."

"So your final words are 'Yes'! I see... With this word, you are agreeing to your own will, your life, and your death... I take it that you mean you will allow me to kill you, correct?"

"...Yes."

"Thank you... I'm truly grateful, Rucott. That was an excellent answer. I expected no less from my wife. We are one and the same--you are a wonderful temporary priestess, Rucott."

And for the first time, Bride turned to look at her empty eyes--

And put his lips over hers.

For a single moment, life returned to her face.

"...N-no...! No... nooo... gah..."

Before Silis could finish screaming, one of the women standing by Bride quickly and covertly struck her in a chop.

Silis lost consciousness and collapsed into Bride's arms.

Bride supported her weight and mumbled to himself, still a nervous young man.

"So you're still conscious. Poor thing... all that's left for you is pain. ...But I guess it's better for you as our priestess to still retain your sanity..."

He quietly shook his head and left Silis to the gorilla-like man standing beside him.

Silis's scream earlier was not a quiet one.

Around them were people travelling in families, in couples, or alone.

But her scream had been completely erased by the strike that silenced her.

The scream had become something that never existed to begin with.

That wasn't because of this location--

It was because of the people around her.

The people standing in a semicircle around Bride and Silis, who were against the wall--

All carried something in their cases--young and old alike.

Their holy garments of red and black.

Every last one of them were members of SAMPLE.

Bride's all-understanding army had occupied this space.

There were only about two hundred of them or so.

That would consist of less than ten percent of everyone aboard the ship.

But it was an overwhelming ten percent.

And they lived for their beliefs, with malice and benevolence alike. And though they had heard Silis's scream, each one of them had a smile on their faces.

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"Hey, can I talk to you for a sec?"

"...Hm?"

Nile was standing with a gruff look on his face behind the mask.

He then found himself being spoken to be a silhouette even taller than himself.

"Sorry 'bout that. I'm just curious... What's with that mask of yours? I've been watching for a while now, but I can't get it off my mind."

The woman who spoke to him in English was a giant of over two metres in height.

It wasn't just her height. Her muscled physique easily rivalled Nile's, but her voluptuous, obviously feminine build and her facial features made her look quite beautiful.

The woman had boldly approached Nile, perhaps out of mere curiosity or confidence in her abilities. Nile remained expressionless, however, and mumbled.

"...I say this. It is a personal preference."

Nile actually had his reasons, but it would be no use telling any of this to a mortal.

This was what he had decided as he gave his reply.

The woman's eyes widened for a moment, but she then broke out in a masculine laugh.



"Gahaha! I get it. It's that simple, huh? I see... preference! Haha! Sorry about that, I was just real curious! Excuse me!"

The woman's laughter echoed as she left with a wave.

"... I say this. Who was that woman?"

"This one cannot say... but it is natural that those with great curiosity would wish to know why you would don a mask, Master Nile."

Nile crossed his arms at Denkuro's answer and looked over at the others.

"I say this. Is it that strange?"

"Wow, I never thought I'd get such a simple question...! Nice one, Nile! I'm going to express my respect for your joke by laughing! Pick one--raging laughter, stifled laughter, or insulting laughter! I bet I could even manage the world's best sarcastic laughter for you!"

"Then I request that you laugh your heart out."

Nile went for an Iron Claw on Elmer's chest. Denkuro sighed, not even bothering to stop him. Sylvie looked at the woman who had spoken to them earlier, and made an amazed remark.

"...She's so muscular, but her chest was so large... and they don't look like silicone, either. She must have taken a lot of care into bodybuilding..."

"Owowowowowow! Sorry, Nile. Sorry, so *please* get your fingers out of my ribs."

Once he had apologized and was released from Nile's grip, Elmer finally looked in the direction the woman had disappeared to.

She had already gone quite far, but her height made her stand out in the crowds.

"That lady must have trained really hard. It's like she's straight out of a fighting game. She could take down Chun-Li with those legs--you think she's got some special attack for if you press the right combination?"

"I say this. I don't play video games."

"What? We're in Japan--you're missing out. Then again, I guess Japan's not all about games. Come to think of it, I saw Nile lose a fight for the first time in my life. I'll always cherish that memory."

"I say this. Do not talk about it."

"Where was it, now? I think it was..."

"I warned you."

Elmer was hit with an Iron Claw to the face this time. He flew into the air. And despite hearing the sounds of his own skull cracking, Elmer never lost his smile as he clapped.

"Haha! I'm pretty glad Nile's taking over the straight man routine from Maiza, but what to do? I can't laugh if my face is gone!"

"You can always try laughing in writing." Sylvie joked, seemingly used to things like this. She continued waiting for the immigration gate lines.

"...Come to think of it, that woman talked to Nile in English... but how could she tell? Nile's ethnicity isn't that easy to notice..."

Sylvie glanced at Nile again, and found her curiosity overtaken by another thought.

"I always wonder... how does Nile get through immigrations dressed like that...?"

<=>

"Hah! Who'd have known it was just a preference? That was pretty stupid of me."

The tall woman walked over to a less crowded corner of the lobby, and spoke to the boy who was standing there.

"I'd think your *actions* just now were more idiotic than your curiosity."

"Quit your fussing! I've been wondering about it ever since I saw his picture--why was he wearing a mask? Can't ask him once we're fighting, can I?"

Aging laughed heartily. The Rookie put his fingers to his temples and shook his head.

"I never imagined... that you'd just walk up to the target like that. That's right. I never imagined you'd do something like that."

"No need to tell me twice! Gahaha! Don't tell me you're getting alzheimer's at *your* age, kiddo?"

"Speak for yourself...!"

The boss yelled as quietly as he could. Aging laughed and slapped him on the back.

"Kids like you shouldn't be so finicky!"

Aging's fan-sized palms struck the air out of Luchino's lungs.

"Gah!"

He stumbled for a moment, but soon righted himself and glared at her.

"Enough playing around, Aging."

"I get it, all right. So stop glaring at me like that. Where's everyone else?"

"They already got past immigrations. They're on the ship."

"That was quick. Wanna get moving now, boss?" Aging addressed him normally and lifted the case beside him.

The tuxedo-clad boy gave her a sharp look.

"Don't call me that... When we're on duty, you will address me as 'Rookie'."

"There you go, getting fussy again. Most people'd get red in the face and look away when a girl like me calls them 'boss'."

"You're giving me a headache..."

The Rookie ignored Aging's laugh and slowly began to make his way to the immigration officials.

Having temporarily left his veteran of a weapon, the boy put on a mask-like expression and boarded the ship.

And this mask was--

"Um... Are you Mr. Rookie?"

"..."

He turned around to the voice calling him in his mother tongue. Standing behind him was a boy about ten years of age. People who seemed to be his family stood watching from a little distance away.

The boy, who had come over and tugged at the Rookie's sleeve, broke out into an innocent smile.

"Hey, could you show me a magic trick?"

"..."

The Rookie was silent for a moment as the boy--presumably Italian--begged him for a trick.

But he suddenly put on a surprisingly elegant smile, lightly closed his hand into a fist, and shook it in front of the child.

The next moment, multiple rubber balls suddenly appeared from his hand.

"Wow! That's so cool!"

"Here. They're yours."

"Really?! You mean it? Thanks!"

The boy lightly bowed and ran pitter-patter over to his family.

The woman who looked to be his mother gave the Rookie a light wave of the hand.

Luchino, the "Rookie Warlock".

He was a young magician, well-known in several countries.

This was the mask--the surface identity of Luchino Campanella.

This boy was boarding this ship and taking the stage as a magician.

And as he prepared to do the work of both his surface identity and his hidden side, the child's smile at the magic trick instantly dissipated half his anxiety.

The 'filth' that built up within himself each time he killed someone--the filth that stained him, swirling in a thick vortex inside him--seemed to dissipate ever-so-slightly each time he saw someone's smile, just as he had seen now.

'Still, I'm just running away from the problem...'

He had been trained in this profession by his father as a cover for his true duties.

Although Luchino's father had suggested different careers, he had personally gone out of his way to choose this unique face of a magician.

'That's right. I don't care if I'm running away.'

'I can't stop, whether I'm falling back or moving forward.'

The Rookie, whether he was cursing his destiny or resigned to his fate, forced down this filth into a corner of himself and gave the little boy and his family another smile.

It was because he felt like his mask could become his real face, if only for this moment--

And as a result, the two-faced Rookie could not let go of the smiles of others.

<=>

Once Luchino had disappeared, the little boy showed off his present to his family.

"Look, look! Isn't it cool?"

"You're so mean, big brother! You hafta share!"

The little girl hiding in her father's shadow reached out to her brother with a pout.

However, their smiling mother stopped the argument before it could even begin.

"Now, now. There's more than one, so why don't you share with your sister?"

"Okay, mom."

"Okay."

The boy handed one rubber ball to his sister, and opened his bag to stow away his new toys.

They were a happy family.

A cheerful, generic family of four.

And at least, their smiles were real.

Inside their son's bag was a single garb.

A strange set of children's clothing, patterned with red and black.

<=>

The luxury cruise ship *Exit*.

Countless passengers and a drop of violence.

And with a hint of malice, and a group of immortals on board--

The gigantic closed space made its way onto the open seas.

A tiny world raced along the ocean, towards the sister it would meet on the Pacific.

And the ocean stretched out far and wide ahead, as if to swallow all malice and benevolence on the ship.

It was aboard this ship--a tiny place compared to the sea, but a huge world from inside it--that a carefully orchestrated tragedy would begin.

And the curtains would rise much too quietly, masked by the silence of the ship.

Interlude

'The first day of the cruise.

Since I brought my laptop with me, I decided to write a journal.

Unfortunately, I don't get internet on this ship. It looks like my laptop just doesn't work well with the systems here.

But I guess I'll have a lot of stuff to post about afterwards if I keep writing.

But first, there's something I have to write down before I describe what happened today.

It's about Hiroko. (I'll only post this part after I get permission from Hiroko.)

Is this fate?

Or maybe it's just some big, cruel joke by destiny.

I happened to get this ticket to go to the States.

That was fine.

Up until that, everything was fine.

The problem is the ship.

To think, that my ex-wife would be on the sister ship that would be passing by us on the Pacific!

What are the odds? Even taking into consideration the fact that I got this ticket by accident, this is closer to a miracle than a coincidence.

How do I make use of this chance... that's what I have to think about first. Maybe this seaborne miracle might bring us back to how we were when we first met.

I'm not going to mess up again.

That's why... I honestly want to start over again.
(This part's kind of embarrassing, so I won't post it.)

Hiroko's still in the States. She's probably departing tomorrow.

I'll contact her tomorrow night. For now I'll write down what happened today, before I have to go for the reception party tonight.

I thought there would be a lot of Japanese people because we were leaving from Japan, but I thought wrong.

Most people were foreigners--I couldn't see other Japanese people I could speak with easily.

I saw one calm-looking Japanese man, but he was standing beside a beautiful foreign woman and a man wearing some tribal-looking mask. I couldn't bring myself to talk to him. Maybe they're celebrities or rock stars. The woman was so beautiful I ended up getting dizzy for a second, but I'll keep this a secret from Hiroko. (I won't post about it, either. I might have to delete this line later.)

And then I saw something incredible.

It looked like a little kid from a foreign family was asking something to a foreign guy.

The guy waved his hand, and then rubber balls appeared out of nowhere!

I figured this out after reading the pamphlet later, but it looks like he's a stage magician. The Rookie something-or-other. He's still young, so I'm assuming he's a newbie. Maybe I'll go watch his show tonight if I have time.

Otherwise... I think I saw a couple of giants. One of them was pretty far, but from the build, I think it might have been a woman. But not a lot of women are over two metres tall. Something about the muscles made her look different from something like a volleyball player, too.

The other one was definitely a man. He looked just like a gorilla, down to that curved back.

Wait, my blog's going to blow up in my face if I post something that insulting.

I'll have to edit this some more.

Let's just say what I wrote today was just practice. I'll start the post with stuff I write tomorrow.

In any case, the ship's set sail.

Oh, I can't wait to call her tomorrow night.

There's a time difference, so I'll have to take care not to bother her at the wrong time...

And finally, I raise a virtual toast to you, the great cameraman who gave me this vacation of a lifetime.

He's a pretty unlucky guy, having to turn down a cruise like this.

And to myself, Bon Voyage. Do your best! My best! I can do this!

Maybe it's because I write like this that Hiroko always tells me that I turn into a grade schooler every time I write. Oh well. I'll come back and edit it later.

Misao, on the first day of the cruise.'



第五章 手品師の少年は嘘で他人の笑顔を作り出す

Chapter 5 : The Boy Magician Creates Smiles Through Lies

The first night of the cruise, a certain suite room.

'It's red.

Red and warm.'

Silis just sat there in vacant thought, holding her change of clothing.

She was lying on the bed, and though it was only little by little, she was coming back to her regular self.

She could see ornate decorations all around her.

From the ceiling hung something that looked like a chandelier, and she noticed that the lighting was at minimum brightness, dimly illuminating the room.

She knew what kind of a situation she was in.

But she could not move forward.

Her sanity had returned. She had a sense of self again.

But **now what?**

She could not think of an answer.

She couldn't even think.

The more and more she tried to return to normal, the more and more something squeezed into her head again.

It was a certain memory.

The images that she had been witness to continued to play over and over again in her mind, taking up all of her conscious energy.

The images looked both as if she had seen them mere seconds ago, yet also as if she had known them since the moment of her birth.

The foggy images seeped into her mind.

"Yes, yes. We don't have to make a move at the moment."

She could hear a voice from out of the corner of her ear.

It was Bride's voice.

Legally, he was a complete stranger.

In terms of the doctrines, he was her husband.

And from Silis's perspective, he was the man who would murder her.

The moment she considered escaping, however--

'I have to get--!'

That was as far as she would get.

It was not just her mind--her entire body ran through those images again and again.

And there was unease.

And Silis could do nothing but listen from afar the conversation between Bride and the members of SAMPLE.

"Yes, that's correct. Viralesque is giving us frequent reports from *Entrance*. We have to take care in our plans, but sometimes we must be bold. If we choose the bold path of creating no casualties, there will be no victims. But if we choose to be careful, it would be best to sink everyone but ourselves, correct?"

It was a disturbing conversation, but the meanings behind the words did not reach Silis's mind.

At the moment, she was nothing but a puppet under Bride's control.

As she was instructed, Silis had boarded the ship in the role of Bride's ailing fiancée. She could not tell what these people thought of her as they ignored her presence and continued to spill their secrets and plans.

"Of course, it goes against our doctrine to cause pain and death to those who are not involved. I'd prefer that we take the bold approach."

"But Master Bride, what of the possibility that the immortals have noticed our presence?"

As usual, the people talking to Bride were the two women who were always at his side. They served in the role of secretaries, and always called him 'Master'. There was little to distinguish the two--they looked almost like sisters, or even twins--but Silis did not know anything more about them.

"Maybe they've noticed us, and maybe they haven't."

"But the 'Child of Calamity and Light' was originally one of us. It may have been three centuries, but he may have caught on to us."

"Maybe so. Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. After all, we've always been prepared for uncertainties. Haha."

Bride smiled as he always did and calmly continued.

"Let's enjoy the situation. Enjoy life! That *is* the crux of our faith, you know! Oh! Uh, um. Sorry for being so in-your-face. Haha!"

The women went silent in the face of their still-sloppy leader.

Bride laughed, then sat up and took a look around the entire room. He then mumbled to himself, as if enjoying a high.

"In any case, the other ship is departing a day after us. Why don't we enjoy the cruise until then? For example... right! How about giving the married couple a moment alone?"

He suddenly turned towards the bed in which Silis lay, and leapt over towards her as if attempting a flying body press.

However, his jump was too feeble--he ended up hitting a corner of the bed with his side.

"Guh...!"

Letting out a pained breath, Bride got up with a sheepish look and spoke to the other people in the room in a poor attempt to excuse himself.

"Y-you know, right? How vacations make people more... open? And, well... this would be my first time having such a mature woman as a wife, so you could hardly blame me for the libido."

The flustered leader waved his arms about, rambling on in an embarrassed tone.

"In any case, I don't even have a lolita complex--**this is entirely different from marrying ten-year old girls at the moment of their deaths**, you understand?"

Bride managed to mumble sheepishly. He then cleared his throat and held out a gentlemanly hand to Silis, who was still lying on the bed.

"Now, Miss Rucott. Let us leave for the party. I'm sure it'll cheer you right up.

You only have a few days left, so I ask that as my wife, you **experience as much pain as possible.**"

<=>

Thirty minutes later, *Exit* party hall.

"I went to my cabin, but there wasn't anything like a message from Huey..."

Sylvie brought her wineglass to her lips.

Currently, they were in the middle of the reception party on the first night of the cruise.

It was in the middle of a gigantic banquet hall, one you could find at any hotel.

And it was in a corner of this renowned banquet hall--which had hosted the weddings of celebrities and the like--that Elmer, Sylvie, and Denkuro were having dinner.

An orchestra was playing on the stage, and circus performers stationed on smaller stages between the tables were contorting themselves in rhythm to the orchestra.

"Well, I guess I half-expected this."

Sylvie continued, as she watched the strange combination of classical music and acrobatics.

"Huey's actually pretty fond of making a grand entrance. Maybe he'll pop out of a silk hat during tonight's magic show or something." Elmer replied with a grin.

"Magic show?"

"Yeah. I hear they're having a magic show at this place called 'Ristorante Cuculo' in about two hours. The magician's someone called the 'Rookie Warlock', but I was really surprised when I read the pamphlet."

"Why? You know him?"

"Unfortunately, not until just now."

Elmer took out the pamphlet he brought from his room and opened it up to show Sylvie and Denkuro.

"Apparently he's from Lotto Valentino."

"Wha..."

"Hm...?"

There was a short profile in a corner of the pamphlet, written in English. Sylvie and Denkuro read the name of the magician's hometown and looked at each another.

Lotto Valentino.

It was a port town in southern Italy, only a stone's throw away from Naples.

The city was famous for the vast number of libraries on its streets. The stone buildings facing the sea that were built along the steep coastline were also renowned for their historical value.

But most people would not know any of this. Unlike the likes of New York, London, Paris, or Tokyo, it was a tiny city that not even most Italians knew about.

But for the three people sitting at this table, this city held a special place in their memories.

To Elmer, it was a place almost like a hometown.

To Denkuro, it was a land where he was drawn into a certain incident--which ended in the forging of multiple friendships.

To Sylvie, it was the hometown of her lover.

Her breath stilled for a moment, but she soon calmed herself and smiled.

"...How nostalgic. Maybe I should visit someday."

"Yes... This one is also quite curious. But this one believes 'twould be best not to call Master Nile. He had once threatened to burn down the city--he may not take it very well."

Elmer broke out into a smile at these responses.

The three ended up ignorantly approaching the show put on by their 'enemy'.

<=>

At the same time, a semi-suite cabin.

"I say this. I am bored."

Nile remained in his cabin by himself, claiming he did not want to disturb the party.

"Really... inviting someone, only to leave them unentertained? How shall I complain to Huey once he appears?"

He was not very interested in the TV in his room. Nile went out onto his tiny balcony and unpacked his belongings.

They mostly consisted of several changes of clothing and about a dozen or so masks.

Nile looked out at the evening sea as he polished the differently-coloured masks with a special cloth.

"Hm... I suppose it is also entertaining in itself to enjoy the endlessly changing waves."

He continued to polish the masks, sitting on a small chair on the balcony--

When out the corner of his eye, he suddenly spotted a silhouette cutting through the waves.

"Is that... A ship?"

The ship, which for some reason was sailing with no lights, slowly disappeared into the distance.

To think they would sail without lights.

Of course, they're likely not pirates or the like, if they're sailing away from this ship.'

Nile returned his focus to polishing his masks.

On the face under his current mask he wore a belligerent grin.

I suppose it might have been entertaining if pirates were to attack the ship.'

<=>

At the same time, a suite room.

After the ship that Nile had seen had sped away--

The cargo it had left behind was hanging from a certain balcony.

"Oh! Glad they managed to get it here! Death was supposed to be joining us here personally, but what can you do when you're dead?"

The speaker was in a room quite far from Nile's--it was Aging, who was in a tank top, and members of the Mask Makers, who were lined up behind her.

"Well then, better get pulling--"

"Isn't it a bit early, Aging? Maybe we should wait until the middle of the night..."

"What are you talking about? Now's the time--while everyone's off at the reception. If we leave it here too long, the wire might snap."

Aging glanced over at the balconies above and below, checking to see if anyone was there. Nile was polishing his masks in a cabin much further away, but they were positioned in a way that they could not see one another.

Aging finished her check, and grabbed hold of the hook hanging from the balcony rail. She then began to pull up the wire with ease.

The wire got thicker the more she pulled up, and by the time it had become about as thick as a rope, several large boxes rose up from under the water.

"It only takes a few seconds, anyway."

Aging didn't even try very hard as she pulled the ropes up a height of ten metres.

"There."

With one hand holding the wire, she used her free hand to hand over the first container to her waiting teammates.

One man gently took the fifty-centimetre box into his arms--

"Ugh...?!"

He began to collapse under the weight. The others quickly came to his aid.

"What? It's only about eighty kilograms or so." Aging laughed, and pulled up the watertight containers one by one.

"Jesus Christ... what are you, some sort of cyborg?"

In pairs, the Mask Makers began to bring in the boxes one by one. They opened the containers and began to expertly piece together the objects inside.

Inside the cases were a large number of 'Merchandise'. They contained everything from uniform firearms and grenades to things that were unrecognizable at first glance-- the equipment in the cases looked like they were about to be used to wage war.

And these people were actually planning such a thing.

"Gahaha! This is big! That boss of ours really spared no expense, huh? Let's hope none of you called room service, 'cause if anyone sees us, we're all headed for the slammer!"

Aging laughed energetically. The men quietly continued to put together the firearms, at a loss for words.

"If that does happen, the poor maid's gonna be taking a nice, long, swim."

"Hm... Never get seen when you're at work--that's how a real pro does it. It might look cool to get rid of a passing witness so coldly, but only amateurs without proper plans do things like that."

"...Do you even know what we're planning to do from here on out? Depending on the situation..."

Although her teammate had a look of incredulity, Aging just responded with an even louder laugh.

"Gahahaha! I know, I know! And the fact that we're even doing all this just means we're the most amateur of amateurs! Seriously, we're probably the worst-organized and least thoughtful group there is! I'm so excited I'm going crazy!"

"...I won't complain as long as you get your work done." the man replied, and returned to work.

The Mask Makers had a tendency to treat the likes of Aging, Life, and Illness as tools more than allies. This didn't mean that they were looking down on them--the 'Four Agonies' were essential to their work. If guns were plain old tools, Aging and the others were akin to weapons.

They were people whose existences alone gave the Mask Makers a sense of security.

These people who were their shields and swords, were people to be respected, not ignored.

But the two women of the 'Agonies' were not given so much respect due to their eccentric personalities.

Aging, however, didn't even bat an eye at the team's attitude towards her. She took out her personal equipment from the third box, which was longer than the other containers.

First, she tossed her night-vision goggles with infrared sight onto her bed.

"Hey, take better care of those!"

"I never use 'em anyway. And I have a bigger line of sight without them, unless it's pitch-black. I might use some of the newest models, but these old things aren't much better than using my own eyes."

"...And what does that imply about you?"

Aging ignored her teammate and took out her black infiltration suit. She then opened the lower compartment of the container and took out a weapon.

It was a gigantic Kukri knife, about as long as a man's arm.

It was a weapon also known as a Gurkha knife, named for the people who used them. It was sometimes used for combat purposes.

Unlike a katana, the blade was curved inwards. The model Aging was holding was less of a knife and more of a sword.

It was a gigantic weapon, weighing in at four kilograms and at 80 centimetres long.

Aging once again checked the knife--which looked like it could sever an arm just by dropping onto it--and put it inside a leather sheath like she was handling a bamboo sword, humming all the way.

And finally, the object that took up over half the space in her container made its way out.

"Oi."

The Mask Maker who caught sight of this spoke, face pale.

It was a metallic object that was less black than it was stained silver.

It was easy to tell that it was a weapon, but its shape and size easily distinguished it from the firearms that the other Mask Makers were holding.

"Hey... Isn't that the machine gun Schwarzenegger used in [Terminator 2]?"

"Hm? Oh, maybe it is! You know, it's the one that the moustache guy in [Predator] was carrying around!"

It was a heavy machine gun commonly known as a Minigun. Normally firearms of this calibre would be mounted on helicopters and the like, but the Minigun was lightened to weigh only about twenty kilograms. That was why it was known as a 'Mini'gun, despite being classified as a heavy machine gun.

"But this isn't some movie..."

The man was less dubious and more overcome by shock.

People in movies and video games carried around guns like this, but that was not possible in real life.

Although one might assume that it would be possible to carry around a twenty-kilogram weight, a Minigun also needed to be connected to a belt-style magazine and an umbilical battery to power it all.

This was a gun that could shoot four thousand rounds per minute. The ammunition that needed to be expended in this single minute weighed at least forty kilograms, and the added mass of the battery and other accessories would usually total up to over a hundred kilograms.

The extreme levels of recoil was why it was nearly impossible to aim by hand during fire. Thus, it was not something a normal human would be able to use. But--

Aging lightly hoisted up the box containing the ammunitions belt and the other parts of the Minigun, and put it down on the bed.

'Don't tell me... wait a sec. Doesn't that box come with a tripod for anti-air attacks, too?'

Aging ignored her teammates' dubious glances and let out a hearty laugh, waving her hand.

"Quit your worryin'! Who says I'm actually gonna use a Minigun as is? This one was custom-made for me. The best of the best! They cut out some weight, and it uses an ultra-light battery!"

"Th-that so...?"

"The recoil's been reduced, and the speed's been lowered to conserve ammo... is what they said, but I'll have to figure out the rest as I go along. So much to memorize!"

"Is that supposed to be something to be proud of?! Is that even the problem...? Anyway, I guess someone your size might be able to use it..."

As the Mask Makers nodded disbelievingly, Aging energetically gave a chilling response.

"No worries! I made sure they customized it so **I can use it single-handedly.**"

"..."

It felt as though they had just heard something terrifying, but the Mask Makers pretended not to hear.

Aging sometimes appeared a bit flaky, but she wasn't so foolish as to lie on duty.

In other words, what she had just said was the honest truth.

And as her teammates didn't have the kind of discipline expected in militaries, they decided to brush off the topic and not inquire any further.

This was the kind of group they were.

Aging, however, ignored the atmosphere and continued to excitedly chat away.

"Haha! Now this is the kind of backup weapon I'm talking about! The Gurkha knife might break if it gets hit with machine gun rounds, after all!"

The men did their very best to ignore the hearty ramblings. But they finally broke down and began whispering to one another.

(Wait... You mean that beast of an axe is her main weapon?!)

(What about guns?! *Normal* guns?!)

(Whoa, I've never worked with her before, but now I know why she was always on solo missions.)

(You don't even have to think about it. You can just tell.)

(I feel like I'm gonna get killed just by being around her...!)

(Does she even know what a backup weapon is supposed to be?)

(What was that she just said about machine gun rounds...?)

"Tsk tsk. You boys have nothing better to do than talk behind someone's back?!"

When the men turned back, they found that Aging had finished putting together her customized machine gun.

"Gahaha! It's every lady's dream to shoot a machine gun singlehandedly!"

'*You're. Calling. Yourself. A. Lady?!*' Everyone thought at once, but no one had the courage to say this out loud to the woman who was holding a Gurkha knife in one hand and twirling a Minigun in the other.

<=>

Two hours later, the Italian restaurant 'Ristorante Cuculo'.

It was magic at its finest.

There were tricks and deceptions.

And although the audience knew full well that they were being fooled, they all found themselves in wonder of the show. Perhaps it was not the extraordinary things happening in front of them, but the act of deception itself that was the most magical about this performance.

It was a small, but high-class Italian restaurant on the ship.

And it was on a rather small stage in this restaurant that these deceptive miracles were taking place.

Casino tokens spilled like a waterfall from a palm held over a cup.

A round table tilted and spun like a top without even being touched.

Levitation tricks with only a single hand touching the wall.

Silk hats appeared from under doves' wings, and eggs spilled from inside the hats.

When the magician took one of the eggs into his hand, it instantly changed into a baby alligator.

The cards in the magician's hand all turned into tiny balloons.

The balloons popped one by one, turning back into cards. From inside the final balloon came out the card that the audience member had chosen.

A bottle of red wine that had been poured for a patron poured out milk for another customer. The next customer received a glass of white wine.

The magician on the stage, creating everything from fantastic illusions to simple tablecloth tricks, balanced a varied repertoire to create deceit, controlling the surprises to build them into a crescendo.

And this manipulating mage was a boy who still looked a few years short of twenty.

His fingers danced in beat with the swaying of his nearly transparent blond hair, and they occasionally came to dominate the stage.

The magician known as 'Rookie'.

That was his moniker.

The Rookie Warlock. It was the kind of name that was difficult to call a proper noun, but the young man's magics were far from amateur. He handled them with expertise in both the technical and theatrical aspects.

He spoke very little during the performance, but the boy carefully dispensed smiles to psychologically lead the patrons into relief, and sometimes anticipation.

And because the cool smile he showed after receiving applause looked very much like that of an innocent child, the audience would sometimes even forget that this boy had been the one performing these spectacles.

In the meantime--

"Whoa! That's amazing! How d'you think he did that?"

There was a man in the audience who was acting like an excited child.

"Hey... you think maybe that kid's pretending to be a magician, but he's really an actual magician?"

"...Are you a child, Elmer?"

"Think about it, Sylvie. If I were a real magician and I used magic, I'd get scolded by a bunch of religions and people won't smile for me like this. But if I just say, 'Oh, it's just stage magic', I'll earn money *and* get popular! It's two birds with one stone!"

"I guess it's just like you to not think altruistically about the possibilities." Sylvie replied with a smile. She focused on watching the magic show, not even touching her dessert.

Meanwhile, Denkuro stopped enjoying the show for a moment, and opened his mouth as if he had realized something.

"Hm... Perhaps it is this one's imagination, but it seems he is occasionally observing our table..."

"That so? Maybe it *is* just your imagination. I think most magicians would observe all the tables for their shows, right?"

"Ah... Perhaps you are right. This one humbly apologizes for interrupting the performance."

Denkuro relaxed his brows and returned to purely enjoying the show.

The boy on the stage was--mentally, at least--sweating bullets.

'That Asian guy... what is he?'

The way he was looking at me just now... it felt like I was being stalked by a wolf.

But to think I'd be able to find them so easily.

Maybe using the pamphlet really worked.'

He had considered that mentioning his hometown of Lotto Valentino on the pamphlet might draw in the immortals out of curiosity.

However, the Asian immortal--Denkuro Togo--seemed to be more of a headache than Luchino had initially expected. Perhaps he had noticed the fact that Luchino had been subtly observing them in the middle of his tricks--Denkuro's eyes had suddenly turned icy.

Luchino would not even have noticed the glare if he had been giving equal amounts of attention to all the tables. But if he were to react to this gaze right now--

'I'll be found out.'

He didn't know what it was about him that would be found out, but right now he could not risk drawing suspicion to himself. They would inevitably become enemies, but until then, he could not let himself be suspected by the immortals.

He knew that writing down the name of his hometown might draw them to speak with him. However, Luchino never expected a situation quite like this.

'Hide everything.'

Put on a calm mask. Freeze your heart...

No, I can't do that.

Concentrate.

Right now, I am a magician.

I have to concentrate on the tricks. All audience members are equal before the stage.

All I have to do is awe them, impress them, and make them all smile.'

The magician on the stage set the table aside and prepared for the finale.

The boy smiled and wordlessly walked over to the table where Elmer and the others were seated.

He then gave them a gentlemanlike greeting, knelt in front of Sylvie, and extended a hand to her.

"Oh... um, me?"

Although Sylvie had taken the stage in speakeasies before, this was completely out of the blue. She looked around, wide-eyed.

The boy slowly got to his feet, and elegantly led Sylvie to the stage by hand.

The guests' attentions went from the stage to Sylvie. Her perfectly complete beauty made the guests certain that she was not a collaborator of the magician.

There were, however, some who hurriedly began flipping through the pamphlet, expecting her to be a singer or a model for another event on the ship. One person began recording with a camcorder he hadn't even taken out during the magic show itself.

And it was in this heavy, hushed restaurant that the boy silently handed Sylvie a knife.

She was given a silver-coloured sabre. Although it was likely rigged as a part of the trick, its texture and weight were identical to that of a real weapon.

The boy then pulled over a box from beside the stage that looked like a broom closet about his height.

From the box's dimensions, it was obvious that it was built to encase the magician. There would not be enough room for him to even twitch once he entered the box.

There were softball-sized holes poked in several places on the box. A little above the middle of the container was a small heart-shaped marking.

The boy magician opened the door of the box and rotated it to show the audience that there were no tricks set up in the box.

He then closed the door, chained it shut, and locked it.

What could he be doing? As the guests wondered why he wasn't entering the box--

They realized that there was a large ring on the floor, with a long piece of cloth like a curtain draping down from it.

The boy held up the ring and slowly walked into it. He then raised the ring into the air as hard as he could.

The curtain that came up with the ring hid the boy from the audience's eyes.

But that was only for a moment.

Soon, the ring fell to the floor, having lost its support. And from behind this curtain appeared the chained box, the boy magician's arms sticking out of the small holes on the sides.

"Hoh..."

Even Denкуро found himself awed by this spectacle.

But of course, this was not the end of the magic trick.

The boy's voice echoed out from the box to the wide-eyed Sylvie.

"If the stunning lady would--" The boy had purposely spoken in a shy tone of voice. "Please, pierce my heart."

Sylvie hesitated for a moment at this request, delivered in partial Italian, but she made up her mind and slowly pointed the knife at the box.

It was in the blink of an eye.

The very next moment, the knife in Sylvie's hand slowly drew itself into the heart mark on the box.

The boy's hands twitched and shook for a moment, and dropped something beside the box.

It was the key to the chain, which he had been holding earlier.

As Sylvie went to reach for the key, the boy's arms disappeared into the box. Silence fell over the stage.

An anxious Sylvie hurriedly removed the chains and opened the box, but--

The boy was no longer there.

In his stead, countless flower petals rose up from inside the box.

The petals flew--

And fluttered--

And as if comparing her silver hair to the wind, the petals illuminated Sylvie in brilliant light.

There was a thunderous roar of applause.

Sylvie was struck dumb by wonder.

Suddenly, a hand reached out to her from behind.

Standing behind her was the smiling boy magician, who had disappeared from inside the box.

"The key, if you would..."

Sylvie quickly handed him the key to the lock.

The boy wrapped his fingers around the key, then opened them to reveal a single rose.

"I wish you a wonderful voyage."

The magician handed the rose to Sylvie with a soft smile.

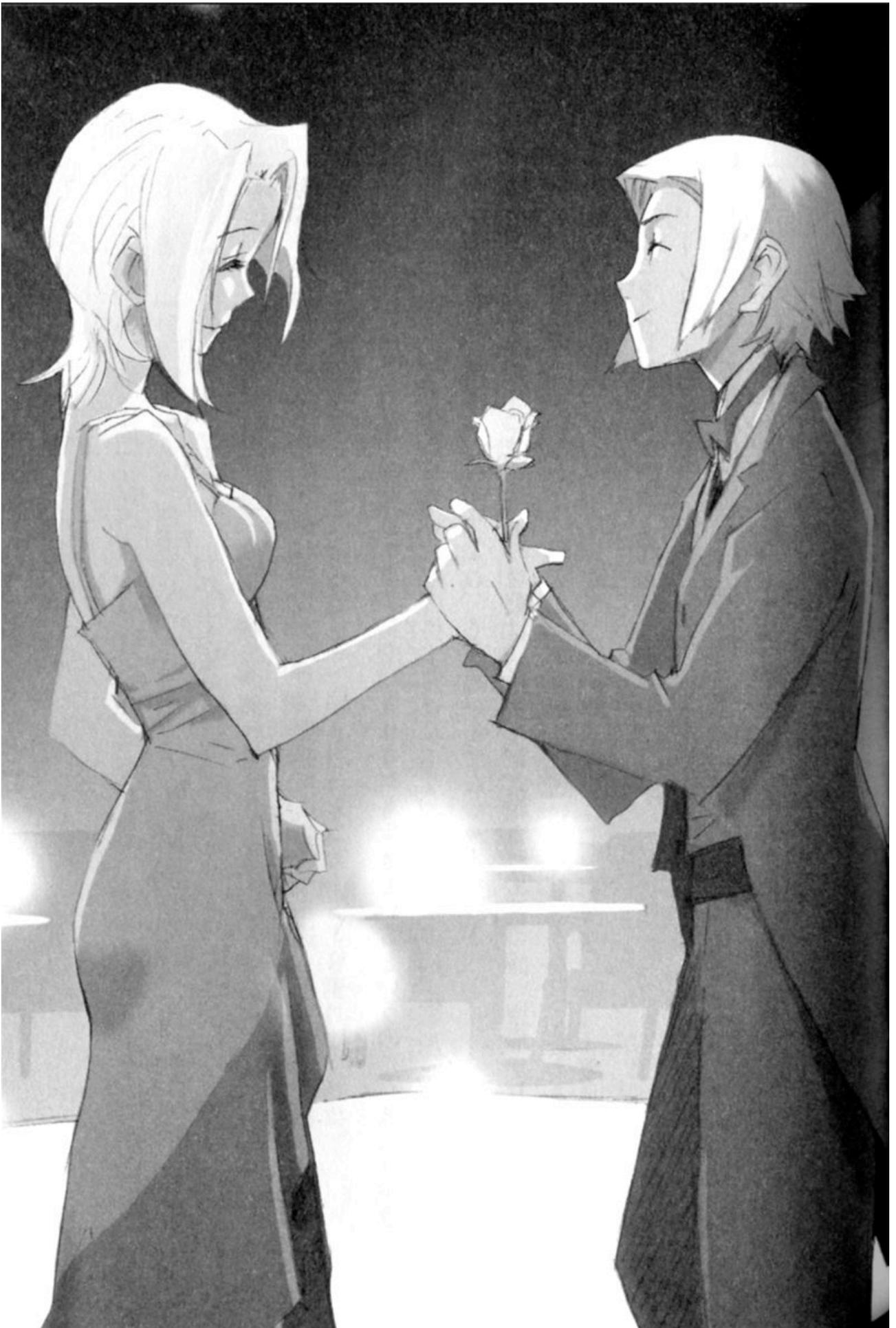
Sylvie accepted it and walked off the stage.

Before she knew it, her face had bloomed into a smile. Perhaps it was because she knew that--despite knowing it was rigged--the boy she had stabbed was safe, or perhaps because she was just caught up in the wonder of the performance.

The applause continued as a girlish grin appeared on Sylvie's beautiful features.

The boy took centre stage to signal the end of the performance.

An innocent smile--just like Sylvie's--had graced his face.



<=>

"Did you see that? Did you see?"

The man sitting on the opposite side of the restaurant from Elmer mumbled expressionlessly as he watched Sylvie return to her table.

"How delightful. A smile! A smile! Even after three hundred years of life, she has not grown tired of living. Lovely. Don't you think so, Rucott?"

His quick, awkward mumblings were drowned out by the applause and did not reach anyone.

But the woman sitting beside him gave him an answer, eyes still caught between dreams and reality.

"...Oh. Yes."

"I'll make a copy of that video later."

Whether or not he had heard the woman--Silis--answer him, Bride took out the tape from his camcorder and placed it into his bag with a look of adoration.

"After all, once I marry that woman... showing off to her these memories of happier days would be **a prayer** in its own right."

<=>

Thirty minutes later.

Although he couldn't be any more awake, the boy felt a strange sense of detachment from reality.

The shaking of the ship--which should normally be imperceivable--continuously rattled his heart.

Having finished his performance, the Rookie was drinking coffee by himself in a corner of the deserted restaurant.

Although he had made some under-the-table bargains to gain entrance to this ship on short notice, he had not told the restaurant manager about the Mask Makers.

The kindly-looking manager quietly brewed him a cup of coffee as an encouragement.

Luchino was overwhelmed by guilt, knowing that he was just using the ignorant manager. But he pushed away these feelings into a corner of his heart and began to calmly go over his plans.

I'll leave the communication with the Mask Makers to Aging for now.

Even if the Mask Makers are revealed to the surface, no one will be able to connect me to them.

And even if that happens and I'm left by myself, I have to capture him.

I made preparations to get off the ship mid-cruise. I just have to find the right timing--'

And as the boy went over his thoughts, a visitor came to see to him.

The visitor said something to the manager of the now-closed restaurant.

After a short conversation, the manager left him at the entrance and approached the Rookie as he drank his coffee.

"Someone from your hometown is here, Mr. Luchino. He says he wants to thank you personally for the great show."

"I don't mind. I was actually just thinking I'd wanted to talk with someone."

Luchino put on a mask of childlike naivete and asked the manager to call in the visitor.

The moment the door opened, he could tell who it was.

It was the face of a man he both expected and dreaded.

"Hey there, nice to meet you... I think? I'm Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross."

"Luchino. It's a pleasure."

Luchino quietly held out a hand to the man who showed an honest smile.

"Thank you very much for coming to my show today... Perhaps you could also convey my thanks to the lady companion of yours."

"Nah, no problem! We should be thanking *you* for the great show!"

The moment Elmer took his hand, Luchino felt anxiety circulating through himself.

'..He's an immortal... or so they say.'

Even though he was seeing and in contact with an immortal in person, he didn't seem to be any different from a normal human being.

But the man in front of him was most definitely not human.

Luchino reminded himself thus, and spoke to the man with a mask of a smile.

"I've been told that you're also from Lotto Valentino..."

"Yeah. It's been a while, but I lived there for about six years when I was growing up."

"Oh? Then have you heard of this one? About the womanizing Count who loved thirty maids over the course of his life."

"Thirty-seven, to be exact. I see... So Spe-Count Boronial's stories are still around with your generation."

"What might you mean, Mr. Elmer? You don't look more than ten years older than myself."

Luchino knew he was saying something too obviously direct.

If the stories were true, the man in front of him had lived in Lotto Valentino at the same time as Count Boronial. This was what Luchino was thinking as he asked Elmer.

However--

"Well, you'd better keep this between us--but I'm actually a lot older. By about three hundred years."

"...A joke? Don't tell me you're a vampire."

"A vampire, huh? I dunno. I know a guy who looks kinda like one, but I never actually checked with him. Do you think vampires really exist?"

"...Uh. I wonder."

Luchino answered vaguely. Although he thought that the existence of vampires wouldn't be implausible if immortals were real, he felt like he was just playing into Elmer's hands.

'What is this guy? Does he even know what kind of a situation he's in?'

Luchino had always thought that immortals would have to hide their identities--people would call them monsters, and jokes about being kidnapped by men in black would not be quite so funny.

And even if these things were not a problem, he never expected that Elmer would disclose his immortality so easily.

"Setting that aside, your magic show was great! I was a bit proud, as a fellow Lotto Valentino resident. I didn't do anything, but I think I can be so much happier knowing that I'm from the same hometown as someone as amazing as you. So I'll speak for everyone who might feel this way! Wow! Thank you. Thank you so much!"

Elmer's thanks to the boy magician was completely sincere, without a hint of malice or sarcasm.

'What is this?'

Luchino, meanwhile, was inwardly regaining his calm--but the more and more he calmed himself, the more and more he found himself wondering:

'Is this guy... really an immortal?'

He had no specific image of how an immortal behaved, but this man was just too rash to be believed.

However, the boy held back his confusion and decided to listen to Elmer and observe him.

He set aside any unnecessary emotions, froze his heart, and put on a fake smile.

In the end, they ran out of things to say in about ten minutes or so.

It was initially interesting to talk about their hometown, but there was a three-century difference between their images of home.

Although they discussed common topics about the land, or historical artifacts and jokes, more modern aspects of the city were completely different.

After the latest in a string of awkward silences, Elmer smiled and got off his seat.

"Well, sorry for holding you up so late."

"Not at all. I was very interested to hear your stories! Please visit Lotto Valentino again one day!"

Luchino replied with a smile, hiding this thought--'*Of course, you'll be coming along soon anyway.*'

Elmer then smiled and stared into Luchino's face--

"Yeah, I'll think about it. ...Oh, right! I'm just saying this, 'cause you kind of resemble someone I know..."

"Yes?"

Luchino felt his heart speed up at hearing that he bore a resemblance to Elmer's acquaintance.

They say that Elmer knew his ancestor Monica.

Was he really going to say that Luchino bore a resemblance to an ancestor who was three centuries removed?

'Or... don't tell me... is he talking about Huey...?'

He was somewhat anxious about this possibility, but he stowed away these feelings as best he could and did what he could to see off Elmer with a smile.

But the next moment, Luchino realized that all of his efforts had gone to waste.

"I'm sure you'll be happy one day."

"...Pardon...?"

Luchino could never have expected the words that followed.

"Right now, all you're showing me are fake smiles--but I'm sure you can be truly happy someday."

"...!"

His lie was uncovered.

Found out.

Seen through.

Alarm bells began going off in Luchino's head.

How much had Elmer found out? Or had Elmer approached him, knowing everything from the start?

'If that's the case... what am I supposed to do?'

As his muscles tensed, Luchino froze his face and waited for Elmer's response.

Elmer seemed to have realized the shock Luchino had just received. He began apologizing.

"Oh! Seeing through fake smiles is a specialty of mine. But... your smile when you were performing on stage! That was a *real, genuine* smile. It's been a while since I saw such a great laugh."

Elmer looked like he was lost in remembrance of the magic show earlier. He then said this:

"If it can grant you that smile, your magic probably won't betray you."

"..."

"That's why... you have to continue believing in that magic."

The immortal who had completely betrayed Luchino's expectations left the restaurant with this kindly piece of advice.

"Then I'm sure you'll be able to laugh as much as you like."

He left, whether or not he noticed how cruel these words of kindness actually were to the boy.

The Rookie did nothing but silently watch Elmer disappear.

'What the hell...'

As the boy tried to regain a sense of calm again, he realized that his eyes were welling up.

'Was this man always like this? For the past three hundred years?'

He didn't know why he felt like crying.

He didn't even try to think about it.

But he tried to brush off the tears by contemplating the next question on his mind.

'If he was... why didn't he stop him?'

Why... why didn't he stop Huey from killing Monica...?

Damn... damn it...!

There was no one around who could answer the boy's questions.

Only the sound of dishes being washed in the back echoed through his heart.

Clatter clang clack clang

Clack clang clatter clang

<=>

So the first day came to a peaceful close.

But that was only what it appeared to be on the surface.

The gang of malice on this ship had begun to bare its fangs.

Slowly, but surely.

It was in a certain suite room.

"Hm... Normally, people would start on the third day of the cruise, right?" Bride calmly explained to the believers who were in charge of communication.

As he spoke to them serenely, he took out his red and black labcoat from his belongings.

"Until then, let us enjoy this cruise... is what I'd like to say, but I suppose it's best to get to an early start. How about we begin to drench this ship from tomorrow night or so? If possible, that is? Haha."

With an awkward laugh at the end, Bride unfolded his labcoat, thought for a moment, and folded it back up, mumbling "I'll put it on later".

He walked up to Silis, still as nervously as ever, and softly brushed aside her bangs.

"I don't know how much longer you have, so, uh. Well. I'd like to say now, that... I, well. You see, I'm very much in love with you?" Bride stated slyly, averting his eyes with a shy look.

With a sheepish laugh, he whispered to his current wife with neither malice nor aggression.

"So what I'm trying to say is... That, um. That I'd like for you to suffer beautifully, Miss Rucott."

Interlude

'The second night of the cruise.

In the end, the continuation of my journal entry is about what happened last night.

I talked to Hiroko on the phone just now.

It was more nerve-wracking than I'd expected. I almost felt like back when we'd first started going out. This time, of course, it's not so much happiness as it is anxiety.

But when I talked to her, I actually felt a lot better.

This is fine.

I just can't wait to call her again in 24 hours.

I really feel like a middle schooler again. They say that travelling makes you bold, and maybe they're right--being in a place like this by myself, I feel like I've gone back to being a kid again.

24 hours left... It'll be a pain to calculate the time difference, so I won't adjust my watch.

In any event, yesterday was just full of surprises.

It was the first night. I went to see that young magician's show.

(I completely forgot to tell Hiroko about it. I'll mention it to her next time I call.)

I don't know how to explain it, but it was an amazing performance.

Hats came out from under doves' wings, and he guessed all the right cards, too.

It was terrific, but I don't know how to describe it.

I was especially shocked because the magician was a kid about ten years younger than me.

And the foreign beauty (the one I saw before getting on the ship) looked even more glamorous under the stage lights.

One of the audience members was just filming *her* with his camcorder, even though someone who looked to be his wife was sitting right there beside him. That's just wrong. I would never do anything like that if Hiroko were there.

In any case, I spent all day today (the second day of the cruise) exploring the ship. I didn't say anything to Hiroko, but something feels really off.

Is it just my imagination? I thought I saw a lot of people wearing red and black.

Yesterday everyone was still in suits and dresses, but today I've started noticing people in plain clothes.

I think I've seen a lot of people wearing these weird, red-and-black marble-patterned outfits. Maybe they're handing out promotional jackets or something for a movie, but it was strange to see people wearing *hats* with that pattern.

It was a really creepy design. Maybe it's supposed to be some kind of superstitious marking?

Maybe I'm just being paranoid. After all, even little kids were wearing that pattern. If I think about it that way, the guy in the tribal mask and outfit is much more suspicious.

'Course, his mask is a different colour today. He's probably some celebrity I've never heard about.

Anyway, this cruise so far has been great. The service is so great I feel like I've been reborn as a president.

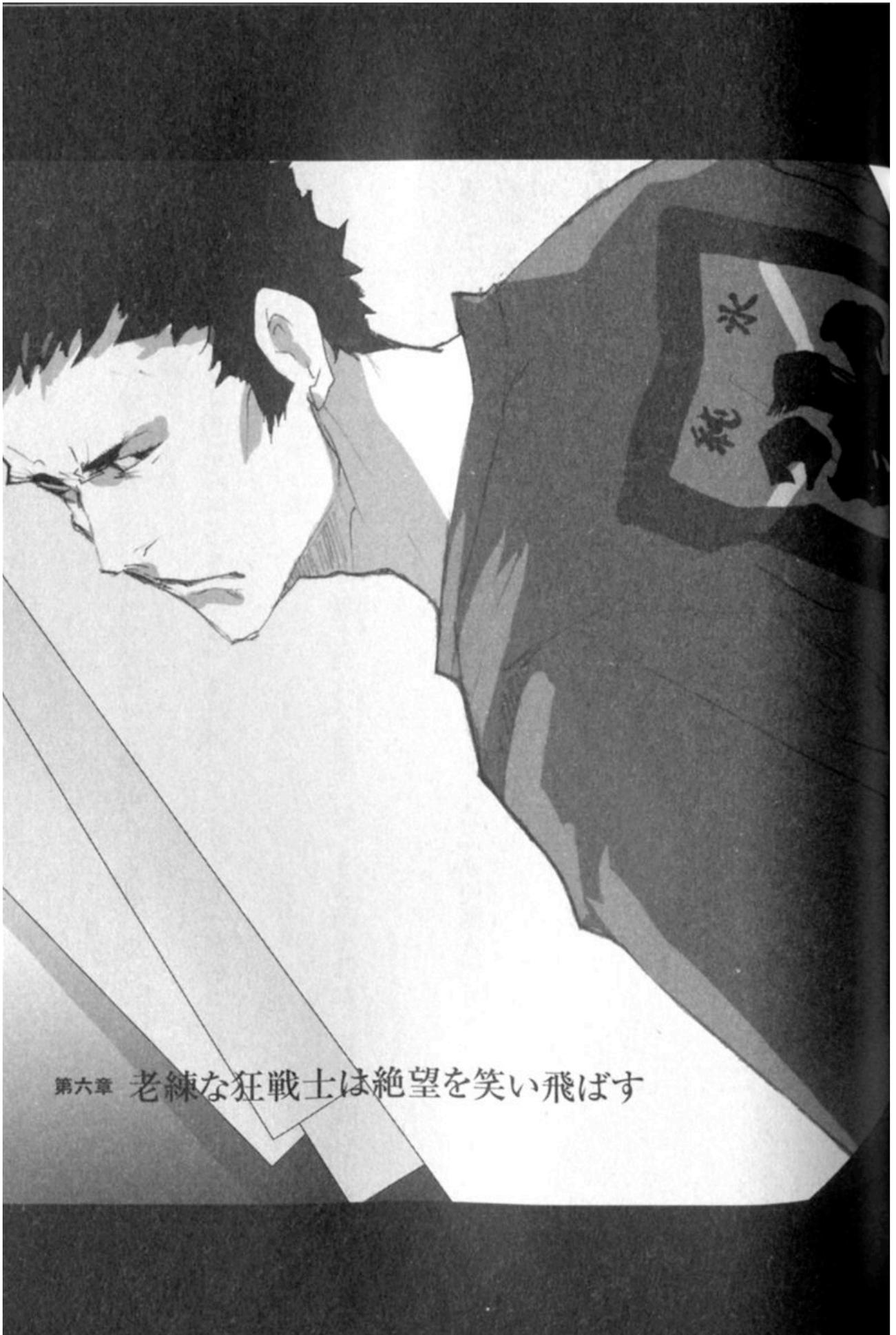
After I call Hiroko in 24 hours, I'll call Japan. I'll make sure to thank the cameraman who gave me this chance. Although I'm pretty sure I'll just end up raving about the cruise.

I hear voices singing from somewhere. It almost feels like angels are blessing me.

Then again, it sounds more like a prayer than a song. It's in a language I don't recognize, but I guess someone's getting married on the ship or something.

It reminds me of our wedding. I can't wait to hear Hiroko's voice again.

Misao, the second night of the cruise.'



第六章 老練な狂戦士は絶望を笑い飛ばす

Chapter 6 : The Veteran Berserker Laughs off Despair

The luxury cruise ship *Exit*. The third night of the cruise.

To the passengers expecting a relaxing vacation--

And to the Mask Makers who intended to shatter the journey with their power--

The collapse of the illusion of security came all too quickly.

Although it was only so on the surface level, the gigantic, seaborne closed space called *Exit* was at peace.

It was the third day since the cruise had begun.

The sister ship *Entrance* had also set sail from across the Pacific, and the two were scheduled to meet in approximately one day.

Even the few passengers who were nervous about going on a ship had just begun to find themselves enjoying the cruise.

It was just then.

That their vacation--

Their safety--

Their future--

was denied to them all too quickly.

This rejection had only taken thirty minutes.

A time of less than an hour was all that was needed to dye this seaborne palace in crimson.

And though those who had been drawn into the centre of this vortex of red fell into despair--

A select few were enjoying the situation, finding excitement in righting the chaos.

<=>

Exit, the storage area.

[Yo! That you, boss? Where are you?]

'What...?'

"...I'm in the storage area, Aging. What in the world--"

His words were cut off by a burst of static.

"Dammit..."

The boy frowned and ran for cover behind a piece of cargo.

'What is going on here?'

The Rookie considered the situation, panting heavily as gunfire and screams rang out through the ship.

Nothing was happening.

At least, not until just half an hour ago.

The hijacking should have gone smoothly.

Five hours ago, he had received reports that the Mask Makers had covertly taken over the communications office, the control room, and the bridge without problems.

"That's kinda boring. I'd have gotten some exercise if they got found out and got police choppers to come after us." Aging had complained. As she was completely unfit for covert operations, she had been preparing to buy time in case things went wrong, just like Illness on *Entrance*.

As Aging continued to sleep in her own room, the boy had been out walking through the shopping mall to observe the passengers.

There didn't seem to be anything off about them.

One thing nagged at him, however--the red and black clothing he had seen so much starting from the second day had disappeared completely.

He had chalked it up to some film-related event aboard the ship, and simply dismissed this concern--

And now, he was deeply regretting his inaction.

He could hear footsteps.

A shadow was being cast at the entrance of the storage area. When the Rookie peeked out, he could see a man standing there, wearing a buttoned-up red-and-black trenchcoat.

The man mercilessly pointed the submachine gun in his hand towards the boy.

Ratatatat. The muffled gunshots echoed through the area, and the floor and cargo where the Rookie's head had been only a moment earlier exploded in the storm of bullets.

'What in the world are they?!'

The people who had been attacking him for the past little while were all, without exception, dressed in red and black.

And it wasn't just men. He thought he had seen women as well.

They also ranged in age from people who seemed to be only slightly older than himself, to old men with snowy beards.

But up until half an hour ago, none of these people in red and black had been around.

He thought everything would be fine. That nothing would happen.

However, he suddenly heard gunshots from all around the ship as he walked through the mall. He remembered that a wave of panic flooded the mall and its patrons in an instant.

Immediately afterwards, the people in red and black began roaming through the ship as if they were wholly unaffected by the chaos.

The Rookie had to take a great deal of caution if he wanted to contact the Mask Makers, so he had tried to return to his room. However--

He then noticed a group of people in red and black approaching him.

These people weren't even trying to hide their weapons as they headed for him in a straight line, cutting through the escaping horde of people.

'...!'

It was as if the other passengers didn't even matter to them at this point.

These people, who were obviously the party behind the crisis, seemed to be smiling.

They were not smiles of bloodlust, nor were they smiles borne of madness.

'That's... peace of mind.'

The kind of relief granted to a traveler who had buried his face into his own pillow in his own home after a very long journey. It was the kind of smile a person would spill wholeheartedly without restraint--a positive look of gentleness.

The boy instantly knew.

'It's me.

They're coming after me.'

A chill ran down his spine the moment he came to this realization.

His instincts were the first to scream out--if he didn't escape, he would be killed.

His heart beat fast enough to sound like an alarm clock, sending shockwaves to the tips of his toes.

The moment he took his first step, he broke out into a sprint.

If he hesitated, he would be cornered in no time.

He had but one goal. He ran in a straight line towards the exit in order to escape from this space.

The Rookie had boarded the ship with its layout memorized. He was originally supposed to use this knowledge to drive Elmer and the other immortals into a corner, but he had never imagined that he would end up utilizing it to make an escape himself.

This was how he had made it to the storage area, but he was found so easily.

However, he was sure that the man who was attacking him now was not part of the group that was initially after him.

The Rookie was sure that he had lost the first wave of pursuers, but he had no time to be relieved.

'They're everywhere... how many of them are there?'

But he didn't have time to think about this. He had to get out of here somehow--

The Rookie had attempted to calmly walk in a crouch in the shadows of the cargo. However, there was almost nothing to use as cover in the storage area due to the fact that there were no special events planned for this cruise. It was nearly impossible for him to find a blind spot.

He had also made one other miscalculation.

The man in red and black ran straight towards him.

As the few pieces of cargo in the storage area were mostly large containers, there was a human-height wall between the man and the Rookie.

But the man, still holding his submachine gun, **jumped up onto the container** and ran across the top in a straight line.

'--?!'

He could hear footsteps coming towards him diagonally. They were approaching him much faster than he imagined.

It was as if someone was running hurdles on the container, and the finish line was above his own head. Add to that the fact that the runner was sprinting at Olympic-speed.

The shock of the situation delayed the Rookie's actions by about two seconds.

The man was probably unable to come to a proper stop. He jumped up above the Rookie's head with a look of peace, still holding the submachine gun.

'Im going to die.'

The Rookie tensed.

To him, it looked as if things were happening in slow motion.

The man's form blocked out the light on the ceiling, and he pointed the firearm towards the Rookie mid-flight--

When something even more unexpected happened.

"Haaaah!"

There was a strange battle cry.

A familiar woman's voice echoed above the Rookie's head, sounding like some costumed hero from the movies.

Aging's silhouette leapt up even higher than the man who was after the Rookie. Her ankles smashed into the man's neck like a metal rod.

There was a sound like something cracking. A red-and-black lump and his submachine gun fell right beside the Rookie.

Aging then landed on her feet with an exaggerated flourish.

"Hm... Feels like I need a cool catchphrase for things like this."

"Aging!"

The boy was truly glad to see the laughing giant--and with her presence as support, he was able to regain some of his tranquility.

"You really saved me back there, Aging. I'd like to thank you properly, but... the mission comes first. What's happening?" the boy asked, recovering his dignity as the president of the Mask Makers.

However--

"Huh. Things are getting interesting, but maybe not so much for you..."

The next moment, both his dignity and his recently recovered sense of calm were completely shattered.

"I'm pretty sure the Mask Makers are completely wiped out."

"...What?"

The Rookie blinked, unable to comprehend this piece of information.

Aging laughed bitterly, turned her head in a strange direction, and pointed at the silencer-equipped submachine gun that lay beside the twitching man. His neck had been twisted at a disturbing angle.

"Look over there. See that gun? It's the one you ordered to be brought on board for our mission. The only weapons we've got left are my axe and Minigun back in my cabin!"

Aging laughed loudly as she lightheartedly went over these terrifying facts.

"Gahaha! Really, what can I say? The world's not something you can get away with underestimating. I thought it was weird we didn't have some paragon of justice onboard, and now we've got hundreds of zombies running around the place! This kind of stuff is why I'm still in this business!"

Meanwhile, the president--his face empty like a person who'd lost his soul--collapsed into Aging's arms.

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

"Quit your worryin'! We can rebuild the company, as long as you and I are both around! ...Whoops! Look at that! I completely forgot about the guys on *Entrance*! Gahahaha! Now Illness'll try to rip me a new one next time I see her."

Aging, having caught the boy with her stomach instead of her chest, gently and reassuringly embraced him with her right arm. Her eyes glinted with excitement as she began cracking the knuckles of her left hand.

"Anyway..."

Aging's eyes looked like that of a ravenous beast. Her tongue escaped between her smile and licked her lips like a child in front of a feast.

"Things are really getting interesting."

<=>

It was thirty minutes earlier.

"So... We've got about a day until the 'Meeting' event? So I guess there's only an hour or so of time difference between the ships."

An expressionless white mask straight out of an Italian carnival.

And the man wearing this mask spoke, energetically waving around a handgun.

The captain of *Exit* glared at the masked man with a look of utter contempt.

"Damn you... you'd better not lay a hand on our passengers."

"Don't worry! As long as none of you make a fuss, we'll finish our job quietly, get off the ship partway, and say goodbye. The passengers don't notice a thing, and they have a wonderful vacation... is our plan. How many times do I have to tell you, huh?!"

The Mask Makers had taken over the bridge, just as their teammates on *Entrance* had done.

As Aging could not sneak through the vents like Life, they had only installed a limited number of gas devices--on this ship, they were worth nothing more than a bluff. However, the Mask Makers made up for this shortcoming by allocating twice the number of operatives that were on *Entrance*.

It had been nearly five hours since the takeover had officially been completed, but the Mask Makers did not reveal themselves yet.

"There's this thing called 'timing'. So just sit tight until the other ship gets here too. We're not trying to ram this ship into an oil tanker like in those movies."

It seemed that these people were just as fond of movies as the others on *Entrance*. The masked men all laughed at this statement.

They didn't carry themselves with the discipline of trained soldiers.

But this only served to fan the flames of fear in the captain's heart. This group's laid-back attitude made them seem even more likely to kill without reason, and this feeling of uncertainty swept through the rest of the hostages.

The Mask Makers did not seem like calculated criminals who would target the weak--rather, they looked like they would have no qualms about randomly opening fire into the crowds, so the captain had a hard time believing their story.

The hijackers had also made them continue their regular contacts with the mainland, but it seemed that they had done their research.

"FYI, don't pretend you're sending them a regular report when you're actually sending them an encoded SOS."

They had even cut off their backup plan for countering hijackings.

As a result, the captain and crew could do nothing but follow the hijackers' demands.

Suddenly, one of the handcuffed hostages got to his feet.

"Hey, who said you could get up?"

"Ri-Richel!"

The captain, wide-eyed, gaped at his first mate's unusual actions.

This man, who had been silent in the five hours since the takeover, had suddenly stood up and begun to walk.

His action was so bold and unexpected that even the Mask Makers were dumbstruck for a moment. One of them hurriedly aimed his gun at him.

"Hey, sit down, you son of a bitch!"

"I'm sorry, but it's time for my report."

"What?!"

The first mate was smiling calmly. The others thought he had gone mad out of fear.

As the Mask Makers prepared to beat him into submission--

The first mate said something strange.

"You see, **I have to send periodic reports to our Master**. If not, someone's going to come to see what's going on. Oh. But if you also took over the communications office, I guess they might have noticed already... I guess that's it. That must be it."

"...What the hell?"

"Well, we're going to get orders to speed up soon. So I have to start getting ready... oh, right. My clothes. Look at the time, I have to get changed..."

As the first mate continued rambling incoherently, the Mask Makers just looked at one another.

Suddenly, the bridge door opened from the hallway and one of the Mask Makers who were on watch came in with a strange girl in tow.

"Hey... this weird kid was wandering around outside..."

"...What?"

The Mask Makers and the hostages all looked at one another in confusion at this sight.

The girl, who seemed to be still a few years shy of ten, was wearing a simple white outfit that wasn't a dress. There was no expression on her face. Her eyes were covered by a black blindfold, and a pair of headphones were over her ears. The wire from the headphones led somewhere into a pouch at her waist, and for some reason, her hands were behind her back.

"Who is this kid...?"

"No, well... take a look."

The watchman turned the girl around. Her hands had been bound in handcuffs different from the ones the Mask Makers had prepared.

"...Did you do that?"

"No way! This girl just... walked over to us like this, barefoot. I tried to shoo her away, but her eyes and ears are covered... she didn't even react when I took off the headphones. It was pretty creepy..."

"Seriously..."

As the man began to try and justify himself, the girl seemed to have sensed something. She turned around and spoke.

[Believer Richel, Believer Richel. The periodic reports. Are no longer. Necessary.]

"She just kept saying that once in a while."

As the girl, chin trembling, finished speaking, she shut her mouth and looked down.

"Isn't 'Richel' the first mate's name? This is pretty creepy."

It seemed that one of the Mask Makers had been particularly disturbed by the girl. He pointed his gun at the first mate's temple.

"Hey. Who is this kid?"

"She is a priestess who is in the role of a loudspeaker." he laughed, and knelt towards the girl.

And He bowed his head towards her as if waiting for something.

"..."

The strange unease gave way to fear.

And as the Mask Makers wondered if they should tie up the girl too, or if they should try and beat a confession out of the first mate--

The blindfolded girl's expression changed.

Although there was a change, there was no difference in the fact that her face was without expression.

But the nature of her expressionlessness had changed.

Her empty, powerless stoicism suddenly hardened as if she was under a great strain--

And a tuneless song filled the bridge.

[Let the answer within us

fear death

Let the answer within them

fear life

Fear death

Fear death

Fear life Fear life The body shall accept death the heart shall desire death

Yet the exalted lamb persists in life

Calm the soul to be devoured

Worship pain

Our god exists not

Yet we shall affirm god]

It was a clear, beautiful, and fragile voice.

A resonance so frail it sounded like it could be extinguished by a breeze.

And yet at the same time, the girl's voice was **overwhelming**.

"H-hey, what the hell's with this kid? Stop it! Stop singing!"

One of the men, overcome by the unwillful screaming, forcefully removed the headphones from the girl's head.

"What the hell are you listening to, anyway--"

When he put it to his ears, he could hear a faint sound.

He listened to it for a moment, then blanched and threw it to the ground.

"Wh-what the hell?!"

"Hey! What's wrong? What'd you hear?!" another Mask Maker asked. The first man replied--

"...Screaming."

"...What?"

"I just barely heard it, but... it was this girl's voice... don't tell me... is this kid **constantly listening to her own screams through the headphones?!**"

"...Wait..."

It was a truly alien concept.

The man had wanted to think it was just his imagination, but the girl was definitely listening to her own screaming.

The man who had brought her into the bridge widened his eyes and yelled.

"Wait a sec! I tried listening to it just before, but I didn't hear--"

"That's only natural. The sound's only started playing just now."

"?!"

The voice had come from the entrance to the bridge.

Before anyone knew it, a man was standing inside the bridge, looking at the situation.

"After all, **we've blessed** the priestesses so that they would recite these prayers to the sounds of their own screaming."

The man was over two metres tall. He was likely not as tall as Aging, but he was much bigger than anyone else in this space.

His featured resembled that of a gorilla, but his voice was surprisingly intellectual.

"Don't move!"

The Mask Makers simultaneously pointed their weapons at him.

Suddenly--

Crack.

An unpleasant sound echoed through the bridge.

Several looked towards the source of the sound, attention still focused on the giant man.

And at the source of the sound was a **fresh, now silent corpse.**

"...Huh? Huh...?"

One of the Mask Makers blurted out without even realizing it.

The corpse was that of the leader of this ship, the captain.

"Wh-what... who..."

There was no point to even asking.

The culprit who had snapped the captain's neck over 180 degrees was still standing right beside the corpse.

"I express my gratitude that our most respected captain has passed on without suffering."

The first mate mumbled, and once again knelt at the feet of the little girl.

The girl's song had ceased the moment the headphones had been removed, but the first mate was still treating her like an object of worship.

"No... wait a sec... how..."

The confused Mask Makers now realized that the first mate's hands were no longer bound.

How had he removed his handcuffs?

The answer to this question was very clearly visible.

The skin around the man's right wrist was bloody where the flesh had been dug into. It looked as if several of his fingers had been dislocated.

He had pulled out his hand by force.

It was that simple.

Of course, it wasn't such an easy task in practice.

Some stage magicians could free themselves from their bonds by purposely dislocating their joints, but the first mate's actions could be nothing more than simple, uncalculated force.

But that wasn't the problem.

Why did the first mate kill the captain?

If he had time to snap the captain's neck, he would have been able to start a counterattack against the Mask Makers.

Of course, things might not have turned out so easily due to the Mask Makers' poison gas threat--

But there was still no reason to kill the captain.

Even the other crew members held hostage did not seem to be able to believe it.

"You... why did..."

"Because we were planning to take care of them from the very start."

The calm answer came, not from the first mate, but from the intelligent gorilla leaning against the wall by the door.

"What...?"

"Excellent. We were just thinking about how to take care of the meddlers."

"What are you... Who are you people? Why did you kill the captain?"

As the Mask Maker asked this of both the first mate and the gorilla, gun going back and forth between them, the gorilla-faced man quietly shook his head and spoke.

"*You* are the ones who killed him."

"...What?"

"As for *why* you did this, I will ask one of you later."

The giant continued speaking calmly, despite having multiple guns pointed at him.

"*You* are the ones who killed the captain."

"...?"

"And *you* are the ones who will have killed anyone who is going to die on this ship. That is how it will be."

"What the hell are you taking about...? Wha... Hey, what the..."

At that moment, the Mask Makers noticed something taking place within the bridge.

The crew members had been handcuffed with their hands held behind their backs.

But several of them began squirming like wraiths and got to their feet.

Their wrists were all similarly blackened. Several more stood up.

Including the first mate, there were about a dozen or so crew members free of their bonds. The rest of the crew gaped at them with eyes full of terror.

The Mask Makers tensed, keeping a firm grip on their weapons.

But the gorilla looked at them and laughed.

"In other words, if we are to place the blame on you--"

He paused, and finished with a cruel smirk.

"then it is best that we leave no witnesses."

"--! You son of a--!"

[If possible, try and avoid any unnecessary bloodshed.]

This was that the president had ordered, but there was no time to be concerned with this command.

It was not because the gorilla's words had provoked them.

'This guy's dangerous.'

The years of experience they had built up as Mask Makers were setting off alarm bells in their heads.

*'These guys are **dangerous**.'*

And as they began to aim for the standing crew members with their guns--

It seemed that the gorilla had done something. Just as the Mask Makers readied fire, the sound of screaming burst out directly from the pouch at the girl's waist.

**[AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH! GAAAHHHH
UUUUUUUUUUGGGGGGGHHH! KYAAAAAAAAAAA! AAAAAAHHHHH!]**

It was a bloodcurdling series of screams.

Though there was no way of telling what had caused the girl to scream in this way, the nauseating screams echoed through the bridge.

**"DEATH IS A NEIGHBOUR TO DREAD AAAAAHHHHHH HAAHAAAAAAAAAAAA!
LIFE IS KIN TO BE FEARED UUUUUUUUUGH AAAAAAHHHHH!
GAAAAAHHHHHHH! OUR GOD AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH COMES FROM US
GUUUUUUUUHHHHHH HAAAAAAAHH AAAAAAHHHH! AND RETURNS UNTO
THE VOID AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH ANDGUSH JOINS WITH LIGHT
AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!"**

The girl's old screams(songs) melded with her current screams(songs). It was merely a series of sounds, but the chorus of the music player and the girl's singing instantly drenched the atmosphere of the bridge in red and black.

And as befitting this mood, the Mask Makers simultaneously pulled the triggers of their submachine guns.



<=>

The sounds of the silenced submachine guns were muffled by the walls of the bridge and its thick glass windows. They disappeared, almost completely muted.

However, a select few had noticed something strange at this exact moment.

<=>

One of these people was the giant of a woman who was a teammate of the beleaguered Mask Makers.

"Hm?"

Aging was in the middle of a massage in the beauty salon when she detected the faint sounds of gunshots in the air.

"Hey, sis. Sorry for bothering ya, but looks like I have some business to take care of. Could you speed it up for me?"

"I understand."

This aesthetician was a professional. She massaged Aging's obviously unusual muscles and completed the process faster than she had initially scheduled.

"...Can't be."

Aging quickly began to get dressed, preparing for the worst.

She smiled, feeling something like a sense of fate at having met one of their targets, the silver-haired woman, at the beauty salon.

"I guess they wouldn't open fire so easily. Might be just my imagination, but..."

Aging left the beauty salon, half excited and half worried.

However, the situation on the ship had far greatly exceeded her idea of the worst.

Of course, this ultimately only led to her being entertained.

<=>

A semi-suite cabin.

As the bloodbath in the bridge began--

Elmer and the others were lounging around the suite room as if they were living in a completely different world.

Denkuro was completely absorbed in his viewing of Akira Kurosawa's [Yojimbo], which happened to be on the DVD list. Elmer was playing a portable game system, wearing a pair of earbuds.

Nile stood on the balcony, looking out that the sea. Occasionally he would play with birds that had flown over from nearby deserted islands.

One of them, Sylvie, had left the room about an hour ago, saying, "I'm going to the beauty salon. Apparently it's part of a famous chain from France".

It had been about fifty hours since they had boarded the ship.

There was still no contact from Huey Laforet.

"Hm... I say this, I am dying of boredom."

"Perhaps you should partake in a film viewing, Master Nile. This one believes you may enjoy this movie."

"I say this. I do not understand Japanese, but you will wish to watch it in your native tongue. Do not bother yourself unnecessarily: I will watch it on my own later."

"To think you would be so considerate, Master Nile. This one feels somewhat guilty to say this, but you must be particularly overwhelmed by this boredom."

"I say this. Don't say anything if you already know. Because I am on a ship, I cannot get the Advenna Avis out of my head. I am feeling restless."

Nile seemed to be particularly uneasy because nothing was happening. He occasionally glanced over at Elmer.

"Elmer. What are you going to do if nothing happens?"

Elmer took out one of the earbuds to hear what Nile had to say, but he did not take his eyes off the screen as he replied.

"Hm... I think it might have been a good idea to invest a little extra money to bring Phil along."

Phil was the name of **several** girls they had brought out from a village in Europe last year.

They were children born through a byproduct of the Elixir of Immortality--a single consciousness that occupied multiple bodies.

After a certain incident, Phil and another friend took a step out into the open world from their hometown in the forest, along with Elmer and the others.

One of Phil's vessels was now living with Sylvie, but they did not bring her along on this trip. This was because they did not want her to get involved, in case this really was Huey's trap. Not only that, Huey had not sent a ticket for her in the first place. Sylvie had left her back in Japan with someone she could trust.

But in the end, nothing had happened.

They were on edge on the first day of the cruise, expecting something to occur, but by the second day, Nile's unease had turned into restlessness--he wanted something, *anything* to happen.

"...Damn you, Huey. I will make you suffer if you leave me hanging like this."

"Nah, from his personality, I think he might have just gotten these tickets by coincidence and decided to give them to us as a gift."

"I say this. He would not go through so much trouble--wait. It may be possible that he did so."

"Huey's a lot shyer than most people think. He calls humanity his experiments, but he has a hard time accepting compliments."

Elmer laughed, recalling his old friend, and returned to his game.

"...How absurd, calling the most evil man on the Advenna Avis bashful."

"Evil, huh? I can't deny that, and Huey himself wouldn't, either. But I don't think he was the *most* evil from the ship."

"I say this. Szilard was the ultimate scum of the earth, therefore I believe it right to call Huey the greatest evil."

"No, what I'm saying is... You know, when it comes to 'evil', well, there's Fermet."

Fermet.

Nile looked confused at the sudden mention of this name. Denkuro silently moved his attention from the film to the conversation.

"I say this. What are you talking about? You claim that this timid but good man was evil?"

"... I see. So you didn't notice it, Nile? What about you, Denkuro?"

Even though he was suddenly put on the spot, Denkuro answered as if he was half-expecting the question.

"...This one had some inkling."

"Wait. What are you two saying?"

"No... Let us not delve further, Master Nile. This one does not wish to speak ill of the dead."

"I say this. Both of you--this is bothering me... but I suppose we should not further insult someone who has already been devoured..."

In contrast to Nile's reluctance, Elmer laughed and continued the conversation.

"Speaking of Fermet, you think Czes is doing all right?"

"It has been less than two months since he departed. This one believes he is doing well in New York."

Elmer smiled at this answer.

"Come to think of it, we didn't tell Czes or Maiza about this cruise, huh? Wait! We should just drop by and surprise them!"

"I say this. What of Phil, who is still back in Japan? Sylvie will not take too kindly to lengthening this trip much more."

"Nah, if we can, let's call Phil over, too. Czes probably wants to see her again, too. Y'know? Czes doesn't have a lot of luck with girls. So I'm saying we should give him a little push!"

"I say this. Your meddling is completely unnecessary." Nile commented incredulously. He went back to watching the sea.

"Hm...?"

A faint sound reached his ears, carried by the wind.

Someone who was unused to this sound would never have noticed it--and someone without a certain degree of hearing would never have been able to detect it.

Nile was bothered by this continuous noise--the sound of submachine guns on automatic fire--and left the cabin, wearing the cabin card key around his neck.

"Huh? Where are you going?"

"I can only hope this is my imagination, but I heard something bothersome just now."

"?"

The words 'I can only hope this is my imagination' was actually a half-truth.

'I can only hope I wasn't imagining things or I had heard fireworks for an event--'

Having exited the cabin, Nile began to slowly walk through the hallways.

'I hope this will at least keep me entertained.'

The moment he thought this, Nile quietly reached out to touch his mask.

"...Well."

He mumbled, disciplining his own heart.

As he wandered the battlefields, Nile had become desensitized to the death of others.

The moment he found himself being excited at the prospect of battle, Nile found himself in self-loathing.

'An immortal who wishes for battle--am I actively desiring a one-sided massacre?'

'My goodness, I have no right to be calling Huey a villain at this rate--'

Nile anxiously grit his teeth behind the mask, but he continued walking.

He quietly wandered in search of his battlefield, unable to fully deny his bloodlust.

<=>

A certain suite room.

"...It seems it has begun."

Bride shook his head as he listened to the gunshots and screams emanating from the radio.

His room was large enough to host a small party.

For some reason, he was mumbling with an elated look on his face, steepling his fingers.

Standing beside him were not the usual secretaries, but a group of bound children in white clothing.

They were the 'priestesses' that had been brought here by their own parents under the pretence of a family vacation.

The silent children merely stood in a line in the room, as if they had no will of their own.

Silis was still lying on the bed. It was impossible to tell if she was even awake.

There was one thing different about her today.

She was wearing a white gown patterned in red and black--the one that Bride had shown her back at their mass.

"In any event, I suppose there's no turning back now. We're past the point of no return. Right? Oh, what to do? My goodness, to think we'd run into seajackers at a time like this. Why must fate be so cruel? Oh, I ask me to please grant me courage. Pain, I ask that you grant me your blessings."

As the young man recited this strange prayer, he slowly pressed a switch in his hand.

And right on cue, the headphones over the children's ears began playing their own screams. The children reflexively began their chorus.

[Let the answer within us fear death]

A tuneless song.

That alone was enough.

[Let the world within them fear life]

No matter where--whether the holy place of another faith, outdoors, or even on a department store rooftop, the presence of these voices alone made the location a place of worship to Bride and SAMPLE.

[Fear death fear death fear life fear life]

"I thank our pain for this. I feel the courage flowing through my veins."

The man smiled as he listened to the screams of the children, and reached into a briefcase that was on the table.

In a hidden compartment of the briefcase were several syringes and needles.

There were about twenty in total, including the ones that had already been filled with some liquid. Even if they were caught by security, none of this was illegal to carry around as long as they got rid of the needles.

After all, the liquid contained in the syringes were completely legal for use--there were no laws to hold them back.

Bride took out two syringes and held one in each hand.

"Well... so the seajackers are confirmed to be in, at least... the bridge... the control room... and the communications office..."

Amidst the chorus of little boys and girls, a look of ecstasy appeared on Bride's face.

"Let our mass... begin."

He stabbed the needles into either side of his neck without hesitation.

[The body shall accept death the heart shall desire death yet the exalted man persists in life.

Calm the soul to be devoured worship pain our god exists not we shall affirm god. Death is a neighbour to dread life is kin to be feared our god comes from us and returns unto the void anguish joins with light shame conjoined with shadow I merely stand before the exalted one and bring a single herb to my lips fear god fear self to pity is the forgiveness granted to us...]

The unbroken chain prayers spread across rooms, echoing through the entire ship.

Slowly, but surely.

The prayer born of malice became a fragrant poison, seeping into the entire ship--blindingly and seductively.

<=>

At the same time, the communications office.

The Mask Makers had taken over this room just as they had with the bridge.

The five members assigned to this room were keeping guard in boredom--

One man, who had gone to the bathroom without his mask, found his way blocked by a woman.

She was one of the women who accompanied Bride at all times, but the unknowing man saw nothing but a young woman wearing a black and red dress.

"...?"

"Hello."

The man determined that she was just a lost passenger, and coldly spoke to her.

"Miss, no unauthorized entry beyond--"

He was never able to finish his line.

It was because **the young woman's hand had stabbed into his throat.**

The woman was wearing gloves that looked like some gauntlet, which covered her hands from the index finger to the ring finger. The sharpened fingertips, combined with the woman's sudden movement, turned the glove into a weapon.

There was a sound of wind escaping. At the same time, blood gushed from the entry wounds.

The woman silently allowed herself to be showered with blood, but the blood did not stand out because of her red and black dress.

The woman looked down at the man, who had likely died instantly, and left with this one phrase:

"I wish you as painless a death as possible."

She stepped towards the communications office.

And as if following her, other men and women stepped out from the washroom that the Mask Maker was about to head into.

They were all dressed in red and black--it looked almost like they were witches on their way to perform an eldritch summoning of sorts.

<=>

At the same time, the control room.

The control room was near the bow of the ship, on a much lower level than the bridge.

About ten Mask Makers were dispatched to this location, as it was a place from which all aspects of the ship were controlled--from ventilation and electricity to communication lines.

In any event, they could not let the passengers know of the events occurring on the ship. As the control room had to continue regular functions even after the takeover, the Mask Makers in charge of this room had to take extra care to make sure their hostages knew exactly what was going to happen to them.

There were multiple routes into the control room--the ship's elevators, a long flight of stairs, or a path from the storage area at the bottom of the ship.

Due to the important nature of the room, the doors were carefully reinforced. But the Mask Makers had broken the locks and were taking turns guarding the door.

There were always two Mask Makers on patrol in the last hallway that needed to be taken in order to reach the control room. They would conceal their masks and guns as a precaution against lost civilians.

"Damn it. What kind of normal person would wander all the way down here?"

"Stop complaining. Ol' Death always used to say, 'A one-in-a-million chance is still higher than zero'."

As the topic of their very recently deceased 'weapon'--Death--came up, the two guards both seemed to get saddened.

"Hm... It really was that one-in-a-million chance that offed him, huh."

"You know the Mariachi from [Desperado]? The one Antonio Banderas played? I heard the gunman who got Death kinda looked like him..."

"Seriously? No way... There's no way someone that scary actually exists."

They began their chattering conversation of mourning.

Suddenly, a woman stepped before them.

"...?!"

She had appeared without a sound. The men just looked at one another in shock.

She was dressed in a women's suit that was popular in Japan about a decade ago--it was a type of outfit that showed off the curvature of the wearer. The skirt she wore was quite short, exposing her pristine legs from the thighs down.

One strange thing was, however, the unsettling red and black pattern that the suit was designed with. But one of the men reflexively began speaking before he could even register the thought.

His words were exactly the same as that of the man who had been killed near the washroom beside the communication office.

"Miss, no unauthorized entry beyond--"

And just like his teammate, this man was also unable to finish his line.

"Guh...?"

He had seen up until the woman had suddenly spun around.

However, his functions were completely paralyzed a moment later due to the piercing shock he received to his stomach.

This was not an exaggeration.

The woman's leg had penetrated through his stomach and crushed his spine.

"... Ugh... Ack... Agh..."

The Mask Maker spewed out blood as he moaned. His voice still came up from his throat, but he was no longer conscious. The shock of his spine being crushed had instantly stopped his brain and heart.

The woman immediately pulled her leg out of the corpse's stomach, and took action before the other Mask Maker could even react.

The Mask Makers were no novices when it came to battle.

Having seen the grotesque image of a woman's leg sticking out of his teammate's back, he had taken only two seconds to grasp the situation and reach for his gun.

But distinctions between novices and professionals did not even factor into the woman's inhuman movements.

She had already leapt into the air and lunged at him with something resembling a rolling sobat.

By the time he had realized that the tip of her high heels were covered with his teammate's blood, he was already dead.

His final thoughts were--

'Damn.

Can't beat these guys without Aging or Death...'

As much as he hated this, this was the harsh reality of things.

The man had reflexively tried to avoid the kick. And he had already begun moving.

However, the woman overpowered him through sheer force of strength and quickly carved in the result of death into his body.

"I wish you as painless a death as possible."

She spoke, and took the bloodied pistols from the two corpses.

She waited for a moment, and soon a group of believers in red and black poked their heads out from the hallway, just like in the communications hallway.

"Use these."

The female secretary smiled softly and handed the guns to the believers at the head of the group.

The believers were also smiling. It was as if the corpses on the ground didn't even exist.

<=>

It was only a few minutes later that the Mask Makers who were on standby in the ship were bombarded by a frantic message.

[This is Guelph. We have a Code F! I repeat, Code F! Goddammit!

We're being attacked! Those creeps are attacking all of our takeover spots!

They are people dressed in red and black! They are hostile! I repeat, the ones in red and black are extremely hostile!]

The members on standby were initially confused, but the words "Code F"--which meant an attack by a third party--immediately put them on high alert.

[Don't make any contact with the boss! If they figure out who the boss is, it's all over... Ugh... agh... Shit, they're here--]

His voice cut off there, and was soon replaced by static.

And with this message as the final start, the world aboard *Exit* was turned upside-down.

<=>

A certain semi-suite room.

Silis, still not quite herself, could hear the songs and screams of the children.

The sound triggered her memories of the bloodbath that had occurred at the church where she had met Bride.

She had recalled these images countless times in the past month, but right now was the first time since that day that she had heard the children's song in person.

Perhaps this was why the 'memory' had become a much clearer 'scene' that shook her mind to the core.

<=>

Back then, when the Asian men had barged in--

The events that occurred could be neatly described in four words.

There was a fight.

That was the simple answer.

The believers--men and women, young and old, with their bare hands--

This alone was outlandish enough for Silis, but the true madness was only just beginning.

Obviously, the interlopers did not look kindly upon the throngs of believers descending upon them.

They cut down the believers one by one with their blades, and several shot their guns.

However, no matter how much they cut, they could not cut them down.

They could shoot, but they could not shoot them down.

The believers were visibly critically wounded, but they did not back down.

They ignored their gunshot wounds and cuts, and just swarmed around the men like zombies straight out of a movie.

But that was not what Silis thought most insane about the scene.

It was that the believers who were locked in battle--

They were all smiling.

She did not know when they had begun to smile.

Perhaps they had been that way since the children had begun their chorus. Perhaps they were just barely grinning, despite looking expressionless.

But these smiles on their faces were not derived from bloodlust or anxiety--they were smiles of pure peace and serenity.

"What... is this..."

Silis fell to her knees and made for the wall in as if attempting to get away from the bloodbath.

And at the end of her confused line of sight, the man who led this group as its Master looked up at the air and calmly recited with a look of peace:

"Life within death!

Death within life!

The two are opposite sides of the same coin!

And what is it that joins them together?

It is *pain*!

Pain brings death unto the body and leads the heart to desire death!

Then our role is clear--

We must bring an end to all with pain!"

And the moment this short speech--likely recited for Silis's sake--came to an end, the massacre also reached its conclusion.

Whether they had been shot or cut, the believers were all looking towards the altar with smiles of tranquility. However, none of the intruders were breathing.

As the believers were holding them off, the two secretaries, the giant, and the bandaged man had instantly taken care of half of the interlopers. The other half were murdered by the believers.

The believers endured their wounds as if they did not feel pain. They smiled--

"They... I mean, we--it is not that we do not feel pain. After all, pain an important indicator of disease or injury."

Bride had come to Silis's side before she had realized it, and smiled at her like a benevolent saint.

"We just make it so that pain is not something agonizing."

With these words, he put a syringe to Silis's neck.

<=>

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!"

Having reflexively sat up, Silis was gripped by a feeling like her heart was about to burst out of her mouth.

She then realized that she was merely breathing too quickly, and forced herself to calm down from her state of half-panic.

The powerful recollection of these memories, triggered by the children's song, seemed to have caused a great shock--her half-empty psyche had been restored.

She took twenty seconds to calm her breathing. She took five seconds to recall and understand her current situation.

She remembered what this room was, and reflexively looked around.

However, it seemed her dream had lasted much longer than she had thought. The room was deserted.

Neither Bride nor the singing children were there.

Although a part of her wished it had all been a dream, that she was not on a ship but some hotel near the office, the two empty syringes on the table brought her back to reality.

Silis forced down the fatigue that threatened to drag down her body. She got off the bed and took a step forward.

She took out a red and black dress from the luggage Bride had packed for her and quickly began to change.

Once she had finished dressing up, she carefully approached the door and looked outside.

And once she had confirmed that no one was around, she made her decision and stepped out of the doorway, into the bowels of *Exit*.

'I have to tell her...'

Her memories from her hazy days were still perfectly intact.

She recalled the finale of the young magician's performance.

She remembered the beautiful silver hair of the woman Bride had called 'Sylvie'--and Silis began running through the gigantic ship, for herself and this complete stranger.

I have to let her know... and ask for her help...

I need help to get away from him... or to take care of him somehow...!

<=>

Back at the storage area, when the Rookie had been reunited with Aging.

"Feeling a bit better now, boss?"

"...Yeah. I'll be fine."

The Rookie took deep breaths in a corner of the hold.

Aging checked to make sure he was uninjured, and laughed heartily in agreement.

"But I'd never have expected they'd come after you because they recognized your face, boss. Maybe they tortured the info out of one of us and he told 'em that our boss is the magician in the pamphlet. Or maybe they used truth serum."

These were the most realistic responses, but that would mean that the enemy had believed such a claim--that the boy magician in the pamphlet was the leader of the Mask Makers.

It would sound very much like a badly done lie, but perhaps that was exactly why they believed it. Or even if they were skeptical, perhaps they were targeting him just in case.

"What in the world... are those bastards?"

"Who knows? I've got no idea myself, but... looks like they have the numbers to back them up. And if they get rid of their clothes, you can't even tell them apart from any old passenger. Should I just kill them all?"

"Don't even--Why would you do something that inefficient? Besides, our mission isn't to massacre them."

The boy almost ended up impulsively talking as his emotions dictated, but he caught himself and quickly pushed back his childlike face back within himself.

"Then what? You're just gonna run with your tail between your legs? Then again, I guess you can't just throw away your ancestral Mask Maker name to the seas so easily. Considering the situation,

you could probably keep your life and the Mask Maker name if you just refund the money to the client."

"...I can't do that."

"Hm?"

"... The Mask Maker's legacy isn't an organization. It's 'resolve' and 'determination'. And the ultimate goal... is with the immortals. Even if we cancel the mission, when I leave this ship, I will leave with an immortal... Elmer C. Albatross."

However, he had lost contact with most of his subordinates. And if he were to believe Aging's words that no one was answering their calls, things were looking grim indeed.

The boy grit his teeth. He pushed back his flood of emotions and locked them within himself. He then picked out one resolve in particular to put over his face.

He took a breath and looked Aging in the eye.

"I'm asking you this, not as your boss, but as Luchino Campanella--the heir to the name of the Mask Makers."

"..."

With a serious look, the boy straightened up and looked up at the face of the woman who was much taller than himself.

"Help me... I know this is practically impossible, but we're going to capture the immortals and escape this ship. And we'll try and find any Mask Maker survivors that might still be left. And as for these creeps... Let's take care of them if we can."

"Pretty greedy, ain'tcha? All right, all right, so you're not talking to me as the president, but as a kid, huh?"

Aging stared into the boy's face.

She then laughed as if the answer had been decided from the start and gave her reply.

"That's pretty low of you, boss--I mean, Rookie."

"..."

"You're saying this because you *know* there's no way I'd pass up something this reckless and entertaining, right?"

Interlude

'The third day of the cruise.

I'm getting uneasy.

Setting aside how I called Hiroko a bit early, the phone call actually got cut off partway through.

I wonder if something's happened.

I tried calling again, but I didn't get any signal.

I started getting worried.

Hiroko was just laughing and telling me to relax, but I couldn't shake off that feeling.

What are the odds of getting cut off right at that moment?

My cell phone's on three antennas.

I heard that the ship's satellite communication systems were excellent, so I'd like to believe that everything's going to be fine.

If that's the case, did something happen on Hiroko's ship?

It can't be. On top of my bad feeling about *this* ship...

What to do?

There are a lot of foreigners who don't look like they even speak English, let alone Japanese, and there's a bunch of creepy people walking around, too. I just keep getting the feeling that there's something off about this cruise.

Should I check outside?

I thought better of it.

I feel like I'll just get more worried if I look outside.

I feel like I'll run into those creeps again.

I don't know what to do, but I'll just try and give her another call.

Something's strange.

I feel the floor shaking.

The ship feels like it's moving faster.

I'm scared.

I'll fix up my journal later.

This is crazy. First, I'll call Hiroko.

-Misao'

<=>

'This might be the last thing I ever write.

Even though I'm about to die, my head feels so clear.

I'm writing down the things that are happening, in case someone finds this laptop. I'm still trying to make phone calls, but there's no sign of the communications systems coming back on.

I want to believe that the other ship is safe.

I think I've been hearing gunshots for a while now.

I don't know what's going on right. But I don't have the guts to look outside.

There's some sort of announcement coming over the speakers.

What is this? It sounds kind of like a prayer.

The ship's speeding up again.

They're saying something about crashing the ship.

around evening tomorrow evening

on the entrance

HIRoko is in dangr

imscaredscaredsdjfbpleasebesafesfhijustwanthirotoknowsjfbthanksskfsforeverythingskfhls;iwantt
ocallhersjf;

<=>

And the fate of the two ships would collide on the seas.



第七章 血の休息日に入口と出口は重なり合う

Chapter 7 : The Entrance and Exit Overlap on a Sabbath of Blood

He was not a so-called 'lonely sniper'.

As far away as they were, he had a loving wife and son waiting for him.

Sometimes, he honestly considered washing his hands of this bloody work to live a happy, peaceful life with his family.

However, he still had his reservations.

He had killed far too many people in his life.

'I have no right to have a happy, ordinary life.'

'But at least, I want my wife and son to be happy.'

This hypocrite of a man, of course, had killed countless people.

Half of these kills were either in self-defence or for vengeance against those who had hurt those precious to him.

The other half were killed either on orders of the Boss to whom he was indebted, or in defence of this Boss.

The shots he fired were so accurate they almost appeared to be drawn to their targets--he had become an object of fear, sometimes likened to a man-eating shark who could track the scent of blood.

At first, however, he was just another gunman you could find in any place where no laws were sacred.

This man--Angelo--was now an excellent 'hound', but in the past, he was the kind of person who would not be out of place in a pile of corpses.

He did not survive this far because he possessed some special skill.

He had become strong **because he happened to have survived this far.**

He never would have even gotten his hands on a gun to begin with if the police had 'cleaned up' that alley back when he was a street urchin.

If, in his first shootout, his opponent had not tripped on an ally's corpse, that opponent might have lived to become as skilled as Angelo was now.

Angelo's skill did not come from natural talent, but pure 'experience'.

Murder called forth more murder, bullets called forth more bullets, and vengeance called forth more vengeance.

Having spent his days in what could never be called a normal daily life, Angelo was now at the point where he was using more bullets than most soldiers fighting on the front lines of a war.

And it could be nothing less than a miracle that he found a spontaneous time of peace between these days to have a family for himself.

Angelo had turned down the woman who had fallen for him, out of the feeling that he had no right to pursue happiness--but this woman was far more formidable than he could have ever imagined.

Setting aside the circumstances, Angelo had found himself a family--he registered his name in her hometown in Spain, and did bodyguard work in South America.

And one day--the Mask Makers barged into his life.

Several days before *Entrance* set sail--

[Yo, boss Angelo. How ya feelin'?)

When the walkie-talkie at his side crackled to life with a cackle, the gunman called Angelo brought it up to his face and spoke. The restaurant behind him was going up in flames, thanks to the truck that crashed into it.

"All clear. We've accomplished our main mission."

[That thing 'bout kickin' 'em outta the restaurant? Anyway, Boss wants to talk to ya.]

The Demolisher's coarse laughter faded--

And from the walkie-talkie came the **terrified, despairing voice of a young girl.**

[Ah... uh... um... Angelo... H-how did it go...?]

"The enemy's escaped. There's no need for you to worry, Boss."

The employer of this gunman who called himself a 'hound'--Angelo--could only be the Boss of the drug cartel that ran this area.

However, this was only true until a several days ago.

It seemed that there had been a spy in their midst. The Boss was killed in a shootout against another organization.

Angelo had defeated all of the enemies, but the Boss was shot in the back. It seemed he had been killed by the spy, but it was still not clear who the spy was.

The Boss's only blood relative was his daughter, who had just turned twelve. It was a hectic time, as everyone was vying for the position of second-in-command, who would be the Boss in all but name.

And once the power structures had been properly reorganized, the Boss's daughter would become useless to them.

But the Boss had asked Angelo with his dying breath--"Take care of my daughter".

'Of all the annoying orders.'

At first, he had thought about taking the girl to his home back in Spain.

His wife's outrage at his return to South America to earn money must have subsided by now.

However, if he went back with his Boss's daughter now, he might find himself faced with a kitchen knife to the skull before he could get a chance to explain.

He made it a personal rule to never kill women. This was a no-brainer in the case of his beloved wife. In other words, he could not put up any resistance.

'Her kitchen knife skills are lethal unless you go in with the intent to kill.'

He could not go on the run as soon as he went back home. The easiest thing for him would have been to ignore the Boss's orders and go back to Spain alone, but--

'But I can't just leave her behind.'

The debt Angelo owed to his Boss was absolute. He could not go against it.

He would never kill women or children.

His Boss had accepted his stubborn personal rule, and even gave him a place to be.

And this Boss's daughter--who was now the new boss--asked him in an urgent tone.

[What about you, Angelo? You're not hurt, are you?]

"I'm fine."

[And... the others...]

"You don't need to worry about them, boss."

He lied.

The life and death of one's subordinates--subordinates who made up the core of the organization--was definitely something that a Boss should have to worry about.

But Angelo treated her not as the Boss, but a young girl.

After Angelo's cool answer, the girl took a moment to breathe--

She then continued, desperately holding back her emotions.

[And... what about the attackers...?]

"They've been dealt with. I'll go after them now--"

[Wait a moment...! Please, stop! I can't put you in any more danger, Angelo...!]

"..."

While a part of Angelo thought the girl was being naive, he realized that she was truly worried for him. Angelo sighed, not letting slip if he was in agreement or disagreement with her.

"I cannot place you in danger, Boss. I'll just go and **convince** them to make sure they'll never lay a hand on you. Please don't worry."

The girl said something in reply, but the voice on the walkie-talkie was replaced by a vulgar male voice.

[Hahaha! sweet thing to say, ain't it?! First she finds out her old man's a drug lord on the day he kicks it--she gets to be the new Boss just a couple of days later, and now a bunch of hitmen get here to off her 'cause they can't even wait! Ya think maybe the little Boss secretly *wants* to go die?]

"Shut your trap, or I'll pluck your teeth and cut out your tongue."

Angelo felt a surge of contempt for the man who was laughing right next to the Boss, but he calmed himself to think about his next move.

'That timing bothers me... did they not know that a little girl like Carneia is the new Boss?

Or is it that they don't even care...?'

Nothing would be solved unless he found the answers to these questions.

"Demolisher. I have a favour to ask."

[Ya want me to get some dirt on 'em, right? I got your back. Hell, I'll even find out about their embarrassing tattoos for ya.]

The Demolisher.

As the moniker implied, he was a man who specialized in demolishing. He also did some work on the side as an information broker.

Although he was nowhere near the level of a newspaper company in the U.S. called the Daily Days, this man's speed was unthinkably fast enough for Angelo.

[Yeah, yeah. Cut your worryin', Boss. Your little doggie's gonna clean up for ya.]

"...Don't say anything unnecessary."

Angelo thought he could hear the girl say something from behind the Demolisher over the walkie-talkie, but he decided to ignore it.

'She might end up hating me for it, but I have no choice.'

Once I get my info, I'll leave her somewhere safe... Right. Pietro's Bar should be good. After that I'll go after those bastards with the Demolisher.'

The present day.

Although it was Angelo's plan to corner the Mask Makers on this ship, with the cooperation of the Demolisher, he had made several miscalculations.

One was that the Mask Makers were not here on vacation--they had brought weapons on board the ship.

Another was that a series of unfortunate coincidences had led to a shootout in the ship.

Yet another miscalculation was that the Demolisher had installed explosives on the ship.

And the final mistake--

"I'm so relieved... I'm so glad you're safe, Angelo!"

"How..."

Angelo's eyes widened, still hidden behind his sunglasses.

"How did you get here, **Boss?!'**"

"H-hey... you mean this kid is the one you told me about...?" Firo asked, wide-eyed.

"Hm. Yes." Angelo nodded, "Of my organization... of course, there are only three official members surviving..."

Angelo sighed, bowed his head, and looked at the silent girl. He then let out an uncharacteristic, bitter laugh.

"In any event, this is the Boss of our organization--Carnea Kaufman."

<=>

The luxury cruise ship *Entrance*.

While chaos descended upon *Exit*, its mirror image and twin *Entrance* was also being overwhelmed by confusion.

Firo had decided to find a team of mercenaries known as "Mask Makers", with the help of a gunman from South America.

He had been prepared for a certain extent of turmoil, but never had Firo imagined that he would be involved in a shootout in front of countless normal passengers.

And upon realizing that the gunman's Boss had somehow gotten onto the ship and was now inside the animatronic shark, the young man on his honeymoon fell into a moment of indecision.

In hindsight, he had a feeling that something might go wrong.

Although Firo Prochainezo's senses had been somewhat dulled by the exciting prospect of his honeymoon, a powerful feeling of unease had been nagging at him.

He had probably first noticed this unease when he first saw Angelo.

Firo unconsciously came to a realization when he saw this gunman, who was clearly not a law-abiding man.

'Oh. This ship is dangerous.

The fact that someone from this side of society is here at all means there's something off about this place.'

But he had desperately tried to ignore this unease. After all, he didn't want to ruin this event--his honeymoon, and the first vacation they had taken together as a family.

Of course, his little hope had soon been shattered to pieces.

"...Incredible. What is this?"

It was back on the first night of the cruise, in Angelo's cabin.

Firo, who had found himself being threatened with a gun, did not hesitate to try and snatch the weapon.

He had considered talking his way out of the situation, but Firo had determined that it would be faster to stop him by force.

He was confident. All he had to do was hold down the barrel before his opponent could pull the trigger, and prevent the gun from going off.

He had determined all this from what he had seen of Angelo's skills back at the casino. Firo had confidence in his victory.

However, he lost.

'..So he was hiding his skills back at the casino, huh.'

That was the simple version of the result.

A gunshot muffled by a silencer rang out through the room, and Firo found himself with bullet holes on either shoulders and legs.

His upper body was thrown back, and his non-prescription glasses fell to the floor.

Firo then fell on top of his glasses, along with the chair.

Crack. He could hear the lenses breaking.

"I thought I told you not to move." Angelo said, shaking his head expressionlessly, "...No. I apologize. I *didn't* say so. But perhaps you should have tried to be a bit more aware of your own situation."

Angelo prepared to begin his interrogation, but immediately noticed something strange.

The blood flowing from Firo's body quickly began making its way back.

It squirmed like a living creature, like a swarm of red insects scurrying to their nest.

"A magic trick... or not."

Although it would be unsurprising for a normal person to panic upon seeing this, Angelo just furrowed his brow as if he was just looking at a mildly peculiar sight.

"What are you...?"

"Guh... Damn it... Second time this year I ended up this bad... Ugh... Now you feel like... listening to what I have to say?"

Angelo fell silent as Firo gave a surprisingly confident grin between coughs.

"I had been planning to listen to you from the beginning... I only fired because you suddenly tried to take the gun from me."

"...Putting it that way just makes me look bad. I just want you to know that I'm not one of these 'Mask Makers' or anything."

"I can't say this is absolute proof that you are unconnected, but... I'll hear you out for now."

Angelo lowered his gun, but he was still on edge.

'Damn, that hurt. That was really stupid of me. I'm really losing my touch...'

As his wounds finished healing, Firo fell onto the couch and grinned bitterly.

"Before I talk, I have a favour to ask."

"What is it?"

"Actually, I'm on a honeymoon with my wife and... a kid who's like a brother to us. You mind telling them that... uh... I got shot in a really tough fight?"

"..."

Angelo could not find a trace of anxiety in Firo's question. He paused.

"Well, it'd be pretty hard to pretend I wasn't shot. Y'know, my clothes don't regenerate."

Angelo then realized that Firo's eyes were serious--he sighed and replied with a bitter laugh.

"...I understand. I don't know if you're a human or a vampire, but I will trust you for now."

"Thanks."

Angelo was momentarily thrown off by the sudden brightening of Firo's expression, and said this to the mysterious lifeform before him.

"As an apology for shooting you, I will tell your family that you are a courageous and skilled warrior."

<=>

Present time.

They took shelter in the cafe again and assessed their situation, carefully monitoring the mall outside.

The people in the cafe were Firo, Ennis, Angelo, and the little girl who was his Boss. Between all of them was a boy wearing Charon's suit of cogs, but he was currently being ignored, being perceived as a harmless element to their situation.

"When you told me you were working of a young, inexperienced Boss, I didn't really expect someone this young."

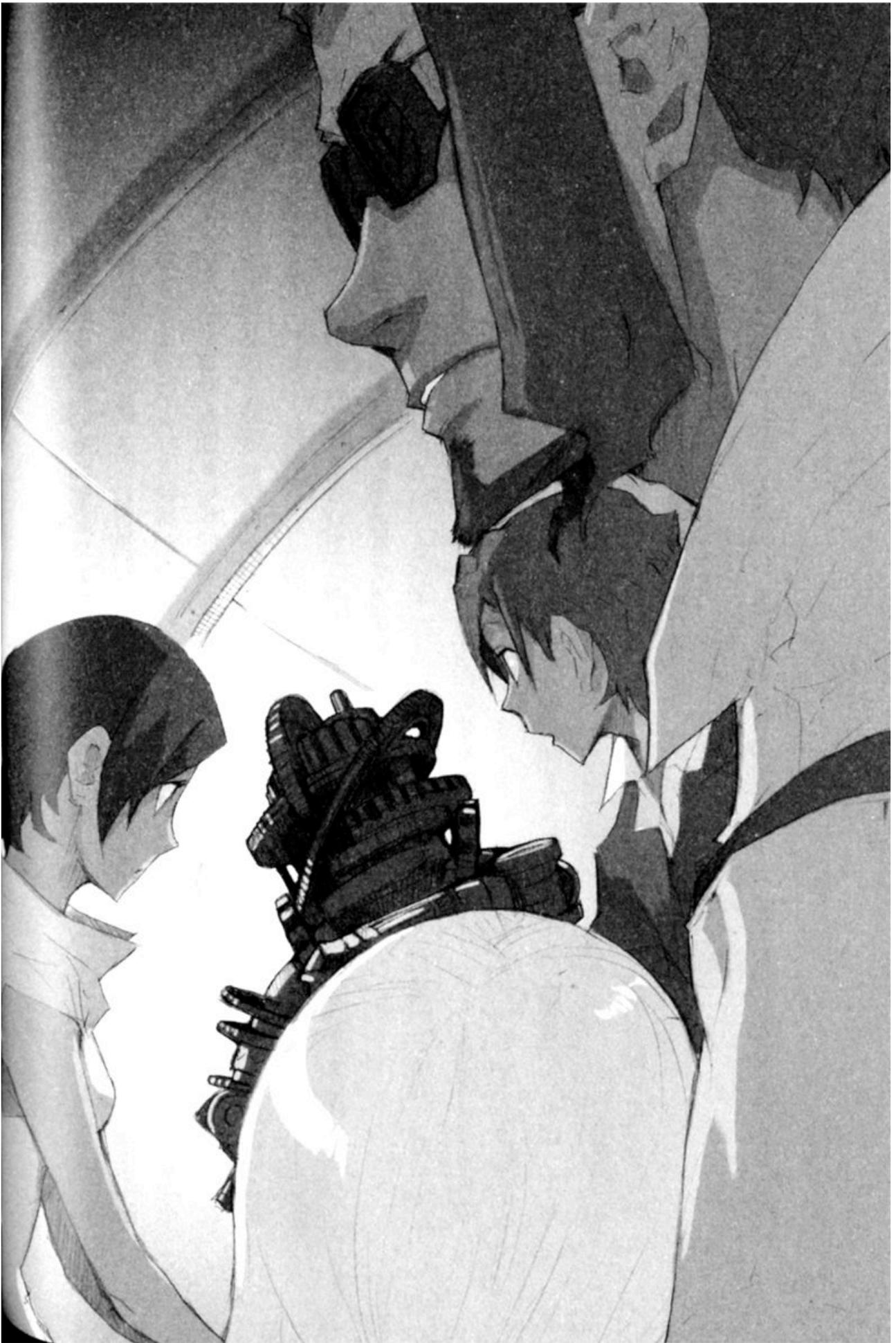
Firo commented, incredulous. Angelo's reply was stony.

"No. I did not feel it necessary to divulge so much to you. In any case--Boss, how did you get here...?"

Firo realized as he watched Angelo breaking out in cold sweat--Angelo was incomparably more shocked than when he had seen Firo's recovery. However, he decided to stay silent and watch the dramatic reunion.

It seemed that the girl called Carnea had reached a breaking point of relief. She answered Angelo's anxious, perplexed question with tears in her eyes.

"But... I... I was afraid you and other people might end up even more hurt because of me..."



It wasn't the sort of words one would normally hear coming from the Boss of a drug cartel, but Carnea had been thrust into this position against her will. It had been only a few days since, and it was doubtful that she knew the full extent of the affairs concerning her father's business.

Firo sympathized with her situation and judged that Carnea had been acting out of concern for Angelo. Perhaps they had known one another for a long time, and Angelo was like a brother, or a father to her.

"That's foolishness... And why on *this* ship...?!"

"I stowed away."

"Of all the...! How did you find out about this ship? And how did you even get into the States...?"

"Um... Mr. Demolisher took care of all the details... He said that if I was around, you wouldn't start any gunfights on the ship, Angelo..."

Carnea answered sheepishly. The moment she said the word "Demolisher", a vein popped on Angelo's temple.

"That. Fucking. Bastard."

Angelo's cold fury was enough to overwhelm not only Carnea, but even Firo and Ennis. The boy in the Gear costume flinched with a soft scream and took a step back.

The scream reminded Firo of something as he turned to the boy, still wary of possible shots from outside.

"Actually, I've been wondering..."

Who are you?"

<=>

The ship corridors.

"No... nooo... nooooooooooooo..."

A silhouette was crouched in a deserted corner of the hall, holding her head.

She wore a gothic-lolita dress of black and yellow.

Tears flowed over the bags under her sickly-looking eyes. The girl was breathing heavily, wailing in terror.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH! Ah...! AAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

But her cries fell on deaf ears.

Currently, the entirety of *Entrance* was filled with screaming.

Gunshots rang out.

The lifeboats had been destroyed.

The seajackers had shown their unbelievable power.

Some of the particularly distressed passengers were wailing even louder than the girl.

The meaning of their tears were different, but there was no one among the passengers who could spare a moment's notice to this girl's screams.

And--

The first person to speak to the girl as she wallowed in her endless tears--

"What are you doing, Illness?"

"Aaaaah... Ah... Aaah. Sniff... Oh... L-Life..."

The girl called Illness desperately held back her tears as she looked at the man who appeared before her.

He was not a passenger on this ship.

However, he was a familiar presence to Illness.

He was the cause of the current incident, the man who had smuggled a large quantity of weapons onboard in the middle of the cruise.

The combat suit-clad man sighed.

"Stop your tears. This is no time for crying. Please arm yourself and provide support."

This man, who spoke in a very calm tone, was Life--one of the **weapons** of the Mask Makers.

From the tears visible on his combat suit, it seemed that he had been involved in multiple battles thus far.

"Aaaaah... Ah... Life... I, I..."

Illness trembled as she looked down at the cell phone she had thrown to the ground earlier.

The call seemed to have already ended. The screen, which was miraculously still intact, showed a photograph Illness had set as her wallpaper only yesterday.

It was a picture she had taken with the redheaded child actress in front of the animatronic shark.

"Ah... Ah. Right... I... I have to go... help Claudia..."

Illness staggered as she picked up the cell phone off the floor.

"I don't know who this 'Claudia' is, but I ask that you assist our mission first." Life sighed as he reminded her.

"...No... I, I don't want to. But. They said... I don't have to do anything until the police show up. So, I..."

"Illness."

"..."

Life's words were calm, but there was a weight to them that froze her in her tracks.

Illness wordlessly clutched her cell phone and slowed her breathing.

Once again, Life's words pierced at her heart.

"...If you do not wish to cooperate, then that is fine. All it means is that you will no longer be associated with us. I hope you have a good life on your own."

"..."

"Or do you plan on returning to that religious organization you were from? Excuse me, where are my manners? They're already dead. My goodness, it was our company who annihilated them all, including your parents."

Life's tone was laid-back, but the power behind his words were tremendous.

They forced Illness's heart from confusion into reason.

At the same time, the voice that had come from the cell phone reignited in Illness's memories, creating an absolute terror that seized her heart.

'It can't be.

There's no way.'

Life was saying something from behind her, but his words did not reach Illness right now.

Having come back to her right mind, Illness used her logic as best she could to deny the phone call that had just occurred,

'It can't be.

It can't be. No. Nononononono. No.

*There's no way I just heard **that prayer.**'*

Illness slowly calmed her breathing and decided to pretend that the call just now was just a hallucination.

The religious organization Illness had once been part of.

The parents and friends who had filled her past with despair.

And--the 'abnormal' humans who should have been annihilated by the Mask Makers.

Hearing their prayers over her cell phone could have been nothing but a hallucination.

This was what she believed as she clutched her phone, but the LCD screen clearly showed that she had received a phone call from an unknown number.

The proof that the call just now was not imagined only served to make Illness panic even more.

'What do I do?'

No. I. I don't want to go back there.

That fairy tale is over.

So it shouldn't happen again.'

Illness trembled as she mentally shook her head.

'No. I don't want to be abandoned.

If they kick me out, I won't be able to survive.

No. It's okay. That's okay, for now. I'm scared of dying, but I'm fine for now.

But... But...'

"...don't want to."

"? Pardon me?"

Realizing that the girl was mumbling something, Life stopped mid-lecture and listened to what she had to say.

"I... I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back!"

"..."

"So please... Please. So, I'm asking you. Don't leave me. Please don't abandon me. I'll be a Mask Maker forever! I'll keep being Illness forever!"

The girl declared with tears in her eyes, as if driven by some mental trauma.

Although Life didn't have the authority to decide such things, Illness as she was would have said the same thing to anyone, whether it was the president of the Mask Makers or one of the team's flunkies.

Life sighed loudly, looking at the pleading Illness, and answered in an unchangingly calm tone.

"First, suit up in your room and hurry to the bridge. You will be given your orders there. I will be going to search for the explosives."

"...Explosives?"

Illness asked curiously. Life sighed even loudly--

"It seems that someone unaffiliated with the Mask Makers has set up a massive quantity of explosives on this ship."

He then pressed his hand to his shoulders, covered by his ragged suit, and mumbled wearily--

"I almost got caught in the blast a little earlier."

<=>

Entrance bridge.

"What's going on...? Damn it."

The Mask Makers who had taken over the bridge anxiously looked at one another. Of course, given the fact that they were all wearing masks, it was impossible to see one another's reactions.

In some ways, the reports from Aging on *Exit* were even more shocking than the unexpected events occurring here.

"What do you mean, 'Annihilated'...? Zombies and Jason...? The hell's going on...?!"

Fear began spreading among the crew members held hostage as they watched the Mask Maker grind his teeth.

Although it was true that there was some trouble here, they were only up against a lone gunman. And even though the Mask Makers were concerned about the explosives, they believed it was probably Life accidentally setting off a grenade or something of the sort.

The Mask Maker tried to shrug off this worry, but he suddenly realized that someone was contacting him through the radio at his belt.

"Yeah, it's me."

['Me' who? Ain't it polite to introduce yourself to someone you never met before?]

"...? What? Who is this bastard?"

[Hm... That's a pretty shitty question. Should I just spill it? Actually, I just borrowed this radio from one of your unconscious little buddies.]

At the very least, this man didn't seem to be an ally.

A vulgar laugh echoed from the radio. Anxiety spread through the Mask Makers.

[Ah well, just call me 'Demolisher'. And who am I...? Well, did ya like that little present I sent to the restaurant a while back?]

"...A 'present'?"

[See, rigging up a truck into a remote-controlled, exploding toy was pretty hellish, ya know? Gyahahahaha!]

This brought back a certain memory.

They had failed a mission right before they boarded the ship.

It was a massacre that took place during their mission to get rid of the head of a South American drug cartel.

It was a loathsome incident in which they lost Death and other teammates to an unknown gunman. The explosives-rigged truck that struck the restaurant immediately afterwards had killed many more of their allies.

"You little bastard... you're with that gunman, aren't you?"

[Sad to say, *he* doesn't think so. I was so lonely I thought I might join up with you bastards! So I got ya a little something!]

"Like what...?"

[Well, ya know! That little lightshow with the lifeboats just now! See? I was actually pretty moved! And what's a Demolisher without a bit of an itchy trigger finger?]

Although the Mask Makers wondered what the Demolisher was getting at, they stayed quiet and listened to what he had to say.

[So I had a little thought! Why not just blow up this whole fucking ship?]

"...What?"

The Mask Maker replied, astonished--he was almost under the impression that he was talking to a complete idiot.

"What are you babbling about? *We're* the ones who have the ship--"

The man could not finish his sentence, however.

The front deck was visible from the bridge windows. The deck, which was currently deserted, suddenly gave off a brilliant flash of light as it exploded.

"No...!"

The roar of the explosion swept outwards across the sea.

The bridge's windows shook in their frames, showcasing the sheer force behind the explosion.

"You little bastard... What the hell was that all about?!"

Although the blast was not nearly strong enough to stop the ship, the damage it caused made it very clear just how powerful it was.

The Mask Makers held their breaths, and the crew members looked out at the smoke-filled deck in confusion.

"Hey... You. Don't tell you went all over the ship--"

[Bingo.]

The Demolisher answered the Mask Maker's enraged question.

[Guess I set a hundred or so around the ship. Threw 'em around at random, and they're all powered somewhere on a scale of one to a hundred. Some of 'em could probably take down the whole ship if I wanted.]

"You crazy son of a bitch...!"

['Course, *you're* the ones who're gonna blow up those things from now on.]

"What?" the Mask Maker frowned.

The Demolisher replied in an ecstatic voice.

[Couldn't have done it without ya bastards and that crazy lightshow you pulled! 'Cause from now on, anything that happens on this rig is gonna be *your* fault! Oh, right! Ya did something to the vents, right? Shit, I found those little bugs of yours when I went to go set up my gear! Sad, but I'll let you off the hook on that one.]

"...You bastard..."

[Dunno what you peeps are planning, but I'm a big fan, y'know? I think we'd make friends pretty easily! Whaddaya think? Like it or not, we're holding each other's lifelines. 'Course, *you're* the ones who're gonna keep picking the Joker! Gyahahaha!]

One of the Mask Makers listening to this man had a thought--

'This guy is serious.

He's not like the gunman.

This bastard... he's actually enjoying the situation.'

This self-proclaimed 'Demolisher' would set off everything at once if he needed to.

He might even set them off without a good reason.

He wasn't like the gunman, who worked for money--this man caused mayhem because he enjoyed it.

It was as if he didn't care about sinking the ship, despite being on board himself.

'And I thought we were the abnormal ones...'

As the Mask Maker went over these self-deprecating thoughts, an even crazier man laughed and spoke.

[Course, I ain't going to interrogate you myself. Have fun with the gunman!]

"..."

Things could not get any worse.

Setting aside the gunman, whose face was known to them, the man calling himself the Demolisher never showed himself. In fact, they had only just found out about his existence.

The Mask Makers realized that the threats they used against the Captain had been turned against them--and simultaneously ground their teeth and let out a 'tch'.

It seemed these sounds were audible to the Demolisher--his voice, sounding even happier than before, echoed from the radio.

[You know what they say about needing friends to go on trips with you, right? If you don't wanna end up being friends with me on that road down, let's all calm down. Don't lose your minds, now!

Hope you have a fun cruise! Bon fucking voyage!]

<=>

Aboard *Exit*.

The organization called SAMPLE was less of a religious organization, and more of a malignant virus.

There are many theories as to the origins of this group, one of which claim that it **occurred** in different places right in the midst of the Witch Hunts in Europe.

Of course, the name 'SAMPLE' had only been coined in recent years. Before, different names had been given to them and forgotten.

They were born from branches that would split to create even more branches from themselves.

There may be in operation today other organizations with different names, but of the same origins.

As they did not have a large-scale network of communication for their faith, they were easily comparable to viruses that had identical origins, but had mutated differently.

Socially they were a dangerous cult, but they were not a single, united organization--they were like grains of sand scattered across the world.

Although it was not known if there was some other connection between the branches, these groups had differing practises and doctrines depending on the locations of their existence.

However, they shared several doctrines across all branches.

'God does not exist.'

This was the foundation of their faith.

There was no god, and there was no higher power, no such thing as fate. Only coincidence determined one's destiny.

There was nothing that awaited them after death. Saints and devils alike would die to equally face oblivion.

The above beliefs were shared by many sane, normal people and groups as well, but the *following* doctrine was the reason these people were treated as a cult by the outside world.

'God does not exist. Therefore, we must make, construct, and create a god.'

What they wanted was absolute peace of mind, or a foundation upon which to place their beliefs.

Even those who do not claim any faith find their own moralities and guiding philosophies in communities like families, homes, or countries.

The big difference was that this group actively tried to build a foundation for themselves.

'Pain is the foundation upon which people build their humanity.'

The origin of this conclusion was not recorded in any of their doctrines.

In any event, they wanted a replacement for a god--something that would take on all their pain in their stead.

This group had long researched drugs that would eliminate pain and suffering from within themselves and give them happiness. For centuries, they tried all sorts of methods--herbal, animal, mineral, gaseous, and even physical means.

And in order to retain their humanity even after getting rid of their suffering, they prepared a god.

If they were to get rid of the pain given unto them, the pain had to go *somewhere*. Even if everyone's suffering was to be lessened, there would always be individual differences--and these differences would turn into heartache that could eventually cast a shadow of anxiety over the entire group.

And this was why these people who denied god needed a god.

Their ever-thickening book of doctrines said this:

'In order to eliminate heartaches, one must create a god within oneself to whom one must pray and give thanks.'

In other words, this was for their own happiness.

What they wanted to achieve their joy was a very human sacrificial lamb.

'A suffering substitute who will take on absolute unhappiness and pain.'

This was the sacrifice they desired--

Who was, at the same time, the god to whom they prayed.

Those who were the 'sacrificial god' had to be immersed in pain from the moment of birth.

They had to live in suffering.

There were differing opinions as to whether a child in an undeveloped country starving to death without even knowing about hope would go through more pain than their sacrificial god.

However, sustaining their lives did not bring hope of any sort to the sacrificial god.

Anything was permitted as long as they survived.

And as if to dash any of their hopes, they were all fated to be killed on the year they turned ten.

Ten years of nothing but suffering.

The children were given prayers--not of hatred, but of thanks and exaltation.

They would never be taught the concept of suicide, and even if they found out, they were tools who would not be allowed to take their own lives.

The injuries were usually focused on the torso or internal organs, and the arms and legs would mostly be left undamaged.

The reason the wounds had to be focused out of sight was because the believers had to be shown that the one who was receiving pain was just like one of them--someone you could find anywhere on the street.

Children no different than any of their peers would be subjected to incomparable suffering.

It was like pitting a snail in a close race between lions and tigers. They would show someone overwhelmingly inferior to themselves in order to please the average person.

In some ways, it was similar to caste systems used by some governments and religions, but this group's actions had no basis in politics or a 'will of god'.

Because the one on the deepest level of pain *was* their god.

"And in this way, the pursuit of fulfilling human desire is our happiness."

It was a little earlier--just before the Rookie had found himself being chased.

The bridge had turned into a nightmarish hell.

The pristine white floors had been dyed red and black by oxidized blood, and lying in this sea of blood were the corpses of masked men and the crew members who were at the bridge.

And in the midst of this tangle of blood and cadavers--

One man continued his calm explanation about themselves.

He wore a black and red labcoat, which was neatly camouflaged in the surroundings.

And the man wearing this labcoat--Bride--smiled a heavenly smile and continued to explain to the man standing before him.

"Why is the world full of conflict? Why does everyone--no matter their age or gender--pick out the weak and abuse them? Why is there discrimination in the world? Why do these things happen, even though the ethics lessons of schools and many religions forbid them?"

"..."

The man Bride spoke to was wearing a mask.

He was the only Mask Maker in this room still breathing. Blood dripped from his limp, injured arms.

"The reason is simple. It is because the act of looking down on others is infinitely pleasurable to humans. People deny this, but if it were so trivial a matter, it wouldn't still happen despite the fact that no one tells them to do so."

"..."

"We do not deny this natural instinct. This is because it is our mission and way to happiness to leave ourselves to our desires."

"So you don't do anything, but want some security anyway? Sounds just about perfect for a pig sty of a church." the surviving Mask Maker said sarcastically as he spat, desperately trying to ignore the pain in his arms.

However, Bride countered the insult with a laugh.

"As long as the pigs in that sty are happy, fattened creatures who will never be butchered, that is fine with us. I hope the day that someone wishes to eat them never comes."

"...If you were running the world, humanity would be finished."

"Quite right. People who pursue nothing but pleasure, forgetting hard work and pain, would eventually forget how to survive, and would die off."

Although it sounded almost like Bride was denying his own faith with a smile, he suddenly took a powerful step forward and took off his glasses.

"Humanity will be destroyed... and where is the problem in that?"

"..."

"Do you recall? We do not believe in gods, Nirvana, heaven, or hell. Nor do we have ethics systems like those grown in countries or families. Please remember that this is the basic principle upon which we operate."

Clop.

Bride took another step and situated himself right next to the Mask Maker.

"If they still desire to leave behind descendants, we will not deny them their pleasure. However, if the desire does not exist, there would be no point in forcibly continuing on the human race. Of course, there are people who wish to leave behind a remnant of their existence--so I honestly can't say what will happen later."

Clop.

He took another step.

Having gone behind the man's back, Bride mumbled as if talking to himself.

"We do not deny a person's pursuit of pleasure. The only exception is our sacrificial god."

Clop.

Clop.

Splack.

Having stepped into a puddle of blood, Bride finally looked around.

It was quiet.

The sky outside the window was dark. The room was full of blood illuminated by the fluorescent light.

Taking pleasure in the sound of silence piercing his ears, Bride looked around at the silent believers standing around the room.

The believers were holding the firearms that had only recently been plucked from the hands of the Mask Makers--and all of them were pointed towards the surviving Mask Maker.

Though they had completely silenced their own presence, they all wore on their faces smiles of unbridled joy.

"Creepy bastards..."

"Now, we'd be thankful if you could tell us who your leader is, and what you are here to do."

"...You think I'd fess up that easily?"

Although the Mask Maker was considering taking the man before him hostage, he could not find any weakness or blind spot in Bride's actions--even though all he was doing was talking.

He was truly an enigmatic existence.

All Bride did was speak as he walked languidly, but the Mask Maker felt as if there was a blade pointed at himself from above. Despite his fear, however, he began to mentally prepare false information for when he was interrogated or tortured--

"That's right! These days, we've been using some new methods to create pain--those that won't leave marks, even on the torso!"

"...?"

"You see, the likes of electric shocks are only the beginning. They say that putting a stun gun directly above your kidneys will evenly distribute the pain across your entire body."

Bride mumbled calmly, sighed, and again stepped in front of the Mask Maker's face.

"Normally, it would be most effective to give you a dose of screaming through a pair of headphones, but as we are a bit strapped for time, I will have to **give unto you** a more direct sort of suffering."

"Do your worst, you son of a bitch."

Bride completely ignored the insult and received a briefcase from another believer. He took out a syringe from the briefcase.

"Please, rejoice. It may only be for a short while, but you are going to become the object of our faith. And please, try to give us as great a scream as you can. We're not sadists, but... well, let's put it this way. We all smile because 'Oh, I'm so glad that's not me over there!'"

"You sick bastards..."

The moment the Mask Maker mumbled--

The syringe in Bride's hand made its way into his neck.

"Gah."

There was a soft scream.

As Bride had ignored the placement of blood vessels, some of the liquid in the syringe had entered his hypodermic tissue.

For a moment, the surviving Mask Maker was sure that his neck had exploded.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

He screamed as if there was an electric current running through him, writhing and thrashing on the floor hard enough to break his spine, looking like a shrimp caught in a fishing net.

In reality, nothing was happening to him.

There was merely a syringe mark on his neck. No explosion, and no noticeable spilling of blood.

Pain.

Pain.

Pain.

It was an oxymoronic state in which this overwhelming, momentary pain **continued on**.

The shock of ripping apart a non-existent wound with a boxcutter tore at his entire body, and the excruciating pain and the screaming of his cells began to paint over his existence.

Agony.

Agony.

Agony.

A powerful throbbing took over his cranial fluid.

Creaking

Throbbing

Searing

Crushing

Burning

Aching

Stinging

Scorching

Painful

Agonizing

One expression of pain called upon another, but they soon grew fainter and disappeared.

Having run out of ways to express his agony, the man's brain began to resort to creating imagery to adequately describe his suffering.

Countless insects boiled out from the pores of his skin and excreted pure magma, which then turned his skin to charcoal.

"-----!! -----!!!!"

The man, lost in the illusion of his own flesh rotting and burning, thrashed on the bloody floor with silent screams.

And Bride, watching this sight, could not hide his ecstasy.

"Ah, I'm very thankful that *I* am not the one going through this pain. I offer you my gratitude."

On his face was an all-forgiving smile, and honest eyes full of appreciation.

The other believers, with their guns still aimed at the Mask Maker, also had peaceful smiles on their faces as they silently prayed from their hearts in thanks to the writhing man.

It was an eerie sight.

But for these people, it was completely normal.

The man rolling on the floor desperately clung onto his sanity as he started to speak.

"AAAAAHHH! GAAAAAAHHHHHHHH! Bastard...! What the hell...!"

"Oh, please don't worry. This isn't a poison or a drug."

Bride answered softly, looking at the syringe--it had not yet been emptied.

"This is just... saline solution."

"Uuuuugggghhhhwhaaaaat..."

"It's three percent sodium. It's more concentrated than physiological saline, but it's still a saline solution. Medical tests on pain have set two percent as the limit, but humans really are interesting, aren't they? Their own bodies contain of water and salt, yet an injection of slightly more concentrated saline solution into the flesh makes their brains writhe in pain."

Bride mumbled calmly, like a teacher explaining something to a student.

"Since my lesson's finished, let's move on to the question-and-answer session. Of course, *I* will be the one asking all the questions."

"--!! AAAAAHHHH!"

The Mask Maker could not stop screaming. Bride calmly began his questioning.

"All you have to tell us is this... what is your mission here, and who is your leader?"

"Oho, I see. This boy, is it? And it doesn't seem like you're lying."

Bride narrowed his eyes, looking at the informative pamphlet for passengers that was lying on a shelf.

The photograph on the page was that of a boy magician with eye-catching, nearly transparent blond hair.

"But to think that there would be others who are also after the immortals..."

Bride quietly closed his eyes, as the Mask Maker continued to thrash before him.

"Does Viralesque on *Entrance* even know of any of this...? Although the only target on *Entrance* is Czeslaw Meyer... perhaps it was rash of us to send Viralesque alone."

Bride drew a slow breath, stepped forward, and looked down at the man whose eyes had started rolling into the back of his head.

The multiple syringe wounds on his neck were testament to the immeasurable agony his body must have been experiencing.

"Even though you are a non-believer, I pray your death will be as painless as possible."

Bride slowly raised one foot--

And stomped down on the man's neck like a pile driver.

Crack.

There was a sound like something being dislocated, and the thrashing man's movements instantly ceased.

Bride, possessed of the same superhuman strength as the other believers, had little problem in breaking the man's spine and his blood vessels.

He then drew a symbol over his chest that wasn't a crucifix--and expressed his gratitude to the man who was no longer in pain.

"Although he was a nonbeliever, he had momentarily become our god."

Bride began to pontificate towards the believers, arms wide and voice trembling with emotion.

"Thank you. Let us fear the pain that has not come upon us. Let us thank the god who has taken it all upon himself!"

Tears fell from his eyes.

Bride actually began crying, like a holy man who had just been witness to a miracle.

And the other believers began crying as well, as if the tears were contagious--

But they were all smiling through their sobs.

Their faces spoke of great joy.

They continued to shed tears, with the smiles of a family gathering together for the holidays.

Dripping down from their eyes were tears--a 0.9 percent saline solution.

<=>

Thanks to the forcible extraction of information from the Mask Maker--not through torture, but by the destruction of his mind--the Rookie had, in a matter of minutes, become a wanted man in this tiny space called *Exit*.

Although he was now supported by his reliable ally, Aging, the fact that they were at a great disadvantage remained unchanged.

This was because they had no idea of the numbers of their enemies, who could even pose as regular passengers if they removed their black and red clothes.

"It feels like the ship's shaking more."

"Dunno why, but looks like we're speeding up."

"Damn it... What are they up to...?"

Aging and the Rookie carefully left the storage area and began running through the halls.

They had searched the storage area for anything that might be of use, but they found nothing but the submachine gun that their attacker was holding. The Rookie tried to have Aging take the submachine gun, but--

"This here's good enough for me. Even you can handle a gun like that, right, boss?" Aging refused to take the gun, as she picked up a wire with a hook attached to it that was used for moving cargo.

The Rookie's eyes turned to dinner plates as he watched her pick up this bundle of wire, which looked to be easily over twenty kilograms. He asked her what she was planning to use it for, but all she did was reply, "All kinds of things. Don't you know? Every lady and gentleman has to carry one of these things around."

The Rookie asked another question as they escaped down the hall.

"...Your personal gear's in your cabin, right?"

"Yeah. I probably won't have anything you can use, though. Wait! Guess it might be pretty entertaining to see our fragile little boss getting swung around by a Gurkha knife."

"..."

The Rookie wanted to tear his hair out at Aging's completely relaxed tone, but at the moment, there was no one more dependable than her.

In any case, all they had to do after getting her weapons was to hole up in a hiding place.

"I feel like I've been asking this for a while now, but... what are those guys up to...?"

"Who knows? I breezed through a bunch of 'em while I was coming to save you, boss. Some of them got back up even after I broke their necks."

"..."

"The last Mask Makers I heard from were screaming, 'It's not just zombies! They've got Jasons and Freddie's with them, too!'. This mean we've got immortals *and* undyings on this ship? Isn't it exciting? Well, boss?"

It was like a depressing nightmare.

However, Aging was not so foolish as to exaggerate in a situation like this.

As the Rookie became even more depressed, realizing the magnitude of his situation, Aging laughed heartily.

"Anyway, I was fighting bare-handed, and I didn't have the time to be facing a bunch of little zombies, so I got over to you as fast as I could."

"Why are you dressed so lightly? You don't even have a jacket over your T-shirt. Did something happen?"

"See, I tried going to that beauty salon, just so try it out. Turns out the lady in the next room was that silver-haired sis--one of our targets."

Aging responded without hesitation. The president frowned.

"...A beauty salon?"

"Yeah. What with that look? Does my skin look so shimmery and soft that you got a hard-on?"

"...As if."

The president averted his eyes and continued to run through the corridor. Aging laughed and caught up to him.

"Gahaha! Don't be so shy! After all, humans in danger always end up following their instincts."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"Oh? Don't forget--I'm the one keeping you alive here, boss!"

Aging's toothy grin was not one of anger, but a smile of someone who was having too much fun teasing the naive boy.

"Well, look what we have here! We've got a few guests, boss!"

There were five or six men standing at the end of the hallway leading to Aging's cabin.

It seemed that they had noticed Aging and Luchino as well--they righted their grips on their guns and prepared to fire.

"A--AAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

The Rookie reflexively broke out into a scream and fired the submachine gun in his hands.

Although his voice was full of fear, his body moved on its own.

He stepped forward with his left foot, put the stock against his right shoulder, and twisted his body halfway.

He wasn't so calm as to be able to properly aim at his targets.

He held the body of the submachine gun against his face, put his weight forward, and pulled the trigger all the way.

He was soon engulfed by a loud noise and recoil, forcing his upper body--and his aim--towards the ceiling.

"Gah..."

He desperately fought the recoil and tried to fix his aim by looking at where his previous shots had landed, but the wave of bullets had already struck the men and women in red and black--several were bleeding.

"...!"

'I killed them.'

The moment he realized this, the boy was struck by nausea far greater than the usual fare.

He didn't have time to prepare himself.

He killed them without even trying to find out who they were.

Whether or not this was something shocking for him, there was no time for him to think. The wave of nausea lapping at his stomach drained his ability to think.

'I killed them.'

I killed them. I ended up murdering them.

No, this time it was in self-defence...'

But the boy didn't even have time to properly justify himself.

This was because the people in red and black, covered in bullet wounds--

Had gotten up as if nothing had happened and were making their way towards him in a squirm, **smiles plastered across their faces.**

"...Huh...?"

Several of them were still lying on the floor.

They had been hit directly by the submachine gun rounds. It wasn't that the bullets passed through their flesh--it was more like tiny bombs had blown up inside their flesh. After a hit to the knees, most people would be rendered unable to stand.

However, these people in red and black held onto one another's sleeves and the like, and got to their feet with smiles on their faces.

They were smiling.

"What... are they...?"

If they really were zombies, there was no way they would be smiling--zombies were emotionless corpses, and that was the definition of their being.

But these people were smiling.

With these smiles on their faces that proved their ability to feel emotions, they slowly got up and slowly began to make their way towards the boy.

The Rookie's heart froze for a moment upon this sight--

He then registered the event before him and began to scold himself.

'What am I doing...?'

'When those guys--my enemies--got up...'

'Instead of getting scared, I was relieved...'

'No!'

The Rookie grit his teeth and once again aimed his submachine gun at the smiling, bloodied people in red and black.

Suddenly, Aging put a hand to her chin and sighed.

"Well, well. That was a pretty good firing stance for an amateur. Don't tell me you practice this stuff in secret?" She mused relaxedly. The Rookie's answer was filled with frustration.

"I learned from Death! Damn... What are those bastards?! Do I have to shoot them in the head--"

As the Rookie prepared to open fire again, Aging took his arm like an eagle snatching up its prey.

"Huh. Just to warn you, boss."

"?!"

"You're gonna have to prepare for a roller coaster ride!"

"...What?"

In a single moment, the Rookie's form was tossed into the air. The boy's tiny frame fell into Aging's arms.

"What are you--"

"Keep your mouth shut or you'll bite your tongue!"

The moment she finished talking, Aging opened her mouth to take in a deep breath. She then launched herself off the floor.

In that single instant, the Rookie fell under the impression that the entire ship had shook.

His body was overwhelmed by a powerful impact, and the scenery before him began to spin on its axis.

The weight disappeared from his body.

Gravity disappeared from his world.

The Rookie was hit by multiple shockwaves as his eyes began watching the world spin around him in fast motion.

And several seconds later, his eyes were finally fixed on a single scene.

Beneath him was a pitch-black abyss, and endlessly shimmering waves reflecting the lights from the ship and the moon.

'..Huh?'

The boy came to a realization before he could even let out a shout.

How had he left that hallway--

It had only taken a few seconds for him and Aging to leap out of the ship and soar over the seas.

"Gahahaha! Having fun, Rookie?"

Aging laughed like she was experiencing the platonic ideal of excitement--and as he remained tightly gripped in her arm, the rookie mumbled to himself.

"...No way."

<=>

At the same time, *Exit's* kitchens.

Although it was a massive ship, it was a closed world floating on the ocean.

The small scuffles that broke out in different parts of the ship had spread across the rest of the vessel like wildfire.

This gigantic kitchen was built to be several times larger than most metropolitan five-star restaurants.

Dozens of chefs had been hard at work on the pork and beef hanging from the ceiling.

Their race against the deadline for tonight's party had changed to anxious confusion as the ship began to succumb to the strange incidents.

At first, they heard nothing but gunshots. But things began getting louder afterwards, and the ship began to tremble--anyone could tell that they were speeding up.



The reactions among the chefs varied--some stopped cooking to check what was going on outside, and others continued working on their dishes. Finally, one of the chefs came back inside and broke the news that a shootout had begun outside--the underlying anxiety then gave way to commotion.

They first tried to contact the bridge, but both the internal lines and the wireless communications were down.

As the horror of the realization began dawning on the chefs, they began to ponder their next course of action--

"Apologies."

A clear representative of the confusion walked right through their door.

"I say this. There seems to be something strange afoot on this ship..."

Saying this was a dark-skinned man wearing a strange mask. He looked around the kitchen.

His ethnic outfit made him appear much more suited to perhaps a stage in a party room rather than a kitchen--he appeared almost eerily unsettling.

"Apologies, but I will borrow this."

The masked man had taken in his hand a gigantic butcher knife, which was normally used for slicing meat and bone.

With this thirty-centimetre knife in his grip, he then began walking out of the kitchen as if nothing had happened--

"W-wait!"

The head chef yelled out without meaning to. The others glared at him for this outburst and cowered in the shadows.

Meanwhile, the masked man stopped in his tracks and cocked his head as if he had been put on the spot--

"Hm. I say this. Although I am sorry for using a cooking utensil as a weapon, even for self defence, this is a state of emergency. I need a weapon I am comfortable with."

The voice from behind the mask was heavy with authority, and was completely incongruent with the man's previous action of cocking his head.

"I say this. Should it come to the point where I cannot return this to you, I shall reimburse you. So, hm. F-forgive me."

The man left the kitchen with this brusque apology. The head chef shut his mouth, unable to even get a word in. He only began speaking again once the man had disappeared from the kitchen.

"...Looks like we'll have to change tonight's menu to vegetarian and seafood."

This was an approximation he had made considering what would be happening to this ship.

"I'm just guessing, but I get the feeling we'll be serving a lot of passengers who won't be able to eat any meat for a while."

<=>

A semi-suite cabin.

"...There is something off..."

It had been a few minutes since Denkuro first said these words.

Elmer had turned off his game system, and Denkuro had also switched off the television and the DVD player, focusing on the sounds echoing from outside.

Denkuro had first heard the gunshots not long after Nile had left the room.

Perhaps Nile had already realized that something was wrong by then.

Regretting not asking for details earlier, Denkuro did his best to try and figure out what was going on outside.

"Hm... This one fears for Sylvie's safety. Those sounds could be nothing but gunfire."

"You're right. I'll go get her. 'Course, I bet Nile'd be fine even in the middle of a shootout."

"Master Nile would not die so easily, even discounting his immortality..."

"You know what? I'll go find Nile. You should go get Sylvie, Denkuro." Elmer suggested.

Denkuro was about to reply, but he was cut off.

"You should try showing off your cool side to Sylvie sometimes."

"Wha--!"

Denkuro became flustered as Elmer grinned.

"Haha! What's wrong?"

"Elmer! This is no time for jests--"

Denkuro began protesting, red in the face. However, he was cut off once again--

The television, which he had turned off, suddenly flickered to life, displaying a blue screen.

At the same time, the ship's PA system turned on.

[Nice to meet you, everyone. We are the Mask Makers, and this ship is now under our command.]

<=>

The voice rang out equally across the entirety of the ship, from freight holds to washrooms.

[Currently, this ship is making its way towards *Entrance* at beyond full speed--almost like a rampage. As you may have already guessed, our goal is to connect the entrance and the exit... if you catch our drift.]

Silis came to a realization as she ran through the hallways.

The voice on the PA did not belong to these people called 'Mask Makers'--

"...This is *that bastard's* voice...!"

It was the voice of Bride, the leader of the religion called SAMPLE.

[I'm sure you've already noticed the things that are happening aboard the ship... You see, we are among you. Your neighbour may suddenly turn around, wearing a mask and running towards you with a gun in hand. Please think of it this way--as long as we plan to crash this ship with *Entrance*, we are above caring for one or two lives being lost. Speaking of which, we would like to inform you that the captain has already left this world, and ask for your understanding.]

Nile narrowed his eyes under the mask as he listened to the calm voice on the PA.

The masked man with the meat cleaver sighed and muttered.

"Mask Makers... you say...?"

He then visualized himself--

"I say this. Is it possible that I would be mistaken for one of them?"

Nile fingered his own mask and spat again.

"Well? What do you think?"

He was speaking to the people lying scattered in front of him.

They were all dressed in red and black, each of them were holding firearms. They had been rendered immobile as Nile had taken care to dislocate the joints of their limbs.

The shopping mall had been emptied, perhaps because of a shootout--Nile had been attacked out of the blue by these men.

"In any event, what are you small fries? I did not even have to use my knife." Nile mumbled in a bored tone, looking down at the cleaver.

However, the men--dislocated limbs and all--continued to squirm and smile.

"...Nauseating. ...But then again, I'm sure Elmer might be happy to see people this way."

Nile laughed bitterly as he recalled the Smile Junkie, and focused his attention on the PA announcement.

But--

The smile disappeared from Nile's face the moment he set eyes on the images being shown on the television.

[We would like you to know that we are not here to cause meaningless deaths. We have taken over this ship with a clear purpose--and once our goal has been achieved, we promise to get you onto land safely.]

With this, every single screen on the ship began to display a certain video through an emergency broadcast line.

The images that suddenly replaced the blue screens were a series of photographs that seemed to have been taken from a distance away.

[The ones we are looking for are inhuman creatures in human shells. If you will assist us in the next... fifteen hours? Before we crash into *Entrance*, we will guarantee the safety of this ship.]

Four photographs were being displayed on the screens.

One was a photo of a man wearing a tribal mask.

Another was of a silver-haired beauty.

The third was that of a short-haired Asian man.

Of course, it went without saying that the final photo was of a young man with a sincere smile.

<=>

A semi-suite cabin.

"Master Elmer."

Denkuro frowned and spoke to Elmer, looking at their pictures on the television.

"...Do you believe this is Master Huey's doing?"

Surprisingly enough, Elmer removed the smile from his face to match Denkuro's hardened expression, and took a moment to think before speaking.

"No... I think Huey might make fun of me for relying on my instincts, but I can say this for sure. **This is just a gut feeling, but this isn't Huey's doing.** The name 'Mask Maker' makes it sound like Huey's involved, but... that's not it. This is more like--"

Before Elmer could voice his theory, however, the voice of a man calling himself a 'Mask Maker' once again came over the PA.

[We are wearing masks. Fear your neighbours. Be suspicious of your neighbours. You may not know who is your ally, but we have provided you a milestone. These four people on the pictures are unmistakably your 'enemies'!]

"Hm... I guess it might really be dangerous to just hole up in the cabin. Huh?"

A smile returned to Elmer's face as he picked up a nearby cell phone.

"I guess it might be too much to expect a scenario where the passengers work together to get rid of the terrorists?"

Denkuro had already moved--his ear was glued to the door.

Once he was sure that the hallway outside was deserted, he opened the door and roared in a loud voice.

"Let us be off, Elmer. First, we shall search for Dame Sylvie."

It felt as if razor-sharp blades of wind were swirling around Denkuro.

Elmer delightedly walked into this veritable storm of focus around Denkuro and made his way into the hallway.

"Yeah... I found myself a goal, too, Denkuro."

"..."

"I want to do whatever I can to bring smiles to the people on this ship."

To a stranger, this statement might have sounded like nothing but empty words. However, what Elmer said next served to reconfirm his madness in Denkuro's eyes.

"I want to make them all smile equally--the passengers *and* those people calling themselves 'Mask Makers'."

"..."

Denkuro did not try to pursue this line of thought. Instead, he continued down the hallway and asked Elmer something that had been nagging at him for a little while.

"In any event... It seemed to this one that you have some familiarity with these 'Mask Makers', Master Elmer..."

"Hm? Oh, I guess I never told you."

Elmer's reply was calm, but he bowed his head slightly as if he was embarrassed.

"Well, I dunno if it's the same organization... but both Huey and I were members of a criminal organization called the 'Mask Makers'."

"What...?"

As Denkuro continued running, drawing a sharp breath, Elmer put a hand on his chin and fell into thought.

"Yeah... come to think of it, I never said that I quit. So that wouldn't mean I *was* part of the group..."

I guess it means I'm still a member of the Mask Makers?"

<=>

It was a few minutes earlier.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

It had only been one second since he had realized that he was dozens of metres in midair.

A scream finally escaped his mouth, and the submachine gun in his hand slipped away from his grip.

The lump of metal fell, and was followed by a small splash on the surface of the ocean. But it went without saying that the Rookie did not have the time or strength to look at this sight.

He was hit by the feeling that gravity was working in a different direction, and soon the Rookie realized that he was **sliding** through the air.

Aging had taken the Rookie in one arm, broken out into a powerful sprint, tore through a nearby door, ran straight towards the outside, and when the sea became visible through the window, she hitched the hook of the rope she was carrying to the window.

Then, she took flight.

It was simple.

As she hung from the rope she had taken from the storage area, Aging pulled on it and **kicked off the hull of the ship.**

First, she swung to the stern of the ship--she then used the momentum to instantly propel her run towards the bow.

Aging moved across the hull like a gigantic lizard, or a spider spinning a web, adjusting the length of the rope along the way.

She ran.

Dashed.

Sprinted.

Galloped.

Flew.

If anyone could see her running along the wall at the speed of an Olympic sprinter, they would immediately call her a ninja.

The Rookie could do nothing but feel the force of the wind as he was taken along at Aging's side--

"...Whoa! This looks about right!"

Aging's sudden declaration suddenly alerted him to the fact that there was solid ground beneath his feet again.

"Aaaaahhh... Haaahh..."

The Rookie let out something like a long breath or a weakened scream, realizing that he was still alive.

"Th-this is..."

"No mistake! This is my cabin!"

"?!"

Aging opened the balcony door into her room, still holding the shocked Rookie.

"H-hey! Let me down!" The red-faced Rookie demanded, having finally regained his senses.

"Hm? Oh, sorry 'bout that. You were so light I almost forgot I was carrying you! Gahaha!"

Aging put the Rookie on his feet with a laugh.

In her cabin was a transport container that she used for Mask Maker missions--this proved the fact that she had reached the right place.

"...I don't believe this."

"Hm? No, no, boss! Now, I get you don't want to believe how much danger we're in, but don't chicken out yet! It's only been a few seconds since you made that decision, right?"

Aging lectured the Rookie with a laugh. He put his hands on his head and yelled back.

"Don't be stupid! I just can't believe we got to your cabin so... outrageously!"

"Outrageous, huh? That's stretching it a bit. Did you hit your head? All we did was run across the hull to get here."

"...Sorry. Never mind."

Although the Rookie was still on the verge of tearing out his hair, it was true that they had finally arrived at a temporary shelter.

And the moment he took a seat on the sofa, contemplating his next course of action--

The television flickered on to a blue screen, and the hijacking announcement from the self-proclaimed 'Mask Makers' began.

"..."

The moment the words 'Mask Makers' came up on the PA, the boy's mind went blank.

'It can't be.'

I know I gave permission for a full hijacking depending on the circumstances, but...'

Not only that, the voice on the PA belonged to a stranger--the moment the Rookie realized that a third party was behind the announcement, his blank mind was painted over by despair.

'No...

Who... who is this...?'

And when the photos of the immortals--different from the ones the Mask Makers had prepared--began to show on the screens, confusion began to mix into his despair.

'How...?'

How... Why is there another group... another group going after the immortals...?'

At the end of the announcements, the Rookie was silent.

And as his heart stood still in the aftermath--

The cell phone at Aging's waist began vibrating.

"Hey, it's me."

She took the call without a hint of hesitation, and energetically greeted the caller.

It seemed that she was talking to a Mask Maker on *Entrance*--the Rookie snapped out of his stillness.

"Good to hear! I'm practically going crazy from all the fun I'm having over here!

Yeah, the boss managed to stay alive! Everyone else here is dead!

Just me and the boss left here! Ain't it pretty entertaining?"

He could vaguely hear a frantic voice from the other end.

"Wouldn't be half as fun as this, you rascal. Maybe Death just decided to take everyone along on his way! Gahahahaha!"

He could not tell what kind of a conversation they were carrying on.

But for some reason, he found himself completely calm as he watched Aging talk with a smile, even in the midst of their situation.

I wonder why?

She's laughing, even though so many of our friends are dead. I should be angry with her.'

On one hand, he was astonished at Aging's relaxed laughter--but on the other hand, he found himself denying his own feeling of relief at her relaxed grin.

"Yeah, I'll contact you again. The plan's been totaled, so do what you can over on your side."

Aging hung up. The president quietly got up.

"...How are they holding up?"

"Looks like the gunman who got Death showed up. Apparently they had a fun little shootout."

"!..."

Once again, the boy's heart teetered on the edge of collapse. It was similar to how he felt when he heard that Death had been killed--like the feeling of being betrayed. Not by his own plans, but by the world that he trusted.

If things had at least been going well on this side, he might have been able to calmly come up with a counterattack--but at this point, he was just receiving one shock after another.

He thought for a moment, and all he could say was--

"What kind of a shootout is 'fun'...?"

The way he spoke, it was almost as if the boy was trying desperately to escape this reality.

"Hm? Gahaha! True, true! Only the lowest of the low would enjoy something that destructive. So I guess it'd be normal to be sad in a shootout? Or maybe being normal would be just shooting mechanically as if you don't feel anything?"

"Shut up for a bit..." he mumbled, and went over the situation in his mind--a complaint escaped his lips, so quiet it was as if he was talking to himself.

"...The Mask Maker... has been defiled."

"Hm?"

"Our name's been used by some no-name thugs who're dragging us down to the level of mere terrorists."

"What are you talking about? The stuff they talked about on the PA's exactly what we've been planning from the start, depending on how things went. And *Entrance* is actually in that situation, y'know?"

Aging laughed, dumbfounded. But the boy shook his head.

"No. That's not it. ...I've been prepared to have our organization fall to the lowest from the very beginning. The Mask Makers have never shied away from death."

"So what's the matter, then?"

"But when we fall, I... I have to strike us down myself! I can't let these no-name crazies use the Mask Maker name! I can't stand it!"

"Oh. I get it. Can't say I don't agree."

For some reason, Aging was being surprisingly understanding. But the Rookie glared at her and spoke.

"You 'can't say you don't agree'? What do you know? You're just a belligerent fighter--how would you know?! My fate was decided from the moment I was born--what do *you* know about the formless vow of the Mask Maker?!"

The moment he shouted this, the Rookie immediately fell into a deep pit of self-loathing.

He knew the truth--the one who really wanted to deny and reject the Mask Makers was *himself*. And yet he found himself directing this anger at Aging--his rescuer and his last pillar of support.

'I'm the worst... I'm such an idiot! What... what am I trying to do...?'

And as if she was looking straight through him--

"Hm. If you put it that way--"

Aging dropped her smile and spoke with a serious expression.

'Please don't say anything. I know what you want to say.'

"Can *you* explain for yourself what you know about the Mask Makers?"

'I know. I know. I know I don't know anything about it.'

'I don't know what the Mask Makers mean to me, or what I want to do with the Mask Makers.'

He desperately swallowed his tears and prepared to launch a "shut up" at Aging, but--

She was smiling again.

It looked sort of like she was forgiving him for everything, but it also looked as if she had no cares in the world--and with this smile, Aging continued.

"Seriously... Don't be so stubborn! Don't reject yourself when you don't even know what you want to do in the first place!"

It was the smile of a dirt-covered child coming home after a day in the playground.

Yet at the same time, it was also the smile of an astonished yet loving mother welcoming the child home.

And with this look, Aging ruffled the Rookie's hair.

"Even if you don't know about yourself, things are gonna work out! First thing you have to do is find a way! Either way, that's all you really need to enjoy life! Gahahaha!"

"...What's that supposed to mean?"

The Rookie shook his head, not understanding Aging's words. He had literally been unable to comprehend what she had said.

However, he felt a sense of warm strength from her comment. The Rookie erased his grievances from his mind.

"...I'm sorry, Aging. First, let's try and decide on our next course of action."

The Rookie shook his head in deference and went over the situation in his mind again.

"If only... If only I had a weapon..."

He was momentarily overcome by nausea as he recalled shooting the people in red and black, but the rookie held it back and looked into the case that had been sitting in Aging's cabin.

Inside the open container was a metre-long Gurkha knife and an outlandishly customized Minigun.

It went without saying that neither of them looked like a viable option for him.

As the Rookie searched the nooks and crannies of the case, he spotted a glint in the corner.

"Oh, almost forgot."

Aging clapped her hands, reached one long arm into the case, and pulled out a shining object.

"This is..."

"Your favourite, right, boss? I had a feeling we might need it."

And with that, she handed to the boy an ornate sheath containing a single stiletto.

Taking the weapon into his hands, the boy quietly reaffirmed his resolution.

And as he unsheathed the ancestral weapon, he made his vow.

'That's right. I can't die here.

I can't let the line of Mask Makers end.

No matter how far we fall, no matter how much we're dragged through the mud and beaten...

Not until I get vengeance on my ancestor--my ancestor's enemy... Huey Laforet.'

The boy quietly sheathed the stiletto again, eyes filled with renewed determination--

"Let's go, Aging.

Even if I have to use you and everyone else as human shields, I will live on--and I will keep the Mask Maker alive."

<=>

A certain suite room on *Entrance*.

'What do I do?'

Bobby buried himself in an unbelievably comfy sofa and clasped his hands together in front of The Gear's mask.

He had decided to stay in the suit and make up an excuse--"I'm Charon's stuntman".

"Why would a stuntman have his own stuntman?"

He was found out in the blink of an eye.

However, Carnea vouched for him, saying, "He saved me when I was being chased by those masked people!"--adding this to the fact that they didn't have the time for interrogations--

"Let's go to my cabin first. It's dangerous here."

As a result, Bobby had been dragged all the way here.

'Dammit! I came here to get back at those Martillo bastards!

And now what am I doing?! The Martillo goon's helping me!

Firo, Ennis, and Angelo were going over their next plan of action, ignoring the boy in the corner of the room. Carnea seemed to have been completely worn out--she passed out as soon as they stepped into the cabin, and was now lying on the bed.

'I guess it's still a good thing they forgot to try and get more info out of me.'

"...yeah...I'm trying to say is... ...find Czes first..."

The moment Bobby heard this, he realized that 'Czes' was the boy they assumed was Firo's brother-- and he remembered something very important.

I completely forgot...

Are the others safe?'

<=>

Ship corridors.

"We had to take a detour, but my cabin's just up ahead." said Czes, as he carefully made his way forward.

Following behind him were Tall, Troy, and Humpty.

"Damn. Bobby better be all right."

"He has always been the unlucky one, but I'm sure he will be fine. Right now, we should be worried more about the entire ship."

"Oh, I'm hungry."

As a distinctive trio of voices chatted behind him, Czes put up his guard.

He had been leading them straight towards Firo's cabin, when a group of masked people armed with guns passed through the hall--it was not long afterwards that the lifeboats exploded.

This was why he had tried to pick out the more deserted hallways to take on the way to Firo's cabin, but there was still no guarantee that a detour would keep them safe.

'Damn. I can't believe that bad feeling of mine actually came true.'

Czes mumbled, grinding his teeth.

'I really have the worst luck with traveling.'

He continued on, recalling the tragedy on the Advenna Avis and the terror on the Flying Pussyfoot--

Clang.

There was a sound like something opening, and a figure jumped down from the ventilation shaft on the ceiling.

"...Huh?"

"..."

The figure in front of Czes was dressed in black.

The man, who was completely covered by his black combat suit, had just jumped out of the ventilation shaft like it was nothing.

The man glanced over at Czes, but the goggles over his face and the mask made it impossible to tell what kind of a man he was.

Considering his appearance, of course, he was obviously one of the terrorists.

"..."

The man remained silent, but there was something about him that suggested he had been faced with a sudden, unexpected situation.

He looked at the children in silence for a while--

And pulled the trigger of his large-caliber gun without hesitation.

Ratatatat. The dry sound of gunfire rocked the hallways, and bullets smashed into the floor next to Czes and the others.

"..."

"AAAAAAACCCCKKKK!"

The stowaways screamed and fled.

Czes wondered what to do for a moment, and came to the conclusion that this was a warning shot-- he then let out a scream and followed the other boys down the hall.

'I guess even they wouldn't kill children unprovoked.' Czes concluded, and ran down the stairs with a grin.

'I'm glad that guy was so easy.'

But come to think of it, he... it looked like he was really surprised for a minute there...'

<=>

Entrance bridge.

[My goodness, do you know how shocked I was to run into children running around the halls? Did our threats even *have* any effect?]

As Life's voice crackled out of the radio, one of the Mask Makers shouted back anxiously.

"Shut up! We don't have time for that right now, so ignore the brats!"

[What might be the matter? I had heard that there was some trouble on the other ship.]

"Shit... I checked the ship's GPS... *Exit* is coming straight for us ridiculously fast... What is this-- it's way past 50 kilometres an hour!"

As the man mumbled, breaking out into cold sweat, he ground his teeth and twisted his lips into a troubled grin.

"...Damn, never thought we'd be the ones being rammed into, instead of the other way around."

The captain, who was still bound, spoke up anxiously.

"This ship's engines are specially built. If you ignore the passengers' comfort, it can reach speeds higher than any other cruise ship in the world. ...I don't know what's going on, but if you want to avoid a collision, you should give up now and contact and surrender to the coast guard."

"...You're being so logical it's annoying, dammit."

As the Mask Maker wavered between being entertained and being anxious, the door opened and Illness came in, wearing her combat suit.

"..."

She was wearing goggles, and her frail-looking body was completely covered by the suit. Normally she would be letting out an endless tirade of complaints, but Illness was being strangely tight-lipped.

"What, you're finally here, Illness?"

"...What do you want me to do?"

She sounded calm. The Mask Makers looked at one another, floored by this surprisingly professional attitude, but they let out a quick order, as they did not have the time to delve further.

"It's simple. Easier than making a trained chimpanzee dance."

It was a short enough order for the Mask Makers.

"...Do something about the gunman. Doesn't matter what you do. Kill him, seduce him, or whatever. Hopefully the guy's into jailbait. Anyway, we've got something bigger to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

Illness cocked her head, still out of the loop. The Mask Makers quietly grit their teeth and gave her an update.

"It looks like... the boss is in trouble."

"Oh... Luchino?"

"Course, looks like employees like us aren't any safer than he is."

The Mask Maker suddenly seemed to recall something. He slowly turned to look at the bound captain.

"That's why we have to meet up with the boss ASAP... and you said something pretty interesting a while back, right?"

You said, if we ignore passenger comfort... we can go even faster?"

<=>

Ship corridors.

"...Huh?"

Firo was out in the hallways in search of Czes, when he suddenly felt something strange and froze in place.

"It feels like the trembling's gotten stronger..."

Firo focused, and realized that the ship seemed to be going faster than before--no, it was still speeding up.

"...Hey, what the hell's going on here?"

Even amidst this uncertainty, however, Firo tightened his fists and ran, prioritizing Czes's safety first.

<=>

Somewhere in the ship's storage area.

Even in the despairing atmosphere created by the hail of gunfire and the exploding lifeboats, the boy retained a stoic face.

Charon Walken.

The young stuntman's heart was always nothing but calm, but he knew very well just how much danger this ship was in.

Everything had been fine up until he managed to hide the boy and girl who were being chased by a strange group of people. But the director and the crew came in right afterwards and left, taking the boy in the costume and the girl in the shark.

But if Charon were to just step in and switch costumes on stage, the boy and the girl would be found and captured by these strange people.

If that was the case, it would be best for him to explain everything to Claudia and John after the event was over.

This was what the boy concluded as he decided to watch how things were going from the shadows--

When the shootout suddenly began.

Then there were explosions.

Thanks to these incidents, the entire ship had now become the stage for what looked like an unending show.

"...Claudia."

He first decided that his sister would be safe, as she had been evacuated immediately. He also confirmed that the boy and the girl had been taken along by Firo and the others.

Charon stayed put, watching the events unfold before him--

And once he learned from the announcement that the lifeboats had been destroyed, he took a silent step forward to find his sister.

He took action just as he would in a film shoot, walking into a battlefield haunted by death.

Of course, this first step was really all in a day's work for the boy who always risked his life as a stuntman.

<=>

Entrance, movie theatres.

The theatre happened to be emptying itself of patrons.

However, there was no sign that the next movie would begin anytime soon.

The director, John Drox, looked around at Claudia and the crew members gathered around him and practically began dancing in excitement.

"Now, then! We managed to take cover here, but what in the world is going on out there? In any case, there's nothing more important than the shoot! Keep the camera rolling, men! Keep your brains alert! Only me and the camera department need to do any rehearsing, so focus on keeping yourself alive enough to get home, you hear?!"

(Huh? Does that mean I'm supposed to keep shooting until I die?)

The cameraman shook his head in despair, but he did not complain. He was acting out of the resolution that not even his voice should be burned into the film, but in this sense he was almost on John's level of strangeness.

"Hm... It's not the safest thing to say, but I just can't hold back this excitement, even in the midst of terror! Ideally, the seajacking will be resolved with no casualties, and we will have it all on camera...! Is what I see playing out, but what do you think, Claudia?"

The redheaded girl, who was suddenly put on the spot, shook her head in astonishment and sighed.

"You're terrible, John. How could you still obsess over film at a time like this?"

She then stood up straight and smiled.

"But I like your idea! Especially that part about there being no casualties!"

As Claudia gave a strong smile, unaffected by the chaos surrounding them, the director gave her a thumbs-up and replied, "Perfect!"

'Oh, it's all over for us.'

The other crew members all sighed, and decided to mull over how they would get out of this situation alive.

However, there was nothing anyone could do at this point--they didn't know who these armed people were, or how many were on their side--an even louder sigh escaped their lips--

The doors opened and a group of people entered the theatre.

"Excuse me, we'd like to take cover here--oh!"

The boy at the head of the group looked around at the people in the theatre. He then caught sight of the video camera and froze on the spot.

"Uh, e-excuse--"

As the boy began to turn around and head for the door--

"Don't run away!"

The redheaded girl barreled towards him and landed a flying cross chop on his head.

"Gah!"

The young actress climbed over Czes, who was knocked to the floor, and chastised him.

"Honestly, Czes! Isn't it rude to run away as soon as you see someone's face? Anyway, I'm so glad we have someone as experienced as you are! So..."

As the boy's expression turned into despair, the redhead grinned energetically and spoke.

"Let's work together and figure out a way to **take control** of this ship!"

<=>

Several hours later, *Exit* bridge.

"That's peculiar."

The gorilla-man, the first mate, and the other crew members in charge of the bridge noticed a change on the ship's radar.

Exit was currently moving at high speeds, all according to **their** schedule.

The problem was, however, the fact that *Entrance*'s position was much closer to them than was originally planned.

"Don't tell me... *they're* speeding up too."

If things kept going this way, the collision would not happen tomorrow evening, but around noon.

Realizing this, the gorilla-man sent a transmission to the woman in charge of the communications office.

"It's me... it looks like we'll be arriving sooner than expected. Have our vessel depart six hours earlier to match the new schedule. And..."

He frowned slightly before giving the next order.

"...Have them bring in as much medial supplies as possible."

The man's eyes were fixed on the monitors displaying videos from the ship's security cameras.

"It looks like we're not the only monsters on this ship."

<=>

Exit, the freight hold.

Aging and the Rookie had made their way to a freight hold that was filled with cargo unrelated to any events.

The Rookie took cover in the shadows of the cargo as he surveyed the area, and Aging quietly focused on the sounds echoing through the ship to look for an opening for a counterattack.

Aging suddenly broke her silence as her eyes widened and her lips twisted into an entertained grin.

"Oh? This is..."

"What is is, Aging?"

"If I'm getting this right, it sounds like there's someone who can match these red-and-black bastards in a fight."

<=>

Exit, movie theatres.

In contrast to the theatres on *Entrance*, which had been turned into a shelter of sorts, the theatres of *Exit* had turned into a battlefield.

Dancing on the stage in battle were a group of people in red and black, and a masked man.

The believers of SAMPLE could tell from the fact that he wore a different mask that the man was not a Mask Maker.

As the gigantic cleaver in the man's hand glinted in the light, the man who was pointing his gun at the masked man found his own wrist flying into the air.

Blood splashed onto the red and black clothing, forming invisible stains that covered the victim.

Meanwhile, the attacker took a step away from the people, leapt atop the stage in one jump, and shook his head.

"I say this... you will live if you are treated immediately. Immortal as I may be, I will not let you live if you continue to fire at me--hm?"

Nile stopped mid-speech and looked at the man whose wrist he had just severed.

There he saw the man--he had switched the gun to his other hand, and was pointing it towards Nile with a smile.

It was a grin of joy.

"...I see. So it seems you are not a passenger who is here to capture me out of fear for his own safety... And those red and black clothing do not match any current trends I know of."

Nile frowned as he looked at these smiling people, who were strangely reminiscent of Elmer--and felt like spitting on the ground.

"...I say this. Your smiles are nauseating. I will not deny you this, but..."

A hailstorm of bullets were unleashed upon Nile before he could even finish.

Nile smoothly leapt sideways, like a surfer moving along with the waves.

"I will not deny you this, but... I say this again! You are nauseating!"

Nile then threw himself into the bullets.

He leapt towards the centre of the group of people, ignoring the rounds piercing into his flesh--he used his own momentum to charge at them.

Of course, the gigantic cleaver in his hand followed--

<=>

At the same time, at the fountain in the ship's shopping mall.

"It seems you are different from the ones from before... But this one must ask. What possessed you to do this?"

Denkuro spoke quietly, completely surrounded.

Unlike the heavy, overwhelming air of power that Nile exuded, Denkuro let out a much more quiet pressure, one that felt like it rose up from the very ground on which they stood.

And despite Denkuro's question--oddly reminiscent of the calm before a storm--the people surrounding him remained silent.

They could hear the furious sounds of gunfire from the theatre nearby.

'Is it Master Nile, perhaps?'

Denkuro had been searching for Sylvie with Elmer, but they had been separated when they were suddenly attacked by a group of people in red and black.

However, the people currently surrounding him were normal passengers not wearing red and black.

This was easy to see from the fact that these people's faces positively radiated fear, anxiety, and despair.

Soon, voices began flying towards Denkuro from the crowds.

"Sh-shut up! We're going to die just because we happened to be on the same ship as you!"

"W-we know you're sorry, b-but just surrender, okay?"

"I don't know wh-who you are, but if you surrender, we can all live."

The people defended their actions, all with good intentions.

To them, Denkuro and the others were nothing more than wanted men that they had nothing to do with. The announcement had claimed that they were not human, but no one could seriously believe this.

"...You believe that these seajackers will heed their promise?"

"Ugh..."

However, the passengers were kept at bay from attacking Denkuro as a mob was because of this quiet force that Denkuro exuded, which drove them all to fear.

"...Hm. This one understands that you are desperate to protect yourselves and your families. And if this were a lone journey, this one would not hesitate to surrender, but..."

Denkuro fell into deep thought, took a step back, and spoke to the passengers surrounding him

"However, even should you capture this one, things will not turn out so well."

"Wh-what?"

As the passengers looked at one another, Denkuro realized that the gunfire in the theatre had ceased and quietly let out a sigh.

"Should you capture this one, there will be none left to calm this one's ally."

A shadow darted out from the direction in which Denkuro was looking at.

Upon first glance, the figure, covered in red and black and white, seemed to be one of the seajackers. A closer look showed that he had been wearing light-coloured clothing, and that its current colour had been because of the massive amounts of blood coating it.

A masked man covered in blood.

In his hand was a gigantic meat cleaver.

This time, the passengers fell into panic--they screamed and stampeded back into their rooms.

"Master Nile..."

"I say this. I did not lay a hand on any normal passengers. Even I know where my limits are."

"However--"

"...I was somewhat bothered."

Nile swung the cleaver in a wide arc to shake off the blood, and spoke to Denkuro.

"Their expressions... I'm sure you must have also realized, Denkuro."

"...Yes."

"The erasure of pain, and their happiness... and the fact that they still retain their sanity--**it's almost identical to the drugs from that city three hundred years ago.**"

Whether or not he realized the implications behind these words, Denkuero quietly drew breath and spoke the name of a certain alchemist.

"But Master Begg..."

"I know. ...To begin with, that drug was just an inferior copy of one of his discarded creations--one that he forbade from use. But you still think this is mere coincidence? Could this really be Huey's trap?"

"Nay, when it came to that drug, even Master Huey--hm?"

Denkuero's eyes were drawn to a figure walking slowly in their direction.

It was a woman in red and black. Having confirmed her allegiances, Nile kicked off the floor without hesitation.

"So there were more of you left. As long as we are in battle, I will not spare you, even though you are a woman."

"Ah..."

Nile swung the cleaver at the woman before she could speak.

However, the cleaver stopped just short of its mark.

Denkuero had grabbed Nile's arm before he could reach the woman.

"Calm yourself, Master Nile. Fall not to bloodlust."

"..."

"The lady may be dressed like them, but her expression is different."

It was as he had said--unlike the other people in red and black, the woman's face was full of fear, anxiety, and despair.

She soon realized that Nile had made to attack her, and fell to the ground powerlessly.

"Ah... aaaahhhhhh..."

Denkuero stepped between the terrified woman and Nile, and handed her a handkerchief.

"Apologies. It seems this one's friend was momentarily mistaken. Perhaps the lady would be so kind as to explain where she has acquired this attire?"

Meanwhile, Nile pressed down on his mask abashedly--

And seconds later, chopped off his own wrist with the cleaver.

"I say this. Forgive me. I will try and calm myself."

The blood that had cooled as it spilt in mid-air soon made its way back into Nile's body.

Having seen such a terrifying action and the resulting sight, the woman momentarily flinched--

But she soon collected herself and finally spoke.

"Um... Your friend... the silver-haired woman..."

"Hm? You speak of Sylvie? Might this one ask why the lady seeks to find her?"

There was much he had wanted to ask, but the woman soon lost consciousness.

As Denkuero hoisted her up to bring back to the cabin, he clearly recalled what she had said just before passing out.

"They're after... that woman... hurry... they're going after..."

Having heard this, Denkuero thought for a second before biting his lip and carrying the woman back to the cabin, believing that Sylvie would have returned to their room.

<=>

At the same time, a semi-suite cabin.

"I guess it might be safer to go outside after all..."

Sylvie had barely managed to make it back to her cabin. However, the room was deserted. Cell phones did not work, and the ship was filled with enemies.

"...Could this really be Huey's doing...?"

In this state where practically the entire ship was against her, Sylvie was torn between leaving and staying--

"Good evening."

When a sudden voice from behind her sent her thoughts screeching to a halt.

"Who's there?!"

Sylvie hurriedly looked back, and saw a bespectacled young man wearing a red and black labcoat.

"I suppose I should say... it's a pleasure to finally meet you. I am Bride."

"... Is that so... Mr. Bride...? What are you doing in my cabin?"

Sylvie considered that the man was a passenger from a neighbouring cabin here to capture her, but soon changed her mind.

There was something terribly **off** about this man.

"...How did you get into this cabin?"

"Please excuse me. I let myself in during your absence. I have the master key, you see."

Sylvie was eerily reminded of the terror on the Advenna Avis, when Szilard had put his right hand over her head.

The man in front of her reeked of danger, just as Szilard had.

"I'll ask you again. What are you doing here?"

The man's reply was calm and without hesitation.

"Of course, I am here to propose to my bride."

"...What?"

Sylvie froze. She was about to question him, but the man cut her off.

"Let me put it simply... Please, marry me. I have been enamoured with you ever since I saw that photograph. I hold no love for you, but I have been captured by your beauty. Please marry me--and despise me. And curse this world in which you live."

"...What are you talking about?"

Bride's words made no sense to Sylvie. She decided to take it as a joke, and tried to figure out what he was really thinking by playing along.

"...Unfortunately, I have a previous engagement."

However, Bride's reply stopped her dead in her tracks.

"Oh, you speak of **Gretto Avaro**, correct?"

"----?!"

As Sylvie's mind went blank, she lost herself for a moment--and at that very moment, sleeping gas was sprayed in her face.

Sylvie could hear the man's voice as her consciousness faded.

"So sleeping gases and the like are effective, even against immortals."

She soon lost consciousness altogether.

"So the holy book was correct... I'm glad it has been proven right."

<=>

One hour later.

Entrance, storage area.

Charon ran through the ship in literal silence, searching for his sister.

Thanks to learning to walk in stealth from his great-grandmother and training this skill on his own for stunts, Charon was able to move through the ship to find Claudia and the crew almost undetected.

Of course, he could never have imagined that the tree would be hidden in the forest--that the movie star would be taking shelter at the theatre.

Charon looked around his room and the event stage, regretting not getting a cell phone. Eerily enough, however, he found not a trace of anyone--let alone Claudia.

The passengers had probably gone to their own cabins, and the personnel were likely holed up in their own work stations. Charon had no way of knowing how many people could even be behind the seajacking.

As he silently dashed through the storage area for event use, he suddenly detected a human voice from somewhere far away.

At first he thought someone was talking to himself, but he soon realized that the person was talking over the phone.

The boy silenced himself even further as he approached, listening in to the conversation.

And as a result of this action, Charon Walken fell into the greatest danger of anyone aboard *Entrance*.

<=>

The shopping mall in *Entrance*.

As the sky behind the ship's stern began to glow orange, those inside the ship lost their sense of the passage of time. Most of the passengers obediently remained holed up in their own cabins.

A lone shadow walked through the partially-lit shopping mall.

This strange gunman, who was wearing sunglasses even in the dimness, stopped in front of the fountain on the lowest level. He smoothly drew his pistol and aimed to his side.

"Stop it."

As the gunman warned, a shadow to which the gun was pointed at moved.

The girl, who had been meaninglessly hanging from the second floor, cocked her head in wonder.

"...How'd you know I was here?"

"I had a feeling."

The gunman replied nonchalantly. Illness pursed her lips and cocked her head with a look of doubt.

"...But you don't kill women and children, right?"

"That's correct."

"So if I shoot you now, you're going to die, right, Mister?"

The girl with the submachine gun looked at the gunman through her night-vision goggles and snickered.

However, Angelo calmly broke out into a grin.

"Maybe, if I'm unlucky."

"... Hey Mister. Why don't you shoot women and children?"

"When I was young, I used to be a street urchin."

The man's answer was so nonchalant it was almost surprising.

"Those damn villagers said something about 'cleaning up the streets'. They just fired off their machine guns into the alleys, without any mercy for women and children... By the time they got to my little corner of the alley, they had to leave because they were out of ammo. So I lived."

"...Why did those kids have to die?"

"I told you, they were **cleaning up**. To be specific, they were officers that the villagers hired. If I remember right, it was something about 'harming the town's aesthetics'."

The man calmly confessed the details of this incident, which must have been deeply traumatizing to him. Perhaps his heart had become so cold that it was no longer an emotional event to recall, or that he no longer cared for this past--or perhaps it was just so deeply rooted in his heart that he could tell the girl about it with such nonchalance.

"The reason I don't kill women and children... isn't my own little way of revenge, or anything like that. ...It's just my own stubbornness, and my pride as a gunman."

"...Don't you even want to take revenge?"

"I *did* take revenge."

"Uh."

Illness could not hide her surprise. Angelo withdrew the emotions from his voice as he explained.

"Would you believe... Twenty years later, the population of that town would be eradicated--with the exception of the women and children--and wiped off the map? Of course, many of us were thieves and murders, so I can't say it wasn't even... but I forcibly put an end to this cycle of revenge."

"...Don't say that... don't make things so tough..."

The gun in Illness's hand started trembling. Whether or not he was aware of this, Angelo continued speaking without looking at her, with only the pistol still pointed in her direction.

"I have no intention of bragging about my misfortunes. I'm sure you have your own past to contend with. Whether or not you've been through worse than myself is a trivial matter. Some people in this world die of starvation before they even have a drink of water. Others live unfortunate lives even if they have food, shelter, and a family. Happiness and misfortune--neither are ever significantly important, and they aren't reason enough for people to survive through bloodbaths."

"..."

"The only thing that matters right now is the fact that you and I are **here and there**, each holding our weapons."

'He's--right.'

The trembling of her hands stopped. Illness steeled her resolve thanks to Angelo's words and decided to pull the trigger in response, but--

Suddenly, a voice from the shadows stopped her in her tracks.

"Um... Excuse me. You said you didn't kill children, right? I'm a kid, so please don't shoot."

And from out of the darkness--

"Seriously... Claudia must be insane, sending out a kid on a reconnaissance mission. Same with those crew members too. I guess the star really is king in Hollywood."

Out of the darkness came a boy with his hands raised in the air--a boy Illness had met not very long ago.

"C-Czes!"

Illness yelled, catching sight of the boy emerging from the direction of the theatre.

"Oh, watch out! This guy's a really strong gunman--"

"Wait. Your name is... 'Czes'...?"

Czes was taken aback for a moment as the man interrupted Illness, but the words that followed instantly dissipated his anxiety.

"Don't tell me... you're Firo's little brother?"

<=>

Meanwhile, Firo was on his own, running through the ship in search of Czes.

'Where could he have gone? And who was he with yesterday?'

"Huh...?"

Just as Firo was considering returning to his cabin for a lack of leads--

He heard gunfire from not too far away.

'This sound... it's that combat suit guy's machine gun!'

As Firo ran through the halls towards the direction of the sound, he saw a boy **running along the wall** towards himself.

"Ch-Charon?! H-hey! Stop!"

"...Hide."

Charon mumbled, just as he slid past Firo.

It was a strange sight to see someone making his way through the halls by kicking off the handrails and ceilings, but Firo always knew what would follow when Claire did something like this.

'He'd be butchering some machine-gun goon every time--'

Suddenly, there was the sound of gunfire from deeper in the hallway, and Firo found himself being assaulted by bullets.

"Gaaaah?!"

Firo followed Charon and kicked off the ground to dodge... or rather, he was just lucky to not get hit.

"Damn! So it's you!"

Firo stared into the hall, and caught sight of the man in the combat suit, who was holding an assault rifle.

It seemed that Firo had been noticed as well. He prepared to be attacked, but--

Strangely enough, the masked man suddenly turned around and disappeared into the hallway.

"? What was that all about...?"

"...Are you okay?"

Charon asked from behind him. Firo slowly got to his feet.

"Yeah. Why was that guy after you?"

"..."

The boy shrugged. Firo let out a quiet sigh.

"So what were you doing? Where's Claudia?"

"I'm... looking for her."

Just as Firo was about to sigh again, his cell phone went off. From the caller ID--Angelo--it seemed that the network was functional again, at least on the ship.

"Wait a sec. Someone I know. ...Hello? Yeah... Yeah. What? Really?"

After a short conversation, Firo hung up and spoke with relief.

"I know where Claudia is. She's with Czes right now."

At that very moment, Charon's robotically stoic face warmed up very slightly.

"What do you know? Looks like you're pretty happy about finding Claudia, too!"

Firo sighed again as the smile faded from Charon's face.

Charon then mumbled very quietly, still as expressionless as ever.

"...Of course."

Firo broke out into a grin.

<=>

Two hours later.

The amusement park aboard *Exit*.

It was a playground for children that was about as large as most theme parks.

There were meticulously positioned rides all over the place, including an electrically powered go-cart track.

And as the Rookie and Aging made their way through, their sights were focused on a group of children, who were standing frozen at the entrance of the park.

"Why are there kids in a place like..."

As the Rookie tried to approach them, Aging suddenly pulled him back.

"Hold up, boss. Look carefully."

"Huh...?"

After a short moment, the Rookie realized the fact that most of the children were dressed in red and black.

"No..."

Upon closer inspection, he saw the little boy he met at the immigrations gates as he boarded, and even the boy's little sister.

'It... can't be...

But... they're just normal children...'

It seemed that each of them were holding blades and sharp objects, but the Rookie wanted to believe that they were just toys.

"So they finally sent in their kids. Looks like our enemies are running out of people to use."

Aging spoke with just as much delight as ever, even when faced with a situation like this. The Rookie glared at her and quietly took cover behind one of the rides.

Soon after, Aging followed him. She crouched down and asked:

"What now?"

"...About what?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I'm asking if I can kill those kids if they decide to attack us."

"...!"

The Rookie found himself feeling like he'd been punched in the gut.

"Course, real battlefields have child soldiers everywhere. Death would've probably ended things before we got caught... or while we're sitting around like this. But I'm not a pro like him. I don't care either way. It's your call, boss."

Aging's words, mixed in with yawning, came across as a test to the Rookie. The choices battled one another in his mind.

Should he kill them, as the president of the Mask Makers? But didn't the Mask Maker originally start out saving abused children like them?

"So... you mean a pro can just kill people without a second thought?"

"That's a weird question to ask. It depends on the person. Some people can kill without even blinking, like in those movies. Other people can't do that, like in some other movies. It's pretty obvious, don't ya think? The only problem is what *you* want to do, boss."

"Then don't kill them."

'Huh?'

That answer did not come from the Rookie.

Aging looked unusually surprised--her eyes were wide as she looked at the owner of the voice.

The one who had answered in the Rookie's stead was their ultimate target--Elmer C. Albatross himself.

"It looked like you guys were having a bit of trouble, so I just threw my opinion out there."

"..."

When did he get here? And why was here here in the first place?

"How... did you get here?"

"Oh, sorry. Did I scare you?"

Elmer had a grin on his face, but he spoke softly so they could stay hidden.

And with that smile, he let out a surprising fact.

"I've been looking for you. You're the current leader of the Mask Makers, right?"

"----!"

The Rookie was dumbstruck at this sudden revelation. Aging, however, laughed amusedly and spoke.

"Oh? How'd you come to that conclusion?"

"Well, you see, I saw the seajackers' announcement when they called themselves the Mask Makers. And those people in red and black that looked like they were working with... their expressions were exactly like the effects of the drug that went around in that city before. Not only that, there's a boy from Lotto Valentino who strangely resembles Monica. I think anyone'd be able to guess with this much information."

"Then why did you come to find me?"

"I was going to surrender peacefully and suggest that you stop the collision plot and throw a big, happy party--but looks like things are a bit more complicated, huh?"

Elmer grinned and spoke as if to try and calm the Rookie, completely oblivious to the atmosphere in the park.

"I'll do whatever I can to bring back that smile of yours from the magic show, so tell me what you want me to do."

Since I'm still technically a member of the Mask Makers, I'm your subordinate!"

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Several hours later, upper deck event stage.

The sun had completely risen over the horizon.

"...What is this...?"

When Sylvie came to, she realized that she was in a wedding dress.

However, it was dyed in red and black--something out of the dreams of a sick fetishist.

"Oh, you're awake. How do you feel?"

In front of her was the man who had introduced himself as Bride back at the cabin--and around the stage were dozens of people in red and black, and children dressed in white with blindfolds with their hands bound.

Having instantly realized what kind of a situation she was in, Sylvie sighed and replied.

"This is surprising... I never thought I'd be taken hostage two years in a row."



"Is that so? My goodness, I'm quite jealous of whomever must have captured you last year."

"So... Who told you about Gretto? Was it Huey?"

Sylvie fearlessly raised her voice, despite her current predicament. She had already faced the greatest fear of her life--having accepted the reality of Gretto being devoured, she threw out her question to figure out her next course of action.

And Sylvie was sure that these people had been influenced by Huey, and that the invitation was his trap, but--

"...'Huey'? Who might that be?"

Bride asked, looking honestly confused. Sylvie frowned without realizing it.

"...Then who told you?"

"I'm saying that we have friends everywhere. For example, even on the Advenna Avis, the site of the great tragedy of yours."

"...I'll try another question. What are you people?"

"All right. Let me explain from the beginning."

Bride quietly raised his hands. At the same time, the blindfolded and bound children began reciting the song burned into their minds as if they were screaming.

And with this, Sylvie was sure that no matter who these people were, there would be no mutual understanding between herself and Bride.

Several minutes later, Bride finished explaining about his faith.

Then, he slowly took the syringes on the podium and jabbed them into his own neck. With something that sounded like a tortured scream, Bride turned around with a look more manic than ever before.

"Now, my exalted and eternal future bride... do you understand why you must marry me?"

"So you're saying that once we reach some sort of harmonious balance between you, the person without pain, and me, the person who will be tortured, you'll be complete as a human or some nonsense."

"It's a bit more complex, but I suppose that is the ultimate distillation of the philosophy."

Sylvie had tried to be as condescending as possible, but Bride accepted the insult as if he was unaffected. It was as if even insults were no longer painful for these people.

"If you vehemently refuse, of course, we have another bride candidate in mind. But as long as you live on as an immortal, and as long as our faith continues to exist, you will one day be put into this position again as a bride candidate. ...how unfortunate for you."

"For someone who says he's going to marry me, you're being pretty detached about everything."

They were conversing, but Sylvie had long given up on communicating with this man.

The one who had kidnapped her last year was someone she could at least connect with on some level, but these people had an altogether alien thought process.

Sylvie raised her head as if in defeat, but suddenly froze out of an entirely different reason.

"Wait a second..."

'Didn't they say on the announcement last night... that the crash was supposed to be tonight?'

The sun had yet to reach its zenith--there were perhaps two hours or so left until noon.

But something had caught her eye.

The view from the upper deck stage was beautiful--the endless blue horizons only served to highlight this marvel.

And this was exactly why--

That the **great white shape** in the distance heading straight towards this ship captured her thoughts and drove her to fear.

"It is almost time for contact... it seems that the other ship has also increased their speed."

"...You won't get out of this unscathed, you know."

"Of course. ...Well then, let us get belowdecks for now. It won't do to fall into the water, after all."

The people around her, including the calm Bride, were so tranquil that it looked as if they were experiencing true relief.

And this was exactly why Sylvie found herself repulsed by them.

It was almost like looking at inferior copies of Elmer.

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And the moment of fate came upon them.

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From a bird's eye view, it looked rather like an eclipse.

Gigantic masses of black and white slowly approached one another.

They began slowing down in unison, almost as if this was planned--

And yet they did not stop.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly--

But the moment was finally here.

The two ships, like the sun and the moon--

Little by little--

Elegantly---

Came together as if in a mating dance--

And finally, became one.

Of course, this would be impossible.

A deep, heavy, and ear-splitting noise rang out over the waters.

Although both ships were almost at dead slow speeds, the shock of the impact roared through the ship--the sound alone seemed powerful enough to shred everything.

The ships had avoided a head-on collision, and ended at nothing more than skidding against one another's port sides. It was like a car skidding against a guard rail--not smashing one another, but ripping one another apart.

The survivors on either ship simultaneously let out a scream.

Of course, the cabins inside the ship were no exception to the shock of the impact. The passengers who were crouched on the ground rolled across the tilted floors.

Even still, the damage was minimal for a collision of this scale.

As the two great ships skidded, they tilted away from one another.

They did not list nearly far enough to flip over--but the gap between the two ships split to over twenty metres or so.

About thirty seconds had passed.

And as the ships shook, they swung back towards one another.

The ships tilted again, and repeated these movements--each less ferocious than the last--about a dozen times.

And about five minutes after the first collision, the ships finally ground to a halt.

According to a **certain person's** plan, *Entrance* would then be blown to smithereens, and the SAMPLE members on *Exit* would begin a massacre--

But in reality, everything came to an end in those five minutes.

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"...Now, everyone. Once the ship has made a full stop, we will bring along our goal--the sacrificial god."

Even while bracing for impact, the members of SAMPLE had nothing but elation written on their faces.

What kind of a drug would render these people like this all the time, Sylvie wondered, as she desperately tried to fight the shaking of the ship.

There was blood splattered all over the ground, and what looked to be body parts littered the floor--but no one, man or woman, seemed to care.

Bride continued to speak calmly from beside Sylvie, seemingly oblivious to the tilting of the ship.

"It seems that these so-called 'Mask Makers' are also on the other ship, but we will end them without suffering--"

However, Bride's words were suddenly interrupted.

He then let out a something completely out of the blue.

"A shark...?"

What Bride saw as they moved from the deck to the bridge was--

A gigantic shark flying towards them from *Entrance*.

The shark slid onto the deck, like a flapping fish jumping onto a boat.

There were no screams, but the hundred or so believers who were on their way across the deck and those in the bridge found themselves frozen to the spot.

And following the shark across as the ships tilted back and forth were two figures.

One was an immortal, babyfaced young man.

The other was a man dressed in black, holding a gun in each hand.

The man in black ran without hesitation, even as the ship shook--

And he immediately shot at the legs of the people in red who were standing by the main entrance to the belowdecks area.

Those who stood behind the fallen men registered the man in black as an enemy.

The next wave of believers prepared to attack.

However, as they made to move--

Multiple flashes of light blinked on from *Entrance's* upper deck, tracing an arc in the sky.

Suddenly, the rocket launcher shells exploded--each taking out a dozen or so people at once.

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The men responsible for firing the shells reloaded as they chatted.

"Who knew things'd turn out like this?"

"I guess stars really live in a whole 'nother world."

A notepad with Charon's autograph was in one of the men's breast pocket.

And on the mask over the face of the other man--was Charon's autograph.

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Several hours ago, Illness had appeared before the confused Mask Makers, saying, "I brought a hostage".

Although they were about to send her away with a "We don't need any more hostages! Just go finish the gunman", their attitudes did a 180 once they saw the boy and girl who appeared from behind Illness.

And the self-proclaimed hostage--the Hollywood star--spoke out without hesitation.

"Illness told me the gist of things. Your leader on the other ship's in trouble, right? Then we'll have to join forces temporarily!"

Logically, it was an unthinkable suggestion.

Although they were initially reluctant, something that Charon soon told them and seeing Firo (an immortal) from the hostages convinced them. A temporary alliance was born.

"...But I didn't think that gunman would've joined up, too..."

"He's not gonna try and off the boss, is he?"

"Nah, probably not."

"Why do you say that?"

The man with the autographed mask aimed the rocket launcher as he replied to his partner.

"That old-fashioned gunman won't kill women and children."

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As the second rounds of rocket propelled grenades went off, *Exit* fell prey to a new threat.

They began receiving reports that 'immortals' had appeared in the communication office and the control room, taking down SAMPLE members one by one.

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It was in the communications office. A man covered in blood choked the female secretary single-handedly as he muttered, "...I say this. Be thankful that I have cooled down."

Nile looked around at the believers lying around the floor, whose lives were just barely intact. He put the unconscious woman on the floor.

"...How tedious."

He mumbled to himself as he watched his own stomach heal from being carved out by the secretary.

"...Once this alliance is over, I look forward to a match against that Amazon of a woman."

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Meanwhile, a narrow-eyed Asian man mumbled to himself in the engine control room.

"My goodness. Elmer never learns to be sensitive when dealing with people."

In contrast to the communications office, the believers here were miraculously unharmed--only unconscious. Denкуро bound them with ropes as he shook his head.

"Nay... perhaps it is this one's own weakness, for being unable to volunteer to go save Sylvie."

Denкуро drew breath and tied up the last one, as if fighting off any unnecessary thoughts.

"In any event, what is Elmer up to? Does he truly mean to bring things to an end with the Mask Makers once this alliance is over...? Curious..."

<=>

It was a simple conclusion.

They joined forces. This was all.

As phone calls within each ship were possible, the members of SAMPLE were prepared for a confrontation against the Mask Makers who were aboard *Entrance*.

However, Bride and the others had not accounted for the possibility that everyone else would join up into one large faction.

Their misfortune would be that, when Elmer made contact with the Rookie, Aging received a phone call from *Entrance*.

As a result, each side was able to share information on the details of what happened on each ship--and they came to the conclusion that their first priority was to take care of the people in red and black.

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And one man boldly stepped into the bridge.

This smiling man looked around at Bride and the twenty or so people dressed in red and black.

"I guess I should say... Hello there!"

"Elmer!"

The relaxed immortal caught sight of Sylvie, who was bound to a chair.

"You all right there, Sylvie? If this is a new hobby of yours, I won't stop you. But I'd like it if you could smile."

Having been responded to with a look that could kill, Elmer decided not to look Sylvie in the eye anymore.

Meanwhile, Bride spoke to Elmer with an expression of joy, despite his obviously crumbling plan.

"It is an honour to finally meet you, **o boy who was once our sacrificial god.**"

Elmer's eyes narrowed at these words.

But he never lost his smile as he replied.

"Oh... I *thought* this might have something to do with that."

"Then you understand our goals?"

"I understand them, but I can't accept them. Sylvie is a good friend of mine--"

Elmer tried to read Bride's intentions as he slowly glanced over at a corner of the room. He looked at the blindfolded loudspeakers(children) and quietly smiled.

"And I really want to see those kids smile, too. So **could you just stop everything now?**"

"...Strange words to say."

"You're all using drugs, and you all look so happy already. What more do you want?"

In some sense, this question got directly to the heart of the matter. Bride's answer was stoic.

"...Peace of mind."

"...?"

"We need peace of mind. This is what the holy book says."

"..."

"We need that which supports our happiness. We need the means by which we use to confirm our own happiness. And we need 'peace of mind'--something that speaks for our happiness as humans. If we have no such thing, this is not joy--it is merely delusion."

Bride's philosophy was forced. Elmer quietly sighed and gave a troubled grin.

"Three hundred years ago, the people of my hometown killed children because they wanted peace of mind."

"..."

"So people don't change, even after three centuries..."

Elmer recalled his nostalgic past, and smiled.

"But maybe the fact that I understand that is why I became an immortal."

There was something melancholy about Elmer's smile--it almost looked like he was saying goodbye to Bride.

"Then what will you do? What can you do alone?"

"...I'm not going to do anything today. I could try and wish for your happiness, but you're *already* happy."

"?"

"You look truly happy. And even if you were to die, the drug would keep you happy until the end. That's why--even if you die now, I'll know you'll still be happy. So I won't say anything. No..."

Elmer paused for a moment and corrected himself.

"I... *can't* say anything."

At that very moment--

The windows of the bridge shattered as a gigantic silhouette flew into the room.

"Gahaha! You finished your little chat?"

The woman in an armour of pure muscle gave a toothy grin--one rivaling Elmer--

And began firing away with her Minigun.

She then lunged into the fray with the Kukri knife.

<=>

Exit deck.

While the gunman stormed the belowdecks area, Firo remained on the deck as he took care of the remainder of SAMPLE alone.

He had heard the 'zombie' metaphor over the phone, but these people went above and beyond his expectations.

Although Firo was fighting unarmed--without so much as a single knife--he knew he was causing a great deal of injury.

However, as the people in red and black stood back up as if oblivious to pain, Firo decided to opt for knocking them unconscious one by one.

He would aim for their chins and temples to affect their brains directly.

With the exception of their zombie-like resilience, keen reflexes, and monstrous power, these people were no different from regular people. Firo was able to fight despite being outnumbered because he had a surefire way of knocking them out.

However, by the time the number of SAMPLE members on deck swelled to over a hundred, Firo shook his head.

"Damn... Am I really supposed to take a hundred people? If only I had a knife, at least..."

As Firo complained to himself, the number of SAMPLE members just continued to increase. Several of them were holding submachine guns and even rocket launchers.

Having been backed into a corner, Firo broke out into cold sweat. He twisted his lips in a smirk and raised his arm high into the air.

And with this as a signal--

A cloud of colourless gas blew out of the mouth of the animatronic shark that had fallen to the deck.

At the next moment--

The people in red and black who had inhaled the gas began thrashing on the floor like fish in a net.

Their expressions were peaceful, but the coughing and breathing problems caused by the gas had rendered them physically unable to persist.

Firo covered his mouth and made his way upwind, frowning at the power of the poison gas.

'Those damn Mask Makers... they brought something this dangerous onboard...'

Firo reconfirmed that, although they were currently allies, these people could not be underestimated--and again faced off against the remainder of the people in red and black.

'These guys are after immortals.'

'So they're after Maiza's friends.'

When he remembered this, Firo found himself recalling the faces of these people. Of course, these were not his own memories, but those of Szilard and the other alchemists he devoured.

'This is a weird feeling.'

Firo had volunteered to become bait for the sake of people he knew very well, yet didn't know.

'[Why are you doing something like this, even though it puts you in so much danger? Don't tell me that it's because of your immortality. After all, being unable to die means that you can experience magnitudes of inhuman pain.]'

When Angelo said this, Firo had laughed sheepishly and gave this answer.

'[Well, this is all just out of self-satisfaction--'

I just wanted to do this.

I just wanted to show off my cool side to my family.]'

Firo blushed at this recollection of his own words and shook his head.

He was willing to turn the world against him for so simple a reason.

Maybe he just wanted to prove this resolve to Ennis, at the very least.

He wanted to prove to her that he was her loving husband.

And as Firo risked his soul for this current family--

A boy who risked his life for a long-nonexistent ancestor stepped in the way of a certain man.

"Hm...?"

Bride, having barely managed to escape the bridge, found himself facing a certain boy with blond hair.

"You're... Luchino, correct?"

"Yes. I suppose I should say, 'It's a pleasure to meet you'."

"I see. Well, if you'll excuse me."

Bride muttered quietly, and tried to pass by Luchino.

"...If you would wait a moment."

"...What is it? I don't recall having any business with you."

Bride's words were cold.

They were simple words, devoid of emotion.

And yet the man still had a smile of joy on his face.

Luchino, driven to sickness by this expression, squeezed out his voice to interrogate him.

"I want to know something... I don't know who you people are. But I still want to know. What are you after...? Why did my subordinates have to die?"

"It is simple."

Bride stopped mid-walk and answered nonchalantly.

"You were murdered by our desires."

"...Desires, huh. I can't say I don't know how that feels."

"Desire is the most basic motivation of all life. Even an ascetic's wish to rid himself of desires is a desire in itself..."

As Bride spoke, the ships skidded against each other again created another large impact.

Luchino instantly closed the distance between himself and Bride and stabbed him in the side with the stiletto he had kept hidden.

He had no hesitation this time--he didn't even feel nauseous about this.

The man in front of him had destroyed the lives of his friends and dragged the Mask Maker name through the mud.

He could not forgive him.

However--

"Excuse me, you're in my way."

The man pushed Luchino away, almost as if the blade that skewered him from side to back didn't even bother him.

His strength was too great. Luchino was helplessly tossed to the floor.

"...Any more than this will be pain."

Bride put on a look of disinterest and smiled--

He took another step and began speaking words that may or may not have been meaningful.

"If you think about it, you and I are almost eerily diametrically opposed in philosophies and actions both. I do not have your resolve, and you do not have my faith. Resolve and faith may seem different yet similar, yet they are on completely different vectors. In other words, we can do nothing but pass by one another."

And it was because he didn't even try to look at Luchino--

That he never figured out the secret behind his trick.

"You're right... I never intended to speak with you in the first place."

"...?"

"I have been aware from the start that we have neither semblances nor parallels! That's right! I knew all that ever since you murdered **my** precious employees! I... That is why, as a magician--"

Luchino twisted his lips into a grin and quietly laughed.

"As a magician, **I have just been awaiting the right timing.**"

"...?"

The moment Bride turned back to see what Luchino meant--

He fell helplessly to the floor as his body began being pulled away by a powerful force.

It was a pressure that made him feel like his entire body would be ripped apart.

Although Bride never noticed it, Luchino did not stab him in order to land a critical blow.

The moment he stabbed Bride, Luchino had used an extremely powerful, stringy fibre used for levitation tricks and wrapped it around Bride's body.

And the other end of the fibre--**was tied to the edge of *Entrance* as it swung back and forth like a pendulum.**

"Ugh... Gah..."

Bride was powerless to resist as he was dragged away.

However, the boy did not stay to watch the aftermath.

"If you were afraid of the pain of being stabbed... you could have lived."

Bride's body slid across the deck, flung over the edge, and was dragged overboard.

Luckily enough, *Entrance* and *Exit* were both swinging back towards each other. Bride fell towards the sea in between the two behemoths.

"Ugh..."

He had managed to grab on to the lowest part of the metal railings at the edge of the ship, but his sweaty palms made it impossible for him to hold up his own body weight.

It would only be a matter of time until he fell.

At that very moment, however, someone took hold of his arms.

The one who had saved him from falling to the sea was--

"Rucott?"

The woman whom Bride had brought along as a false wife.

This woman--Silis--had taken off her black-and-white dress. She was dressed in her underclothing as she tightly gripped Bride's hands.

"You're lighter than you look... .. I'll tell you something important. Not 'you', the insane cult leader, but 'you'--the insane husband who took me as his wife."

The woman holding up his body weight from beyond the rail continued to speak--her eyes showed that she had regained her sanity.

"Do you understand? People... can only grow stronger because they experience pain. I'm still standing right now, completely fine, all thanks to what you did to me."

"..."

And with these sarcastic words, Silis smirked.

"And this is for that insane cult leader--"

Her smile was derived from pure elation--

"Just die painlessly like the weakling you are, you fucking bastard."

Soon, the body of *Entrance* returned towards *Exit* like a pendulum.

As the two ships were the same height, it closed in on *Exit* with force powerful enough to crush whatever was hanging off the edge of the ship--

And Silis did not let go until the two ships skidded again.

As a result, she never managed to hear Bride's scream--

But she was satisfied by the splatter of blood that accompanied the impact, and the man's severed arms that had been flung all the way onto the deck.

<=>

This sight spread like wildfire among those dressed in red and black--

And the believers began to retreat.

It was an escape so precise and quick that no one had the time to question where they were headed.

SAMPLE disappeared like a single organism, leaving like the tide.

Firo and the gunman were left alone in the deserted deck and bridge, wondering if what they had just seen was even real--

Only the gruesome corpses in the bridge and the animatronic shark that was still letting out small amounts of poison gas were testament to the fact that this meaningless carnage had actually taken place.

Repulsively and unchangingly--

<=>

"...It's gotten quiet."

Illness mumbled and sighed in relief, still holding her gun.

She was in the bridge of *Entrance*. Standing behind Illness were Czes, Claudia, Charon, Bobby (who was, for some reason, still in Charon's The Gear costume), and his gang.

Of course, the captain and the crew were checking the ship's functions--they busily moved about, bringing all the systems back online.

"I-is it over...? Are we safe?"

Bobby was about to fall to his knees, but remembered Carnea's eyes on him and forced himself to keep standing.

"Bobby...! You did it!"

"N-no, it's nothing..."

"Please. All you did was retrieve the gas devices that were equipped in the ventilation systems."

"And *we're* the ones who did most of that work..." "I'm hungry."

As Bobby's friends began berating him, Carnea tried to cheer him up.

Illness watched the sight and quietly recalled her past.

She remembered the boys who were killed trying to save her.

'If someone had saved them back then... I wonder if they could have become like these kids.'

The moment Illness made to sigh quietly, Claudia grinned and gave her a hug.

"Thank you, Illness! We're all safe thanks to you!"

"N-no... Th-that's not it... besides, *you're* the one who got everyone together..."

Illness blushed at this sudden compliment and struggled for words.

However, her reply was cut short by Czes's anxious voice.

"Huh? Something's coming--what the?! That can't be human--"

Suddenly, there was a crash.

The bridge's sturdy windows shattered to bits as a gigantic shadow **flew in** from outside.

'Aging?! ... No!'

The giant silhouette was much wider than the one Illness knew.

"...How glad I am... for coincidentally spotting you in this bridge."

The gorilla-faced giant was speaking to Czes.

"My goodness... since Master Bride has died, we must at least capture a new sacrificial god."

He looked around the bridge and fixed his gaze on Illness.

"Hm? You're... no... Illness? **Why do you grace this place with your presence?**"

"Uh...?"

"How fortuitous. **To think we would be able to capture two of our gods at once...**"

The gorilla took a gun from his pocket.

"We have no need for the rest of you."

The moment he took aim at Claudia, who was standing beside Illness--

Multiple people sprung into action.

Illness pushed Claudia away and stood to shield her.

Czes also ran to take the bullet--

The round pierced through Czes's shoulder, and the weakened bullet made its way into Illness's side.

"Uh...!"

Illness let out a silent scream.

Suddenly, there was a loud battle cry as the boy in the gear costume leapt at the gorilla.

There was no calculation or desire for praise in Bobby's head. All he knew was what Claudia had told him--"As long as you're in that suit--you have to play the part of a hero"--and the question of *whom* he wanted to be a hero for. And the answer was the girl standing behind him.

He had merely moved as his emotions dictated, but he ended up playing his part perfectly.

Bobby's part was the lowly yet all-important role of distracting the enemy, if only for a single moment.

As the gorilla reflexively turned to aim at Bobby, Charon slid in from the side and kicked the gorilla's gun-arm.

"Ugh!"

The gorilla ended up dropping the gun and began swinging his arms around instead, but he suddenly found his eyes covered with red liquid.

Illness had closed in on him and thrown her own blood into his face.

And at the next moment, Illness used her hand--covered with her own blood--to pull the trigger.

The submachine gun rounds tore the gorilla's upper body to shreds.

Several seconds later, Illness smiled as she lay in Claudia's arms.

Was she able to risk her life for others, just as those boys had done for her?

"Hey... Claudia.... I'm not weird, am I...? I'm-I'm not sick, right?"

"No, you're not weird at all. Even if the entire world rejects you, I'll welcome you with open arms."

"Ahaha... But why...? I'm a terrorist... Why are you so nice to me, Claudia...?"

As Illness laughed weakly, Claudia did her best to stop Illness's bleeding. She then smiled encouragingly.

"You know... it's not that the world acknowledges me. *I'm* the one that acknowledges and accepts the world."

"...?"

"That's why... I'll never betray the world I've accepted. After all, I acknowledged it myself, right? Even if my world betrays me, I-I'll love my world until the end. That's all."

Illness looked at Claudia as she said these absurdities--and with the relief of having been smiled at, she also grinned in reply and fell asleep.

"Thank... you..."

Claudia called for people to transport Illness to the infirmary. The siblings then accompanied her down.

Czes sent them off, relieved that Illness's injury was not critical.

"Come to think of it... I think that gorilla was after me..."

Czes turned towards the man's corpse, and froze in place.

There was nothing where the gorilla-faced man had fallen.

'He survived all that...?! And... he ran for it...?' Czes mumbled to himself.

Had he noticed? The fountain of blood that had escaped him when Illness had shot him had also disappeared from the bridge.

<=>

Thirty minutes later.

The ship was quiet.

Most passengers seemed to be still reeling from the shock of the impact, remaining holed up in their room.

One man, presumably Japanese, crossed over from *Exit* to *Entrance*, shouting, "Hiroko!", but no one tried to stop him.

And currently, the smiling Rookie was aboard the ship that had come to pick up the Mask Makers, commending Life for a job well done.

"...Good work, Life. It's unfortunate we couldn't retrieve Illness... but I'm so glad you made it back."

"...I'm not unharmed myself, of course. Actually, it seems that I was the only one who was not told of the plans for after the collision--I will chalk it up to a communication error."

Life replied, shaking his head. The Rookie grinned and slowly went around behind Life's back.

"I see. Let me show you a little magic trick to cheer you up."

"No thank you. I'm sure that can wait until we get back."

"No... I've already started it."

And the next moment--

Click.

"..."

A pair of handcuff appeared from the Rookie's previously empty hands as he instantly bound Life's hands, which were hanging behind the chair he had been sitting in.

"Wait... what are you doing?"

"There's just something I wanted to confirm." the boy replied, and a figure stepped in from outside.

"!"

A gunman dressed in black.

At the sudden appearance of the Mask Makers' worst enemy, Life looked around frantically--but the Rookie, Aging, and their surviving allies from *Entrance* stood there quietly and did nothing.

"What is going on here...?"

Life squirmed his legs anxiously. The gunman--Angelo--stepped towards Life and removed his goggles.

There was a moment of silence. Then--

"Don't be such a stranger. We know each other quite well."

The gunman mumbled, with a somewhat melancholy look behind his sunglasses.

"Right, **Demolisher**?"

Another pause.

An unbearable silence came over the ship--and a moment later, Life's mad laughter shook off the quiet.

"Pfffft... HAHAAHAHAHA! Shit! That son-of-a-bitch! That Charon bastard, right?"

The answer came, not from the gunman, but from the Mask Maker with Charon's autograph on his mask.

"...Yeah. He heard you laughing and talking to 'Boss Angelo'. Now I see how you managed to get weapons to the gunman here."

"Fuck... I knew I should'a blown you all to smithereens when I had the chance! Yeah! I'm the bastard who brought your guns with the Mask Maker goods, boss Angelo! Shit, how else do you think I'd have done that?! HAHAAHAHA!"

There was no trace of Life the Mask Maker in the Demolisher. Angelo quietly bowed his head. There were many things he wanted to ask, but he narrowed it down to one.

"Are you... the one who shot the Boss's father?"

"What do you think?"

The Demolisher was playing dumb. Angelo ground his teeth--

And walked back to *Entrance* with surprising calm.

"I'll leave this bastard's fate in your hands. Get whatever info you need from him, and take care of him."

"Is that all right with you?"

"My Boss started crying, ordering me to not kill anyone anymore. Besides--"



He mumbled this with a strangely satisfied look and left quietly.

"I don't kill women and children. I've got no business with you anymore."

Left behind were the icy-gazed Mask Makers--

And a nameless man, formerly known as Life.

"Hey, now. Don't look so an--guh!"

Life(Demolisher) fell to the ground as the Rookie kicked him in the gut.

The Rookie looked down at him--

And began to speak.

"Well now... That's right. Before we begin to talk about this series of events, we need a change of pace."

And the boy put on a mask.

A mask of ice that would allow him to take care of the traitor.

Whether the mask was there to hide his tears, or to shield his eyes from the sight before him--the boy put on his mask, not even knowing why.

As if he was trying to turn this mask into his own face.

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On the deck of *Entrance*, as things began to settle down--

Firo lay spread-eagle on the deck, looking at the rising plumes of smoke, as he spoke to Czes.

"Hey Czes."

"What is it, Firo?"

"You think... you think I managed to be a family man?"

It seemed that Firo was talking about the rash battle he had charged into earlier.

Czes shook his head, astonished, and looked down at Firo coldly.

"...Don't you think that making your family worry means you failed?"

"That's cold of you."

Firo covered his face with his hands in fatigue. Czes continued calmly.

"So what is a 'family man' supposed to be, anyway? Is it protecting me and Ennis while looking cool?"

"...Huh. What do you think? What *does* it mean?"

"Maybe... it's when you come home every day in time for dinner?"

Czes then turned his sights to the entrance to the belowdecks area.

Firo looked up slightly--and caught sight of Ennis running towards him.

"Anyway, I'll give you two some alone time."

"Hey! Hey! Czes!"

Firo looked back and forth at Czes's disappearing figure and Ennis closing in on him--and desperately grasped for what he would say.

'Dammit, what am I supposed to say?! Is Ennis angry at me? Do I have to apologize? No, but... right. I'll tell her, [I love you]... Gah! No! How am I supposed to say something that embarrassing? But I do love her, so.... uh... ack!'

Every word he wanted to say to Ennis piled up in his heart, but they quickly overflowed and disappeared.

As he found himself worrying about Ennis as she approached him--

"...Since it's our honeymoon, I guess she'll let me get away with a kiss."

Firo realized that he was a truly happy man.

Epilogue II

<Mask Makers>

Somewhere on the seas, inside the Mask Makers' personal cruiser.

"Now.

Let's continue your interrogation, shall we?"

Life shrank back in fear before the boy's icy tone.

"Oh, don't feel pressured to say something. After all, I don't have anything in particular I want to ask you. If you still need a hint, then why not let me hear a scream?"

The Rookie's face, drained of emotion, was a veritable mask.

"Please don't be shy. Should your screaming bother me, I need only crush your throat."

"Guh..."

Meanwhile, the handcuffed Life glared at the boy with a groan. And the groan soon turned into a mad laugh.

"Guh...Gah... Gahahahaha! Hahahahahahahaha!"

"...What's so funny?"

The Rookie frowned. Life smirked and began rambling elatedly.

"My goodness, you never change at all, boss! You truly are worthy to wear the most intricate yet thickest mask of all the Mask Makers! Even now, your face is nothing but ice!"

"..."

"I *know* that inside, you're actually going crazy holding back your tears and your vomit! I am astounded! How does it feel? How does it feel to have made your business personal and led your precious employees into a slaughterhouse?"

"...!"

The Rookie anxiously kicked Life in the side.

Life drew in a sharp breath, but he put on a strangely happy look--and said something completely unexpected.

"**Well now**, I'd love to stay here and watch you succumb to your despair, but the huge lady behind you has begun to break out into quite a belligerent smile--so...

If you'll excuse me."

"...What?"

The handcuffed man's statement was simple.

The Rookie, feeling like he had just been insulted, began to truly consider killing this man.

Suddenly, a powerful impact rocked the ship.

"?!"

At the same time, he heard something snapping--

When the Rookie turned, he saw Life, who had dislocated his joints to free himself from the handcuffs, kicking off the floor and out the window.

"Stop--"

Life jumped overboard before the Rookie could even finish.

However, they did not hear a splash.

"What...?"

When the boy ran out of the cabin, he found himself faced with a large cruiser that had presumably just collided with his own ship, and Life, who had climbed onto the large cruiser. And on the cruiser--

There were believers dressed in red and black.

For some reason, the man standing in the middle of these people was missing his arms. The fact that there was almost no bleeding only served to show that the man was approaching death.

However, the large cruiser departed across the sea without even giving the boy time to think, easily outstripping the Mask Maker vessel in speed.

The boy knew there was no way they could catch up--so he removed the mask from over his heart and relentlessly let out his anger.

"Damn...! Damn it...!"

At that moment--

"Something happen?"

When the boy turned around, he found himself facing a smiling man.

Elmer C. Albatross.

For a moment, the Rookie thought he was dreaming.

It was a natural response to the fact that their number one target was nonchalantly walking around their own ship.

"H-how did you...?!"

"Well, we're your targets, and I figured you might have some business with me especially. I was worried Denkuro might be annoyed and Nile might get angry at me, so I just took shelter on your ship."

Despite the fact that he was being assaulted by a blast of ocean gales and was surrounded by enemies, Elmer seemed to be completely oblivious.

"Besides, I've been a Mask Maker for three hundred years now; it'd be the least I could do to give my boss a hand!"

"..."

As the Rookie gaped at a loss for words, the founding member grinned to cheer him up.

"So you have to smile, boss! Laugh!"

<=>

<Believers>

"...There is one thing... I would like to ask."

The dying man said to Life, who had just climbed onto the cruiser.

Bride, who seemed to have been turned into mincemeat during the collision, had only actually lost his arms--he was still alive.

But his time in this world was growing shorter and shorter.

Although the sheer force of his arms being squeezed off was enough to minimize his blood loss, it would be impossible to keep him alive much longer.

And though everyone knew this, none of the believers shed even a single tear.

This did not mean they held any disrespect for the Master. It was just that their loyalties lay with the holy book, not him. Not only that, the **pain of losing a loved one** had also long been erased from their psyches.

Life's response to the question was calm and expressionless.

"Yes, Master Bride?"

"Viralesque. You knew about these 'Mask Makers' this whole tim? And you were using us as your pawns?"

Bride's voice became faint, almost as if it would be extinguished any moment now. **Life, who was also called Viralesque**, took off his mask. He took the red and black bandages that a secretary handed to him and wrapped them around his head as he replied nonchalantly.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Why did you do such a thing?"

"It is a long story, but to make it short... I did it because **it was entertaining.**"

Viralesque's reply was completely different in tone from both that of Life and the Demolisher. The Master of their faith chuckled--

"I see. Then it can't be helped. **You have our forgiveness.**"

Bride's words were equally nonchalant.

"Our doctrines do not deny any human pleasure, even if it is the path that leads to our own demise."

"You were a splendid leader, Master Bride."

"But now that will soon be over."

Bride mumbled, his voice without burden. He then stepped towards the railings at the edge of the deck.

The blood dripping from his arms were swallowed into the sea drop by drop.

"I have left all matters relating to the holy book to the secretaries. I ask that you take good care of the next Bride."

"I understand, Master Bride. But... What would you do **if I had a substance that could keep you alive?**"

Viralesque let out these mysterious words, not once changing his polite tone of voice.

But Bride smiled, brain draining of dextrose, as he let out his final words.

"I make it a personal policy to never use extra lives unless I'm playing a shooter in an arcade."

It's a habit of mine from playing games. A loss is a loss. I. must. fear death. and. accept.--"

And with a smile, the leader's body plummeted to the surface of the ocean.

At the very next moment, the wide-open jaws of a gigantic shark broke the surface--having been led here by the trail of blood--and swallowed Bride's lifeless body, chewing it into pieces.

The surviving believers who watched this--men and women, young and old alike--all made a symbol over their chests and spoke the same words.

"We wish you as painless a death as possible."

<=>

<Gunman & Boys & Girl>

Several days later, New York. At the Alveare.

"Speaking of, wasn't that cruise ship incident a few days ago crazy?"

"Sounds like Firo and the others had a lot of trouble."

"Yes. It seems the culprits are still at large. And considering the confusion among the passengers, they don't seem to have very much reliable testimony."

Maiza provided some background information as Randy and Pecho watched the news in surprise.

And suddenly, a new face entered this familiar scene.

A man opened the door and walked in.

He was dressed completely in black, and wore blue shades. There was nothing about him to suggest that he made an honest living.

The Martillo executives knew at once that this was not a man to be trifled with.

However, they could not rashly attack a stranger, so they held off from attacking--

"I have a question to ask."

The man spoke calmly to a bespectacled man who seemed to have the greatest authority in this room.

"I was brought here by introduction of Firo Prochainezo... Have you any need for a bodyguard?"

The atmosphere in the shop instantly did a 180.

Of course, it was in the opposite way from what the man had expected.

"What, so you're that Angelo guy?" "Firo told us all about ya!" "We heard about that sharpshooting skill of yours..." "Well, the guys here all fight with knives. The boss was pretty happy about hiring a bodyguard!" "...Hehe... let's get this over with in one shot. I'll call him 'teacher' from now on..." "Palm's being weird again."

"Well, if you could give us some details, Mr. Angelo."

"..."

Angelo was momentarily taken aback at this atmosphere, so different from a normal criminal organization, but--

'Now I see. So this is the organization that made Firo into what he is.'

Angelo came to this conclusion and smiled bittersweetly.

After the incident, the South American had essentially been destroyed. And since he could not return to his hometown until the investigation into the cruise ship incidents were completed, Angelo needed to find a place to hide. Having come to New York at Firo's suggestion, he found himself beset by an unfamiliar yet comforting situation.

"...Oh, also... she isn't my child, but... I'm taking care of an acquaintance's daughter. I'd like to find a safe place for her to stay..."

And several days later.

"Hey! Listen up, everyone! We have a present for the Martillo Family today!"

"It's our very own measure against the falling birthrates!"

And with these confusing words, Isaac and Miria brought along--

Their very own countermeasure against the Martillo Family's aging population.

"W-we're joining the Martillo Family, so please be relieved?"

As one boy let out a jumbled series of words and the three boys behind him sighed at once, the Martillo Family capos looked at one another.

Soon, the boy in the front glanced at the tanned girl sitting in a corner of the restaurant, turned beet-red, and began rambling.

"I-it's not like I came here because I was thinking about Carnea or anything!"

The entire restaurant burst out laughing.

Bobby was confused for a moment, when a man suddenly came up to him and spoke.

"Normally, we would tell children to go back to school... but I have no interest in getting in your way in the matters of love."

"Wha-?! Uh. Y-you! I, uh, I mean, you're..."

"**Well, no matter.** We can't have you working here officially, but we'll allow you to take on some odd jobs from time to time."

"R-really? Awesome! Now I'm a real gangster!"

The boy shouted with a kind of naivete unsuited for the situation.

No one would be able to predict that this boy would eventually become a hero of the Martillo Family.

And not even God or the Devil knew if such a thing would really happen--what was for certain was the fact that one boy had found himself stepping into the path of ne'er-do-wells.

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<Hollywood Star & Stuntman>

It was back aboard *Entrance*, in the direct aftermath of the incident.

"Illness... has been kidnapped?"

"Yes... It seems that a group of people in red and black suddenly burst into the infirmary..."

Upon hearing this report, Claudia went through a whole spectrum of emotions, from anxiety to sadness--and a mere ten minutes later, she made her decision and announced it to Charon.

"It's decided! I'm going to pour all the pay I've earned so far into hiring a private detective!"

"..."

"This is unforgivable! They barged into my world and stole Illness--a part of my world... Unacceptable! I have to do everything I can to save her!"

"..."

What was Charon thinking about all of this?

He did not object to his sister--instead, he quietly accepted her world.

Suddenly, a woman who was listening to the siblings' conversation from nearby entered the scene.

"Hey... I heard you were looking for a private investigator."

"That's right. Are you a detective, Miss?"

Claudia asked doubtfully. The woman--Silis--quietly smiled.

"No, my name's Rucott... A woman I know--Silis--works at a huge investigation office. They'll look into anything for you as long as you pay them."

The woman who had overcome her pain and despair returned to the world, stronger than she had ever been.

"Besides... I have some experience with those people in red and black..."

Silis, who would eventually rise through the ranks of her company thanks to her connections with a certain star actress and the fees that followed--hid her true self with a fake smile, still full of nothing but hatred for SAMPLE.

"Thank you! You're so kind, Miss!"

And accepting even Silis into a part of her world--

The girl who had made the world hers since birth believed with all her might.

That her world would be able to rescue Illness.

<=>

<The Sickly and the Poison>

The girl who had been accepted into another's world opened her eyes.

'Where am I?

It hurts.'

Illness looked up at the ceiling before her, holding her hand against her wound.

She looked around to figure out where she was, and suddenly froze.

It was because the bed she lay on was surrounded by people in red and black.

And though she was filled with astonishment and fear alike--

She scarcely had time to let out the scream from her throat.

Clap clap clap clap.

It was a cheery round of applause.

"Congratulations... **Master Bride.**"

"...What?"

The man with bandages wrapped around his face stopped clapping and politely bowed his head. The others followed and knelt at the floor.

Recalling the days of her 'godhood', Illness shrunk back, expecting pain--

"In the name of Viralesque, the supervisor of this faith, I name you as our new leader."

'Leader?'

"You will have to take the place of our leader, as the new 'Bride'. You have no right to refuse."

'The leader... that was dad.'

The girl remained silent for a moment. She opened her mouth, not even knowing what to say.

"I... can stay alive...?"

"Of course."

'Dad used to be called the leader.'

"You're... not going to hurt me anymore?"

"Of course not, Illness--no, Master Bride. From this point on, you will be *free* from all suffering."

Her mind began to go blank. She could not grasp what he was saying.

"Now, as for the 'god' who will become your eternal partner... we have already selected a candidate."

Viralesque spoke softly, as if to embrace the empty-hearted girl with his words.

"You are permitted to stay alive. No one will reject you here."

And with a smile, he spread poison into her heart.

SAMPLE had no intention of releasing Illness.

The girl looked at the photo of the 'groom candidate' that Viralesque handed to her, and found herself mumbling--

"Czes..."

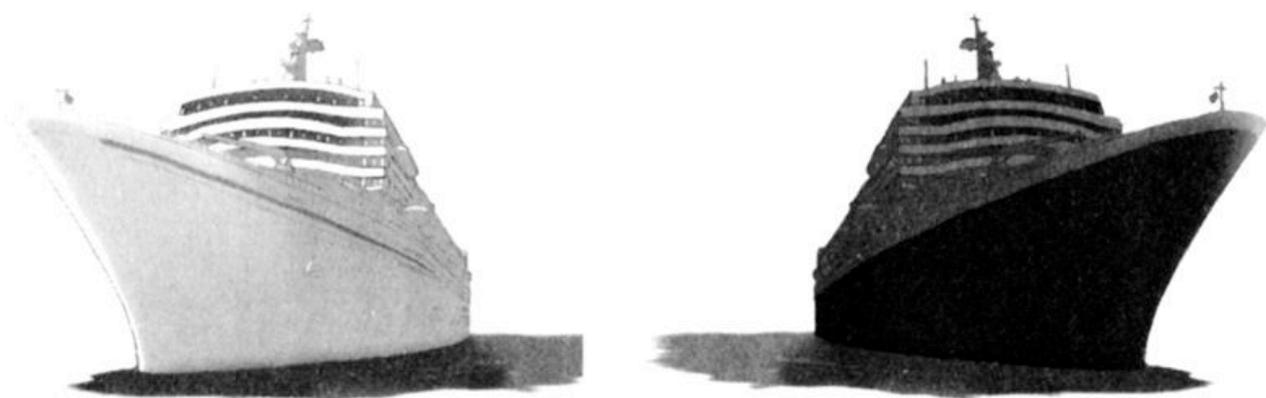
And this malice had no intention of releasing Czes, either.

The poison clung on stubbornly--

Slowly corrupting the world.

[Baccano! 2002] - Complete

On to [1710] & [1935] & [2003]



『バッカーノ!2002』完
『1710』&『1935』&『2003』へ続く

Afterword

Yes--this concludes the 'Cruise Ship Incident'.

I honestly thought I was going to die this time. I was bleeding, I almost suffocated on my own vomit in my sleep, and I went through a lot of trouble and felt like I could understand what it felt like to be stranded alone, but I managed to get this book published!

Originally, I was planning to make this a trilogy and write a C Side, but some things came up and I was given the rule of keeping the story to two volumes or less--so I ended up cutting out about two hundred pages' worth of story and three or so new characters. Events like Nile vs. Aging will play out in future volumes, so please look forward to it!

[Baccano!] always wraps up each story within the year in which it is set, but this series of stories has connections to [1705], [2002], [1710], [1935], and [2003]. But I hope you will enjoy each standalone volume like before!

Now, the anime is finally coming to an end. But it seems like there's some new things to announce, so please wait for **NEXT MONTH'S** [Dengeki Kanzume]! Hm... also, oh no! The anime is so well-made that even in the midst of my cheering, I anxiously ended up thinking, "No way... this is even better than what I'm writing!!" ...! I hope you enjoy it, along with the manga and the Drama CD!

That's right! Humble as it may be, I wrote about a hundred pages' worth of story for the new DS version of Baccano coming out this spring! There are new characters and some characters you might be surprised to see, so please look forward to it!

And here are some special thanks--

To my editor Papio and everyone at the editorial department, the publishing department, and the presses--who all put up with the immense trouble I caused.

To Nasu Kinoko, who coined the name "Bride".

To Asai Rabo and friends, who provided me with information in relation to Bride's characterization.

To Furiwara Yu and Sanda Makoto, who provided input on several aspects of SAMPLE.

To friends and acquaintances, and the teams working on the manga and the anime--and everyone who is reading this book.

Thank you so much!

-Narita Ryogo, currently listening to [Gun's N Roses (with vocal)] on repeat.

As a side note, the next part is the Extra Chapter. However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the [2002] story was written for this moment, a turning point in the tale of Baccano. I can finally reveal to you the true villain, whom I've been foreshadowing since [1931]. So please--take your time reading! Here it is...!

Extra Chapter B

My name is Copycat.

I'm just a simple imitator.

Oh no, I messed up, I messed up. I did something stupid at the critical moment.

It seems I was just too excited. It seems I just couldn't contain my joy.

If only, if only things had gone according to plan--they would have both been doomed.

There shouldn't have been hope on those ships. Oh, too bad, too bad.

I'm sick of being Copycat.

That's why, for the first time in a long time--I'll walk as myself.

I'll take a walk through this lovely, lovely world.

<=>

Several days later, somewhere on the seas.

"Gahaha! No way I coulda beat your clowning back there. You seriously tried to protect those blindfolded kids after yappin' away, and I ended up cutting you in half with my Kukhri knife!"

"But if I hadn't done anything, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be able to see those kids smile."

"You didn't have to worry 'bout that. I was just trying to give 'em a little scare."

In the middle of this cheerful yet creepy conversation, the hostage suddenly lowered his voice.

"That's right, Luchino... can I talk to you for a sec?"

Elmer was not physically restrained, instead being guarded by Aging. He called over to Luchino, who was sitting a little ways away.

The boy had managed to evade their target for the past few days now, but it seemed that he had finally been able to set his thoughts in order and face Elmer with the cool face of a president.

Of course, he was still in silent observation mode.

Elmer took the boy's look as a positive answer and nonchalantly spoke to him.

"I'm just wondering, why do you hate Huey so much?"

"..."

The Rookie glared at him silently. However, Elmer's obviously optimistic expression compelled him to look away and answer stoically.

"...It's vengeance."

"Vengeance?"

"Vengeance for myself... and the sentiments passed down from my ancestor."

"If it's not too much trouble, could you tell me about it?"

Elmer's question was as oblivious as ever. The Rookie was slightly nervous, but he decided to restate his reasons as a way to reaffirm his resolve.

"I'm sure you also know... My ancestor, Huey Laforet... he killed his wife, Monica Campanella... my other ancestor."

"..."

"And ever since then, our family has passed down the 'Mask Maker' and this desire for revenge through the generations. Does it look stupid to you? Does the fact that we carry on this bloodline for the sake of avenging an ancestor we've never even met seem like nothing but foolishness?"

"...No, I'm not going to stop you if that's what makes you happy, but..."

For some reason, Elmer trailed off. The Rookie looked at him suspiciously.

"What is it? You have something to say?"

"No, it's just... I see. So that's how the story was told to you."

I get it... That's... just like **him**."

<=>

The same day, an FBI facility in the U.S.

"I say this. Why have we been arrested?"

"You say you want to know the answer, you ticking time bombs?"

The bespectacled man retorted with even more annoyance.

The immortal who was the assistant director of the FBI's Special Investigation Division--Victor Talbot--continued on, his temples twitching.

"You realize that all of this is because *you* went on a rampage, Nile? Well?"

"I am remorseful. And yet I still have my regrets. That gigantic woman I met during the planning stage... I was planning to battle her once we'd defeated the people in red, but they fled to their ship before any of this could happen."

"How is that showing any remorse?! Argh, you people... You really can't let me go a day without springing something big on me, can you?! Well? You want me to die of overwork, come back to life, die of overwork again, come back to life, die of overwork again, and come back to life again only to die of overwork *again*? Those blindfold brats you brought in were so badly traumatized to begin with that the counsellors are probably going to die of exhaustion, but they're just victims! This is not their fault! In other words, until the culprits are caught, I will take out my rage on that idiot Huey!"

"Calm yourself, Master Victor. In any event, have you any information on the identity of the assailants?"

Victor seemed to have regained his focus at Denkuro's question. He quietly shook his head.

"To be honest, all I can say is that we're still working on it. The Mask Makers are just a bunch of mercenaries, but those religious freaks are just... anyway, **they all disappeared--the ones that were captured, and even the corpses**--all we have left of them are bloodstains and bits of flesh. Of course, they're all evidence in our hands anyway, but you'd better hope that idiot Elmer is one lucky man."

"Come to think of it... is it true that Czes was on the other ship?" Sylvie asked.

"Hm? Ohh... that little brat. He's gone on a family vacation with a couple of new immortals. This is ridiculous." Victor answered as if it was an unimportant matter.

"It is a relief to hear that he is well. Then are they also somewhere in this facility?"

"No, well, actually... hm."

Victor paused. As the other three stared at him, he shook his head in surrender.

"...Right now... they're in Japan."

<=>

The same day, a tourist attraction in Kyoto, Japan.

They climbed a long set of steps lined with souvenir shops. Soon, a building painted in primary colours--yet somehow without being garish in the slightest--began to come into view.

The sound of the flute echoing from somewhere in the distance was practically tailor-made for this sight. Their walk could not have been more relaxed.

However--

"...Argh, I can't take this. I really have to get this off my chest."

As they finished climbing up the steps, Firo--whose expression had been dark all this time--turned around to face Ennis and Czes.

"This is a late apology, but... I'm sorry. I completely messed up our vacation." Firo confessed. But Ennis and Czes responded with smiles.

"Not at all, Firo. Of course there was some trouble, but it was thanks to you that Czes and I made it to Japan safely."

"Ennis is right, big brother. We might have gotten that ten-hour lecture from Victor, but it beats swimming across the Pacific any day!"

The Prochainezo couple and their adopted brother had been caught up in a seajacking incident.

In the end, they safely arrived in Japan. And now they were walking through one of its tourist destinations.

As the incident in question was on such a huge international scale, they normally wouldn't just have been allowed to have a fun vacation as soon as they made port.

However, Claudia gave them some assistance and asked John Drox to count Firo and his family as part of the publicity crew for Japan--and as a result, they came to Japan with Claudia on a chartered plane.

However, they were asked to provide testimony regarding the incident from Japan's side as well. So they were forced to see Victor (who was here to explain the situation) for the first time in a while.

"Count yourselves lucky. Normally they'd never let anyone do this. Coming to Japan just days after going up against a bunch of seajackers? It's the end times, I tell you. Yes! The end is nigh! I almost *wish* I could have it all end right now!"

"Isn't it your job to protect the world?"

"Shut up, you lowlife criminal! Damn it! That studio's got a lot of influence, even on our turf... 'course, it's partly because *Entrance* was miraculously lacking in casualties in comparison to *Exit*. But we're stuck having to monitor everyone who was involved for a while. You'd better thank the McDonnell Company!"

"I thought McDonnell was an airline company, not a film distributor. So even movie companies can pressure you guys?"

"That's right. Also, the airline company's called McDunnel--wait! The FBI does not succumb to any outside influence! Well, the *FBI* doesn't, but as our department deals with immortals, we've received

favours from the film industry to keep the public out of the loop... wait. Why am I telling you all this? Honestly, it'd be different if you were trying for a fresh start, but a criminal like you? Going on a relaxing cruise? You really have no respect for--"

Firo and Czes were subject to half a day of Victor's complaints and lectures.

They spent the second half almost dozing off, but Victor continued rambling passionately, oblivious to the state of his audience.

In any event, although it was possible that they were being watched by Victor's agents, the family of three was now enjoying their tour of Japan.

It seemed that there had been some casualties aboard *Exit*, so Firo worried that he would end up wracked by guilt--but he had made up his mind to go sightseeing anyway, so he could get Ennis and Czes away from that feeling as much as he could.

His cameraman friend was giddily preparing his camera back at the hotel, saying, "I'm going to take lots of pictures this evening". Although Firo wished he would take some pictures for them, it looked like the cameraman was probably going to use up all his film on landscapes.

The cameraman was Japanese, and he was being a tour guide for the family during this trip.

It just so happened that the cameraman had acquaintances aboard the other ship--he was at the hospital to visit them up until yesterday. It seemed that the acquaintance had fallen down the stairs as he set out to see if his lover was okay.

The trio of foreigners left behind their serendipitous friend and wandered the area.

All three of them were well-versed in Japanese. In Czes's case, this was his fifth time in Kyoto. They had no problems walking around without a guide.

This was when Firo suddenly burst out into an apology, to which Ennis and Czes hurriedly responded--

But Firo just shook his head apologetically.

"No... it's all my fault. All this time, I've been scared of old Szilard's memories. I was so confident that I'd be able to protect the two of you without having to use that damn knowledge. If only I looked around for memories I could use earlier... I feel like things would have been solved much more quickly. ...But things are going to be different now."

"Firo..."

Ennis sounded somewhat worried for him, but Firo nodded resolutely.

"I promise. I'll always be myself."

Even though I have Szilard's memories, I'll never become like that old bastard--"

Ennis listened to Firo with a look of joy.

Czes mumbled, "Goodness, that sounds just wonderful" and began fingering the brim of his hat.

But at the next moment--

"And even though I have Lebreau's memories, I'm not going to become like him."

The moment Czes heard this, he raised his head questioningly.

"Huh? What... did you just say?"

"Hm? Oh, uh. Well, I have memories from Lebreau, who got eaten by another alchemist who got eaten by Szilard..."

"What are you talking about, big brother Firo?"

Czes's look of confusion made Firo freeze in place.

And--

"All right, see, Lebreau was devoured by another guy, and then *he* got devoured by Szilard--"

"Ahaha! You're so funny, Firo."

Czes's innocent smile sent question marks popping up in Firo's head.

<=>

An FBI facility in the U.S.

"So... Czes is on a vacation, but we're being kept under arrest..."

Victor averted his eyes from Sylvie's icy gaze, and spoke to Denкуро as if trying to change the topic.

"Well, anyway--it's been years, Denкуро! What? I hear you fell into the sea up north and got turned into a popsicle!"

"...Hm... So even you have heard the rumours, Master Victor..."

Denкуро frowned very slightly and thought for a moment--

"It seems there is no choice. This one supposes 'twould be best to make the truth known rather than to risk humiliation."

"What?"

It wasn't only Victor--even Nile and Sylvie looked at him with looks of interest.

"This one had not fallen on his own. It seems that this one was caught in a plot--trapped in a box in his sleep, and tossed into a crevasse. After all, this one's memories from before falling asleep are still very clear."

"Who'd do something like that? Don't tell me it was old man Szilard? He would've devoured you in your sleep, not thrown you into a crevasse."

As Victor pried even further, Denkuero paused for a moment--and began speaking, having made his decision.

"This one had been ensnared by a man you all know quite well..."

<=>

On the seas.

"I don't think you'll believe me, but I'll say this anyway."

"No, I don't think I'll believe you, either, but I'll have a listen anyway." The Rookie replied sarcastically.

Elmer drew breath and calmly began to reveal the truth.

"Huey isn't the one who killed Monica. Back then, he wasn't the kind of guy who could call the world his experiment. ...no, I guess that was the reason Huey turned out to be the way he is now."

"..."

"Monica wasn't killed by Huey, or me... but another alchemist, who was at the time called a genius rivalling Huey..."

"...Who is that?"

The Rookie asked darkly. Elmer slowly brought up a certain name.

"...Lebreau..."

<=>

A tourist spot in Kyoto.

"Haha! That's a funny joke, Firo!"

And Czes ran off with these words and a laugh.

"Hey, hey, hey! Czes!"

"I'll meet up with you back at the hotel! You two have some alone time with each other, okay?"

Czes just kept running, not even listening to what Firo had to say.

He ran.

Ran.

Ran.

How long had he been running?

He could no longer hear Firo's voice coming after him.

But Czes's tiny form squeezed through the crowds of tourists and ran towards a deserted area, all under the blazing sun.

"Ahaha. Seriously."

Czes found himself talking to himself.

"That Firo, wh-what kind of a bad joke..."

Czes, who had finally reached a location rather devoid of tourists, finally began panting and looked down.

He was at the top of the steps heading down from the shrine.

Czes took a seat on the top step and began to calm his breathing.

But there was no sign of his breathing slowing anytime soon. A childlike smile was plastered over Czes's face, but he was covered in cold sweat.

"Ahaha... hahaha... why would Firo... lie like..."

His breathing was unsteady.

Although his tone was still light, the grin had disappeared from his face somewhere down the line.

With the look of a child being chased by a boogiemán, Czes recalled a traumatic incident from his past.

'What you fear is the unknown.'

The words that the red monster had said to him on the train.

Having been then subjected to heights of pain yet unknown, and an unerasable feeling of terror, Czes was again assaulted by the feeling of unease that had dogged him from the ship, which had gotten much worse than before.

'That's right. It's the unknown.'

'I don't know why Firo would lie like that.'

Something was strange about what Firo had said.

And this one fact wrapped Czes in a chill and made him nauseous.

He realized that he had been smiling to deny these things, but he was now at his limit.

And as he suffered in this gut-wrenching pain--

The voice called to Czes from the bottom of the steps.

"Are you okay, Czes?"

The sound of the flute ceased. The wind stopped.

The man smiled softly at Czes, as if he had been awaiting this particular timing.

And Czes's mind froze.

"...Huh...?"

His voice was nearly extinguished. Czes stared right at the man before him, letting out a noise that wavered between a vocalization and a breath.

The man looked a little embarrassed as he spoke to his old alchemist friend.

"It's been too long, Czes."

His lips were very much suited to this shy grin.

If a certain Smile Junkie were here to see, he would have been happy to see such a truly overjoyed smile.

But the sound that escaped Czes's lips was a sigh quieter than a mosquito tone.

"No... it can't be... it's not possible."

The past that the boy recalled had come back to the present--at the very moment he called out the man's name.

"Fer...met..."

<=>

"The man who ensnared this one is well known to you all..."

Denkuro made his decision and disclosed a certain name.

"...Master **Fermet**."

<=>

"...Lebreau... **Lebreau Fermet Viralesque**..."

Elmer slowly recited the man's name.

Unusually for him, Elmer's smile was very slightly shadowed by something. He began mumbling to himself slowly, looking into the distance.

"I never knew much about him--we never really talked, and he despises me."

Elmer recalled his conversation with Czes on the rooftop of a northern European castle last year.

As Elmer saw the man perhaps once every hundred years or so, he did not have as many memories of him as Huey or Czes. But what was certain was the fact that Fermet was Czes's guardian.

"He always tried to conceal his true self... So no matter what he did, it never really made a big impression."

Although he had nothing but the vaguest memories of this man, whom he had not heard of in decades, Elmer went over his thoughts and slowly recalled what Huey had said about him.

"**Last time I saw Fermet was either 1931 or 1932... Come to think of it, I wonder when Czes devoured him?**"

He remembered Czes's confession on the rooftop.

The tragic story of how, after years of abuse, Czes ended up devouring Fermet.

'Sure, he was evil, but he didn't seem like the type to do something like that to Czes--they were like family...

*He definitely had some strange intentions for Czes, but... I always thought he was the really sinister kind of person who'd **be more discreet about tormenting others when it came to Czes...***

<=>

Somewhere in Kyoto.

"It... can't be..."

'This must be a dream.'

"It can't be..."

'It's just a nightmare.'

The man before the trembling boy smiled softly and spoke nostalgically.

"It looks like you're doing well. Have you fixed that old habit of eating sugar-sprinkled snow?"

"Ah... uaahh... ah..."

"You know, snow contains atmospheric dust particles. And these days they probably contain chemicals too... you'll get a tummyache."

Suddenly--

The world around Czes began distorting.

Before he knew it, he had stilled his breathing, staring down at the man climbing up the steps towards him.

He was physically looking down at the man, but it certainly didn't *feel* that way.

The man's eyes were hidden beneath his curtained bangs--Czes had no way of seeing his eye colour or shape.

It wouldn't be strange to find that he had three eyes under those bangs. That was just how mysterious this man was.

But Czes know that face.

His hair was shorter than before, but the face was all too familiar to him.

"No... no way..."

As Czes repeated these words with an empty heart--the unease that had been haunting him since he boarded the ship instantly expanded--

"Don't be such a stranger, Czes."

And this unease burst like a balloon at the man's next words.

"Don't tell me... are you ignoring me?"

"Ah..."

Czes screamed softly and leapt back.

But his legs would not move anymore.

They would not even budge.

The man was now right below him on the steps--he stopped.

"Czes... my cute, clever Czes. I bet I know what you're thinking right now! 'How is this guy still alive?'"

"...Ah... aaaaahhhh..."

"That's right! You're thinking, '**I know I devoured him!**', right, Czes?"

"...Ah.... uh... aaaaaahhhhhh..."

Czes's mouth twitched as he let out his breaths in gasps. The man's lips curled into a grin.

"Looks like I was right. What a relief. You haven't changed one bit, little Czes."

The man sighed as if he was truly relieved.

"You see, I know you best, Czes."

"H-how... how... how?! How?! How?!"

The boy struggled to squeeze out these words, but the man ignored them.

"This was a very, very difficult job. But it was *all* worth it in the end. It's very important for an immortal to have a passion for life, Czes. If you lose that passion, you'll end up a walking corpse, just like Begg."

And with these words--

The man who was at once the Mask Maker weapon Life, the Demolisher who had brought Carnea onto the ship, and the man who was an executive of SAMPLE thought back to his 'game'.

"Oh, I was so, so happy to see you on *Entrance*, Czes. I almost ended up taking off my mask and goggles. I was worried you would ask me who I was, since I can't use a fake name in front of you. That's what scared me into letting you go back then."

"Ah..."

The man in the combat suit that Czes had run into on the ship.

Even knowing that that was Fermet, Czes's voice would not return.

"The best thing about being an immortal, you see, is that we can live all kinds of lives, Czes. Ahh... and if you live so many lives like this, you can even make wonderful toys like Illness, Carnea, and Luchino Campanella. I can't rank them, but... since you're here, Czes, I'll say that you're the one most special to me."

As Czes remained rooted to the spot, Fermet slowly whispered to him.

"Are you happy? You can smile, you know."

"... No... no... you can't... be... Fermet."

Czes desperately tried to reject the reality unfolding before him. Fermet withdrew his smile and shook his head.

"Let me say this--I'm not a clone, and I'm not a fake. *I am* the Fermet who was aboard the Advenna Avis with you."

"Ah... ah."

As Czes struggled to find his voice, Fermet finally spoke the forbidden words.

"Now, here we have a little conundrum."

"..."

A question that Czes wanted to stop himself from asking.

"If this is the case... who was the 'me' that you devoured before?"

"...!!!"

Czes's mind went blank.

As Fermet was standing on a lower step, Czes reflexively reached out his right hand and placed it on his head.

All he had to do now was think, "I want to eat" and Fermet's life would end.

Everything would be absorbed into Czes's mind.

But even so--

"Before, you could devour me, Czes."

The man spoke with an even friendlier tone than before.

But his next words would be a critical blow against Czes.

"But, the way you are now... **you can't devour me, can you?**"

"----"

Czes felt sick to his stomach.

Even though *he* was the one holding Fermet's life in his hands, his thoughts froze and refused to move.

His instincts screamed, "don't devour him".

His soul as an immortal told him that the man before him was pure poison.

"----"

Czes remained frozen and dumbstruck.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

With a happy, cheerful, overjoyed grin--

"See? I told you so. I know you best, Czes... Hahahahahahaha! Hahahahahahahahaha!"

Fermet began laughing in a voice that made him sound like a completely different person. Tourists walking in the distance began turning heads in their direction.

Having realized their disturbed glances, Fermet quietly calmed himself--

"Well, **let's play again sometime**, Czes."

With a soft smile, he patted the boy on the head with his right hand.

"Of course, you never know when I'll come see you again--maybe tomorrow, or in a hundred years..."

The boy did not resist, despite the imminent threat of death upon his head.

To Czes, it felt as if Fermet had then vanished--faded away like a summer mirage.

Of course, this was just wishful thinking.

"Oh! There you are, Czes! Sorry! I shouldn't have just blurted out that guy's name like that... I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Firo was saying something to him, but Czes did not listen.

However, the presence of Firo--his family--led him to a realization.

That this was reality, not some nightmare or a dream.

"Ah. Ah... Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh...!"

"C-Czes?!"

"WAAAAAAHHHHHHH...! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

The first sound that escaped Czes when he regained his voice was--

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH! WAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Something that sounded just like a lost child of Czes's physical age, crying out for his parents.

<=>

And as the boy's sobs rang out into the distance--

"Oh, what a wonderful sound. How exciting."

The culprit (in more ways than one) responsible for Czes's tears boldly walked through the streets.

"I said too much back there. 'Course, I guess it's not too strange to get excited to talk to Czes for the first time in a while."

His tone was different from when was speaking to Czes.

It was not the tone of Life, or the Demolisher.

As he returned to his true voice, one which he had hidden from all on the Advenna Avis, the man walked forward under the sunlight--as if to flaunt his previously hidden existence to the entire world.

Suddenly, a ringtone of a song from a famous English band began ringing from his pocket.

[...How are you, Fermet?]

The voice on the other end belonged to an immortal who had not been involved in this incident.

"Hey, Huey! What's up? You angry 'cause I used your name without asking?"

[...Of course not. The actions of a guinea pig are still nothing but a part of my experiment.]

The man, speaking in a truly emotionless tone, merely inquired about his own curiosities.

[By the way... that elixir you gave to your allies--]

"Don't worry. I gave three of 'em the incomplete formula. And they're not even my allies. Just a bunch of one-off tools."

The young man was looking at a large station wagon parked in the direction he was walking towards.

Inside the car were the uninjured gorilla-faced man and Bride's two secretaries, who seemed to have been able to escape somehow.

[Let me ask you this. What was it you were planning to accomplish by sinking these two ships?]

Huey Laforet asked, as if he already knew the answer.

And in reply--the mere criminal who didn't even count as a terrorist answered with a look of sheer elation.

"It's just that... Czes looked so happy. Now, I love smiles, but--"

Huey Laforet knew.

That Fermet's answer, although it sounded like an excuse, was actually the honest truth.

"I just wanted to see him in tears again!"

In reality, Fermet had not once lied or hidden any secrets.

He wanted to pester 'toys' like Czes, Carnea, and Luchino.

That was the simple truth.

And the young man, who caused everything for this one purpose--smiled refreshingly and looked up at the blue skies over Kyoto.



Lebreau Fernet Viralesque.

Or, a man who had been devoured by Czes. Or a man who had been devoured by another alchemist.

The man who was to Czes--and the other immortals--the 'lowest' and the 'worst'--

Returned to their world.

Confidently and fearlessly.



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