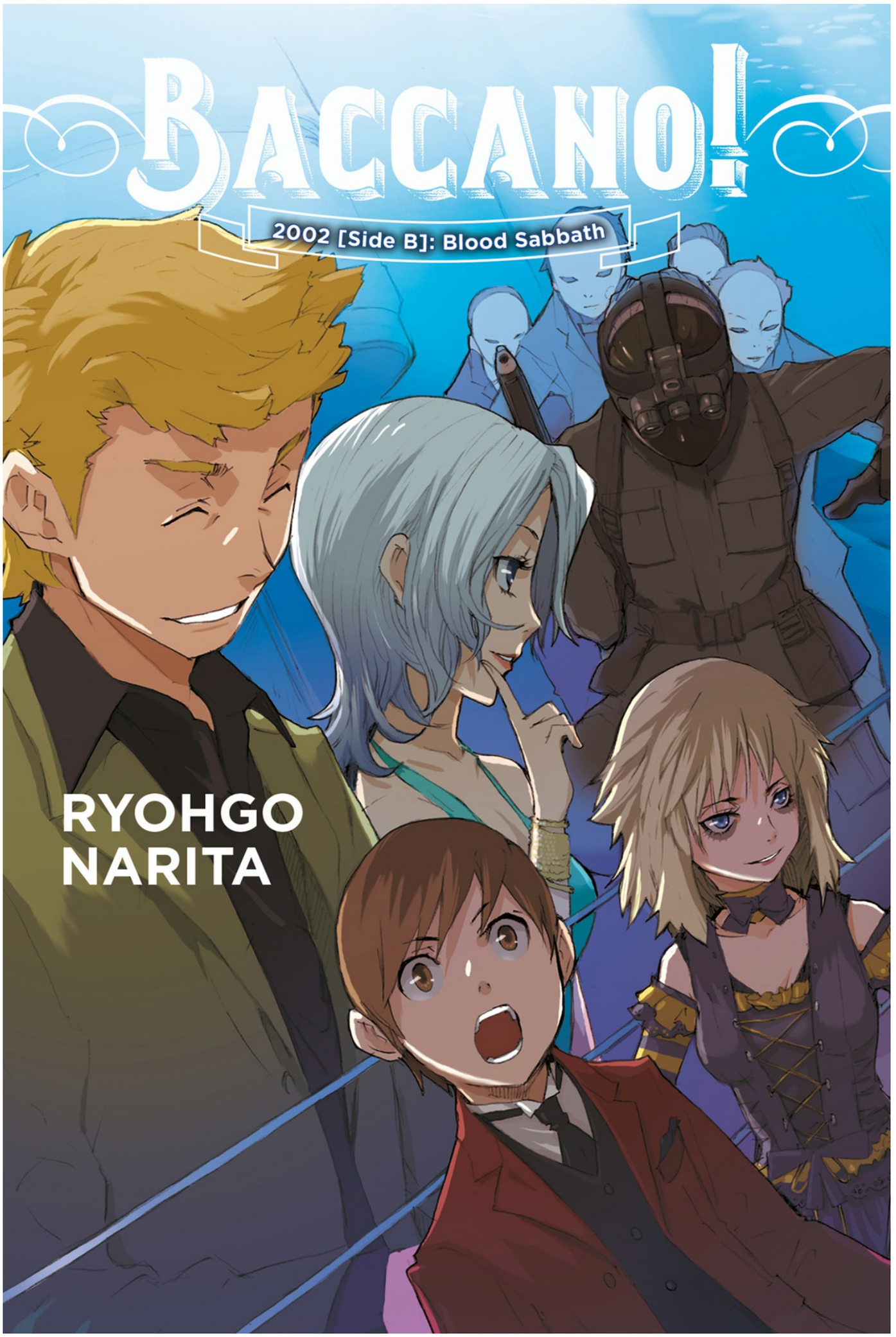
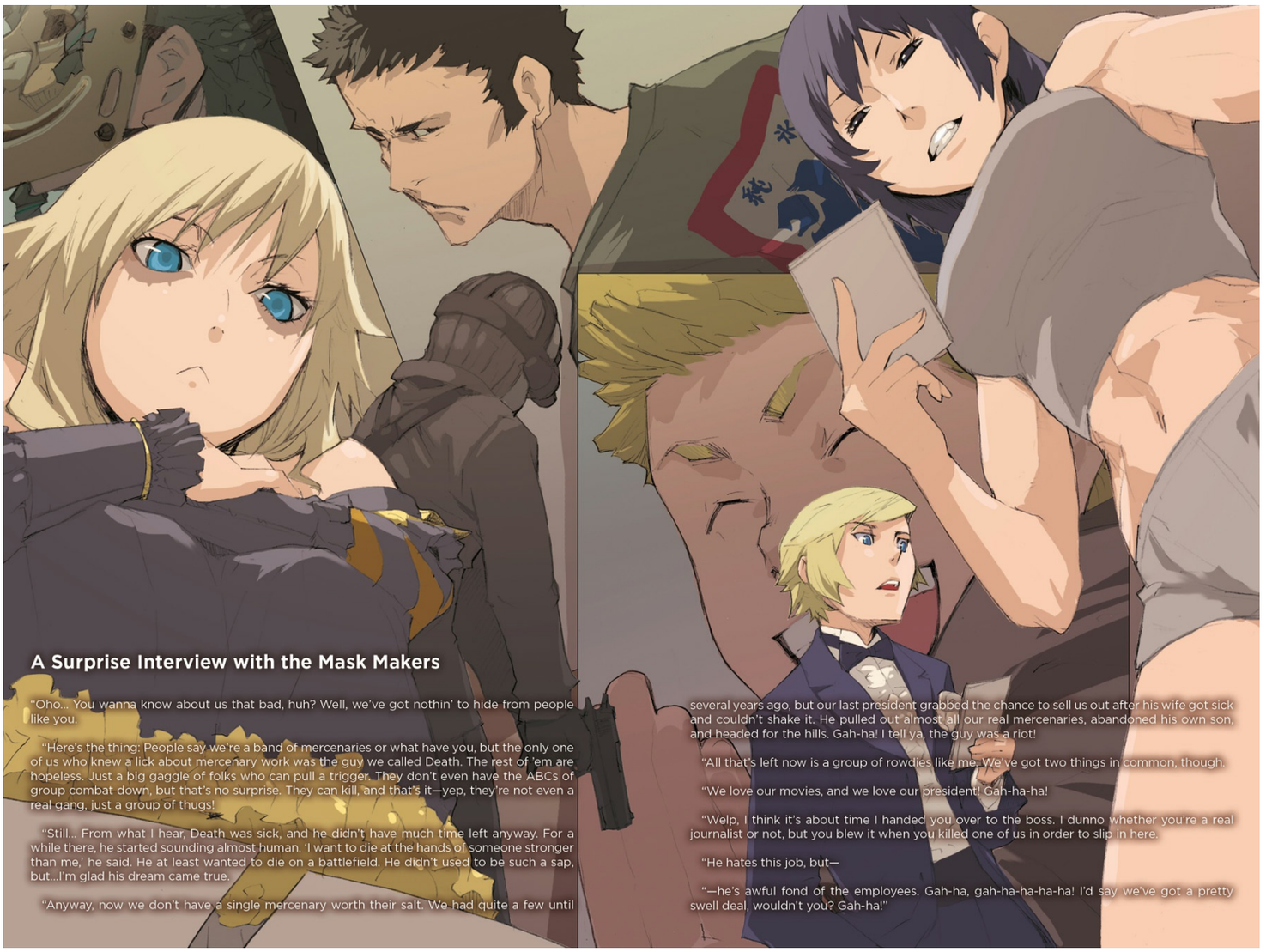
BACCANO!

2002 [Side B]: Blood Sabbath



RYOHGO NARITA

BACCANO!
2002 [SIDE B]: BLOOD SABBATH
RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY
KATSUMI ENAMI



A Surprise Interview with the Mask Makers

"Oho... You wanna know about us that bad, huh? Well, we've got nothin' to hide from people like you.

"Here's the thing: People say we're a band of mercenaries or what have you, but the only one of us who knew a lick about mercenary work was the guy we called Death. The rest of 'em are hopeless. Just a big gaggle of folks who can pull a trigger. They don't even have the ABCs of group combat down, but that's no surprise. They can kill, and that's it—yep, they're not even a real gang, just a group of thugs!

"Still... From what I hear, Death was sick, and he didn't have much time left anyway. For a while there, he started sounding almost human. 'I want to die at the hands of someone stronger than me,' he said. He at least wanted to die on a battlefield. He didn't used to be such a sap, but...I'm glad his dream came true.

"Anyway, now we don't have a single mercenary worth their salt. We had quite a few until several years ago, but our last president grabbed the chance to sell us out after his wife got sick and couldn't shake it. He pulled out almost all our real mercenaries, abandoned his own son, and headed for the hills. Gah-ha! I tell ya, the guy was a riot!

"All that's left now is a group of rowdies like me. We've got two things in common, though.

"We love our movies, and we love our president! Gah-ha-ha!

"Welp, I think it's about time I handed you over to the boss. I dunno whether you're a real journalist or not, but you blew it when you killed one of us in order to slip in here.

"He hates this job, but—

"—he's awful fond of the employees. Gah-ha, gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I'd say we've got a pretty swell deal, wouldn't you? Gah-ha!"

Report on the Red-and-Black Group from a Journalist at the *Daily Days*

If I were to provide my honest opinion regarding the group SAMPLE, it would be that they are—incomprehensible.

They worship pain as a deity, yet they are attempting to rid themselves of suffering entirely.

According to them, this is because "God must not reside in the self." Disturbingly, they do indeed seem to be incapable of feeling pain.

I do not know how long they have been this way, but it is a fact that someone guided them to their current state.

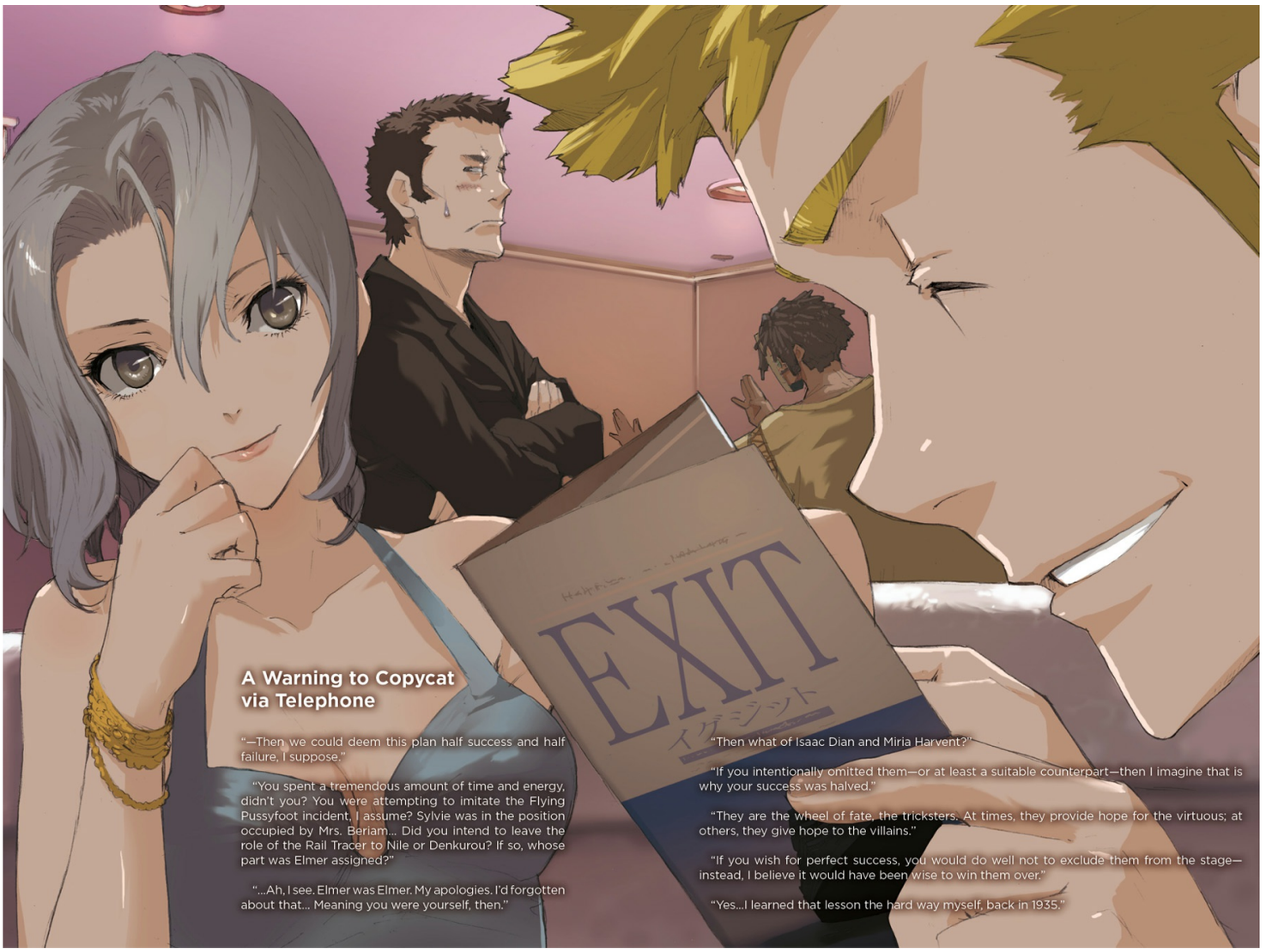
By the standards of the vast majority of the world's religions, this group would deserve to be labeled heretics. Even so, they do not reject other religions. If a practitioner so desires, they are allowed to *belong to another religion as well*.

As a matter of fact, I hear the forty-second leader of SAMPLE was a member of a total of seventy-three religious sects, encompassing everything from the world's three great religions to cultlike groups and even folk religions.

They say this leader ignored all the contradictions therein, ultimately adhering to the doctrine of this religion: "Obey your desires."

And so it may be that in their minds, God is not "pain"...

...but human beings themselves.



A Warning to Copycat via Telephone

"—Then we could deem this plan half success and half failure, I suppose."

"You spent a tremendous amount of time and energy, didn't you? You were attempting to imitate the Flying Pussyfoot incident, I assume? Sylvie was in the position occupied by Mrs. Beriam... Did you intend to leave the role of the Rail Tracer to Nile or Denkurou? If so, whose part was Elmer assigned?"

"...Ah, I see. Elmer was Elmer. My apologies. I'd forgotten about that... Meaning you were yourself, then."

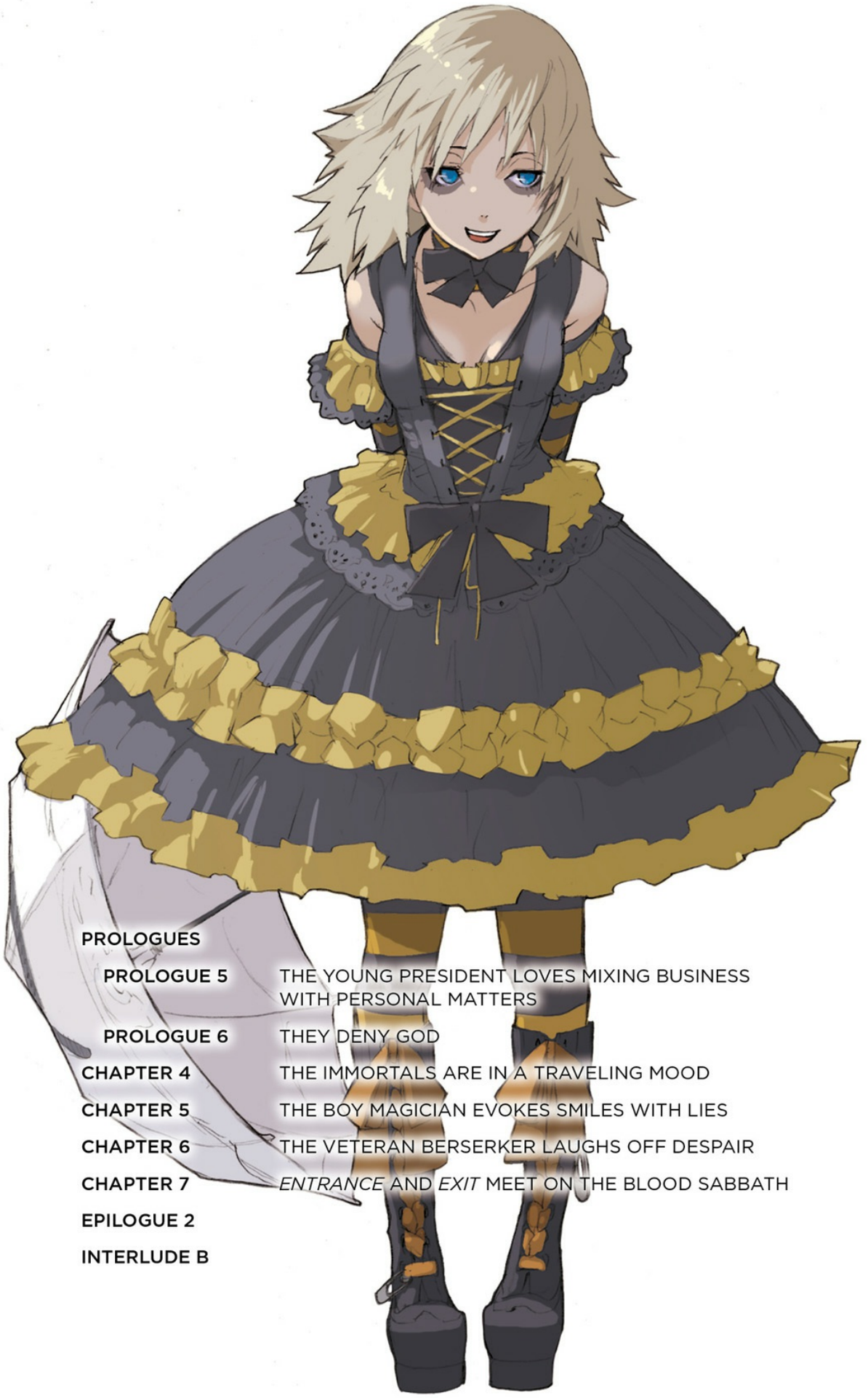
"Then what of Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent?"

"If you intentionally omitted them—or at least a suitable counterpart—then I imagine that is why your success was halved."

"They are the wheel of fate, the tricksters. At times, they provide hope for the virtuous; at others, they give hope to the villains."

"If you wish for perfect success, you would do well not to exclude them from the stage—instead, I believe it would have been wise to win them over."

"Yes...I learned that lesson the hard way myself, back in 1935."



PROLOGUES

PROLOGUE 5 THE YOUNG PRESIDENT LOVES MIXING BUSINESS WITH PERSONAL MATTERS

PROLOGUE 6 THEY DENY GOD

CHAPTER 4 THE IMMORTALS ARE IN A TRAVELING MOOD

CHAPTER 5 THE BOY MAGICIAN EVOKES SMILES WITH LIES

CHAPTER 6 THE VETERAN BERSERKER LAUGHS OFF DESPAIR

CHAPTER 7 *ENTRANCE* AND *EXIT* MEET ON THE BLOOD SABBATH

EPILOGUE 2

INTERLUDE B

BACCANO!

2002 [Side B]: Blood Sabbath

VOLUME 13

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

BACCANO!, Volume 13: 2002 [SIDE B]: BLOOD SABBATH

RYOHGO NARITA

Translation by Taylor Engel Cover art by Katsumi Enami

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

BACCANO! Vol.13

©Ryohgo Narita 2007

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2007 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2020 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: April 2020

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Narita, Ryōgo, 1980– author. | Engel, Taylor, translator.

Title: Baccano! / Ryohgo Narita ; translation by Taylor Engel.

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2016– Identifiers: LCCN 2015045300 | ISBN 9780316270366 (v. 1 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316270397 (v. 2 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316270410 (v. 3 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316270434 (v. 4 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316558662 (v. 5 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442275 (v. 6 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442312 (v. 7 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442329 (v. 8 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442343 (v. 9 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442367 (v. 10 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975356859 (v. 11 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975384715 (v. 12 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975384739 (v. 13 : hardback) Subjects: CYAC: Science fiction. | Nineteen twenties—Fiction. | Organized crime—Fiction. | Prohibition—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.N37 Bac 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015045300

ISBNs: 978-1-97538473-9 (hardcover) 978-1-9753-8474-6 (ebook)

E3-20200312-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologues

Prologue 5—The Young President Loves Mixing Business with Personal Matters

Prologue 6—They Deny God

Chapter 4: The Immortals Are in a Traveling Mood

Interlude

Chapter 5: The Boy Magician Evokes Smiles with Lies

Interlude

Chapter 6: The Veteran Berserker Laughs Off Despair

Interlude

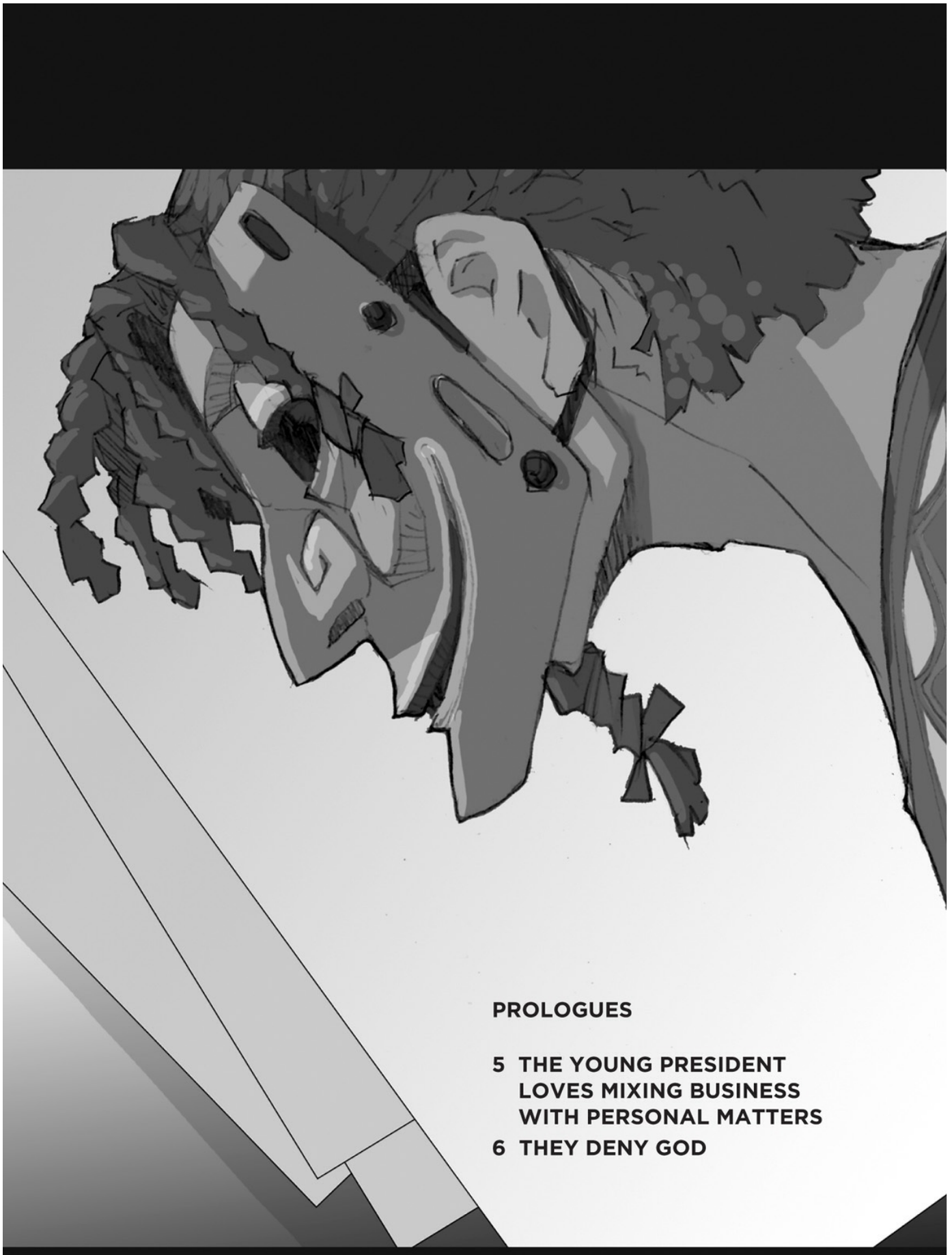
Chapter 7: *Entrance* and *Exit* Meet on the Blood Sabbath

Epilogue 2

Middleword

Interlude B

Yen Newsletter



PROLOGUES

5 THE YOUNG PRESIDENT LOVES MIXING BUSINESS WITH PERSONAL MATTERS

6 THEY DENY GOD

Prologue 5—The Young President Loves Mixing Business with Personal Matters

Let me tell you an old story—the story of how we came to be.

It's a tale from the distant past, from long, long ago, long before World War II broke out, and even before the first, a century before the hero known as the Corsican Fiend, or Ogre, built his empire, all the way back when Europe was embroiled in the War of the Spanish Succession.

Will you listen?

You will, won't you?

Can you hear me?

You can, can't you?

Oh, good.

I thought you might be dead already. I suppose you want to be spared—and if so, then you should listen well.

Our organization is said to have originated near the beginning of the 1700s, in the remote Italian countryside. Specifically, a port town that was rather well-developed for its rural location.

I'm sure you already know, but it's this town. The one we're in right now.

Oh, I'm sorry. You can't see anymore, can you?

That's a shame. I would have liked to show you more of the townscape.

How did it come to be, you ask? One possible answer is that it was "incited."

At first, the Mask Maker was an individual. When that individual roused a group of abused children to action, the Mask Maker became a monster. Then, after one insane boy inspired the first individual, the monster became a jester—and when a second boy became involved, the jester was transformed into an

organization.

I imagine none of that made much sense to you.

It's fine if you don't understand. That part isn't important.

Once they had become an organization, the Mask Makers gradually permeated the town. Yes, it is an odd turn of phrase, but *permeate* is the best word for it.

If I had to explain, I might call it…

…a poison.

Yes, the Mask Makers were both a love potion and a poison. And as they spread little by little through the town, they built up their power.

There's no telling what they intended to use it for. Those feelings and wishes gradually vanished, while the power alone was passed down from generation to generation.

All the way to ours.

Wealth, military might, influence all accumulated, bit by bit, away from the eyes of others.

Gradually, the shape of the organization changed, as did its raison d'être, while its core consisted of pure power.

After constantly changing through the years, we are the end result.

We are the group you know, the one you have continued to pursue—

—the humble *commercial organization* known as the Mask Makers.

…Me?

Do I need to introduce myself?

I believe you've already *guessed*, in a general way.

You do have a point, though.

No doubt you want proof that your actions had meaning.

So I will tell you, at the end.

Just now, I told one lie.

As a matter of fact, the Mask Makers did leave behind one thing—only one—in addition to power.

I told you that the first Mask Maker was an individual.

Her name was…Monica. Monica Campanella, though her real name was Monica Boroñal.

Yes, she was a girl.

From what I hear, she became the Mask Maker when she was still only fifteen or so.

Although she was a daughter of the distinguished House of Boroñal, she had committed a murder that could never be publicly disclosed, and so, in lieu of punishment, her name was taken from her.

The girl fell in love with a boy, and the Mask Maker came into being for his sake and his alone. Then, as I said earlier, he and another boy inspired her to reinvent the Mask Maker as an organization.

In the end—

—she was killed by the one she loved.

She was murdered without ceremony.

What a fool my ancestor was, wouldn't you say, to be used and murdered by her beloved?

I also have the blood of a monstrous villain. After all, he went so far as to give his lover a child; then, when he had no more use of her, he brutally took her life.

…Yes. That's right.

Just before she died, Monica Campanella had a child, whose blood has been passed down through the ages and protected by the power of the Mask Makers.

Her blood and the blood of her murderer have flowed through the generations—all the way to me.

Luchino B. Campanella.

Your pursuit of this humble young magician has led you all the way to my true identity.

What sort of person am I? That's easy.

I'm the person who's about to kill you. I can't have you telling anyone, after all.

…Don't be so frightened, please.

You wanted to know about us, didn't you? And now you do.

It's an equal trade. You poked your nose in, so I'll dispose of you.

That's all it is.

I believe I gave you more than enough warnings. It's a pity.

I'm not interested in you.

Whether you're a journalist from some newspaper or a member of an enemy organization or some associate of an individual we eliminated in the past—whether you were motivated by curiosity or business or the thirst for revenge—it's all the same.

I have no choice but to kill you. It's sad, but there it is.

Refrain from struggling, if you would. I don't want to miss my mark. For your sake.

That said, your arms, legs, and lower back are already broken, so I doubt you have any real way to struggle.

One last magic trick, then—

Look at this silver stiletto.

I will make this sharp, gleaming, triangular blade disappear in the blink of an eye.

I think you'll understand how the trick is done quite easily.

It's very simple.

I'm going to hide it inside you.

Just like this.

With one stab, he took the man’s life.

I killed him.

The moment the blade went in, there was a light, simple *crunch*.

I killed him.

The blade plunged deep into the man, angling from his throat toward his brain. Every so often, there were soft squeaks as friction acted on something damp inside.

I killed him.

However, the victim himself never heard those unpleasant noises. His mind had already left this world.

I killed him.

The one who had stabbed him was young, more boy than man. He pulled the stiletto out from under the corpse’s jaw, shifted his grip on it, then briskly turned on his heel and shrugged at the handful of men and women standing nearby.

I killed him.

“Dispose of the corpse promptly, please.”

I killed him.

The boy, who still had a few years left in his teens, glanced emotionlessly at the corpse, then turned away with apparent disinterest.

I killed him.

There was no light from outside in this underground room, only the ice-cold fluorescent light reflecting off the concrete walls and floor.

Several men stood in a row in front of the boy who’d called himself Luchino. They nodded to signal that they’d understood, then surrounded the corpse with practiced movements.

The boy didn’t wait and watch them clean up. Quietly, he left the room.

Luchino B. Campanella, commonly known as Rookie.

He was both the face of the group known as the Mask Makers and its newest member.

As far as age went, he and Illness were peers, but she’d been in the organization longer than he had. The president was also the rookie.

The boy’s subordinates had tagged him with that on-the-nose nickname, but he didn’t complain about it. In their presence, his expression was always perfectly cool.

Publicly, the Mask Makers were mercenaries of a sort. Privately, they weren’t much different.

The one disparity was that in peaceful cities in nations like Japan or Great Britain—places not involved in war or violent internal strife—they’d undertake contract killings as if it was nothing.

You might call them hitmen who’d organized. They supplemented their individual skills with the organization’s power and financial clout. If someone employed them, they’d show up, no matter what sort of trouble it was. Even if the request was for a crime, they’d treat it as a job and employ violence without a blush.

Their employers were a diverse group, from average citizens to mafia syndicates and large corporations, and the Mask Makers safeguarded their secrets completely.

Although they were ostensibly mercenaries, they hadn’t taken a single actual job on that front.

This was because they had absolutely no skills as “mercenaries” or soldiers. They weren’t an organization designed to efficiently massacre the enemy. They were simply a group that specialized in committing crimes.

They were similar to a gang of thieves or the mafia itself; their equipment might have been cutting-edge, but that was it. They were a group of ruffians who would go anywhere and do anything, as long as someone gave them an

objective.

As a third hidden face, they had manufactured false precious metals and counterfeit bills until a decade or so previously. But their expertise in that line of work had already been lost, and it wouldn't have been possible for the current organization to begin it again.

The one in charge of this violent organization was a lone boy with blond hair. He had the face of a child, but the cruel expression of someone with an ice-cold heart.

Today, he'd dispatched another unfortunate busybody with his own hand and left the bloody corpse behind, wearing that expression like a mask.

Letting his subordinates handle the corpse disposal, as he always did—

I killed him.

Leaving the room, as he always did—

I killed him. I killed him.

Climbing the stairs, as he always did—

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

Stepping into the bathroom, as he always did—

I killed him. I killed him.

Entering a stall and closing the door, as he always did—

I killed him.

Still wearing that heartless expression, as he always did—

He violently expelled the contents of his stomach into the toilet. As he always did.

“Gahk…!”

I killed him.

I killed him.

I killed him.

While the gastric fluid spilled from his mouth, tears spilled from his eyes. His tongue tasted nasty and sour.

I killed him.

I killed him.

I killed him.

A soundless voice whispered in the boy’s brain over and over.

It echoed like a curse, determined not to let him forget what he’d just done.

I killed him.

I killed him.

I killed him.

It was me. I killed him.

Every time he heard the voice, he could feel it again—the dull, heavy, *squiggish* sensation that had traveled through his wrists when he’d stabbed the man’s throat.

That wasn’t all.

He’d killed many people up till now in the same way.

Their faces rose again in the boy’s mind, all at once, becoming vengeful ghosts tormenting him.

You killed us.

Killedkilledkilledkilledkilled.

You *You*

You *You* *You*

You *You* *You*

You *You* *You* *You* *You* *You*

You *You* *You* *You* *You* *You*

You killed us.

“Gah…! Aaah…”

That pressure was coming back, as if all his organs were turning inside out. He couldn’t hold it down, and stomach acid worked its way up his throat again.

This happened over and over and over again, until he’d run out of even gastric fluids. Only then did the boy finally begin to get his breathing under control.

How many times did I just throw up? he thought, setting his hands on the edge of the sink once he’d flushed the toilet and left the stall. *Eight—or no, nine?*

It wouldn’t do any good to remember, and the curse-like voices had already vanished from his mind. His expression still calm, he wiped his red eyes with a handkerchief.

Rookie kept looking down for a few minutes. Then, after he was sure his eyes were no longer bloodshot, he left the bathroom.

“Well? Feel a little better now, President?” someone called to him when he opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

“…Aging…”

Slowly, he turned to face a very large person leaning against the wall.

Aging stood up and sauntered over to the boy, towering above him at well over six feet in height. This underling of his was a seasoned veteran, despite being only around thirty years old, give or take.

“Still not used to it, huh?” Aging said with a grin. “Well, Illness loses her

cookies after she kills people, too."

"I don't know what you're talking about. If you don't have a job to do, you could have a nice day at home, you know." Rookie responded not as the president, but with a relative gentleness more befitting of his age, and he got another grin in return.

By listening to this conversation, someone might have assumed the one needling Rookie was much older, but the raw physical energy of Aging's body made it clear that was not the case.

Aging's short-sleeved shirt and shorts exposed arms and legs as well muscled as a bodybuilder's—more like a bundle of skin-colored wires than human flesh. Every inch was toned muscle, as thick and sturdy as a tire and perfectly lean. Legs especially—imagine a Greek statue, but chisel the lines even more deeply.

In fact, people might describe Aging as a statue of David with 50 percent more muscle mass and fluid movements, but just as durable—except for one obvious difference around the chest.

Aging had two bulges large enough to warp the shirt covering them, and they were far softer and more elastic than the muscly flesh found elsewhere. Incidentally, the appendage on David's lower body was also absent.

The big, beautiful *woman* looked down at the boy, who only came up to her chest, and gave a good-natured laugh.

"Gah-ha! Ah, c'mon, don't get all bashful on me! Listen, I'm not gonna laugh and call ya pathetic. If you're not used to it, well, living that way is its own kinda fun! Getting used to killing folks certainly ain't all good! But in this day and age, I'd say it's better than being unfamiliar with it!"

From her silhouette alone, you might have assumed she was wearing some sort of powered exoskeleton, but all she had on were light clothes. While she wasn't round enough to be called a muscle-bound meatball, she seemed like a doll made from a tire that had been stretched out by some sort of divine power.

The woman made for an imposing figure simply by standing there, and her face was filled with a wild beauty. As she changed the subject, she wore a frank smile. "It's hard to believe you're really getting on that boat, President. Don't go

doing anything reckless."

"And that's *really* none of your business. I have to settle this particular score personally."

"I admire the get-up-and-go, but what're you gonna do if the worst happens to you?"

"If we find ourselves in that situation, the Mask Makers are finished either way." The president shot her a sharp glare.

Aging guffawed. "Sounds to me like you don't see yourself as a company president at all. Well, as long as you're sure. If that's what you're saying, I've got no complaints, either!" With an uninhibited laugh, the woman went on. "That aside, what are we gonna do about the guy who killed Death? Strike back?"

"If you want to, go right ahead. If you're planning to use the company's combat resources, put in a formal request."

"Hey, it's a little late for a personal grudge. I ain't *that* bored. I don't have a death wish, of course, but when it comes to killing, or me or my buddies getting killed, it's just business."

"…Are you making fun of me?" Rookie shot her an intense glare.

"Nah, I'm not sayin' it's a bad thing to make it personal. Make it as personal as you want, as long as it doesn't start causin' problems. Me, I enjoy the hell out of my job! Or do you think grudges get in the way of business?"

"…No." The young president averted his eyes slightly as he answered. "I don't think they do. Unfortunately, I don't think like the people who believe human hearts and lives can be bought with money. I suppose that level of pragmatism is a talent of sorts, but in any case."

His expression had regained that cold-blooded, masklike quality, and the rookie who'd thrown up in the bathroom was now nowhere to be seen.

"Human lives and peace of mind are a wonderful, priceless thing. They're *profit*."

"Oho…"

"And I'll do anything for that profit." The boy smiled quietly, wearing the

expression of the Mask Makers' president. "I stand to gain from this, too. It's no different from buying a product with an employee discount… That's why I used my own assets and hired you, the Mask Makers, for *additional work* on this job."

"I'm impressed you can hate somebody you've never even met."

"…"

"The client just hired us to capture immortals, right? Can't say I see what that has to do with the goal," she commented matter-of-factly.

"…We can fulfill *their* request by capturing any one of them," the president responded, a little irritated. "If all goes according to plan, there should be at least three immortals on that ship. It should be fine if I take care of one of them."

"My, my, so we're 'taking care of' stuff now, hmm? That's not something you expect to hear from a snot-nosed kid who lost his lunch from killing one lousy guy."

"Shut up, Aging. You Four Afflictions are just tools, weapons we own. You don't have the right to give me your opinion, and I don't intend to listen."

"And now you're lying, President? That's cute."

His callous words didn't seem to have disturbed her at all. Cackling, Aging leaned in until her face was inches from her boss's.

"If you really thought of us as tools, you wouldn't get so cranky every time."

"…"

"Why do you keep pretending to be so coldhearted? Do you feel you owe something to the bloodline that let you inherit this organization? Or do you want revenge on a monster you've never even met? Or do you think one of us is gonna hijack the organization out from under you if you let us see your softer side? Do you think it'll get you killed? Or do you not trust yourself? Maybe you're a little too proud, or—"

She was close enough for him to feel the warmth of her breath as it left her shapely lips.

Rookie involuntarily averted his face.

“This is an order from your president,” he said, turning his back as if he were running away.

He sounded furious.

“Stop looking into my heart.”

On that note, which could have been either childish or an attempt to seem more mature than he was, the president left. As Aging watched him go, she gave a small, brassy chuckle.

“Looking into? It looked to me like you were trying to get me to notice.”

Or do you want somebody to stop you?

Are you hoping somebody’ll say you don’t have to push yourself so hard?

“Gah-ha! …Gah-ha-ha!”

Remembering the words she’d nearly said a moment ago, the woman who was a veteran “tool” kept laughing in that distinctive way.

“Well… Let’s hope these guys end up entertaining me as much as that young president.”

At that, she turned her attention to a few photographs she’d taken out of her shirt.

Each photo seemed to have been secretly taken from a distance.

The faces of several people had been extracted individually and had names written underneath them.

The photo of a man with an odd smile was captioned: Elmer C. Albatross

The man wearing some sort of ethnic mask (nothing like those of the Mask Makers) was tagged with a simple name that might or might not have been his real one: Nile

A photo of a silver-haired woman so bewitchingly beautiful that even Aging couldn’t help falling for her a bit: Sylvie Lumiere

Then there was a stoic Asian man.

He was gazing straight at the viewer, perhaps because he'd noticed the sneak shot as it was being taken: Denkurou Tougou

And then—on the last photograph, there was a red line scrawled right across the neck of its subject.

This last one hadn't been distributed to the staff.

Aging had snatched it from the room without permission. There had been several, but she'd picked out the one that had the most innocuous graffiti.

"…I swear. He never acts like a kid except for dumb stuff like this. What's the point?"

Sighing, Aging looked at the face of the young man in the photograph. The subject was smiling, and his sharp eyes seemed to see through everything.

The name below the face belonged to—

—a terrorist who'd been famous in America more than fifty years earlier: Huey Laforet

"Hmm… He ain't really my type, but…"

Examining the photograph, the woman said what she was thinking out loud.

"…it's true. He does look a lil' bit like the president.

"Maybe it's not total bunk—maybe *this guy really is his ancestor*."

Prologue 6—They Deny God

2002 Summer

Something was very wrong with this church.

A group of several dozen strangely dressed people were assembled in a round room.

They were old and young, men and women; even their races were different. The gathering was quite diverse. You might expect to find any one of them at an ordinary Sunday service, if it weren't for the strange aura around them.

Everyone present, adults and children, was dressed in the same way.

The actual type of clothing varied, but it was clear from a glance that they belonged in the same category. All the garments had the same odd design in red and black. The young men's jackets, the women's dresses, the children's pullovers, and the old men's robes were all covered in the same two colors.

All the lights were turned off, but the moonlight streaming in from an overhead skylight illuminated the place more brightly than one would have expected.

This room was perfectly silent except for the sound of breathing, and here—

—everyone stood around an empty altar. The strange, round fixture was positioned in the center of the room.

They didn't pray, and they didn't kneel. They just stood there silently, at ease.

Then, when the moonlight was nearly at its brightest—

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

At first glance, the man at the head of the group looked like a research student who'd snuck out of a lab. The moonlight reflecting off his glasses hid the color of the eyes behind them. He held a large bundle of loose documents

under his arm, and there were several ballpoint pens in his breast pocket.

He was the very picture of a researcher, except for one thing.

His “lab coat” wasn’t white.

An odd pattern in red and black covered every inch of the fabric, as if it had laid waste to an ordinary lab coat.

“Hiya! Sorry to be late! That last boss was tougher than I expected. Had to hit Continue five times!”

With that, the mood was shattered, and the man walked over in front of the altar with a clownish grin.

“Still, you know how it is with these modern shooters! The bullets like fireworks around you, the thrill of dodging and weaving among them—it’s exhilarating! Just for that moment, you rule the world! It’s magnificent. A toast to the technical skills of the Japanese developers, who have *made* toast of yours truly,” the man rambled, placing the bundle of paper on the altar. Perhaps he was talking to the group, or perhaps he was merely talking to himself.

The children who’d come in with him dispersed to stand in a ring around the room, and a few adults lined up beside the man.

Two young women stood on his left and right, and two odd-looking men stood on either side of this group.

One was a big man who resembled a gorilla, while the other man wore a black suit and had bandages wound around his face. The bandaged man in particular was eerie in a way that made *bizarre* a better descriptor for him than *odd*. The bandages themselves were stained with the same red and black as the people around him; in fact, it was questionable whether they were even bandages at all.

His face and neck were completely hidden, and he was wearing bright-red leather gloves.

It wasn’t possible to tell the man’s age or race, and he made the already creepy scene even more uncomfortable…

But the young man in the red-and-black lab coat didn’t seem to care, and in

fact he seemed completely unconcerned. “Okay, okay, okay, quiet down! Quiet! Wait, I guess I’m the only one talking. Beg your pardon, folks! I’m a really shy person, and this is… Well, you know? Standing here with all of you makes me terribly, terribly nervous! …So there’s no way around that, really.”

He adjusted his glasses and looked around, but he didn’t make eye contact with anybody. Despite his rather foolish grin, his gaze was darting around through empty space in a patently dubious way.

“Besides, uh, you know what I mean. We have someone new with us today—a woman. Problem is, I really can’t talk to women, truly… So, uh, let’s have a round of applause! Everybody, clap! Give it up for our new friend, Miss Lucotte!” the young man cried in an attempt to disguise his nervousness.

He held out his hand to a young woman standing among this odd group.

She was dressed in an outfit with the same colored design as the lab coat. As she took an embarrassed step forward, she thought to herself: *What the hell is this?*

The thought was full of confusion and contempt.

One month previously Somewhere in Europe Celice Artia was an employee at a detective agency, and her fate was decided the moment her boss—whom she hardly ever saw—tapped her on the shoulder.

“You want me to infiltrate them for a report…sir?” she asked, confused.

“Yep,” he answered casually. “It’s a mildly problematic religious group with some characteristics distinctly similar to those of a cult that was active in the past.”

None of this was unusual.

For the right price, this detective agency would conduct fairly risky investigations that were kept separate from its usual business.

They had probed into the seamier areas of various societies before, including the occasional background check of mafiosi and politicians using illegal methods. Celice herself had made contact with various criminals and gangs of

thieves.

Her work had brought her to religious groups a few times as well, and it wasn't as if she'd never felt that her life was in danger.

However, this was the first time she'd heard a job referred to as "infiltration."

Naturally, there were other employees who did that sort of thing, but she couldn't understand why this job had come to her.

Even as those thoughts ran through her head, Celice asked her supervisor about the details.

"A cult from the past… How long ago are we talking?"

"A good while. Just about three centuries."

"Huh?"

"Way back when—I dunno exactly where it started; I think Spain or Portugal—this group of religious weirdos was scattered all over Europe. It was more an ideology than a religion, really… Anyway, now there's a new sect cropping up with the same mind-set. God knows why now, of all times. All the details are in here, so take a look." With that, Celice's boss held a single CD-ROM out to her. "Give it a skim, then decide whether you'll take the job. I can't force you to pick this one up." Once he'd said his piece, he left.

She gazed at the CD-ROM uncertainly for a little while, but eventually, she realized she'd never get anywhere if she didn't at least look at it.

And so she loaded the data into her computer and opened it.

As a result, she ended up inside that peculiar church.

What is this? Some kind of joke?

The religious group was called SAMPLE.

It was a ridiculous name, in her opinion.

According to what she knew, this sect was descended from another that had been found all across Europe several hundred years ago. That ideology hadn't been widespread; it was more of a localized collection of isolated groups here

and there.

She didn't know whether those scattered units had been in contact with one another. One thing was clear, however: At one time, there had been untold numbers of them, and then, in the blink of an eye, that number had plunged.

During the infamous witch hunts, they had been true heretics.

They hadn't split off from some larger religion; apparently, they'd had their own completely independent doctrine and faith.

Still, they would have been considered blasphemous not just in the eyes of the largest, most prosperous religion in that area but probably by most regions and religious denominations around the world.

Child murder.

Of all the customs condemned as heresy the world over, theirs was no doubt the most heretical.

Yes, the sacred books of a few religions did include child sacrifice, but in the case of SAMPLE, the word *sacrifice* didn't hold quite the right nuance.

When she'd seen the passage about the deliberate abuse of children for faith-based reasons, she'd initially assumed it was some sort of sacrificial act, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

The children's blood and souls weren't offered up to a god, or to nature, or to any sort of higher power.

It was written that they had offered "pain" to the children and treated their screams—or their deaths—as an object of worship.

She hadn't understood what it meant. What sort of beliefs could lead to such behavior?

Even stranger, the reason for inflicting that pain wasn't clearly defined.

Its significance seemed to change depending on the specific subsect, and some of the remaining records had described groups whose ideology had been more like magic, the polar opposite of faith: "If you eat the flesh of a child, you will become immortal."

Over a period from the end of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth, the church had sent out its chivalric order and destroyed a certain country's particular sect, which was considered to be the most influential.

The philosophy behind that group's child-killings had been "Making them shoulder all the misfortune in the world."

As an idea, it wasn't something she couldn't understand in the first place, but she couldn't fathom acting on it in an era when the witch hunts were almost over.

That said, fanatical groups were responsible for all kinds of incidents, even in the present.

Maybe they'd chosen the deviant course of sacrificing their own children because they'd lost sight of what was around them.

Of course, it was probably deviant only as far as her own sensibilities were concerned; within their community, it had been normal.

Still…that faith has been resurrected in the present? What's going on?

When she read through more of the data, she learned that the group seemed to spontaneously well up from time to time, even today. According to one theory, there might have been a main organization that had existed all along, with factions that showed up in mainstream society every now and then.

Was the organization she was infiltrating the main one, or a faction, or a group that had simply seen and copied past records?

She had to admit she'd been curious about that.

However, her main reason for accepting the job had been the enormous reward listed on the job order.

There was also the fact that it all seemed very unreal, and she hadn't been as wary of the group as she should have been.

…And so she had acquired the official identity of a stranger named Lucotte and flown to another country to infiltrate the religious group in question.

The request itself was a simple one: After the clients' son had joined that

religion, he had started contacting them less and less frequently. Something seemed odd, so they wanted Celice's company to look into it.

In cases like this, since the individual had made a voluntary decision, it was hard for the police to take action unless there was a clear crime. They'd requested an infiltration to find out whether the group was doing anything criminal.

With a record like this, you'd think the police would've cracked down on them a long time ago.

The group's own doctrine embraced child abuse and murder. Technically, she thought it was weird that it hadn't been broken up already, but she managed to accept the fact after thinking about it for a while.

Well, if they said all that was three hundred years in the past, I guess even the police wouldn't cross-examine them about it.

In addition, there were no signs that they were actually kidnapping children; they seemed less harmful than a gathering that played at devil worship as a hobby.

The data she'd received from her boss had contained almost no information about this present organization; they didn't seem to be living communally, and they had no restrictions on time or location.

They really do seem like a group of hobbyists.

With some chagrin, Celice had made contact with the group—

—but there were a few things she hadn't noticed.

The intelligence in the data file she'd received from her boss was factual—but she didn't know he'd obtained it from a dedicated information broker. Nor that this person could obtain intel that wasn't ordinarily in open circulation…and that the file fell into that category.

From the fact that the group had no restrictions regarding time or place and the fact that they hadn't been marked by the police, she'd mistakenly assumed that the people around them knew.

If she'd done some checking around on the Internet, she probably would have

realized.

Both the general public and the police were almost entirely unaware of the organization's existence.

Even the clients, who were the young man's parents, probably didn't know about the religion's past or its origins.

The perfection of the data had made her careless; none of this should ever have seen the light of day.

In other words, the information broker her company had used had been too good.

There was also one miscalculation that had nothing to do with her: Her boss had been stingy with the broker's fee.

As a result—the broker hadn't included any "deeper" information in the data.

The deepest, most vital information…

"Even today, that group is extremely dangerous. If you don't want to ruin your life, you must not get involved with them."

Information that could have changed Celice's fate.

And so, with no way of knowing any of this, Celice—who was pretending to be someone named Lucotte—gave an incredibly reluctant internal sigh.

Is this literally a children's club?

She'd managed to contact them with startling ease. They'd initially asked her, "Who told you about this organization?" but that was all; they hadn't truly interrogated her or been wary of her at all.

And now, three days after she'd made contact, they'd said they'd introduce her to the religion's founder.

I swear—this is going so well, it's frightening. With a group this soft, infiltrating them is a piece of cake.

Even as she scoffed inwardly, Celice spoke respectfully to the young man in front of her.

"Yes…I'm pleased to share the same faith as the rest of you."

“Oh, no, no! Don’t be so stiff! There’s no need for such formality here. Just act however you like!” The bespectacled young man smiled awkwardly.

At the moment, he seemed to be the one in charge. Regardless, to all appearances, he was nothing but an uninspiring researcher. The black-and-red design only appeared as a contrived attempt to look tough, one that actually made him seem less reliable.

I can’t imagine that this guy is the founder… I suppose he might be a caretaker.

The big, inhuman, gorilla-like man and the man with the bandages concerned her, but at this stage, the organization still seemed like a club of eccentrics to her. Maybe they were like a group of fans who had been influenced by a self-proclaimed devil-worshipping rock star.

If they had had the enthusiasm and fanaticism of such a group, it would have been frightening, but what the bespectacled young man said had only disturbed the mood a little.

It really does feel as if it began from some sort of university club.

Although…it does seem odd to find children and mature adults here as well.

Even as she got the very minor sense that something wasn’t quite right, the man with glasses continued in a detached way, averting his eyes.

“So, uh, you see, I hear Miss Lucotte Diaz has lived in England since she was a child, and her hobby is baking cookies. I’m looking forward to having her bake some for us, aren’t you?! Ha-ha.”

He laughed, attempting to lighten the mood, but since he wasn’t making eye contact with anyone, it had absolutely no effect.

“Uh, I mean, it’s not that I can’t bake cookies myself or anything. It’s just that, you know, making them for other people to eat is scary. What if they hate them and stop being your friend? Oh, uh, the thing is, what I’m trying to say is, well, um… Oh, right. I’m introducing Miss Lucotte. Ha-ha.” The second forced laugh did nothing to brighten the mood.

This guy is pathetic, Celice mentally sneered, but she kept listening without

letting the emotion show on her face.

“Ha…ha-ha… Ahem. Uh, so, well, you know how it is; she’s…”

If this was how it was going to be, this job would probably be an easy one. She’d report that there was absolutely nothing to worry about, sniff out a few of their weaknesses just in case, and that would be that.

Internally, Celice chuckled to herself, but—

—the next moment, both her inner smile and her actual expression froze simultaneously.

“She’s… Ah, right! She’s a Hillrom University grad! That’s a good school, you know! I’m incredibly jealous; my school was bottom of the barrel.”

Huh?

She forced herself to break out of the ice freezing her thoughts, but it happened again.

Huh?

She kept trying to think, but the only thought that would form was confusion.

Hillrom University wasn’t in the paperwork for Lucotte Diaz.

It was the university Celice herself had gone to.

“After graduating from university, I hear she joined the St. Crystelle Firm right away. She successfully completed various jobs, both open and private, earning the trust of the company. That’s really splendid! Trust has a value that can’t be exchanged for any form of money.”

Her heart was racing—more like sprinting at this point.

It was leaping so violently she thought it might burst.

The St. Crystelle Firm was the name of the detective agency where she actually worked.

The false self she’d built up, acquiring a stranger’s official identity and personal history, even a fake passport…

They know…about all of it?

She wanted to think it wasn’t possible.

She didn’t want to believe it.

As a professional with one foot on the wrong side of the law, she’d been self-assured.

A group of patent amateurs like this one really couldn’t have found her out.

After all, if they had, she was doomed before she’d even begun.

Suddenly, she felt like throwing up.

Sweat broke out all over her body, then instantly evaporated, chilling her skin. She couldn’t sense anything from the outside; the only feeling in her brain was her own subtle trembling.

However, her expression still remained neutral.

He had to be trying to trap her into an admission.

That simplistic wish let her stand her ground, one step away from the brink.

“What are you talking ab—?”

Pretending to be calm, Celice tried to put him off the track, but sadly, her attempt ended in vain.

After all, the bespectacled man wasn’t listening to her anymore—he hadn’t been listening to her in the first place. He had no intention of listening to her after this, either.

“On top of that! She came here from that detective agency, all by herself, to infiltrate and investigate our group! Talk about brave. She didn’t even know what she was getting into! Give her a hand, everybody! Let’s give her a sincere round of applause!”

The next moment, the confused woman was bombarded with admiring, envious applause.

What?

She had absolutely no idea what was going on.

She didn’t understand what was happening or why she was being applauded.

But the people around her kept clapping, and she was still confused.

“Oh…” The sound escaped her involuntarily. She didn’t even know what she’d been trying to say.

What is this?

What kind of joke is this?

She was beginning to feel as if she’d stepped into a world where nothing made sense. Maybe she’d wandered into Wonderland, like Alice. It was as if she’d been abruptly invited to a house party by people she’d met right then, and all she could do was stand there in silence and watch events unfold around her.

“Oh, that’s right! We were going to introduce you to our founder today, weren’t we?! Let’s take care of that now. Except, uh, you already have. In a way. Hi.”

“……Huh?”

“Ooh, ouch! ‘Huh?’ she says! Yikes. I knew it: Humans are scarier than anything else! I got a ‘Huh?’ from a person I just met… Well, it doesn’t matter. Whether you believe it or not, I’m Bride, the forty-third founder of SAMPLE. It’s great to meet you.”

“…”

Celice’s mask of calm finally crumbled before this man calling himself Bride.

She gazed at him, her face a mixture of fear and doubt. He looked like a gloomy researcher and nothing more. He didn’t have a shred of charisma—hardly the kind of man people would trust to lead them.

“Calling myself the forty-third ‘founder’ may not make all that much sense to you, but what it really means is ‘the progenitor of the teachings.’ We don’t have blind faith in a single human being; we believe in our sacred book, as it should be. We can keep the same faith, even if our founder changes. At the same time, our canon is still incomplete. Thus, even if someone new takes the position, they are a founder and originator who continues to create our doctrine. Which means—” Muttering in a low voice, Bride shuffled around the bundle of loose-

leaf paper on the altar.

The papers were densely covered in small writing, while the later sheets were blank and white. When she looked closer, she noticed that the first section was parchment or something like it, and that the paper gradually got newer down the stack.

"—I suppose you could say this sacred book is our true object of worship," he murmured. "Carrying it around has gotten to be kind of a hassle lately, so we've been batting around the idea of digitizing it. What do you think? Our sect has been around for over three hundred years, but in some respects, we're rather modern. That said, bigger and older religions than ours have been making full use of modern conveniences for a good long time now. Makes me jealous."

Celice couldn't understand what he was saying.

A sacred text on loose-leaf paper? And some of it's blank?

And to top it off…you're telling me this awkward, insecure nerd is actually the leader?

Various questions whirled inside her, and she opened her mouth to say something, but she had so many questions, she didn't know which to ask first or even how to string the words together in her head.

Then Bride smiled, clapped his hands together, and drove the final nail into the coffin of her reasoning.

"Okay. Starting now, I'll *become the founder for a bit*!"

"…?"

"My thanks to civilization," said Bride, gazing up at the ceiling. He slowly extended his hands to either side.

Each of the two young women flanking him placed an object in one of his hands.

Syringes?

They were indeed syringes, the type used for ordinary vaccinations. They appeared to be filled with a clear fluid of some sort, and together they might have been about three ounces.

The man skillfully tapped the air bubbles out of the syringes, and then—

—he plunged them into both sides of his neck simultaneously.

“——!” Celice gave a wordless scream.

However, the bespectacled man was unperturbed. Slowly, he pushed in the plungers. “Oh, no need to worry. It’s just a glucose solution,” he said quietly with an unreadable smile. “You see, uh, unless my brain is saturated with sugar, I can’t fully perform my role as the founder.”

The muscles of his neck moved slightly as he spoke, and the syringes shifted with them.

Before she could even worry about the risks of that, the injection was complete. He withdrew the empty syringes from his neck and gave them to the women who stood beside him.

“…”

Without a word, the man briskly turned around and returned to the altar. He removed his glasses.

Celice looked at him as he stood, still facing away from her.

…She realized the mood had changed completely.

“Ohhh… Ooooooooh…”

With a sigh that sounded like a groan, Bride bent backward, and the sound of all his joints cracking reached her clearly.

“OouuaaaaaAAaaAAAAaaaaaaaaAAAaaaah…——”

The groan became something like a scream, and as it ended, time came to a stop around her.

She felt a chill; the air was oddly cold and heavy.

The actual temperature hadn’t changed as far as she could tell. No one had turned the air-conditioning up or down. It wasn’t physically cold.

The air was simply, genuinely icy.

When she looked, the smiles had disappeared from the faces around her.

Their expressions weren't tense, but the eyes of children and adults alike were akin to an emotionless abyss.

I blew it.

That was when it finally hit her.

I screwed up. I made the wrong choice!

She never should have come here.

The people before her weren't here for mindless fun, and they were nothing like a university club. They had *something* that clearly set them apart from the rest of the world.

Setting down his glasses, the man slowly turned around.

"Allow me to greet you again… It's good to meet you."

His smile was pleasant, but the depths of his eyes held no emotion, as if dark, dull glass beads had been set into his skull.

"Eep…!" A scream escaped Celice. Everything was feeling less and less real.

The individual who'd turned around was that awkward young man from before, she was sure. He'd merely taken off his glasses.

Somehow he was a totally different person.

The change was so complete, one might suspect a split personality, but it was nothing of the sort. The man's brain had simply been fully nourished with glucose.

"Let me welcome you, she who was once Celice Artia, she who is now Lucotte Diaz."

This *was* a different person, though, or so she wanted to believe.

People snap in an instant and lose their minds. His transformation was of a similar type.

It was as if the uncertain young man of a moment before had been pulverized and reconfigured into a new shape. After such a great change, one might wonder at how much a pair of glasses could change someone's appearance.

It was like a scrambled Rubik's Cube had instantly snapped back to its default configuration, so clear you could almost hear the *click*.

With a mere two injections, less than three ounces of glucose solution, the man was now *complete*.

No, it was more than the man—the world around them might as well have been replaced.

The emotion that assailed her was less fear and more anxiety. The unease of being instantly transported to an alien world.

Existential dread roiled inside Celice, as if everything she'd ever been was falling away.

The world around her kept spinning in its own unique time, leaving her behind.

"Now…let us sing." Bride smoothly spread both hands. His eyes were already closed.

He was talking less, and even as excitement seemed to buzz all through him, down to the ends of his capillaries, he sounded far more collected than he had a few moments ago.

There was no longer anything heartwarming about the believers around him. Their tension was based not in anxiety or fear, but in respect.

What's…about to happen? Celice wondered as their world left her behind, but the man ignored her and waved both of his outstretched arms like a conductor.

And then—

The answer lies within us. Fear death.

""""The answer lies within us. Fear death."""

A monotone canon echoed through the church.

The world lies within them. Dread life.

""""The world lies within them. Dread life."""

It didn't come from the believers.

Fear death. Fear death. Dread life. Dread life.

“““Fear death. Fear death. Dread life. Dread life.”””

The children who had entered with Bride and the others a moment ago stood by the walls, singing in clear voices. They were less than ten years old.

Your own flesh accepts death. Your own heart wishes for death.

“““Your own flesh accepts death. Your own heart wishes for death.

Yet still you live, O noble goats.

Yet still you live, O noble goats.”””

When she looked closer, each of the children wore headphones over their ears—and every one of them was blindfolded. Their sight had been taken away, and if any sound was playing, they wouldn’t be able to hear the outside world.

They could sense nothing around them but what smell and touch could tell.

And still the boys and girls continued singing the tuneless song in beautiful voices.

Quell the soul that is to be devoured. Worship pain.

“““Quell the soul that is to be devoured. Worship pain.

We affirm our god Who does not exist.

We affirm our god Who does not exist.”””

She couldn’t detect any emotion in the children’s voices, but somehow, the sound was like a scream—and she was certain.

That’s exactly *what they are. Those are* the screams of the children*.*

What was playing through those headphones? She was far away, and she had no way of knowing.

When she looked closely at the boys and girls, she noticed that their hands were behind them.

A glance at their feet revealed sturdy-looking shackles, which suggested their hands had received the same treatment.

Taking another look at the children, she saw that something seemed very

wrong, and then she realized why.

Their clothes didn't have the red-and-black design on them; instead, the cloth was a white so startlingly pure one might imagine it was made of fine snow or swan feathers.

The cut of the garments was simple, yet they exuded a sense of airy beauty.

If that was all you looked at, the children seemed like angels—those classic religious figures—or the heavenly maidens and fairies that appeared in folktales the world over.

However, the much more practical physical restraints undercut that illusion.

The bound children simply continued to sing.

Their song held none of their own emotions, carried on impassive screams.

Bride moved his hands in an elegant, flowing manner, directing that unsettling "song."

The children were little more than speakers, there to be his voice now that he'd grown quiet.

Death is a neighbor to be feared.

""""Death is a neighbor to be feared.

Life is kin to be dreaded.

Life is kin to be dreaded.

Our god

Our god

departs from within us

departs from within us

and returns to oblivion.

and returns to oblivion.

Agony abides with light,

Agony abides with light,

fury and shame dwell in shadow.

fury and shame dwell in shadow.

In their illustrious presence,

In their illustrious presence,

I simply consume a single leaf from the garden.

I simply consume a single leaf from the garden.

Fear god.

Fear god.

Fear thyself.

Fear thyself.

The acts of pity—

The acts of pity—""""

Don't… Stop it.

The wave of singing voices undulated like a snake, coiling slimily and sickeningly around Celice's heart, then squeezing it violently.

What's wrong with them…? This is insane; this can't be right.

The abnormality was clear, and their malice was palpable.

The believers who stood between Bride and the children were listening to the song in rapture and ecstasy.

Finally, Bride lowered his hands in a smooth motion, and the singing voices broke off neatly.

And Celice saw it.

The smile of the conductor held unmistakable happiness. The expression surpassed delight and pleasure to become pure euphoria.

Slowly, Bride covered his face with his hands and chuckled, lowering his head.

To Celice, every single move he made was unpleasant and terribly creepy.

At the same time, she understood:

This stomach-turning room had her life completely in its power.

What a horrifying joke.

They had caused her no pain.

They hadn’t taken her family or a loved one hostage.

They hadn’t forced her to witness an atrocity.

Even so, this place was unbearably disturbing.

She understood nothing but the hopeless truth that she should never have come here.

Her eyes were fixed on the *something* that had abruptly arrived in this room a moment ago.

It was neither a god nor a devil, just a human. And that was why Bride, whatever he was, made her blood run cold.

The anxiety crawling on her skin threatened to swell into terror, and the peculiarity around them became a formless grotesquerie.

Bride walked through the stagnant air toward Celice again, smiling quietly.

“Now, as for what we’ll do with you…Lucotte.”

Even the way the man spoke had changed, and his words made Celice tremble in spite of herself. She had completely succumbed.

Bride addressed her in a solemn voice. “You will marry me.”

“Aah…! …?”

“Don’t worry; it won’t be for long. Once I’ve found my true heart’s desire, I’ll divorce you, then kill you gently.”

“…?” She felt as if something vital had been stripped from her.

Marriage was a word she hadn’t even been able to imagine from the mood here. The threat of death that came afterward was less surprising.

Then, before Celice could get her emotions in order—

—a dizzying whirlwind of changes blew through, changes even more unimaginable…

There was a percussive roar, and Celice’s nearly blank mind woke up.

At the same time, the doors of the cramped church flew open—and several men forced their way in.

What?! What now?!

They appeared to be either Southeast Asians or darker-skinned East Asians. The tan, black-haired men were shouting something angrily in a language Celice couldn’t begin to understand.

However, what concerned her more than their words was what they held in their hands.

There seemed to be seven or eight intruders in all. One of them held an enormous machete that looked to be half his own height, while about half of the rest held smaller blades. The final three or so gripped small, gleaming, black handguns.

“Eek…!”

With an involuntary shriek, Celice retreated to the far wall and crouched down.

Meanwhile, Bride and the rest of the group remained perfectly calm. They

only turned, slowly and silently, to look at the men.

At first, the men just kept yelling, but when they saw that the group inside wasn't responding, they gradually lowered their voices and exchanged looks.

They seemed to have no intention of putting their weapons away, though, and one of the men with a gun was sweeping it back and forth as if searching for someone to shoot.

"Wait… This can't be real…"

"Oh, they aren't part of us." Standing beside the shivering Celice, Bride smiled quietly. "We ended up having a little trouble the other day. We're both foreigners in this country, and we would have preferred to get along with them, but… It's a pity."

Shaking his head regretfully, Bride slowly resumed his smile, and then— —as founder, he issued an order to the silent believers around him.

"All right, everyone. If nothing changes, these men will kill us all. How truly dreadful."

Wearing an innocent, saintlike smile—one that held neither ill will nor desire —he said: "I don't want to die, so before they can do anything—"

Thirty minutes later

What followed was a perverse and hideous sight.

However, it would be about a month before Celice's mind managed to process it completely.

Right now, she was simply trembling, like a soulless shell with vacant eyes.

Bride, now wearing his glasses again, put an arm around Celice's shoulders and slowly drew her toward the church's exit.

Holding the stunned woman close, he glanced away and began muttering to himself, the charismatic aura from a moment ago already gone. "Official paperwork aside, we're man and wife as far as our doctrine is concerned, so, um, let's get along and all that."

"…"

Celice had temporarily become a shell of herself; it wasn't even certain whether she was conscious.

Bride kept talking to her anyway, beginning with a bit of a non sequitur. "You see, our doctrine doesn't condemn desire." With a glance, he signaled the two women who were walking beside them and had them bring out several photographs. "So, you know, I want everything I want. That's how humans should be. Um, so, what I'm getting at is… Well, erm, Miss Lucotte, once I get together with one of my first choices, we'll divorce, and someone—probably me—will silence you. So I thought maybe you'd have an easier time dying if you knew a little more about my first choices. Ha-ha." The remark probably would have infuriated Celice if her mind had been present.

He showed Celice a few photos. The first one was of a silver-haired woman with an ethereal sort of beauty.

"This is Miss Sylvie. Pretty, isn't she? Makes your heart beat a little faster. She's much, much, much older than me, so I'm nervous about that as well."

He turned that photo over, and the next one showed a rather sickly-looking girl.

"And this is the next candidate. She's younger than me… Apparently, she calls

herself Illness. Odd name. She was a priestess with ancient, honorable origins from another branch, but that entire branch was massacred. Still, I guess that name could work, technically—”

Along with his meaningless commentary, the man flipped over one photograph after another. These showed men of various ethnicities.

An Asian man with narrow eyes.

A dark-skinned man who wore a peculiar mask.

A young man with a carefree smile.

A black-haired, golden-eyed youth with an intelligent expression; a tall man with glasses; a gaunt, whiskered man—all the different people were beginning to run together.

“These fellows are male, so they aren’t candidate wives. According to our doctrine, though, they’re living gods, so we have to *safeguard* them carefully.”

Then he plucked out one photograph in particular.

“Oh, right,” he said happily. “This one, this child. He’s the one! In a way, he’s even more important than the wives.”

“…”

“He really ticks all the boxes! I’m sure this boy would become *a magnificent god for us*! Um, his name was… That’s right, Czeslaw! It’s Czeslaw Meyer, or so I’m told!”

Bride opened the door of the car waiting for him outside the church and laid Celice—still stunned and immobile—down on its back seat.

Behind him stood the man whose face was completely hidden by red-and-black bandages.

“Oh, leaving already?” Bride asked. “…Okay. In that case, I’ll see you on the ocean next.”

In response to the oddly candid remark, the bandaged man nodded silently, then climbed into the backseat of a different car. The car pulled away.

Watching the black car leave a little ahead of his own, the “founder” quietly looked around.

The believers had already changed clothes by the time they’d left the building. They filtered back toward their homes and lives, dressed like anyone else.

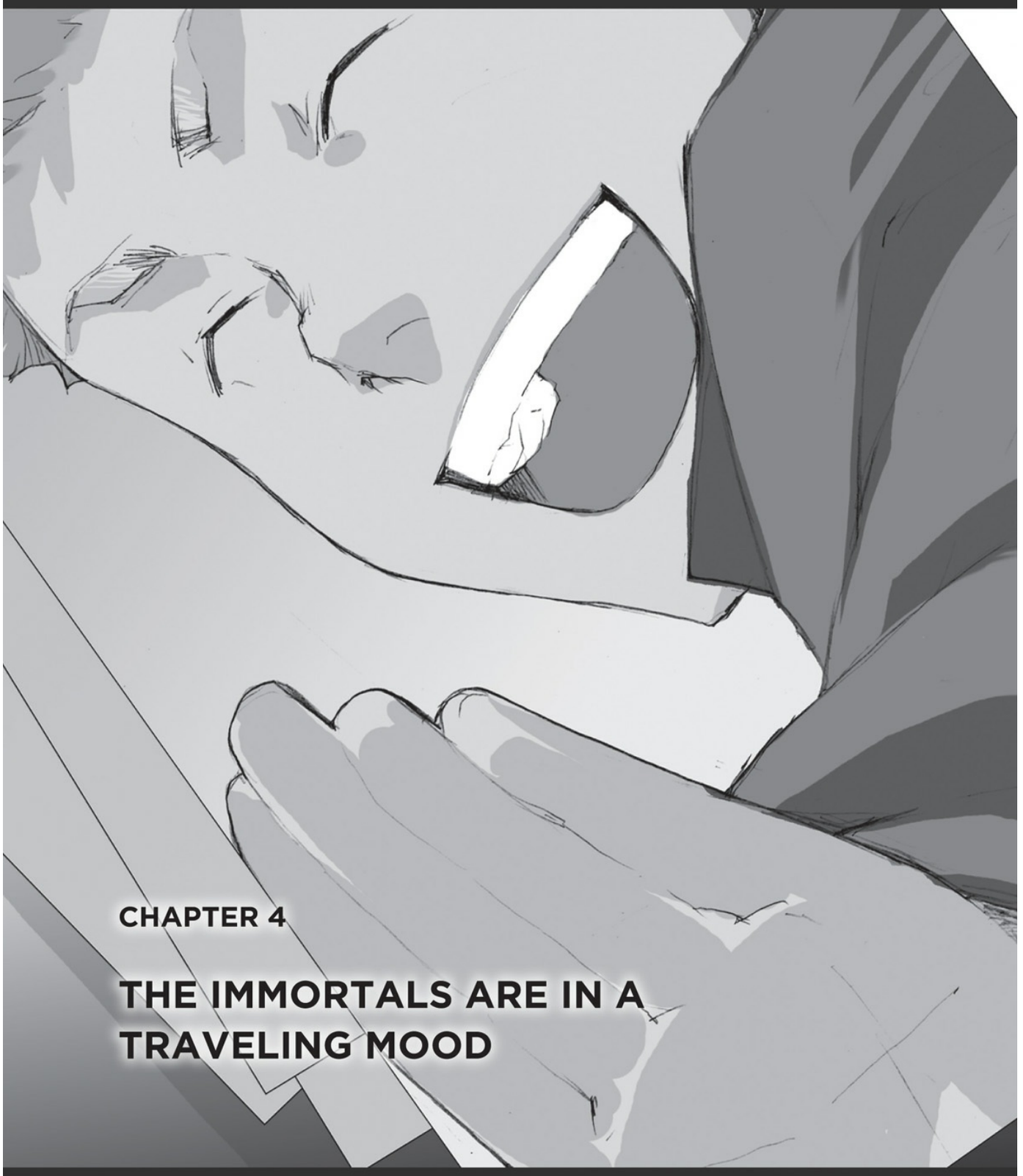
As he saw them off, the young founder gave himself a quiet pep talk.

“Now, then… The next mass will be the first big one in a very long time. I was starting to worry about whether I could run it on my own, but… It’ll be all right. I can do it. If anyone can do it, it’s me. If it’s me… Hmm… Well, I’ll pin my hopes on the power of glucose.” Smirking at himself, he climbed into the back seat and spoke to the woman driving. “Okay, take us to Orihara’s. I have to return the key to the building. It sounds as though he’ll *dispose of the bodies* for us for free, so I need to thank him for that in person.”

As the car began to move, he turned his eyes to the skyscraper district outside. Gazing at a building in the distance that was larger than the rest—the *Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building*—he smiled.

“This is a lovely country, isn’t it? It has such a wealth of arcades.

“…I hope the shipboard mass is as fun as a video game.”



CHAPTER 4

THE IMMORTALS ARE IN A TRAVELING MOOD

CHAPTER 4

THE IMMORTALS ARE IN A TRAVELING MOOD

A day in August 2002 Yokohama Port

“It’s the ocean!”

Although he was old enough to know better, the young man threw his arms wide in a sincere show of excitement at the sea.

“Wow! The ocean’s so huge; it doesn’t get better than this! You know that saying about having ‘a heart as big as the ocean’? People think it means ‘forgiving,’ but I think it probably means it’s so big it doesn’t even notice little stuff! Okay, everybody smile!”

The man was shouting non sequiturs, and none of his companions seemed impressed.

“If we were only staring at the ocean and burst out laughing, people’d think there was something wrong with us.”

“Let me just say this: The ocean is bound to accept even a man like yourself, so go drown in it until you are satisfied.”

“Do not assume the sea is insensate. Such a mentality could result in an environmental crisis.”

The three responses were different, but none of them agreed with him. Still, the young man replied with a nod of approval.

“I know, I know. The ocean’s great, isn’t it?”

“Let me just say this: Listen when people are talking.”

“I did listen. And then I ignored you.”

“Let me just say this: Elmer, go die. In fact, I’ll venture to kill you myself.” With that, the man—a dark-skinned individual who wore the sort of mask used in festivals in South America or Southeast Asia—promptly caught Elmer’s neck

with one arm and began to choke him.

“Can’t get away with anything around you, huh, Nile…? *Koff!*”

Even as his face turned purple, the young man—Elmer C. Albatross—kept right on smiling. The woman who was with them ran her fingers through her silver hair, smiling uncomfortably.

Stealing a glance at her bewitchingly beautiful profile, the Asian man who was standing a short distance away murmured to himself, “…How comely.”

“Hmm? Denkurou, did you say something?”

“N-no, ’twas nothing, Sylvie.” Denkurou averted his gaze, and the woman tilted her head, puzzled. She seemed to decide she’d been imagining things and looked back at the ocean.

The members of this mixed quartet were of different backgrounds and ages.

However, from another perspective, their differing ages were still very close.

After all, since they were over three hundred years old, they naturally seemed to fall into the same age bracket.

Elmer C. Albatross,

Nile,

Sylvie Lumiere,

and Denkurou Tougou.

These four had two things in common.

The first was that they had crossed the Atlantic on the same ship in 1711.

The second was that all four had unique, immortal bodies.

The moment they drank what had been termed the “elixir of immortality,” their bodies had become simultaneously human and inhuman.

They could suffer wounds or even death, but the immortals’ bodies would repair themselves whether they wanted them to or not. When a single drop of their blood was separated from its host, it would begin to wriggle like a creature with a will of its own, attempting to return to the source.

And yet, they also retained normal circulation, water balance, and nutrient supply. It was a truly convenient body to have.

Although around thirty immortals had been born on that ship in 1711, at present, only a third of them remained. Other new immortals had technically been created later on, but they didn't count at this point.

Only immortals could kill other immortals.

If one immortal put their right hand on the head of another and thought, *I want to eat*, they would absorb the other's physical body and knowledge, exactly like a vacuum cleaner.

No one knew where the mass went. Someone had theorized that it might be converted into the tremendous amount of energy it took to transfer the knowledge, but that immortal had already been absorbed by somebody else.

Ordinarily, one would have expected the immortals to grow paranoid of one another and live through eternity fearing shadows that might try to devour them—but these four, at least, seemed free of any such suspicions.

About a month ago, with the help of another immortal named Maiza Avaro, Elmer's group had managed to reunite with the final missing immortal, Denkurou.

After that, Maiza had said he'd achieved his objective and returned to New York with another immortal, but Elmer and the other three had stayed in Japan for a relaxing break.

They hadn't been living together, though. They'd each had their own reasons for staying in the country.

For example, Elmer had decided that Japanese games were fantastic (to use his own word) and spent days on end in arcades and toy stores. During his stay, he had studied the language through games and leveled up his language ability enough to clear visual-novel games in their original language.

The four of them had gathered again for one reason.

"Huey… He'd better not be plotting something," Sylvie murmured suspiciously, glancing at the small booklet she was holding. It looked like a

leather-bound passport, but it was in fact the needlessly fancy boarding pass for a certain luxury cruise ship.

Huey Laforet.

He was one of the surviving immortals from 1711, and for a time, he'd been notorious in America as a terrorist. They knew he'd been arrested by the police in the 1930s, but none of the four had heard anything after that.

However…

Although they had rented out separate lodgings in Japan, last week, out of nowhere, invitations had been delivered to all four of them.

Boarding passes to a luxury cruise ship had been sent in the name of Huey Laforet, accompanied by a brief message: *Let's meet on the ocean.*

"Frankly, I don't understand this at all."

Sylvie had initially considered ripping hers up and tossing it, but just in case, she'd decided to talk it over with the other three.

As it turned out, the others had also received tickets. During the ensuing discussion, Elmer had joked, "If Huey's involved, and we ignore these, we'll get the same tickets again. Every single day." That had ended up being the clincher, and they decided to take him up on the invitation.

Between making sure they had their affairs in order to leave the country and finishing all the other preparations, they'd had almost no time to spare.

As a result, Sylvie's group hadn't really looked into what sort of ship the *Exit* was…

"…I'd heard it was a luxury cruise ship, but I never dreamed it would be this grand," Sylvie murmured in amazement as she turned to look at the black *thing* she'd spotted out of the corner of her eye.

Moored at the large pier of Yokohama Port, it was best described by the word *alien*.

Elegant, opulent, resplendent, magnificent—all those terms would have been fitting if you were only paying attention to size. But more than anything, the word that best suited the object floating on the waves was *alien*.

The luxury cruise ship *Exit*.

It was like an imperial marine stronghold, as though a fortified city had been converted into a resort after the war and set afloat on the ocean.

One of the world's most distinguished cruise ships, it had been built a few years earlier as a joint project between enormous Japanese and American corporations.

The giant vessel was said to employ all sorts of luxuries and navigation functions that were ahead of even the most advanced ships.

Even though it was a passenger vessel, the unique ship was equipped with huge cargo bays that were used for various events and large enough to drive cars around in.

In the past, international game shows had been held on board, and it was even more famous as an event venue than a cruise ship.

However—there was one more unusual thing about the vessel.

Its sister ship, *Entrance*.

A second ship of the exact same type had been built, and the pair had been christened *Entrance* and *Exit*, in the sense of "Entrance to paradise" and "Exit from the ordinary," respectively.

The most vivid display of the uniqueness of these two ships was the "Crossing" that occurred when they sailed across the Pacific or Atlantic Oceans. The ships would pass within eyeshot of each other, and each vessel would launch fireworks toward the other, wishing it well on its voyage.

"That's incredible! What do you suppose happens when black and white ships overlap?! They might turn into that yin-yang symbol, the one that looks like a penguin's face! Hey, what happens if it summons something?"

"Hmm. Frankly, that would be troublesome."

As she watched Denkurou absently deal with Elmer's antics, Sylvie ran her eyes over the ship again.

The two sister ships were the same model, so there was only one thing that distinguished them.

Their overall color.

While the *Entrance* was swan white, the *Exit* was as black as deep darkness. If the latter sailed with no lights on a dark night, it would mostly likely be hard to spot.

In contrast with its elegant white twin, the vessel had an aura of majestic power.

After looking at it, Sylvie glanced at her ticket and read about the ship's specifications.

Full length: 1,004 feet.

Total height: 180 feet.

Total width: 171 feet.

Due to the size of the cargo bays and the event stage, its regular crew was slightly smaller than usual for a ship this large, but even so, it had the capacity to carry more than twenty-five hundred passengers and a thousand crew members.

"It even has a beauty treatment clinic. I'd like to go, but it's bound to be expensive…" Sylvie had been murmuring to herself for some time now, possibly because the longer she looked, the more uneasy she grew. She turned to Elmer and asked him another question. "Say, are you sure this is all right? Huey hasn't set some sort of trap so he can use us as guinea pigs for something, has he?"

"I can't say there's no chance of that, I guess. Huey might even kill his own flesh-and-blood daughter to satisfy his curiosity."

"…"

"So I won't force you. I'm going even if it is a trap, though. I do want to see Huey again; it's been so long." Elmer was boarding this ship not because he intended to stop Huey or felt responsible or anything. He only wanted to see his friend.

Sylvie had no way to respond to that, and she sighed. "You and Huey really are close, aren't you? You'd think the two of you would be like oil and water."

"Really? We've known each other for three centuries or so, but we've never

fought.”

“Maybe not to you. I doubt he’d agree.”

“Yeah, Huey used to tell me the same thing all the time,” Elmer replied nonchalantly.

Sylvie fell silent, a little nonplussed.

Elmer was a guy she just couldn’t bring herself to hate.

You couldn’t hate him—but he was totally unhinged.

That was Sylvie’s impression of him.

Holding a conversation with him was possible, but sometimes she didn’t feel confident that she was talking with someone of the same species. It wasn’t clear what he was thinking, and she couldn’t read him at all.

Even so, Sylvie had decided Elmer was trustworthy. If he hadn’t been, he wouldn’t have shown himself to other immortals this openly.

Well, I wouldn’t really mind if it was a trap, either.

Sylvie’s only goal in life had been avenging the death of her lover after the tragedy of 1711.

One of the alchemists who had obtained immortality had begun to eat his companions, one after another. Back then, Sylvie hadn’t yet drunk the elixir of immortality, so she had been spared. On the other hand, a young man who’d been everything to her had vanished from the world.

Gretto…

As she remembered her lover’s name, his face, his voice, Sylvie quietly clenched her fists.

Szilard Quates, the man who’d eaten him, no longer existed. She’d completely lost sight of her goal in life, but she hadn’t lost the energy to live. She’d once been shattered by despair and had nearly given in to the feeling of emptiness—but now she was living to find a new goal.

Gretto… I’ll make sure I remember you forever.

He had definitely existed in the past, but now, he was gone.

Thinking of him, Sylvie shook her head softly.

But if that's my goal, it would be missing the point.

I'll find a goal that's just for me. I'll live on and use my remaining time well. I'll make him proud.

Quietly, Sylvie had made up her mind. That decision had kept her from fearing this voyage, even though it could be a trap.

If I die here, then that's that, and anyway…

…if one of my companions from that ship is planning to attempt something idiotic, I have to stop him. I'm sure Gretto would have done the same.

In the end, Sylvie realized, she hadn't completely let go of the shadow of her past lover.

But maybe that wasn't such a bad thing, she thought as she gazed at the luxury cruise ship, and she smiled.

It was almost time to go, and the four of them set off for the large pier, but suddenly, Elmer asked the other two the question Sylvie had asked him a moment earlier.

"What about you, Nin-Nin and Nile? Are you worried, too?"

"Let me just say this: I do not particularly care. When it comes to Huey, nothing he does would surprise me at this point."

"I believe we'd do well to be cautious, but… Ah, wait, Elmer. Was that 'Nin-Nin' intended to apply to me?" As Denkurou asked his question, he thrust out a hand, palm facing outward.

Elmer responded with a breezy smile. "Well, sure. I don't want to call you Ninja, so starting today, you're Nin-Nin."

"You might simply call me Denkurou, as most others would… I am not one of those *shinobi* ruffians." Denkurou sighed, sounding put out.

"Aw, c'mon…," Elmer whined, but he seemed to reluctantly agree to call him by his real name.

Relieved, Denkurou turned to look at the ship, but his eyes instead stopped

on Sylvie, who was also gazing at it as she walked along a little ways ahead of them.

Hmm… Sylvie certainly is lovely, isn't she?

If he wasn't careful, his heart would be stolen; he rang a clear-toned bell in his mind, calming his emotions.

It was Gretto who had won Sylvie's heart, and no doubt Sylvie still had feelings for him.

No matter. Gazing at an unobtainable blossom from afar is a diversion in its own right.

With a wry internal smile, Denkurou quietly looked up at the ship, but—

"Hmm… I was unable to see them myself, yet perhaps the infamous 'black ships' of which I've read were not dissimilar to this… Certainly, if several vessels this enormous bore down on them, the people would inevitably riot."

"Let me just say this: I am positive they were this big."

"No, I imagine they seemed equally strange to the people of that day."

"Ah, I see… Denkurou. Will you be all right, traveling by ship?"

"? What are you saying? I have no recollection of suffering seasickness on the *Advena Avis*…"

Denkurou seemed puzzled.

"I hear you were frozen in ice in the Arctic Ocean, long ago," Nile murmured, sounding detached.

"…I was traveling on foot at the time. I have no aversion to the ocean itself."

"I see. That is good to hear… I rather dislike ships, personally."

"Why is that?"

So this fellow has things he would rather avoid. Imagine that.

On that thought, Denkurou asked his question out of simple curiosity, and from behind his mask, Nile answered in the same impassive tone.

"They remind me of the *Advena Avis*."

“…Ah.”

In one tragic night, they had lost many friends.

They had gained eternal life, but it had brought the worst possible results: death and murder.

“Do you regret becoming immortal, Nile?”

“Let me just say this: Immortal or not, the fact that I am alive is the same. If I have time to regret every little thing, I will use that to obey my instincts and live.”

“Instincts, you say! Indeed, that is quite like you.”

In the course of this conversation, the group had reached the entrance of the terminal on the large pier.

Inside the terminal building, there were lots of passengers who seemed to be waiting to board the same ship.

There were only a few Japanese people; the majority were white, black, or from other non-Asian races.

“We aren’t Japanese, either, but this feels odd for a ship that’s leaving Japan,” Sylvie remarked.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it,” Elmer replied, inexplicably cheery. “I hear there are tours where people come here by plane, then return to America by ship. It’s probably hard to decide which to spend more time on, coming or going.”

“They do say Japan’s in a recession right now. Maybe people wouldn’t go out of their way to travel on such an expensive cruise ship.” She seemed convinced by her own logic, then shot a glance to the side. “Never mind that… Nile, why don’t you take off your mask here, at least? Everyone’s looking at us. Security guards included.”

Nile, who was standing tall in his usual ethnic costume and mask, objected to Sylvie’s cold glare. “What are you talking about?” he retorted. “Let me just say this: I am merely the trigger. After that, the one everyone looks at is you.”

“…”

Now that he’d brought it to her attention, Sylvie looked at the people around them.

Everyone—men and women, young and old—looked at Nile first, then turned their eyes to Sylvie, his companion. The children seemed to find Nile more unusual; they kept waving at him until their mothers pulled them away.

“Oh… I’m sorry. It looks like you’re right.”

The gazes of the men in particular seemed to twine around her in layers. This was nothing new, but the fact that she’d reproached Nile did make her feel rather awkward.

“I wonder if I should just be happy about it?” Sylvie sighed.

Denkurou fell silent, thinking, while Elmer gave his usual answer.

“Okay, for now, go on and smile! You’ll be even prettier if you smile.”

…An answer that solved nothing.

“Oh, looklooklooklook, over there. Look, Miss Lucotte. Her, it’s her…! I showed you her photo earlier, remember? That’s Miss Sylvie!”

“…Yes.”

“Magnificent… This is nothing like seeing her in a photograph! I— Well, you know how it is, uh, I mean, I just… I thought I’d picked out a particularly good picture of her! But just look! This is almost like… Uh, it almost makes you think the picture was a bad one.”

As he spoke, the man gripped the hand of the woman who stood beside him: his “wife,” Celice, who was currently going by the name Lucotte.

He sounded incredibly cheerful, and although he was speaking to Celice, his attention and gaze were riveted on Sylvie, who was sitting on a bench some distance away.

The silver-haired woman was wearing a dress designed to generously expose her arms and cleavage, with a simple jacket draped over her shoulders like a

cape. The contours of her arms were slim and smooth, beautiful as those of a finely polished plaster figure.

Her willowy loveliness had a solid core reminiscent of the most graceful carnivores.

Her smooth, silken bangs fell softly over her face, and the uneven cut of her bobbed hair only served to accentuate her even features.

“What’ll I do? I’m getting nervous.”

“…Yes.”

Celice’s eyes were as vacant as a doll’s, and her only response to the man’s voice was a nod.

Bride wasn’t listening to her, though. He was gazing at Sylvie’s beauty, captivated.

By general standards, Sylvie fit into the “beautiful” category quite easily. However, her loveliness wasn’t the natural sort used to depict goddesses in pictures. She was brimming with the allure of a demon from fantasy stories, a succubus or an imp, specifically tailored to human desires.

Her beauty was the truly devilish type that charmed even members of the same sex—but Celice wasn’t moved at all. It wasn’t even clear whether she was looking in Sylvie’s direction.

However, Bride didn’t care. He completely ignored her reactions and rambled on unfiltered about his own excitement.

“Alluring, isn’t she…? She’s an Italian sculptor’s magnum opus and life’s work, a plaster figure, a sculpture. She doesn’t depict a goddess or an angel or a saint—she symbolizes a succubus or prostitute, a beauty that kindles human desires…”

“…Yes.”

“Whoops! I am technically a man of the cloth, and you may think it’s odd for me to compare her to goddesses or angels. But our doctrine acknowledges the myths of other religions as well. Only as stories based in fantasy, though.”

“…Yes.”

“What do you say? You think your beauty could never rival hers, don’t you?”

“…Yes.”

“Mm-hmm, that’s what I thought.”

“…Yes.”

“Are you jealous?”

“…Yes.”

“Are you averse to dying?”

“…Yes.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“…Yes.”

“That’s fine, then. At the earliest, you’ll be, well, you’ll be disposed of during this voyage. Do you have any last words? I am your husband, after all! Let me do that much for you!”

The question was neither mockery nor sarcasm. Bride was asking out of a sincere sense of duty and justice, a genuine belief that as her husband, he should listen to his wife’s last words.

That was what made the question especially eerie and awful, but as she was now, Celice didn’t even register that.

She couldn’t think.

You could see from her eyes that she wasn’t in her right mind, and yet she had just enough of an ego left to stand on her own and complete the departure formalities. Meanwhile, she kept repeating the same response.

“…Yes.”

“What was that?”

“…Yes.”

“Your last words are ‘…Yes,’ hmm?! I see… Acceptance itself is your last will; you accept everything, both life and death. And you’ll forgive everything, even my killing you. That’s what you meant, isn’t it?”

“…Yes.”

“Thank you… Really, Lucotte, thank you. That’s a wonderful answer. I’d expect no less of my wife. The one who’s meant to be my other half. You’re also a splendid interim priestess, Lucotte.”

For the first time, Bride turned his face toward the hollow-eyed woman, and —

—slowly, he covered her lips with his own.

For a moment, the life returned to her face.

“…N…no! NooooOOOoooo! …Ghk…!”

As Celice began to scream, one of the women who attended Bride struck her with a karate chop from behind.

Celice slumped against Bride’s chest, unconscious.

“So she still had some sanity left,” Bride muttered, still in his “timid young man” persona, holding the unconscious woman close. “How sad; it will only be painful for her… Still, that sanity will make her a better priestess for us…”

Quietly shaking his head, he handed Celice off to the big, gorilla-like man who’d been standing beside them.

That scream certainly hadn’t been a faint one.

In addition, there were families and couples and solo travelers all around them.

However…Celice’s scream and the female attendant’s knifehand strike had been completely ignored. It was as if none of it had ever happened.

The space itself was abnormal.

No, it wasn’t the space. It was the people in it.

Bride and Celice stood by the wall, surrounded by a solid semicircle of passengers.

Every one of them—adults, children, and senior citizens—had one common item in their luggage: the red-and-black sacred garments that each would wear.

They were all members of SAMPLE.

The ship's waiting room was full of people who knew everything and who were completely on Bride's side.

There were only about two hundred of them present, comprising less than a tenth of the people who would be on the ship.

Yet, that still meant they made up about 10 percent.

Holding both good and ill will in equal measure, for their own sakes as people who had placed their faith in themselves, even as they heard Celice's scream in their hearts—

—every one of them wore a smile.

"Hey, buddy. Got a second?"

"…Hunh?"

Still standing tall, Nile scowled with dull irritation behind his mask.

There was a woman standing in front of him, even taller than he was.

"Yeah, sorry to bug ya. I'm just curious… Does that mask mean something? I've been eyeing it for a while now, and the wonderin's driving me nuts," she said in English.

The woman was easily over six feet tall, for one. She was covered in muscles, easily more than Nile himself, by all appearances. That said, her proportions made it easy to tell she was female, and with her big-sisterly kind of face, she was more beautiful than not.

Despite Nile's peculiar appearance, she had marched right up to him. Perhaps she was curious, or maybe she was that sure of her own strength. Without changing the expression behind his mask, Nile muttered to her:

“…Let me just say this: I wear it for my own amusement.”

As a matter of fact, there were various reasons and circumstances involved, but there wouldn’t be any point in telling them to someone who wasn’t an immortal, or so Nile judged. Thus, he’d given a simple answer.

For a moment, the woman’s eyes went round, and then suddenly, she gave a masculine laugh.

“Gah-ha-ha! That’s real easy to understand! I getcha… For fun, huh?! Well, well! Sorry ’bout that! I couldn’t help myself; had to ask! Thanks, buddy!”

The woman raised a hand, then walked away, still laughing that distinctive staccato laugh.

“…Let me just say this: What in the world was that woman?”

“Well…I imagine any individual who is intensely curious would want to inquire into the reasons behind that mask.”

At Denkurou’s straightforward answer, Nile folded his arms for a while, then asked the other two, “Let me just say this: Is it that strange?”

“Woooow, that’s kind of a basic question, isn’t it? After all this time, you’re asking that now? Man, Nile, that was a great joke! You have my respect for that one, so I’ll give you a laugh! All right, which would you prefer, a suppressed chuckle, a snicker, or a mocking laugh?! I bet I could hit you with the best sneer in the world!”

“For now, let us skip straight to the results and simply split your sides.”

As Nile’s hand formed a claw and hit Elmer’s gut, Denkurou gave a weary sigh, not bothering to stop him, and Sylvie watched the woman’s receding back.

“She’s so toned, and her bust was still huge… That didn’t look like silicon. She must have trained very carefully.” She sounded impressed.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! Sorry, Nile, sorry! I was wrong! Hey, don’t stick your fingers between my ribs, okay?” Elmer’s apology was sincere, and once Nile had released him, his gaze followed the woman, too.

She’d already joined the crowd, but even from a distance, her six-foot frame

was easy to spot.

“That woman is seriously buff. She could’ve walked straight out of a fighting game. I mean, look at those Chun-Li legs. Can’t you imagine mashing the attack button and watching her kick ’em to death?”

“Let me just say this: I do not play games, and so I do not understand what you are saying.”

“You should! Especially since you came all the way to Japan. Not that there’s all there is to the country, of course. Come to think of it, I saw you lose a fistfight for the first time, Nile. That’s a good memory, too.”

“Let me just say this: Do not talk about that.”

“Where were we when it happened? I’m pretty sure it was—”

“I warned you.”

This time, Nile’s hand-claw hit his face, and Elmer’s body rose lightly into the air.

As he listened to his own skull creaking, Elmer slapped at the hand, still smiling. “Y’know, Nile, I’m getting the feeling that since Maiza’s not here, you’re giving me enough comebacks for two. That’s its own kind of fun, but I dunno what I’m gonna do if I lose my face! I won’t be able to smile!”

“You could smile in writing,” Sylvie deadpanned as she waited for the line at the immigration control gate to thin out. Exchanges like this were routine, after all. “Still, I’m impressed that woman spoke to Nile in English. You really can’t tell where he’s from just by looking at him.”

At the same time, she took another long look at Nile—and the worry filling her heart changed into something else.

“Speaking of the way Nile looks, I always wonder: How does he get past immigration?”

“How ’bout that! Just for fun! Who’d have thought! That was dumb of me.”

As the tall woman headed for a corner of the lobby where the crowd was slightly thinner, she spotted a boy who’d been standing there and called to him.

“If we’re talking about being dumb, I’d say the dumbest thing was what you did a second ago.”

“Aw, don’t be like that! It’s been bugging me ever since I saw the photo! Why does he wear that mask?! Once we’re enemies, I won’t be able to take my time and ask him, y’know?”

As Aging cackled away, Rookie rubbed his temples and shook his head.

“What the hell. I never dreamed you’d simply walk up and talk to the targets. I *never* thought—”

“I getcha; you don’t have to say it twice! Gah-ha! What, have you gone senile already at your age?”

“*You’re* the one who’s senile!” the president hissed, struggling to keep his voice low, and Aging thumped him on the back with a laugh.

“Hey, you’re young! Don’t sweat the little things!” Her fan-sized palm knocked all the air out of his lungs.

“Gwuff!” He staggered but managed to regain his balance just before he fell over, then turned to glare coldly back at her. “That’s enough, Aging.”

“All right, all right; no need for the stink eye… And? Where’s the rest of ’em?”

“On the ship. They’ve already finished their preparations.”

“I see. Then we should probably get a move on, too, huh, President?”

Addressing the boy in the tuxedo the way she always did, Aging picked up the luggage from beside him— —and the boy shot her a sharp glare.

“Don’t call me that. During the job, I’m Rookie, remember?”

“Picky, picky. When a girl like me calls you President, you should look away with a lil’ smile, all bashful and happy and awkward-like.”

“You are such a headache…”

Ignoring her chortling, Rookie slowly started toward immigration. Once he was away from his veteran weapon, he put on his public mask and got ready to board the ship.

And as for that public face…

“Um… You’re Mr. Rookie, right?!”

“…”

Someone called his name in his native language. When he turned around, he saw a kid of about ten who seemed to be waiting to board the same ship. A little ways away, the boy’s family was watching the two of them.

The kid came running up to Rookie and tugged at his sleeve, smiling at him innocently.

“Do some magic!” the Italian boy cried.

“…”

Rookie fell silent for a short while, as if hesitating, but then— —with a sudden, startlingly graceful smile, he closed his fingers into a loose fist, then waved it in front of the kid.

And then—several bouncy balls appeared from his empty hand.

“Whoa! Cooool!”

“Here. They’re yours.”

“Huh?! Really?! Thanks!” The boy ducked his head in gratitude, then trotted back to his family.

The woman who was probably his mother waved at Rookie.

Luchino Campanella’s public face was the boy magician known as “Rookie Warlock” Luchino, who had gained some fame in a few countries.

Wearing his stage magician smile, the boy began to board the ship, where he would be working as an entertainer.

He’d need to pull off jobs for both his public and private personas simultaneously— And yet, in the moment that boy had smiled because of his magic trick, half of his tension had dissolved.

Every time he killed someone, a sort of hopeless feeling seeped into his heart like mud, building up. Whenever he saw someone else smile that way, the sensation of the boiled-down sludge churning inside him eased, if only for a moment.

It’s just escapism, but…

His father had trained him in this profession to hide his darker side, but he had taken it as seriously if it had been his real trade.

Rookie had been presented with other options, but he’d chosen the unique public face of a stage magician.

No, I don’t care if it is escapism.

I can run away or go forward, but either way…I certainly can’t stand still.

It wasn’t clear whether he cursed the burden of his fate or had resigned himself to it, but before that sludge could well up to the surface, the boy forced it back down and gave the child and his family another smile.

For that one moment, he felt as if his false self could become the real one.

For Rookie, the president with public and private faces, the smiles of others were the one thing he just couldn’t part with.

After Rookie had gone, the boy proudly showed off his bouncy balls to his family.

“Heh-heh! Jealous?!”

“No faaair! That’s not faaaair!” A girl who’d been hiding in their father’s shadow stuck her hand out, pouting.

When it looked as though they might start to fight over them, their mother broke in, smiling.

“None of that. There’s more than one, you know. Share.”

“Okaaay.”

“’Kaaay.”

The boy gave his little sister one ball, then unzipped his bag so he could put away his own.

They were a cheerful-looking family; both the parents and children were happy. Their guileless smiles suited them well.

If nothing else, those smiles were real.

But inside the luggage of their oldest boy, there was an outfit.

A children’s outfit with a distinctive red-and-black pattern.

⟺

The luxury cruise ship *Exit* departed with a crowd of passengers, a fistful of violence, another handful of malice, and a sprinkling of immortals…

And so the enormous closed room headed out to sea.

This small world began racing over the waves of the Pacific, bound for the scheduled crossing with its sister ship.

The ocean, vast and unchanging, lay before the vessel as if it meant to swallow everything, all intentions good and ill, and their consequences— And on board that vessel—an atrocity began unfolding, calculated for the benefit of one.

Compared with the ocean, it was far too small.

Compared with the world on board a ship, it was far too large.

In the middle of the silent ocean, entirely unnoticed, hidden from all— —oh so quietly, the tragedy began.

Interlude

Voyage, day one Noon

Since I have my laptop with me, I've decided to keep a journal. Can't connect to the Internet, though; I don't think it's compatible with the ship's communication functions. But if I write up quite a bit before I get home, I'll have a good stock of posts for my online journal.

To start off, before I talk about my first day on the ship, there's one thing I really need to write about.

It's Hiroko. (I'll check with her about whether to put this bit online or not.)

Is this fate?

If not, maybe it's some grand irony, or maybe just a really big coincidence.

I'm traveling to America on a ticket I got as a gift.

That part's fine. Everything up to that point makes sense.

The problem is the ship. Who'd have believed that my ex-wife would be on the exact same kind of luxury cruise liner, much less the one that's going to pass mine on the ocean?

The probability must be a million to one. When you add in the fact that I only got this ticket by chance, it starts turning from a coincidence into a miracle.

How do I make the most of this opportunity? That's the first thing I have to consider. This miracle at sea just might make us feel the way we did when we first met again.

I don't intend to make the same mistake twice.

To be perfectly frank, I want to do it all over from the beginning. (I'm not posting that part online. Too embarrassing.)

Hiroko's still in America. Her ship departs tomorrow.

I'm planning to contact her tomorrow evening, and I'll spend the time until tonight's reception party writing about today.

Since this ship was sailing from Japan, I thought there would probably be a lot of Japanese passengers, but maybe I'm just naïve.

Almost all the passengers are foreign, and I haven't spotted any Japanese people I could strike up casual conversations with.

There was one Japanese man who looked relatively approachable—but he was standing with a beautiful foreign woman and a man wearing some sort of ethnic mask, so I couldn't work up the nerve to walk over. I think they might be entertainers or singers. The woman was so gorgeous it was hard to take my eyes off her—but I won't mention that to Hiroko. (Actually, I won't mention it in my journal, either. Might want to delete this bit later.)

After that, I saw something surprising.

There was a foreign child with his family, and he went up to another foreign boy and asked him for something.

The second boy flicked his wrist, then opened his hand to reveal a couple of bouncy balls!

I checked the pamphlet later, and it turns out he's a stage magician, "Rookie" something-or-other. Given the name and his age, I'm guessing he's a new hand at this. If I have time tonight, I might go take a look at his show.

What else stuck out…? I spotted a couple of really big men. Maybe. One was too far away to tell for sure, but they might have been a woman. Their face was feminine, but I don't think many women are easily over six feet tall. Might've been a professional volleyball player, but I don't think even they get that muscly.

The other was definitely a man. He had a face exactly like a gorilla's, and he even hunched over like one.

No, wait. People are gonna give me crap if I start insulting people in my journal.

I'll have to edit this some more.

Well, we'll call this a warm-up exercise, and I'll make tomorrow's entry the

first one I post online. We've set sail, at least.

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

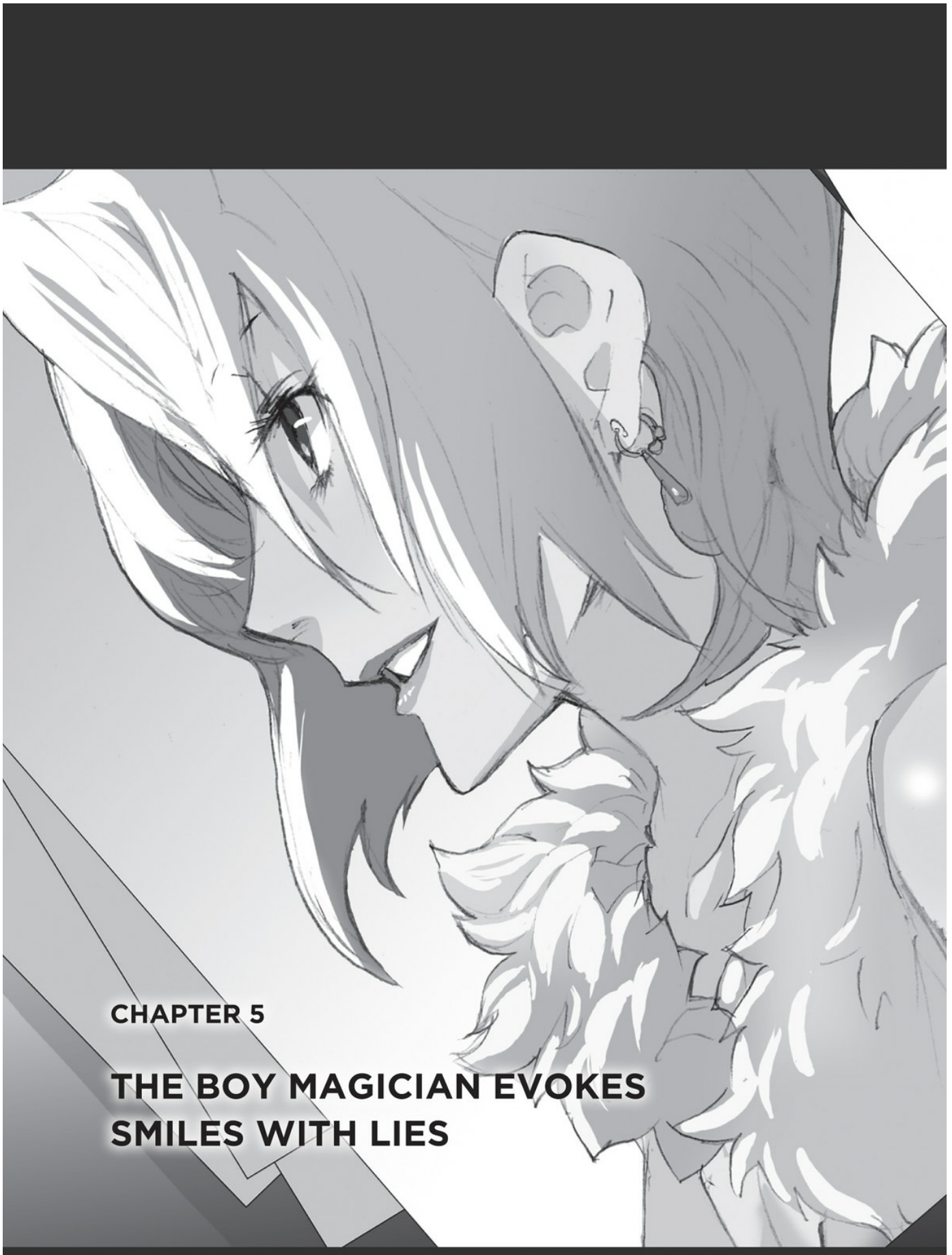
There's a time difference, so I'll have to be careful about the timing…

Finally, a toast to the wonderful photographer who provided me with this trip, and a prayer for a safe journey.

Bon voyage to myself. Good luck, Misao! Go, fight, win!

I wonder if this is why Hiroko tells me that writing turns me into a little kid. Oh well. I'll fix it later.

Voyage, day one —Misao



CHAPTER 5

THE BOY MAGICIAN EVOKES SMILES WITH LIES

CHAPTER 5

THE BOY MAGICIAN EVOKES SMILES WITH LIES

Voyage, day one Night, in a certain suite

Red.

Red…and warm.

As she hugged the change of clothes in her arms, Celice thought vaguely to herself.

After they'd laid her down on a bed, she'd regained just a little of her sanity.

Around her, she could see the interior of an opulent room. A miniature chandelier hung from the ceiling, and she could tell the light was turned as low as it would go, softly illuminating the room.

She understood the situation she was in, but she couldn't get past that.

She'd regained her senses. Her sense of self was hers again.

What should I do?

The answer didn't come. She couldn't even try to think of it.

The harder she tried to recover her sanity, the more something else encroached on her mind.

Her memories.

What she'd witnessed replayed itself over and over, eating up her working memory.

They were as vivid as if they'd occurred only five seconds ago and yet as vague as a prenatal sensation…

With that vague feeling, the images dimly seeped into her mind.

"Yes, yes, for now, there's no need to make our move yet."

In a corner of her consciousness, she heard a voice.

Bride's voice.

According to official records, he was just a stranger.

According to the group's doctrine, he was her husband.

And as far as Celice herself was concerned, he was a murderer who would probably kill her.

I have to run, she tried to think, but her thoughts froze halfway through the sentence.

She could feel the sights replaying not in her head but all through her body.

It made her skin crawl.

All she could do was endure the nightmare and let what Bride and his followers were saying go in one ear and out the other.

"Yes, that's right. Viralesque is on the *Entrance*, and he's reporting every detail of the situation over there. We'll be careful about the plan, and sometimes we'll be more bold. Granted, if we choose the bold approach and inflict no damage, there won't be a single victim. However, if we need to be careful, it's probably best to sink the entire ship and every passenger who isn't one of us."

Despite the violent topic, the meaning didn't register in Celice's mind.

At present, she was a puppet that moved as Bride directed her to.

Celice had gotten through the immigration inspection by doing everything she was told, and she had been admitted to the ship in the role of "sickly fiancée."

Whatever the others thought of her in this state, they didn't seem to care that she was present during the discussion of what was probably confidential information.

"That said, hurting and killing uninvolved parties goes against our doctrine, so I'd like to act boldly."

"But, Leader—Bride—do you think it's possible the immortals have noticed our presence?" asked one of the two women who were always at his side.

The pair called Bride “Leader,” and they attended him in secretarial roles.

Despite that, they had no particular distinguishing traits. At a glance, that lack of individuality made them seem like twins or sisters, but it wasn’t clear whether they really were.

“Maybe so, and maybe not.”

“The ‘child of calamity and light’ was originally one of us. Even if it has been three hundred years, he may pick up on something.”

“He might. Well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. We’ve been prepared for uncertainties all along. Ha-ha,” Bride replied impassively, wearing his usual smile. “Let’s enjoy the situation. Enjoy life! After all, that is the greatest unshakable tenet of our faith! —Uh, th-there I go, talking big again. I’m sorry. Ha-ha.”

Though the leader was as awkward and unsure as ever, the women silently bowed their heads. Smiling at them, Bride got up from his chair, swept his gaze around the room, then paced back and forth and drank in the luxury around him.

“Well, the other ship is setting sail a day after us, so let’s take it easy and enjoy the voyage until then,” he mumbled to himself. “I—I know! With some quality husband-and-wife alone time, for example…!”

And then—he whirled back around toward the bed where Celice was and tried to leap on top of her like a wrestler attempting a flying body press.

…But his jump didn’t take him far enough, and he ended up slamming his side into the corner of the bed.

“Ghagh…!” His grunt almost qualified as a scream. He got up as if to hide his embarrassment, then awkwardly tried to recover his dignity. “W-well, travel is liberating, you know? Besides, uh, this is the first time I’ve ever had such a mature, grown-up woman as a wife, so I can’t really help getting, y’know, turned on.” Waving his hands nervously, the discombobulated leader went on. “After all, I mean—I don’t have a thing for little girls, so this is nothing like before. *My other wives were ten-year-olds, and I only married them right before they died*, you see?”

He looked down, muttering in a strangled sort of way. Then he coughed once, clearing his throat, and extended a hand to Celice like a perfect gentleman.

“Come, Miss Lucotte. Let’s go to the party. It’s all right; it’ll improve the mood.

“You’ve only got a few more days as my wife. Until your death, *feel all the agony you can manage, please*.”

Thirty minutes later The party hall

“Well, we got to our room, but I didn’t see anything that might have been a message from Huey…,” Sylvie murmured, raising a glass of wine to her lips.

The reception celebrating the first night of the voyage was currently underway.

Much like the banquet venues annexed to hotels, the party hall was huge. Sometimes it was even used for celebrity weddings. At one of the tables within, Elmer, Sylvie, and Denkurou were working their way through their meals.

A live orchestra was playing on a stage, and a troupe of acrobats was performing in time with the music on several small platforms that had been scattered among the tables.

“Well, it isn’t as if I didn’t expect that.”

Keeping his eyes on the odd combination of classical music and dance, Elmer replied to Sylvie with a smile. “He may not look it, but he likes to make a dramatic entrance. You never know; he might appear out of a top hat in the middle of tonight’s magic show.”

“Magic show?”

“Yeah! It’s about two hours from now, at a place called Ristorante Cuculo, near the center of the ship. He’s a kid named Rookie Warlock, and I tell you, I got quite a shock when I saw his bio.”

“Why? Someone you know?”

“No, unfortunately. I hadn’t heard of him until now.”

Elmer took the pamphlet that had been in their cabin out of his jacket, opened it, and showed it to Sylvie and Denkurou.

“Says he’s from Lotto Valentino.”

“Huh?!”

“Hmm…?”

The profile was in a corner of the pamphlet, written in English. When they saw the name of his hometown, Sylvie and Denkurou looked at each other.

Lotto Valentino.

That was the name of a port town in southern Italy, relatively close to Naples.

The town was famous for its many libraries, and stone houses lined the slope from the port to the top of a modest hill. It had many buildings of historic value as well.

However, the average person would hardly even know that. Unlike major cities such as New York, London, Paris, and Tokyo, the size of this particular town meant that not even many Italians would be familiar with it.

But in the memories of the three people who were sitting at the table, it was an important location.

To Elmer, it was one of the places he considered a hometown.

To Denkurou, it was the site of several significant incidents and where he had met a few friends, long ago.

To Sylvie—it was where her lover had been born.

Sylvie held her breath for a moment—but just a moment. Then she smiled.

“…That brings back memories. Maybe I’ll go take a look.”

“Hmm… I find it rather intriguing as well. Still, I believe we should refrain from inviting Nile. At one point, he was determined to burn that town to the ground. Were he to recall that memory now, I fear we may find him troublesome.”

Elmer gave a satisfied smile at their replies—

—and so the three made plans to attend their own enemy’s show, blissfully

unaware that the performer was an adversary.

Meanwhile　In a certain semi-suite cabin

“Let me just say this: I am bored.”

Reluctant to destroy the mood at the party, Nile had opted to stay behind in the cabin alone.

“Tch… He summons us only to inflict this tedium upon us. How should I express my displeasure, should the scoundrel ever show himself?”

Showing no particular interest in the room’s TV, he’d gone out onto the small balcony and opened his luggage. The bulk of its contents consisted of clothes and about ten spare masks.

Each mask was a different color. As he polished them with a cloth he kept for that specific purpose, Nile gazed out over the starlit sea.

“Hmm… Well, I suppose the eternally shifting waves have a charm of their own.”

Sitting on the balcony’s little chair, Nile kept polishing masks and watching the water.

And then he spotted a shadow zipping across the waves.

“Is that…a boat?”

For some reason, all the vessel’s lights were dark, and it was gradually moving away from the ship.

How peculiar. The sun has set, and yet they sail without lights. Well, I doubt they are pirates, if they are moving away from us, he thought, then impassively resumed his polishing.

Behind his mask, he wore a rather dangerous-looking smile.

That said, the arrival of pirates would at least put an end to this boredom.

Meanwhile　In a certain suite

After the boat Nile spotted had gone—

The object the vessel had left behind was snagged on the balcony of a certain room.

“Yeah, that’s how it’s done! Good catch. Death should’ve been on board in person, but he went off and kicked the bucket, so we gotta make do.”

The cabin was a good distance from Nile’s. It was currently occupied by Aging, who’d shucked off her jacket and stripped down to a tank top, and the row of Mask Makers behind her.

“Right. Well. Let’s get this stuff hauled up ASAP.”

“It’s still pretty early for that, Aging. Shouldn’t we wait till later at night?”

“Hey, this is a good time for it. Pretty much everybody’s at the reception. If we leave it hangin’ here like this, the cable could break. And besides—”

Aging shot cursory glances at the balconies above and below hers, making sure there was no one around. Nile was polishing masks in a distant cabin, but neither could see the other.

Once she’d finished her check, she set her hands on the hook caught on the railing of the balcony, then hauled on the attached cable, pulling it up.

As she reeled the cable in, it gradually grew thicker, and when it was about as thick as a decent rope—several huge boxes emerged from the ocean.

“—won’t even take a minute.”

Hauling the boxes toward her without much effort, she drew them up over thirty feet into the air.

“There.”

Holding the cable with one hand, she used the other to pass the boxes dangling on the end to the comrades behind her. One of the men accepted a box, about twenty inches square, and—

“Gwuff?!” He immediately staggered under the weight, and the people around him rushed to steady him.

“C’mon, it’s only a hundred and seventy-five pounds or so.” The gigantic woman cackled with laughter, drawing up waterproof cases one after another.

“Damn… What is she, a Terminator?”

Cracking jokes, the Mask Maker men split into teams of two and carried the boxes into the room.

Although their attitudes seemed flippant, their hands were practiced. They opened the lids on the boxes one after another, then dexterously assembled what was inside.

The cases held the tools of their trade—and a lot of them.

All sorts of equipment were inside, including a plethora of standardized guns, multiple hand grenades (or something similar), and items whose purpose wasn’t clear at a glance. It was enough to make you wonder if they were about to go to war.

And as a matter of fact, they were.

“Gah-ha! Whoo, look at ’em all! The president pulled out all the stops! If somebody from room service shows up now, they’ll cuff the whole bunch of us and march us down to a basement storeroom together!”

As she cackled, the men rolled their eyes and kept assembling guns at a brisk pace.

“Or we could just have the room service guy take a nice, seasonally appropriate dip in the ocean,” commented one of her comrades.

“Hmm…,” another mused. “Well, real pros don’t let themselves get spotted in the first place. Sure, you might look like a badass popping off an average Joe witness, but any group pulling a stunt like that is a buncha boneheads without a real plan.”

“…Do you actually know what we’re about to do?” asked a third wearily. “Depending on how things go, we might—”

But Aging laughed even louder.

“Gah! Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh, I know, all right! We’re all a buncha numbskulls for even tryin’! I swear, ain’t no other group this reckless and planless and lawless! I’m havin’ the time of my goddamn life!”

“Well, as long as you do your job, I guess.”

With that, the Mask Makers went back to work.

They tended to see Aging, Life, and Illness more as tools than as companions. That didn't mean they looked down on them; as tools, the three of them were vital. If guns were weapons for a fight, then Aging and the others were munitions for a war. Just having them on their side gave them a certain feeling of security.

Aging and the others acted as their shields, slaughtering without blinking. The other Mask Makers hardly felt superior; in fact, they respected them.

Although, given the idiosyncratic personalities of the two female members, they didn't really look up to them all that much, either.

Aging didn't give a damn about their attitudes toward her. She was unpacking her own dedicated equipment from the third box, which was longer than the others.

First, she took out a pair of night vision goggles that combined night sight with heat vision—and casually tossed them onto the bed.

"Hey, careful with those!"

"Yeah, well, I almost never use 'em. Unless it's actually pitch-black, I can let my eyes adjust. Feels better and doesn't cut off my periphery. The latest goggles might be different, but this old night-vision gear ain't much better than the naked eye."

"…That's, uh, kind of a big deal, don'tcha think?"

Ignoring her comrade's comment, she took out a matte-black infiltration suit, lifted the inner lid, and picked up her weapons from the storage area underneath.

The first was a thick Kukri knife with a blade as long as a human arm.

Also called Gurkha knives, these blades were used as everyday tools, and sometimes in combat, by people known as Gurkhas.

The knife had a distinctive blade that curved in the opposite direction from a Japanese *katana*, bending sharply in the middle, with the cutting edge on the inner side of the curve. However, the one Aging was holding was large enough

that *sword* seemed to be a more appropriate term than *knife*.

The enormous knife weighed just under ten pounds, and its blade alone seemed to be about two and a half feet long.

If you let it fall naturally, the weight of it might have been enough to sever an arm. As she checked this dangerous blade, Aging handled it as lightly as a bamboo sword, and when she slid it into its leather scabbard, she was humming to herself.

At last, the components of the weapon that accounted for more than half the weight of the box appeared.

“Whoa. Hey,” said one of the Mask Makers, turning pale when he saw them.

The components were pure metal, not black so much as dull silver.

They were obviously for some sort of gun, but it was no gun like the ones the other Mask Makers held.

“That’s…the heavy machine gun Schwarzenegger used in *Terminator 2*, isn’t it?”

“Hmm? Oh, y’know, you could be right. The guy with the beard had one in *Predator*!”

It was a type of heavy machine gun called a minigun. It was a smaller version of a large gun intended to be mounted on helicopters; despite being heavy weaponry, it was known as a “minigun” because its weight had been reduced to a little under forty-five pounds.

“This ain’t a movie, guys…,” one of her comrades muttered, more in pure shock than in any sort of chagrin.

People carried guns like this around in games and on TV as if that were a normal thing to do, but it wasn’t actually used that way. At less than forty-five pounds, it looked manageable for someone with strong arms, but it required a cartridge belt and needed a battery to run it.

The minigun had a terrifying firing rate of four thousand rounds per minute. The ammunition required for that single minute would weigh nearly ninety pounds all on its own—and if you added the weight of the battery and the

auxiliary equipment, the weight could easily reach two hundred pounds and then some.

And with a weapon of that caliber, its recoil was a force to be reckoned with as well, and if you were aiming it by hand, it was nearly impossible to control the sight. Meaning it really wasn't a weapon that humans could carry, and yet—

Aging picked up the box—which held a full set of components, gun belt included—as if it weighed almost nothing, then carried it over to an empty bed.

Don't tell me she's seriously… No, there's gotta be a gun mount or something in there, too, right? Right? It's for intercepting a police helicopter if it shows up, right?

Ignoring her companions' dubious stares, Aging cackled and waved a hand.

"Hey, don't worry! I wouldn't use a minigun as is! This one was made just for me, special order! It's lighter, and they cut down the weight of the battery, too!"

"I-is that right…?"

"The recoil's way tamer, and the firing rate was dialed down so the gun belts last longer… Or so I was told, but I learned all the fiddly little details later on by actually using it. I don't remember the other stuff too well!"

"Don't sound so proud of it! And, uh, I'm not sure you're seeing the issue here…? W-well, I mean, somebody with a build like yours might be able to use it, but…"

The men acted convinced, although they weren't, really.

Oblivious, Aging gave an openhearted smile and told them, "Well, I had them tweak the shape *so I can shoot it with one hand*!"

"…"

The Mask Makers found this claim incredibly difficult to accept, so they pretended they hadn't heard it.

Aging often acted irresponsible, but she wasn't incompetent. She wouldn't lie on the job.

Therefore, if she said she could do it, she probably could.

Her companions believed this, and they weren't exactly a well-ordered military unit anyway, so they let the matter slide.

That was the kind of group they were.

But Aging didn't notice any of this and kept blabbing away.

"Yeah, this is about what you need for backup guns. After all, the Gurkha knife might break if I used it against bullets from enemy machine guns!"

Even though the men struggled desperately to ignore the guffawing woman's words, they whispered to one another in spite of themselves.

("So, wait… That monster of a machete is her main weapon?!")

("What about a gun?! A normal gun?!")

("Whoa. This is the first time I've ever worked with her, but now I get why she's usually solo.")

("Yeah. It's hard to put it into words or process it—you just know*.")*

("If we fight alongside her, our lives are gonna be in danger!")

("Does, uh… Does she know what backup gun *means?")*

("What was she gonna do with enemy bullets again?")

"Hey, c'mon now, don't whisper about a gal behind her back. Man up."

At the woman's words, the men turned around—to see she'd already finished assembling her special-order minigun.

"I tell ya, every starry-eyed dame dreams of blazing away with a heavy machine gun one-handed!"

Who the hell's a starry-eyed dame?!

The whole group mentally screamed at once, but—

—as the giantess twirled around with a Gurkha knife in her dominant hand and a minigun in the other, nobody had the courage to say it out loud.

⟺

Two hours later In Ristorante Cuculo, an Italian restaurant

The show was indeed nothing short of magical.

There were strings and other tricks behind it all; this was an immutable fact, one that everyone in the audience knew, and yet they were still fascinated by the whole thing. More than the mysterious phenomena before their eyes, perhaps the deception itself was the spell, a real one with no tricks or strings.

The place was a shipboard Italian restaurant that managed to be simultaneously cozy and high-class. On the small stage within, man-made miracles were unfolding.

Casino medals welled up from the palm of his hand when he placed it over a cup.

A round table tilted without being touched, spinning like a top.

Setting one hand on the wall, the magician slowly levitated himself into the air.

A top hat appeared from the wings of a dove, and several eggs rolled out of it.

He squeezed one of those eggs, and it instantly turned into a baby alligator.

All the cards in his hand were transformed into tiny balloons.

The balloons burst one after another, turning back into cards, and the card chosen by a member of the audience appeared from the last remaining balloon.

The red wine he poured into an audience member’s cup turned to milk as soon as it left the bottle.

When he poured for someone else, the wine was white.

The magician on the stage ran through everything from illusions like these to basic tablecloth magic.

He made excellent use of a wide variety of conjuring tricks, striking a careful balance in the order in which he performed them so that the audience would be pleasantly deceived, gradually building the surprise.

The one who wielded all this magic and had the hearts of the audience under his spell—was a boy who still seemed to be a long way from adulthood.

His light-blond hair swung in a bewitching way, and his fingers danced over

the table, occasionally controlling the entire stage.

He was known as Rookie the magician.

His stage name, Rookie Warlock, didn't even sound like a proper noun, but the legerdemain he demonstrated wasn't the work of a beginner. It was highly polished, in both technique and stage presentation.

During performances, he hardly spoke at all, but he knew how to smile and when to manipulate the audience. Sometimes he would reassure them, sometimes unsettle them.

In addition, the calm smile he showed when applause broke out after a successful trick seemed so genuinely childlike, people would forget he was the one who'd just performed a miracle.

Meanwhile—

"Whoa! That's incredible! How do you suppose that's done?!"

—a man in the audience was acting as giddy as a child, too.

"Hey, I just had an idea. What if that boy is only pretending to be a stage magician…and he's actually a *real* warlock?"

"…You think like a kid."

"Aw, c'mon, Sylvie. If I could use real magic and started casting my spells everywhere, I bet I'd upset people from all sorts of religions, and then not everybody would smile for me. But if I told them it's stage magic instead, I could make money and be popular, and it would all work out, see?"

"Typical Elmer. You didn't even consider the idea of withdrawing from human society and living as a hermit."

Responding with a smile and a sigh, Sylvie kept her attention on the stage and the boy's performance. She hadn't even touched the spread of desserts on the table.

Meanwhile, Denkurou had at first expressed open admiration for the boy's magic tricks—

—but then he suddenly seemed to notice something.

“Hmm… Perhaps it is my imagination, but he appears to be taking particular note of our table from time to time.”

“You think so? I bet it is your imagination. Even if it’s not, I think it’s normal for stage magicians to scan the tables every so often.”

“I see… Now that you mention it, you may be right. My apologies for casting doubts.”

Denkurou’s expression softened, and he chose to simply enjoy the rest of the show.

Meanwhile, the boy on the stage was internally sweating buckets.

What is with *the Asian guy?*

His eyes… I felt like a wolf was staring at me until a moment ago.

Still, I never thought getting a good look at them would be this easy… Did the pamphlet catch their interest? I wondered whether that would do it.

He’d hoped mentioning his hometown of Lotto Valentino would pique their curiosity and encourage them to come, and indeed it had.

However, the Asian immortal who was with them—Denkurou Tougou—was apparently a tougher customer than he’d anticipated. Rookie had been subtly keeping an observant eye on them during his performance; had the man noticed? Partway through the show, Denkurou’s gaze had sharpened into a knife piercing right through him.

If it had been a mistake on his part, and Rookie hadn’t been paying any more attention to their table than the others, he probably wouldn’t have noticed.

Meaning that if Rookie reacted to it now—

He’ll know.

He didn’t know exactly what it was that Denkurou would know, but Rookie couldn’t let them suspect him of anything at this point in time. They would end up in conflict sooner or later, but he couldn’t afford to make them wary.

Since he’d written down where he was from, they might try to meet him after the show.

He’d been prepared for that, but he’d never dreamed they’d try to start something now.

Cover it up, hide it.

Play it cool, turn your heart to ice…

No, that’s not it.

Focus.

Right now, you’re a magician.

Concentrate on the magic. All the audience members at your stage are the same. All you have to do is thrill them, impress them, and make every one of them smile.

As the show reached its climax, the magician cleared the table and moved it to the side of the stage.

Smiling wordlessly, the boy approached the table where Elmer and the others sat.

After a chivalrous bow, he knelt and held out a hand to Sylvie.

“Huh…? M-me?”

Long ago, she’d taken the stage as a singer in taverns not unlike this one. But this time, she was caught completely off guard, and her eyes darted around in bewilderment.

Slowly rising to his feet, the boy took Sylvie’s hand and gestured elegantly toward the stage.

Until then, the eyes of the audience had been riveted on the performer, but they gulped when they suddenly saw Sylvie. Her beauty was so perfect that the idea that this encounter might be staged never occurred to them.

Some began hastily flipping through their pamphlets, thinking she might be a singer or a model who would be appearing at a different event, while others finally pulled out their video cameras and started filming.

As the restaurant began humming with excitement—the boy silently handed Sylvie a sword.

Sylvie found herself holding a gleaming silver saber. Although its blade was probably blunted, its weight, the feel of it, and the way it gleamed were just like a real weapon.

The boy dragged over a box that had been sitting beside the stage. It was about as tall as he was, reminiscent of a locker for cleaning supplies.

The height, width, and depth of the large cabinet could have been tailored to the boy's measurements. If he climbed inside, it would probably be so cramped that he wouldn't even be able to turn around easily.

There were softball-sized holes scattered around the cabinet, and a little above its center, there was a mark in the shape of a heart.

The box was set on casters, and the boy magician rotated it with its door wide-open, showing the audience that there was nothing out of the ordinary about it.

Then he shut the door of the empty cabinet and wrapped a chain around it and locked it.

What on earth was he doing? the audience wondered. Wasn't he going to get inside? But then they noticed a ring attached to a long piece of fabric like a curtain had appeared around the base of the cabinet.

The boy picked up the ring, slowly stepped inside, and then flung his arms above his head.

The cloth rose to hide him from the audience, but only for a few seconds.

The ring and its cloth fell to the floor to reveal the chain-wrapped box—and the arms of the boy magician protruding through the small holes in its sides.

"Oho…"

At that, even Denkurou gave an involuntary murmur of admiration.

Of course, that wasn't the end of the trick. As Sylvie stood on the stage in shock, the boy spoke to her from inside the box.

"Now then, my beautiful lady," he murmured in Italian, his voice ever so slightly bashful, "pierce my heart, if you would."

Although Sylvie was bewildered for a moment, she steeled herself and slowly turned the tip of the sword toward the cabinet.

There was a moment's pause.

Then Sylvie gently slid the sword into the box through the heart-shaped mark at its center.

A moment later—the boy's hands twitched, and something slipped from his fingers to land beside the box.

It was the key to the chain around the cabinet.

While Sylvie was picking it up, the boy's arms withdrew into the cabinet, and complete silence fell over the stage.

Sylvie was rather anxious. Hastily unlocking the chain, she opened the door, but the boy was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, countless flower petals spilled out of the box.

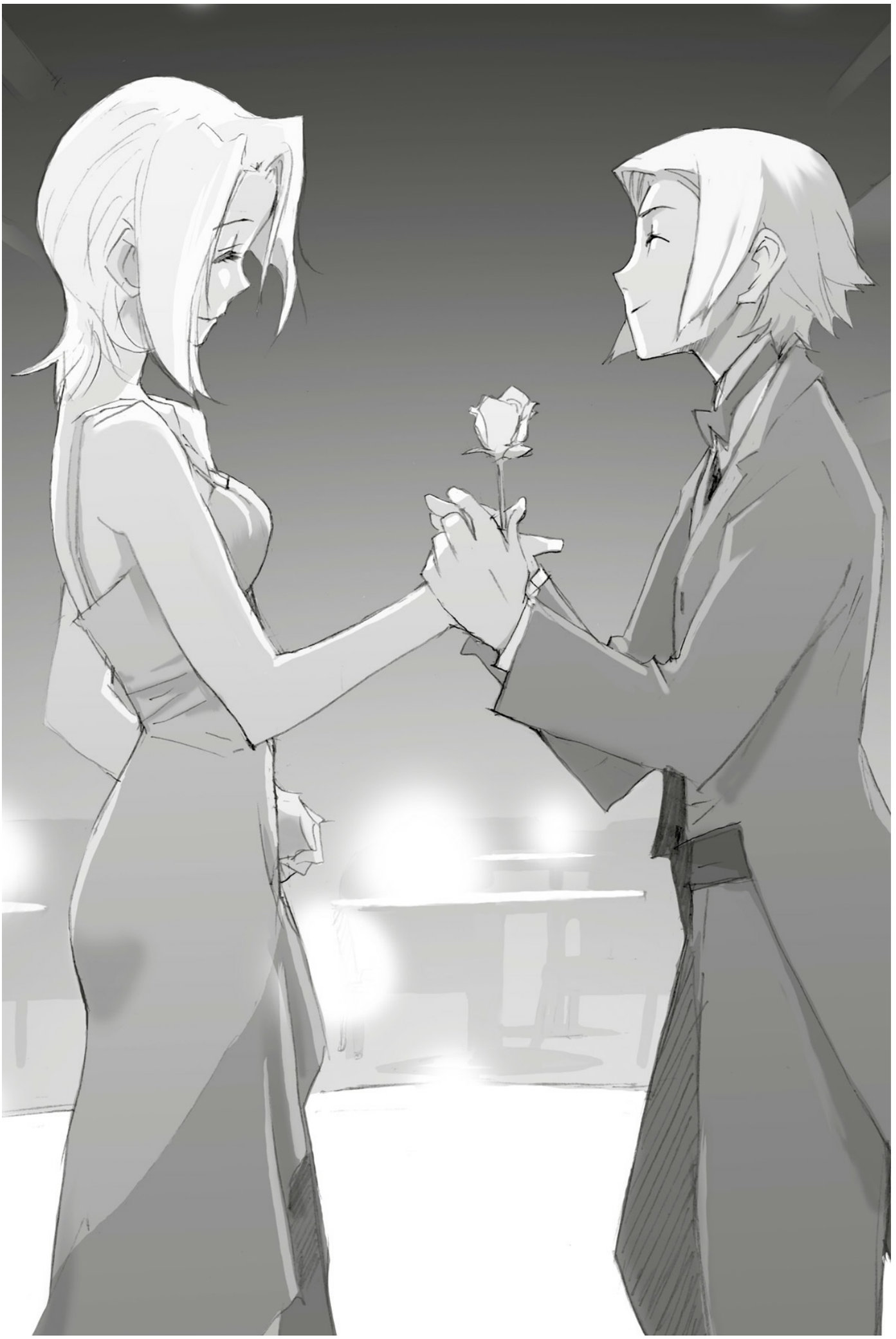
Dancing, twirling through the air above the stage, the blossoms created colorful accents to her silver hair, pale as the wind.

The audience broke out into thunderous applause. Startled, Sylvie stared blankly at them.

A hand touched her back.

The boy magician who'd vanished from the box was standing there, smiling innocently.

"May I have the key?" he asked, and Sylvie hastily handed it to him.



The boy closed his hand around it, instantly transforming it into a single rose.

“Have a wonderful voyage.” With a gentle smile, the boy magician held the rose out to Sylvie.

Sylvie accepted it, then left the stage.

She realized she’d begun to smile.

Maybe it was from relief that the boy she’d stabbed was unharmed, or maybe she’d simply been charmed by his performance. She knew it was a mere trick, but—

Sylvie’s movie-perfect face wore the smile of a young girl, and the whole restaurant showered her with generous applause.

With the adulation in his ears, the boy took the center of the stage to announce the end of the show.

His smile was warm and genuine, exactly like Sylvie’s.

“Did you see that? Did you see what just happened?”

A man sitting on the opposite side from Elmer’s group murmured, his face expressionless, as Sylvie returned to her own table with a smile.

“Marvelous, isn’t it? What a smile. Even after three hundred years on this earth, she isn’t tired of living. She’s lost her lover and her chance to avenge him, and yet her heart is still alive. Yes, it’s magnificent. Don’t you think so, Lucotte?” he mumbled rapidly, drowned out by the audience before anyone else could hear.

The woman who sat next to him responded, but her eyes seemed to have strayed into the space between reality and fiction.

“…Y-yes.”

“All right. I’ll make copies of that video later.”

It wasn’t clear whether he’d heard Celice’s response. With a fond expression, Bride removed the videotape from the camera and stowed it inside his bag.

“After I’ve made her my wife, forcing her to watch the bygone days when she

was happy will make for a splendid *prayer*.”

Thirty minutes later

The boy wasn't consciously sleepy, but everything around him had started feeling strangely unreal. The rocking of the ship should have been nearly imperceptible, but it kept messing with his mind.

After the show, Rookie sat in a corner of the closed, deserted restaurant, drinking coffee by himself. True, he'd cut a special deal and slipped onto the ship at the last minute—but the proprietor of the restaurant didn't know about the Mask Makers.

The man, a good-natured fellow as far as Rookie could tell, had wordlessly made him coffee out of appreciation for his show.

The idea that he was using the unwitting proprietor made guilt well up inside the boy. However, he promptly buried that emotion and calmly considered what came next.

For now, I can leave contacting the rest of the team to Aging. Even if the Mask Makers become public knowledge, they won't connect me to them right away.

If that happens…I'll have to capture him. Even if it means doing it myself.

I've ensured I'll be able to leave the ship in the middle of the voyage. Now I just have to grab that chance, take him, and…

As the boy was thinking to himself, a visitor appeared.

The sign on the door was turned to CLOSED, but a man had walked in and begun talking to the proprietor.

After they'd conversed for a while, the proprietor left the man waiting at the entrance and came over to Rookie, who was drinking his coffee.

"The gentleman over there says he's from your hometown, Luchino, and he wants to thank you for the magnificent show."

"I don't mind. I was just thinking I'd like to talk to somebody myself." With a false, childlike expression, he told the proprietor to let the man through.

He'd recognized the man the moment the door opened.

It was the very one he'd half feared and half hoped to see.

“Hi there. We haven’t met before…I don’t think? I’m Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross.”

“Luchino.”

The man introduced himself with a nonchalant smile, and Luchino quietly extended a hand to him.

“Thank you very much for today. Please give the woman who was with you my thanks as well.”

“No, no! If anything, I should be thanking you! That was a fantastic show. Thank you.”

The moment the man gripped his hand, tension ran through Luchino from head to toe.

An immortal, hmm?

Even looking right at him, even touching his skin, Luchino didn’t feel anything particularly odd.

But the man in front of him was definitely not human.

Firmly reminding himself of that fact, the boy put on his mask of a smile and said, “I’m told you’re from Lotto Valentino as well, Elmer.”

“That’s right, although I haven’t been back in a while. I spent about six years there when I was a kid.”

“I see. Then do you know the story about the womanizing count who spent his entire life in love with thirty maids?”

“Thirty-seven, actually. I see, I see, so rumors about Speran—uh, Count Boroñal have made it all the way to your generation, too.”

“Oh, come on, Elmer. There can’t be more than ten years’ difference between us.”

Even Luchino thought the remark was shameless. If the story he’d heard was correct, the man in front of him had actually lived in Lotto Valentino during the lifetime of the real Count Boroñal.

Rookie made that spiteful jab despite knowing this.

However—

“Actually, just between us, I’m older than I look. By about three hundred years.”

“…That’s a joke, isn’t it? I mean, you can’t be a vampire.”

“A vampire, huh? I dunno. I know somebody who reminds me of one, but I’ve never actually checked. Say, do you think they exist?”

“…I, um… That’s a good question,” Rookie evaded, rather absently. If immortals existed, it wouldn’t be strange if vampires did, too—but more importantly, this man’s behavior was confusing him.

What is this? What’s wrong with him? Does he even understand his own position?

He’d assumed immortals would do everything in their power to hide their existence from others.

The people around them would fear them as monsters, and the stories about being snatched by black-suited government agents would cease to be fiction.

Even without those potential issues, he’d never dreamed the man would volunteer the information that he was immortal so easily.

“Aaaanyway, your magic tricks were terrific! As a fellow Lotto Valentino native, I’m proud. Maybe I’m riding your coattails a bit, but being from the same town as an amazing kid like you is enough to put me over the moon… And so I speak for everyone who felt that way when I say, with heartfelt gratitude, thank you very, very much!”

Elmer thanked the younger boy with genuine feeling and no apparent ulterior motives whatsoever.

What is this?

Meanwhile, Rookie was gradually managing to calm down, but the calmer he got, the clearer one question grew.

Is this guy…really…uh…immortal?

It wasn’t as if he’d had a firm mental image of what immortals were like, but

wasn't Elmer a little too cavalier?

Keeping his bewilderment in check, the boy decided to observe the other man and listen patiently to what he had to say.

He froze his heart in ice to keep all unnecessary emotion out of the exchange, then masked it with a smile.

In the end, the conversation was unexpectedly short. After ten minutes or so, they'd run out of things to say to each other.

They could have had a lively discussion about their hometown, except that the towns the two of them knew were three centuries apart. They got along fine when talking about the land, historical relics, and traditions, but when it came to recent minor changes, the conversation fell flat.

Finally, when silence had fallen for the umpteenth time, Elmer got up, smiling.

"Whoops. You're busy, and here I've been chatting about nothing at all. I'm sorry."

"No, what you shared with me was very beneficial. If you ever get the opportunity, please do come visit the town again!" the boy said with a grin.

Behind that smile, his true feelings remained hidden:

After this voyage, you'll be coming back with me whether you like it or not.

Elmer gave a little smile of his own and gazed steadily at Rookie's face.

"Yeah, you're right. I'll think about it… By the way, you kinda look like a friend of mine, so I hope you don't mind me being a little forward before I go."

"What is it?"

The phrase *You look like a friend of mine* had made his heart skip a beat.

He'd heard that this man had been acquainted with his ancestor Monica. Was Elmer saying he resembled an ancestor from three centuries ago?

Don't tell me… He can't have meant…Huey…can he?

The thought concerned him, and the idea that it might be true was downright irritating, but he kept both emotions hidden in his heart and made an effort to see the other man off with a smile.

Only in the next instant did he learn that all his efforts had been in vain.

“I think you’ll find happiness someday.”

“Huh…?”

Elmer’s remark was completely unexpected. “Every smile you’ve shown me here has been fake, but…”

“…!”

He’d spotted it.

He’d figured it out.

He’d seen right through to his heart.

Instantly, an alarm began to sound in Rookie’s brain.

How much had the man noticed? Did he know everything, right from the start, before Rookie had even made contact with him?

If so…what should I do?

Even as anxiety threaded through his veins, Rookie kept his expression unchanged, waiting for the other man to make his move.

Elmer must have noticed the shift in the boy’s mood anyway. “Sorry, sorry,” he said. “Yeah, I’m good at spotting these things. But, you know…that smile you had when you were doing magic? Now, that was the real thing. I haven’t seen such a fantastic smile in a long time,” he said kindly, with an expression as though he was savoring some nostalgic memory. Maybe he was remembering that evening’s show. “If your magic tricks can make you smile like that, I’m sure they won’t betray you.”

“…”

“And so…keep believing in your magic, too.”

With that bit of advice, the immortal who was nothing like what Rookie had imagined started walking out of the restaurant.

“If you do, I know you’ll be able to smile a lot.”

It wasn’t clear whether he’d realized just how cruel those words were.

Elmer left without another word, and as Rookie watched him go, he didn't say anything, either.

What… What is up with that guy? The boy tried to calm his heart again—and realized there were tears in his eyes. *Are you telling me he was like that three hundred years ago, too?*

He didn't understand what had made him cry. He didn't even try to think about it. Instead, a furious question rose inside him with increasing strength, as if to distract him from those tears.

If so, then why… Why didn't he stop him?

When Huey killed Monica…why didn't he do anything?

Dammit… Dammit to hell…!

But there was no one around to answer the boy's question. The only sound reaching his empty heart just then was the clinking of the cooks washing dishes.

Clatter-clatter clank-clack

Clink-clink click-click

And so the first day passed without incident.

…To all appearances anyway.

Gradually, the malice incarnate that had boarded the ship revealed more of its true colors.

Slowly—and steadily.

In a certain suite

“Well, now… We should act around day three of the voyage.”

Bride impassively but casually outlined the situation to a few believers who acted as his liaisons with the rest of the group. He took his red-and-black lab coat out of his luggage.

“Until then, let’s enjoy the cruise… Or so I’d like to say, but there’s nothing better than getting the prep work out of the way early. Let’s spread our colors over this ship little by little, starting tomorrow night or so. Only if we can, I mean. If we can. Ha-ha.”

With a hollow, noncommittal laugh, he unfolded the red-and-black lab coat and began to put it on, then thought for a bit, decided he’d wait awhile longer, and refolded it.

As he did, Bride approached Celice. She was still standing in a corner of the room looking as if she’d misplaced her soul, as she had been the whole voyage. He softly combed her bangs up with his fingers.

“You could die anytime now, so, erm, well, I want to make sure this gets said… I’m really, well, you know—I’m quite partial to you.”

Averting his face as if he was embarrassed, Bride spoke *as if he didn’t give a damn*.

There was no malice or hostility in his face, but there was no good will there, either. He simply smiled in a bashful way and whispered to the woman who was currently his wife.

“And so, uh, Miss Lucotte, I’d love to see your beautiful suffering.”

Interlude

Voyage, day two Night

As it turned out, I ended up writing the rest of my journal entry at night.

I just got off the phone with Hiroko, and I was way tenser than I'd expected to be. I felt like I did back even before we got married, when we'd just started going out. Except less happy and pleasant; half the tension was just awkwardness.

When we talked, though, it actually helped me feel better.

I'll keep this up.

Right now, I'm just looking forward to calling her again in another twenty-four hours.

Seriously, it feels like I'm back in middle school. They say travel makes you brave, but maybe it's more that being thrown into uncharted territory makes you feel like you're a kid again, just a little.

Twenty-four hours from now… I forgot to reset my watch for the time difference, but if I have to factor that in at this point, I'll just get confused. I'll leave it alone.

Man, yesterday and today were full of surprises.

On the first night, after the party, I went to see that magician boy.

(Shoot. I forgot to mention that to Hiroko. I'll tell her about it during our phone call tomorrow.)

I don't know how to describe it, but the magic tricks were amazing. He produced a hat from a dove and guessed cards and all kinds of things.

It was a lot better than that, but I can't really put it into words.

What startled me was the performer being a good decade younger than I am.

At the end, he took a beautiful Westerner (the one I spotted before we left port) up onstage. She looked even lovelier under the lights up there.

In the audience, I saw a guy filming her the whole time. He had a lady next to him who seemed to be his wife, but he didn't pay any attention to her.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. If it was me and Hiroko, I wouldn't have been filming another woman.

Anyway, I spent today—the second day—exploring the ship. I didn't mention this to Hiroko, but something felt very weird.

It seemed like I saw an awful lot of red and black. Almost everyone was in tuxedos or evening dresses yesterday, but today, more people were wearing regular clothes. And it felt like quite a few of them were wearing this marbled red-and-black design—I'm not sure how to describe it.

Maybe they're jackets from a movie or something and they're being sold on board. Some people were even wearing hats in that pattern, so I really was getting curious.

The design seemed rather ominous, too. Almost cursed or something.

…Well, I think it was probably my imagination. Even little kids were walking around in pullovers with that pattern. When you take that into account, the guy going around in that foreign outfit and mask is a whole lot more suspicious.

He was wearing a mask in a different color today, though, so I think he probably is some sort of entertainer.

All that aside, the voyage is fantastic. The service is perfect. I feel like I died and came back as a millionaire.

Twenty-four hours from now, after I call Hiroko for the second time, maybe I'll place an international call to Japan.

I really do have to say thanks to the photographer who gave me this trip.

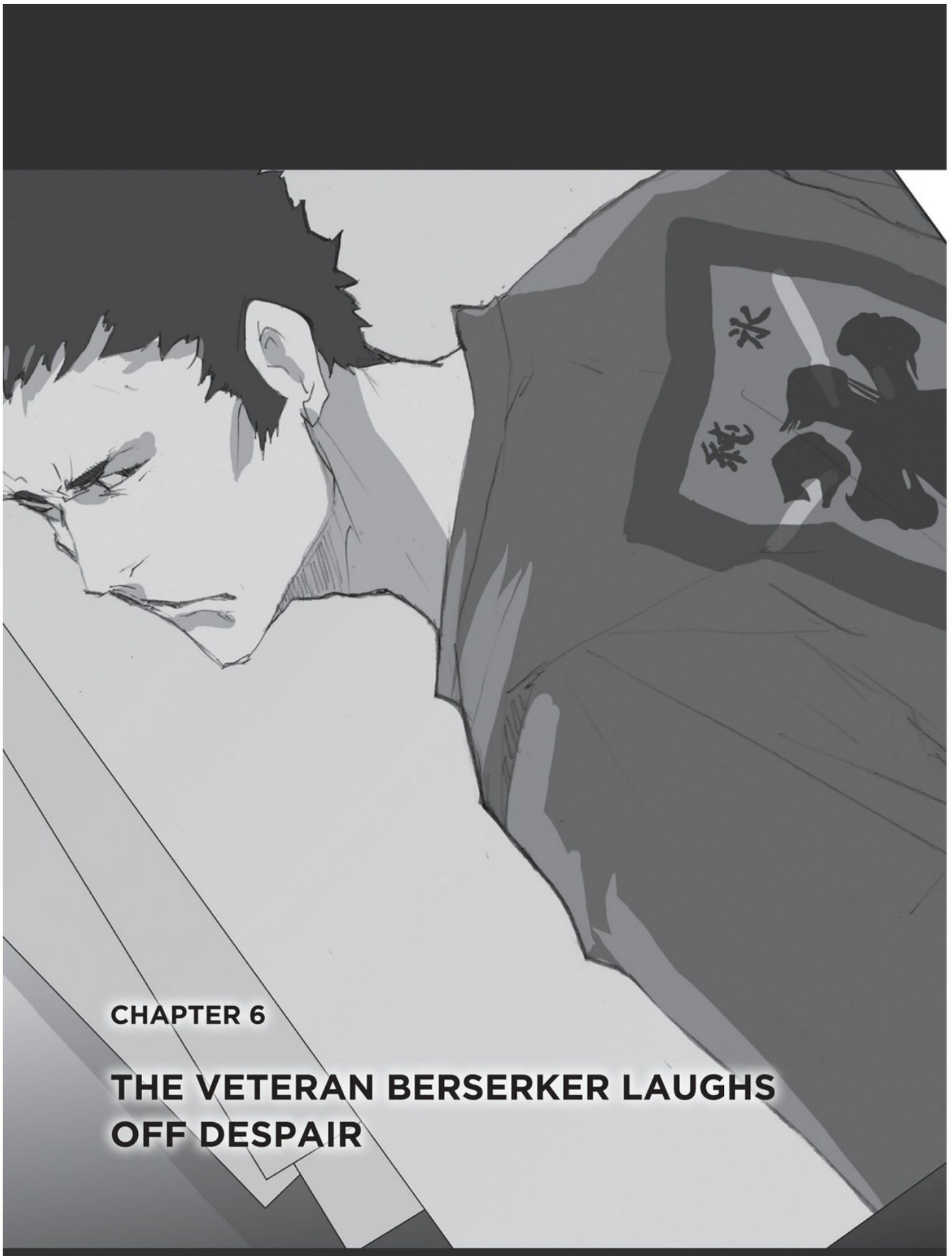
…Although I'll probably just end up rambling on about how great it is and hanging up.

I've started to hear singing. Maybe they're congratulating me on my good luck.

Actually, it's more like a prayer than singing. I'm not sure what it's saying—it's in another language—but they must be holding a wedding in the shipboard chapel.

I just remembered my wedding to Hiroko. I want to hear her voice as soon as possible.

Day two—Night —Misao



CHAPTER 6

THE VETERAN BERSERKER LAUGHS OFF DESPAIR

CHAPTER 6

THE VETERAN BERSERKER LAUGHS OFF DESPAIR

Luxury cruise ship *Exit* Voyage, day three Evening

The passengers had been expecting an elegant voyage.

The Mask Makers had planned to use their overwhelming strength to stir chaos on the ship from the shadows.

For both parties, the world turned inside out in an instant.

Up until then, time on board the *Exit*—an enormous oceangoing closed room—had passed peacefully, at least on the surface.

The voyage was already in its third day.

The *Entrance* had departed from the opposite shore of the Pacific, and in another full day, the ships were scheduled to pass each other at close range.

Around about the time when even passengers who had initially been uneasy about the prospects of a voyage had gotten used to being on the water and begun to genuinely enjoy the trip—

Their journey…

Their safety…

Their futures…

…were all shot down in the blink of an eye.

A mere thirty minutes was all it took to dye the fate of this marine palace red and black.

At the very least, those who were dragged into the middle of the colored spiral despaired equally—while only a handful of exceptions enjoyed the situation.

Those individuals took delight in flipping their inverted circumstances right-

side out again by force.

⟺

On board the *Exit* A storeroom

“Well, hey there, President! Where are ya?”

What is this?

“…In a storeroom near the bottom of the ship. Aging, what in hell is—?” He was interrupted by a burst of static, and the two-way radio went dead. “Dammit!”

Clicking his tongue, the boy launched himself into a run, diving behind a nearby pile of cargo.

What in hell *is going on?*

As gunshots and screams echoed through the ship, Rookie reviewed the situation, taking a few deep breaths.

Everything had been normal until thirty minutes ago. Before that, nothing had been out of the ordinary.

Their occupation of the ship had gone smoothly.

More than five hours ago, he’d received a report that they’d taken the bridge, communications room, and engine room without a single passenger being any the wiser.

Aging had even complained, “Boooring. Somebody needs to figure it out and fight back and call a police copter so I can raise some hell.” She was completely unsuited to stealth maneuvers, so—like Illness on the other ship—she was there to buy time in the event that the police showed up.

She had so much free time on her hands that she was back in her cabin, sleeping, and the boy had been strolling through the shopping mall and around the ship in person to see how the passengers were doing.

He hadn’t spotted any marked changes among them, either.

The one thing that had seemed a little odd was that the red-and-black clothes, which he’d noticed frequently on the second day of the voyage, were

nowhere to be seen today.

It probably had something to do with a movie that was showing on board, he'd assumed, and so he'd dismissed the oddity.

Now he really wished he'd been more suspicious.

He heard footsteps, then spotted a human figure in the doorway to the storeroom.

When Rookie stuck his face out to look, there was a man standing there. He wore a long red-and-black coat buttoned up in front, even though it was summer—

—and without ceremony, he pointed a submachine gun at Rookie.

The room rattled with the sound of silenced gunshots, and Rookie hastily ducked back under cover as they pulverized the floor and cargo right beside him.

Just who are these people?!

The ones who'd been attacking him for the past little while had, without exception, been wearing red and black.

From what he could tell, they weren't all men; he thought he'd seen women among them as well.

Their ages were also all over the place, from kids who seemed only a little older than he was to white-haired old people.

Only thirty minutes ago, he was sure he hadn't seen any of these people in red and black.

Everything, absolutely everything, had been normal.

However—as he was walking through the shipboard shopping mall, he'd suddenly heard gunshots from multiple places, inciting a wave of panic that had swept rapidly through the passengers.

Immediately afterward, groups wearing those red-and-black clothes had begun striding purposefully through the ship as though the panic around them didn't even exist.

He couldn’t risk contacting his subordinates, and he’d been planning to make his way back to his own room, when—

—he’d realized one of those groups was looking his way. Without hiding the guns they were holding, they’d begun marching straight toward him through the milling, fleeing crowd.

——!

It was as if they didn’t even see the passengers around them.

They were clearly the leading players in this atrocity—and yet, to Rookie, they seemed to be smiling quietly.

These expressions weren’t born of murderous glee or insanity.

That’s…relief.

After a long, unwanted journey, there’s a certain peace of mind that comes when a person lets their head sink into a familiar pillow back at home. These were the smiles that would accompany that feeling: soft, lukewarm, even hopeful, as if they had relaxed completely into themselves.

The boy came to a single conclusion instantly.

It’s me. They’re after me.

The moment the realization hit him, all the hair on his body stood on end.

Even before he understood it logically, he knew instinctively that if he didn’t run, they would kill him.

His heart was pounding nearly as loud as a bell on an alarm clock, sending pressure all the way out to the beds of his finger-and toenails.

He was sprinting as hard as he could from the very first step. If he was indecisive about getting away, he wouldn’t last long.

There was only one place he should be going. He made a beeline for the corridor that would get him out of here.

Rookie had memorized the ship’s layout before he came. He’d expected the information to come in handy if they ended up pursuing Elmer and the other immortals. He’d never dreamed he’d be using it to run away.

The bottom line was that Rookie had fled into this storeroom, and yet they'd found him easily.

From what he'd just seen, though, this wasn't the group that had initially begun chasing him.

He was sure he'd managed to lose those first pursuers, but apparently, he couldn't afford to ever feel relieved in this situation.

That's a lot… Just how many of these guys are there?

He didn't have time for an analysis.

He had to get out of here somehow, or else—

Keeping his stance low, he calmly stood up and tried to use the cargo as cover. But there was almost no cargo in the storeroom, possibly because there were no big events scheduled, and it was nearly impossible to create dead angles.

He'd made one other miscalculation.

The man in red and black came running straight toward him.

The bulk of the cargo was in shipping containers, and the object between the man and Rookie formed a wall that was easily taller than the boy.

However, still gripping the submachine gun, *the man jumped up on top of that container*, then ran straight toward him across it.

——?!

Footsteps were closing in on him from above, on a diagonal, and much faster than Rookie had anticipated.

It was as if there were a hurdle race taking place on top of the container, and the goal was right above him. And the runners were Olympians.

The completely unexpected act made Rookie hesitate for a bare two seconds, and immediately afterward—

—a man wearing a relieved, carefree smile like the others launched himself into the air over Rookie, still holding his submachine gun. He probably hadn't been able to stop entirely.

I'm gonna die.

His nerves were about to snap.

To Rookie, the scene seemed to be playing out in slow motion.

The man passed in front of the light, and just as he began to aim his gun at Rookie in midleap—

—he was surprised again.

"Toh!"

The shout was a little odd, like one of the suit-wearing heroes in one of those whatever-ranger shows on TV, but the woman's voice over Rookie's head was familiar.

A figure sprang off the container even higher than the red-and-black man had. She looked larger than he did, even though he was closer—and she slammed an ankle like a metal baseball bat into the man's neck.

The boy heard a crunch as something broke, and then a red-and-black mass landed right beside him, along with the submachine gun that had slipped out of the man's hands.

The new arrival landed on the ground in a dramatic pose, although to Luchino it looked contrived.

"Huh… This is one of those times you need a catchphrase or somethin'."

"Aging!"

At the sight of the cackling giantess, the boy was openly relieved—having her strength and combat skills right there with him restored a bit of his composure.

"Excellent save, Aging. I wish I could take my time and thank you, but…I need a report. What on earth happened?" he asked, mustering all the presidential dignity he could find.

However—

"Mm. Lemme see. I'm having a grand old time, but you probably don't see it that way."

—the next instant, he lost both that dignity and the composure he'd just

regained.

“I got a feeling all the other Mask Makers already bought the farm.”

“…Huh?”

For a moment, Rookie’s mind refused to absorb the meaning of the words, and he blinked.

Smiling awkwardly, Aging pointed at the silencer-equipped submachine gun lying beside the twitching man, whose neck was twisted at a weird angle.

“See that gun over there? That’s one of ours. ’Bout all the weapons we got left are the machete and minigun in my room!”

Aging nonchalantly outlined the hopeless situation and gave a hearty laugh, although there was no telling what she’d found so entertaining.

“Gah-ha-ha! Tell you what, that was awful careless of us! No heroes, just a zombie horde! Didn’t see that coming! See, this is why I can’t quit this job!”

For his part, the president looked as if his soul had been sucked out of him. His face was perfectly expressionless—

—and then he collapsed weakly against Aging.

“…That’s impossible… You’re kidding…right?”

“Hey, no worries! As long as you and me are around, we still got two people! That’s enough to rebuild the company… Whoops, I completely forgot about the crew on the *Entrance*! Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yeah, Illness is gonna pop me one for that later.”

Aging had caught the boy against her stomach more than her bosom and put her right arm around him gently in an attempt to set him at ease. Then, eyes shining with genuine glee, she began cracking the fingers of her left hand.

“Be that as it may…”

Her eyes could have belonged to a savage carnivore. Her lips were twisted in a smile, and she flicked her tongue out against them like a child who’d stumbled onto a feast.

“…I think the fun’s just gettin’ started.”

⟺

Let’s go back about thirty minutes.

“Well, now. There’s about a day left until the Crossing, right? I don’t think the time difference between us is more than two or three hours at this point.”

The man was wearing a pure-white, expressionless mask reminiscent of Italian carnivals, and he let his gun dangle cheerfully from his hand as he spoke.

The captain of the *Exit* shot him a resentful glare.

“Damn you… You’d better be telling the truth about not harming the passengers.”

“Hey, no worries. Just keep quiet, and once we’re done with our job, we’ll be getting off the ship, and then it’s adios. And all the fine folks aboard get to finish their swanky little trip none the wiser… That’s the plan, as I’ve told you several times already, remember?”

As on the *Entrance*, the Mask Makers had occupied the ship’s bridge.

Since Aging couldn’t get into the vents the way Life had, the number of devices they’d set up was much lower than on the *Entrance*, acting only as leverage for their threats.

To offset this fact, this ship had almost twice as many people as the *Entrance* did.

Although it had been nearly five hours since the actual occupation, the Mask Makers still hadn’t made a move.

“See, there’s this thing called timing. Just tough it out until the boat comes to pick us up, will ya? At least we’re not trying to ram the ship into a tanker. We’ve got a little more heart than those guys from the movies, eh?”

Apparently, they shared the *Entrance* team’s love of cinema, and the other masked men started cackling at the comment. They didn’t have the formality of military types, and that made the captain and staff especially anxious.

The way they were joking around suggested they’d kill people even if they didn’t have a reason, and that uncertainty kept the minds of the hostages on edge.

These people might abruptly fire their guns at random and without need, and that made them more frightening than criminals who operated like machines and would kill women and children if they had to. It was hard to believe in their promise not to harm the passengers.

The crew was still making their scheduled check-ins with headquarters—at gunpoint, of course—and apparently, the group had looked into their SOP beforehand, because they'd summarily cut off their emergency communication protocol:

"Just so you know, we're already aware of your secret signal that you're in trouble. So no small talk about starfish."

As a result, the captain and the rest of the crew had been feeling powerless and frustrated, but…

Suddenly, one of the handcuffed hostages got to his feet.

"Whoa there, did I say you could stand?"

"H-hey, Roeckl?"

The chief mate had acted so abruptly that the captain stared at him, eyes wide.

Although the man hadn't said a word in the five hours since they'd been taken hostage, he'd suddenly risen to his feet and begun to walk.

The Mask Makers froze briefly at his sheer boldness, but then one of them woke up with a jolt and hastily pointed his gun at him.

"Hey! Sit the hell down!"

"Sorry. It's time to report in," replied the chief mate with a candid smile.

"Huh?"

The people around them thought the fear must have sent his mind over the edge.

The Mask Maker was about to rough him up a bit and sit him back down when the man said something strange.

"You see, *I have to contact the leader regularly*. If I don't, someone will come

to check up on me. Since the communications room has been occupied as well, they may have already realized something's wrong… Yes, that's right; I'm sure they have."

"…Huh?"

"You see, I believe there will be an order to speed up soon," he murmured. "That means I must prepare… Yes, that's right; I need to go get my other outfit…"

The Mask Makers looked at one another, and then—

—the door to the bridge opened, and one of the Mask Makers who'd been standing guard outside entered, bringing an odd little girl with him.

"Hey… This weird brat was hanging around out there."

"…What?"

The man was holding the girl's sleeve. When they saw her, everyone shared a look—both the Mask Makers and the hostages.

The girl was probably less than ten years old, and she was wearing a white outfit too simple to call a real dress. There was a black blindfold over her expressionless face and headphones on her ears.

The end of the headphone cord was connected to a pouch at her waist, and for some reason, her hands were behind her back.

"What's with the kid?"

"Well, she's… Here, look."

As he spoke, the man turned the girl around—and not only were her hands behind her back, there were handcuffs on her wrists. They weren't the type the Mask Makers used.

"…Did you do that?"

"No way! She just…came walking up to me, barefoot. She was already like this. I tried to run her off, but she can't see or hear… I took the headphones off, but she didn't react. I got a little creeped out."

"So what'd you bring her in here for?!"

“Well, see…”

As the man started to explain, the girl seemed to sense something. Turning her head in a facsimile of looking around, she spoke. “Believer Roeckl. Believer Roeckl. Scheduled check-ins are. No longer. Necessary.”

“…she started saying that every so often.”

The girl finished her mechanical speech, then bowed her head and fell silent again.

“Roeckl’s the chief mate’s name, right? It gave me the willies.”

Sensing something very eerie about the girl, one of the Mask Makers shoved a gun against the chief mate’s temple. “Hey, what’s the deal with the brat?”

“She is a priestess who serves as a mouthpiece for us,” the chief mate replied, smiling. He faced the girl and knelt, then bowed his head for a while, as if waiting for something.

“…”

The pointlessness of it irritated them, but they found it more eerie than anything.

The Mask Makers didn’t know what to do with this. They spent a few seconds hesitating over whether they should bind the girl’s legs or try to get an explanation out of the chief mate, maybe even beat it out of him, but then—

—the blindfolded girl’s expression underwent an abrupt change.

Her face was still blank, but it was blank in a different way.

Before it had been listless emptiness, but in an instant, it was rigid as though hardened by some sort of pressure—

—and a monotone song echoed in the bridge.

“The answer lies within us.

Fear death.

The world lies within them.

Dread life.

Fear death.

Fear death.

Dread life. Dread life. Your own flesh accepts death.

Your own heart wishes for death.

Yet still you live, O noble goats.

Quell the soul that is to be devoured.

Worship pain.

We affirm our god

Who does not exist.”

Her voice was beautifully breathy and fragile, a shiver of sound so weak that a puff of wind might have blown it away.

And yet, the girl’s voice was *overwhelming*.

“H-hey, what is she—? What’s wrong with this kid? Stop it! Stop that chanting!”

There was no will behind her scream, but the sound nearly rendered them unable to act. Still, one of the Mask Makers managed to remove the headphones from the girl’s ears.

“What are you listening t…?”

When he put them to his own ears, although the volume was low, he could definitely hear something.

The man listened to it for a while, then turned pale and flung them to the floor. “Wh-what the hell is this?!”

“Hey, what gives?! What did you hear?!” one of his comrades asked.

The man was sweating. “…I heard screams.”

“…Huh?”

“I only listened to a little of it, but…I think it was her voice. She’s… Wait, don’t tell me she’s… *Has she been listening to her own damn screams on those headphones all this time?!*”

“…Wait—”

This was just bizarre.

They wanted to think the man was mistaken, but all the same, it was clear she had been listening to screams.

The man who’d brought the girl into the room was shocked. “Hold it, hold it!” he yelled. “I listened to those a bit ago, and I didn’t hear anything like…”

“Of course not. That radio only started picking up sound just now.”

“?!”

Someone had spoken from the entrance to the bridge.

A lone man had appeared in the doorway before anyone noticed, and now he was looking around.

“Our priestesses are *blessed* to sing the words of the prayer to the accompaniment of their own screams.”

He was probably just a shade over six feet tall. They could tell he was shorter than Aging, but even then, the man was clearly taller than anyone else present.

His features were reminiscent of a gorilla’s, but he spoke like an intellectual.

“Freeze!”

All the Mask Makers turned their guns on him at once.

In the next moment—

Krrntch.

—a spine-tingling noise echoed in the bridge.

Wondering what was going on, several people looked in the direction of the sound while keeping their attention partially focused on the big man.

And then they saw—a silent, *freshly created corpse* on the ground.

“…Huh? Wha…?” one of the Mask Makers said dully.

The corpse was all that was left of the person responsible for everything about the *Exit*: its captain.

“Wha… What the…? Who killed…?” But he didn’t even need to ask.

The one who’d twisted his head more than 180 degrees was standing right beside the corpse.

“My thanks to the destiny that kept the captain I love and respect from suffering pain,” the chief mate murmured, then knelt to the girl again.

The girl had stopped singing a few moments ago when the headphones were removed, but the chief mate was still facing her with worship in his eyes.

“No… Uh… Hang on just a minute.”

That was when the confused Mask Makers noticed that the man’s hands were free.

How had he gotten the handcuffs off?

It didn’t take long to see the answer to that.

From the wrist down, the flesh on the man’s right hand was gouged and dripping blood, and the bones in his fingers seemed to have been dislocated in several places.

He’d wrenched his way out. That was all it was.

Naturally, this wasn’t an easy task.

Some stage magicians can dislocate their joints at will and slip out of handcuffs—but no matter how you looked at it, the chief mate had broken out with brute force, at the cost of his hand.

That wasn’t the problem, though.

No, there was a far bigger question.

Why had the chief mate killed the captain? If he’d had time to break his neck, he could have fought back against the Mask Makers.

Of course, the Mask Makers had threatened them with gas, so it wouldn’t have been easy—but that still didn’t explain why he’d killed the captain.

The other bound crew members were also speechless; they couldn’t believe what they were seeing.

“You… Why…?”

“Oh, disposing of the captain and his staff was always on the agenda.”

The impassive answer came not from the chief mate, but from the well-spoken gorilla who was leaning against the wall beside the door.

“What…?”

“We’re killing those who are in our way. Why wouldn’t we?”

“Look, you’re not making any sense… What the hell’s wrong with you people? Why did you kill the captain?” The Mask Maker was pointing his gun at the chief mate and the man with the simian face by turns.

In response, the gorilla quietly shook his head and replied curtly. “It was you who killed him.”

“…What?”

“After it’s over, we’ll ask one of you about your objectives.” Despite the gun trained on him, the big man was calm and matter-of-fact. “You are the ones who killed the captain.”

“…?”

“The people who are about to die on this ship are all your victims as well. That’s what the story will be.”

“What are you talking about…? What are you…? Hey, what are you ta…?”

Then, all at once, the Mask Makers registered the abnormality that had begun to occur on the bridge.

The members of the crew had been restrained, with their hands cuffed behind them, and yet…

…several of them were standing, swaying slowly like wraiths, their hands red and black and deformed.

A few more of them were rising to their feet.

Including the chief mate, who was already unbound, a total of about ten people got to their feet, and the remaining crew members gazed at their companions with frightened eyes.

Tension raced through the Mask Makers, and they adjusted their grips on their guns.

The big man sneered at them, quietly. “Meaning if we’re going to pin all of this on you—”

He paused for a moment, then continued with a cruel smile.

“—it won’t do to have witnesses around. Nothing personal.”

“——! Don’t screw with us!”

“Unless it’s necessary, avoid killing as much as you can.”

That had been the president’s order, but under the circumstances, they couldn’t afford not to strike first.

It wasn’t because the big man had irritated them.

They’re dangerous.

They had spent long years walking on thin ice as Mask Makers, and the experience they’d gained was sounding an alarm.

These guys are bad news*.*

On that thought, they leveled their guns at the crew members who’d yanked their hands out of their cuffs—

—and at the exact same time, the big man flipped some sort of switch, and screams began to issue directly from a speaker in the pouch at the girl’s waist.

“HigigakaaaAaaaaAAAah-aaah! AAAAaaaaaAAAaah! DAAaaah! WaAAaaaaaaaah! ByaaaaaaAAah-ah-ee, ee, eekyAAAAaaaaah-ah-aAAAh!”

The screams were horrible; there was no telling what had been done to her. The sound alone was enough to make people uncomfortable, reverberating off the walls of the spacious bridge.

“Death is a neighbor to be feared AAaaah-aaaaaAh! HyAAAaa aaaaAHYAAAA aaaaaaAAH! AaaAAaah Life is kin to be dreaded Hngh! Gng-gng-gng! GyaaaaAAh! Giiii! GIIiiiiiHIIiiiiAAAaaah! Our god AaaaAAIIOAaaOuOUuOOOoaaaAaaaa AAaaiiAAAaaaah! GiiiIII! Gkyaa-ah! Departs from within us NOOOooooOOOooo!

HigyaaaaaAAaaAaaaAAAAaaaaAgh! WaaAAAAh! And returns to oblivion Kghhyaaaa! AuraaAAaaaah! AAaGaaNooooOOooo! NOOOOooooOO! Agony abides with light Aaah! Ghk-ghk-ghkkkAaAaaah!”

*

The song of the girl's past screams joined the scream of her current song.

It was nothing but sound, yet the duet between the radio and the girl was like a cloud of red and black falling over the bridge. The perfect color for the tragedy that was about to occur—when the Mask Makers squeezed the triggers of their guns in unison.

⟺

Between the walls of the bridge and the thick glass, almost none of the noise of the silenced submachine guns escaped the room.

However—even now, as early as it was, a few individuals had noticed that something was wrong.

⟺

One of those people was a companion of the men experiencing the disaster—a giantess.

"Hmm?"

In the middle of her massage in the beauty salon, Aging picked up on the faint explosive sounds traveling through the air.

"Sorry to do this to ya when you're workin' so hard, young lady, but something urgent just came up. Can I get you to pick up the pace a lil' bit?"

"Of course." The beauty therapist was a pro as well. Aging's muscles were not like most people's, but she massaged them with precision, driving the fatigue from her body at a speed significantly faster than what she'd scheduled.

"…Nah. It couldn't be…"

Fearing the worst, Aging hastily began pulling her clothes on. She smiled quietly; she'd sensed something like destiny when she ran into one of their targets—the silver-haired woman—in the salon.

"Well, I doubt they'd start firing that easy. I bet I misunderstood, but…"

Half-hopeful, half-worried, Aging left the salon, but—

—the situation on the ship was turning into something worse than she could

have imagined.

Of course, as it turned out, she was delighted.

In a certain semi-suite cabin

While the bridge descended into blood and chaos…

Elmer and his friends were taking it easy in their cabin, as if they were residents of another world.

Denkurou was absorbed in Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, which he'd found on the room's DVD list, while Elmer had earphones in and was playing a handheld game console he'd bought in Japan.

For his part, Nile was out on the balcony, gazing out over the ocean and occasionally fooling around with the birds flying toward them from desert islands.

Sylvie was the only one who was absent. "Since I'm here," she'd said, "I'm going to the salon. They say it's part of a chain that's famous in France," and had left about an hour ago.

It had been a little over fifty hours since they boarded the ship.

There was still no word from Huey Laforet.

"Hmm… Let me just say this: This tedium is excruciating."

"Why not watch a movie, Nile? I believe you'd find this one to your liking."

"Let me just say this: I do not understand Japanese, and I assume you want to listen to the Japanese audio. I will watch it again later, so do not trouble yourself."

"I never thought I'd live to see the day Nile would be so considerate… Perhaps it's unfair of me to say, but the boredom must be weighing heavily on you."

"Let me just say this: If you understand that, then say nothing. Traveling by ship reminds me intensely of the *Advena Avis*, and my mood sours when I do not stay active." Impatient over the uneventful voyage, Nile turned his attention to Elmer. "Elmer. If these doldrums continue, what do you intend to

do?”

Elmer slipped out one of the earphones so he could hear better, but he kept playing his game as he answered.

“Mm, I’m thinking we should have scraped the money together to bring Fil along, too.”

Fil was the name of the *girls* they’d removed from a certain village in Northern Europe the previous year.

The girls had been created as a byproduct of the elixir of immortality: one mind shared by multiple bodies.

After a minor incident, the girls (plus one) had accompanied Elmer’s group out of the forest where they’d been born, taking their first steps into the wide world.

One of them had been staying with Sylvie, but she hadn’t come along on this trip.

If it did turn out to be a trap, set by Huey or somebody else, they’d wanted to avoid dragging her into the mess. Plus, no ticket for her had been sent in the first place, so they’d temporarily left her with a trustworthy Japanese friend.

However, in the end, all was quiet.

They’d spent the first day of the voyage on their guard, expecting that something might come up, but when the second day had also passed uneventfully, Nile’s tension had been replaced by discontent. “Something happen already,” he’d said.

“…Blast Huey,” Nile was saying now. “If he stands us up, so help me, I will—”

“No, this is him we’re talking about. Maybe he coincidentally got boarding passes for the ship and gave them to us as a present.”

“Let me just say this: If that were his intent, such a roundabout approach would have been… Ah. No, it would not be unthinkable for him.”

“Huey can be pretty bashful. For a guy who sees all humans as his personal guinea pigs, he’s awful at taking a genuine compliment.” Visualizing his old friend’s familiar face, Elmer chuckled and kept pushing buttons on his

controller.

"…Calling the greatest villain on the *Advena Avis* 'bashful.' That is astounding."

"'Villain,' huh? Well, I don't deny it. I bet he wouldn't, either. I dunno if he was the *biggest* one, though."

"If Szilard was scum, I imagine calling Huey a villain would be appropriate."

"No, I mean…there was Fermet, too, y'know? If we're talking villains."

Fermet.

Nile looked mystified to hear the name so suddenly, while Denkurou quietly shifted his attention from the movie to the pair's conversation.

"Let me just ask this: What are you talking about? That diffident, good-natured fellow is hardly a villain…"

"…Oh, I see. So you didn't notice, either, huh, Nile? What about you, Denkurou?" he asked, drawing the other man into the conversation.

For his part, Denkurou answered as if he'd expected the development. "…I had noticed, such as it was."

"Wait, what are you two saying?"

"No, erm… It's of no importance, Nile. I would rather not speak ill of the departed."

"Let me just say this: You scoundrels. This is going to bother me now… Well, you are correct: Vilifying someone who has already been eaten will only annoy the fellow who consumed him."

Nile had reluctantly resigned himself, while Elmer went on, cackling.

"Speaking of Fermet, that reminds me: What do you suppose Czes is up to right about now?"

"It hasn't yet been two months since we parted, but I would imagine he's relaxing in New York at this point," Denkurou replied.

Elmer laughed cheerfully. "Come to think of it, we didn't tell Czes and Maiza about this trip. Let's show up out of nowhere and surprise them."

“Let me just say this: Remember that we left Fil in Japan. Sylvie may not find a journey of that length agreeable.”

“Well, let’s call Fil, too, then. Czes may want to see her. Plus, uh, I bet he probably doesn’t have much luck with women? Makes me want to add a little color to his life.”

“Let me just say this: That would be tremendously uncalled-for,” Nile replied with dismay as he returned his gaze to the ocean. “Hmm…?”

The sound the wind carried to him was a faint one.

Someone unused to hearing it probably couldn’t have identified it, and it was so very faint that unless that someone had rather well-trained ears, they wouldn’t even have heard it. It was a terribly soft series of explosive bursts.

Curious about the noise—the submachine guns—Nile wordlessly got up from his chair and headed out of the room, card key hanging from his neck.

“Huh? Where are you going?”

“I hope I am merely imagining it, but I heard sounds that concern me slightly.”

“?”

I hope I am merely imagining it—was not what Nile actually thought.

I hope I heard correctly—and that it does not turn out to be event fireworks.

Once Nile was out of the room and in the corridor, he decided to take a slow stroll through the ship.

I hope it proves to be a decent diversion.

The moment after Nile thought that—he quietly put a hand to his mask.

“…No, I mustn’t.” Out in the hall, he softly admonished himself.

Nile had once wandered from one battlefield to another, and he’d grown used to the deaths of other people. Now the beginnings of elation stirring in his chest at the prospect of combat plunged him into self-loathing.

The idea of one who is immortal wishing for battle! Am I planning to relish a one-sided massacre?

For goodness' sake. Who am I to call Huey a villain? If this is how it stands, I am far more of a—

Behind his mask, Nile ground his teeth in irritation, but he set off anyway.

Without completely denying the "thirst" welling up inside him—

—quietly, he began walking through the boat, searching for his battlefield.

In a certain suite

“…It sounds like they’ve started.”

As he listened to the gunshots and screams issuing from his radio, Bride quietly shook his head.

In a room large enough to host a casual house party, he rested his elbows on the table in the center, murmuring with an expression of near rapture. Instead of his usual secretaries, several children in white clothes and restraints stood at his side.

The children were the “priestesses,” and they had been brought here by their own parents, each in the name of a “family trip.”

It wasn’t clear whether the children had wills of their own as they stood silently in a neat row.

Celice was still lying on the bed, and it was hard to tell whether she was awake or asleep.

If there was one other thing that was different from the day before—

—it was that Bride was wearing the red-and-black lab coat he’d worn at the church.

“Still, we can’t go back now. No, we’ve passed the point of no return. Oh, what should I do? Sheesh, what a time to run into a seajacking. Fate is truly cruel. O Bride, please grant me courage. O pain, please grant me blessings.”

With his strange prayer, the young man slowly pressed the switch he held in his hand.

At that, the sounds of each child’s “voice of agony” spilled from their headphones, and they reflexively began to sing in chorus.

The answer lies within us. Fear death.

“““The answer lies within us. Fear death.”””

The monotone canon was enough.

The world lies within them. Dread life.

“““The world lies within them. Dread life.”””

No matter where they were—whether it was a church from another religion, a shrine, or a Buddhist temple, whether they were outdoors or on the roof of a department store—as long as those voices were there, to Bride, that place was SAMPLE’s church and holy ground.

Fear death Fear death Dread life Dread life

“““Fear death Fear death Dread life Dread life”””

“You have my gratitude, my agonies. Courage has welled up within me.”

With the children’s screams in his ears, the man smiled quietly, then reached for the bag sitting on the table.

Beneath the false bottom of the attaché case were multiple syringes and needles.

There were about twenty in all, some of them already filled with liquid. Even if someone had singled his luggage out for inspection, there was nothing illegal inside but the needles themselves. After all, the liquid was a legal and completely unregulated substance.

Quietly, Bride took out two syringes, gripping one in each hand.

“Now, then… At this point, we’re sure that there are seajackers…on the bridge…in the control room…and in the communications room, hmm?”

Amid the song of the boys and girls, bliss was rising into Bride’s expression.

“In that case, shall we begin our mass?”

With no hesitation, he plunged the syringes into his neck from either side.

Your own flesh accepts death. Your own heart wishes for death.

“““Your own flesh accepts death. Your own heart wishes for death.

Yet still you live, O noble goats. Quell the soul that is to be devoured.

Yet still you live, O noble goats. Quell the soul that is to be devoured.

Worship pain. We affirm our god Who does not exist.

Worship pain. We affirm our god Who does not exist.

Death is a neighbor to be feared. Life is kin to be dreaded.

Death is a neighbor to be feared. Life is kin to be dreaded.

Our god departs from within us and returns to oblivion.

Our god departs from within us and returns to oblivion.

Agony abides with light, fury and shame dwell in shadow, in their

Agony abides with light, fury and shame dwell in shadow, in their

illustrious presence, I simply consume a single leaf from the garden.

illustrious presence, I simply consume a single leaf from the garden.

Fear god. Fear thyself.

Fear god. Fear thyself.

The acts of pity are the forgiveness we have been granted…

The acts of pity are the forgiveness we have been granted…""""

The words of the prayer never broke off. They traveled through the walls, echoing inside the ship.

Slowly and steadily—

—this prayer, this product of malice became a sweet poison permeating the vessel.

To delude, to deceive…

Meanwhile The communications room

As on the bridge, the Mask Makers had taken control of the communications room.

The five employees assigned to that area had been keeping an uneventful watch, but—

—when one of the men removed his mask and headed off to use the bathroom, a lone woman blocked his way.

She was one of the two constantly at Bride's side, but the man wasn't aware of that. All he knew was that she was a young woman in a red-and-black dress.

“…?”

“Good evening.”

Deciding she must be a passenger who’d wandered in by mistake, the man calmly told her, “Miss, this area is off-limits—”

He didn’t manage to finish his sentence.

With her right hand, the woman had stabbed him in the throat.

On closer inspection, she was wearing miniature gauntlets (or something like them) that covered the middle three fingers of each hand all the way to the fingertips and tapered out into a sharp point. The woman’s keen skill turned it into a deadly weapon.

There was a wheezing whistle as the man’s breath escaped the wound with a spurt of blood.

The woman didn’t react when it splashed onto her. On her red-and-black dress, the color hardly showed at all.

He was probably already dead from the blood loss. With one last glance at him, the woman left him with the words:

“May you be granted a painless death.”

She was headed for the communications room.

Following her with their eyes, several men and women peeked out of the restroom the man had been planning to enter.

They were all wearing red and black—like a coven of witches preparing to summon a devil for their dark mass.

Meanwhile The engine control room

The control room was located near the front of the ship, far nearer to the bottom than the bridge. This place single-handedly managed the ventilation system, electrical system, broadcasting equipment, and more, and the Mask Makers had assigned ten or so people to occupy it.

After all, they couldn’t let the rest of the ship realize anything was wrong.

Even after they'd taken control, they had to have their hostages perform their jobs as if everything were normal, so in a sense, it was even more necessary to make their position clear to them here than it was on the bridge.

There were several routes here: You could take the elevator or a long stairway down, or you could head over from one of the cargo rooms at the bottom of the ship.

Since it was an important location, it was equipped with a sturdy door—currently unlocked, thanks to the Mask Makers. They were taking turns keeping watch in front of it.

Anyone going to the control room had to travel down one last hallway, and there were always two lookouts stationed at the entrance. Just in case an ordinary passenger approached by accident, they kept both their masks and their guns hidden in their jackets.

"Maaan. No normal passengers would be nosy enough to come all the way down here."

"Quit bellyaching. Remember what Mr. Death said? Even when the odds are a million to one, always be ready for the one."

Death was the name of the "weapon" who'd died the other day, and at the mention of his name, the Mask Makers turned somber.

"Yeah… His death was a million to one, for sure."

"Remember that El Mariachi guy Banderas played in *Desperado*? I hear the guy who shot him was the same kinda gunslinger."

"That's terrifying; don't even joke… I can't believe someone like that exists."

As the pair went on with their idle talk, or perhaps their way of mourning the dead—

—a lone woman appeared in front of them.

"…?!"

She hadn't made any noise as she approached, and the men looked at each other.

She was wearing a tight-fitting women's suit, one of the "bodycon" types that had been popular in Japan about ten years back. The skirt was rather short, and it exposed her flawless legs to just above the knee.

The suit's color scheme was an unsettling red and black, but even before he could think it consciously, one of the men automatically opened his mouth to say almost the exact same thing as the man who'd been killed in front of the bathroom by the communications room.

"Oh, sorry, miss, but this area's off-limits—"

And like the other man, he didn't get to finish the sentence.

"Gahk…?"

He'd seen her whirl around sharply, but the heavy impact that pierced his abdomen in the next instant prevented him from thinking anything else.

And *pierce* was indeed the right word for the sensation. The woman's foot had literally punched right through the man's stomach, shattering his spine.

"…Huf…afuu…afwah…"

The Mask Maker gave a foolish-sounding cry, spitting up blood.

He was still making noises, but his mind was already gone. The shock of a severed spine had stopped the man's heart and shut down his brain.

Swiftly withdrawing her foot from the man's stomach, the woman shifted into her next move before the second man could react.

The Mask Makers weren't amateurs. Even when a woman's leg was sticking out of his companion's back, the man understood the situation in a mere two seconds and promptly reached into his jacket, but—

—the way she was moving, "amateur" or "professional" didn't make a difference. She didn't even seem human.

The next thing he knew, the woman had leaped, and he saw her toes heading his way in a savate-style kick.

By the time he spotted the blade sprouting from the toe of her high heel, stained with his companion's blood—it had already slashed his throat.

The last thought in the man's head was:

Shit. Nobody but Aging or Death could…handle this one.

It was pathetic, and the man in question wasn't happy about it, either.

His reflex nerves had instantly tried to evade that kick; they'd even carried him part of the way.

But the woman was that much faster, and the battle was decided as she drove death directly into the man's body.

"May you be granted a painless death."

With that, the woman took the men's bloodied handguns out of their coats.

She waited there for a short while, and then red-and-black-clad "believers" appeared, just as they had in the corridor by the communications room.

"Use these."

Smiling softly, the secretary handed the guns to the believers at the front of the group.

They all had similar smiles pasted on their faces—as if, in their minds, the corpses that lay on the floor no longer existed.

Not even a few minutes later, an emergency alert went out to the radios of every Mask Maker standing by on the ship.

"This is Gelf, we have a Code F. Repeat, Code F! Goddammit!"

"Hostiles! All our occupied locations are under attack by an unknown group!"

"They're all in red-and-black clothes! They are hostile! Repeat! They are all hostile!"

The members on standby had no idea what was going on, but when they heard the term *Code F*—which signaled an attack by a third party—tension ran through them.

"Nobody make contact with the president! If they take him out, we're done f—A-aaaah… Shit, they're here!"

The voice on the radio cut out, leaving nothing but static.

That radio alert proved to be the final trigger—

—and the world of the *Exit* was turned completely inside out.

⟺

In a certain semi-suite cabin

Celice still hadn't managed to completely regain her sense of self, and the scream of the children's song kept ringing in her ears.

Their voices brought back memories of the atrocity at that church, when she'd first met Bride.

That scene had risen in her mind and faded before, many times, but this was the first time she'd really heard the children's song since then.

Maybe that was why the memory was becoming a vivid flashback wreaking havoc on her mind.

⟺

If you want to know what happened back then, when the Asian group had burst in—

—the answer is a very simple one.

They'd fought.

At the end of the day, that was all it was.

The believers had fought. Men and women, young and old, without any weapons…

As far as Celice was concerned, that was bizarre enough on its own, but the true insanity lay in what had come after.

The attackers had shown no mercy when the believers swarmed them, of course. They'd slashed at them one after another, and several had opened fire. But despite the wounds they inflicted, they hadn't been able to cut them down.

The believers didn't fall, even when they suffered clearly fatal injuries; like movie zombies, they weathered the blades and bullets to swarm the men.

But that still wasn't the strangest thing to her.

As she watched the believers fight to the death—

—every one of them was smiling.

She didn't know when exactly they'd started to smile. It could have been when the children's chorus began, or even before. Perhaps those blank expressions had been faint smiles the whole time.

However, the emotion behind them wasn't exhilaration from the thrill of battle. Their smiles were simple, genuine relief.

"What…the hell…?"

Celice had fallen onto her rear and scooted back to the wall, trying to get away.

Her confused eyes found the one they'd called *leader*. The man was gazing tranquilly up into empty space, *raising an emotionless cry*.

"Life amid death!

"Death amid life!

"Both sides of the same coin!

"What binds them together?!

"Pain—pain and nothing more!

"In agony does the body meet its end; in suffering does the heart long for death!

"Therefore, all we do…

"…must end in pain!"

Before the end of that brief speech—one that had probably been given solely for Celice's benefit—the killing was already over.

The believers, including the wounded, were all looking toward the altar with smiles of relief—and none of the attackers was breathing anymore.

While the swarm had kept them pinned down, the two secretaries, the big man, and the bandaged man had moved, disposing of half the attackers in the blink of an eye.

The remaining half had been killed by the believers themselves.

Bride's followers had endured the men's attacks as though they felt no pain at all, and still smiling quietly, they had—

"It isn't that they—that *we* feel no pain. If we didn't, we wouldn't notice when we were sick or injured, and our lives would be at risk."

Bride had come to stand right beside Celice, who was still sitting on the floor. His eyes were as soft as a saint's, completely free of malice.

"We merely strive not to suffer from it."

As he spoke—Bride jabbed a syringe into Celice's neck.

"NOOOOOOooooooooOOOOOooooooOO!"

Celice bolted up from the bed with her heart in her throat and a wave of nausea. She was hyperventilating, on the verge of a panic attack—but nothing more, she realized, and she forced herself to get her breathing under control.

The singing of the children had triggered an intense memory that had completely shocked her mind out of the empty haze.

It took twenty seconds to get her breathing to settle down. Five more seconds to remember and process the situation she was in.

Remembering where she currently was, she looked around the room.

Still…her dream might have lasted longer than she'd imagined. No one else was there.

Bride was gone, and so were the children who'd been screaming their song.

She thought with hope how wonderful it would be if all this turned out to have been an illusion and she wasn't on a ship at all. Maybe she was actually in the hotel next to the detective agency or somewhere similar—but her hopes were dashed by the sight of the two used syringes that sat on the table.

Struggling to dispel the fatigue around her, she got down from the bed and took a step. She took a red-and-black dress out of the luggage that Bride had packed for her and swiftly began to change into it.

When she was all ready, she made her way to the door, carefully keeping an eye on her surroundings, and peeked outside.

After she'd seen no one was there—

—with firm resolution, Celice walked through the door and into the *Exit*.

I have to tell her…

Her ego had been blank at the time, but the memories were solidly etched in her mind.

The one that had surfaced was of the end of the young magician's show.

Remembering the beautiful silver hair of the woman Bride had called Sylvie, Celice began to run through the vast ship, both for the sake of this stranger and for her own.

I have to hurry and let her know, get her to help me…

I have to get away from him… I have to stop him somehow…

⟺

Thus, we arrive at the storeroom where Rookie and Aging reunited.

"Well, President? How're you doing? Feelin' better?"

"…Yes, I'm all right."

They'd moved to a corner of the storeroom, and Rookie was getting his breathing back under control.

Aging checked to make sure he wasn't hurt first, and when all was well, she laughed heartily. "Damn… They saw your face and came after you, huh? Maybe they tortured one of our guys until he told 'em you were the magician in the pamphlet. Maybe they used a truth serum."

That was the most realistic interpretation, but in that case… Had they actually believed that confession? It would have sounded like a completely random lie: *The boy magician from the in-room pamphlet is our leader*.

Still, maybe that was why they'd believed it—or maybe they hadn't but decided to kill him anyway, just in case.

"What the hell are they?"

“Who knows? Not me…but there are plenty of them, far as I can tell. Plus, if they take those clothes off, there’s no way to tell ’em apart from the regular passengers. Want to slaughter everybody?”

“Oh, shut—! No, we can’t do anything that inefficient. Plus, wiping them all out isn’t our objective.” He’d almost yelled exactly what he was feeling, but at the last moment, he shoved his more childish self deep down inside.

“Well then, what? Do we tuck our tails between our legs and run? Your ancestor left you the Mask Maker name; you can’t let it die here out on the ocean. The situation being what it is, you could refund the client to save your life and the Mask Maker name, y’know?”

“…I can’t do that.”

“Oho?”

“The legacy of the Mask Makers isn’t the organization itself. It’s our resolve and determination. The immortals are here; they’re our greatest objective. Even if we cancel the job, we won’t escape from this ship until we’ve captured an immortal: Elmer C. Albatross.”

However, practically speaking, he didn’t know the status of most of his subordinates. No one was answering their radios, so if Aging’s report was to be believed, it was probably hopeless.

The boy gritted his teeth. Burying a variety of emotions inside himself for the moment, he picked out the resolve to accomplish a certain goal and pasted it on his face.

He drew a breath, then turned to face Aging straight on.

“I’m not speaking as your president now. This is a request from Luchino Campanella, the individual who inherited the name of the Mask Maker.”

“…”

Expression serious, the boy stood tall and looked up into the face of the woman, who was still far taller than he was.

“Help me, please. I know what I’m asking is reckless, but we’re going to capture the immortals, then escape from the ship. If possible, I intend to search

for surviving Mask Makers as well. And I don't know who this other group is… but if we can take care of them, we'll do that."

"…You just want everything, don'tcha? I see, I see. Right now, you're not asking for this as the president, but as a kid."

Aging gazed steadily back at the boy—

—and at last, she laughed broadly, as if to say the answer had been completely obvious all along.

"That ain't fair. Not fair at all, President. Er, Rookie."

"…"

"You know damn well that's too crazy and too fun for me to say no to!"

Interlude

Voyage, day three

I don't know why, but I'm uneasy.

I jumped the gun and called Hiroko a little early, but that doesn't matter. The problem is that the call got cut off in the middle. Did something happen? I tried calling back, but it wouldn't go through.

I'd started feeling nervous while we were still talking. Hiroko laughed at me and said there was nothing to worry about, but I just couldn't shake it. And that's when the phones stopped working. Is that even possible?

I've got three bars on my cell phone over here. I hear the ship's satellite communication system is top-of-the-line, so I'd like to think there's no problem there.

Does that mean something happened on Hiroko's ship? This is insane. I'm already worried about this ship, and now this.

What should I do? We've got all these foreigners who don't even speak English, plus a whole bunch of creepy weirdos. I'm really getting anxious about this voyage.

Maybe I should just go see what's going on outside?

I decided not to. I figured going to check would just make me feel worse. I might even run into that weird group again.

I don't know what to do. Should I just keep trying to place that call, or what?

Something's weird

It feels like we're rocking

I think the ship's going too fast

I'm getting scared

I'll fix my journal entry later

God i cant write. Im just gonna call Hiroko. —Misao

These may be my last words. I feel awfully calm for a man who's probably going to die.

I'll write down what's going on around me now, just in case someone manages to retrieve this laptop undamaged. I'm technically still trying to place that call, but I really doubt it's going to go through.

I want to believe the other ship is all right.

I've been hearing this noise for a while now, and I think it's gunshots. I don't know what's going on, but I don't have the courage to peek outside, either.

Oh, they're making an announcement

The hell is this? A prayer?

We're speeding up again

They're saying theyre going to crash it

in the evening tomorrow evening

into the entrance

theyre gonan kill hirpko.

Im so wroried adn scared Is she okye/ I wnatd to tlel her I lvd her byut th phone wosd gof thr

And so—the fates of the two ships intersected, out on the ocean.

CHAPTER 7

ENTRANCE AND *EXIT* MEET ON THE BLOOD SABBATH

CHAPTER 7

ENTRANCE AND *EXIT* MEET ON THE BLOOD SABBATH

The gunslinger was certainly not “lone.”

They were far away now, but he had a wife and son he loved.

He’d considered getting out of this bloody line of work and living happily with his family—but on the other hand, he was hesitant. He’d already killed too many.

I have no right to be happy like everyone else. But I do want that happiness for my wife and son.

The man who thought these contradictory things really had killed too many people. Half of them had been in self-defense or retaliation against those who’d violated things he held dear.

The other half had been repaying the debt he owed his boss, whether that meant fulfilling orders or serving to protect.

The bullets he fired went exactly where he aimed them, almost uncannily so, and he was as feared as a man-eating shark closing in on the scent of blood.

But at first, he’d been the sort of anachronistic gunslinger who turns up in any rough area.

Angelo now was a “hound” with too much skill, but long ago, he’d been nothing special, and death could have found him at any time.

He hadn’t survived this long due to any special ability. He’d gotten as strong as he was because *he’d been lucky enough to survive this far*.

Back when he was a kid on the streets, if the police had chosen his alley to “clean,” he’d never even have picked up a gun.

In his first gunfight, if his opponent hadn’t tripped on a friend’s dead body, that man might have become as skilled as Angelo was by now. What had made

him strong wasn't innate talent or a special supernatural ability, but experience.

Deadly fights called for more deadly fights, bullets called for more bullets, revenge called for more revenge.

And after so many days in this unconventional routine, he'd gone through more bullets than soldiers who stood on the front line of a war. During a lull in the carnage, an accidental sort of holiday, he'd managed to find a wife and have a child. It would be fair to call it a miracle.

Believing he didn't deserve happiness, Angelo had turned down a woman he was genuinely in love with—but she had been far more aggressive than he'd anticipated.

No matter how it had happened, Angelo had ended up with a wife and child, had gained a permanent address in Spain—the woman's home country—and currently spent his days working as a sort of bodyguard in South America.

And then the Mask Makers had turned up.

A few days before the *Entrance* left port—

"Heya, Mr. Angelo. How's it going?"

Angelo stood with the restaurant at his back, now in flames after the truck had crashed into it, and listened to the crude voice that issued from his two-way radio.

"There's no problem. I accomplished the initial objective."

"You mean the one about chasing 'em out of the restaurant?" said the demolition expert. *"Ah, wait, the boss wants to talk to ya. Hee-hee!"* After the coarse laugh, there was a brief pause.

Breaking the silence, a voice issued from the radio—the voice of a *thoroughly frightened, anxious little girl*, full of despair.

"Oh…ngh…um…Angelo… Wh-what happened?"

"The enemy got away. There's nothing for you to worry about, boss."

The individual who'd employed the gunman and self-proclaimed hound should have been the boss of a drug cartel that ran this area. And it had been,

until the other day.

A mole in their group had betrayed them, and the boss had died in a firefight with another organization. Angelo had driven off all their enemies, but the boss had been shot in the back. The informant was probably responsible, from the looks of it, but they still hadn't figured out who it was.

The boss's only blood relation was his daughter, who'd just turned twelve, and the rest of the cartel was currently squabbling over who would become her guardian, the virtual leader.

It was likely that, once they'd sorted out the new hierarchy, they wouldn't need the boss's daughter anymore. But the boss had made his dying wish clear to Angelo: "Take care of my girl."

Of all the orders he could have left me with…

At first, he'd considered taking the girl and heading back home to Spain. His wife had hit the roof when he'd told her he was going back to South America to find work, but she'd probably cooled down by now.

However, if he brought the boss's daughter home with him now, she'd probably hurl a carving knife at him before he could clear up the misunderstanding. He made a point of not killing women—especially if the woman in question was his beloved wife. He wouldn't be able to fight back at all.

And with the way she handles a carving knife, if I don't fight to kill, she'll kill me.

There was no point in going home if he had to flee the moment he got there. The safest option would be to ignore his boss's order and go back to Spain by himself, but—

I can't just abandon her.

To him, his obligation to his boss was as rock-solid as his own principles.

His boss had accepted his rule not to kill women or children and given him a place to belong.

That boss's daughter—his new boss now—asked him a question over the

radio in a flustered voice.

“What about you, Angelo? You’re not hurt, are you?”

“I’m fine.”

“What about…everyone else…?”

“That’s not a problem you need to concern yourself with, boss.”

That was a lie.

Her subordinates’ deaths—and especially the loss of almost all the cartel’s surviving key members—was a problem any boss would have to be concerned about.

Even so, Angelo was treating her as a little girl right now.

She gulped at his calm response, but before long, she went on, as if she was desperately bearing up under something.

“What happened…to the people who attacked us?”

“I ran them off. I’m about to go after them—”

“Wait, please… It’s all right; that’s enough! I can’t put you in any more danger, Angelo…”

“…”

How naïve can you get? he thought, but on the other hand, he knew she was genuinely worried for his safety—and he gave a sigh. She could take it as either rejection or acceptance of what she wanted.

“I can’t put you in danger, either, boss. Don’t worry. I’m just going to *persuade* them, so that they’ll never even consider laying a finger on you again.”

The girl started to say something else—but a man’s coarse voice took her place on the other end of the radio.

“Geh-ha-ha-ha! Damn. Brave lil’ thing, ain’t she?! She found out her dad was the boss of a drug cartel the day he died, they made her the new boss the day before yesterday, and then a band of hitmen came to kill her right off the bat! If that’s how it’s gonna be, maybe she already wants to die, deep down.”

“If you don’t want your teeth and tongue all shot out, shut your mouth.” Angelo was furious at the man cackling away over the radio, not caring that the boss was right next to him—but he focused on what to do next.

The timing is worrisome… Don’t they know our boss is currently a girl named Carnea?

Or are they planning to kill her anyway?

He had to find that out, or he’d never get anywhere.

“I have a favor to ask.”

“You want me to go check into ’em, right? Just you leave it to me. I’ll demolish all their secrets for you, right down to how many moles they have on their asses.”

The demolition guy.

Obviously, his specialty was demolition work, but he was also an information broker on the side.

He apparently wasn’t as good as the American *Daily Days* newspaper network, but in Angelo’s opinion, this man gathered information at a speed beyond comprehension.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t you worry, boss. That mutt says he’ll take care of all your enemies for you.”

“…Don’t say anything uncalled-for.”

From the radio, Angelo could hear the girl’s voice behind the demolition guy’s, but he pretended he couldn’t.

I expect she’ll hate me for this, but there’s no way around it. Once I get that information, I’ll leave the boss somewhere I can trust—Pietro’s tavern, maybe—and then the demolition guy and I will go after their organization.

Time passed, bringing him to the present.

As Angelo had planned, he and the demolition guy had cornered the Mask Makers on the ship—but he’d made several miscalculations.

One was that he’d assumed the Mask Makers were on vacation, when in fact

they'd brought weapons onto the cruise ship. The second was that due to a series of unhappy coincidences, a gunfight had broken out. Third, the demolition guy had wired the ship with bombs.

And the final miscalculation was—

"I'm so glad… I'm so glad you're okay, Angelo!"

"Why…?"

Angelo's eyes widened behind his sunglasses when he saw the girl in front of him.

"Why are you here, *boss*?!" he yelled.

"H-hey… Then she's the one you were talking about yesterday?" Firo asked, wide-eyed.

"That's right." Angelo nodded quietly. "The organization I work for… Well, the executives are all dead now, too, and we don't have even three official members left, but…"

Angelo sighed and looked at the girl. She had lowered her head and gone silent, and he smiled at her, more gently than one might expect from him.

"Anyway, this kid is our boss—Carnea Kaufman."

The luxury cruise ship *Entrance*

Around the time all hell was breaking out on the *Exit*, the passengers on its sister ship, *Entrance*, were experiencing confusion in both major and minor ways.

Firo had been helping a South American gunslinger ferret out a group of hitmen known as the Mask Makers.

He'd been prepared for a certain degree of rough work, but he certainly hadn't expected to get dragged into a gunfight in front of a crowd of ordinary passengers. To make matters worse, the man's boss had inexplicably stowed away on the ship and turned up inside a shark animatronic, and Firo was currently trying to figure out how a young man on his honeymoon was supposed to react to something like that.

Thinking back on it now, he'd had a hunch there'd be trouble.

Even if the joy of his honeymoon had dulled his instincts, Firo Prochainezo had had an intense feeling that something, somewhere, was wrong. It first hit—when he initially saw Angelo, probably.

The moment he'd spotted a gunman, a man from the dark side of society, Firo had instinctively known.

Oh. This ship is in trouble. If someone like that is on board, that's enough to be sure. You don't need any other reason.

He'd desperately tried to deny it, though.

This was his honeymoon trip, a time to celebrate. It was also his first family trip, and he hadn't wanted to wreck it.

In the end, however, his wish had been thoroughly denied.

"…Wow. How does that work?"

Let's go back to the first night of the voyage.

When he found himself at gunpoint in Angelo's room, Firo had tried to take the other man's gun. Although he'd initially tried talking, he'd decided stopping him by force would be quicker.

He'd been confident he could do it. Before Angelo could squeeze the trigger, Firo would grab the gun and keep the slide from operating.

Firo had based his call on the card shuffling he'd seen a little while earlier in the casino, and he'd been sure he could win this bet.

…But he hadn't.

Oh, great. So he was hiding what he could do during the card business, huh?

In simple terms, that was all it had been.

And as a result—several muffled gunshots accurately nailed Firo in both shoulders and legs.

His upper body arched back dramatically, and his costume glasses fell to the floor. Both Firo and the chair fell over right on top of them. There was a damp-sounding *krntch*, and the lenses shattered.

“I told you not to move.” Angelo shook his head quietly, his face expressionless. “…No, I’m sorry. I didn’t actually say it, did I? You should have been able to tell, though.”

Angelo was about to shift into interrogation mode when he noticed something strange.

The blood pouring from Firo’s body was being sucked back into it. The droplets wriggled as if they had a life of their own, streaming up into him like a swarm of red insects returning to their nest.

“That…doesn’t look like a magic trick.”

A normal person might be expected to panic at the sight, but Angelo only frowned dubiously and asked Firo a question.

“So, uh…*what are you*?”

“Gahk! …Dammit! …You’re the second person this year who didn’t react. Wai — …Ghk… Now do you feel like…listening to me?”

Through his coughing fit, Firo grinned fearlessly.

Angelo took a moment to think before he spoke. “I intended to listen to you all along. You just made a sudden grab for my gun, so I ended up shooting you.”

“…Aw, come on. That makes it sound like I got shot for nothing. Anyway, as long as you understand I’m not with that group of Mask Makers. They’re normal humans, after all.”

“I don’t consider this proof positive of that, but…I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

Angelo pointed his gun at the floor without letting his guard down in the slightest.

Damn, do I look like a loser. I really am rusty…

Firo’s wounds were very nearly closed. He dropped down heavily onto the sofa, then spoke with a wry smile. “Before we talk, I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

“I’m actually on my honeymoon. I’m here with my wife and, uh…this kid

who’s kinda like my little brother, and, um… Could you maybe…tell ’em I got shot at the end of a really badass fight?”

“…”

There was a marked lack of concern in the request, and Angelo stayed silent for a while, but—

“Thing is, I can’t exactly hide the bullet holes, so, uh… You know what I mean. My clothes won’t regenerate.”

—finally realizing Firo was serious, Angelo sighed, then offered a mirthless smile.

“…All right. I don’t know whether you’re a human or a vampire, but for now, I’ll trust you.”

“Great, thanks.”

Firo’s genuine happiness threw Angelo off, but he apologized to the mysterious life-form in front of him anyway.

“Consider it my apology for shooting you by mistake. I will tell your family you were a daring, skilled warrior.”

…And now back to the present.

As they kept a wary eye on the situation outside, the individuals who were taking shelter in the café compared notes on their respective predicaments.

The group consisted of Firo and Ennis, plus Angelo and the girl who was his boss.

A boy in the gear costume that technically belonged to Charon was dithering between the two groups, but they’d determined he wasn’t a threat and decided to ignore him.

“You said the boss you were working for was a kid who only entered the underworld a few days ago, but…I really didn’t think… Uh, I didn’t think she was literally a child.” Firo sounded a little exasperated.

“Yes,” Angelo replied, his expression hard. “I didn’t think there was any need

to mention it. Never mind that; boss, what on earth are you doing here?" he asked the girl, and Firo noticed the cold sweat on his face.

Huh? Firo thought, watching him. *Somehow, he looks a lot more flustered now than he did when he saw me regenerate.* He decided to keep his mouth shut, though, and watch their reunion play out.

Angelo had sounded both furious and bewildered.

The girl he'd introduced as Carnea looked at him with tears in her eyes, perhaps tears of relief. "Well, I… I was…a-afraid that you and other people would get hurt even more, because of me…" She didn't sound anything like the boss of a drug cartel, but she'd been forcibly installed in that position before she was mentally prepared. It had only been a few days, and it was questionable whether she even understood what her father's organization actually was.

Knowing the girl's circumstances, Firo judged that she was genuinely worried about Angelo's safety. Plus, they'd known each other for ages, he guessed. Maybe Angelo was a sort of big brother or father figure to her.

"Don't be foolish. What are you doing on this ship?!"

"I stowed away."

"Now *that* was foolish! How did you find out about the cruise?! How did you even get to the U.S.?"

"Um… The demolisher guy took care of all the details… He said if I was here, you wouldn't start a firefight on the ship." Carnea sounded flustered.

When he heard her mention the demolition guy, Angelo looked ready to pop a blood vessel.

“That slimy son of a *bitch*.”

Angelo’s cold, expressionless fury intimidated not only Carnea but Firo and Ennis, too. Meanwhile, the mystery boy in the gear costume took a step backward with a small shriek.

When he heard the sound, Firo swiveled around to face him, keeping a wary ear out for gunshots from outside.

“By the way, I’ve been wondering…

“Who are you anyway?”

In a shipboard corridor

“No! …Noooo…aaah…aAAAaaaAAAaaaaAAaAAaah!”

In a corner of a deserted corridor, a girl crouched, hugging her head.

She wore Gothic Lolita–style clothes in yellow and black, and tears spilled over the unhealthy-looking dark circles beneath her eyes as she wailed, gasping for breath.

“AaAAAAAAaaaah! AAAAaah…AAAAaaAaaAaAAAaaaaaAaaaaah!”

Her wails went unheard.

Right now, every inch of the *Entrance* was filled with screams.

Gunshots everywhere.

Lifeboats destroyed.

Seajackers taking total control.

Most of the passengers had lost hope, and many of them were crying even harder than the girl.

The reasons behind their tears might be different, but none of the passengers on this ship had time to listen to the girl’s screams.

And so…

…the first person to speak to the crying girl was—

“What are you doing, Illness?”

“Aaaaah…ah… Aaah…*hic*…ngh! …Ah! …L-Liiife…”

The girl who’d been addressed as “Illness” looked toward the man who’d appeared in front of her, hastily choking back her tears.

It wasn’t a passenger, but it was someone she knew.

This man had boarded the ship after it set sail, bringing a whole store of weapons on board with him. In fact, he was the cause of the current situation. He sighed behind the mask of his full-body black combat suit.

“What are you crying about?” he said dispassionately. “This is hardly the time.

Hurry up—fetch your equipment and come help us, would you?”

This man was the *weapon* the Mask Makers called Life. His combat suit was ripped in places, showing he’d been involved in a battle earlier.

“Ah, aaaah, Life, I—I…”

Shivering violently, Illness looked at the cell phone she’d hurled to the floor a moment ago.

The call had ended already. On the phone’s miraculously unbroken screen, there was a photo she’d set as her standby image just the day before.

The photo showed her and a redheaded child star standing in front of the shark animatronic.

“Oh… Oh, that’s…right… I have to…go save…Claudia…”

Tottering, Illness picked up the cell phone.

Life sighed. “I don’t know who this ‘Claudia’ is, but save us first, please?”

“No… I don’t…want to, okay? I mean, look, you said I only had a job if the police or somebody like that showed up. So I—”

“Illness.”

“…”

There was no emotion in the way Life said her name, but it held a pressure that brooked no argument.

Falling silent, Illness gripped her cell phone and quietly took a few deep breaths.

From behind her, Life’s words slid into her ears.

“If you don’t wish to help us, you’re under no obligation. Your ties to us will simply be severed. Do your best to live on your own.”

“…”

“Oh…will you go back to that religious group I hear you belonged to, long ago? Ah, I beg your pardon. They’re all dead, aren’t they? Your parents included. Exterminated by our company, if I recall.” Although Life spoke quietly,

his words held an irrefutable power.

They forcibly dragged Illness's mind from the brink of confusion and back into reason.

At the same time, the voices she'd heard on the phone a moment ago rose in her heart, then turned into unshakable terror coiling around it.

That can't be.

It can't be, but…

Behind Illness, Life was still speaking, but his words didn't reach her now.

She'd retaken her sense of reason, and she clung to it desperately to deny that phone call.

It's a lie.

It's a lie, it's a lie, it's a lie, it's a lie, it's a lie.

I can't have heard that prayer.

As she quietly calmed her breathing, Illness struggled to write off the phone call as a sort of daydream.

Illness had once belonged to a religious organization, though not by choice. Her parents and their comrades had buried her past under pure despair, but the Mask Makers had wiped out those lunatics. Hadn't they?

If the prayer they'd used had been coming from her cell phone, it must have been some sort of illusion.

Believing this, she squeezed the phone—but its history informed her, quite clearly, that she'd received a call from a withheld number. As she gazed at the screen, with its immutable proof that that call hadn't been her ears playing tricks, Illness's difficulty breathing returned.

What do I do?

No, I don't want to go back there. Anywhere but there.

That fairy tale in the woods is over. It can't happen again.

The girl's entire body was trembling, and she mentally shook her head.

I don’t want them to chase me out. I can’t survive out there.

No, it’s okay. It could be worse. I don’t wanna die, but it could still be worse.

It’s just… It’s just…

“…Go back.”

“? What was that?”

Realizing Illness had murmured something, Life stopped lecturing her and listened.

“I don’t want…to go back there… I don’t want to go baaack!”

“…”

“Please… I’m begging you, please, please don’t! Don’t abandon me! I’ll be a Mask Maker forever! I’ll be Illness forever!”

Her trauma was clearly severe; as the girl pleaded, she looked as if she might burst into tears again.

Life didn’t have the authority to make that call, but at this point, the girl probably would have screamed the same thing no matter who she was talking to, whether it was the president or the company’s lowest flunky.

As she cried and pleaded, Life heaved a deep sigh behind his mask, then responded as impassively as ever. “Just go to your cabin, get your equipment together, and then go to the bridge. Get your orders from the people there. I’m off to pinpoint the location of the bombs.”

“…Bombs?” Illness sounded puzzled, and Life heaved one final sigh.

“It looks as though someone outside our group has wired this ship with a large number of explosives.” He gripped the battered shoulder of his combat suit and murmured to himself, sounding a little annoyed.

“I was nearly blown away myself a moment ago.”

⟺

The bridge of the *Entrance*

“What’s going on…? Dammit!”

The Mask Makers who'd taken over the bridge were all looking at one another anxiously. Not that they could see their companions' worry behind their masks.

In a way, the report they'd received from Aging, who was over on the *Exit*, had been more of a shock than their own situation.

"What did she mean, 'wiped out'?" one of them complained, grinding his teeth. "Zombies and Jasons? She's screwing with us!"

Beside him, the ring of unease was beginning to spread among the captain and crew members as well.

The situation on this ship was also out of control, but the enemy was still just one enigmatic gunslinger, another thought. The mention of an explosion was concerning, but Life had probably detonated a grenade by mistake or something.

Then he realized somebody was hailing him from the two-way radio at his waist.

"Hello? It's me."

"Still doesn't tell me who you are. Ain't you supposed to give your name first time you talk to a guy?"

"…? What is this? Who the hell are you?"

"Hmm. I dunno how to answer that. Should I be honest and tell you? See, I just borrowed this radio from one of your buddies who's lying on the ground over here."

At the very least, he wasn't a comrade.

As they heard the crude cackling on the other side of the radio, tension ran through the Mask Makers.

"Well, you can call me the demolition guy. If you wanna know who I am… Let's see. Didja like the present I sent to that restaurant you ate at a little while back?"

"…Present?"

“I tell ya, that was a lotta work, turning a truck into a radio-controlled car with a bomb attachment. Geh-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Those words brought two things to mind: the job they’d bungled before boarding the ship and the tragedy that had occurred during their mission to take out the boss of a South American drug cartel.

In that appalling incident, Death and a few of their people had been killed by a mysterious gunslinger, and immediately afterward, the truck-bomb that had plowed into the restaurant had taken a few more lives.

“You bastard… Are you that gunman’s friend?”

“Not to him, sad to say! In fact, I got so lonely I wanted to make friends with you guys! Even got a little present for ya!”

“A present…?”

“Yessirree! See, that show you put on a bit ago, with the exploding lifeboats—got me right here! I can’t just sit around on my ass after you showed me such a great time! I’d lose my good name as a wrecker!”

The Mask Makers wondered what his “good name as a wrecker” and the show had to do with each other, but they stayed silent, listening to the voice on the radio.

“So I says to myself, ‘Okay! I gotta blow up the ship now.’”

“…Huh?”

Wondering whether this man was soft in the head, the Mask Maker went ahead and asked: “The hell’s wrong with you? There’s only one group occupying this boat, and that’s—”

But he didn’t get to finish the sentence.

The windows on the bridge overlooked the forward deck, and on the deserted bow of the ship—there was a bright flash, followed by an explosion.

“Wha…?!”

The roar echoed over the ocean, and the bridge windows rattled, eloquently conveying the intensity of the blast.

“Why, you… What the hell did you do?!”

It probably wouldn’t affect the ship’s ability to sail, but a look at the damage to the bow made it patently clear just how powerful that bomb had been.

The Mask Makers gulped, while the captain and staff gazed at the smoke rising outside with clueless shock.

“What the…? Hey, don’t tell me you’re on the—”

“Bingo,” the demolition guy interrupted before Mask Maker could finish his hate-filled question.

“I think there’s probably about a hundred of ’em, all different strengths. These babies run the gamut, and some of ’em have enough punch to sink the whole damn ship, if I feel so inclined.”

“What do you think you’re doing…?”

*“*I *ain’t doin’ anything.* You’re *the ones who set off that explosion, and you’ll set off the rest, too.”*

“What?”

The Mask Maker frowned while the demolition guy’s voice rose with glee.

“Man, oh man, I’m so glad you made that little show; I really owe ya. Now no matter what happens on this ship, it’s aaaaaall gonna be on you! Oh yeah, that’s right: You’ve got something set up in the ducts, don’tcha? See, I was thinking I’d rig up bombs in there, but the space was already taken. I was kinda sad, but I forgive you.”

“Why, you…”

“I dunno what you’re trying to pull here, but I’m a big fan. Y’know, I’m pretty sure we can be friends; whaddaya say? Either way, what I’m getting at is, we’ve each got the other’s life in our hot lil’ hands. And your side’s gonna end up drawing all the Old Maids. Geh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

As he listened to the voice on the other end of the receiver, one of the Mask Makers thought: *This guy means it.*

He’s not like that gunslinger.

He…genuinely enjoys this situation.

If he had to, this individual wouldn't hesitate to activate those bombs.

…Even if he didn't have to.

He didn't seem like a professional, the way the gunslinger did; he was the type who had fun when he worked. And as far as they could tell, he wouldn't care if the ship sank right now, even though he was on it.

And I thought we *were pretty out there…*

As the Mask Maker entertained a rather masochistic thought, the man who had left the bounds of reason far behind cackled with laughter.

"Well, I won't come grill you in person. Have fun with the gunslinger."

"…"

The situation was about as bad as it could get.

They knew what the gunslinger looked like, so they could maybe manage him, but the demolition guy hadn't shown his face at all during the restaurant fiasco, either. As a matter of fact, this was the first they'd even heard of his existence.

And they realized he'd just given them the same threat they'd used on the captain.

The Mask Makers all ground their teeth and swore under their breath. Maybe he'd heard them.

The man's voice came over the radio again, sounding even more entertained.

"There's a saying all over the world: 'It's not where you go, it's who you travel with.' Well, if you don't wanna join me on my trip to the afterlife, let's be careful not to set each other off.

"Well, that's all from me! Enjoy the cruise! Bon fucking voyage!"

On board the *Exit*

The organization SAMPLE behaved more like a vicious virus than a religious group.

There were various theories regarding their place of origin, including rumors that they had “broken out” all over early modern Europe during the height of the witch hunts.

That said, they had acquired the name SAMPLE only recently, and the group had previously had—and lost—a variety of other names. They had been born from a tributary and had generated more.

Perhaps there were other active organizations that shared their roots but operated under different names.

However, SAMPLE didn’t have a large-scale network of churches; they were practically viruses from the same strain that had developed in their own unique ways.

They were a cult whose ideas were socially dangerous, but they weren’t a monolithic organization. They were more like grains of sand scattered all over the globe.

Whether or not they had horizontal connections, parts of their characteristics and doctrine varied by region.

Despite that—there were several unchanging doctrines they had in common.

“God does not exist.”

That was the foundation of their faith.

God did not exist, and there was no superhuman power setting an arbitrary destiny for the world. Fate was influenced only by coincidence.

After death came oblivion, to both saints and sinners.

By itself, that was a principle held by many respectable ideological groups. What caused those around them to view them as heretical was that their doctrine took this further.

“God does not exist. Meaning—we can just create one and shape it as we

will.”

What they wanted was a steadfast relief, or perhaps a foundation for their beliefs. Even those who followed no religion found their own morals and principles in the communities of their families, regions, or countries.

And so they attempted to build that foundation from scratch.

Pain is what makes us human.

How had they reached that understanding? The doctrine didn’t say.

However, they sought a substitute for God, something that would shoulder all their pain for them.

The sect was constantly researching an elixir that would erase all pain and suffering from within them, leading them to euphoria. For several hundred years now, they had been studying various ways of doing away with pain, using plants, animals, minerals, gases, and surgical procedures.

And so that they could remain human even after they had rid themselves of pain—they prepared gods.

If they reduced the pain they themselves bore, someone else had to shoulder it in their stead. Even if everyone continued to decrease their pain, each individual’s experience would always be different. These differences became their own form of psychological distress, a seed of anxiety and frustration.

They denied God, and yet they needed one for that very reason.

In their sacred book, whose number of pages grew by the day, the reason was set down plainly:

“So that we may erase the pain from our hearts, make from a human a god to whom we may pray and offer thanks.”

In other words—this was all for their own happiness.

And what they sought to reach that happiness was an extremely human scapegoat.

“A substitute who will take on utter misery and pain, experiencing our suffering for us.”

That was both the scapegoat they sought—and the god they prayed to.

The ones who became these “sacrificial gods” were required to suffer from the time they were born. They had to suffer and live.

Did they suffer more than children who starved to death because of a famine before even knowing hope existed? That was probably a matter of individual perspective.

But despite their continued survival, there was ultimately no hope for the sacrificial gods.

They could tell themselves there was hope as long as they were alive—so to crush that hope, too, they were all fated to be killed at the age of ten.

In those ten years, they were given nothing but pain.

These children weren’t hated, far from it; people prayed to them with gratitude and reverence.

They weren’t informed of the concept of suicide, and if they somehow learned about it, they weren’t permitted to carry it out. They were expendable gods who simply spent their existence in constant pain.

The believers did their best not to leave wounds on the arms and legs. For the most part, the pain was inflicted on the torso and internally. They avoided those visible areas so the believers would feel that the one suffering was just like them, the sort of person you could find anywhere.

A perfectly ordinary child was experiencing agony far greater than theirs.

It was like intentionally setting down a turtle to join a race between tigers and lions. The system introduced an extreme example to minimize the differences between the normal members and help them feel content.

In a way, it might have been similar to the class systems that sometimes appear in the political systems and religions of the world—but what they were doing contained neither political significance nor “the will of God.”

After all—their “god” was the one at the very bottom of the pit.

“And so, our happiness lies quite simply in the thorough investigation of human desire.”

Rewind time slightly, to shortly before Rookie was under pursuit.

The bridge had been transformed into a hell of screams.

The white flooring had been stained reddish brown with oxidized blood, and the corpses of men in masks and the crew members who'd been on the bridge lay in a vast pool of it.

And among the corpses and gore—

—one man was impassively explaining their group. Against the surrounding blood, his red-and-black lab coat was camouflage.

As Bride spoke to the man in front of him, he wore a gentle smile that seemed to reflect the vast sky.

"Why do trivial disputes persist in this world? Why do humans always choose the weak to abuse, regardless of age or sex? Why do we discriminate? The ethics classes conducted by nations and the majority of religions all condemn it, and yet…"

"…"

The man forced to stand in front of him wore a mask.

At this point, he was the only Mask Maker on the bridge who was still breathing. His badly wounded arms hung limply at his sides, and blood dripped from his fingertips.

"The reason is simple: Humans find utter delight in looking down on others. We deny it, but we wouldn't keep doing it if we didn't enjoy it. After all, no one forces us to."

"…"

"We don't condemn that human instinct. Abandoning ourselves to desire is our goal and our path to happiness."

"So, what, you do nothing and want to be rewarded for it? With a creed like that, no wonder you all turned out as pigs." Despite the pain in his arms, the surviving Mask Maker spat on the ground after his sarcastic retort.

But Bride accepted the insult with a smile.

“Yes, that’s exactly what we’re aiming for, provided they are happy pigs who merely grow fat without being slaughtered. I hope it becomes a world where no one eats those pigs.”

“…If the world ends up the way you people want, humanity’s done for.”

“Most likely. People who only pursue pleasure, who have forgotten how to work through pain with effort, will eventually forget how to live and will be destroyed.”

Still smiling, Bride seemed to condemn the religion of his own followers. A moment later, with a sharp *click*, he took a step forward and removed his glasses.

“And so will we…but so what?”

“…”

“Do you remember what I told you? We don’t believe in God or nirvana or heaven or hell, and we don’t have the moral compasses fostered by national, regional, or familial communities. You mustn’t forget that basic premise.”

Click.

Bride took another step, circling around to the Mask Maker’s side.

“If people still have the drive to leave descendants behind, then we won’t condemn that desire. However, if they begin to feel that even that doesn’t matter, then there’s no need to force the human race to continue. Naturally, some people will want to keep the human race going, to leave everlasting proof that they lived, so I’m not sure how that will play out in the future. It doesn’t truly matter either way.”

Click.

Another step.

Bride was now diagonally behind the man. “We do not condemn human desire,” he murmured, more to himself, “unless it is for the happiness of our divine scapegoats.”

Click.

Click.

Plish.

Stepping into the pool of blood on the floor, Bride took another look around.

All was silent. The dark sky was visible beyond the window, and inside, the fluorescent lights illuminated the red pool of blood. Bride looked at his mute believers, sensing something pleasant in the way the absence of sound struck his ears.

They gripped the guns the Mask Makers had held a few moments before, pointing them at the lone survivor. They had quietly faded into the background of this scene, but every one of them wore a euphoric smile.

“Buncha creepy bastards…”

“Now, then. Who is your leader, and what is your objective? I would greatly appreciate it if you’d tell us.”

“…No way in hell.”

The Mask Maker had been planning to take the man in front of him hostage if he spotted even half a chance, but this guy wasn’t open for a second, even though he was just talking.

He was a strange man.

He was simply walking slowly and talking, and yet he provoked an uneasy sense of pressure in the other man, like a sword suspended over his head.

Despite his fear of this man who was doing nothing openly threatening, the Mask Maker was still thinking up lies he could tell if he was questioned—or tortured—after this, in an attempt to get out of it, but—

“Oh, that’s right. Recently, we’ve been transitioning to inflicting pain without wounding even the stomach or back.”

“…?”

“Electrocution is only the beginning. From what I hear, a stun gun directly over a kidney sends shock and pain coursing through the entire body.” Murmuring indifferently, Bride gave a quiet sigh and returned to stand right in

front of the man. “Ordinarily, shouting into a megaphone pressed against your ear would be effective, but we don’t have time for that right now, so we’ll *offer* agony to you in the form of direct pain.”

“Go ahead and try, you piece of shit,” the man snarled, but Bride ignored him.

Instead, he reclaimed a case a nearby believer had been holding for him—and took out a single syringe.

“Rejoice. You will become an object of worship for us, if only for a moment. Let us hear magnificent screams, if you would. I wouldn’t call us sadists, but… perhaps the most straightforward way to phrase it is that we’ll be able to smile and think, *Oh, I’m glad that isn’t me*.”

“You perverted freaks…,” the man muttered—

—just as Bride drove the needle into his neck.

“Gah!” The man gave a little yelp.

Bride had ignored the blood vessels and simply injected a tiny bit of the liquid into the man’s subcutaneous tissue.

The next moment, the Mask Maker was convinced that his neck had exploded.

“AAaaaakakakakaaah! Aaaaah! Ah!”

With a scream as if an electrical current had run through him, he arched backward, then flipped and rolled around like a shrimp hauled out of the water, flailing with so much force that his spine seemed liable to snap.

As a matter of fact, nothing had happened.

There was just one small needle mark on his neck. No explosion—not even any blood, really.

Nothing but pain.

Pain.

Pain.

The contradiction of an overwhelming, acute shot of pain that *refused to stop*.

It was like the shock of a box cutter carving out a nonexistent wound but through his entire body; the pain that raced through him and the screams it drew from his cells recolored his existence.

Agony.

Agony.

Agony.

There was nothing in his mind but the excruciating convulsions.

Piercing

Throbbing

Twinging

Grating

Stinging

Burning

Ripping

Grinding

Tingling

Splitting

Pain summoned more pain, until those descriptions blurred into nothing.

By now, adjectives alone weren't enough to describe the pain, and the man's brain was forcing him to see images.

Countless bugs swarming out from under his skin, excreting magma that burned and rotted his body away.

"———! ———!!!"

Imagining his skin both rotting and erupting in flames simultaneously, the man screamed inarticulately, rolling around in the gore until he was covered in it.

Bride watched the man writhe, splashing in the pool of blood, with a look of

undisguised delight on his face. “Oh, I’m so very glad that wasn’t me. I offer my thanks to you.”

His smile seemed to forgive everything, and his eyes were full of devotion and genuine, sincere gratitude.

The surrounding believers, guns at the ready, were all smiling warmly, offering silent prayers of thanks to the writhing man.

It was an abnormal sight to most, but not to them.

Clinging to his sanity by sheer force of will, the struggling man shouted desperately, “AAAAaaah! AAaaaah! AaaAAAAaaAh! You bastard…! What the… what the hell did you…?!”

“Oh, don’t worry. It isn’t poison or any other toxic substance.” Bride gazed at the syringe, still partially full, and gently answered, “It’s just…salt water.”

“Ung— Ung— Ungwaah! Ah! Ah! What did! You! Sa— Gwuh…!”

“The saline concentration is three percent. It’s significantly higher than sanitary saline solution, but it is only salt water. That’s all. From what I hear, about two percent is the limit according to experiments about inflicting pain through medical means. Humans are so fascinating, aren’t they? Our bodies are made of water and sodium, but simply inject a slightly stronger saline solution into the skin, and the brain starts screaming,” he explained matter-of-factly, like a teacher explaining something to a student. “All right, now that the lecture is over, we’ll start the Q and A… Although I’ll be the one asking the questions.”

“———! ~~~~AaAAaaAAh!”

As the man continued to scream—Bride calmly asked him a question.

Calmly, ever so calmly.

“Your objective, and the identity of your leader… That’s all you need to tell me.”

“I see… This boy, hmm? I don’t believe he was making it up.”

Bride was reading a section of the cruise pamphlet for passengers that had been on a shelf on the bridge. He smiled.

The photo on that page showed a boy magician with striking pale-blond hair.

“Still, I never expected there would someone besides ourselves after the immortals.”

Facing the writhing man, Bride quietly closed his eyes.

“Viralesque is on the other ship. Does he know about this, I wonder…? Even if the only target on the *Entrance* is Czeslaw Meyer, leaving Viralesque to handle the task alone may have been reckless.”

Heaving a small sigh, Bride stepped forward with a *click*. The man at his feet was beginning to black out.

Numerous injection marks dotted his body, and one could assume that the same explosion of pain as before had burst inside him again for each mark.

“Though you are not one of the faithful, I wish you no pain.”

As he spoke, Bride slowly lifted one foot—

—and stomped down through the man’s neck with the force of a pile driver.

Grunk.

It was the sound of something being dislocated, and the thrashing man fell still, his eyes still rolled back into his skull.

Like the other believers, Bride had stomped down with inhuman strength, enough to dislocate the bones in the man’s neck, splitting his cervical vertebrae and blood vessels.

He drew a sign in front of his chest with a finger—though it wasn’t the cross—and expressed his sincere gratitude to the man who had been freed from his suffering.

“Even this nonbeliever became a temporary ‘god’ for us.”

Spreading his arms to the ring of followers around him, Bride gave his passionate cry.

“Give thanks. Dread the agony that did not befall us. Give thanks to the god who took it upon himself!”

Tears spilled from his eyes.

Bride wept and wept, as a religious man who had witnessed a miracle.

As if those tears were contagious, the surrounding believers also began to cry —

—but as they wept, they smiled.

They smiled with joy, true joy.

They smiled like a family that had welcomed the new year in safety, like a community in perfect harmony with one another as they shed their tears.

A fluid with a saline concentration of 0.9 percent…

Drop by drop, drop by drop.

The Mask Maker hadn't so much broken under torture as much as relinquished the information from his addled brain, but a few minutes after he gave his testimony, Rookie became a wanted man on the *Exit*.

At present, Rookie had a reassuring ally with him in the form of Aging, but that did nothing to change the fact that he was at an overwhelming disadvantage.

After all, he didn't know how many enemies he was dealing with, and if any of them weren't in those red-and-black clothes, he wouldn't have a way of telling who they were.

"The rocking seems to have gotten worse."

"I dunno what they're after, but I think they've sped us up."

"Dammit… What are they trying to do here?"

After cautiously leaving their hiding place, Rookie and Aging raced down the corridor.

They'd looked around the storeroom for anything useful, but unsurprisingly, other than the submachine gun the attacker had carried, they hadn't found any battle gear. Rookie had tried to give the gun to Aging, but—

"As long as I've got this, I'm good," she'd said, taking only a hook and cable used for loading cargo. "You can use that gun, can't you, President?"

Rookie's eyes had gone round when he saw the bundle of cable; it had to weigh forty-five pounds all by itself. He'd asked what she was going to use it for, but she just blew him off with a nonsensical answer. "Oh, could be a weapon; could be anything at all. Every lady and gentleman should at least know how to handle their ropes a little, don'tcha know?"

While they raced down the corridor, Rookie asked her a question with the gun in his hand.

"…If we go to your room, Aging, your weapons will be there, right?"

"Yep. I don't think there's anything you'll be able to use, though… Although I would get a kick outta watching that Gurkha knife handle a little twig like you, I s'pose."

"…"

The complete lack of concern in Aging's comment made Rookie want to tear his hair out, but under the circumstances, she was also the person he could depend on the most. For now, they had to get her weapons, then either hide or barricade themselves in a room somewhere.

"I know this isn't the first time I've asked, but…who in the world are those people?"

"Search me. I kicked over a bunch of 'em when I was on my way to save you—even broke a few necks—but they still got right back up."

"…"

"The last time I heard from some of ours, they were screaming about it. 'They aren't just zombies, dammit! We've got some Jasons and Freddies, too!' Does that meant we've got other folks who don't die on this boat, on top of the immortals? If that ain't a kick, I dunno what is! Ain't that right, President?!"

It was something straight out of fiction, a story depressing even to hear. But Aging wasn't an idiot; she wouldn't tell lies in a situation like this. Her story was probably true, and Rookie's gloom deepened.

Aging cackled. "Well, I was unarmed anyway, and I didn't have time to fool around with a buncha boring zombies, so I hustled over here."

“Come to think of it, why are you dressed so lightly? Even if you were away from your cabin, don’t you need more than just a T-shirt?”

“Well, up until a minute ago, I was having this beauty treatment thingy done; figured I’d give it a try. And hey, one of the targets was right in the next room. You know, the silver-haired gal,” Aging responded easily, and the president frowned.

“A beauty treatment?”

“Yeah. What’s the matter? You’re staring. Does my squeaky-clean, silky-smooth skin get your fires burning?”

“…Obviously not,” the president snapped, looking away as he ran down the corridor.

Aging laughed, keeping pace with him. “Gah-ha! You’re no fun. If any minute could be your last, sex ain’t a bad way to spend it.”

“I just don’t want it to be with you, Aging.”

“Oho. Don’t go forgetting that your life’s pretty much in my hands, President.” The woman flashed him a toothy grin. There wasn’t a trace of anger in her words; she was simply having fun teasing the boy. “And hey, lookit that! Speak of the devil—we’ve got company!”

There were five or six men and women standing farther down the corridor to Aging’s cabin.

The group seemed to have noticed them, and they raised their guns to take aim.

“W-waaaaaaaagh!”

A yell left Rookie’s mouth as he stopped, leveled his submachine gun, and cut loose. The anxiety was clear in his voice, but his body moved on reflex.

He put his left foot forward and pressed the butt of the gun against his right shoulder, twisting his body halfway around.

He wasn’t calm enough to take aim. Pressing his face against the stock, he shifted his weight forward and squeezed the trigger all the way back.

There was a burst of noise, and the vibration shuddered through him, pushing back his upper body and raising the sight.

“Ghk…”

Fighting the gun back down, he tried to see where the bullets had struck and adjust his aim, but the wave of bullets had already caught the men and women at the front of the red-and-black group. Blood was gushing from several of them.

“…!”

I killed them.

The boy understood this in a flash, and the wave of nausea this time was several times stronger than usual.

He hadn’t had time to brace himself.

He hadn’t had time to learn what sort of people the others were. He’d simply killed them.

How much weight did that fact hold—or not hold—for him? He didn’t have a spare moment to figure it out. The powerful urge to be sick just swept over him, robbing him of the ability to think.

I killed them.

I killed them. They’re dead and gone because of me.

No, it was self-defense…

But the boy wasn’t even given the time to make excuses for himself.

After the volley of bullets, the red-and-black group—

—slowly turned to face him, *smiling*, as though nothing had happened.

“…Wha…?”

Several of them had fallen.

They’d taken direct hits from machine-gun bullets, after all. It was as if tiny bombs had exploded inside their flesh, rather than passing clear through it, and the ones who’d taken shots to the knees probably wouldn’t be getting up.

And yet… And yet—the people in red and black grasped the hems of their companions' clothes and stood up.

Smiling.

Smiling—

"What…is this?"

If the others really had been zombies, they wouldn't have been smiling. Zombies were emotionless corpses; that was why people fought them as zombies in the first place.

And yet—these people were smiling. Proof that they had emotions.

They slowly got to their feet and began turning to face him.

When Rookie saw that, his heart stopped for a moment—

—and in the next instant he came to his senses with a jolt, berating himself.

What…am I?

The enemy…got back up, and…

Did I feel relief before I felt fear?

No!

Gritting his teeth, Rookie turned the muzzle of his gun on the bloodstained group and their eerie smiles.

Beside him, Aging exhaled and put a hand to her chin. "How 'bout that. President, you handled that gun pretty well for an amateur. Have you been practicing on the sly?" she asked him casually.

"I learned from Death!" Rookie snapped back at her. "Dammit… What the hell are they?! If I shoot them in the head, then…"

He was about to strafe with the gun again, but Aging grabbed his hands with the speed of a hunting raptor, yanking them up.

"So. By the way, President."

"?!"

"We're gonna take a lil' ride on a virtual roller coaster!"

“…Wha—?”

The next instant, Rookie rose lightly into the air, and Aging hugged his slight frame to her.

“What are you d—?!”

“Keep your mouth shut, or you’ll bite your tongue!” Aging opened her mouth wide, sucked in a rapid lungful of air—and then launched herself off the floor.

In that instant, Rookie felt like the ship itself had given a massive shudder. He felt the impact all around him, and the scene around him seemed to warp.

He felt weightless, and gravity fell away from the world around him.

Rookie felt a series of thuds while sights flashed by with dizzying speed. Then, a few seconds later, his view stabilized.

An inky darkness spread out below him, and the light from the moon glinted off the waves in the infinite expanse.

Huh?!

Before he could scream, the boy realized where they’d gone when they left the corridor, and how—

—in a few seconds, he and Aging had leaped from the boat, soaring out over the ocean.

“Gweh-ha-ha-ha-ha! Havin’ fun, Rookie?!”

Aging laughed in genuine delight, while the boy locked in her arms muttered tersely:

“…You’ve got to be kidding me.”

⟺

Meanwhile In the kitchen of the *Exit*

Vast as the ship was, it was still a closed world out on the ocean.

The chaos that had erupted in multiple locations rapidly spread through the vessel.

The kitchen was an enormous one, several times more spacious than a top-class restaurant in a major metropolis. Several dozen cooks had been preparing the many pig and cow carcasses that hung from the ceiling, hard-pressed to keep up with preparations for the party that night. Now they were hard-pressed by the emergencies breaking out all over the ship.

At first, they'd heard only gunshots, but pandemonium soon followed—and the way the ship was rocking made it clear that they had accelerated.

Some of the cooks had stopped what they were doing and gone to check on the situation outside, while others had kept working in spite of it all. However, the scouts soon returned with news of a firefight outside, and at that, the panic reached the kitchen as well.

They'd started by contacting the bridge, but they weren't able to get through either on the internal phone lines or by radio.

Realizing conditions on the ship were obviously not normal, the cooks had been discussing what they should do next, when—

"Coming through." Another anomaly appeared in the door to the kitchen. "Let me just say this: Something peculiar appears to be happening on this ship, and so…"

As he spoke, the man took a look around. His skin was dark, and he was wearing an odd mask. His clothes appeared to be some sort of ethnic outfit as well; he might have fit in on the stage in the party room, but here in the kitchen, he didn't look so much out of place as downright frightening.

"My apologies, but I am borrowing this." The masked man picked up an enormous, thick-bladed meat cleaver that was used to cut hunks of meat—bone and all—from the hanging carcasses. It was easily over a foot long.

With the blade in his hand, the masked man headed back outside as though nothing had happened.

“H-hey!” the head cook called.

The rest of them sent him warning glares, then crouched down in the shadows of the kitchen.

The masked man stopped at the voice, cocking his head as if he was mildly troubled.

“Hrm. Let me just say this: Ordinarily, I could not bring myself to use a cooking utensil as a weapon, even for purposes of self-defense. However, this is an emergency. The tools to which I am accustomed are easiest to use.” The voice behind the mask was filled with an imposing dignity, one that didn’t exactly match the head tilt. “Let me just say this: Should your knife end up in unreturnable condition, I will compensate you for it. And so…I expect to be forgiven.”

After his extremely arrogant apology, the man left the kitchen, while the head cook failed to find a reply. Once the man was completely out of sight, the cook heaved a big sigh and began to mutter.

“…We’re changing tonight’s menu. We’ll focus on vegetables and fish.”

He’d guessed at the sort of tragedy that was about to occur on the ship.

“No guarantees, but…I have a hunch that a lot of people won’t be eating meat for a while after this.”

In a certain semi-suite cabin

“…I feel curiously uneasy…”

Denkurou had muttered to himself several minutes ago now.

Elmer had already powered down his game, while Denkurou had shut off the DVD and TV, gone over to the window, and begun concentrating on the sounds from outside.

He’d noticed the first gunshots out there shortly after Nile had left the room.

Come to think of it, Nile might already have noticed something by then.

Thinking he should have questioned him in more detail, Denkurou had been trying to figure out what was happening outside.

“Hmm… I’m concerned about Sylvie. Those occasional sounds we’ve been hearing do seem to be gunshots.”

“You’re right; let’s go pick her up. I bet Nile’s probably fine, even if he’s smack in the middle of the gunfight, but…”

“True. Nile would not die so easily, even were he not immortal.”

“In that case, I’ll go hunt down Nile, and you go to the beauty clinic and pick up Sylvie, Denkurou,” Elmer said casually.

Denkurou started to say something, but before he could—

“Show Sylvie how cool you are once in a while,” Elmer continued

“Wha…?!” Denkurou reacted with clear consternation.

“It’s fine; just do it.”

“Elmer! This is no time for jests…,” Denkurou protested, red-faced.

As if to block out his voice—

—the TV he’d shut off abruptly came to life, and the screen turned blue.

At the same time, a strange-sounding voice came over the ship’s PA system.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ladies and gentlemen. We are the Mask Makers… and we have occupied this vessel.”

That voice reached every corner of the *Exit* equally, from the storerooms to the bathrooms.

“At present, this ship is sailing toward the Entrance *at more than full speed; in fact, one could say it’s out of control. One could say our objective is to connect exit and entrance—so I expect you’ll take my meaning.”*

As Celice ran down a corridor, the realization hit her: Whatever the Mask Makers were, this voice didn’t belong to one of them.

“It’s him…!”

It was the leader of the religious group known as SAMPLE. It was Bride.

“I believe you’ve already noticed the unusual circumstances…but we are also lurking in your midst. Perhaps your neighbor will suddenly don a mask and turn a gun on you. We are planning to crash this ship into the Entrance*, after all, so it is safe to assume we won’t trouble ourselves over the lives of one or two individuals. And my apologies, but the captain is already dead.”*

When Nile heard the impassive announcement to the rest of the ship, his eyes narrowed behind his mask.

At the moment, he was an enigmatic masked man gripping an enormous meat cleaver. He gave a disgruntled sigh and muttered, “The Mask Makers…?”

Then, mentally reflecting on his own appearance—

“Let me just say this: Is it possible I will be mistaken for one of them?” He patted the mask over his face. “Well? What do you think, scum?”

The men Nile was speaking to were lying on the ground in front of him.

They were all wearing red-and-black clothes, and each had been holding a gun, but—

—Nile had meticulously dislocated the joints in their arms and legs, which made moving difficult for them.

The group had suddenly attacked Nile in the nearly deserted shopping mall, possibly because a gunfight or something of the sort had broken out there a little earlier.

“Be that as it may, are you amateurs? I did not even need to use the blade,” Nile muttered disinterestedly, gazing at the meat cleaver.

Nevertheless, even as they struggled, the injured men kept on smiling.

“…What an unsettling lot you are. Although, I suppose Elmer would be delighted if he saw you.”

Thinking of his smile-junkie cabinmate, Nile smiled wryly and went back to listening to the announcement.

However, just a moment later—

—what appeared on the mall's informational monitors wiped that smile right off his face.

"That said, we certainly aren't hedonistic killers. We occupied this ship with a clear objective in mind. If that objective is achieved, I promise you that you will all be returned safely to land."

As he spoke, an image was uploaded onto every single monitor on the ship through the emergency communication circuits—several surreptitiously taken photographs.

"We are searching for these individuals. They may appear human, but they are not. Our collision with the Entrance *should occur in about fifteen hours if we continue at our current speed—but if you help us to apprehend them before then, we will guarantee the safety of the ship."*

There were four photos on the screen.

One was of a man wearing some sort of ethnic mask.

One showed a beautiful silver-haired woman.

One was of an Asian with short hair.

And the last one was of a young man, who was, of course, smiling artlessly.

⟺

In a certain semi-suite cabin

"Elmer."

As he looked at their photographs on the TV, Denkurou's eyebrows drew together.

"…Does this strike you as Huey's doing?" he asked tersely.

Unusually, Elmer's smile vanished. "Hmm…," he said, pausing in thought for a few seconds before he responded. "No… I'm not sure why, but I know this isn't him. I bet Huey would laugh at me for sounding so sure when I don't have a solid reason. By itself, the name 'Mask Makers' makes it sound like it could be him, but… No, it's not. If anything, it's—"

As he was about to make some sort of deduction, the voice of the self-proclaimed Mask Maker echoed from the speakers again.

“We wear masks. We ask you to fear your neighbors and view those around you with suspicion. I imagine you won’t be able to truly trust that anyone is your ally, but we have provided you with a guide. As far as you are concerned, the four in those photographs are undoubtedly your prey. They are the enemies you can distinguish from the rest!”

“Um… Holing up in the cabin might be a majorly bad idea at this point.” Elmer’s typical smile returned as he picked up his nearby cell phone. “Under the circumstances, I don’t suppose we could get everyone on the ship to band together and overthrow the terrorists, do you?”

Denkurou was already over by the door, listening intently to the outside. Having determined that all was clear for the moment, he opened the door.

“Let us go, Elmer,” he said firmly. “We’ll rendezvous with Sylvie first.” Denkurou’s aura coiled around him like a razor-sharp air current. That pressure might have petrified a normal person, but Elmer kept right on smiling as they stepped out into the corridor together.

“Right… I’ve got an objective of my own now, Denkurou.”

“…”

“I’d like to make the people on this ship smile somehow.”

If his comment had ended there, he would have sounded like a hero. But when he continued, Denkurou was reminded that this man, Elmer C. Albatross, was truly mad.

“Everybody, if possible. Both the innocent passengers and the group calling themselves the Mask Makers.”

“…”

Elmer was smiling the whole time, and Denkurou didn’t press him to elaborate. As they made their way down the corridor, he asked about something that had been on his mind for a little while.

“By the by… That name, the Mask Makers. You responded as if it was familiar

to you…”

“Hmm? Oh, didn’t I tell you?” Elmer sounded indifferent, but he ducked his head in mild embarrassment.

“Well, I don’t know if it’s the same group, but… Both Huey and I were members of a criminal society called the Mask Makers, way back when.”

“Wha—…?” Denkurou gulped.

Beside him, Elmer put a hand to his chin, thinking as he ran.

“Hmm… Come to think of it, I never officially quit, so…‘were’ may not be accurate.

“Maybe I still am a Mask Maker.”

A few minutes ago…

“AaaaaaaAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A bare second after he’d realized he was floating in midair at a height of several dozen feet…

…Rookie finally started screaming, and the submachine gun he’d been holding slipped out of his hands. The metal fell rapidly, sending up a small spray of water from the ocean’s surface a few moments later—although he had more important things to worry about than watching it fall.

It was like gravity was working in the wrong direction—and Rookie realized he was *sliding* through the air.

Holding him in one arm, Aging had sprinted away, kicked down a nearby door, and made a near-perfect beeline for the outside of the ship—and when the ocean appeared beyond a nearby window, she’d used her other hand to catch the hook and cable on the sill.

…And had then leaped right through it.

The results were simple.

Hanging by the side of the ship, Aging let the wire go taut, then *launched herself off the ship’s hull*.

First, she swung toward the stern—and as she swung forward again, she used the momentum to race across the side.

Adjusting the length of the cable as she went, Aging seemed to scuttle across the wall like a spider or lizard, gravity be damned.

She ran.

Dashed.

Sprinted.

Raced.

Flew.

If they had seen her running over the wall faster than a minor sprinter, the word *ninja* would have popped into most people's minds.

Pressed against her side, Rookie could only feel the wind rushing past, with no time to process his situation. And then—

"…Yep, this should be it!" Aging crowed.

That was when he realized he could see the floor beneath him again, although he didn't know how it got there.

"…AaaAAAAaaaah, AAAAAaaaaah!" A sound that was neither a sigh nor a true scream escaped him as he realized he was still alive. "Wh—… Where are…?"

"Uh-huh, I was right! This is my cabin!"

"?!"

With her stunned employer in her arms, Aging opened the door that led into the room, cackling away.

"H-hey, hurry up and put me down!" Rookie urged, flushing red once he'd calmed down enough to take stock of his situation.

"Hmm? Oh, hey, sorry 'bout that. You're just so light, I didn't even realize I was still holding you. Gah-ha!" Laughing, Aging lowered Rookie to the balcony.

The transportation boxes the Mask Makers used during jobs were in the cabin, making it clear that this was indeed her room.

“…I can’t believe this.”

“Huh? Wah-ha-ha, nope, President, don’t you start thinkin’ like that. I don’t blame ya; we’re in a real pickle to be sure, but you just vowed you’d carry out our objective, remember? What’s the point of gettin’ cold feet now, huh?!”

Aging laughed with her gentle lecture.

“Don’t be stupid!” he snapped. “What I can’t believe is the ridiculous way you got to this room!”

“Hmm? Ridiculous? What’s ridiculous? Did you hit your head? We just got back to the room by running over the outside of the ship, that’s all.”

“…Sorry. Enough.”

He pressed his hand against his head, but they had reached a temporary hiding place, and that fact was huge. Right now, he had to come up with a strategy going forward.

However, just as he sank down onto the sofa—

—a blue screen appeared on the TV monitor, and he heard the announcement by a self-styled “Mask Maker” explaining that the ship had been occupied.

“…”

The instant the voice in the broadcast introduced itself as a Mask Maker, the boy’s mind went blank for a moment.

It can’t be.

I did give permission for an open takeover under certain circumstances, but…

Then he realized he didn’t recognize the voice at all, that whoever this was wasn’t one of them, and the blankness turned into despair.

It’s a lie.

Who… Who is this?

And then—when unfamiliar photos of the immortals appeared on the screen, confusion joined his despair.

Why?

Why… Why is someone else, someone besides us…after the immortals…?

Once he'd heard the broadcast all the way through, Rookie's reaction was silence.

In the middle of a situation where it felt as if his time had completely stopped —

—the cell phone Aging wore on her hip buzzed, and she snatched it up. "Yeah. Speaking," she answered in her characteristically unusual way.

The call was apparently from a Mask Maker on the *Entrance*, and Rookie's petrified body twitched.

"Oh yeah? That's great! I tell ya, you folks wouldn't believe the party we're having over here!"

"Yep, the president's hanging in there, just barely! Everybody else is dead!"

"*The only ones left alive are me and the president!* How's that for a situation? What a blast, huh?"

He could hear an anxious, frustrated voice on the other end of the line.

"That wouldn't have been nearly as much fun. Maybe it's 'cause Death bought the farm a little while back and he's pulling the rest of us into the grave after him! Gwah-ha-ha-ha!"

He had no idea what sort of conversation they were having. But when he saw Aging laughing as she relayed the dire situation they were in—strangely, he didn't feel irritated.

Why is it, I wonder? She looks like she's having so much fun, even though our comrades are dead. I should be furious with her for that, and yet…

Aging's smile wasn't a vain attempt to make him feel better. It was based in deep-rooted confidence, and despite his dismay, he was naturally reassured by it. —A feeling he quickly rejected.

"Okay, I'll be in touch. The plan's all shot to hell anyway. You make your own calls over there and do what you can do."

With that, Aging hung up.

Quietly getting to his feet, the president spoke. “…What’s going on over there?”

“Sounds like the gunslinger who killed Death came after them and turned it into a party, Wild West–style.”

“…”

On learning of this additional chaos, the boy’s heart nearly collapsed under the pressure again. He’d felt the same way upon learning Death had fallen—betrayed, not only by his plan but by the very world he’d believed in.

If things had been going well on this ship, he would have been able to calmly think of a way to handle the situation—but right now, the shocks wouldn’t let up.

He thought about what he should say for a while, and he finally settled on:

“You think a gunfight is a party…?” It was all he could come up with. Maybe his mind was searching for a way to avoid reality.

“Hmm? Gah-ha! You’ve got a point there! Given all the trouble gunfights cause for other folks, only a real scumbag would enjoy it. Huh, now does that mean you should be feelin’ blue during a shootout, or should you be more like a machine?”

“Just shut up for a minute…,” Luchino muttered as he pieced together the situation in his mind. As if he was talking to himself, a complaint slipped out.

“…The Mask Makers have been…defiled.”

“Huh?”

“Some random group is using our name, and they’ve turned us into simple terrorists.”

“What are you talking about? What they just said over the PA is stuff we were planning to do all along, if we had to. We already did, over on the *Entrance*.” Still grinning, Aging sounded a little exasperated, but the boy quietly shook his head.

“No, it’s not the same… I was prepared to fall from the beginning, and we Mask Makers have always been open to anything, murder included.”

“Which means none of it matters, right?”

“But if we fall, it should be by my hand…by *ours*! Some group we don’t even know is using the Mask Maker name as a piece in their game, and I won’t stand for it!”

“Ohhh, I see. Can’t say I don’t get where you’re coming from,” Aging agreed, unusually for her, but Rookie glared back.

“You get where I’m coming from, huh? You think you understand? Enlighten me, then; what exactly do you ‘get’ about this? All you do is treat bloodshed like your personal entertainment, while my destiny has been set since I was born… What do you ‘get’ about the Mask Makers? What do you know about the will that was passed down to me?” Rookie shouted even as he plunged into self-loathing.

He knew it, too. The one who really wanted to condemn the Mask Makers was him, but he was lashing out at Aging, his current savior, his heart’s final refuge.

What the hell’s wrong with me…? I’m so disgusted with myself! What do I…? What am I trying to do?

And as if she’d read his mind, Aging said, “Hmm. Sounds like you know a lot about the Mask Makers that I don’t, President.” Her smile had vanished, and her face was serious.

Please don’t say it. I know already.

“Can *you* explain what that is, exactly?”

I know. I know I don’t get anything, either. I don’t know what the Mask Makers are to me, and I don’t know what I want to do with them.

He was nearly in tears, but he shoved that emotion into the back of his throat and out of sight. He was about to yell at Aging to shut up—

—but she was smiling again. She wasn’t hiding anything behind that smile; it was as if she’d forgiven him for everything. Or maybe she just wasn’t thinking

anything at all.

She finished what she'd been saying earlier. "Sheesh, kiddo… No need to beat yourself up before you even understand what's what, y'know."

Aging's expression was both the smile of a kid who'd come home covered in mud and the smile of the chagrined mother who let him come back inside anyway. She ruffled Rookie's hair until it was a great big mess.

"You don't hafta understand it all; it'll work out in the end. First off, think about solvin' the problems in front of ya! That's about all you have to do to enjoy life! Gwah-ha-ha!"

"…What's that supposed to mean?" Rookie shook his head in confusion.

He really had no idea what her words were intended to accomplish. Still, they gave him strength—and the boy cleared his heart of all complaints.

"…I'm sorry, Aging. For now, let's think about what to do."

Shaking his head with resignation, Rookie took another look at the situation.

"If I had…some sort of weapon, too…"

The recent memory of strafing the red-and-black group with the machine gun instantly made him feel sick again—but he kept it under control and looked into the box that sat in Aging's room.

The lid on the box had been left open. Inside was a Gurkha knife more than a yard long and a minigun that had been modified into a deformed shape.

Naturally, he'd never be able to use either one properly.

Rookie peeked into the recesses of the box for some sort of gun, and something glinted in the dark.

"Oh, I clean forgot."

Aging smacked her hands together as if something suddenly came to mind, then she reached a long arm into the box and retrieved the gleaming object.

"That's…"

"It's a favorite of yours, right, President? I hung on to it, just in case."

With that remark, she handed him—

—a single stiletto in an ornamented sheath.

As he accepted it, the boy quietly reexamined his own reason for existing.

Drawing his ancestor's knife from its sheath, he renewed his resolution.

That's right. I can't die. I can't let them put an end to the Mask Makers.

No matter how far we fall, no matter how dirty our hands get with grime and blood.

Not until I take revenge on the man who is both my ancestor and my ancestor's enemy…Huey Laforet.

Quietly returning the knife to its sheath, the boy murmured, and the determination in his eyes was different from before.

"Let's move, Aging.

"Even if I have to sacrifice every pawn I have, you included, I won't let the Mask Makers end here."

In a certain suite on the *Entrance*

What am I supposed to do now?

Bobby was sitting deep in an unbelievably soft sofa, his hands clasped in front of the Gear's mask.

In the end, he'd decided to stay in the costume and lie. "I'm Charon's stuntman," he'd told them, but—

"Why's a stuntman need another stuntman?"

—he'd been busted in one second flat.

Still, Carnea had covered for him: "He saved me when those people in masks were chasing me!" Plus, there just wasn't time for a full interrogation, and so—

"Let's go to our cabin for now. It's not safe here."

—he'd ended up getting escorted to this suite.

Of all the lousy— Getting revenge on the Martillos is why I got on this boat in the first place! What am I doing letting one of them hide me?!

While the boy sat still and stunned over in a corner of the room, Firo, Ennis, and Angelo were discussing what they should do next. Carnea had collapsed onto one of the beds as soon as they arrived, probably exhausted.

Well, at least they forgot about asking me nosy questions.

"…And…means…should look for Czes first…"

As he listened to their conversation, he realized "Czes" was Firo's apparent little brother, and then he remembered something important with a start.

Come to think of it, I totally forgot, but…

…I hope Tall and the guys are all right.

In a shipboard corridor

“We took the long way around, but we’ll be at my cabin shortly,” Czes murmured calmly, making his way forward with some caution.

The stowaways—Tall, Troy, and Humpty—were right behind him.

“Man. Bobby better be okay, the jackass.”

“He’s always had the devil’s luck, so I imagine things will work out for him somehow. More importantly, we should be worried about the ship itself.”

“Gggghhh, I’m hungryyy.”

As they followed after him, the three of them muttered among themselves, while Czes kept his senses sharp.

He’d tried to make straight for Firo’s cabin, but then a masked group with guns had come through the corridor. A short while later, the lifeboats had exploded.

That was partially why he’d taken paths that were as deserted as possible and attempted to get to the room in a roundabout way, but there was no guarantee that getting there would help them at all.

Dammit. I had a bad feeling about this, but I never expected it to pan out. Czes gritted his teeth. *I knew it. I really have no luck with traveling.*

Remembering the tragedy on the *Advena Avis* and the terror on the Flying Pussyfoot, Czes kept on walking quietly, but then—

—he heard the clatter of something being dislodged, and immediately afterward, a black shadow leaped down into the corridor from a vent high on the wall.

“…Huh?”

“…”

They landed right in front of Czes.

The man, clad from head to toe in a black combat suit, had jumped down from the vent as if it was nothing. He glanced Czes’s way, but his face was hidden behind a high-tech mask and goggles that made it impossible to gauge

anything about him as a person.

However—from his presence here and his combat gear, it seemed safe to assume he was one of the terrorists.

"…"

It was eerie, facing down something as unusual as a silent terrorist dressed for war.

For a few moments, the man gazed at him, silently—

—and then, without hesitation, he squeezed the trigger on the large gun he held.

Rat-tat-tat-tat. Dry, percussive noises ricocheted around the corridor, and black bullets bit into the floor beside Czes's group.

"…"

"Eeeeeeep!"

The stowaways took to their heels, screaming.

Czes hesitated, not sure what to do, until he realized the man had missed on purpose to chase them off. He faked a scream of his own and ran after the boys.

Well, at least they're not bad enough to kill children indiscriminately.

With that new little bit of knowledge, Czes grinned to himself as he ran down the stairs.

Lucky for me they're soft.

Still… That guy seemed more surprised than I would have expected…

On the bridge of the *Entrance*

"I tell you, that was a shock: children just milling around as if everything were perfectly normal. And after we issued our threats, too… Did it have no effect at all?"

As Life complained from his radio, one of the Mask Makers yelled back in irritation.

“Shaddup! We’ve got bigger stuff to worry about over here! Leave the brats alone!”

“What’s the matter? I heard there was trouble on the other ship, but…”

“Dammit… We confirmed it on the ship’s GPS radar. The *Exit*’s barreling right for us. I dunno how fast, exactly, but I bet it’s over thirty miles an hour, easy,” the Mask Maker muttered, tense and frustrated. He ground his teeth as sweat broke out over his face, but his lips twisted in a grin. “…Who’d have thought we’d be the ones finding out what it feels like to have a boat plow into us, instead of the other way around?”

The bound captain spoke up with anxiety on his face. “The engines on these ships are special made. If you don’t consider the comfort of the passengers, they’re among the fastest cruise ships in the world… I don’t understand the situation, but if you want to avoid a collision, I’d give up on this seajack immediately, contact the maritime police, and turn yourselves in.”

“…You’ve got an excellent point, my friend, and I hate it.”

As the Mask Maker struggled to decide whether he was stressed out or having fun, the door of the bridge opened. Illness peeked in from behind it, now in her combat gear.

“…”

She was a sickly-seeming girl dressed in a full-body black combat suit, with goggles over her face. She was generally always complaining, but now, her mouth was set in a hard line, and she wasn’t saying a word.

“Hey, Illness. You finally showed up, huh?”

“…What should I do?” she asked in a monotone. Her attitude was so commendable that she hardly seemed like Illness at all, and the Mask Makers exchanged looks. But now wasn’t the time to question it; they just got right to the point and passed along her orders.

“Your job is simple. About as simple as having a trained chimpanzee dance a waltz.” They gave the order indifferently and succinctly—for them anyway. “Stop that gunslinger. We don’t care if he’s dead or alive; kill him, use your feminine wiles, whatever. Let’s hope the guy likes little girls. Anyway,

apparently we've got other stuff to deal with."

"What do you mean?"

Illness knew nothing about the situation, and she cocked her head quietly.

Gritting their teeth a little, the Mask Makers filled her in on the present circumstances. "From what we hear, the president's life is in danger."

"Huh…? Luchino?"

"Although I think that goes for everyone else in the company, too."

The Mask Maker suddenly fell to thinking, then slowly turned to face the bound captain.

"Now, then… We have to meet up with the president ASAP…and you said something pretty interesting a minute ago.

"As long as we don't care if the ride's comfortable…this thing can go faster. Right?"

In a shipboard corridor

“Hmm?”

Firo had left the room to go look for Czes, but he stopped in his tracks as he sensed something amiss.

“It almost feels like the ship’s rolling more.”

He concentrated on the feeling, trying to tell for sure, and it really did seem as if the ship had sped up a bit in the past few minutes. In fact, if he was right, it was still speeding up even now.

“…Hey, whoa, what’s going on?”

Firo felt a flicker of unease, but he decided that finding Czes came first. He curled his hands into loose fists and wordlessly began to run through the ship.

In a storeroom somewhere

Even on this hopeless voyage, with bullets flying every which way and all the lifeboats destroyed, Charon Walken's expression was calm.

The young stuntman's mind was serenity itself—but he did understand the crisis the ship was currently in.

A mysterious group had been pursuing a boy and girl in the storeroom, and he'd hidden them. That was all well and good, but immediately afterward, the director and staff had appeared and had taken the boy in the costume and the shark (with the girl inside) away with them. If he created a scene and switched with them onstage, the mystery group would probably spot them and nab them immediately.

In that case, the best move would be to explain the situation to Claudia and the director after the show.

With that in mind, the boy had been watching the event from the shadows, but then a gunfight had broken out, and then came the explosions.

Due to a combination of factors, the entire boat had become the venue for a new event that wouldn't be ending anytime soon.

"…Claudia."

Since his sister had promptly evacuated, he decided there was no need to worry about her for now, and he'd already seen Firo take the mysterious boy and girl away.

Charon hid for a while, watching the situation on the ship, but after the announcement that all the lifeboats had been destroyed, he quietly set off to look for his sister.

He was crossing the battlefield aboard the ship, where one wrong step would mean death, but he walked just the way he did when filming a movie. He was always prepared to die even during ordinary filming sessions; for him, that first step was business as usual.

In the movie theater

A new audience had arrived in the theater, but the next movie showed no sign of beginning.

Director John Drox looked around at his staff and at Claudia, and the excitement in his large frame was clear.

“Now, then! We’ve evacuated here for starters, but what do you suppose we should do?! The most important thing, and that’s capturing everything on film! Keep those cameras rolling, people! Don’t let your focus slip, either! Unless you’re me or the cameraman, channel all your energy into getting home alive; no need to act!”

Huh? So I have to keep filming even if it kills me?

The cameraman shook his head defeatedly, but he didn’t complain out loud. A cameraman’s voice should never touch his film, he believed; in a sense, his conviction was as abnormal as the director’s was.

“Hmm… I can’t help being a little indiscreet; I’m terrified and just so *excited*! Ideally, this seajacking will get its happily ever after before anyone dies, and we’ll have the whole thing on film…! That’s the hope anyway. What do you think, Claudia?” he asked her suddenly.

The redheaded girl shook her head and sighed with chagrin.

“I think you’re totally nuts, Director. Is the footage all you can think about in a situation like this?” Then she threw out her chest and beamed. “I like that proposal, though! Especially the part about nobody dying!” Her smile was powerful and dauntless, even in the face of these dire straits.

The director responded to her with a thumbs-up and a loud “Good!”

Oh man. This is headed south.

The other staff members heaved a collective sigh, then started to think about what they’d need to do to survive this.

That said, they didn’t know who or how big the armed group was, so there wasn’t much *to* do. The thought made them give another, heavier sigh, and then—

—the door opened, and several newcomers entered the movie theater.

“Excuse us. Please let us take shelter in here… Oh!”

The boy at the head of the group scanned the crowd inside, noticed the man with a movie camera, and froze up.

“S-sorry to intrude—”

Seemingly frightened, the boy automatically spun on his heel to leave, when —

“Don’t you run away from me!”

—the red-haired girl landed a vigorous flying cross chop directly on the back of his head.

“Yaugh!”

Czes toppled over, and the young Hollywood star straddled him with a triumphant smile.

“Honestly! Why do you bolt every time you see me?! You’ve got all kinds of experience for a kid, so you’re gonna be a huge help! Now then, Czes…”

As he gazed back at her with despair, the red-haired girl smiled breezily.

“…let’s think up a way to *take over* this ship!”

A few hours later The bridge of the *Exit*

“That’s strange.”

The gorilla-esque man, the chief mate, and a few others had been left in charge of the bridge, and they were examining the position of the ship on the radar. Specifically, how it had changed.

This ship had accelerated, just as they’d planned.

However—the *Entrance* seemed to be far closer to them than it should have been.

“Do you suppose…they’ve sped up as well?”

If this kept up, they’d collide before noon the following day, not that evening.

Realizing this, the gorilla-faced man radioed one of his female comrades in the communications room.

“It’s me. It appears we’ll be making contact ahead of schedule. We need the boat that’s picking us up six hours early. Also…” Scowling slightly, he issued an order. “…have them bring plenty of medical supplies and equipment.”

The man was looking at the monitor for the security cameras on the ship.

“It seems we aren’t the only monsters here.”

The lowest level of the *Exit* A cargo bay Rookie and Aging had reached a storeroom loaded with non-event-related cargo.

Hiding in the shadows, Rookie kept an eye on their surroundings, while Aging quietly listened for an opportunity to strike back.

She’d been silent for a while, but then her eyes suddenly widened, and the corners of her lips rose with excitement.

“Well, I’ll be…”

“What is it, Aging?”

“Sounds like somebody on this ship can go toe-to-toe with these guys.”

The movie theater on the *Exit*

While the theater on the *Entrance* had become a shelter of sorts, the one on the *Exit* was now a battlefield. By the stage, a group in red and black was doing a deadly dance with one masked man.

His mask was nothing like the Mask Makers', and the fanatical believers of SAMPLE were aware that this was not one of the faithful.

The man's meat cleaver flashed, and his enemy's hand flew through the air before he could open fire. His blood splashed onto his red-and-black clothes, covering the victim in well-camouflaged spots.

Meanwhile, the masked man took a step back from the other group, jumping up onto the stage in one bound and shaking his head.

"Let me just say this… If you get that treated promptly, you will live. Immortal I may be, but when you turn a gun on me, I can no longer afford to… Hmm?" Nile broke off, looking at the man whose hand he'd just severed.

The man had picked up the gun in his opposite hand and was aiming it at him, still smiling. He seemed at utter peace.

"…I see. I thought you might have been passengers who heard that broadcast and came after us out of fear for your lives…but it appears you are not. Likewise, those red-and-black garments are not the current fashion."

Their smiles reminded him vaguely of Elmer. Nile frowned behind his mask and thought of spitting on the ground.

"…Let me just say this: I do not condemn your smiles, but they do make me sick."

Before he had finished speaking, a wave of bullets assailed him; as smoothly as a surfer, Nile slipped to the side.

"I do not condemn them…but let me say this once more! They make me sick!"

Then Nile plunged into the storm.

He leaped toward the center of the group and let his violent instincts take control, heedless of the bullets sinking into him.

Naturally, he'd taken the meat cleaver with him…

⟺

Meanwhile The shipboard mall In front of the fountain "You seem to be a different group from the previous one… Allow me to inquire: Why do you pursue me?" Denkurou quietly asked the people surrounding him.

Nile's intimidating aura pinned people down, but Denkurou's was a subtle pressure that seemed to well up from the depths of the earth. His soft question seemed like the harbinger of an earthquake.

The group responded with silence.

The movie theater wasn't far, and Denkurou had begun to hear shots from powerful-sounding guns.

Is that Nile?

While Denkurou and Elmer searched for Sylvie, they'd been separated during an attack by a group in red-and-black clothes.

However—the people hemming in Denkurou now weren't wearing red and black. They were ordinary passengers, and the proof was in their obvious fear, panic, and despair.

At last, one of them replied to Denkurou.

"Sh-shut up. It's not our fault we're on the same ship as you people; why do we have to deal with this?!"

"I don't feel great about it, but j-just let us capture you. Please."

"I—I dunno who you people are, but they won't crash the ship if you come quietly."

Although there was no ill will in what they said, they were making excuses for themselves.

As far as they were concerned, Denkurou and his companions were no more than a mysterious bounty. The broadcast had said they weren't human, but there was probably no one who believed that.

"…Do you imagine those seajackers would honor such a promise?"

“Ngh…”

That the passengers in front of Denkurou didn’t turn into a mob and jump him was solely because his quiet intimidation was covering over their emotions with fear.

“Hmm. I understand that you are desperate to protect your families and personal safety. Were I traveling on my own, I would not be averse to letting myself be apprehended without a struggle. However…” As he gravely wondered to himself what this was all about, he spoke to the passengers surrounding him at a slight distance. “However, for your sake, I cannot allow you to apprehend me now.”

“Wh-what?”

As the passengers looked at one another, Denkurou realized the gunshots from the movie theater had stopped. He exhaled quietly. “After all, should you apprehend me—there will be no one able to stop my companion.” He looked over toward the theater, and soon, someone appeared there. Their clothes were a mixture of red, black, and white; one might have initially thought they were one of the seajackers.

In any case, the fabric had originally been a light color, and the pattern on it was the result of multiple layers of blood spray.

It was a masked man, covered in the blood of his victims. In his hand was an enormous meat cleaver.

This time, the passengers panicked. Screaming, they fell over one another in their haste to escape to their cabins.

“Nile…”

“Let me just say this: I have not laid a finger on ordinary passengers. I do know better than that.”

“But…”

“…I am only a little irritated, you see.” Nile gave the cleaver a few good shakes, flicking blood onto the floor, then asked Denkurou a question. “Those expressions of theirs… You have noticed it as well, haven’t you, Denkurou?”

“…I have.”

“The ignorance of pain, the utter heartfelt bliss while they retain their reason —*it is almost the same as the drug that was rampant in that town three hundred years ago*.”

However Denkurou had interpreted those words, he drew a quiet breath, then mentioned another alchemist. “But Begg is…”

“I am aware… And in fact, that product was an inferior one that he had declared a failure. The townspeople reproduced it without permission. Even so —do you believe this is merely coincidence? Is this a trap set by Huey after all?”

“No. When it came to that drug, Huey was also not… Hmm?” Denkurou looked and saw a woman slowly shuffling toward them.

When he saw she was wearing red and black, Nile sprang into motion with no hesitation.

“So there was another one, was there? On the battlefield, I show no mercy even to women.”

“Ah…” The woman began to murmur something, but Nile swung his blade down.

Immediately before the blow struck, his arm stopped.

Denkurou had circled around Nile before he even noticed and caught his arm in the nick of time. “Calm yourself. Are you so drunk on blood?”

“…”

“This lady’s garments may be the same, but her eyes are not.”

Unlike the group in red and black, the woman’s expression was full of fear and panic and despair.

Finally realizing Nile’s blade had nearly struck her down, she sank to her knees right where she was.

“Ah, aaaaah…”

Standing between Nile and the frightened woman, Denkurou quietly extended a handkerchief to her.

“My apologies. It seems my companion temporarily lost his better judgment. If you don’t mind, madam, could you explain why you are wearing those clothes?”

Meanwhile, Nile put a hand to his mask, embarrassed—

—and after a few seconds, he lopped off his own hand with the knife.

“Let me just say this: Forgive me. I will go cool my head and my blood for a while.” The spray had turned cold in the air, but it soon returned to Nile’s body.

As she witnessed that incredibly bizarre phenomenon, the woman briefly flinched— —but she was not overwhelmed, and it wasn’t long before she pulled herself together and spoke.

“Um… Your companion… The silver-haired woman…”

“Hmm? You mean Sylvie? How do you know of her, madam?”

There were several things he wanted to ask, but the woman was on the verge of passing out.

Judging they should return to the cabin temporarily, Denkurou began to pick the woman up, and so he heard what she said clearly.

“They’re…after…her… If we don’t…hurry…then they’ll… He’ll—”

When he heard that, Denkurou hesitated for a few seconds. Then he bit his lip and broke into a run with the woman in his arms.

…He had to believe in the possibility that Sylvie had returned to their cabin.

Meanwhile In a certain semi-suite cabin “Maybe I really should go outside…”

When Sylvie finally made it back to the cabin, Elmer and Denkurou were already gone. Her cell phone wasn’t working, and the entire ship was swarming with enemies.

“I wonder… Is Huey behind this?”

Under the circumstances, it was fair to say the whole vessel was against her. Sylvie thought for a while, trying to decide whether it was better to leave the

room or stay, but— “Good evening.”

—a voice from behind her brought her train of thought to a halt.

“Who’s there?!” When Sylvie hastily turned around—she saw a bespectacled man in a red-and-black lab coat.

“May I say it’s a pleasure to meet you? My name is Bride.”

“…Oh. I see. Mr. Bride… And? What did you need? This isn’t your cabin, you know.”

Maybe he was a passenger from the next cabin over who was attempting to capture Sylvie to save himself. The idea crossed her mind, but she rejected it instantly.

There was something clearly *wrong* about the man standing in front of her.

“…How did you get into this room?”

“I let myself in a moment ago, while you were out. I have a master key.”

She remembered the time on the *Advena Avis*, long ago, when Szilard had put his right hand on her head. She sensed the same danger around this man.

“I’ll ask you again, then: What do you want?”

The man responded matter-of-factly. “I’ve come to confess to my bride, of course.”

“…Huh?”

Her brain and her body stalled at the exact same time. Quietly, she tried to ask a question of her own, but the man interrupted her.

“It’ll be brief. And once I get that out of the way…I’d like you to marry me. I like you. I have ever since I saw you in that photo. I feel no love for you, but I do like you. No matter what, I want you to marry me—and to loathe me. And then I want you to curse this world.”

“What are you talking about?”

Nothing he was saying made any sense.

Assuming the man was joking, Sylvie decided to respond with a joke of her

own and see what he'd do.

"…Unfortunately, I've got a previous engagement."

However—at the man's next words, her heart truly froze.

"Oh, *you mean Gretto*?"

"____?!"

As Sylvie's mind froze—a puff of gas struck her in the face in that moment of vulnerability.

As her consciousness dimmed rapidly, she heard the man's voice:

"So sleeping potions and the like are indeed effective on immortals as well."

And then—her mind was swallowed up by total darkness.

"I see. It's just as it was written in the scriptures… I'm glad they've been proven correct."

One hour later

In an event storeroom on the *Entrance*

Charon was running through the ship without making a sound, searching for his sister.

His presence was nearly undetectable as he looked for her and the movie crew; perhaps his great-grandmother had taught him stealth techniques that he had then honed for his work as stuntman.

It really was darkest under the candlestick, as they say; the idea that the star might be taking refuge in the movie theater still hadn't occurred to him.

Wishing he'd brought his cell phone, he'd checked their room and the area around the event venue, but he hadn't found a trace of her yet. Not only that but, eerily, the ship seemed nearly deserted.

This was probably because the passengers were hiding in their cabins, and the staff was taking shelter in the kitchen and similar areas. After all, they didn't even know how many criminals there were.

As Charon ran soundlessly through the event storeroom, he heard a voice somewhere in the distance.

At first, he thought whoever it was was talking to themselves, but apparently, they were on the phone with someone.

Nearly undetectable, the boy crept closer—and heard what was being said.

He would soon be spotted after eavesdropping— —and Charon Walken would be in the most danger of anyone on the *Entrance*.

In the *Entrance* shopping mall

While the sky behind the boat was a little lighter than before, those on the ship had lost all sense of time, and the majority of the passengers had holed up quietly in their cabins.

Meanwhile, a dark shape walked through the sparsely lit shopping mall.

Even in the gloom, the odd gunslinger was wearing sunglasses. He stopped in

front of the fountain on the lowest level—and smoothly drew his gun, aiming directly to the side.

“I wouldn’t,” he said to the person dangling in his line of fire.

The girl had dropped to hang upside down from the second floor for no particular reason, and she cocked her head in confusion. “…How’d you know?”

“Instinct,” the gunslinger replied flatly.

Illness’s mouth curved into a dissatisfied line. She tilted her head, seeming a bit troubled. “You don’t kill women or children, though, right?”

“Yeah, well.”

“Then, if I shoot now, you’ll die, won’t you?”

With a submachine gun in her hands, the girl looked at the gunman through her night vision goggles and snickered.

However, Angelo didn’t seem the least bit anxious and even gave her a small smile in return. “If I was unlucky, I guess that could happen.”

“…Hey, why don’t you shoot women and children?”

“When I was a kid, I lived on the streets.” The man answered the girl’s question with unexpected frankness. “The folks in town swept the alleys with machine guns once. Called it ‘cleaning’ or something like that. Man, woman, child, they didn’t care; they didn’t even look at our faces. When they got to the alley where I was hanging out all by myself—they happened to run out of bullets, so they called it a day and went home. That’s why I’m still here.”

“Why did they kill those kids?”

“Like I said, it was *cleaning*. To be accurate, the ones who did it were policemen who’d been hired by the people. I’m pretty sure it was because we spoiled the view.”

The incident had to have been traumatic, but the man spoke about it indifferently. Had he grown that jaded, or did it no longer matter to him now as an event from the past? Or was he relating the event so calmly precisely because it had rooted itself firmly in his heart?

“My resolve not to kill women or kids is my act of protest against them… Actually, it’s nothing so admirable. It’s just pride and my self-respect as a gunman.”

“Don’t you ever want to get revenge?”

“Already did.”

“Huh?!” the girl yelped, and Angelo went on, his voice going colder.

“Would you believe me if I told you that twenty years later, the town was wiped off the map when almost everyone except women and children was dead? Well, there were a lot of us who stole and killed, too, so I suppose the violence was mutual, but…I ended that cycle of revenge by force… If I said that, would you buy it?”

“Don’t… Don’t tell me that stuff. Just don’t.”

The next thing she knew, the gun Illness held was trembling slightly. Whether or not Angelo had noticed that, he didn’t even look her way. He only continued, with his gun trained on her: “I don’t intend to boast about my misfortune. I’m sure you’ve experienced your share. It doesn’t matter to me which of us has been through more. Some are born into this world and die before they taste their first drop of water, while others are blessed with family and food and a place to sleep and are still unhappy. Plus, happiness and unhappiness aren’t the reasons behind strength, and they aren’t what let you survive a fight to the death.”

“…”

“What’s important is the fact that you and I both have guns, *and we’re both where we are now*. That’s all.”

That’s…right.

Between one moment and the next, her hands stopped shaking. At Angelo’s words, she’d found her resolve. Instead of answering him, she began to squeeze the trigger, but— —a voice came out of the darkness and curbed her actions.

“Um… Excuse me. You don’t kill children, right? I’m a child, so please don’t shoot.”

The shape that materialized from the shadows was…

“I can’t believe this… There’s really something wrong with Claudia, sending a kid out on recon. The staff, too, since they didn’t stop her. I guess stars really do have the movie industry under their thumb.”

The boy grumbling to himself with both hands raised was the boy she’d just made friends with on the ship.

“C-Czes!” Illness screamed as she saw him step out from the direction of the movie theater. “Y-you’re in danger! That guy’s a super-duper strong gunman…”

“Hold it. You’re…Czes?”

The man spoke over Illness, and for a moment, Czes stiffened—but when Angelo continued, all that tension dissolved in a rush.

“Are you maybe…Firo’s little brother, Czes?”

⟺

Meanwhile, Firo was running around the ship looking for Czes.

Geez, where could he have gone? And who was he going around with yesterday anyway?

“Hmm…?”

Just when he was completely out of ideas and was starting to think about temporarily heading back to the room— —he heard a gunshot from somewhere fairly close by.

That sound… It’s the same gun that masked special-ops bastard was using!

As Firo raced down the corridor toward the noise— —he spotted a boy charging toward him, *running across the wall*.

“Ch-Charon?! H-hey, stop!”

“…Hide,” his friend’s great-grandson said as he passed him.

Charon was traveling down the hall in a completely nonsensical manner, launching himself off the ceiling and the doorknobs along the walls. It was something Claire used to do, but only under certain circumstances.

That always meant some guy with a machine gun was trying to kill him—

A moment later, there was a thunderous noise from the depths of the corridor, along with a spray of bullets.

“Dwaaah?!”

Firo immediately launched himself off the floor, evading by a hair… Although that was due to luck more than anything.

“Dammit! You again?!”

Firo glared down the corridor, his eyes focused on a man dressed like an operative from a special-forces unit and holding an assault rifle.

The other man seemed to have registered his presence as well. *Whoa, is he gonna make another sweep?* Firo wondered, but…

…for some reason, the man in the mask and goggles turned and disappeared back down the corridor.

“? What was that about?”

“…Are you okay?” Charon asked from behind him, and Firo slowly straightened up.

“Yeah. Why the hell was he after you?”

“…”

The boy shrugged to say he had no idea.

Firo sighed quietly. “Anyway, what exactly are you doing? Where’s Claudia?”

“I’m…looking for her now.”

Baffled, Firo was about to say *Are you kidding?* when the cell phone in his jacket rang. The display told him it was Angelo; apparently, it was possible to call other phones on the ship now.

“Ah, hang on a sec, it’s from a friend… Hello? …Yeah. Yeah… What? Seriously?” After a brief conversation, Firo ended the call and murmured with relief. “They found Claudia and the crew. He says Czes is with him now.”

Just then he saw a slight change in Charon’s robotic expression.

“What’s up? You’re glad Claudia’s safe, too, huh?” Firo commented, and

Charon’s face went blank again.

Firo gave a resigned sigh, but—

Face still expressionless, Charon murmured in a small voice.

“…Of course.”

Firo broke into a broad grin.

Two hours later

The shipboard ride center on the *Exit*

The amusement center was the size of a modest theme park and held rows of children's attractions. The carefully maintained ride equipment even included electric go-karts.

Rookie and Aging were making their way through the park. Near the entrance to the ride center, they could see several children standing in a tight group.

"What are children doing in here?" Rookie started to approach them, but Aging stopped him with a whisper from behind.

"Hold up, President. Look closer."

"Huh…?"

Rookie strained his eyes—and then he noticed.

Almost all the children were wearing red-and-black clothes.

"Wha…?"

When he looked again, he spotted the boy who'd approached him at the immigration gate before departure, along with his little sister.

Wh…why…? But they… They were normal kids.

They all seemed to be holding knives. Rookie wanted to believe that the blades were toys.

"So they're finally breaking out the kiddies, huh? Guess the enemy's runnin' low on people."

Even now, Aging seemed to be enjoying herself, and Rookie glared at her. Holding his breath, he hid behind one of the rides. Aging followed suit and hunkered down as much as her huge frame would let her.

"And?" she asked Rookie. "What do we do?"

"…About what?"

"C'mon, you know what I mean. Is it okay to kill those kids if they come at us?"

“…—!”

A shudder ran through Rookie again.

“I mean, you can find child soldiers everywhere on battlefields, and if Death were here, he might’ve already finished them off by now…before they even noticed he was there. I ain’t a pro like him, though. I don’t care what we do. It’s your call, President.” She was yawning as she spoke, but to Rookie the words sounded like a test.

Sudden conflict welled up inside him.

As the president of the Mask Makers, should he kill in this situation? But the Mask Maker had been born as a savior to abused children.

“So then…could a professional mercenary kill them as if it were nothing?”

“Hmm? That’s a weird question. It’s different for everybody, obviously. You get some comic-book types who can kill without blinking and write it off as business, and you get some types who can’t. Well, you see those in comic books, too. Anyway, that’s all it is. The point is, what do *you* want to do?”

“Let’s go with not killing them, then.”

Huh?

The answer hadn’t been his.

Aging’s eyes had gone wide, unusually for her, and she was looking at the person who had spoken.

The one who’d answered the question for Rookie was— —their ultimate target, Elmer C. Albatross himself.

“Ah, I could tell you were having trouble deciding, so I tossed in my two cents. That’s all.”

“…”

When had he appeared? What was he doing here in the first place?

“Why…are you here?”

“Oh, sorry; did I startle you?”

Elmer was beaming, but he was keeping his voice thoughtfully low.

“I was looking for you. I figured you were the current leader of the Mask Makers,” he said, still smiling, as if it wasn’t a ridiculous thing to say.

“____!”

Rookie was speechless. This was just too much.

Meanwhile, Aging seemed impressed. She smiled and asked Elmer a question of her own. “Hoh-hoh. What gave you that idea?”

“Well, I mean… You know, there was that broadcast where the seajackers identified themselves as the Mask Makers. Plus, those people in red and black seem to be their friends, and…when I see them, it reminds me of the effects of a drug that was all over the place in Lotto Valentino way back when. And then there you were, a kid from the same town who looks a little like Monica. Put it all together, and anybody could guess.”

“Then why’d you come out to meet us?”

“I was gonna tell you I’d turn myself in without a fight, so let’s all smile and not crash the ship and have a party instead—but I guess it’s more complicated than that, huh?”

With a breezy smile in an attempt to reassure Rookie, Elmer completely failed to read the mood.

“Well, I want to see you smile the way you did when you were doing magic tricks, so I’ll do my best. Ask for anything.

“I’m still a member of the Mask Makers, technically, and that makes you my boss.”

A few hours later On the event stage, out on deck Out on the ocean, the sun had come all the way up.

“…What is this, exactly?”

On waking, Sylvie discovered she was now wearing a wedding dress. One with an extremely tacky red-and-black color scheme.

“Ah, you’re awake. How do you feel?”

The man who’d introduced himself as Bride back in the cabin was standing in front of her, and the stage was surrounded by a group of several dozen in red and black. She also saw several bound, blindfolded children in pure-white clothes.

Instantly understanding the situation, Sylvie sighed. “I’m surprised. I never thought I’d be taken hostage two years in a row.”

“Oh, is that right? Well, well. I envy the one who took you hostage last year.”

“By the way…who told you about Gretto? Was it Huey?” Despite her circumstances, Sylvie kept talking without a trace of fear. She’d already been through what was, for her, the worst that could happen. She’d even accepted the possibility of being eaten, and she simply said what she had to so she could learn what she needed to know.

She had also assumed Huey was backing this group and that letter of his really had been a trap, but— “Huey? Who is that?” Bride looked genuinely mystified, and Sylvie frowned.

“Then who did you hear about him from?”

“Oh, let’s just say I have comrades everywhere. For example—on the *Advena Avis*. Such a tragedy you suffered there.”

“…I’m changing my question. What are you people?”

“Very well. Let me explain from the beginning.” As he spoke, Bride quietly raised his hand—and the blindfolded, manacled children began to recite in a near scream the song that had been engraved in their minds.

That was enough to convince Sylvie:

No matter what this group was, she and they were probably never going to get along.

A few minutes later, having finished a meticulous explanation of the group’s religion, Bride casually reached for the syringes on the lectern—and jabbed them into his own neck.

He gave a strangled scream, and then he started acting even more psychotic than he had a moment ago.

“Now then, O great and eternal one who will be my wife: Do you understand why I am marrying you?”

“Basically, you’ve erased all sense of pain, while I will suffer at your hands for

eternity. As perfect yin-yang complements, we'll reach the pinnacle of humanity or some childish nonsense like that."

"The nuances are more complex—but if you boil it down to the bare essentials, then yes, that's correct." Despite her obvious condescension, Bride accepted her summary with a nonchalant smile. It was as if his group was immune to everything, even scorn. "That said, if you insist, I do have another in mind to be my bride. Although, if your immortal life continues, and our doctrine continues to exist, I suspect you will become a candidate again in due time… Alas."

"For someone who's planning to marry me, you don't seem particularly invested in this." Sylvie was still participating in the conversation, but she'd given up on being listened to.

She'd managed to communicate well enough to have a discussion with her captor the previous year, but this group's thoughts were formed on a totally different wavelength.

Raising her head as if she'd given up—Sylvie froze again, but for a different reason. "Hang on a second…"

I remember that announcement yesterday… Didn't they say this was supposed to happen this evening?

The sun was still on its way up the sky, and there were two hours or so left before noon.

…And yet she saw it.

From up on the outdoor stage, the view was truly beautiful, especially looking out onto the endless horizon.

And that was why—

—*the enormous white shape directly in front of this ship*, far in the distance, made for such an unsettling image to everyone who saw it.

"The time is at hand… It appears our counterpart accelerated as well."

"…Your group won't get out of this unscathed, either."

"Probably not… Well then, shall we go inside? It would be troublesome if we

were flung off into the ocean," Bride impassively replied. Both he and those around him looked truly tranquil—and happy.

That was exactly why Sylvie felt such strong aversion to them.

It was as if she were looking at corrupted copies of Elmer.

And then—the fated hour arrived.

From a bird's-eye view, it looked like a lunar eclipse.

Two gargantuan masses—one white, the other black—slowly approached each other.

As if they'd exchanged signals beforehand, both decelerated—

—yet didn't stop.

Slowly slowly slowly slowly slowly…

Until at last, the moment came.

It was so smooth, one might have expected the two ships to overlap like a real eclipse…

And they slowly…

…elegantly…

…smoothly approached each other like two lovers…

And finally—they overlapped.

…But of course, that wasn't actually possible.

A low and heavy yet ear-piercing screech echoed over the ocean.

Both ships had slowed to a near stop, but the impact groaned through the vessels as if it meant to destroy them.

The ships hadn't collided head-on. They'd made contact near the bows, where their left sides had struck. It was like a car scraping against a guardrail; instead of crushing each other, they tore at each other.

A chorus of screams went up from the survivors inside the ships.

Naturally, the cabins experienced the powerful shudders as well, and the passengers taking cover on the deck rolled across the slanting floors like pill bugs.

Even so, the damage had admittedly been kept to a minimum.

The enormous ships tilted away from each other in the water. The angle was nowhere near great enough to let them capsize, but the edges of the ships that had made contact with each other separated by more than twenty yards.

About thirty seconds passed.

Then they swung back toward each other—and the ships' hulls scraped together again.

The vessels repeated the cycle—leaning apart, then colliding again—ten times or so, with each cycle less severe than the last.

Finally, about five minutes after the collision, the rocking stopped.

According to *his* plan, the *Entrance* should have exploded, and the members of SAMPLE should have flooded in from the *Exit* and executed a massacre— *But in reality, by the time those five minutes were up, it was all over.*

"…All right, everyone. Once the ships have come to a complete stop, bring the sacrificial gods here. They are our objective."

Even as they hung on through the shock of the collision, the members of SAMPLE seemed lost in utter bliss.

Strangely, while she rode out the impact, Sylvie was wondering how on earth they were keeping the drug in their system for it to be so consistently effective.

The floor of the bridge was spattered with blood, and corpse fragments (as far as she could tell) lay here and there, but none of the men and women around her seemed bothered by the situation.

Beside Sylvie, Bride kept speaking calmly, not even flinching when the ship tilted. "As on this ship, members of a group calling themselves the Mask Makers appear to be on the other ship. Once again, we shall grant them a quick and painless—"

However—he broke off partway through his sentence.

Instead of finishing, he asked a peculiar question.

“A…shark?”

He had moved from the deck to the bridge, and there he saw— —*a giant shark flying toward them through the air* from the *Entrance*.

The enormous shark slid onto the deck as if it had jumped, writhing, out of the ocean.

Although they didn’t scream, the people on the bridge, as well as the hundred or so believers who’d been waiting in the corridor that led to the deck, felt their hearts freeze for a moment. Soon after the shark arrived, two figures leaped over the edge of the ships rocking toward each other and away.

One was a baby-faced immortal. The other was a man in black with a pistol in each hand.

Despite the extreme tilting of the deck, the man in black ran with no hesitation— He clearly believed words were no longer necessary as he shot at the red-and-black group waiting near the door to the deck, taking out their legs one after another. As they crumpled and fell, their companions behind them identified the man in black as an enemy.

Without thinking twice, the group in the rear tried to come forward.

However, before they could—

—several bright flashes arced from the upper reaches of the *Entrance* with trails of smoke behind them.

The next instant—the missiles from the rocket launcher touched down, and each powerful explosion sent a dozen people flying.

The men operating that rocket launcher were having a chat as they loaded the next round.

“Well… Can’t say I was expecting this.”

“Guess stars really do live in another world.”

One of the men had a notebook with Charon's autograph in his breast pocket.

The other had Charon's autograph on the mask he wore.

A few hours earlier, Illness had appeared and told the confused Mask Makers on the bridge something odd: "I brought new hostages."

They'd started to complain and chase her away ("You think we need more hostages?! Hurry up and take out that gunslinger!"), but when they saw the boy and girl behind her, their attitude changed drastically.

The young Hollywood star and self-styled hostage hadn't seemed particularly concerned. "Illness told me what's going on. Your leader is in trouble over on the other boat, isn't he? So let's work together for a little while!"

The suggestion seemed to be completely outside the realm of common sense.

They weren't sure about the idea at first, but after she shared what she had learned from Charon and after seeing what the immortal hostage Firo could do in a fight, the Mask Makers had agreed to a temporary partnership.

"…Y'know, I didn't think the gunman would be in on it, too."

"He'd better not be planning to shoot the boss once he gets onto the other ship."

"Nah… There's no way."

"What makes you so sure?"

The man with the autographed mask answered as he took aim.

"They say our hotshot gunslinger is the old-fashioned type. He doesn't kill women or kids."

As the second explosion from the rocket launcher went off, something strange was occurring on the *Exit*.

The bridge received word that immortals had appeared in both the communications and engine rooms and had begun to beat back the occupying members of SAMPLE little by little.

In the communications room, a man drenched in the blood of his victims had one hand around the neck of the female secretary who had been occupying it.

“Let me just say this,” he murmured. “Because my head is now cool, you have escaped with your life.”

Gazing at the half-dead believers who lay around them, Nile lowered the unconscious woman to the floor.

“…This is tiresome.”

As he watched the flesh she had torn from his side stitching back together, he murmured to himself quietly: “I suppose I will look forward to fighting that titaness once we are no longer working together.”

At the same time, in the engine room—a sharp-eyed Asian man was muttering to himself.

“For goodness’ sake. Elmer is as strict a taskmaster as ever.” Unlike in the communications room, the believers were all unconscious but miraculously unharmed. As he tied them up, Denkurou quietly shook his head. “No… I was unable to declare that I would go rescue Sylvie, so perhaps it is only that I still lack experience.”

He drew in a deep breath, then tied up the last believer, as though to distract himself from unnecessary thoughts.

“Still, what does Elmer plan to do? I wonder… After we are done fighting as allies, does he intend to stir up trouble with the real Mask Makers?”

As for the bottom line, it was really very simple.

They’d teamed up. That was all it was.

It had been possible to make phone calls from one ship to the other all along, so the members of SAMPLE had anticipated that the Mask Makers would attack when the ships connected.

However—Bride and his followers hadn’t imagined that all the other involved parties might collude with them.

Unfortunately for them, right as Elmer and Rookie made contact, Aging had gotten a call from the *Entrance*.

As a result, the details of what was happening on the *Entrance* and the *Exit* became common knowledge on both ships—and everyone had decided that doing something about the group in red clothes came first.

And then—one man stepped boldly onto the bridge.

With a gentle smile, he looked around at Bride and the group of twenty or so in red.

“Um, hello. Is that what I should say?”

“Elmer!”

After his carefree entrance, the immortal spotted Sylvie, who was handcuffed in a chair.

“Hi there, Sylvie. You okay? I don’t wanna stop you if you’ve discovered a new hobby, but if that’s what’s going on, I wish you’d smile.”

He cracked a light joke—but when Sylvie’s expression shifted into a very angry smile, he decided to look elsewhere.

Although this state of affairs put Bride at a clear disadvantage, he still wore that euphoric smile. “It’s an honor to meet you,” he said quietly, “*boy who was once a sacrificial god*.”

When he heard those words, Elmer’s eyes narrowed softly. Then, without letting his smile slip…

“Ah… I had a feeling it might be you all.”

“In that case, I trust you understand our objective as well?”

“I understand, but I don’t approve. Sylvie’s a good friend of mine, and…” Reading the other man’s intentions, Elmer slowly let his eyes travel to the corner of the room where the blindfolded speaker-children stood, and he smiled quietly. “…besides, I’d like to see those kids smile. So, *do you think you could call it quits*?”

“…What an odd request.”

“Well, I mean, you already look happy. Even if it is the drugs. So…what more could you want?” There was a certain sort of conviction behind Elmer’s question, but Bride answered it impassively.

“…Relief.”

“…?”

“We want relief. That is what the scriptures say.”

“…”

“We need a relief to underpin our happiness, to serve as an index by which we can know our bliss is true, to satisfy us that we are fortunate as humans. Without it, our happiness is counterfeit, nothing but drunken escapism.”

At the man’s unreasonable reply, Elmer gave a little sigh. A hint of melancholy crept into his smile.

“Three hundred years ago, the people of my hometown said the same thing when they killed kids.”

“…”

“I guess a few centuries isn’t enough for people to change.” As he remembered bygone days, Elmer smiled again. “Well, maybe I became an immortal because I knew that.”

His smile was vaguely sad. It was almost as if he meant it as a farewell to Bride and the others.

“Then what are you going to do? What can you do all by yourself?”

“…Nothing, at least not today. I could wish you happiness, but you’re happy already.”

“?”

“You really are; I can tell. You could die here and now, and I bet the drug would keep you happy to the end. Even if you die after this, I’ll assume you’ve found your own kind of happiness, so…I won’t say anything. No…”

After thinking a bit, Elmer corrected his last comment.

“I…*can’t* say anything.”

Then—

—the bridge window shattered, and an enormous figure dropped in from above it.

“Gwah-ha-ha! Sounds complicated! Ya done?”

The woman was armored with sheer muscle, and she showed her teeth in a smile even breezier than Elmer’s. Then— —still smiling, with no hesitation, she strafed the room with her minigun—

—but the bullets were just a deterrent, and she descended on the bridge, Gurkha knife in hand.

The deck of the *Exit*

While the gunslinger took his offensive into the ship’s interior, Firo had stayed on the deck to finish off the remaining enemies by himself.

He’d heard them described as “zombies” over the phone, and they were as tough as you might expect.

He didn’t have a weapon, not even a knife, but he was steadily wearing them down. However, when the people in red and black kept getting back up as if they didn’t feel the pain, Firo switched to knocking them out individually.

He aimed directly at their chins or temples, delivering the shock to their brains so that they instantly lost consciousness.

That way, pain was irrelevant. Plus, if you ignored their zombielike persistence, abnormal agility, and tremendous strength, they were practically amateurs.

That was why Firo had managed to put up a good fight despite being outnumbered, but— —when the hundred or so who had still been inside the ship came out, he quietly shook his head.

“Dammit… I really can’t take on a hundred by myself, huh? If I at least had my knife…”

Even as he spoke, the red-and-black group had begun to spread out over the deck in front of him.

Some of them held submachine guns and rocket launchers.

Even for an immortal, this was a rock and a hard place. He was breaking out in a cold sweat, but even so—Firo smiled, then gently raised a hand into the sky.

And at his signal—

—the mouth of the shark animatronic that had landed on the deck began spewing a colorless gas.

The next instant—

—as soon as they breathed it in, the people in red started to flop and roll around like shrimp hauled out of the water.

From their faces, they didn't seem to be in pain, but they were showing obvious signs of physical distress, coughing and breathing with difficulty.

Covering his mouth and heading downwind, Firo frowned at the potency of the gas.

That's some nasty stuff. Those Mask Maker assholes brought this onto the ship?

Even if they were currently allies, Firo made a mental note never to let his guard down around them, then turned to face the group in red again.

These guys are after…immortals. Maiza's friends.

When he'd heard what was going on, he'd pictured their faces. Not from his own memory, naturally; they were in the memories of the alchemists Szilard had eaten, and of Szilard himself.

It's so strange.

Firo had chosen to play decoy for the sake of people he'd never met yet knew very well.

"Why would you do that, when it gets you nothing? Even if you can't die, that's not a reason on its own. In fact, that only means you would experience the pain of death without the relief. You can't want to put yourself through

that."

Angelo had made that remark right before they began, but Firo had only answered with an awkward smile.

"Well, if you wanna know what I'm getting out of this—it's for myself, more than anyone. It's something I kinda always wanted to do. Show off a little in front of my family. Stupid, I know."

Remembering what he'd said, Firo flushed and shook his head.

That was reason enough for him to fight—and he would fight the whole world if he had to. Maybe he wanted to prove it to them—or at least to Ennis.

To show her the best of the man she'd married.

While Firo was putting his soul on the line for his current family— —the boy who'd gambled his life for the sake of a long-gone ancestor quietly stood in the path of a man.

"Hmm…?" Bride had made a narrow escape from the bridge, but then the blond boy had confronted him. "You're…Luchino?"

"Yes. I suppose I should say it's a pleasure to meet you."

"I see. Good-bye, then," Bride murmured and tried to slip past Luchino.

"…Would you wait a minute?"

"What is it? I have no business with you," he said without emotion. There was no displeasure in his words; it was only a simple statement.

That said, even under these circumstances—the man's smile looked happy.

He made Luchino sick to his stomach. "I'd like to ask you something," Luchino said in a strangled rasp. "…I don't know who you and your people are, but there is one thing I'm interested in… What…is your goal? What did you hope to achieve by killing my people?"

"It's simple," Bride answered matter-of-factly, slowing to a stop. "You were killed by our desire. That's all."

"Desire, hmm? …You and I have that in common, then."

"For all living creatures, appetite is instinct. When mountain ascetics wish to

renounce all desire, it's nothing more than another form of des—"

As he was speaking, the ships' hulls scraped together again with a shuddering impact.

In an instant, Luchino closed the distance between them and ran the stiletto he'd been hiding into Bride's side. He didn't hesitate—and for once, he didn't even feel like throwing up.

This man had defiled his companions' lives and dragged the Mask Maker name through the mud. He couldn't let these crimes go unpunished.

However—

"Excuse me. You're in my way."

As if the weapon that had impaled him side to back wasn't even worth mentioning, the man swept Luchino aside. He was dreadfully strong, and Luchino was dashed to the ground easily.

"…Any more than that will hurt, you know."

He smiled, but his eyes weren't even seeing the boy. Taking one quiet step forward, Bride said something that might or might not have had any significance.

"In any case—with regard to both our thoughts and our actions, you and I have so little in common it's frightening. I don't have your resolve, and you don't have my faith. While resolve and faith may seem like two different things, they're both sides of the same coin; it's the vector that's different. Meaning you and I can do nothing but pass each other by, I suppose."

He didn't even bother to look at Luchino…

…and that was why he couldn't figure out how the trick was done.

"Right… Me too… I wasn't planning to talk with you in the first place."

"…?"

"I already know we have nothing in common. A conversation between us is impossible. I've known the whole time! Yes, the president of the Mask Makers realized it the moment your people killed subordinates I cared about! …As for

Luchino… As for the magician Rookie, I was just—”

Luchino’s lips twisted in a grin, and he huffed a tiny laugh.

“I was just—*waiting for the perfect moment*.”

“…?”

Wondering what he meant, Bride began to turn around, and in that instant—

—a massive force suddenly pulled at him, powerful enough to rip him apart, and he dropped helplessly to the deck.

He’d completely failed to notice, but Luchino’s stab with the stiletto hadn’t been trying to inflict lethal damage. He had used that moment to wind around Bride the sturdy fiber he used to “levitate” during his magic shows.

The end of that fiber—*was attached to the* Entrance*’s edge*, which was rocking toward them and away like a pendulum.

“Ngh…ghk…”

Still on the ground, Bride was dragged away helplessly.

The boy didn’t watch. He just walked away.

“If he’d been afraid of the pain of getting stabbed…maybe he would have been saved.”

Bride slid rapidly over the deck and right over the edge.

By a stroke of luck, the *Entrance* and *Exit* chose that instant to rock back toward each other again, and gravity pulled him down between the ships, toward the ocean.

“Ghk…”

He managed to grab the lowest part of the railing, but his hands were slick with sweat, and he couldn’t support his weight the way he wanted to.

It was only a matter of time before he fell—until someone caught his hands.

The one who’d stopped him before he could plunge into the ocean was…

“Lucotte?”

…the woman Bride had brought with him as his temporary wife.

Celice had already stripped off her red-and-black dress and thrown it away, and all she was wearing above the waist was her bra. She was holding Bride's hands firmly, supporting his weight.

"You're lighter than I thought you'd be… Let me tell you something. And I'm not speaking to the crazy cult leader; I'm talking to the crazy man who took me as his wife."

As she held him over the railing, the light had fully returned to her eyes.

"Listen. People get hurt and suffer pain, and that pain makes them stronger. You want to know why I have it together right now? It's because of you and your little followers."

"…"

After that sarcastic jeer—Celice smiled quietly.

"And this is for the crazy cult leader."

She smiled with genuine, heartfelt satisfaction.

"Die weak and die numb, you fucking son of a bitch."

Right after she spoke, the hull of the *Entrance* rocked back toward them again.

Both ships were floating at the same height, and the other vessel bore down with a force fit to crush anyone who might be hanging on to the outer edge of this one— —and Celice didn't let go until right before the collision.

In the end, Celice never did get to hear Bride scream. However…

…the spray of blood, the crunch of the impact, and the man's severed arms flying across the deck were enough for her.

The sight spread among the group in red-and-black clothes in an instant— —and the fanatics abruptly began to withdraw. It was such a swift, unerring retreat that there wasn't even time to wonder, *Where to?*

As if they were a single life-form, the believers of SAMPLE vanished like the receding tide.

The deck and the bridge were now completely deserted except for the corpses, while Firo and the gunslinger racked their brains about whether what they'd just seen had actually happened.

But the gruesome corpses littering the bridge and the shark animatronic, which was still emitting a faint stream of gas out on deck, told them that the senseless killing had been a fact.

…Hopeless and sickening…

"…It's quiet now."

Still holding her gun, Illness murmured with a sigh of relief.

She was on the bridge of the *Entrance*, and behind her were the children at the center of this incident: Czes, who was keeping a wary eye on the situation outside; Claudia and Charon; Bobby (who was still wearing the Gear suit, for some reason) and his friends; and Carnea, who was hiding behind them.

Naturally, the captain and crew were also present and were busy checking the instruments, but they seemed to have their hands full trying to recover and maintain the crashed ship's systems.

"I-it's over…? Is it safe now, or what?"

Bobby very nearly sank to the floor, but he managed to stop himself when he sensed Carnea's eyes on him.

"Um… It's thanks to you, Bobby!"

"No, uh, I didn't…do anything…"

"Truer words were never spoken. All you did was retrieve the gas from the ship's vents."

"And we're the ones who did most of the retrieving anyway."

"I'm hungryyy."

Bobby was discouraged by the comments from his friends, and Carnea comforted him.

As she watched this happy-looking scene, Illness quietly remembered the

boys who had once come to save her and lost their lives in the attempt.

If they had saved me…would we have been like these children?

She was about to heave a little sigh, but that was when Claudia hugged her, beaming.

“Thank you, Illness! We’re safe, and it’s all because of you!”

“O-oh, no… No, I didn’t— I mean, you’re the one who organized everything, Claudia…”

The direct praise made Illness blush, and she wasn’t sure what to say.

Czes’s tense voice cut her off before she could go further.

“Huh? Something’s coming this— What the heck?! Humans can’t move like _”

The next instant—there was a crash. The sturdy glass on the bridge shattered to smithereens, and an enormous figure *flew in* from outside the ship.

Aging?! …No!

This one was even bulkier than the giant Illness knew.

“How fortunate… I just happened to spot you on the bridge over here,” the huge gorilla-faced man said to Czes. “Well. Now that our leader has passed beyond the veil, we must at least acquire a new sacrificial god.” He took a look around the bridge—and suddenly, his eyes stopped on Illness.

“Hmm? You wretch… I mean, young lady… Are you Illness? *Why are you here?*”

“Huh…?”

“What a stroke of luck, *to obtain two gods*…” It was an odd thing to say as the gorilla-faced man took out his handgun, right in front of Illness. “We don’t need the rest.”

He turned the muzzle on Claudia, who was standing next to Illness, and in that moment— —several people sprang into action.

Illness shoved Claudia away, shielding her from the gun with her body.

At the same time, Czes slid in front of her. The bullet passed cleanly through his shoulder, but it wasn't going nearly as fast when it sank into the flesh of Illness's side.

"Ghk…ah…!" Illness gave an inarticulate scream.

The next instant, the boy in the Gear costume ran up. "WAAAAaaaaaaAAAaaugh!"

Bobby was not thinking of any plan or his chances of success. There were only two things in his mind: what Claudia had said to him—*"As long as you're wearing that suit—make sure you act like a real hero from start to finish"*—and the question of who he wanted to become a hero for. The answer was the girl who was standing right behind him.

He'd simply moved as his emotions dictated—but he played his role magnificently.

The simple yet vital role of distracting the man, only for a moment.

As the gorilla-faced man involuntarily turned the gun toward Bobby, Charon's toes cut in smoothly from the side to land a solid hit on his hand.

"Gmph!"

The gorilla fumbled the gun and began swinging his arms around as if he believed his bare hands would still be enough—but then a red liquid hit him right in the eyes.

Illness had gotten in close to him and used the blood streaming from her side to blind him.

The next moment, her hands still smeared with her own blood, Illness set her finger on the trigger— —and a volley from the submachine gun ripped the gorilla's upper body apart.

A few seconds later—Illness collapsed into Claudia's arms and smiled quietly up at her. She wondered—had she managed to risk her life for another, as those boys had once done for her?

"Say…Claudia? I'm not weird, am I…? I'm not—ill or anything like it, am I?"

"Nope, you're not weird at all. I don't care if anyone says otherwise. *I've* said

it’s true.”

“Ah-ha-ha… Why…? I really was a terrorist… Why are you so…nice to me, Claudia…?”

Illness was smiling weakly.

As she stanched her bleeding, Claudia gave her an encouraging smile in return. “I’m… It’s not that the world accepts me,” she said firmly. “I’m the one who accepts the world. That’s what I think.”

“…?”

“And so…I’d never betray the world I accepted. Because, I mean, I’ve already accepted it. It can betray me as much as it wants, but as for me—I’ll keep loving my world forever. That’s all there is to it.”

What Claudia said made no sense at all, and Illness gazed at her for a while—but she was just happy Claudia was smiling at her. Illness returned that smile as she drifted off to sleep.

“Thank…you.”

With Illness still in her arms, Claudia shouted, “We’re taking her to the infirmary!” With that, she and Charon carried her off.

As he watched them go, Czes was relieved that Illness’s wound wasn’t a fatal one.

“Come to think of it… That gorilla… From what he said, it sounded like he was after me…”

As he spoke, Czes turned toward the man’s body. Then he froze.

He was looking at where the gorilla-faced man had been standing—but there was no corpse.

He wasn’t dead…?! And…he got away?

Did Czes notice as he asked himself what had happened?

The gorilla’s blood had sprayed all over the room when Illness shot him—but it had all vanished as well.

Thirty minutes later

All was quiet on the ship.

The ordinary passengers didn't seem to have recovered from the shock of the collision yet, and they were still in their cabins.

Just one, a man who appeared to be Japanese, had jumped from the *Exit* to the *Entrance*, screaming "Hiroko!"—but nobody had gone to the trouble of stopping him.

At present, the ship that had arrived to pick up the Mask Makers had come up alongside the *Entrance*. On board, a smiling Rookie was thanking Life.

"Excellent work, Life. It's a shame we weren't able to retrieve Illness, but I'm truly glad you came back to us."

"…I'm not unscathed, either, mind you. And I'm the only one who wasn't informed of the maneuver following the collision, so I'd like to report an issue with our chain of communication, if I may," Life said, shaking his head wearily.

Rookie smiled at him quietly, then slowly walked up behind him. "I see. Then let me show you a magic trick to cheer you up."

"What's this about, all of a sudden? Don't bother; it will keep until we're back—"

"No… It's already begun."

And the next instant—

Clink.

"…Huh?"

Rookie's empty hands now held a pair of handcuffs—and Life's hands, which had been dangling behind the chair, were restrained in the blink of an eye.

"Excuse me? …Is this some kind of joke?"

"Oh, there's just something I'd like to check," he said as someone poked his head in from outside the cabin.

"!"

A gunslinger in black.

The man should have been the Mask Makers' enemy under any circumstances. When he appeared, Life looked around the room, but…none of them—not Rookie, nor Aging, nor his surviving companions from the *Entrance*—seemed to have any questions about the gunman's presence. They were quietly watching the situation unfold.

"Wait a minute, what is this?"

Flustered, Life struggled, flailing his arms and legs. The gunslinger—Angelo—took a step closer to Life. With no hesitation, he ripped the goggles off his face.

For a moment, there was silence. Then—

"Don't be so cold. It's not like we don't know each other," the gunman muttered quietly, and his expression was vaguely sad beneath his sunglasses. "Right, *demolition guy*?"

More silence.

An unbearable hush hung over the ship—and the next instant, a coarse chuckle escaped Life's lips to drive it away.

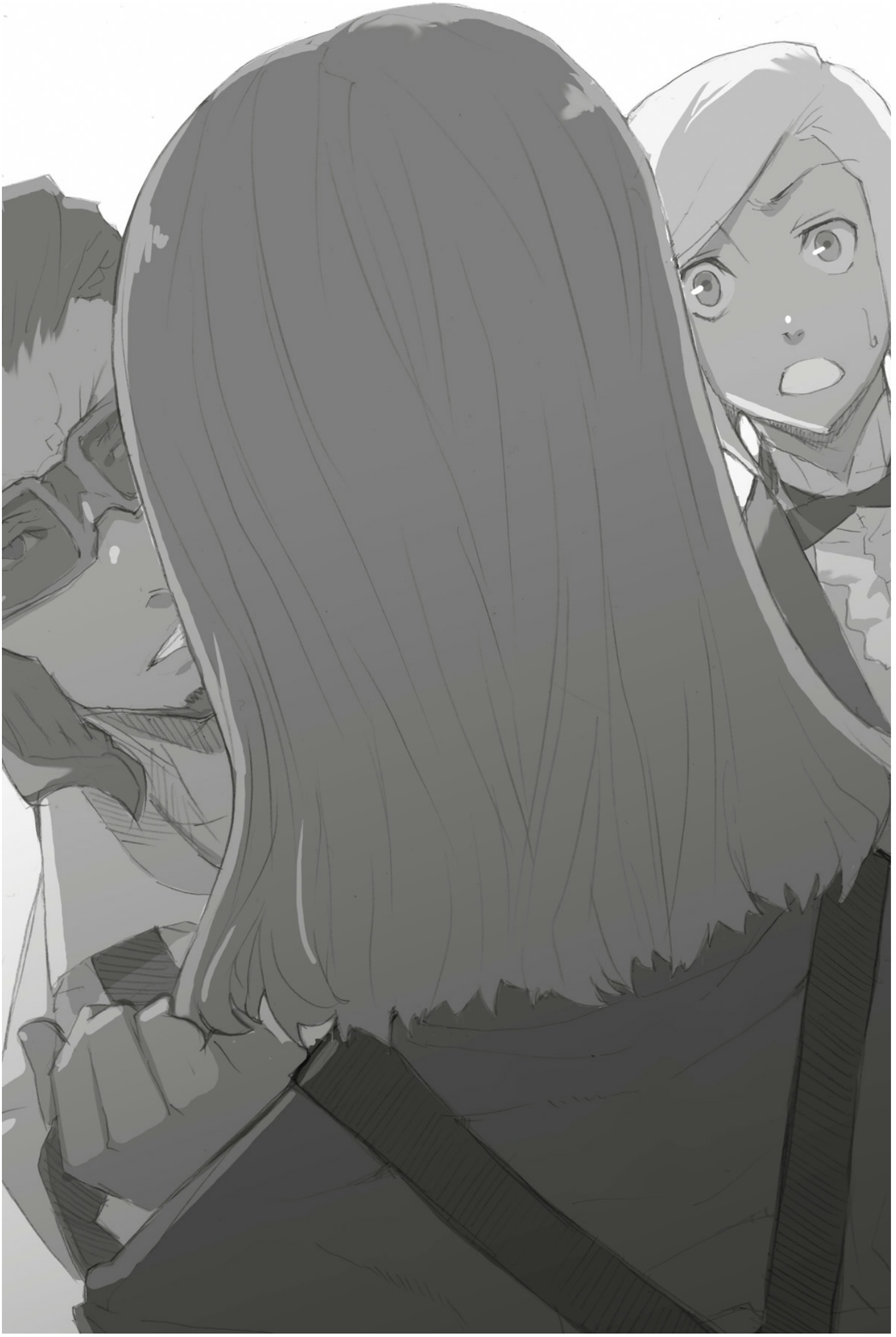
"Hya-ha… Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Damn! The kid, huh…? It was that little shit Charon, wasn't it?"

The one who responded wasn't the gunslinger, but the Mask Maker who had Charon's autograph on his mask.

"…Yeah. Well, I mean, when he said he'd heard you do that 'Hya-ha, hya-ha' laugh while talking to a 'Mr. Angelo'… Makes it pretty clear how you got those guns to the gunslinger, too."

"Well, shit. I really shoulda whipped out the bombs and whatever else it took to get rid of him! Yeah, that's right! I put Mr. Angelo's guns in with the Mask Makers' weapons! You think I could've gotten them in this easy otherwise?! Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

There was no trace of Life in the demolition guy's demeanor.



The gunslinger lowered his eyes. He must have had a million questions he wanted to ask, but instead, he asked just one. “Was it you…who shot our former boss…in the back?”

“I’m gonna let you figure that one out on your own.”

Angelo ground his teeth at the casual bluff, but—

—soon, his expression went surprisingly calm—and he started toward the door that connected to the *Entrance*.

“I’ll let you take care of him. After he coughs up his objective, do whatever you want with him.”

“Are you sure?”

“A minute ago, the boss ordered me not to kill anybody else. She was crying —” The gunman seemed to have a weight lifted off his shoulders as he quietly put the room behind him. “And I don’t kill women or children. I have no more business with you.”

The only ones left were the Mask Makers, whose eyes were as cold as ice…

…and a man who had once been Life, and now had no identity at all.

“Hey, c’mon, don’t look so scary— Gweeh!”

Rookie slammed a kick into his solar plexus, and Life (or the demolition guy) writhed on the floor.

As he looked down at the man, the boy quietly spoke.

“Now, then… All right. If we’re going to talk about what’s brought us to this point, it’s necessary to mentally switch gears.”

And—the boy put on his mask.

A mask without emotion that would enable him to dispose of his treacherous companion.

In the end, was the mask there to hide the boy’s own tearful expression or to keep him from seeing what was in front of him? Even he didn’t know. He only continued to wear it.

As if he was hoping that mask would become his true face.

⟺

On the deck of the *Entrance*, everything had begun to settle down.

Firo lay spread-eagle on his back, gazing at the plumes of smoke rising here and there, while Czes sat next to him.

“Hey, Czes,” he said.

“What is it, Firo?”

“You think…I did everything I needed to for our family?”

He was apparently asking about that reckless battle he’d fought a moment ago.

Czes shook his head with exasperation and looked coldly down at him. “… Don’t you think making us worry about you means you failed?”

“Ouch.” Exhausted, Firo covered his face with his hands while Czes went on impassively.

“And what does that mean to you anyway? What do you think you have to do? Protect me and Ennis and be a badass?”

“…I dunno. What do you think, Czes? What does it mean to you?”

“I think…just coming home and spending time with us is enough.” As he spoke, Czes’s eyes shifted toward the entrance to the ship.

Firo raised his head slightly and saw Ennis running toward them.

“All right. This third wheel is going to make himself scarce.”

“H-hey! Czes!”

Looking back and forth between the departing Czes and the incoming Ennis, Firo thought about what he should say.

Dammit, what are you supposed to say at times like this?! Wait, is Ennis mad? Should I apologize? No, but… Oh, right, I can just tell her I love her… N-n-n-no, no way, I can’t! That mushy stuff’s so embarrassing! But I do like her an awful lot, so… Aaaaah!

Inside his heart, the words he wanted to say to Ennis welled up, spilled over, and disappeared.

Realizing he was worrying in earnest about what to tell Ennis, as she came closer— “…We’re on our honeymoon, so maybe she’ll let me get away with just a kiss?”

—vaguely, Firo understood that he was happy.

Epilogue 2

The Mask Makers

On the ocean On the Mask Makers' cruiser

"Now, then. It's about time we continued the interrogation."

Life shrank away in fright from Luchino's icy stare.

"That said… You don't need to tell me anything. After all, there's nothing in particular I want to ask. If I must spell it out for you, then let me hear you scream, if you would."

Luchino's face was perfectly blank—as blank as a mask.

"Please don't hold back—if it proves irritating, I can simply crush your throat."

"Ghk…" His hands cuffed, Life groaned and glared at the boy—until those groans morphed into loud, maniacal laughter. "Ghk…kh-kh…! Gwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha… Gwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"…What's so funny?"

Rookie was frowning, and Life smirked back.

"Well, well!" he crowed with exhilaration. "You haven't changed a bit, President! Of all us Mask Makers, your mask is the most fragile of all, and yet it's the thickest, too. Even now, you're playing the heartless president!"

"…"

"You want to throw up and break down sobbing right this moment, don't you?! I'm impressed. And curious. You involved your personal vendetta in this job and got a bunch of your dear, dear subordinates killed for it—tell me, how does that make you feel?"

"…!"

Rookie kicked Life hard in the side to disguise how much the taunts were

getting to him.

Life wheezed but still seemed to be enjoying himself—and then he said something that made no sense in the context of his predicament.

"*Now then*, I wish I had more time to appreciate your despair, but I'm detecting a hint of savagery in the smile of the large lady behind you, and so…

"…it's time I took my leave."

"…What?"

The handcuffed man had made a simple declaration.

Rookie wondered whether this was just more mockery and began to seriously consider killing him, but—

—suddenly, a huge impact rocked the boat.

"?!"

At the same time, he heard a *sgrunk*—

As he realized Life had dislocated his own joints and brought his hands around in front of him, the man launched himself off the floor and out the window.

"Wai—"

Before he could even finish the word, Life had leaped over the side of the ship and into the ocean.

Except Luchino didn't hear the splash that would have indicated he'd hit the water.

"Wha…?"

When the boy left the room, he saw a large cruiser that had apparently collided with this boat a moment earlier, and Life, who'd jumped over onto it. And—

—a group of fanatics in red and black.

The man at their center had somehow lost both his arms; there was hardly any blood dripping from the wounds, but that only meant he was near death.

However, before Rookie had time to analyze the circumstances in detail, the

large cruiser sped off through the waves at a pace far greater than the Mask Makers' boat could manage.

Instantly understanding that they wouldn't be able to catch up to them, the boy tore off the mask he'd put on his heart and hissed in genuine fury.

"Dammit… God*damn* it…!"

Just then—

"What happened?"

—a voice spoke behind him. When he turned around, he saw a beaming man.

Elmer C. Albatross.

For a moment, Rookie thought he was dreaming.

Of course he did. His biggest target had just waltzed onto their boat.

"You—… Wh-why?!"

"Well, I mean. You're after us, and I thought you probably had business with me in particular. Plus, Denkurou was getting annoyed, and Nile was about to start shouting, so I made my escape. And here I am." He nodded to himself, seemingly oblivious to everything around him: the tension, the blustering sea wind, and the fact that he was in his enemies' midst. It was just how he was. "After all, I've technically been a Mask Maker for the past three hundred years. I have to help my president keep his pride!"

"…"

As Rookie gaped uselessly, the veteran and founding member of his organization grinned with perfect sincerity.

"So, come on and smile, President! You have to smile!"

Fanatical Believers

"…I'd like to ask you one thing."

The man who would soon be dead spoke to Life after he'd jumped over onto the cruiser.

When the ships collided, Bride should have turned into hamburger—but he'd miraculously lost only his arms in the impact and not his life.

Although that life had nearly run out.

Since his arms had been crushed so quickly, he had lost less blood than one might expect, but it wouldn't be possible to keep him alive much longer than this. Everyone was certain of that—but none of the surrounding believers shed so much as a tear.

It wasn't that they held the leader in contempt. They simply saved their blind belief for their sacred book, not their leader. In addition—*the pain of losing someone close to them* was already gone from inside them. Their unchanging expressions made the whole situation eerie.

Even so, Life responded with indifference. "What might that be, honored leader?"

"Listen, Viralesque. Did you know…about that Mask Maker group? Did you use us as pawns?" His voice was so faint it was almost inaudible, and his face was so pale he could have passed on right then and there.

Life—*the man he'd called Viralesque*—removed his mask, accepted the red-and-black bandages the female secretary handed him, wound them around his face, and answered plainly.

"I did indeed. What of it?"

"Why would you do such a thing?"

"It's a long story, so to sum it up… *It was for fun.*"

The man had answered simply; he didn't sound like Life or the demolition guy.

In response, the leader gave a rasping chuckle.

"I see. There's no way around it then. *I'll forgive you.*" His reply was far too brief. "Our doctrine does not condemn human desire. Not even if it destroys us."

"You were a splendid leader, Master Bride."

"That's over now, too." Murmuring with something like relief, Bride stood on

the edge of the boat. Drops of blood fell from his arms into the water, disappearing one after another into the vast ocean. “I’ve given the entirety of the sacred text to my secretaries. Please give them to the next Bride.”

“Understood, Master Bride. However…if, hypothetically, *I told you I had a drug that could save you from that state*, what would you do?”

As Viralesque accepted his instructions respectfully, he asked a peculiar question.

Bride smiled at him. As the last of the glucose left his brain, he spoke his last words.

“At the arcade, it’s only polite to let the next person play after you’ve lost, unless it’s a shooting game.

“This is the same. A loss is a loss. I will do…the mature…thing, and…accept…the…death…I…fear—”

Smiling—the leader tipped over the edge and plunged headfirst toward the ocean.

The next instant—as if it had been waiting for him, the jaws of an enormous shark that had been attracted by the blood leaped out and snapped around Bride’s already lifeless body, then mercilessly chewed it to bits.

The surviving believers who’d seen it happen—men and women, old people and children—all made the sign in front of their chests and said the same words in unison.

“May he be granted a painless death.”

The Gunslinger, the Boys, and the Girl

Several days later New York Inside Alveare

“Man, that mess on the ship the other day was something else.”

“Firo’s family had a hell of a time.”

“Yes, and I hear they still haven’t caught the responsible parties. The passengers all seem confused, so it’s difficult to judge how reliable their

testimonies are for an investigation."

Randy and Pezzo were watching TV and offering live commentary, while Maiza was supplementing their conversation.

It was a perfectly ordinary scene—at first, until an unusual man opened the door and stepped inside.

He was wearing blue sunglasses, was dressed entirely in black, and was clearly on the wrong side of the law.

The Martillo executives instantly recognized that he was somebody who warranted attention.

However, because they didn't know what he was after, they watched him and waited for him to make the first move…

"Uh… I have a question," he said, approaching the bespectacled man after identifying him as the highest-ranking one there. "Firo Prochainezo sent me over. Would you be interested in hiring a bodyguard?"

At that, the mood in the restaurant changed dramatically—and not in the way the man had been expecting.

"Oh! Hey! So you're Angelo!"

"Firo told us about you!"

"He says you're a real whiz with a gun."

"See, the higher-ups around here tend to use knives, so our boss was saying we could use a gunman like you from outside; he was looking forward to it!"

"…Keh-keh… Allow me to address you as 'Sensei' from this moment forward… keh-keh."

"Palm's being weird again."

"Good grief. At any rate, Angelo, let's hear the details."

"…"

Angelo was briefly taken aback; they seemed nothing like an underworld organization, but…

I see. So this is the syndicate that raised a man like Firo.

It made sense to him, and he gave a wryly amused smile.

In the end, the South American cartel had been effectively destroyed, and he couldn't return to his hometown until the investigation of the ship incident had reached a stopping point. In the meantime, Angelo needed to lie low somewhere. On Firo's recommendation, he'd come to New York. It wasn't what he was used to, yet it was somehow comfortable.

"Oh, and also…she isn't my kid, but…I have the daughter of an acquaintance with me. I'm looking for a safe place for her to live…"

And then, a few days later…

"Hey, everybody! We have a present for the Martillos today!"

"It's our answer to your declining birth rate!"

What Isaac and Miria said made very little sense, but it was difficult to argue that their contribution did not combat the decline in the Martillo Family's number of children.

"W-we're gonna sign on as Martillo Family subordinates, so count yourself lucky! You ain't gotta worry anymore, uh, sir!" The boy had said something else that made very little sense.

After looking at him and the three boys behind him, who were sighing in resignation, the executives looked at one another.

Just then, the boy spotted the brown-skinned girl sitting in the restaurant, then flushed red and began volunteering information no one had asked him for.

"D-don't go thinking I wanted to work here because of Carnea or anything!"

A moment later, the whole restaurant roared with laughter.

As Bobby tried to figure out what was so funny, the man standing in front of him said, "Ordinarily, I would say a child like you should be in school…but I don't intend to stand in the way of true love."

"Huh… A-aaah! Y-you! No, I mean, sir, um…"

"*Well, never mind.* We can't let you join our younger ranks, but we'll allow

you to be their errand boys for now.”

“Wh-what, for real?! Yesssss! Now I’m a gangster, too!” he whooped. At this point in time, he sounded so childlike and innocent, no one even dreamed that he might go on to become a hero in the Martillo Family.

No one, not even gods or demons, knew whether such a thing would actually happen—the boy’s first step onto the path of wickedness was all the world knew for now.

Hollywood Star and Star Stuntman

Our story returns to the *Entrance*, directly following the incident.

“Illness was…kidnapped?”

“Yes… Um, from what I hear, several individuals in red and black forced their way into the infirmary…”

After she heard the report, Claudia’s expression had shifted to fury, and then to grief. A mere ten minutes later, she’d come to a decision, and she turned to Charon beside her.

“I’ve made up my mind! I’ll pool everything I’ve earned from all my movie appearances and send it to a detective agency!”

“…”

“They’re not getting away with this! She’s part of my world, and they barged in and stole her away. They don’t get to do that—ever! I have to rescue her, no matter what it costs me!”

“…”

Charon was silent, and there was no telling what was going on in his mind.

In the end, he made no attempt to object; wordlessly, he accepted his sister’s world.

And that world soon had a new arrival, when a woman who had been standing behind the siblings and listening to the conversation suddenly addressed them.

“Excuse me. Are you two looking for a detective agency?”

“Hmm? …Yes, but who are you, miss? You wouldn’t be a famous detective, would you?” Claudia asked dubiously.

The woman—Celice—smiled quietly. “No, my name is Lucotte, but…my friend Celice works for a very big detective agency. If money is no object, they’ll investigate anything for you.” She had overcome her pain and despair, and now she was jumping back into the world stronger than ever. “Besides…I have a score of my own to settle with that group in the red and black.”

Thanks to her newly forged Hollywood connection and the huge retainer fee from Claudia, Celice would later blast upward through the ranks of her company—but right now, with nothing but her hatred for SAMPLE, she gave her very best false smile.

“Thanks! You’re a good person, aren’t you?”

And so Claudia brought Celice into her world, too.

…The world had been hers from the moment she was born, and she believed in it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

She was convinced that her world could save Illness.

Pallor and Poison

And then—the girl who’d been accepted into another’s world opened her eyes.

Where am I? Ow.

Holding her wound, Illness gazed up at the ceiling. She tried to figure out where she was—and the next instant, her breath caught. She was lying on a bed, surrounded by a large group in red and black.

Terror joined her surprise, but—

—before the girl could scream, a sound reached her ears.

Clap Clap-clap-clap-clap-clap

It was the sound of mild applause.

“Congratulations…Mistress *Bride*.”

“…Huh?”

A man whose face was hidden by bandages stopped clapping and bowed his head reverently. Taking their cue from him, the surrounding red-clad group dropped to their knees as one.

The gestures reminded her of their “worship” toward her in the past. Fearing more pain, she shrank into herself, but—

“I am the observer, Viralesque. In my name, I appoint you as our new leader.”

Leader?

“As our new ‘Bride,’ you will succeed to a position of leadership. You have no right to refuse, but…”

Leader… That’s Father.

The girl was silent for a while. Then, without even knowing what she should ask, she absently started to speak. “I’m…allowed…to live?”

“But of course.”

“Leader” is what they called Father.

“I won’t…be tortured anymore?”

“Of course not. Illness…no, Mistress Bride, you will be freed from all pain forevermore.”

Her mind was hazy. She didn’t really understand what the man had said.

“Now then, as for the god who will be your eternal partner…we have already selected a candidate,” Viralesque said, gentle as an embrace and with a heart as hollow as the void. “You may live. No one will ever reject you again.”

With a smile, he poured poison into her ear—

—but the hospital where she was being treated, SAMPLE, had no intention of letting Illness check out yet.

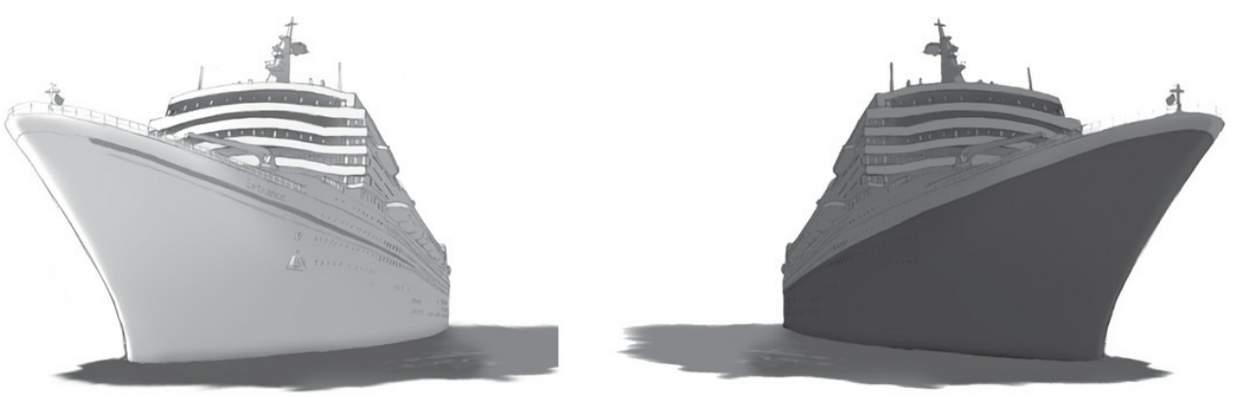
The girl took the photograph of the boy they had chosen to be her husband—and cried out in spite of herself.

“Czes…”

The malice had no intention of releasing Czes, either.

Creeping inch by inch, slow and slick—

—the poison quietly turned the world to rot.



BACCANO!

2002—The End

To be continued in *1710* and *1935* and *2003*

MIDDLEWORD

Um, well, I guess that brings the cruise ship incident to a stopping point.

This time, I seriously thought I was gonna die. I bled from every possible location; I puked in my sleep and almost suffocated; I started to understand why some people cut and run—it was just generally awful, but I finally managed to get this volume to the publication stage!

I was actually planning to make it a three-volume story and write a "C" side as well, but this led to that, the idea got scrapped, and I ended up being limited to a two-part story, so… The bottom line is that I cut roughly two hundred pages of material and three new characters. The events I didn't wrap up this time—such as the Nile vs. Aging match—should be included in a subsequent volume, so sit tight!

The *Baccano!* stories are partitioned by era, but in this sequence, the foreshadowing is going to be divvied up and dealt with in *1705*, *2002*, *1710*, *1935*, and *2003*. I hope you'll enjoy them as self-contained stories, though, just like the previous *Baccano!* books!

Now, then… The anime's wrapping up right about now, but it looks like there are all sorts of announcements, so look forward to seeing that information in **next month's** *Dengeki Kanzume*! Um, and— Whoops, that was close! The anime is a really polished piece of work. Watching it makes me so happy I want to yell, but it also freaks me out a bit: "Crap… Is this better than the original?!" I hope you'll enjoy it, along with the manga and the drama CDs and everything else!

On top of that! For the DS-version *Baccano!* that goes on sale this spring, while unworthy of the honor, I wrote what works out to more than a hundred book-pages' worth of new scenarios! It's packed with some unexpected characters and even some new ones, so I hope you'll look forward to it!

And now for the thank-yous…

To my editor, Wada (Papio), the people of the editorial department, the publisher, and the printer, for whom I caused a catastrophic amount of trouble this time around. They didn't so much attempt to walk a tightrope as haul me back up when I was about to fall from said tightrope.

To Kinoko Nasu, who christened Bride during a casual conversation.

To my acquaintances and Rabo Asai, who gave me resources for some of Bride's characterization.

Also to Yuu Fujiwara and Makoto Sanda, who gave me input on some of the background information for SAMPLE.

To my friends and acquaintances, the anime and manga staff—and to everyone who picked up this book.

Thank you very much!

Listening to the *Baccano!* opening (with vocals) and ending on repeat

Ryohgo Narita

Oh, and by the way, the next section is an interlude. That said, I pretty much wrote the entire *2002* story because I wanted to write these few dozen pages, and it marks a turning point in *Baccano!*. I finally managed to raise the curtain on the "root of all evil" that I've been foreshadowing since the *1931* books. And so—please take your time and read it. See you later!

Interlude B

My name is Copycat.

I'm nothing but a mimic. A humble criminal.

Ahhh, I blew it; I messed up. I was so close, but I fumbled it.

Perhaps I was a little too excited. Perhaps I was a little too delighted.

As a matter of fact, yes, as a matter of fact—both were supposed to sink.

There should have been no hope on those ships. Ahhh, perhaps it wasn't in the cards, wasn't meant to be.

I'm tired of being a copycat.

I'll finally take a stroll as myself—ah, it's been so long.

I'll walk below on my dear, beloved world.

⟺

Several days later On the ocean

“Gah-ha! You’re a riot, buddy. After all that about cuttin’ ’em loose, you let me cut you in half with my Kukri knife tryna protect ’em!”

“Well, I figured if I let that happen, I’d never get to see those kids smile.”

“You shouldn’a bothered; I was gonna stop at the last second anyway.”

The conversation on the ship was cheerful, if violent—until the tone of the captive man’s voice suddenly changed. “Oh, that’s right, Luchino… Can I ask you something?”

Elmer’s arms and legs hadn’t been restrained; he was comfortably sitting in a chair with Aging keeping an eye on him, while Rookie was sitting a good distance away.

A few days had passed since they captured the target, and Rookie hadn’t looked in on him at all. Now, it seemed he’d gotten his thoughts in order, and he finally assumed his neutral “president” facade to see Elmer.

That said, he hadn’t questioned him about anything. He hadn’t said anything at all, instead simply observing him.

And this time was no different; the boy’s only response was a wordless glance. Elmer took that as consent and calmly asked his question. “Why is it that you hate Huey so much?”

“…”

Rookie glared at him silently, but Elmer just nonchalantly returned his gaze until the boy finally caved and murmured, “…This is revenge.”

“Revenge.”

“I intend to exact it for myself…and for my ancestor’s grudge through the generations.”

“What do you mean? If you don’t mind telling me, I’d really appreciate it.”

Elmer poked his nose right in as artlessly and irritatingly as ever. Still, Rookie wanted to reestablish his own resolve for himself, and so he laid out his reason.

“You must know already. My ancestor Huey Laforet…killed my other ancestor… Monica Campanella, his own wife.”

“…”

“Ever since then, the Mask Makers and her revenge have been passed down through the generations in my family. Do you think it’s absurd? I’ve inherited nothing but blood and vengeance for the sake of an ancestor I never knew from generations ago.”

“…No, if you say that will make you happy, then I won’t stop you, but…” Elmer was being unusually evasive, and Rookie frowned suspiciously.

“What’s the matter? Disagree?”

“Well, it’s just, uh, some things are starting to make sense… So that’s the story that got handed down to you and yours.

“I see, I see… That really is…very like *him*.”

That same day America A certain FBI facility

“Let me just say this: Why have we been taken into custody?” Nile asked with some irritation.

“Well, let me just answer your question, you goddamned menace. And that goes for all of you,” a bespectacled man snapped back. Victor Talbot—an immortal who served as the deputy director of a special department of the FBI—had a twitch in his temple. “Nile, do you understand this is because *you* got too rough out there? Huh?”

“I will consider how to prevent such an encounter again. However, I do have one regret. When we were planning the maneuver, I encountered an enemy titaness… She and I planned to fight each other once we had finished with the group in red, but she and her allies fled by ship immediately afterward.”

“You’re not sorry about any of it! Aaah… I swear, you people… Can’t you let me have one quiet day? Huh? You’re gonna work me to death until I revive and you work me to death again so I can revive and you can work me to death *again* in an endless goddamn cycle—is that the goal?! You’re gonna work the

therapists to death, too, what with all the trauma from those blindfolded kids, but they're innocent victims! So until we catch those criminals, I'm taking everything out on that dumbass Huey!"

"Peace, Victor, and set that aside for the moment. Have you learned the identity of those who were hunting us?"

Denkurou's voice did seem to mollify Victor somewhat, and he shook his head quietly.

"Frankly, all I can say is we're still checking into it. We know the Mask Makers are a mercenary group, but we've got nothing on that cult. After all, *the guys we had in custody evaporated, and even the corpses are just plain gone*. All we've got are bloodstains and little bits of meat. Well, in our hands, those are clues enough. Now let's pray that dumbass Elmer's got some good dumb luck."

"Now that you mention it… Is it true Czes was on the other ship?" Sylvie asked.

"Hmm? Yeah…," Victor answered disinterestedly. "The little punk was on a nice cozy family trip with some of the new immortals. What a joke."

"As long as he is unharmed, I could not ask for more. But does that mean he and his family are elsewhere in this facility?"

"No, uh, well, you see… Argh, fine."

Victor was suddenly being very cagey, but the three of them stared him down until he shook his head and gave up.

"Right now, they're…in Japan."

That same day A certain tourist spot Kyoto, Japan

After they'd climbed a long stairway flanked by rows of souvenir shops, they finally saw the building painted in tasteful shades of primary colors. The melody of a distant flute matched the constant motion of the city, lightening their footsteps.

Until—

"…Ahhh, dammit. There's something I need to get off my chest." Just as he

reached the top of the stone steps, Firo spun around to face Ennis and Czes. Whatever it was had clearly been worrying him for some time. “I shoulda said this a long time ago, but…I’m sorry our trip turned into such a mess. It was my fault.”

Ennis and Czes smiled at him as he earnestly apologized.

“That’s not true, Firo. We did encounter some trouble along the way, but it’s thanks to you that Czes and I both made it safely to Japan.”

“She’s right, Firo. Even if Victor did give us crap for ten hours—it sure beat having to swim from the middle of the Pacific!”

The Prochainezos and the boy who lived with them had been caught up in the seajacking of a luxury cruise ship. In the end, they’d made it to Japan, and now they were walking through a uniquely Japanese tourist site.

Naturally, they weren’t simply rescued from this huge international incident and politely told to enjoy the rest of their trip. However, Claudia had considerately entreated the director to claim the three as “staff for publicity work in Japan,” and they’d joined her group on a special charter flight to the country.

There were investigations and police interviews on the Japanese side of things as well, though, and the trio had ended up face-to-face with Victor for the first time in a long while, as he had come all the way to Japan to help explain the situation.

“Technically, this shouldn’t even be possible. You beat the shit out of those seajackers, and yet here you are waltzing into Japan a few days later. It’s the end times. The world is ending! God, sometimes I wish it would!”

“Isn’t it your job to make sure that doesn’t happen?”

“Shut the hell up, you rotten lowlife! Dammit… That movie company’s got some serious clout over here, too. Well, the damage to the *Entrance* was miraculously light compared with *Exit*, but we still have to keep all relevant parties under observation for a while. Consider this an exceptionally special special exception, courtesy of the McDannell Company!”

“McDannell meaning the movie company, not the aircraft corporation? Huh.

Didn’t know even a movie company could push you around.”

“Exactly, the aircraft corporation is McDonnell. —Wait, no! The FBI does not yield to pressure of any kind! It’s just, uh, the FBI didn’t *yield*, but we have to fudge some stuff for the rest of the world when we’re handling cases that involve immortals, and so we owe a few favors to some people in the movie industry… But that doesn’t matter now! Y’know, I wouldn’t mind if you’d paid for your crimes, but an active lawbreaker taking a leisurely cruise? What kind of fool do you take me for, you little—?!”

Firo and Czes had had to listen to similar complaints and lectures for half a day.

They’d both been mostly asleep for the second half of it, but Victor had obliviously continued his dissertation. At any rate, the three of them were now enjoying their sightseeing in Japan, although there was a distinct possibility that one of Victor’s men was tailing them.

It sounded as though there had been a large number of deaths on the *Exit*, and Firo had been tempted to feel guilty that they were having a good time after escaping the worst of it. However, he didn’t want that affecting Ennis and Czes, so he’d decided to take the plunge and start sightseeing.

At their hotel, his friend the photographer had cheerfully gotten his camera gear ready and told them he would come over to take some photos in the evening. They would have preferred to get some photos of them sightseeing as well, but he seemed likely to use up all his film on scenic shots.

The photographer was Japanese, born and bred, and he was going to act as their guide on this trip. From what they’d heard, a couple more friends of his had been on those ships, and until the previous day, he’d been away paying the two of them a get-well visit. Apparently, they’d fallen down some stairs as they tried to find out whether their sweetheart was all right.

Their guide had a peculiar connection to the affair, but for now, the three foreigners wandered around tourist sites without him. All three were proficient in Japanese, and this was actually Czes’s fifth visit to Kyoto, so they’d made their way around without any trouble.

That was when Firo had apologized out of nowhere. Ennis and Czes hastily

denied that it was necessary.

Regardless, Firo shook his head with remorse. “No… It really is my fault. The thing is…some part of me still didn’t want to use the knowledge I got from eating old Szilard. I thought I could protect you two even without that awful stuff. If I’d just used everything I had at my disposal earlier, maybe I could’ve helped end it sooner, before things got so bad, you know? …But I’m through hesitating.”

“Firo…”

Ennis sounded worried, but Firo nodded firmly.

“I promise you. I’m me, and I always will be.

“Even if I do have the old bastard’s knowledge in me, I won’t end up like him —”

Ennis smiled a little at his declaration.

“Laying it on a little thick, aren’t you?” Czes muttered, fiddling with the brim of his cap.

But then…

“And even if I’ve got Lebreau’s knowledge in me, I won’t end up like him, either,” he murmured to Czes. The boy looked up, mystified.

“What? What did you just say…?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah. Er, Szilard ate an alchemist who ate Lebreau, so… I’ve got his knowledge, too.”

“What are you talking about, Firo?”

Czes looked thoroughly baffled, and Firo fell still.

And then—

“I mean, you know… Lebreau got eaten by somebody Szilard ate…”

“Ah-ha-ha! You’re so funny, Firo!”

Czes flashed him one of his innocent smiles, and a flurry of question marks surfaced in Firo’s mind.

America　A certain FBI location

“Oh, really…? So Czes and everyone with him are enjoying their trip, while we get detained.”

As Sylvie glared at him coldly, Victor dodged the issue entirely by speaking to Denkurou.

“I tell you what, I can’t believe it’s been three hundred years since I last saw you, Denkurou! What happened? From what I hear, you fell into the ocean up at the North Pole and got turned into a popsicle!”

“…Hmm… So that is the version of the tale that reached you, Victor?” Denkurou’s expression hardened slightly, and he mulled over the issue for a few moments. “There’s no way around it. Both versions are disgraceful, so allow me to relate the one that is at least accurate.”

“What?”

Victor, Nile, and Sylvie looked up, intrigued.

“I did not fall into the ocean; I fell victim to a sinister artifice. I was put to sleep and shut inside a box, then dropped into a crevasse. I remember everything clearly until I lost consciousness.”

“Who did that? It wasn’t that geezer Szilard, was it?” Victor asked. “No, he would have eaten you once you passed out.”

Denkurou thought for a little while—then seemed to come to a decision and spoke.

“The fellow who ensnared me is one with whom you are well acquainted…”

On the ocean

“I don’t think you’ll believe me,” Elmer began, “but I will argue, for the record.”

“No, I don’t think I’ll believe you, either, but I’ll hear your argument. For the record,” Rookie answered curtly.

Elmer drew a short breath, then calmly laid out the facts he knew. “Huey wasn’t the one who killed Monica. Back then, he didn’t see everything besides himself as part of some experiment… In fact, her death was probably what triggered the change. What made him who he is now.”

“…”

“Huey didn’t kill Monica, and neither did I. It was another alchemist. People back then used to say he was just as much of a genius as Huey.”

“…And who would that be?” Rookie asked gravely.

Elmer quietly replied with the name.

“…Lebreau.”

Kyoto A certain tourist spot

“Honestly, Firo, that’s a terrible joke!”

With a shrill giggle, Czes broke into a run.

“Wait, h-hey! Czes!”

“I’ll go on back to the hotel! You two enjoy some alone time!”

Ignoring Firo’s attempt to stop him, Czes kept going.

He ran.

And ran.

And ran.

How long had he been running? He couldn’t hear Firo’s voice behind him anymore.

Czes's small figure slipped through the throngs of tourists in the hot sunlight, trying to find anywhere he could be alone.

"Ah-ha-ha, aah, I swear."

As he ran, he murmured to himself.

"Geez, Firo. Why…why would he tell such an awful joke…?"

Somewhere along the way, Czes had reached a less crowded spot, and he looked down, panting.

He was at the top of the stairway on the main approach to the temple. Quietly, he sat down on the stairs and tried to catch his breath. But even as he gasped for air, he couldn't seem to take a breath, and even as he smiled like a little child, cold sweat was forming on his face.

"Ah-ha…ah-ha-ha, wh-why—why would Firo…tell a…joke like…?"

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe. His laughter came out like a series of tiny gasps, and his smile vanished.

Like a child who'd awoken from a dream full of hungry monsters, Czes was remembering the trauma from before.

"What scares you is the unknown."

That was what the red monster had said on the train.

After that, Czes had experienced uncharted heights of pain and indelible terror; he'd known something was wrong the whole time he was on the ship, and that feeling had come crashing back far stronger than before.

He was right. It's "the unknown."

I have no idea why Firo would tell a lie like that.

Firo had said something peculiar, that was all—and yet an inexorable chill had fallen over Czes, along with the urge to be sick.

He realized he was laughing to hide those feelings, but apparently, this was all he could do. The revulsion made him want to collapse right where he was—

—and then, that voice reached him from the steps below.

“Are you all right, Czes?”

The sound of the flute stopped, and the wind died. The man smiled quietly at Czes, as if he had timed it that way.

And for Czes, time itself had stopped, too.

“……Huh…?”

His voice was barely a whisper, so weak it was nearly impossible to tell the word from a breath. Czes stared at the figure in front of him.

The man spoke to the boy, his fellow alchemist, with a hint of bashfulness in his voice.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it, Czes?” The shy smile was so perfect on his lips, it was as if they had been made for each other. The happiness behind it was so sincere, the smile junkie would have been delighted.

However—when Czes saw it, a whispered protest slipped from his mouth, fainter than the whine of a mosquito’s wings.

“It’s…not true… It’s a lie.”

The moment he said the name, that glimpse of his past became his present.

“…Fer…met…”

⟺

“The fellow who ensnared me is one with whom you are well acquainted…”

Making his decision, Denkurou told them the name.

“…It was *Fermet*.”

⟺

“Lebreau… *Lebreau Fermet Viralesque…*”

Quietly, Elmer murmured the man’s name. Unusually for him, there was a slight shadow in his smile.

His quiet words became more of a comment for his own sake, as he gazed into the distance. “True, I didn’t know him all that well. We didn’t talk much, and he couldn’t stand me, for some reason.”

The memory of his conversation with Czes the previous year, on the roof of that castle in Northern Europe, rose in his mind. Personally, Elmer didn't mind only running into the guy once a century, so his memories of him weren't as deep as the ones of Huey or Czes. The only thing he knew for sure was that he had been Czes's guardian.

"He wants his face to be forgettable, so no matter what he actually does, it tends not to stick in your memory."

He hadn't heard anything about the man in several decades, and his own memories were fuzzy. As he retraced them, though, he gradually remembered Huey's assessment of him.

"The last time I ran into Fermet was around *1931 or '32*, so… Come to think of it, I wonder when Czes ate him."

He remembered Czes's confession, up on the roof.

It had been such a tragic story; Fermet had brutally abused Czes until the boy had finally eaten him.

He was a villain, but I didn't think he was the type to do those things to someone who was practically family.

True, he did have some weird feelings for Czes…but I thought he was craftier than that. He would abuse him without letting him catch on directly, wouldn't he*…?*

Somewhere in Kyoto

“It’s…a lie…”

This is a dream.

“It’s a lie, isn’t it…?”

It’s an illusion.

The boy was shaking, while the man in front of him smiled quietly and began to reminisce.

“You look well. I remember you loved to sprinkle sugar on snowballs and eat them, but I suppose you’ve outgrown such a bad habit by now?”

“Ah…wah…aAAaaah…”

“It’s not a good idea. There’s dust from the atmosphere in snow, and these days there are chemicals in it as well… You’ll make yourself sick.”

The next moment, everything was swimming.

Czes had stopped breathing entirely, and he looked down at the man ascending the stairs toward him. Czes obviously had the higher vantage point, but the man seemed to be towering over him.

The man’s eyes were hidden by his thick bangs, and Czes couldn’t see what color they were or where they were looking. There was something creepy about the whole upper half of his face, as though if you brushed back his hair, you’d find three eyes instead of two.

Czes recognized him, though. Most of his hair was considerably shorter than it had been before, but Czes remembered his face far too well.

“It’s a lie, it’s a lie…,” he repeated over and over, hollow-eyed.

The anxiety he’d felt ever since he boarded the ship expanded inside him, all in a rush—

“Come now, Czes.”

—and at the man’s next remark, it exploded.

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“Ngh…!”

With a short scream, Czes jumped up reflexively.

But that was as far as his legs could take him. They didn’t even try to run.

The next thing he knew, the man was just a few steps below him. He stopped there, quietly. “Czes. My adorable, dreadfully clever Czes. I bet I know what you’re thinking now. *Why is he alive?*”

“…Ah…AaaaaaAAAh…”

“That’s right. You’re thinking it right now, aren’t you? *I know I ate him with my right hand!*”

“Au…mph…aa…”

Czes’s breath escaped from between trembling lips, while the man’s own lips formed a smile.

“It seems I was right. I’m glad. I knew you were still the Czes I remember.” Exhaling with seemingly heartfelt relief, the man continued calmly. “You see, I know you better than anyone.”

“Wh…why… Why… Why, why, why?!”

But the man went on impassively, paying no attention to the boy’s desperate, strangled cry. “My, this job was a big one, but so worthwhile. Now that we’re immortals, Czes, it’s truly essential to get the most out of life. Without that sense of fulfillment, we’ll just end up as living corpses, like Begg.”

As he spoke—

—the man who had been the Mask Maker’s weapon Life, the demolition expert responsible for Carnea’s presence on the ship, and a SAMPLE executive reflected dispassionately on his recent “game.”

“I tell you, when I spotted you on the *Entrance*, I was so elated I nearly took off my mask and goggles in spite of myself. If you’d asked me my name, I wouldn’t have been able to give you a false one, so I really wasn’t sure what to do. I was so frightened of the idea that I even let you get away that time.”

“Ah…”

The man in black who'd materialized in front of him on the ship had been Fermet. But even now after learning that fact, Czes's voice didn't come back.

"The biggest advantage of immortality, Czes, is that you can live any number of lives. Yes… And with those many lives, you can create fascinating toys like Illness, Carnea, and Luchino Campanella. It's very hard to decide which of them is best, but…right now, you're here with me, so we'll say you're the most important one."

Czes was still rooted to the spot. Fermet slowly spread his arms wide, whispering to him softly.

"Are you happy? You can smile, you know."

"…—… N…no… You…can't be…Fermet."

Even then, Czes persisted in denying reality.

Fermet's smile vanished, and he shook his head with concern. "I hope you're aware— I'm not a clone, nor am I a fake. I am the same Fermet who joined you on the *Advena Avis*."

"Ah…… Ah…" Czes was about to lose his capacity for speech entirely, when Fermet quietly asked the one question Czes didn't dare to ask.

"Now then, that leaves us with a rather awkward puzzle, doesn't it?"

"…"

A question Czes knew he must never even think.

"If I'm here now…who in the world did you eat?"

"……!!!"

Czes's mind went utterly blank.

On reflex, he thrust out his right hand and set it on Fermet's head where he stood a few steps down. Now all he had to do was think *I want to eat*, and Fermet's life would be over.

All of who he was would disappear into Czes.

That was how it should have gone, but—

“You did manage to eat me before, didn’t you, Czes?”

The man’s tone was more familiar than it had been before.

To Czes, his next remark was a finishing blow.

“But *now…you can’t, can you*?”

“__”

Nausea surged through his whole body.

Even though Czes was the one holding Fermet’s life in his hands, his thoughts wouldn’t go any further.

His instincts were also telling him not to eat. His soul as an immortal had warned him that this man was pure poison.

“____”

Czes couldn’t move, couldn’t speak.

The man smiled at him softly. “There, you see?”

Entertained, amused, delighted—

“What did I tell you? I do know you better than anyone… Ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

In that brief moment, Fermet had changed into someone else. His laugh echoed off the mountains—and tourists walking a little ways away looked over, wondering what was going on.

Fermet seemed to notice the stares, quietly stopped laughing, and—

“All right, *let’s play again*, Czes.”

—wearing a gentle smile, he patted the boy’s head with his right hand.

“Who knows when I’ll turn up? It might be tomorrow—or it could be a hundred years from now.”

Even though Fermet was using his right hand, the boy put up no resistance. The man looked at him, then quietly left.

To Czes, he seemed to waver and vanish, like a heat mirage on a summer’s

day.

But that was wishful thinking. If only he had been nothing more than that.

“Aah! Czes, we found you! I’m so sorry; I wasn’t thinking when I said that name… I didn’t mean to hurt you; I’m sorry, so—”

Firo was saying something, but Czes couldn’t hear it.

When he saw Firo, when he saw his family there in front of him, the truth hit full force before relief could set in.

This was reality.

“Ah, aaah, AAAaaaAAAaaaaaaaAAaaaaAaaAaaaah…”

“C-Czes?!”

“AaaaAAAaaaaah! Waaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Czes had finally gotten his voice back, and the first sound to leave his mouth was—

“AAaaaaaAaaaaah! AAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

—the scream of the child he appeared to be, a lost boy who’d strayed from his parents.

As he listened to the distant echoes of Czes’s wailing—

“Ahhh, what marvelous cries. I’m getting all worked up.”

—the man responsible for the sound, in many different ways, walked confidently through town.

“Maybe I said a bit too much. Well, it’s been a long time since I last talked with Czes; I couldn’t help being a little giddy.”

He sounded different from how he spoke to Czes, and different from Life and the demolition expert, too.

Speaking as himself, as a person he’d never shown to anyone on the *Advena Avis*, the man strode boldly forward beneath the sun, as if proclaiming to the whole world that his hidden self was alive again.

And then the melody of a band that was popular in the U.K. issued from inside the man's jacket.

"…How are you, Fermet?"

The voice from the receiver belonged to an immortal—one who had not been involved in this incident.

"Well, if it isn't Huey! What's the occasion? Are you mad I used your name without permission?"

"…Perish the thought. Any actions the guinea pigs choose to take still fall within the parameters of the experiment." The man's voice held no emotion at all, and he asked only what he wanted to know. *"By the way… I believe you gave your companions some liquor to drink—"*

"Relax. It's just the failed stuff, and I only gave it to three of them. Besides, they're not my companions. They're tools. Disposable ones. Hardly worth mentioning," the young man answered simply. He looked over at the large station wagon that was stopped up ahead.

Inside were the big gorilla-faced man, who was completely unscarred, and—although there was no telling how they'd escaped—Bride's two secretaries.

"For the record, I would like to ask: What was your objective? What was so worth sinking two ships?" Huey's tone suggested he already knew the answer.

Fermet was a simple criminal, not a terrorist, but he seemed to be relishing every moment of this as he answered the terrorist's question.

"It was Czes. He was looking so happy, you see. I like smiles, too, but—"

Huey Laforet knew.

Fermet's answer sounded facetious—but he was perfectly serious.

"—it's been a while, *and I just wanted to see tears in his eyes again*!"

As a matter of fact, he wasn't lying or hiding anything at all. He'd wanted to torment his "toys"—Czes, Carnea, and Luchino—nothing more.

The young man who'd caused this incident for such a petty reason gazed up at the blue sky over Kyoto with a pleasant smile.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

The man Czes believed he had eaten; the man others believed had been eaten by a different alchemist.

To Czes, and perhaps to other alchemists, too, he was despicable and vile—

—and he had now returned to their world.

Boldly, confidently…

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologues

- Prologue 5—The Young President Loves Mixing Business with Personal Matters
- Prologue 6—They Deny God

Chapter 4: The Immortals Are in a Traveling Mood

- Interlude

Chapter 5: The Boy Magician Evokes Smiles with Lies

- Interlude

Chapter 6: The Veteran Berserker Laughs Off Despair

- Interlude

Chapter 7: *Entrance* and *Exit* Meet on the Blood Sabbath

- Epilogue 2

Middleword

- Interlude B

Yen Newsletter