

BACCANO!

1710 Crack Flag



**RYOHGO
NARITA**

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RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI



2003—According to Victor Talbot

Huey Laforet.
If you wanna understand that terrorist bastard, you need to take a closer look at his hometown. I've been there before, myself, with old Szilard...
Back then, I didn't get Huey all that well. But when I dug a little deeper, I learned something. The guy's got a heart of ice—he'd experiment on his own kid if you gave him the chance—but even he was in love once.
He's never said a word about it himself, and asking Elmer would be more trouble than it's worth.

It's just... Well. Even among the alchemists, a lot of us thought Huey was uncanny. Downright unsettling. And I can vouch for that; he's gotten me a few times, too.
Elmer spends most of his time in la-la land, so I can see why he'd try to tell me Huey ain't so bad. But even Maiza's given me that line, too.

Meaning his personality might've been different back then. Either that, or...
Or maybe Maiza and Elmer know what he's really like deep down.
I think the key is somewhere in those few years between when he moved to Lotto Valentino and the time he met us.

First off, there's this old play about him and his lady, written by this poet Jean-Pierre Accardo. Step one is figuring out whether that play is true.



Just about all us alchemists knew Lotto Valentino back then. The streets were lined with libraries, and each one had some private school or studio for alchemists of one faction or another.

You could say the town was made for us.

As far as what it was known for, though, the two most famous things were the drug and the false gold.

In fact, when I went there with old Szilard—and I wasn't excited about that trip, lemme tell ya—it was to investigate those two things.

Christ. What a time that was. Got kicked out of England, hired by the Spanish aristocrats of the House of Dormентаire, sent to the Italian Peninsula of all places, and turned into a deathless monster by the liquor of immortality...

Nah, my story's not the one we're looking at now. Let's get back on topic.

If I'm gonna be talking about Lotto Valentino, it would be a good idea to fill you in on the folks who hired me, the House of Dormентаire.

Actually, what with you kids being in the FBI, I bet you know some of this already. The House of Dormентаire is a huge financial group, and it's still around.

They've ceded some of their influence to groups like the Mars Clan, but even today, they're one of the world's top financial power players.

Back then, they were so rich that their wealth was on par with the Medici family's during their heyday.

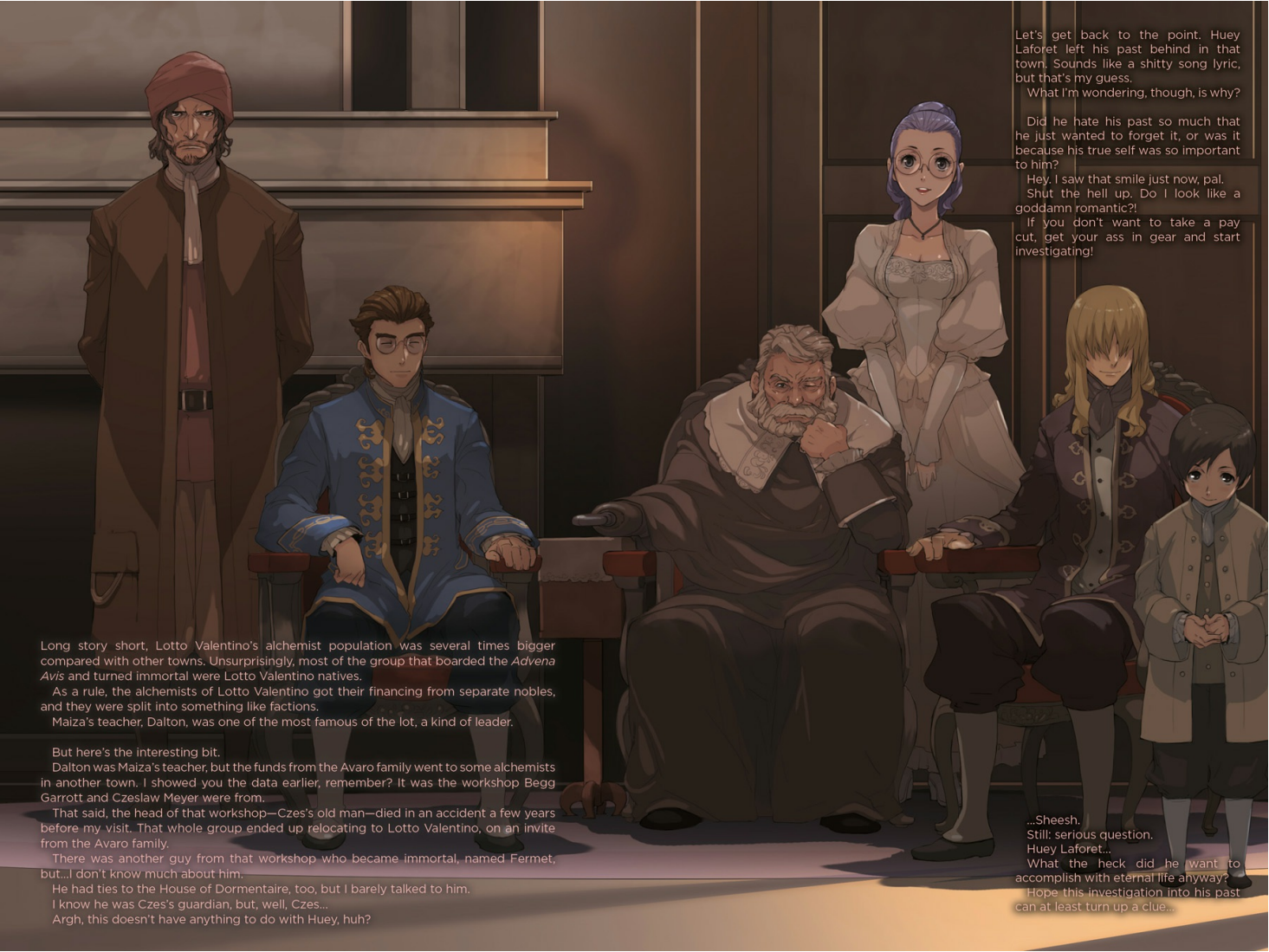
When their kind showed interest in that backwater town, Lotto Valentino lost their minds; it was like someone had kicked a beehive.

Carla was the head of an envoy that was there long before mine, and from what I hear, she landed in trouble plenty of times herself.

...Come to think of it, I used to think Carla's penchant for men's clothes was kinda kooky, but these days, she'd be making a fashion statement... Whoops. Got off topic, huh? Sorry.

Anyway, even with everyone up in arms, there was one nutcase who would try to get a smile out of a killer wasp if he could.

I bet Carla didn't know what to do with him, either.



Long story short, Lotto Valentino's alchemist population was several times bigger compared with other towns. Unsurprisingly, most of the group that boarded the *Advena Avis* and turned immortal were Lotto Valentino natives.

As a rule, the alchemists of Lotto Valentino got their financing from separate nobles, and they were split into something like factions.

Maiza's teacher, Dalton, was one of the most famous of the lot, a kind of leader.

But here's the interesting bit.

Dalton was Maiza's teacher, but the funds from the Avaro family went to some alchemists in another town. I showed you the data earlier, remember? It was the workshop Begg Garrott and Czeslaw Meyer were from.

That said, the head of that workshop—Czes's old man—died in an accident a few years before my visit. That whole group ended up relocating to Lotto Valentino, on an invite from the Avaro family.

There was another guy from that workshop who became immortal, named Fermet, but...I don't know much about him.

He had ties to the House of Dormентаire, too, but I barely talked to him.

I know he was Czes's guardian, but, well, Czes...

Argh, this doesn't have anything to do with Huey, huh?

Let's get back to the point. Huey Laforet left his past behind in that town. Sounds like a shitty song lyric, but that's my guess.

What I'm wondering, though, is why?

Did he hate his past so much that he just wanted to forget it, or was it because his true self was so important to him?

Hey, I saw that smile just now, pal. Shut the hell up. Do I look like a goddamn romantic?!

If you don't want to take a pay cut, get your ass in gear and start investigating!

...Sheesh.

Still; serious question.

Huey Laforet...

What the heck did he want to accomplish with eternal life anyway?

Hope this investigation into his past can at least turn up a clue...

EPILOGUE A

CHAPTER 1

“ARE YOU INTERESTED IN IMMORTALITY?”

CHAPTER 2

“I’M NOT A FOOL.”

CHAPTER 3

“I BET HE’S JUST LOVESICK.”

CHAPTER 4

“THEY REALLY ARE INNOCENT.”

CHAPTER 5

“I’LL SHOW YOU THE GREATEST SMILE
YOU’VE EVER SEEN.”

EPILOGUE B

EPILOGUE C



BACCANO!

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VOLUME 15

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY **KATSUMI ENAMI**



NEW YORK

Copyright

BACCANO!, Volume 15: 1710 CRACK FLAG

RYOHGO NARITA

Translation by Taylor Engel Cover art by Katsumi Enami

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Long ago, the girl committed a crime.

The entire world conspired to hide it, heedless of her wishes.

And so she lived on.

She lived in peace, without a care.

She never aspired to be happy.

She never desired to atone.

She simply didn't know what she should do. That's all.

That was why—I extended a hand to her.

I never thought about what the results might be. I never even noticed the precipice just ahead.

EPILOGUE A



EPILOGUE A

2003 The city of Lotto Valentino, Italy

The young man found the box completely by accident.

He didn't have a steady job, though he was in his twenties. He was a wanderer traveling around the world, burning through the inheritance his parents had left him after their accidental deaths a few years earlier.

He'd come to his hometown of Lotto Valentino because the money had nearly run dry, and now he was scrounging around for something to sell.

Lotto Valentino was a small town to the northwest of Naples. It apparently had a decent amount of history; some of its buildings were several centuries old, and the port, which was said to have existed since the town's founding, was still used for commerce and sightseeing.

The town had many sloping roads, and a labyrinth of alleys ran among them. Looking up at the slices of vivid-blue sky from between the white, stone walls was practically a tourist attraction all by itself.

Lotto Valentino had one of the largest numbers of libraries in all of Italy. The artistic merits of these many libraries as well as their value as historic sites had been recognized, and from time to time, TV crews came from overseas to film features about them. But other than that, it was just a peaceful port town with little to distinguish it from other, similar places. That was the young man's impression of his hometown anyway.

His family home was on the outskirts.

In the attic, he found a jewel casket of unknown origin.

To be more precise, it was a bit too big for a jewel casket. If the decorations were a bit gaudier, it might have been appropriate to call this particular box a treasure chest.

It was about the size of a small bathtub, hidden deep behind piles of other items being kept in storage. The young man had never seen it before.

Realizing there was a hidden space behind a crumbling wall, the youth finally got inside by completely destroying the partition and had discovered the casket.

The young man's hopes soared; perhaps it had been intentionally sealed away.

He'd heard an ancestor of his had been a rather famous poet here in town and had written plays as well—several of his works were no doubt in the town's libraries. The young man wondered if this might be a work of art, a treasure of some sort, left here for future generations.

Although the ultimate goal for his exploring was cash, the young man traveled for travel's sake, and hope grew inside him that he might get to see something he'd never seen before.

Then when the lock was pried open and the lid raised—the hope in his expression faded into disappointment.

Inside the box were several dozen, or possibly several hundred, pieces of parchment.

None of it seemed valuable by any estimation.

Still, they might be poems or prose pieces his poet ancestor had written. If he took them to a museum, they could bring in a little money.

And if the poems themselves are good, his name could sell them even now.

The youth wondered whether he might be able to profit from his own ancestor's fame and add to his future travel fund that way. First, though, he began to read the words on the vast quantity of parchment.

The writings were in an old dialect, the language of three centuries ago, but he'd studied the classics as a hobby while he was still in school, so he could parse the meaning.

While there were some difficult passages, he could go to one of the town's libraries for any necessary research. It helped too that the chief librarian of one establishment happened to be well versed in that field.

Thanks to these convenient coincidences, the young man successfully read his way through the long, long work that was written on the parchment.

For better—or for worse.

That sheaf of timeworn parchment.

In an era when paper was probably already in circulation, it had still been written on parchment: It was a tale of the town of Lotto Valentino, spanning several years.



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

I hereby set down a monologue that I must—yet cannot—relate.

How should I begin?

Whenever I wish to convey my heart to an anonymous audience, my custom is to do so in verse. However, I place here only a lengthy account of my humble memories to paper, and I know not how to broach the subject to my reader.

Would that this great sheaf of parchment (for such it shall become, I'm sure) were never found at all.

But in your hands, it rests, and that is that. After all, if my words are being read, you must have been the one to discover this parchment.

...Or perhaps, unable to understand it on your own, you have availed yourself of the services of one skilled in decipherment.

It is all the same to me.

No doubt it will not be mine to know who will read the memoirs I record here.

While I do not write in anticipation of death by my own hand, once I have written the whole of this letter, I intend to hide it in the house, in as obscure a location as I can manage. If I am successful, it should not be found for some fifty or a hundred years hence.

Allow me to reiterate that I do not mean to destroy myself. I have no intention of defying the will of God for such a foolish act.

I wish to impress this point upon you, dear reader.

My name is Jean-Pierre Accardo.

I earn modest sums by publishing poems and essays in the local newssheet, but I am unaccustomed to writing at length. While my tale may be difficult to follow in places, please persist to the end of

No, never mind.

If reading further causes you distress, I would like you to return this sheaf immediately to wherever you found it and think no more upon it. Tell no one and behave as though these pages do not exist. You may even burn it, if you wish.

I only write these words to set my own mind at ease.

If you elect to read on in full knowledge of this, then I have many things I wish you to hear.

The unbelievable beings I have seen—alchemists who have attained immortality.

Perhaps you read those words and laugh, dear reader, calling my story a fabrication. Perhaps in your world, immortality is commonplace.

However, in the age in which I live, it is a fantasy both impossible and highly sought after.

Yes. It is a fantasy.

Even so—I saw them with my own eyes.

Immortal humans.

My tale takes place in Lotto Valentino, and I witnessed these events myself.

I did not see everything directly. Some parts of my account were relayed to me later.

But no doubt I should begin with an account of the immortal I did see.

I witnessed that miraculous regeneration in the year 1707.

And so I ought to begin with the soiree held by the Avaros—a local family of influential aristocrats—at which my presence had been requested.

CHAPTER 1

**“ARE YOU
INTERESTED IN
IMMORTALITY?”**



CHAPTER 1

“ARE YOU INTERESTED IN IMMORTALITY?”

1707 The Avaro residence, Lotto Valentino

The Italian Peninsula, in the northwest area of the district that fell under the jurisdiction of the viceroy of Naples...

On the coast near the outskirts of the city, there was a certain town called Lotto Valentino, with a population of fifty thousand.

The land was very hilly, with rows of stone buildings overlooking the sea, but the vista wasn't as impressive as that of other cities. The town led a quiet, unassuming existence.

This small city lay along one of the trade routes that led to Naples. The influence of the Mediterranean Sea gave it a relatively mild climate, and fruit was grown on the outskirts of town.

The Tyrrhenian Sea, part of the Mediterranean, was the same vivid blue as ever that day, giving each and every scene the atmosphere of a painting.

The streets looked like a condensed version of Naples, except for the lack of famous sights. Almost no one but traders entered or left the town.

In later days, its many libraries and stone buildings would be enough to lure in their fair share of tourists, but at this point in time, it was just a provincial city.

But even in that small city, the nightlife of the aristocracy was full of splendor and light.



It was a glorious evening.

The ornate chandelier would have been at home in a royal palace, illuminating the vast room with the warm light of nearly a hundred candles in its elaborate, brass fixtures.

Under its glow, several dozen men and women were engaged in pleasant conversation, and the grandly decorated hall had become the venue for a high-society social gathering.

The magnificence of the colors that filled the hall demonstrated the rank of the assembled guests.

Words—dozens of them, hundreds of them—traveled gently back and forth, and all of them suited the atmosphere of the occasion. Everyone present, man and woman, young and old, had stepped out of an aristocratic mold.

All except one, that is.

“I should never have come, and that’s the truth...,” he grumbled. He didn’t even try to hide his discomfort, but none of the people around him heard what he said.

The quality of his clothes was clearly a cut below the surrounding crowd’s. From time to time, the nobles would gaze at the young man quizzically, then move on.

Fully aware this was no place for him, the young man drew a deep breath, preparing for another sigh, but then—

“Well, well, Jean. You came.”

—someone had spoken to him without the refinement of the rest of the nobility, and he turned, still holding that breath.

A tall man with sharp eyes was standing there.

He was dressed like the other aristocrats in the hall, but the atmosphere he wore was somehow different. He exuded an intimidating air that didn’t match his years. It made him seem like a bandit chief, but the young man he’d called Jean—Jean-Pierre Accardo—let out the breath he’d been holding in a sigh of relief.

“Oh, good. I’m glad to see you here, Aile.”

“Well, my father *is* the one hosting this party... And you should call me Maiza here. People will think it’s strange if you call me by my nickname among my family.”

“I see. So you care about appearances, too, hmm? A few years ago, you would have asked me to do the opposite, simply to spite your family.”

The discomfort from a few moments ago had vanished. Jean-Pierre smiled in amusement, thumping the shoulder of the other man, who was a head taller than himself.

Maiza sighed with displeasure in his sharp eyes. “What does it matter? It’s true that I can’t stand having a name that sounds like the English word *miser*, but taking things out on my parents here isn’t going to change it.”

“Why not drive them to disown you? Abandon your family name and all the avarice it implies.”

“...There was a time when I gave that idea some serious thought.” Maiza cracked his neck audibly, then looked down at his friend. “And what about you? This is your first time at one of these society functions, and everyone can tell. You look pathetic; anybody would think you were about to be eaten by rats.”

“...Well, to be honest, I’m not exactly comfortable. If I hadn’t seen you, Maiza, I would be making my way home now.” Jean leaned back against the wall, gazing at the scene that spread before him. “People, people, people,” he murmured. “When you get right down to it, that’s all I see. The masses in the streets are full of vitality, while a funeral procession shows their melancholy plainly. Yet here, each person holds something close to their chest, testing, suspecting, and laying traps for the others... More or less. Were you expecting me to wax poetic like some charlatan just because I’m known to write in verse?”

Jean had abruptly shifted from his florid commentary back into conversational speech, and Maiza shook his head.

“Nobody expects much from your poems. You’re better with spoken words than a pen anyway... Although, your speed at reading and writing is truly incredible.”

“I was born in a town of libraries, after all. What a waste not to make the best use of what I’ve been given.”

Jean shrugged, and Maiza sighed again.

“However, for some unfathomable reason, your awful poems and plays have gained an audience, and thus, you’ve been summoned to a gathering you have no business attending... Is that about the size of it?”

“Enough with the self-pity. You have plenty of talent yourself. You’ve far more to offer the world than leading a band of young hooligans,” Jean-Pierre teased in a theatrically haughty voice.

Looking away from him into empty space, Maiza fell silent for a little while.

Maiza Avaro was a young man in his twenties who lived in Lotto Valentino.

Although he led a group of young, aristocratic ne’er-do-wells known as the Rotten Eggs, he was a proper aristocrat and the oldest son of the Avaros, a noble family with influence in the town. However, he had created the gang out of rebellion against his family’s status and the town itself and, in doing so, had made himself rather infamous locally.

That said, most of the infamy came from the bad behavior of the other members; he didn’t actively lead them in committing crimes. One major reason he had ended up as their leader was his strength—particularly his strength as a fighter, which was said to be the best in town, and which he demonstrated through his technique with a dagger.

Jean-Pierre, his friend from the wrong crowd, as it were, was the son of a merchant trader who had made this port town his base of operations ages ago. Technically, Jean didn’t have the sort of social standing that would qualify him to attend an aristocratic gathering like this one.

However, he was the town’s only “poet.” Although he was still young, his works had earned modest acclaim from those around him, and his name was mildly well-known not just in Lotto Valentino, but in the nearby cities as well.

That said, the play scripts he wrote on the side had grown more popular than the poetry he saw as his main calling, a fact that left him a little unhappy—and had resulted in his invitation to this soiree as a playwright.

“I’m grateful that your father invited me, but honestly, I’d like to go home,” Jean-Pierre complained openly, and Maiza smiled.

“Don’t be like that. Won’t some experience in a place like this be helpful

when you write your plays?”

“Sometimes, not knowing the reality makes your depictions richer. In this suffocating air, it’s no wonder you young, noble ‘eggs’ go rotten,” Jean-Pierre retorted sarcastically.

He was thinking he really should go home, when—

“Um... Might you be Master Jean-Pierre Accardo?”

A hesitant voice reached Jean’s ears.

When he and Maiza turned—a young man was standing there.

He was probably about their age. His long bangs hid his eyes, obscuring the details of his expression, but it was clear from his lips that he was smiling rather excitedly.

The clothes he wore set him apart from both the aristocrats and the townspeople; he resembled a scholar.

“I am, yes... Who are you?” Jean asked dubiously.

The young man blushed as if he felt he’d committed some faux pas.

“Oh, I beg your pardon. I forgot myself for a moment, seeing one of my idols in the flesh. I was the assistant to an alchemist with whom the Avaro family generously established cordial relations...”

With a breezy smile on his lips, the man bowed reverentially to Jean and Maiza.

“I am Lebreau... Lebreau Fermet Viralesque. It is a true pleasure to make your acquaintance.”



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

That was the first meeting between myself and that alchemist...or to be accurate, that apprentice to an alchemist.

He was a very personable man. The way his hair hid his eyes was oddly sinister, and yet one quickly ceased to notice it once he struck up a conversation. This may sound strange, but speaking with him was like speaking to a friend I

had known all my life. To put it in simpler terms, he was easy to talk to.

In any case, he was the first one.

While it is embarrassing to admit, up till that point, I had never encountered any alchemists, nor had I particularly wished to.

My distrust was not toward alchemy itself; the reasons for my aversion were different.

While it is the shame of Lotto Valentino, I must confess one thing here. It is one of the reasons I must hide this letter so that it will remain undiscovered until as far in the future as possible.

Up until 1705, the circumstances of Lotto Valentino were rather peculiar. Alchemists had introduced a new drug and a kind of false gold, and the townspeople had taken exclusive control over the refinement process. With the profits, they had attempted to buy the town itself from the aristocrats.

It was during that time that a serial murderer known as the Mask Maker appeared and plunged everyone into chaos. As it is not my main topic, I'll refrain from discussing the incident in detail here. The important part is...

...the sin.

Yes.

At that time, every single person in town was guilty.

While I was not directly involved in the creation of the drug or the false gold, I was aware that such things were occurring. I also knew that in creating it, children in dire circumstances were subjected to brutal treatment.

Even so, I did nothing.

Some thought this was the natural way of things; others believed it was wrong. Whatever maelstrom our differing opinions formed, none of it meant anything. We did nothing, and considering the results, each of us was just as guilty as the next. This one incident had rendered the whole town of Lotto Valentino to blame.

In 1705, the killer known as the Mask Maker laid that crime bare—but I shall not speak of it in these memoirs. After all, I do not know everything about that

incident myself.

Although I imagine I will touch on the Mask Maker later, that is still a long ways off.

For a time, we attempted to lay the blame for that sin on the alchemists. While I knew false accusations were brewing, I again did nothing.

But like the Mask Maker, I will set that matter aside for the moment.

You may know the particulars of that incident in 1705, should fate deem it necessary. These memoirs of mine were not destined to serve that purpose. That is all it is.

To return to the subject at hand...

Due to my sense of guilt, I made no effort to actively involve myself with alchemists.

I was aware that Maiza's family was on good terms with a group of alchemists in a neighboring city. Of these, a man named Begg Garrott was apparently an expert in the creation of pharmaceutical preparations, and it was he who had provided the town with the original form of the drug that I mentioned earlier.

But at the time, I had no way of knowing all that was happening in the shadows.



"...Oh, you're Begg's companion?" Maiza asked.

Lebreau bowed again. "Well, well. My fellow apprentice is constantly in your debt, sir."

"Where is he?"

"In a meeting with your father, Master Maiza. Until he returns, I am watching this child for him."

"Watching...?"

Jean and Maiza looked perplexed, and just then—

—a small boy slowly peeked out from behind Lebreau.

"Go on, Czes. You must greet him."

Encouraged by the young alchemist, the boy nodded, then timidly stuck his head out and murmured:

“U-um... I’m Czeslaw Meyer. It’s nice to meet you.”

He seemed to be about six years old and was staring up at Maiza in wide-eyed fright.

In spite of himself, Jean burst out laughing. “You’re scaring him, Maiza.”

Ignoring the teasing, Maiza bent down and set a hand lightly on the boy’s head.

“I’m Maiza. It’s good to meet you, too. Everyone calls me Aile.”

“And if they don’t, he gets cross.”

“This fool here is Jean-Pierre. Just ‘Jean’ is fine.”

Despite Maiza’s smile, he still had an intimidating face, and Czeslaw looked flustered; he glanced around uncertainly.

Covering for the boy, Lebreau apologized mildly. “I’m sorry; he’s terribly shy. He’s the only son of our master...”

“Yes, I’ve heard his name from Begg.”

As Maiza looked at Czeslaw, a complicated emotion nearly rose within him, but he suppressed it and spoke with some chagrin in his expression.

“Well, if you’re an alchemist, you’ll hardly lack for things to talk about. Relax and enjoy yourself.”

Then with a glance at Jean—

“Besides, it seems as though you’re a fan of the playwright as well.”

“Huh?”

Jean was stunned. Then he remembered that Lebreau had first greeted him, not Maiza. For his part, Lebreau smiled, then took Jean’s hand and spoke with the excitement of a child.



“Yes, yes! It really is a privilege to meet you, Mr. Jean-Pierre. I enjoyed your latest play, *The Stone Pillar of the House of Durgo*.”

“Stop, please. This is embarrassing.” Jean’s cheeks flushed at such frank praise.

He dreamed of finding success as a poet, but his plays were written to keep food on the table. His feelings toward their relative fame were rather mixed. He wasn’t angry; nothing but genuine embarrassment churned in his heart.

However, Lebreau stroked Czes’s hair and spoke as if he’d read Jean’s mind. “I’ve also had the privilege of reading the collection of poems that was your maiden work. They were truly ingenious, and while I hope you’ll excuse me, I really couldn’t believe it was your first effort.”

“Wha...?”

“I imagine the originality underpinning your work is what has allowed you to capture hearts in your new ventures into playwriting. I only came here for a simple pleasure trip, but I am truly honored to have met you.”

“Ha-ha. Eloquent fellow, aren’t you? Flattery won’t get you anywhere, you know.”

Even as he muttered, Jean’s lips trembled as if he was about to break out into a grin. After one look at his face, Maiza was convinced.

That Jean. He’s genuinely happy.

Lebreau continued to shower him with compliments for a while longer. Jean listened awkwardly, but he made no serious attempts to stop him, either.

Maiza wanted to roll his eyes, but he didn’t interrupt. Instead, he looked at the child hiding behind Lebreau.

So this is Czes, hmm?

Begg Garrott, his alchemist acquaintance, had told him about this boy.

If I remember correctly, the child’s parents died in an accident. So this Lebreau Fermet fellow and Begg are acting as his family? He’s still so young. Poor thing.

...No, at least he does still have family. It could be worse.

Maiza remembered some of the other local children and their particular situation.

After all, if things had gone badly for him, he might have gotten sold off, come to this town, and been forced to work there... That's all settled now, but still.

Remembering an incident from a few years earlier, Maiza took another look at the boy's face.

Czeslaw really did seem to be very shy; he was hanging onto Lebreau's coattails, and it didn't seem likely he'd let go anytime soon. Maiza, who was starting to feel at loose ends, decided to strike up a conversation with him.

"Czeslaw... Or I guess 'Czes' for short. Are you hungry, Czes? I can get you something."

Czeslaw flinched, then looked up at him with a face like a kitten's. Then, timidly, he replied, "...Sorbet."

Hearing that, Lebreau interrupted his praise of Jean to scold Czes with a little smile.

"Now, now, Czes, none of that. You mustn't be so spoiled."

"...But it's what I want, Fermet."

Czes looked up at his guardian with pleading eyes, and Maiza laughed.

"Of course, I'll get you some right now."

"Are you certain? Really, you don't need to trouble yourself. Sorbet is a luxury, you know."

At the beginning of the 1700s, nothing that could be termed a "freezer" had been invented yet. Insulated boxes were one thing, but it would be a little while longer before the concept of a box that froze water came to be.

However, sorbet did exist already. Of course, people had been adding flavors to snow or natural ice since antiquity—but in this era, a slightly different method of making flavored ice was gaining currency.

When saltpeter was dissolved in water, it absorbed the surrounding heat. Once the phenomenon was discovered, the nobility—who could acquire

saltpeter in large quantities—had begun to use the technique as a method for chilling wine. In the process, they had learned how to freeze juice and transform it into sorbet.

Naturally, though, it wasn't easily accessible to commoners, and this luxury was one of the many that were widespread only among the aristocracy.

"My apologies. Czeslaw is really fond of flavored ice... When we went to a northern town a while ago, it was just terrible. He took sugar and honey out of our food stores, poured it over a drift of snow, and began to eat it!"

"But...it was...yummy..." Czes looked down, embarrassed.

Patting the boy's head again, Maiza spoke.

"Not to worry. I'm sure we have more than enough on hand, given the number of children of guests here. I'll go ask a server for it; just wait there."

Maiza went away, leaving an odd combination behind: a poet, an alchemist, and a child. The flow of compliments had been broken, and before the conversation could truly stall, Jean began casting around for a topic.

What should I do? I couldn't possibly follow a conversation about alchemy...

While he was thinking this, Lebreau spoke up, as if the alchemist had read his mind again.

"Do you know the Café Procope?"

"Huh?"

"I hear it's a Parisian café founded by a Sicilian merchant, one François Procope. It seems they deal in sorbet and similar dainties as well. The establishment is popular with poets and playwrights such as yourself, as well as with painters and scholars. If you ever happen to be in Paris, you should stop by."

This man really was treating him like an artist. Partly to hide his embarrassment, Jean replied rapidly. "Ha-ha! I have no plans to go to Paris. I'm sure I'll stay in this town until I die in obscurity. I can feel it."

"I see. If that is what you desire, then so it may well be."

“...”

Lebreau's remark was unexpectedly curt.

Jean realized that in the depths of his heart, he'd wanted him to say, *That's not true. Yours is a talent that should soar onto the global stage.* He flushed an even deeper red.

But Lebreau said something that made his face burn like fire.

“But whatever your wishes are, the words you set down in your poems and scripts take on a will of their own to fly far and wide throughout the world. That is precisely how I learned your name, and how I have come to meet you here.”

“Stop, please, before you can mortify me any further. Never mind me, Mr. Lebreau; tell me about yourself.”

He'd replied without thinking, to hide his embarrassment, and immediately afterward, he thought, *That's torn it. I won't understand anything about alchemy—*

Hastily, he started trying to rephrase himself, but it was already too late: With a breezy smile, Lebreau had begun to speak.

“Ah, I beg your pardon... But a mere apprentice such as myself could never hope to adequately explain the depths of a topic so specific as alchemy...”

“If you put it that way, I'm a rank amateur who knows next to nothing. Even if you told me about its depths, I wouldn't remember any of it. I thought it might serve as a reference for some future play or poem, that's all.”

“A comedy, perhaps, about men possessed by the ludicrous desire to turn iron filings into gold?” Lebreau Fermet Viralesque laughed as he spoke, and Jean quickly shook his head.

“Perish the thought! I'd never show so much contempt for your craft...”

“Don't worry. I think it's ridiculous myself.”

“?”

Jean was dubious, and Lebreau went on, smiling.

“The philosopher's stone, homunculi, chrysopoeia, unifying oneself with God

through the magnum opus, the great work... If these destinations are your only focus, it truly is no more than an utterly risible jest. According to the original philosophy, the goal of refining gold isn't to earn money. However, to a bystander in this day and age, one cannot prevent themselves from being seen as a greedy, moneygrubbing failure of a scholar."

"No, I wouldn't go that far..."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me. I'm not belittling my own field of study. After all, in the process of striving toward these absurd dreams, we have created practical science. To me, alchemy is deserving of respect."

"I see."

Jean had been able to understand that conversation. *Thank goodness.* In his relief, he was nodding along rather carelessly, but—

"However, one of our practices should be revered."

—Lebreau suddenly said something strange.

"Huh?"

"Only a fraction of alchemists deal in it, but to a layman, it would seem to be not alchemy at all, but a form of magic that has soared beyond it... Does the idea not stimulate your creative mind?"

"Well... I don't know. I tend to find irony in reality, after all. Besides, trying to make gold is no different from magic as far as I'm concerned."

"I expect that's true." Lebreau's gentle smile didn't falter. He continued like a child who had thought up some mischief. "Although, you may have a different impression if you actually witness it for yourself, you know."

"Are you going to show me gold being made? I'm astounded. I can practically see the price of gold falling and the market economy collapsing."

His response was good-natured ribbing, but Lebreau slowly shook his head.

"If only that were the case... Although, to undiscerning individuals, the counterfeits created in this town are probably sufficient."

"...Come now, it's only natural for an alchemist to know about that, but it's

better not to talk about it at a gathering of aristocrats.”

Painfully conscious of their surroundings, Jean admonished the other man in a whisper.

He didn't know the full circumstances, but the false gold was still indeed circulating here.

To the aristocrats, the fact that the people had once nearly purchased the town from them with that false gold was taboo and must not be mentioned.

Part of the reason Maiza had formed the Rotten Eggs was his disgust over the corruption that had resulted from the false gold and the drug. Jean was aware of this, and it had made him all the more sensitive about the subject.

“Ah, I beg your pardon. But this ‘pseudomagical phenomenon’... What would you say if you had the opportunity to see it with your own eyes?”

“Would you please just say what you mean? What is this pseudomagical phenomenon of yours?”

He was still wary of the people around them, and his casual response was more to keep the conversation going than anything, but—

—the word Lebreau whispered made Jean widen his eyes.

“Immortality.”

“...What?”

“If I told you that here in Lotto Valentino, there is an alchemist who has become immortal...what would you do?”



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

When I first heard of it, I thought it a joke in very poor taste. And yet even after so brief a conversation, he did not strike me as the sort of fellow who would tell childish lies.

When I asked for further details, he mentioned one of the town's myriad libraries. Its director, a man called Dalton, acted as its head librarian while instructing young people in alchemy. Lebreau explained to me that this man had

once summoned a demon and had gained immortality. Dalton was an old acquaintance, and half the reason Lebreau had come to town that day was to pay him a visit.

Should I wish to witness Dalton's power of immortality, he said, he would arrange it.

Why me? I asked him, and Lebreau smiled.

You are a man who sees the world through clear eyes. That is why I want you to know the truth, he said.

I was taken in by these extremely simple words. Taken in willingly.

After all, had I said I was not intrigued, it would have been a lie.

No doubt you'll think this worthless drivel.

The moment you see the word demon, you may return these memoirs to their box.

In fact, I believe I would appreciate it if you were kind enough to do so.

After all, as I write them, I myself... Even now, years upon years after I first saw it, I still have not truly accepted it.

Now then, given you have continued to read, may I assume you still have an interest in my memoirs?

Perhaps you have discerned a suggestion of truth in my writings. Perhaps you merely wish to know the next bit of nonsense. I care not which it is. I will simply respect the fact that you have seen its continuation on these pages.

The future is in no way guaranteed, but I shall take the various possibilities into consideration and continue to write.

Despite my doubts, I slipped out of the party and went to meet that fellow, Dalton.

But I was not the only fool interested in immortality.



"You didn't have to join us, Maiza."

"Call me Aile."

“One step out of the house, and you’re a different person. Lord, what a spoiled child you are. If you came along because you were worried about me, might you consider giving me a little freedom?”

“I’m not worried about you at all, and if I was, I’d be even less likely to let you run free... I was interested in this Dalton, too, that’s all.”

Next to Maiza were Fermet, Czes, and one other alchemist who’d joined them later—Begg Garrott. They all walked through the dark town.

Ordinarily, an aristocrat’s son like Maiza shouldn’t have been out at night in such company, but he was the ringleader of the Rotten Eggs, and neither he nor the people around him seemed particularly concerned.

He spoke to Jean in a whisper so that the alchemists, who were walking a little ahead of them, wouldn’t hear.

“Dalton’s a real mystery. I hear he’s got connections to that lecherous lord. No idea what kind of connections, but even so.”

“Lecherous... You mean Lord Boroñal? Give the lord of your own town a little respect, would you?”

“My opinion of him did improve somewhat when he quelled that riot in town the year before last. Somewhat. If only my brother could fight back as well as that womanizer, his life would be a lot easier.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, your brother’s fallen for a serving girl, hasn’t he? Her name was Sylvie? Your father doesn’t know about it yet, does he? If word got out, I imagine something would happen to the girl before they disowned him. I could include it in a play, but it would be a bit too cliché.”

Glaring at Jean for his tactless joke, Maiza steered the conversation back to the original topic.

“Anyway, my point is that the count’s connection to this alchemist is the same as the one my father has with Begg over there.” As Maiza walked along, he cracked his neck audibly and narrowed his already sharp eyes. “And now I hear the alchemist is ‘immortal.’ You know that lecher. I wouldn’t put it past him to research immortality in the name of keeping women with eternal youth at his side.”

“What do you suppose Mr. Lebreau means by all this, though? To think he’d even invite you...”

“...But inviting you was a matter of course?”

“He asked me to come because he had confidence in my good sense, you see. If an uncivilized fellow like you witnessed such a miracle, I question whether you’d even understand half of it.”

Jean bantered carelessly with a man who would have frightened anyone else.

Maiza smacked him upside the head just as Lebreau turned to look back at them.

“Oh, it’s simple. Maiza is unlike ordinary nobles. As such, I thought it would be worth showing you one of the town’s hidden oddities, that’s all. Both for your sake, and for Dalton’s.”

So he heard us.

Maiza and Jean thought the same thing at the exact same time, with some awkwardness.

Maiza sighed—perhaps in an attempt to disguise his chagrin, or perhaps not—then took on his usual sullen expression.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘for both our sakes.’ And will this Dalton show outsiders proof that he’s immortal?”

“I hear he doesn’t attempt to hide it. Even if rumors of his immortality began to circulate, what would you think if you saw someone honestly trying to sell you the story?”

“...I’d worry he’d had a bit too much, either of drink or drugs.”

“Exactly. When truth is stranger than fiction, then fiction it becomes in the minds of others, whether one hides it or not. Such is human nature... Ah, we’ve arrived. How does it look, Begg?”

The alchemist named Begg reacted to Lebreau’s question.

He was unshaven and wore a turban, but not even the most generous individual would have found him handsome.

Jean wasn't sure to make of him, but Czes was holding his hand and seemed to find it reassuring, even though he was out on the road at night. At the very least, the boy apparently trusted him.

Having come to that conclusion, Jean didn't ask too many questions about the alchemist. Plus, the man was an acquaintance of Maiza's as well.

Begg was oddly garrulous; if he recalled correctly, the man had been talking to Czes the whole time they were walking. Perhaps Lebreau had tired of it and chosen to listen in on their conversation instead.

"All right, we've arrived, and Mr. Dalton seems to be where he usually is, but that is a surprise, yes, I was astonished when Fermet suggested bringing people here—he doesn't have many friends—and I even wondered if he'd eaten something bad at the soiree, and I'd never have believed one of the visitors would be Maiza. On top of that, the other's the author of the collection of poems my fellow alchemist was reading so avidly; what manner of coincidence is this?"

Speaking so rapidly one wondered when he managed to breathe, Begg proceeded through the gate to the library.

As he did so, a small group passed them on their way out.

They seemed to be either townspeople who'd been using the library, or pupils who attended the alchemy school it housed.

Several of the town's libraries were privately owned by the alchemists—and Jean, who'd steered clear of alchemists up till now, considered these facilities the ones to avoid.

Jean tried to pass the group without making eye contact, but—
—a boy abruptly stopped and called to them.

"Huh? Aile!"

"?"

Everyone present turned to look at Maiza and the boy.

The group leaving the library was a trio.

One was a black-haired boy with icy, gold-colored eyes. The second was a girl with long, blond hair who stood close to the first youth, her cheeks flushed.

The one who'd spoken to Maiza was a blond-haired, blue-eyed boy whose features seemed vaguely Northern European. He wasn't particularly handsome, but he wasn't ugly, either. He was an extremely normal youth, and his childlike smile suited him.

All three were probably around sixteen or seventeen.

They certainly didn't appear to be members of the Rotten Eggs; in fact, they didn't appear to be nobles at all. Curious about how they knew each other, Jean watched Maiza, waiting for his reaction.

"...Hello, Elmer. It's been a while. You've still got that lukewarm smile."

Maiza responded impassively, showing no particular delight or revulsion at their reunion.

The kid he'd called Elmer replied fearlessly to the tall, delinquent aristocrat.

"And you need to smile more, Aile."



A few minutes later On the avenue

"...Elmer. That man back there was the leader of the Rotten Eggs, wasn't he?"

"Hmm? Sure he was. That's Aile."

In the dark streets, the young trio who'd passed Jean and Maiza were talking.

"What was he doing there?"

"No idea. Probably wanted to do some reading."

"...Do you know the people who were with him?" the dark-haired boy asked.

Elmer thought for a little while, then waved a hand, laughing.

"I don't remember them at all. Why? What's got you so curious?"

"The one with the long hair in front of his face... When he saw me, he looked startled for a moment."

"Really? You should have just asked him, then."

“I’m not you, remember?” the dark-haired boy retorted. He looked even more sullen than the leader of the Rotten Eggs, and the girl who was beside him patted him on the shoulder.

“Huey, I bet it was because he thought you were a girl! He couldn’t help but stare!”

“Enough with the nauseating fantasies.”

Before he could imagine anything further, the black-haired boy put the group out of his mind. As far as he was concerned, after all, it didn’t matter whether he’d met that man before or not.

At least, it didn’t matter to him then.

If, during that fateful meeting, he’d tried harder to remember the man with the long bangs—if the encounter had put him even a little more on guard—this story would have ended very differently.

They wouldn’t realize this until later—just a few years later.



Meanwhile In the Third Library

The many libraries of Lotto Valentino had been constructed by the respective houses of long-ago nobles. Wealth had been liberally poured into the buildings, as if the aristocrats had been attempting to boast of their own knowledge.

One of these was a structure that, while not overly ornate, did appear rather more seasoned than the others.

Commonly known as the Third Library, it was a unique facility: It received its support not from one of the town’s aristocrats, but from a family that lived on an island in the north of the Kingdom of Prussia.

A motley group of five was walking quickly through that library.

Lanterns were still lit in the corridors here and there, suggesting others were still in the building.

“Who was that kid back there? The one who just said hello and left.”

“Well... I don’t really know, either. We run into each other in town every once

in a while, and occasionally, I talk to him a bit, to kill time.”

“If he’s striking up casual conversation with a fellow as scary as you, he’s an odd one.”

“Maybe almost as odd as you.”

Their banter did them no favors as they advanced through the library’s stone halls, but it did no harm, either.

There were no other people around them, and the only sound in the cold air came from their footsteps.

“...I’m scared, Begg.”

“What is there to be scared of? Most nights are like this, more or less, and I’d say our town is much, much darker, Czes. This is the first time you’ve been here, and you just aren’t used to it yet, that’s all, and besides, if this is enough to frighten you, when you meet Mr. Dalton, your knees will—”

As Begg smiled at the frightened boy, a light flickered farther down the hall—and a shadow welled up around a corner.

The enormous shape had a smooth curve to it, like a jet-black snake.

“Eeeeeeeeeek!”

With a high-pitched scream, Czes clung to Begg’s leg.

Startled by the shriek more than anything else, Jean flinched, but—

“...Do be quiet. The books aren’t fond of all this noise.”

—what had appeared from the depths of the corridor was a dull, curved, silver hook about the size of an apple.

As Jean stared, the face of a white-haired, elderly man followed the hook into view.

The hook was attached to the man’s right wrist in place of his hand, apparently a prosthetic.

His mustache and beard were long, and he wore a broad-brimmed hat. He looked more like a military man or a merchant than an alchemist, and with the hook, he could easily have passed for a marauder in the Caribbean.

At the sight of the old man, Czes trembled in even greater fear, and cold sweat trickled down Jean's back as well.

However, Lebreau walked up to the man, bowed respectfully, and offered a brisk greeting.

"Well, well, Maestro Dalton. It's been a long time, sir."

"Hmph... You've brought a lot of guests with you for a social visit."

"Why are you wearing a hook today? What's happened to your usual wooden hand?"

"It's been in need of some repairs. The craftsman I usually take it to is restoring it...but one of my students kept pestering me to experiment with wearing a hook instead."

Dalton pushed up the brim of his hat with the hook, turning his gaze to Jean and Maiza.

"Oho... Rare guests indeed. The House of Avaro's oldest son, and the town's one and only poet, hmm? I hadn't heard you were studying alchemy... Are you interested in immortality?"

An old man with one prosthetic hand and white hair talking about immortality made for a strange picture.

Jean and Maiza exchanged glances.

Well, if I imagine him as a god of Grecian myth or a mountain wizard of the Orient, he isn't too divorced from the image, I suppose, Jean thought vaguely.

Meanwhile, Maiza sharpened his gaze, as if he was determined to appear more intimidating than the other man.

"You know us, old man? I can see why you might know a poet, but why would you need to remember a pampered, noble brat like me?"

Meeting Maiza's keen eyes calmly, Dalton made no change to his expression. "It's quite simple. Alchemists have connections with other alchemists. Noble, townsman, or criminal—I consider all men equal in the presence of this peculiar science. If you wish to learn, I'll teach you all I know."

The old man appeared to assume Maiza had come to become his apprentice. Maiza clicked his tongue in disgust.

“Don’t make me laugh. I’m only here to see what sort of fraud is working with that womanizing lord.”

It was clearly an attempt to provoke the man, and Dalton acquired an expression for the first time. Not anger, but a thin smile.

“A fraud, hmm? I see. Well said. Unless you can completely share your sensations with others, you can never convey to another the exact shade of the blue sky you saw. In that sense, telling another person anything at all is fraud. Despite your best efforts, after all, the truth exists only inside you.”

“...What are you going on about? Enough with the smoke and mirrors, you damn old fool.”

“I’ll accept any pupil, but you should mend that filthy mouth. People already tend to consider alchemists frauds, as you put it, so their speech at least should be clean. Yes, for your first lesson, let’s teach you how to speak. Start by being silent.”

“What are you babbling abo—?”

“Hey, calm down, Mai— Er...Aile.” Jean tried to calm Maiza, whose frustration was growing.

However, the situation took a very odd turn.

“Begg. Cover that boy’s eyes. No doubt this will be *a little too much* for a child.”

Even before Dalton had finished muttering, Begg put his palms over Czes’s eyes.

“Ah! B-Begg! What’s the matter?!” Czes cried out uneasily.

In almost the same moment, Dalton raised his hook.

“Now, just a—!”

That hook was going to slash through someone. Jean imagined the sight, but he couldn’t even break into a run to stop it. He just stood there, shivering from

head to toe.

Maiza must have imagined the same sight, but he started sprinting toward Dalton.

But he didn't make it in time.

With a speed that didn't seem to belong to an old man, the hook raced through the air.

A gout of fresh blood blotted out the glow of the lantern.

It didn't belong to Czes or Maiza or anyone in their group.

Dalton had slashed his own throat with the hook, and his blood poured into the dark, library corridor.

Jean and Maiza froze. Neither of them understood what had happened.

Begg was also staring, shocked and wide-eyed. Czes knew nothing about what was happening, and he hung onto the tail of Begg's coat, trembling.

Only one person, Lebreau, seemed undisturbed, but Jean, Maiza, and Begg didn't notice this. Dalton gazed at Lebreau with some disgust, while blood was still spurting from his neck.

Silence.

The sound of gushing blood soon stopped, and the overwhelming silence bore down on everyone in that hall.

Start by being silent.

As Dalton had ordered a moment earlier, Maiza stayed speechless, his whole body tense.

As he stared at the ghastly sight before him, he seemed ready to burst out shouting. *What in the hell is this damn old man thinking?!*

Jean, who'd known him for ages, could almost hear Maiza's scream a few seconds in the future.

However, what truly silenced them was what happened immediately after.

The blood... It began to writhe.

Somewhere along the way, the flow of blood from Dalton's throat had stopped, and the red liquid that clung to the stone floor and the walls began moving instead.

Each individual drop of blood that slicked the corridor, beads even smaller than drops, began crawling out of the cracks in the stonework like eerie, living creatures with minds of their own.

As if a colony of red slime mold was creeping at several hundred times its normal speed, the drops of blood tangled together without slowing or stopping.

Then, like a crowd headed home, the writhing swarm of blood began to *seep up* Dalton's legs, making for his throat.

The motion clearly ignored the laws of physics, and both Jean and Maiza doubted their eyes, wondering if what they were seeing was a dream or some sort of magic trick.

The clothes, the floor, the walls, the ceiling: All of them should have been stained with blood, and yet they were changing back to their original colors as if nothing had happened.

The red procession moved as if time itself were rewinding.

What on earth was going on?

Before they could understand it, before they could even try—

—all of Dalton's shed blood had returned to his neck, and finally, the wound vanished without a trace.

"No matter how often I see it, it never gets easier to believe."

"I'd heard the rumors, but it's really astonishing when you witness it in person. I just assumed I'd overindulged in the drugs I made and was hallucinating."

"S-say, what happened? Begg, I can't see."

While the alchemists were speaking—

"....."

"....."

—Jean and Maiza, suddenly confronted with this overwhelming proof of immortality, couldn't so much as scream.



They were no longer sure whether they were truly experiencing reality, or whether there was a floor under their feet.

“Good. We’ll say you’ve passed the ‘silence’ assignment.”

Cracking his neck, Dalton turned to face Maiza and Jean again.

“Now then, I’ve done away with the roundabout theories and confronted you with the unvarnished results. Let me ask you again: It isn’t as wonderful as it sounds, and you may be called heretics who have strayed from the way of alchemy, but...

“...are you interested...in immortality?”



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

Maiza became Dalton’s apprentice on the spot.

I was quite nonplussed. After all, while Maiza was an incorrigible delinquent, I had not thought he aspired to anything so vulgar as immortality. No one who wished for long life would live for the moment as he did, or so I believed.

In retrospect, however, he may have wished for power—a tool he could use to dispel the stagnant cloud hanging over his town after the counterfeits and drugs wrought their havoc.

Yet he was little more than a noble’s pampered son, and what power he held was insufficient to do anything about that. Or so I assume he was thinking. Thus, the power he chanced upon was the power of immortality Dalton had shown him, something that was not quite alchemy or magic.

Conversely, Maiza’s behavior convinced me not to submit myself to Dalton after all.

To be honest, I wanted to grab hold of Dalton that very instant and scream, Make me immortal, too! The reason was for that was simple: a desire for long life. Nothing more, nothing less.

Meanwhile, Maiza had chosen to do so for a loftier goal, for an honest sort of zeal. That may have been why I admired him so in that moment. Mind you, this occurs to me only now, as I think back.

Yes... When I reflect on it now, after many years have gone by, I think it is best that I escaped with my mortality back then.

I would doubtless not have received an immortal body so easily, but if I had then, I would assuredly have degenerated into something like a rock, eternally stagnant.

No, even a rock changes shape as it tumbles along through this world. I would have become less than stone, an abomination with no right to exist. If one could be freed from death and yet retain his creativity, very well, but would immortality not have rendered me incapable of writing poems or drafting plays from the moment I acquired it? I am very nearly certain that is so.

But that fateful instant—

I do not believe the shock I received upon seeing immortality with my own eyes was in vain.

After all, that event, that image, became a central cog turning the machinery of my life.

In all honesty, I had already been stagnant up until that day, that moment.

In that town, breathing its stale air, I had been unable to depict anything except my own cynicism toward a hopeless reality, and then I felt as if I had been transformed, had transcended.

Of course, that was merely an illusion. I had only “seen,” nothing more. No matter how great the miracle I had witnessed, I was only that—a witness.

But the event did indeed change my fate.

To be clear, I am not immortal now as I write these memoirs. I am no immortal. I am a mere human.

No, less than that. A coward.

That event served as the impetus that led me to pen a certain script.

The story was about a man who had obtained eternal life—a tragedy depicting the pathos and irony of everlasting life, and the people, cities, and nations that were destroyed by their quest for that man’s power.

By chance, it was well received, and half a year later, my rank as a playwright had risen.

At the time, we were in the midst of the War of the Spanish Succession. The city of Naples was occupied by the Austrian army, and the Italian Peninsula was plunged into the chaos of war. With so much going on around me, my rank was more precarious than a rotting chair.

Even so, I continued to sit. The chair was a comfortable one, after all.

This, although I had only borrowed an impetus and depicted it. I had not ventured into that world, as Maiza had done. I had simply reconfigured my own impulse into the shape of a story and used it.

I am a coward who lined my own pockets without exposing myself to danger.

Once, when I worried about this fact, Lebreau told me, Your task is to share your own impulses with the people of the world. There is no need for you to worry. Quite the contrary; you ought to be proud.

I took his words to heart. Or I pretended so, at least.

Had I not done so, it felt as though I would have broken.

Telling myself that I must not waste Lebreau's favor, I accepted that honeyed excuse. As a matter of fact, most other creators probably do take pride in that.

Not I, however. I am not so impressive.

At that point in time, I may already have been broken. I am sure that I was.

By encountering the truth of immortality, I had managed to leave the doldrums. In exchange, I could no longer stop.

Like a fish that keeps swimming with eyes that cannot close, I could now only keep running, unable to look away.

For that reason...

For that very reason, I committed a certain act.

And in the end, I cursed myself and resolved to leave these memoirs.

They are an atonement for the crime I committed a few years later.

I do not imagine I will be forgiven, but at the very least, I shall believe that because you have read these memoirs, she will be saved.

CHAPTER 2

“I’M NOT A FOOL.”



CHAPTER 2

“I’M NOT A FOOL.”

1709, winter Lotto Valentino

The peace was an uneasy one.

The War of the Spanish Succession had swept across Europe, mercilessly ravaging the land and engulfing the Italian Peninsula as well. It had been nearly two years since the Kingdom of Naples had been occupied by Austria.

Had there been any changes to the town of Lotto Valentino? One was forced to admit there had not.

The viceroy, Esperanza Boroñal, was alive and well, and the townspeople still spent their days as if they were a Spanish territory, their lives unchanged from what they had been a few years earlier.

There may have been movement of some sort near the top, but those dark clouds didn’t extend to the streets.

Even so, this city, which was not so very distant from Naples, was still largely spared from the great war that threatened to reach every corner of Europe. It was unnatural by any stretch.

In the future, history books that covered the subject in detail would call it a mysterious, neutral zone. However, while the townspeople recognized the uncanny peace, they went on with their lives no differently.

After all, they’d noticed a certain fact years earlier—that the town of Lotto Valentino was gently isolated from the surrounding cities.

They knew one more thing as well—that they themselves had created the drug that had caused that isolation.

It had been nearly four years since the Mask Maker killed several people here, and yet the air was as stagnant as ever.

Still, there were many people who weren't deceived by the atmosphere.

People like the leader of the Rotten Eggs, who had been trying to dispel it all along.

Those who knew nothing of the incident from four years ago, such as very young children and traders who had come from other towns.

And—

“Oh, Huey! Did you hear?! They'll be performing Jean-Pierre Accardo's new play at the town theater starting next month!”

Lotto Valentino's market street stood facing the port. As one would expect of a merchant city visited by ships from every region, its market offered merchandise from all over; it was the busiest place in town.

All sorts of people visited the market: Romans, Celts, Greeks, Arabs, Germans, Phoenicians, and many other races. This was true of most regions in Italy, not just this particular city, but the fact that it was a port town meant it was especially diverse.

Of course, although this city was peaceful for some reason, the War of Spanish Succession was raging elsewhere, and the ships and passengers visiting the port brought with them a peculiar tension.

But the energy with which people got to work buying and selling tended to set it at ease.

The young woman was speaking with an innocent flush on her pale cheeks, as if she was determined not to be outdone by the market's energy.

“A-and so— Huey, are you listening? I know someone who can get us in to the theater for almost nothing... Would you go see it with me?”

The girl's blond hair streamed in the wind, and although she had the figure of a woman, there was still some youth about her face.

She looked around eighteen, but her gestures and manner of speech would have suggested she was slightly younger.

Her companion, to whom she was speaking so affectionately, was a rather dour young man with black hair and gold eyes.

“...Not interested.”

The young man, Huey Laforet, gave a response that was as surly as his expression, but the girl was undeterred.

“Just because you’re not interested doesn’t mean you can’t see it, you know?”

“It also doesn’t mean I have to. I’m not interested in theater, period. If you’re curious, you could go by yourself, Monica.” Huey’s response was frigid.

Monica looked down sadly. “There’s no point if you’re not with me, Huey,” she sulked.

“If being with me is the point, then there’s no need to see a play. We could just take a walk somewhere, couldn’t we?”

Monica’s face lit up at the reply. “I-in that case, I’d be happy with that!”

“No. I’m headed home for today.”

“Huh? Wha—? Huh? ...What?”

“All right. See you tomorrow,” Huey murmured impassively as he watched her expression, then strode away from the market.

If anyone who didn’t know them had watched the little scene play out, they would have assumed objectively that she had no chance with him.

However, after heaving a disappointed sigh, Monica blushed faintly.

Oh, good. Huey did it again today. He looked me in the eye and said, See you tomorrow.

It was a small thing, but to her, it was enough.

After all, she knew Huey Laforet hated *almost* everything in the world.

As far as she was aware, there were only two people anywhere whom he would look in the eye and greet with an expression of his true feelings instead of his usual false smile.

Monica was delighted to be one of those people, and she savored that feeling practically every day. Even after years of that joy, she hadn’t grown tired of it. If anyone had known what she was like on the inside, they would almost certainly

have decided she was an odd one.

Monica was aware of this, though.

She was odd. She just didn't care.

Ducking from the market street into an alley where no one would disturb her, she put a hand to her chest.

Remembering Huey's cold expression from a few moments earlier, Monica looked down, the hint of a smile on her lips.

However—her moment of supreme bliss was shattered by a deep voice from behind her.

"Hey, sweetheart. Better luck next time."

Erasing the blush and the emotion from her face, Monica slowly looked up.

Several men she didn't recognize were standing there, blocking the mouth of the alley. She could tell they were ruffians, and from their clothes, they appeared to be sailors from a merchant vessel. Since they were speaking Italian, it was probably a trading ship from nearby—but from the look of them, they didn't appear to be meddling sailors come to console a poor jilted girl.

"Don't you worry about that weedy bloke."

"In fact, we'd like you to come show us around town."

They were probably from a ship that was leaving port today or the following day. Even if they ended up creating trouble for themselves down the road, they'd be able to run immediately. They may have casually decided to take advantage of the situation and pick up a heartbroken girl.

But whether they were planning to seduce her with sweet talk or take her around with them by force, the sailors had chosen the wrong girl.

For one thing, Monica didn't feel the slightest bit rejected, and the men's words were more of an affront than anything.

For another—

"..."

The childish innocence disappeared from her downturned face and was

replaced by something sharp and cold.

She showed no emotion, almost as if she were wearing a mask. And yet behind that mask, her eyes held *a clear hostility*, or even something *deadlier*.

...Not that the careless sailors noticed.

“No need to worry. Unlike him, we’ll treat you right. Day or night.”

Muttering his vulgar suggestion, one of the men reached for Monica’s chest—
—and a vicious pain ran through the tip of his elbow.

“Ghk! Adwaaah?! Bloody hell?!”

Leaping away from the woman, the sailor looked at his elbow. There was blood dripping from it.

“Wha...wh-wh...what?!”

The man gripped his elbow in a panic, unsure what had happened to him.

As he groaned, confused, Monica spoke over him before he could have a moment to think.

“Oh no...! You’re hurt!”

“Dammit! What the hell is going on?! What stabbed me?!”

When the man flipped his arm over, he saw a dark-red liquid spreading over his tanned skin. This wasn’t a scratch; the wound was a deep puncture from something sharp.

“You must have caught it on something and torn it open! You should have a doctor look at that right away!”

“Huh? Uh, yeah.”

The man’s face was twisted with pain and fear. Monica looked over to the mouth of the alley, her expression grave.

“If you turn right and go on a little ways, you’ll see a doctor’s shingle! Tetanus is rampant around here, so you’d better get it treated as soon as possible, or else...”

“T-tetanus?!”

“Oy. Forget this; let’s get over to that doctor right now.”

“Dammit! How the hell did his arm...?”

The men were completely confounded by the blood and this sudden turn of events. They should be used to seeing injuries, out on the ocean or in fights, but they hadn’t been expecting this one at all, and the eeriness of bloodshed with no discernible cause seemed to have panicked them.

With no time to waste on Monica, the men set off for the doctor at a run, taking the wounded man with them.

Monica watched them go, her eyes cold. Then, as if nothing had happened, she turned on her heel and walked the other way into the alley.

That was when a young man appeared in front of her, atop a stack of barrels by the wall with the blue sky behind him. There was no telling how long he’d been standing there.

“Hi there. Your sheep’s clothing never ceases to amaze me, Moni-Moni.”

“...Elmer. You were watching?”

In an instant, Monica’s blank expression dissolved, as she pouted slightly in a youthful way.

“Aw, don’t scowl like that. You’ll scare the rest of the herd.”

There was irony in his words, but no malice in his voice. He was grinning and surrounded by a unique sense of blitheness.

The young man clapped his hands together. “Well, you escaped safely, *they didn’t figure out you were the one who hurt him*, and those fellows will get the wound taken care of at the doctor’s, so all’s well that ends well! Now smile, c’mon and smile!”

“It’s all right, Elmer.”

Monica heaved a deep sigh at his odd view of the situation, then let her frown slip away. She smiled wryly.

From within her sleeve, the tip of a stiletto briefly appeared, wet with blood.

“I’m not a fool, at least not enough for men like them to figure me out.”

The innocence she'd shown Huey, the dispassionate mask she'd worn while she dealt with the men, the slightly grown-up smile she was giving Elmer now—each one of those expressions could have come from completely different people.

But every one of them was the true nature of Monica Campanella.

She was one of the pupils who studied alchemy at the Third Library.

She had simply been the girl who'd fallen in love with Huey Laforet, a boy who didn't fit in with the rest. At least, that was what the people around her had believed until a certain incident four years ago.

Even afterward, only a handful of people knew about her multifaceted nature.

It wasn't as if she had multiple personalities. She simply had several different faces that she deliberately used in different situations.

Elmer was one of the few people in the know, but her character didn't appear to bother him one bit.

"Well, I heard there was a strange ship coming into port, so I came to see in case there was something interesting, and then I saw some men bothering you, Moni-Moni. I was shocked."

"It's not very persuasive if you smile when you say it." Monica sighed again, and Elmer grinned at her, using both his hands to pull his face out of shape.

"Aw, don't look so annoyed. Smile, smile more."

"I could fake a smile for you."

"Aww. Fake smiles are no good."

Laughing, Elmer jumped down from the mountain of barrels and thumped Monica lightly on the shoulder. "Where's Huey? Did he head home already?"

"Uh-huh. I asked him to the theater, but he told me he wasn't interested."

"Hasn't changed a bit, huh? Should I check around for a comedy that would get a smile out of him?"

"Don't bother. You don't have to force him." Monica shook her head gently, then leaned against the alley wall and looked up at the blue sky. "I like Huey just

the way he is. I love everything about him, absolutely everything. Right down to his surly temper.”

If she’d said the words in front of the object of her affections, her voice would have started shaking from awkwardness and nerves.

However, this young man, Elmer C. Albatross, was a mutual friend of Monica and Huey, and with him, she was able to say these things with startling honesty.

Any ordinary person would have been embarrassed hearing it, but Elmer just nodded. “Yeah, suppose that’s true,” he commented, then kept on listening without so much as a blush.

“...You’re lucky, Elmer. You can go up to Huey and talk to him any time you like.”

“Huh? Are you jealous of me? I know I’ve said this before, but I’m not that type of guy.”

“I can be jealous of your friendship, too, you know...” Monica stepped away from the wall, brushing the dust from her clothes, and changed the subject. “It’s already been four years since then...”

“What brought that on all of a sudden?”

“When those men were harassing me, it brought back a few memories.”

She was remembering the time when she’d first met Elmer and had grown closer to Huey.

Back then, when those Rotten Eggs tried to come after me, Huey put himself in danger to save me.

It was actually Huey whom they’d been after, and he’d only sidestepped the trouble that was being sent his way—but Monica had reinterpreted it into something more favorable and cherished the memory anyway.

“All sorts of things happened less than ten days after I first told Huey I liked him. Your arrival was one of them, Elmer.” She lowered her eyes slightly, smiling as she reminisced. “You exposed my secret, Elmer; you broke some of the walls around Huey’s heart and tried to save the town’s children... So much happened back then, didn’t it? So much has happened *since* then, too.”

“Yeah. I wonder how many smile-worthy memories there are in there.”

“But...even after four years together, we hardly know anything about one another.”

“You think?” Elmer cocked his head, perplexed, and Monica continued in a more detached tone.

“There’s still plenty I don’t know about Huey, and I don’t know about your past. Neither of you know anything about my past. Well, except for just a few things, maybe.” Gazing at the people who were passing through the alley, Monica let her memories overlap with the crowd. “I can’t even begin to imagine your past, Elmer.”

“I’ll tell you about it, if you ask me.”

“No, you mustn’t. It isn’t fair somehow. When we decide to share our secrets, let’s all do it together, all right?”

“I see. That’s an exciting prospect—it might make us smile.”

Monica stepped out of the alley then, and Elmer followed her.

She was walking far more naturally than when she’d been with Huey, but Monica’s eyes didn’t hold any of the same emotion for Elmer.

“I like you as a friend, Elmer,” she commented, as if to confirm that for both of them. “And of course I’m in love with Huey.”

“Glad to hear it. I hope Huey’s even happier about it.”

Glancing at her indifferent friend’s face, Monica giggled. The smile on her face wasn’t cynical or dark, but genuine and delighted.

Turning to face the port, her glossy hair fanning out in the sea wind, Monica began to elaborate.

“Sometimes, I think— Well, really, I shouldn’t be wishing for this at all, but...”

“Mm-hmm?”

“I wish we could stay just like this forev—”

But she abruptly broke off.

“?”

When Elmer looked her way, Monica had completely frozen, except for her hair whipping wildly in the wind.

Oddly enough, it seemed to be an accurate depiction of what was in her heart.

“Moni-Moni?”

Perplexed, Elmer circled around in front of Monica to get a better look at her face.

She was petrified, her eyes wide with shock, and her gaze was riveted on a spot in the port.

“?”

Elmer followed her line of sight and saw a ship, lying at anchor.

There were many ships in the harbor, but Elmer knew immediately which one Monica was looking at. After all, it was impossible to ignore.

Unlike the others, its entire hull was black, and it flew a strange crest with an hourglass design painted on it.

Multiple circles were arranged around the golden hourglass in a manner reminiscent of the Medici crest, which was a golden shield spangled with red balls.

“That...ship...”

“Oh yeah, that’s the one. The big ship people were saying was in port. Quite a vessel, huh? I wonder where it’s from.”

“ ...”

“That hourglass crest makes it look kinda like a pirate ship.”

In this era, the ubiquitous skull-and-crossbones flag hadn’t yet become mainstream among pirates. Each ship flew a standard of its own design, and one frequent motif was the hourglass, a threat that meant “you are out of time.”

A little later on, the pirate known as Blackbeard would allegedly fly an

hourglass standard, which would rapidly raise its visibility.

Because Blackbeard's flag also featured a skull, the hourglass and skull would become widely recognized as pirate symbols. However, in this era, when Blackbeard's piratical career hadn't yet begun, this was no more than minor trivia known only to curious people like Elmer.

"Wh...why...?"

It wasn't clear whether she'd even heard Elmer's well-informed comments. The way Monica was staring and murmuring at that hourglass crest, one might think she was about to become a victim of pirates herself, believing the symbol was a warning meant for her.

Her face was pale.

Her lips trembled slightly, and her eyes were wide-open, unblinking.

Elmer knew about Monica's various "true natures," but this was an expression even he had never seen before.

"What's the matter, Moni-Moni?"

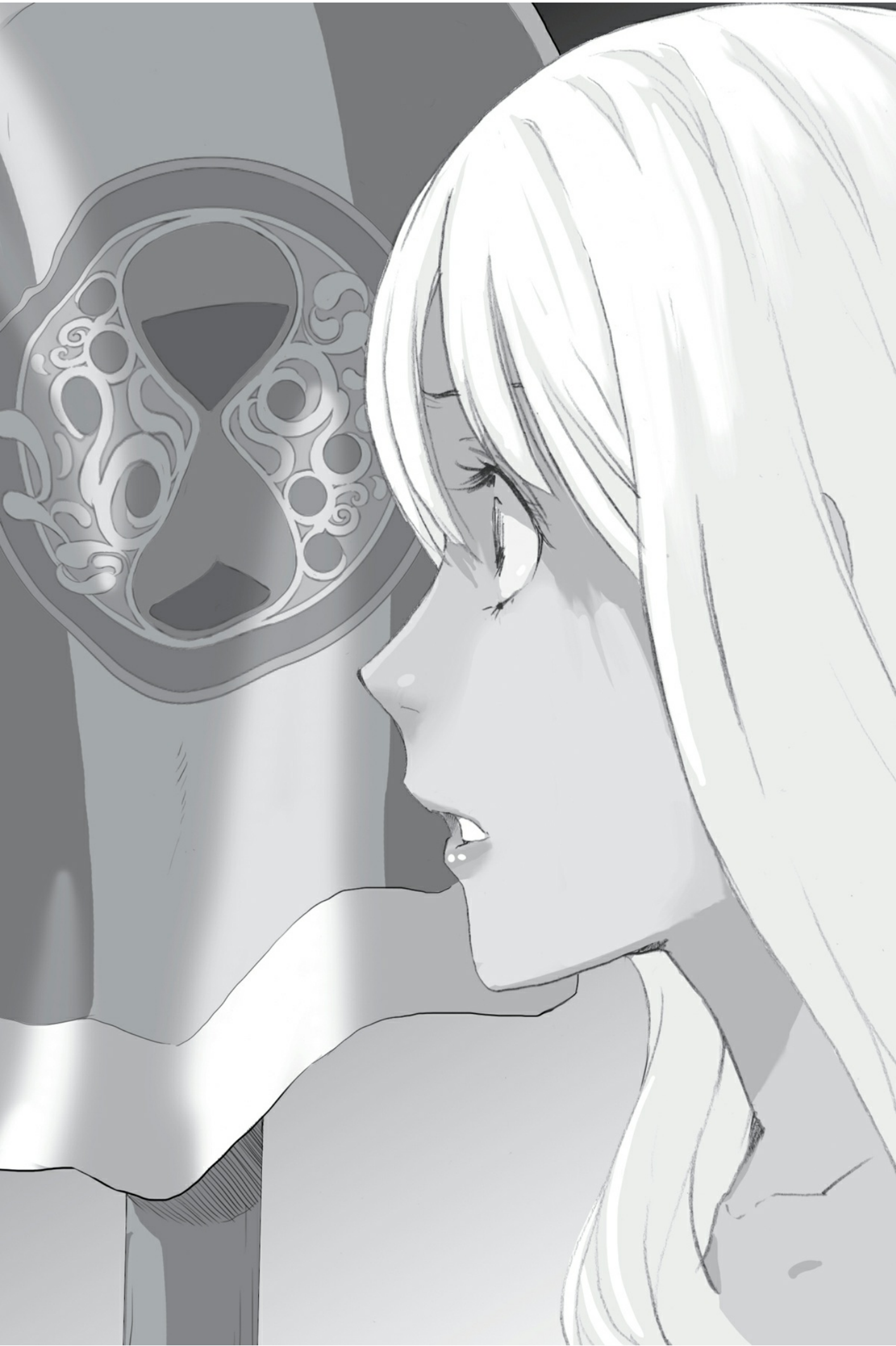
Elmer's smile vanished. Worried, he shook Monica's shoulder, but she still didn't answer him.

Sinking weakly to her knees, she murmured, "Why...here...?"

...And that was all.

Elmer knew the word for the emotion on her face.

It was *despair*.





Meanwhile The port

“How do you even describe it? Just looking up at that behemoth makes you lose all hope, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed. Although, to those on board, I imagine it’s the safest fortress imaginable.”

Looking at the enormous ship, which seemed very much like a battleship, the townspeople were whispering to one another in fright. Had the ravages of war finally reached their town?

Listening to the tumult behind him, Jean-Pierre spoke to Lebreau, who was by his side.

“I came because you said there was something you wanted to show me. What’s the point of bringing me here to frighten me? Are you telling me to write a play about a war next? Or am I supposed to create a poem protesting war and extolling the virtues of peace?”

“I would never try to influence the direction of your work, Maestro. Besides, this is not a battleship.”

“Huh? Isn’t it?”

Jean briefly thought he might have erroneously assumed the daunting, enormous, black-painted hull belonged to a warship, but—there were several dozen gun ports in the ship’s side... He drew his eyebrows together in a frown.

“It’s quite obviously a man-of-war.”

“Physically, yes, but it isn’t actually being used in combat. This ship is in the service of a certain Spanish aristocrat. The gun ports are merely for use on escort missions.”

“And if this ship were propelled by oars, would you call it a canoe?”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

Lebreau laughed, and Jean asked another question that was on his mind.

“What’s a ship like this doing here? We’re in the middle of a war. Wouldn’t

the state have commandeered it from its owners by now and put it to work in the navy?”

“I hear the House of Dormентаire has already ‘donated’ several battleships. While their name is not famous, they are one of the most powerful wealthy families in Europe, along with England’s Mars Clan. It’s said their power rivals that of the Medici Family of ages past.”

“And it all comes down to money. I have so many choice words, I hardly know where to start.”

“If it inspires your creative urges, Maestro, nothing could be better.”

Lebreau’s blend of respect and casual friendliness put Jean in a fine mood.

It had been more than two years since they had first met, and their friendship had only grown since then. Jean still didn’t know much about alchemy, and he had no desire to learn. They only met about once a month, and Maiza, who was studying under Dalton, may have had more opportunities to come into contact with Lebreau.

However, Lebreau managed to light a fire under him every time they met, and his influence had definitely widened the focus of Jean’s works.

“Come to think of it, I hear your lot is going to be moving to this town.”

“You’ve heard right. The war has gradually begun to affect our own town, you see... Besides, now that our master is dead, the libraries here are more convenient for research, in many ways.”

“Is everyone coming here, then? Even the servants?”

“Yes. After all, a few of the young ones are originally from here. That said, some of them don’t have very pleasant memories of it...” His tone suggested there was more to the story than that, but Jean decided not to press him.

At present, to Jean, Lebreau was a fan who respected him, a friend, and a partner who gave him ideas.

At first, he had felt as though he was handing off most of the responsibility for his works to someone else, but the acclaim from the people around him cleared that misgiving from his mind.

Now, Lebreau Fermet Viralesque was a solid part of poet Jean-Pierre Accardo's daily life.

"But tell me, Lebreau. What is an eminent nobleman's ship doing in a town full of libraries? It doesn't seem as though it's stopped in to replenish its water and food stores."

In response to this completely natural question, Lebreau nodded lightly.

"I do think their choice of vessel was somewhat excellent, but...

"...I hear they're looking for someone."



Meanwhile The northeast area of town

As one moved into Lotto Valentino from the sea, the altitude increased sharply.

The district in which the aristocrats lived was a little higher than the rest of the town, so that their fine residences could overlook those of the common people. At the highest point was an enormous mansion. Anyone who hadn't seen how great aristocrats lived in other cities might mistake the building for a royal palace.

Under Spanish rule, this region certainly wasn't wealthy—but the structure's majestic facade was enough to make one temporarily forget the economic situation.

The white mansion was surrounded by a landscaped garden that harmonized with the vista of the town, creating a view that twice overwhelmed its visitors; the ivory fortress rose out of a garden that was a riot of flowers and grandeur.

Inside that residence, many servants worked diligently, and even their subtly precise etiquette became part of the decor adding to the mansion's magnificence.

If there was just one thing that was worthy of special mention, it was that, of the mansion's many servants...

...over 90 percent were women.

"Your Excellency, your guests have arrived," declared the butler, one of the

few male servants here.

In response, a man who had been leaning back in the chair in his office lazily said, “The Dormентаire hounds, I suppose. I’d really prefer to run them off... Could we come up with a suitable ploy, do you think?”

The man looked peculiar. The clothes he wore did seem “aristocratic” enough for a master of this mansion, but only in the sense that they were tailored from appropriately luxurious fabrics.

In terms of age, he was probably not yet thirty. He wore a *habit à la française*—formal wear modeled after the French style—made from thin cloth. The coat was accented with tasteful jeweled ornaments, while its back was embroidered with a single large symbol from a foreign script, as a crest.

If someone who knew had seen it, they would have recognized it as the Chinese character meaning “fire,” but a viewer who didn’t know would assume it was probably just a design and leave it at that.

Unusually for an aristocrat, the man wasn’t wearing a peruke—a noble’s wig—nor had he applied the cloth moles known as *mouches* that were fashionable among the European nobility. Instead, he wore a particularly dramatic tricorn hat pulled down low on his head, and below each of his wide, owlsh eyes, he’d drawn small stars with cosmetic ink in lieu of beauty spots.

There were dark circles under his wide eyes, and it wasn’t clear whether he wasn’t getting enough sleep or had drawn them there on purpose.

On the stage of a theater, he would have been taken for an avant-garde sort of clown, but he was the aristocrat who lived in the highest spot in town and simultaneously held the highest rank.

Esperanza Boroñal.

He was a noble who held the title of count in the Spanish dynasty that controlled Naples, and he ruled this small city as his territory. His unique appearance had made him a laughingstock in the home country, where they called him the Clown Count.

As a rule, the town of Lotto Valentino should have fallen under the jurisdiction of the viceroy of Naples, but due to a unique situation, an exception

had been made, and this town belonged to the count.

Even after Austria occupied Naples, this hadn't changed. The base of supervision had only shifted from Naples to a different city in Spain, and this man managed his domain as a special, self-governing territory.

Rumor had it that the House of Boroñal had been considered a nuisance back home, and the count had been sent here to get rid of him. Given his eccentricities, that explanation was enough for the townspeople.

"Tell them I have been afflicted by an incurable illness that affects only men and that if I meet a man, I shall explode and die. Then whoever is showered with my blood and flesh will catch the plague and die as well."

The Clown Count's proposal was insane, but the butler didn't look the least bit perturbed.

"No, Your Excellency. Such an excuse would do nothing."

"You can't say that unless we try it. No, wait a moment... Yes, we'll have to try it before we know for sure. How can you declare it meaningless with such certainty? What is life? A series of challenges, nothing more; without challenge, life is stagnant and no better than death. You must believe! Trust that the other is fool enough to take our noble lie seriously and run right back home!"

The count's second reply was even worse, but the butler didn't lecture him on it. Instead, he gave a more rational reason.

"First, if you do indeed suffer from such an affliction, one might wonder why I am unaffected when I deliver the message. More importantly—

"—the envoy from the House of Dormентаire is a woman."

In the next instant, Esperanza bolted from his chair, leaping to his feet like a spring-loaded doll.

"Why didn't you say that first?! Good lord, I've kept her waiting nearly two minutes already!"

Even as he spoke, he was taking advantage of a nearby mirror to briskly straighten his clothes and hair before he greeted his guest in person.

Esperanza was a peerless lover of women, which was why Maiza and some of

the aristocrats called him a lecher and libertine. Of course, the town was teeming with womanizing aristocrats, but Esperanza was on a different scale.

Not only were the vast majority of the servants at his mansion women, but it was fair to say he loved all those women equally. That said, he wasn't spending every night in debauchery. He had a propensity that was very hard for those around him to understand: Simply watching women made him happy.

When other aristocrats came to the mansion, he was so far gone that he'd tell them, *I want you to think of the words of every woman in this mansion as my own*. This had made him the subject of ridicule not only in his home country, but by the town's nobles as well.

However—there were also rumors that he'd dueled several other aristocrats over matters involving women back in his home country, and no one was willing to disparage a woman in front of him.

"It's my sincere pleasure to meet you, honorable Lord Boroñal. I am called Carla Alvarez Santoña, and I have been sent by the House of Dormентаire."

The woman who introduced herself in the entrance hall seemed to be in her early twenties.

She had regular features, but her sharp eyes and dignified bearing made her seem two or three years older than she actually was.

Her overly polite tone wasn't the only thing about her that was unusual for a woman of the times. The way she dressed was odd as well.

Her tan skin was covered by what appeared to be a man's military uniform. Thanks to that and her rather short hair, when seen from a distance—particularly from the back—she was extremely easy to mistake for a man. However, this did not apply to individuals like Esperanza, who immediately identified her as a woman from her hips.

That said, it was true that she dressed in such a way that she seemed to be half hoping to be mistaken for a man. The sword at her hip gave her an imposing air, and if she'd bound her slightly rounded chest to flatten it, she would probably have been given the full title of "a beauty in male costume."

For the time, she was quite a rare woman, the sort you'd never see outside a

theater. Even so, the clownish Esperanza didn't seem at all taken aback. He spoke to her as he would have to any other female guest.

"It's a pleasure, Carla. I am Esperanza Boroñal. I pray your visit will end in a way that brings you happiness."

"..."

For just a moment, uncertainty entered Carla's sharp eyes, and Esperanza asked her, "Is something the matter?"

"No, it's nothing," she replied tersely.

Nervous, Esperanza pressed her further.

"If I've said something discourteous, I do apologize."

Esperanza's attitude was not that of a town lord, and perhaps that was why Carla told him what was on her mind honestly.

"No, I've been discourteous to you. When people first see me, I expect to get strange looks or curious glances. You did nothing of the sort, Lord Boroñal, and so I was startled. That's all."

"You give me too much credit. I often direct strange looks at the women of this world...along with astonished incredulity over how a being so lovely could have been born here."

"Stop, please. Your words are too kind for someone as lowborn as I am."

"There's no need to disparage yourself. In any case, what other reason could anyone have to look at you strangely?"

At Esperanza's words, Carla narrowed her keen eyes, searching his face. But she could find no hint of intended sarcasm.

She exhaled slightly.

It's astonishing. He really is as eccentric as the rumors say.

Carla belonged to a family that had been in the service of the House of Dormентаire for many long years.

In particular, the family had produced many guards for the Dormentaires. While she was a woman, her character—which, from childhood, had been

manlier than that of many men—and a variety of other circumstances had earned her a position as a guard. Of course, back then, very few men would have gladly obeyed a female commander. As a result, she did not have her own team of guards, and her job was primarily to protect the ladies of the family in places where only women were allowed.

During this mission, she had been chosen as the envoy precisely because the people of the House of Dormентаire were familiar with Esperanza's personality.

No matter how many stories she heard, she'd written him off as nothing more than a lecherous, womanizing noble, but upon actually meeting him, she realized she'd been treating the clown-like Esperanza with contempt. When she understood he was dealing with her with no judgment whatsoever, she felt ashamed.

"I am dressed as a man, after all, and that tends to draw attention."

She had her own reasons for presenting the way she did, but she'd never dreamed she'd end up having to say this sort of thing herself. She wasn't sure how to feel.

So, attempting to center herself in her devotion to her job, she returned to the facts.

"I'll be honest with you. If I am successful in the mission I have been assigned by the House of Dormентаire, the results may not be to your liking, Lord Boroñal."



“What do you mean?”

Esperanza looked perplexed, and Carla spoke with utter calm.

“I have been tasked with locating a certain criminal. It will mean opening your old wounds and proving the villain has been hiding comfortably here, in your town.”

At that, Esperanza exhaled slightly and murmured, half to himself.

“I see. I did think that might be the case...”

Whether or not she’d heard, Carla spoke with dignity and named the target of her search.

“The murderer who killed your parents, as well as the oldest son of Lord Dormентаire...and your younger sister, Maribel Boroñal. One who must be held accountable for crimes against both our houses.”



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

At the time, the House of Dormентаire was merely an anomaly in the town.

Many Lotto Valentinians already treated even the crews of regular merchant ships as outsiders, and great nobles from Spain were nothing more than an annoying disruption to our lives.

So I thought the same as well.

However, as I write this letter, I have come to a different conclusion.

The anomaly was the town of Lotto Valentino itself.

On the Italian Peninsula, on this continent of the world—

—Lotto Valentino was no more than an oddity that had resigned itself to a gentle isolation.

Thus, while I idolized the outside world, I may have loathed my own land.

Back then, I never even had an inkling of the hatred in my heart, but when I look back over the poems I had written, my disdain for the world pours from the page!

...But I digress.

The reality of the House of Dormентаire's abrupt arrival in our town smeared it with illusions and lies.

The people of Lotto Valentino were frightened.

Due to the 1705 incident, many people had been jailed, and the townspeople had only recently awakened to a great fear of aristocrats and the military. That fear may seem incredibly lukewarm in comparison to the terror experienced in the war-torn regions—but as I said previously, this town was rather exceptional, and its people had once been regarded as heroes.

It had still only been a few years since that common sense—or rather, uncommon sense—had been overturned. When that enormous man-of-war appeared in port, how their unsteady hearts must have shuddered...

However...the moment Lebreau led me to set eyes on that ship—I could feel the winds of hope blowing.

As I gazed at its eighty gun ports, anticipation stirred in my heart of hearts.

Just as Maiza sought enough power to change this world in an immortal body...

Just as a fledgling alchemist had accumulated a fortune in order to destroy the world...

Just as a young woman had tried to rend the thin film keeping her from her beloved...

Just as the deviant who sought smiles from everyone tried to gain happiness for himself by creating it in others...

Just as the guard dog who had sworn loyalty to her master took immense pride in her fangs and her chain...

Just as the aristocrat reviled as a clown genuinely wished for the happiness of the opposite sex...

...I spied a definite hope in the “change” that battleship brought. I saw a foothold that would help me start toward those wishes and hopes.

People live with some sort of hope in mind, and as they live, they bite into the rope that leads down the path they desire.

Many panic, bite in, and sever the rope themselves, despite this being a driving force behind creation.

Even those who have realized there is no hope expect that their hopeless days will continue uninterrupted by worse fortunes. Or if not, they look forward to being released from those dull days by their deaths.

Whatever the case may be, what I felt then was hope.

I hoped the ship would stir up a new wind in the town, that surprise and joy like the sort I'd experienced upon first seeing an immortal in 1707 might breathe new life into my community.

Naturally, I did not intend to place the whole of my hopes in others. I wanted that enthusiasm to spread across the world, but the wind can only spread a fire if fire already exists. Generating its first spark was the mission I had been given.

I was so conceited. I thought I had power that could change the world, just because I'd been given a little praise.

Although...I suppose a script I wrote did change the world in its own way.

It shattered the lives of a bare handful of people.

The results were completely unlike anything I had wished for.

That is why I decided to leave these memoirs behind.

Yes, as you may already have realized, they are not a collection of strange stories about immortals and other mysteries I have seen.

Had they been so, I would hardly think to hide them after I finished writing them. As I write now, I have had no change of heart, and after I have finished setting everything down on paper, I doubt my resolution will be reversed.

This is the confession of a sinner, and of a criminal.

There is an ancient myth of a barber who screamed the secret of the king's donkey ears into an old well. I am both that barber, and the king himself.

Should this secret get out, no doubt I will execute myself.

Yours is the role of the old well. You are here to listen to my secret.

I care not what you do with these memoirs. You may spread them across the world or keep them locked inside your heart.

That said, I do not believe my heart is as generous as that of the donkey-eared king, or that I am capable of forgiving myself.

That is why I will hide this letter.

I do not know whether the fable of the donkey-eared king still exists in the era in which you have found this. I cannot guarantee the metaphor will have made sense to you. However...

...I committed a crime, make no mistake.

The grave crime, for which I can never fully atone, of exposing a hidden truth to the world.

CHAPTER 3

**“I BET HE’S JUST
LOVESICK.”**



CHAPTER 3

"I BET HE'S JUST LOVESICK."

1709 A storehouse near the port of Lotto Valentino The street of storehouses was a good distance from the market, despite still being in the port, so it was quiet here.

No ships were moored nearby, leaving the place a bit lonely.

Farther away from the water, there was an old storehouse. Hardly any goods were kept inside it, and the warehouse seemed like part of a ghost town—but there were living quarters on its second floor, and the conversation inside it was too cheerful for the surroundings.

"Wanna go sneak onto that ship? It'll be fun, I'm sure!"

The owner of the voice wasn't the one who lived in this storehouse, however.

Meanwhile, the young man who *did* live here sounded exasperated.

"That doesn't sound like fun."

"Aww."

"Don't give me that. Stop."

"Awwwww," Elmer whined like a child, while Huey Laforet sighed heavily.

"Think about what you're going to say before you say it. Considering this logically: Why should we have to sneak onto that ship just because it gave Monica a shock?"

Monica hadn't been feeling well, and after Elmer had walked her home, he'd gone straight to Huey's house, described her reaction, and immediately suggested raiding the ship.

"Maybe we'd find something that would set her mind at ease, you know?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You don't even know why Monica reacted like that in the

first place, do you?”

“Of course not!”

“Your confidence on that point is less than helpful.”

Huey had been reading a book while he dealt with the other boy, but he shut it and slowly looked at Elmer.

The smile junkie’s face was filled with innocent joy, as always, and he didn’t seem to notice anything amiss about what he’d said.

“Yeah, I dunno the reason, but it was hard to ask her about it. Well, more like she wouldn’t tell me if I did ask, so I figured it’d be faster to check into it on my own.”

“...Sometimes, I have to respect your optimism.”

Giving a very small, wry smile, Huey quietly shook his head.

If one of Huey’s acquaintances aside from Elmer and Monica had seen that smile, they might have been a bit confused. Normally, he wore an agreeable smile to fool those around them, or no expression at all.

He almost never showed such human emotion, and it was likely there were only three people in the town—and maybe not even that many—who could coax it out of him. Elmer was used to his smile by now.

And without changing that expression, Huey continued with his negativity.

“In the first place, we don’t know whether Monica was afraid of what was on that ship or not. Maybe she has some trauma associated with battleships. Or with black ships.”

“But I think she said something like ‘Why here?’ so I’m betting it was the gilded hourglass crest on that ship.”

“Still. That’s no reason to sneak onto a battleship. What if Monica doesn’t want anyone bringing up that part of her past? If we expose things she’d rather keep hidden, we’ll only make it worse for her.”

Huey’s theory sounded plausible, and Elmer cocked his head.

“Huh? If that happens, we can just pretend we didn’t see it and forget all

about it, right?”

“...Ever the optimist.” Huey sighed deeply and leaned against the backrest of his chair until it creaked.

Picking up an odd implement that sat on his desk, he began fiddling with it in front of Elmer.

“What’s that?”

Elmer peered at it with interest, and Huey slipped the device onto his hand. Several thin tubes extended from one end of the object, running down into a leather bag that he wore on his hip.

“It’s the equipment for a little magic trick.”

Huey got to his feet, put some distance between himself and any stacks of paper or books, then waved his hand toward empty space. A small mass of flames bloomed from his hand, blazed up for just a moment in midair, then vanished. The cause seemed impossible to explain.

“Whoa!!” Elmer yelped at the sudden flash of red in the air.

Ignoring him, Huey closed his hand around the odd device.

The implement itself wasn’t that large, and if one only looked at the back of his hand, it couldn’t be seen at all. Checking to see how it felt to wear, Huey murmured to himself.

“...Now I just have to combine it with a gauntlet or something.”

“Wha...? That’s amazing! How’d you do that?! It’s magic!”

Elmer’s eyes were sparkling. Turning his back to him, Huey returned to his seat in the chair.

“It’s nothing impressive. I was wondering whether I could recreate Greek fire, so I mixed naphtha with several materials and created a combustible fuel. This device spits it out and ignites it... It’s just a toy, though.”

As Huey fiddled with his dangerous “toy,” Elmer clapped his hands and laid on the praise.

“Wow, that’s amazing! I’m really impressed you could build it without getting

discouraged!”

Greek fire was an incendiary weapon that had been used in the Roman Empire several centuries earlier, made with “burning water.” The mysterious substance was said to be impossible to recreate, but many alchemists were independently trying to find the recipe.

Setting aside the question of whether Huey’s invention was actually Greek fire, most boys below the age of twenty didn’t build such things.

For most alchemists, if they had seen Huey’s technical prowess, they would probably have tried to figure out where it came from. Was it due to Dalton and Renee’s lessons, or was it his own talent?

But at least one novice alchemist didn’t care which it was and simply kept complimenting him.

“That’s just like you, Huey! You love building your contraptions, don’t you?”

“...Hmph.”

“You do use fire a lot, though, both in your research and in your creations. Do you think you’ve got a fixation?”

“...No, nothing like that. It’s just the first thing I happened to start working on, so it only looks that way,” Huey answered brusquely, but he was lying.

Privately, he did have an idea of why that might be.

The witch hunts in the village where he used to live had been brutal.

His mother had been suspected of being a witch, tried, and ultimately killed.

However, she hadn’t been burned at the stake. She had risked her life to accuse her fellow villagers, and Huey had witnessed their many executions with his young eyes. He would never forget the screams of the girl he once adored as she burned.

Was his obsession with fire based in fear? Was it a reminder of his hatred toward the villagers who had accused his mother of witchcraft? Or did the memory of her enemies burning bring him pleasure?

Even he didn’t understand the current of his own emotions. If he ever did

destroy the world, though, he hoped razing it with fire might be an appropriate method.

After all, to Huey Laforet, the world itself was something like a witch.

He had been trapped by the deep-seated delusion that it would be appropriate to burn it at the stake. As time passed, however, that thought had faded somewhat.

One of the culprits for that change clapped his hands at Huey in sudden realization.

“All right! You use your magic trick to startle the guards, while I’ll sneak onto the ship. How’s that?!”

“If you need a commotion, it would be faster to just start a small fire with some straw or something.”

Huey’s remark was its own sort of dangerous, and Elmer nodded in understanding.

“But just a little bit of straw, so it won’t hurt anybody, then. After all, if the fire spreads and a house burns or somebody dies, we won’t be able to smile.”

“Nobody said we were doing this. And why should I help anyway?”

“Well, you’d hate for Moni-Moni to kill herself, wouldn’t you?”

“...You know, for an optimist, you say things like that very easily... Wait, you think Monica’s death would bother me?” Huey was smirking impudently.

“Sure do,” Elmer told him.

“Why?”

“Because right now, *your smile stopped being real*. That’s all.”

“...”

One of Elmer’s special skills was seeing through faked smiles.

He just couldn’t get enough of other people’s smiles, and the skill might have been inevitable after so many years of observation. To people who weren’t in the know, he was so accurate that it seemed like mind reading or a kind of magic.

“...”

Huey was silent.

Setting a hand on his shoulder, Elmer smiled quietly. “Besides, you may pretend to keep pushing Moni-Moni away, but you’re being remarkably honest. You almost never show your true self to anyone.”

“Don’t act so smug. What do you know anyway?”

“Well, *I know what your own eyes can’t tell you.* Obviously.”

“...Quit splitting hairs.”

The wry smile was back on Huey’s face, and silence fell again for a little while.

Without revealing what it was he felt for Monica, he outlined his own course of action.

“For now, we’ll see what happens tomorrow. I’ll make up my mind after I’ve seen Monica myself.”

“What if she skips school?”

“...If that happens, I’ll go visit her. I’ll make up some excuse about seeing how she’s feeling.”

Huey’s answer made Elmer’s smile even brighter.

“Huh! See?! You *do* like Moni-Moni! That’s not an excuse; you’ll just be going to check on her, right?”

As his friend ribbed him, Huey wiped any emotion off his face, looked away, and muttered: “Whether I like her or not isn’t the question here.”

“*As long as we are the Mask Makers* —for all practical purposes, both you and I share Monica’s destiny.”



Huey Laforet.

Elmer C. Albatross.

Monica Campanella.

The three were Dalton’s pupils and students of alchemy at the Third Library.

At the same time, they shared a certain secret.

The Mask Maker.

They were *affiliated with* the serial killer who had once terrorized the town.

That said, neither Elmer nor Huey had actually murdered anyone. Their association had begun with Monica, who had acted in secret as the Mask Maker for her own reasons, serving as a witness to the suicides of a certain group of people.

However, after an incident in 1705, the Mask Maker had joined forces with Huey's counterfeit operation to become a single organization.

Of course, the only ones who knew this were these three, and Huey directed the creation of the false gold from the shadows without revealing his own identity.

Elmer hadn't done a thing, but he was the one who had allowed Monica and Huey to see each other beneath their masks, and he had become the glue that held them together. Even now, several years later, their odd relationship as the Mask Makers still existed.

The 1705 incident had exposed the town's dark side, and the abuses against the children were finally rectified.

After that, Huey had avoided participating in the creation of the counterfeit gold directly, but he seemed to be pulling quite a few strings from the shadows. Elmer knew this, but he didn't try to butt in.

Instead, he kept saying, *If you have to scheme, at least scheme to help everyone smile*, until it had nearly become his catchphrase. At first, Huey had been irritated, but over the past few years, that had softened into an exasperated smile.

It wasn't clear whether he'd noticed this change in himself.

He simply maintained his identity as a student at Dalton's private school, just as he'd always done, without inquiring into either of his friends' pasts.

Today, once again, he made his way to the Third Library.

"Oh, honestly! I'm really sorry about yesterday, Elmer. I just started feeling

sick all of a sudden. I wonder if there was something bad in my lunch.”

In a corner of the private collection room where their lectures were held, Monica smiled cheerfully.

The lessons hadn’t begun yet, and the teacher, Renee Parmedes Branvillier, was absent.

Monica and Elmer were conversing at a table that could seat several people.

Ever smiling, Elmer tried to dig a little deeper.

“Huh? But you said, ‘Why here?’”

“I meant, *Why did I start feeling nauseous as soon as I got here?*” Monica answered easily, and even to Elmer, her smile didn’t seem like a fake. It was perfectly genuine.

Sitting alone by the window a short distance away, Huey was watching Monica and Elmer. As he flipped through a book, he stole glances at them out of the corner of his eye.

At first, there didn’t seem to be any problems—but something felt off to him.

That smile was definitely Monica’s real one. If she’d been faking it, Elmer would have tactlessly pointed it out by now.

However, something did indeed seem different from usual.

What is it? What’s different?

With his eyes on his book, Huey thought on this for a little while.

Nothing occurred to him, but he couldn’t get rid of that sense that something wasn’t quite right.

.....

It might be safe to ignore, but that discomfort still churned near the base of his neck. He glanced at Monica, one last time.

She was chatting with Elmer and the other students, and nothing seemed markedly different.

However—Huey noticed it then.

That in itself was clearly strange.

He'd been watching Monica for a while now, but she wasn't turning his way.

Ordinarily, whenever Huey happened to glance at her, he invariably caught her paying attention to him. Even when she was talking to other people, or when they were in the middle of a lecture.

It had happened just a few days earlier, in fact, and he remembered being impressed. *It's incredible that she can look at someone's face for almost five years without getting tired of it.*

By coincidence, she was going a long time without so much as glancing at him.

Common sense told him there was probably nothing behind it, but it was also true that the odd sense of wrongness had formed a stagnant patch in his heart. He considered speaking to her, just to check, but— “All right, thank you for wait — Eeeek?!” A woman shrieked before she could finish her laid-back greeting, forcibly ending the pleasant chatter in the room.

The individual who had snagged her own chest on a pile of books and made a spectacular mess in the private collection room was a female alchemist with glasses and a voluptuous figure.

A few giggles rose from the class in response to the woman, who happened to be their teacher.

Huey didn't even smile. He sighed, deciding that talking to Monica would wait.

He took one last look at her, but as before, he didn't manage to make eye contact.

As a matter of fact, Monica seemed to be intentionally not looking his way.

“And so you see, for bismuth, if you apply the method for inducing amalgamation during the refining stage—”

Renee was explaining something technical.

As the lesson went on in the usual way, Huey decided he'd do as he always did, too. He let Renee's lecture go in one ear and out the other, dividing his attention between the view outside the window and the book in his hand.

After this had gone on for a while...

When he focused on the library's front gate, he saw people who didn't seem to belong there.

Soldiers?

The men wore sharp uniforms, and they were walking with their shoulders thrown back.

...No, the one in the lead... Is that a woman?

He'd based his judgment on her slightly rounded bosom and her facial features, but from where he was, he couldn't be sure. His eyes were good, but he couldn't state categorically that he wasn't seeing things.

Well, I don't suppose a woman would be going around dressed like that.

As Huey came to a commonsense conclusion, something occurred to him.

They don't look like the city police.

But I don't think those are official military uniforms, either...

What in the world are they doing here?

A faint alarm began to sound in his mind as a memory rose to the surface.

Four years ago, the school's students had been falsely accused of being the Mask Maker and had very nearly been arrested.

Of course, it hadn't exactly been a false charge in every case.

...I guess I'll keep an eye on them.

He mentally mapped out escape routes, but the private collection room was on the second floor.

Planning for the worst-case scenario of jumping out the window, he kept his eyes on the door.

In the end, nothing happened before the end of the lecture. Wondering whether his nerves might be a bit strained, Huey looked over at Monica again.

As before, she didn't look his way.

...

What is it?

What am I thinking?

Her annoying gaze wasn't there anymore. That was all this was.

He was a bit irritated with himself for feeling so intensely that something was wrong over a matter so trivial.

Ridiculous. You'd think I was the one who had Monica on my mind.

As far as Huey Laforet was concerned, the whole world was his enemy. Fundamentally, that thought hadn't changed since he was fifteen.

Right now, he was searching for ways to take sufficient revenge on the world, and what it would take to satisfy him. If the answer happened to be *mass carnage*, he'd probably do it without hesitation... no matter the consequences for him afterward.

He'd recorded the names of the people he'd met so far in a book in his heart.

Each of those names was labeled as an enemy.

These delusions were not unthinkable for an adolescent boy, but in his case, his experiences had made those delusions more of a reality.

However—after one specific incident, the word *enemy* was absent from Monica's and Elmer's pages.

What exactly were the two of them to him? Were they enemies like the rest, or were they allies who were worth spending his life with from now on? Huey wasn't sure yet, either.

Maybe it was foolish to divide the world into groups as simple as enemies and allies.

Yet, Huey didn't care whether he was foolish. It was just a reason why he had to be very careful in categorizing them.

Even now, after several years had passed, he still hadn't decided how he should treat them.

In fact, he'd nearly forgotten about finding labels for them in the first place.

...It can't be.

Huey had picked up on that change in himself, but he'd forced it into the depths of his heart.

I don't find the ambiguity...comfortable, do I?

But...what is this, then? The end result of my transformation?

Once, Huey had felt a premonition. Ever since Elmer had come to this town, he'd suspected something inside him might change.

Had that suspicion become reality?

No, thinking about that can wait.

He gave a little sigh. Their break had begun, so he started toward Monica, who was talking with Elmer and the others.

"Say, Monica."

"Huh? ...Huey! What's the matter?!"

When he called Monica's name, she gave him her usual bashful smile, but Huey couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. If he could have logically explained exactly what was different, the irritation would probably have gone away, but the only words he could come up with were *it just is*. It irked him.

Not a shred of this irritation showed in his blank expression.

"I heard you weren't feeling well after we parted ways yesterday. Are you all right?"

"Huh?! Oh, for goodness' sake! Did Elmer tell you?! Honestly! Elmer, you blabbermouth!"

Monica turned to Elmer, who was sitting next to her, and pummeled his shoulders. To Huey, the childish gesture looked like a feint intended to hide her true feelings.

"I just felt a little icky, really! Don't worry!"

"I see... And you're all right now?"

"Uh-huh, I'm just fine!" Monica chirped.

Huey fell silent for a short while. In the space of those few moments, he glanced at the ceiling, the wall, and Elmer. Finally, he looked back at Monica with newfound resolve.

“You mentioned having a connection at the theater yesterday. Could we take advantage of that today?”

“?” Still smiling, Monica cocked her head, bewildered.

“I’m interested now,” Huey explained. “Do you want to go see that new play together?”

“...!” Her eyes went wide in astonishment.

She wasn’t the only one. All hell broke loose among the others in the private collection room, a mixture of everything from ten-year-old girls to young men around twenty.

(“Hey, did you hear that?!”)

(“Huey... Huey just asked Monica out! All by himself!”)

(“What’s gotten into him? He never seemed to care about her before.”)

(“That oblivious bookworm finally accepted her feelings!”)

(“Oh, Monica, well done, you! I’m so happy for you!”)

(“Dammit! I was hoping Monica would give up on him someday, and I was gonna be right there waiting!”)

(“Elmer, Elmer! What’s the matter with Huey?! Is he sick?!”)

(“Is it terminal?!”)

(“Nah, I bet he’s just lovesick! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”)

(“Oh, come on... First, that ship comes to port, and now even Huey’s lost his mind.”)

(“What does this mean for the town...?”)

(“Should we report this to Maestro Archangelo?”)

(“Maybe Maestra Renee will strip.”)

(“Yeah, let’s make it happen! Elmer, can you get her to?!”)

("...Maybe she'll do it for us if we make the room really, really warm! The guys will all smile, and once Reyney's cooled down, she'll smile, too... Incredible! It's a perfect smile plan! I'm overwhelmed!")

("No, wait! I think if we just begged her, she'd do it for free!")

When he heard the commotion, Huey's expression froze.

Th-these people...

Apparently, his indifference toward his fellow fledgling alchemists was not mutual, and they were deeply invested in his relationship with Monica. They had been ready to give up after nothing had changed in four years, but here came this sudden development. They had been caught off guard, and the situation seemed to strike them as a rare type of entertainment.

...Wait, have they been calling me an oblivious bookworm behind my back?

Forcing himself to stay calm, at least outwardly, Huey looked around at the other students. The content of the commotion was already shifting to Renee, and he grabbed Elmer out of the fray by the scruff of his neck.

His face still blank, he hissed into Elmer's ear. "...Why are you taking part in this like that's the normal thing to do?"

"C'mon, don't be like that. If you're too touchy, they'll change your nickname from 'oblivious bookworm' to 'tetchy bookworm.'"

"That nickname came from you?!"

"Course not; I used 'oblivious bunny.' It just got changed to 'bookworm' somewhere along the way," Elmer explained blandly, and Huey, still expressionless, was ready to throttle him one-handed.

However, conscious of all the eyes on them, he promptly released him and turned back to Monica.

"...Well, Monica? What do you think? It's up to you."

"Um... Th-the thing is, it depends on the day, so today won't work. Next week should be perfect, though!"

"I see."

Huey had intended to go that very day, and he felt a little let down. He started to return to his seat—but then he realized he was the focus of everyone’s curious stares. Cursing them internally, he left the classroom without another word.

“Oh! Huey, wait!”

Monica hastily followed him out the classroom.

After the two were gone—the babble in the private collection room started up again.

(“...Did they just elope?!”)

(“I bet they’ll skip the afternoon lecture.”)

(“I wanna skip, too. Maestro Archangelo’s giving that one, right?”)

(“I wish it was Maestra Renee...”)

(“Hey, Huey left because he was embarrassed, right, Elmer?”)

(“Of course!”)

(“He acts like he doesn’t care, but I guess Monica really was on his mind.”)

(“It’s just like Elmer said. He does have a human side!”)

(“He said Huey was just a little shy, that’s all!”)

(“So, if everything goes well with Monica, let’s all smile and congratulate them!”)



Meanwhile The Third Library, special reference room “...This is a very lively library.”

The woman murmured quietly, listening to the laughter of the young people in the room upstairs.

The peculiar reference room was filled with fossils and skeletal specimens. A wide area had been left open from the back to the center of the room; considering the chairs that had been placed in the middle, the place could have been a sort of reception room, designed to let the owner of those articles boast about his collection to his guests.

However, the current guest—Carla—was focusing her attention not on the collection but on the man in front of her.

“If they annoy you, I can go quiet them,” replied the elderly man, Dalton. His wooden hand creaked.

Carla was meeting with the alchemist who managed this library.

While the room was spacious, it wasn’t enormous, so she’d had her subordinates wait outside. Currently, she was talking to the man by herself.

When she’d heard Dalton was an aged alchemist, Carla had initially imagined an old man with limbs like thin, dry wood. However, the man was built far more solidly than she’d imagined, and both his appearance and his imposing presence suggested he was a veteran sailor or a pirate chief rather than an alchemist.

The first thing to grab her attention was the hook-shaped prosthetic that sat on the desk. He was currently wearing a wooden prosthetic shaped like an ordinary hand, but if he’d worn the hook instead, he really could have passed for a pirate.

Carla spoke with dignity, refusing to let him intimidate her. “I believe you’ve already been informed by letter, but we are an envoy from the House of Dormентаire who will be staying in town for quite some time. Some of my subordinates may visit this library on occasion, and when they do, I would like to request your lenience. As a rule, we will do nothing to interfere with your other patrons.”

“‘As a rule,’ hmm? It seems to me that the situation was already far from routine the moment your group came to town.” Despite his jibe, Dalton’s expression was as stern as stone. “But at least you’re making the effort. Are you planning to present yourselves all over town this way?”

“We won’t be visiting private facilities or residences. We don’t wish to cause the locals needless distress. We came to greet you first because we heard the Third Library had particularly deep ties to notable aristocrats, and that you were under the patronage of Lord Boroñal.”

“I see. In essence, you want us to know you’re going to be setting up camp here in town, and to stay out of your way.”

“I don’t deny it.”

The demand was insolent, but Carla’s attitude was sincere.

If he underestimated her because she was a woman, he would pay for that mistake, Dalton concluded. He watched her closely as he responded: “Now then...I hear you’ve come in search of a criminal who’s said to be hiding in town.”

“That is correct.”

“...Is that the only reason?”

Dalton raised one eyebrow, glaring at her.

Carla didn’t react. “Is something troubling you?”

“You shouldn’t ask another question before answering mine. You’ve essentially admitted to having ulterior motives... Well, provided you don’t disrupt the lectures, I won’t poke my nose into your affairs. No matter what you do,” Dalton said dryly. He let his gaze fall to the documents by his hand, as if to say he’d lost interest in the conversation.

“In that case, I’ll take my leave.”

Her errand finished, Carla bowed, then turned on her heel, but—

—as she set a hand on the door, Dalton called after her mildly.

“Oh yes. There is one thing I forgot to tell you.”

“Yes...? What is it?”

Carla turned around, still standing tall. Dalton gave her a whiskered smile.

“Welcome to Lotto Valentino, lovely young lady.”



Somewhere in town

“Huey, listen! Break’s almost over!”

Monica’s remark was perfectly natural, but Huey ignored it and kept slowly walking down the road away from the library.

Apparently, the girl didn’t intend to force him to stop; she just followed him

at a similar pace. Huey stayed silent, and Monica stopped trying to talk to him. A quiet wind blew past them, keeping pace with them, too.

The clumsy young man and the lovestruck girl vanished into the townscape, with no words to say to each other. Both were nearly twenty, and yet there was something oddly childlike about the sight.

The girl looked down with a faint smile as she trailed behind him, as if this was enough to satisfy her.

However, the fleeting moment lasted only until they were alone in the street.

“...What happened?”

“Huh?”

Stopping on the hill road, Huey leaned back against the wall.

“Even I can tell you’re acting odd.”

“I—I am not. I’m just like always...”

“Don’t bother trying to lie,” he muttered, rather forcefully, and Monica stopped talking and looked away.

Huey’s suspicion now turned to certainty.

I knew it. She’s hiding something.

“What makes you say that?”

Her gaze averted, Monica asked another question. She still hadn’t admitted to anything.

Huey opened his mouth, then froze. He couldn’t bring himself to say it. *Because you wouldn’t look at me.*

Huey avoided Monica’s eyes, but only briefly before he fixed his attention on her.

“Don’t forget. As Mask Makers, our fates are linked. If you have some sort of change of heart, that could create trouble for me. I’ve been keeping half an eye on you, to make sure that doesn’t happen, so...I notice things. Even subtle ones.”

“...I see.”

She seemed convinced by that; her expression darkened, and she fell silent for a while.

The wind blew between them, and the time ticked by.

No one passed through the lane, and with no clear reason for either of them to move, the silence stretched on—until Huey finally sighed and asked Monica a question, his face serious.

“Is it something you can’t even tell me?”

“Yes,” she answered instantly, never looking up from the ground. There was a faint smile on her lips, but she wouldn’t let Huey see her eyes.

Huey wasn’t stupid enough not to know what that meant, but he wasn’t intelligent enough to dispel Monica’s worries, either.

“I see. Well, I won’t make you tell me.” Slowly, he walked toward Monica.

As her beloved came closer, Monica tried to turn away so that he wouldn’t see her face, but— —Huey caught her right arm.

“Oh...” Monica widened her eyes in surprise.

“We’re too late for the afternoon lecture now anyway.”

“Um, uh, I... Huey?”

Monica cocked her head, bewildered, while Huey started pulling her up the sloping road.

“You can come help me kill time, for once.”



Lotto Valentino The market street While Huey and Monica were walking along, ignoring the afternoon lecture— —another young man had slipped out of school as well.

I wonder if Maestro Archangelo will be angry when he finds out three of us skipped his class. I’ll have to think up a way to make him smile tomorrow, Elmer mused as he was tailing a certain group.

He followed them carefully, never close or too far behind, mingling with the

market crowds.

During the break, a little while after Huey and Monica had slipped out, he'd been gazing out the window and happened to spot this group. They were dressed like soldiers, but they didn't seem to be from the regular Spanish army; he almost never saw anyone wearing clothes like theirs. Curious, he left the private collection room, went down to the first floor, and got close to them, then— —on their uniforms, he spotted the same golden hourglass that was painted on the black ship.

So they really are involved with the ship. Now, what to do—follow them and sneak aboard, or just greet them directly and ask what's going on?

Neither option was a typical response, but this young man wasn't known for his powers of restraint, and he considered both options seriously.

Then, choosing the relatively more commonsense second option, he tried to shift from tailing them to approaching them.

The next instant—

—someone grabbed his collar from behind and forcibly pulled him away.

“Ugwamuh?!”

Flailing around in a panic, he pulled the fabric away from his throat, then looked back.

Standing there was a bespectacled man who was more than half a head taller than he was.

“What are you doing, Elmer?”

Elmer stared blankly back at the mild man for an instant, then broke into a smile and greeted him by name.

“Hello there, Maiza! It's been a long time!”

“We met at the library just last week... Never mind that; what are you doing?”

The man looked between Elmer and the group that was a little farther up the road, then sighed as he realized the answer was more or less what he'd suspected.

“Elmer...”

“What?”

“You’re about to stick your nose into other people’s business again, aren’t you?”

Over the past few years, Maiza Avaro had changed dramatically.

The way he talked, dressed, looked—if anyone who’d known him when he was the leader of the Rotten Eggs had seen him now, they would have thought he was somebody else entirely. He wasn’t exactly more aristocratic now—he’d become more of a scholar, really—but either way, the people who knew him were surprised by the change and whispered about all sorts of things behind his back.

Whether the transformation was truly “growth” was debatable, but when most of the aristocrats saw the complete behavioral reversal in this son of an influential noble, they said, *He’s finally matured.*

Maiza didn’t attend the lectures with Elmer and the others. He was learning alchemy through what was essentially independent study, under Dalton’s instructions. Over the past few years, he’d read his way through practically all the books in the library, and by now, he could compile useful materials on his own.

Because his opportunities to visit the Third Library had increased, he and Elmer naturally had more chances to run into each other, and they spoke more than they had in the past.

Even before that, however, Maiza had known Elmer’s personality and how quick he was to take action, so he intuitively understood what he was about to do now.

“Still, Maiza, what a coincidence! To think we’d run into each other here.”

Elmer smiled, trying to throw him off the trail. Sighing again, Maiza adjusted his glasses with one hand.

“I suppose it was almost inevitable. I have business with those people myself.”

“Huh? Are they friends of yours?”

“No. I had a few concerns, so I was keeping an eye on them... And then I saw an acquaintance of mine sneaking after them.”

“Wow, that’s just like you, Maiza!”

It wasn’t clear what was “just like him,” but Elmer smiled and thumped Maiza on the back.

“So who are they? That group,” Elmer asked innocently.

“...You were trailing them when you didn’t even know?”

“I was trailing them so I *would* know,” the smile junkie answered easily.

Sighing for the third time that day, Maiza smiled as if he’d given up. “You really don’t ever consider the consequences, do you?”



The hills near Lotto Valentino

At an elevation even higher than the Boroñal mansion, there was a hill with a small clearing on top.

Behind that clearing was a forest, and in front of it was a view overlooking the whole of Lotto Valentino. Colonies of wildflowers grew underfoot among the rich-green grass.

This peaceful meadow was one of the places where the town’s lovers held their trysts, and every so often, couples could be found gazing over the town.

True to its reputation, a couple was there now, doing just that.

“...That was quite an uproar back in the lecture room,” Huey commented as they took in the view.

“It was,” Monica replied.

Although his face was still expressionless, Huey was engaging in the sort of small talk he would normally never have made.

“They seem different lately. I’m not sure how exactly, but I never would have expected them to get so worked up before.”

“I think it’s because Elmer came. He’s made everyone so cheerful. It isn’t just us, you know; he’s really good friends with everybody.”

“Which is a mystery to me, given every word out of his mouth is infuriating... Although, aspiring alchemists are all a little strange. Maybe misfits just hit it off with each other somehow.”

He’d meant to give a scathing critique.

But when she heard what Huey had said, Monica burst out laughing instead.

“...! Ah-ha... Ah-ha-ha!”

She didn’t usually laugh like this, and Huey was vaguely bewildered.

“? What is it?”

“Well, you—! Oh, that’s just too funny, Huey! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“? I said something funny?”

“You said everyone in the class was strange...”

After she’d giggled for a while, Monica answered him, wiping away the tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

“...but you’re the one who gets along best with Elmer, Huey!”

“...!”

Huey widened his eyes, and he opened his mouth to deny it. But no words came to him, and his protest was ultimately just a breath of air.

He shut his mouth, defeated, and lowered himself to sit on the grass. Stretching out his legs, he looked up at Monica and asked her a question. His face was still blank.

“Does it really look that way?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Elmer does nothing but irritate me. He’s so optimistic, it’s disgusting, and I’m not even complaining, really. All he says is ‘smile, smile, smile’ without even stopping to wonder if I want to.”

“Uh-huh.” Monica nodded gently, and Huey asked her another question.

“I’ve wasted so much time because of him. And you still think I’m closest to Elmer?”

“I think wasting time with him means you *are* close, don’t you?”

“ ... ”

Falling silent, Huey turned his gaze to the view.

The wind blew up from the ocean, rustling the flowers and grasses. Like they were laughing at him.

Now he was anthropomorphizing plants, and their imaginary gazes were embarrassing him. Huey heaved a deep, long-suffering sigh.

“Well, I suppose that’s one way to think about it,” he admitted with an ironic smile.

A hint of loneliness crept into Monica’s own smile.

“You know, I was always jealous of Elmer.”

“I know what some people think about our relationship, but I really don’t appreciate it.”

“Oh, n-no! That wasn’t what I meant... It’s just...you spent more time with him. That’s all.”

Monica sat down beside Huey and went on, staring at the sky.

“I met you first, Huey, but Elmer was constantly finding sides of you that I didn’t know about. That was...frustrating. Time was moving forward for the two of you, and I was just left behind.”

“ ... ”

“But I like Elmer, too, so I couldn’t really hate him, either... Oh, th-that’s not what I meant! Just as a friend! Not the way I like you, Huey!”

“I know.”

Leaning back on his hands, Huey imitated Monica and looked up at the cloudless, blue sky. For a moment, he imagined what would happen if the heavens really did come crashing down.

Until only a few years ago, when he'd gazed at the sky, he'd wished for the whole world to fall into it and shatter. But now, imagining such a thing frightened him, just a little. He could see it in his mind's eye—the world flipping upside down and plummeting into the sea of blue. Or maybe he was the only one falling. Either way, it made him shudder slightly.

Oh... I see.

He was putting the pieces together about what had changed inside him, and little by little, his conclusion was becoming clear.

I didn't even want to think about it earlier...not in front of everybody else, but...

Glancing at Monica out of the corner of his eye, Huey slowly began to examine the answer he'd buried the depths of his heart before.

Maybe I'm actually just scared.

I'm afraid...of losing the relationships I have with Monica and Elmer now.

No, that's not it. That's a roundabout way of putting it.

I'm finally...starting to find the world pleasant.

That's really all this is, isn't it?

Smiling cynically at his own twisted nature, Huey spoke to Monica.

"You were wrong about one thing, though."

"Huh...?"

"Elmer wasn't the only one wasting my time, Monica. I wasted a lot on you, too. In fact, I met you earlier, so...probably even more."

Monica didn't answer. Between them was nothing but silence and the whisper of the grasses swaying in the sea wind.

Had he said something wrong? Huey looked at Monica to see her reaction, and— —she was crying.

"Huh?!"

That comment was supposed to make her happy. But Monica's face was set in

a blank mask, and tears were running down her cheeks.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Are you hurt?!”

The young man ordinarily presented himself as utterly aloof, but this experience was new territory for him. He shook Monica’s shoulder, misunderstanding the reason for her tears, but— “No, it— That’s not it. It’s not. I-I’m sorry, H-Huey.”

Gasping and gulping back her tears, Monica tried to force a smile.

He didn’t have to be Elmer to see how fake that smile was.

“Hey, don’t push yourself. Where did this come from?”

“...I’m...happy.”

“?”

“You brought me to...this beautiful place, and...and said that to me— *Hic*... It made me so, so happy. I was happy...you’d just...wanted to sit and talk with me... When you...told me about...yourself, I was...really, really, real-really happy.”

Monica didn’t try to stop her tears, but Huey didn’t think they were from joy.

“I’m...so stupid, aren’t I? Of course...we aren’t lovers yet, but...”

The tightness in her throat was gradually abating, but the waves of emotion kept coming.

Like her tears, her words became a flood spilling out in front of Huey.

“...but...but I was happy. You were here, and I was jealous of Elmer, but I couldn’t hate him, either... And that’s not all. Elmer dragged me into talking with our classmates, and then while I was talking to them... I didn’t think they mattered, but I started to like them... And then I liked you more and more...!”

“...”

“Ever since you took on...the secret of the Mask Maker... When the three of us started sharing the secret...it was like you and I had become one. I really felt like we were parts of the same whole! But that’s nothing compared with... This moment is... Now you’re just talking to me normally...and our secret has

nothing to do with it...and I'm happy... I feel so lucky...and I wish...all of it would just...stay the way it is right now, forever...!"

Was Monica trying to hold herself together by telling him this? Could she no longer withstand on her own the pressure of the emotions churning inside her?

Huey thought that might be the case, but he couldn't help her, either. He could do nothing but listen.

"But...that's wrong. It's all wrong. I...I—! I don't have the right! I'm not supposed to...wish for happiness, but...I tried to forget about that... I tried to run...! But...! ...—"

Monica abruptly fell silent, as if even she was no longer able to make sense of what she was saying.

She seemed to be frightened of something; she was shivering, and her eyes were darting every which way.

"Ngh, aaah, aaah..."

No longer able to control her emotions, Monica's face crumpled in the beginnings of a scream, but— —Huey wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly.

"...?! ...Huey...?"

"It's all right. I'm not going to ask you about your past," Huey murmured impassively. He kept his eyes fixed on the town and the ocean, but his voice was definitely directed at the girl in his arms. "Maybe you did commit some unforgivable crime...but I don't care. After all, you captured my attention as the person you are now."

"..."

"We're the Mask Makers, remember? It doesn't matter to me if you're broken. Even if your true self gets exposed and the whole world turns against you—"

Just for a moment, Huey looked at Monica's face.

Watching her almost true expression, the young man murmured with just a little bit of pink on his cheeks.

“—I’ll make you a new mask.”

Huey Laforet was nineteen years old, and he’d spent many of those years entirely self-absorbed and hating the world with an obsession he couldn’t escape.



This was the first time Monica had brought a blush to his face.

It was also the first time in a full decade that he'd shown any interest in the opposite sex as such. His first blush had belonged to the older village girl he'd adored as a big sister. The one after that had belonged to her, too, when she had comforted him after his mother was accused of witchcraft.

Of course, he later learned she was one of the villagers who'd made the accusation.



Meanwhile At the port, beside the battleship

Facing the jet-black battleship, Carla, the leader of the envoy, gave a small sigh.

For heaven's sake. What a farce.

This was a special vessel, and it had been designed to be larger than other ships while still having the same number of gun ports.

In addition to its military facilities, it was equipped with living quarters for nobles to use while they were onboard.

The ship's main purpose was transporting members of the House of Dormентаire, but none of them had come along on this voyage, and no one in the envoy—including its leader, Carla—was using those special rooms.

When an aristocrat was voyaging with them, they were accompanied by an escort ship—but this vessel was built far more sturdily than any escort ship. It seemed, at the time of the battleship's construction, the possibility of being betrayed by its own guards was taken into consideration.

To think they'd go to the trouble of sending this vessel on such a ludicrous mission.

During the voyage, she had lived in the same spaces as the men.

Of course, the sailors had underestimated their female passenger, and there had been attempts to attack her late at night—and seven of them had been hurled overboard as a result.

Actually killing them would have invited a mutiny, so she'd hauled them back up, but after she'd made an example of so many, the sailors had figured out she was as dangerous as a tiger aboard the ship, and they'd reached this town without further incident.

These men can follow orders, and that's all well and good, but...

The envoy members who stood behind her were private soldiers who had been assigned to her by the House of Dormентаire. For seasoned soldiers, they didn't have much initiative, but they were obviously well trained. The pragmatic way they carried out their instructions reminded her of a windmill grinding flour, and Carla found the expressionless soldiers a little eerie.

The way they took orders from her—without protesting, without joy—was a novel situation for Carla, but not a comfortable one.

It feels as if I'm the one being watched.

The soldiers stayed there without talking among themselves, even as they waited for orders. Carla silently stood before them for a little while, thinking about Lotto Valentino.

Her first impression of the town had been that it was peaceful. The market was filled with energy, and not even the footfalls of the succession war could be heard. In fact, the arrival of their ship seemed to have broken that peace and made the citizens uneasy.

The governor here, Lord Boroñal, was definitely an eccentric, but he didn't seem like a bad person. As a matter of fact, she felt more kindly disposed toward him than to the majority of the members of the House of Dormентаire, although she would never say so aloud.

However, while she was walking through the town, she'd started to sense something was wrong.

It was the same inexplicable eeriness that she felt from her taciturn fellows in the envoy behind her. There was only a single church in the whole town, and even that one was just a tumbledown structure on the outskirts. She'd passed hardly anyone in the streets who seemed religious.

The town was simply *too flawless*.

Its people were polite, it was full of energy, and she couldn't sense the languor that was present in every other town.

According to the information she'd been given beforehand, a band of hooligans known as the Rotten Eggs had existed at one point, but they currently did almost nothing.

Still, this is unnatural. It's almost as if they're afraid of something, as if they're living model lives because they have no choice.

Esperanza didn't strike me as the sort of man who would implement a reign of terror, and there doesn't seem to be any other mastermind.

What on earth was adjusting the balance in this town? Carla couldn't see the hand that moved the scales, and that gave her an uncomfortable feeling she couldn't shake.

In the midst of this unsettling situation, she had one other cause for worry.

Just moments ago, up until she'd reached roughly the middle of the market street, she'd caught glimpses of a figure following her group.

He was blindingly obvious, but she'd wondered whether he was actually a diversion from someone else trailing them in earnest.

As a matter of fact, he was nowhere to be seen now, and she couldn't sense anyone sneaking around.

What was that all about? I believe he was following us from the library... Was that Dalton's doing?

Brief though their conversation was, she knew she couldn't afford to be careless around the alchemist.

...But would he have sent someone to follow her immediately after that? Was he so desperate?

The more she thought about it, the less she understood, and Carla heaved another big sigh.

For heaven's sake. What isn't strange about this situation?

This mission has defied common sense from the very beginning.



A few months previously Somewhere in the gardens of the House of Dormентаire

“Lotto Valentino?”

“Indeed. Surely you’ve heard the name, at least?”

The splendid garden could have been mistaken for the grounds of a royal palace. Almost everything in sight was some shade of green, lavishly displaying the extreme wealth of its owner.

In one corner of that garden, in front of the endless, sparkling cascade of a tiered fountain, Carla was facing the noblewoman she was to guard.

The woman wore an opulent dress, while a veil covered her face, hiding her age and the expression on her face.

Gazing at the fountain, the noblewoman spoke in a voice that was both youthful and seductive.

“I’ve received a message from our spy in that town, who reports that a murderer may be there. The very one who killed a member of our House of Dormентаire ten years ago, in fact.”

“? In that case, madam, couldn’t you arrest them immediately?”

“We mustn’t do that. I won’t explain in detail, but we would rather not have the incident become public knowledge. That is why we need to deal with the matter using only private Dormентаire soldiers... And I would like you to lead them.”

“...”

Her mistress’s request left Carla bewildered.

Carla’s field was security; the Dormentaires must have had other internally trained individuals who were more suited to this sort of job.

“My, was this appointment such a surprise to you? I’m sorry, my dear, but there are distinct advantages to sending a woman to that buffoon of a count. Don’t worry; I’ll ensure the men under you will be useful.”

The woman smirked, and Carla waited with her doubts well hidden inside her

heart.

“I understand. I need to contact the spy, then either capture or dispose of the miscreant, correct?”

“Oh my! Slow down, Carla, darling! The evildoer is no more than an excuse, so you mustn’t search for them seriously. In fact, even if you do find them, you *must* leave them alone.” The noblewoman’s sultry voice seemed to tangle around her guard, confusing her.

Carla looked unconvinced, and the woman laughed as she went on.

“There are several rumors in that town, you see... Immortality, for example, and a new type of drug, and nuggets of false gold that only a discerning eye can recognize.”

“...”

When the word *immortality* abruptly entered the conversation, Carla began to suspect she was being teased. However, the noblewoman giggled, as if she had read Carla’s mind, and went on.

“You know Szilard, don’t you? Our old alchemist. He laughed at the prospect of immortality, too, but he was terribly interested in that false gold. He claims if we discover the production method, he can recreate it.”

“...So you want me to search for that method?”

“You’re so very quick, Carla, my dear; I love that about you. But as I’m sure you’re aware, cupidity is the family vice.”

“...”

Carla kept silent, not confirming or denying this. She didn’t feel qualified to evaluate the nature of the family she served.

“Gracious, you are so serious, Carla. I do like that about you. As for what we want—everything. All of it. The immortality, the false gold, and that naughty drug. It would be such a pity if the House of Dormентаire didn’t have control of it, don’t you think?”

A *pity for whom?* Carla wondered, but she assumed the answer would probably be *everyone* or something equally uninformative. She said nothing,

though she wasn't entirely content with the conversation.

But Carla's feelings had nothing to do with this, it seemed, as the noblewoman gave a sultry smile behind her veil.

"According to my young spy, that town is like a miniature box garden, created by alchemists." She sounded terribly amused by the idea.

"..."

"What I would like you to do, my dear, is smash its walls.

"...Even if it takes years."



The present Lotto Valentino, the port

That was what had brought Carla here, but—

—to be honest, when she'd first heard her orders, she'd suspected it was a tactful way of getting rid of her. After the suggestion that her work would take years, especially over a fairy tale like immortality, this sounded an awful lot like exile to the hinterlands.

What sort of mistake could she have made? All the way here, she had been asking herself that. However...

...now that she was in the unsettling air of Lotto Valentino, she knew. They hadn't been getting rid of her. What had been asked of her for this mission was exactly what her mistress wanted.

Even so... Immortality? Ridiculous.

As Carla thought, she was watching the port.

Now then, when will that spy contact me...?

The fact that their vessel was in port was already the talk of the town. As soon as it reached their spy, Carla was expecting them to contact her, but she knew nothing about the person except for their name.

Either way, she had been tailed earlier, and the townspeople didn't welcome the ship itself, and so Carla decided to keep a warier eye on their surroundings.

A few moments later...

They were on their way back to the ship after they'd gone to inspect several libraries in the port area and the market street, and that was when it happened.

In a relatively deserted alley, two figures stepped in front of Carla's group, blocking their path.

One was a tall, bespectacled, mild-looking young man.

The other was a youth, smiling gently.

?

The one with the smile... Is he the one who was tailing us earlier?

"...? Did you need something?" Carla asked them, coming to a halt.

The man lightly raised a hand. "Ah, I beg your pardon. You are the envoy from the House of Dormентаire, I presume. I am Maiza... Maiza Avaro. This is Elmer, a personal friend of mine."

"I"

The Avaros were an aristocratic family whose influence in town was second only to the House of Boroñal.

Naturally, they were nothing compared with the House of Dormентаire, but she certainly couldn't afford to ignore the power they held in this town.

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

Outwardly, Carla stayed as cool as she could manage. After giving a brief self-introduction, she decided to try to trick the two into revealing their true motive for connecting with her group.

"...Your companion seems to have been interested in us for *a little while now*."

Assuming the smiling youth was the one who'd been tailing them, she hoped to startle a reaction out of him—but his response was far more straightforward than she'd been expecting.

"Right, that's why I was following you!"

"..." "

The young man smiled breezily as he answered, while everyone else fell silent.

Meanwhile, Elmer—kept talking nonchalantly.

“In the future, I may try to sneak onto your ship and poke around, but I’d really appreciate it if you’d smile and forgive— Mrglmrglmmph.”

“Excuse him. He seems to be confused,” Maiza said pleasantly, keeping Elmer’s mouth covered. “Him aside, your visit has made the town’s residents rather uneasy. If you would at least clarify your motives to me, I can pass the information along to the other aristocrats and set the collective mind of the town at ease.”

“...I’ve told Lord Boroñal about the purpose of our visit.”

“As you are no doubt aware, he is rather difficult for the surrounding nobles to approach. I had hoped I might be able to help you spread the word more efficiently.”

Although Maiza spoke humbly, she sensed the deeper implications behind his tone: *If you don’t want to cause trouble, be honest with me about why you’re here.* She could have simply ignored him, but it wouldn’t be wise to get on the bad side of the aristocracy right at the beginning of her mission. Carla decided to relate the surface aspects of the mission to him.

“We’ve come to look for a criminal with ties to the House of Dormентаire. We have to apprehend them personally, for our own reasons. As you are someone who also has ties to the nobility, I hope you will infer those reasons for yourself.”

“...I understand. Well, that’s certainly a relief.”

Then, patting Elmer on the head, he went on.

“Elmer is rather eccentric, and he may end up making a nuisance of himself. If that happens, I’ll apologize for him as well. Do be lenient with him, please.”

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, they parted ways, and the members of the envoy walked past Maiza and Elmer.

“I don’t often see women dressed like she was... At any rate, they know what

you look like now.”

“Does that mean anything?”

“You’re planning to stick your nose in anyway, aren’t you?” Maiza smirked as he glanced at Elmer. “If they catch you, I’ve lowered the odds that they’ll kill you on sight, that’s all. Although, I’m not sure how much weight the House of Avaro will carry with them.”

“Is that right?! You’re incredible, Maiza! I bet you’re a genius!!”

“I wouldn’t be too liberal with that word. People will think you’re making fun of them. My point is, I’d really rather tell you not to stick your nose in at all, but you wouldn’t listen anyway.”

“Of course not! Oh, but if you’ll give me a good, hearty laugh for stopping, I guess I could consider it... Huh?”

Partway through his sentence, Elmer broke off, noticing something odd about the envoy making for the port.

Someone else had stepped into the group’s path, just as the two of them had done a moment ago, and seemed to be telling them something. On its own, that wouldn’t have been enough to warrant any special attention, but—

“That’s...”

“? What’s the matter? Elmer? Elmer?!”

Elmer was reacting strangely to something, and Maiza tried to thump him on the shoulder, but his hand swept through empty space.

Ignoring Maiza’s attempt to stop him, Elmer broke into a run.

Rather than going after the envoy, he ducked into a side alley—as if he was trying to circle around ahead of them.



“Your message has been noted. I’ll get the details from you later,” Carla said.

“...Yes, please do.” The young woman nodded in response. She looked no different from the town’s other women, although her expression was cold, and she probably wasn’t quite twenty yet. She was polite, but there was an

indefinable shadow about her.

“...You seem out of sorts. Do you have some grievance with us?”

“No. My memories of this town are complicated, and so— Eek?!”

Before the gloomy girl could finish speaking, two hands reached around from behind her and covered her eyes.

“Guess whooo?!”

The next instant, Elmer took an elbow to the ribs and rolled around on the ground, laughing and groaning at the same time.



“Ah-ha-ha! Ghk...ha-ha! That was one heck of an answer! They call that an elbow in England; was that a pun with my name?! You were a few letters off, but if it’ll make you smile, I’ll gladly go by that instead! Gwah...ow, ow, ow, ow, ow...”

Meanwhile, the moment the girl actually saw him, the cloud hanging over her vanished. Eyes sparkling, she shouted his name.

“Elmer...? Elmer!”

While Carla was wondering what on earth was going on, and Maiza ran over and watched them with confusion—

—Elmer smiled as if he’d forgotten his pain and addressed the girl by name.

“I haven’t seen you in ages, Niki... Did you find your place to die?”



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

Even to my eyes, the change in Maiza was positively bizarre. Can men truly alter themselves so much in such a brief span of time? I was astonished, but I also had my doubts.

Was his mild demeanor only an act, perhaps? Did he revert to the old Aile when no one else was around?

There was no way to discover the truth. Even had I been able to observe him when he was alone, it was difficult to imagine him giving long-winded, violent speeches to himself.

Returning to the subject at hand, the beautiful woman in men’s clothing and her entourage had come to this town in search of a criminal.

Or to be precise, that was what they claimed to be searching for.

Smeared as it was with alchemy and lies, the essence of Lotto Valentino was nearly a complete fiction. It would be a while yet before I learned this.

After all, at the time, I was terribly busy. My new play was proving to be very well received. I was summoned to parties held by my patrons nearly every day, and after returning home, I wrote out new scripts before the liquor had worn

off. All my days were spent on such frivolities.

And indeed, frivolities they were.

I could have ignored the parties, but I welcomed them with open arms. More than the monetary investments, I wanted to hear my praises sung by many people. And I was hearing a choir.

At the same time, I held pride in the knowledge that what I wrote was not merely well received by my audiences.

I had a sense of purpose, that I was telling the truth of the world to those around me in an accessible way. I believe I spoke of it before... On top of attaining that sense of mission, I was showered with praise from those around me, and with more gold than I had ever seen before!

How could I possibly surrender such a life?! I had won the world's acclaim, without selling my soul or fawning over anyone.

I had nothing to fear. No reason for guilt.

I had acquired it all through my own, genuine talents!

...Or so I believed. And I believed it from the bottom of my heart.

Now, upon reflection, I know I had sold a soul. Not my own, but the soul of another. His very life.

I had sold what was not mine to give, the soul of a stranger, and I had been paid in adulation.

Since learning more about alchemy, I had seen the underbellies of a variety of spheres. After my encounter with that immortal, the world had turned inside out for me, and I could not reverse it if I wished.

...

I am not making myself clear, I suspect.

Allow me to briefly outline the play being performed when that ship made port. While I hope its script may yet survive in your era, for the moment, I shall summarize its story here.

It was the tale of a boy who wreaks revenge on the world after being

possessed by the arcane.

In his childhood, the boy's mother had been persecuted as a witch by the villagers.

...The church is tenacious in its efforts to consign the savagery of the witch hunts to oblivion, and so in scripts to be performed in other towns, I avoided mentioning the witch hunts by name. However, in Lotto Valentino, I let the term stand.

At her trial, the mother was proved innocent of witchery. In exchange for her own life, she demonstrated that those who had accused her were the true emissaries of the devil. These included villagers who had protected the boy, who had made a great show of sympathy when his mother was taken away, who had been kind to him. This was nearly all the villagers, in fact.

The boy had been betrayed by his entire world, and then he encountered a real devil.

The devil told him, "I shall give you the power to burn the world to ash." And so the boy became a master of true magic to take his revenge on the world. In the end, he found his humanity again and threw himself into the fires of hell, burning the devil away with him...or so the story went.

The talk of "magic" was window dressing. In fact, I was speaking of alchemy.

...Yes.

Perhaps you've already guessed from my choice of words; this was a tale based in the truth.

After the story had been related to me, I had adapted it into my own style and presented it on the stage.

I wrote this tale because this abhorrent reality, the history of the witch hunts, must not be erased from history. I was compelled by a sense of justice. What I believed was my mission.

The fellow who told me the tale had wept and begged, telling me he wanted the world to know this truth at all costs.

The one who told me the story...was Lebreau.

How did he know it? The answer was simple. He had been there in the village when this particular hunt was conducted.

Not as a resident, mind you.

No one knew whether the “inquisitors” who conducted the witch hunt truly belonged to the church—and Lebreau was the only son of their leader.

He had told me the story with tears streaming down his face.

He said he wanted to atone for the sins of his father and his father’s followers.

It was a past he wanted to forget, but he was unable to forgive himself for being so young and powerless.

He had intended to take it to the grave with him, but ultimately, he could not abide the fact that people were living without a care, oblivious to the horrors of what had occurred there.

However, no one would listen to him.

He told me he had become an alchemist in order to prove with solid logic what an aberration that witch hunt had been.

And so I wrote the tale. I had no choice.

Who would blame me? Who could possibly blame me?

I simply didn’t know. That is my only excuse.

I didn’t know. I—I just did not know.

To think that boy, who had been betrayed by the world and lost his mother, was still alive—was living right here in Lotto Valentino!



One week later Lotto Valentino, in front of the theater

“Um... I’m looking forward to this! Aren’t you, Huey?”

“Yes, well, I don’t know what it’s about.”

“Neither do I, but I hear it’s incredibly popular! The person who got us our tickets is a regular customer at my patisserie; he helps out at this theater, which is why he got them for so cheap. He says the story makes you think about love

and relationships with people!”

“That sounds awfully trite,” Huey mumbled with a crooked smile. He glanced at Monica next to him.

Over the past week, she seemed to have returned to her old self. His concern for her surprised even him, but he was able to be honest about those feelings now.

Elmer and the rest of his fellow students had been teasing him nonstop all week, but even that had settled into a comforting constant.

...When did it start? When did my heart grow this peaceful?

He hoped seeing this play with Monica today would completely return her heart to normal. And he really did believe in this hope, which was unusual for him.

Oh, for heaven’s sake. Is Elmer’s stupidity contagious?

His sigh was without venom, and he genuinely wished for Monica’s recovery.

He had no idea that the play they were about to see would shatter him.

Oblivious, he stepped into the theater—and waited for the show to begin.

Quietly, the curtain rose...and cast its dark shadow over the town of Lotto Valentino.

CHAPTER 4

**“THEY REALLY ARE
INNOCENT.”**



CHAPTER 4

“THEY REALLY ARE INNOCENT.”

1709, late autumn Lotto Valentino, in front of the theater “This is incredible, Jean. Your play is a huge success.”

Even in the blustering wind, people were braving the cold to line up outside the theater.

Lebreau gazed at the queue, complimenting his companion.

“No... It’s not as if this play were my creation alone.”

“That’s beside the point. Your passion brought the truth to life and stirred the hearts of the people.”

Jean was being modest, but Lebreau looked up at the sky as if he was sincerely touched.

“I don’t believe this is enough to atone for what I’ve done, but...I can hope I’ve managed to redeem that poor boy’s past in some way, and to soothe the hearts of everyone who suffered because of the witch hunts.”

“I’d say we’re liable to have caught the eye of the church, though.”

“Yes, and you brought this play into the world despite knowing the risks. You should take pride in it. I say with utmost sincerity...that words cannot express my gratitude.”

“Oh, stop. It’s really nothing like that. It’s the money—I only wrote it for the money.” But despite his protests, Jean was secretly brimming over with satisfaction at having accomplished his mission.

The play was extremely popular, and it had been decided the first performance of his next play would happen right here, at Lotto Valentino’s theater. He was nearly done with the script; at this point, he only had to come up with the very last part.

The ending alone had been left to his imagination.

Jean-Pierre Accardo.

His current play was based on fact, but so was the one he was scripting at the present moment. However, he was hesitant to write that final part, and it wasn't for lack of ideas.

He couldn't finish the play because uncertainty had been rising in his heart.

"Listen, Lebreau."

"What is it?"

"About the new piece I'm writing... Are you sure it's all right to perform it in this town?" Lebreau said nothing, and Jean stammered on. "I, erm, I mean... Perhaps I shouldn't say— Uh, well... I don't mind angering that lecherous lord, and I doubt he'd be careless enough to try anything, but... If I spread knowledge of these events, won't it jeopardize your position?"

"It's all right. I haven't told anyone but you that I know about...what happened. Not even the patrons of our workshop. I had once believed I may need to take the knowledge to the grave with me, but...I can't allow it to continue casting a shadow over this town."

Once again, Lebreau had given him a true story, on which the new play was based—but Lebreau's expression was dark, as if this incident had brought about a deeply troubling choice for him as well.

"Besides, if someone involved—if the very criminal is still here in town...I should hope this would lead to a confession. And absolution."

"But...well, I actually think I'd like the criminal *to get away with it in the end.*"

"If that is what you wish, I won't fault you. If the reputation of your new work spreads, and the guilty party still refuses to face judgment...an opportunity for escape may yet be provided."

"Would it now?" Jean still looked reluctant, and Lebreau nodded at him, smiling softly.

"Yes. Your talent lies in delivering words that help. The sayings of a poet may serve as a weapon or a remedy. Your works hold a power that can change the

world; I'm sure of it. I was convinced the moment I saw the hope in the eyes of the people lining up outside the theater."

As he listened to Lebreau, Jean turned his gaze to the queue again.

"Help," hmm...

I'm only writing for my own sake.

I'm an appalling hypocrite, aren't I?

Even as he silently mocked himself—there was a smile on his face.

It was as if he believed calling himself a hypocrite was enough to satisfy his guilty conscience.



The end of 1709 The hills near Lotto Valentino The wind from the sea was cold, and the whispers of the dead grass on the hill sounded lonely somehow.

Standing on the hilltop, Elmer sensed someone behind him and turned. He was smiling.

"Hi there. You're late, Niki."

"You were just early, and you know it," the woman muttered with a sigh.

Elmer smiled a little awkwardly. "Maybe so."

The two were at a youthful, romantic age, but they didn't seem at all like a pair of lovers wistfully watching the view.

Niki's expression was cold as she spoke to Elmer.

"So neither Monica nor Huey has returned to the library yet?"

"Nope."

"...But it's been months."

"Yup." Elmer answered easily, but there was a hint of loneliness in his smile.

Elmer and Niki had met during a certain incident a few years previously.

Niki had temporarily left town but then returned on a whim, or so she said. At present, she was working at one of the libraries the alchemists used, as a servant. She said they had moved to this area about half a year previously from

another town.

And then—one week after she and Elmer had reunited, a man and woman had disappeared from the town's public eye.

Huey and Monica.

Before the two of them went to the theater together, Elmer and the denizens of the library had teased them mercilessly.

However, the pair had not come to the library the next day, nor any of the days after that.

What on earth had happened?

The reactions varied widely, from people who worried something awful might have happened, to others who whispered they must have eloped. Nonetheless, after more than a month had passed with no word, the couple gradually began to fade from their memories—and now, after several months had gone by, almost no one mentioned them anymore.

“Worried?” Elmer asked. “I thought you would be.”

Niki gave a small nod.

“I didn't get to talk to the two of them much, but... They did save me once, after all. And besides...”

“Besides?”

“I am also *part of the Mask Makers*.”

Once, Niki had been destined to die in this town.

Her life had handed her only two choices: Let someone else end her life or end it herself.

However, over the course of two encounters with the Mask Maker, her fate had entangled with the fates of others, providing a new choice.

Afterward, she had left this town for a while, saying she had to find her own place to die.

“It's been a month since we last met, too. How goes the search? Did you find a place where you could die with a smile?”

“I don’t know.”

Elmer’s words made Niki remember her past.

After hitching a ride on a cart bound for a neighboring city, she’d considered just walking as far as her legs would carry her, then dying in a gutter.

However, she’d fallen asleep on that cart, and when she opened her eyes—the cart had reached the workshop of a group of alchemists.

It didn’t take long for her to learn this very workshop had created the original version of the drug that had changed the town of Lotto Valentino and her own life. As far as she was concerned, what was done was done, and they hadn’t directly committed any crimes. Her heart had only just been saved by her encounter with Elmer and the others, and she didn’t feel like bearing any grudges. She’d only held her tongue and started to leave the workshop.

But someone had held her back. An apprentice alchemist who lived there—a man named Fermet.

You’re looking for a place to die? That isn’t something you seek out. You arrive there naturally, after you’ve lived out your life. I imagine whether you are able to smile then or not depends on the nature of that life.

He was a strange man.

She hadn’t meant to tell him about herself; it had just come pouring out. Niki had felt a peculiar sort of reassurance from the man, and she’d opened up to him almost in spite of herself.

Fermet had smiled at her gently.

The other day, my teacher passed away in an accident, leaving Czes behind. I truly pity him. I believe we can pay you sufficient wages from the workshop’s reserves. Would you become a surrogate elder sister to him? Of course, I know that isn’t the sort of thing one can purchase with money. But...you have the eyes of one who has accepted death, and I would like you to serve as a guide to little Czes.

“Both Fermet and Begg are very good people. Good enough that I want to work for them of my own accord, at least.”

“How about that? And you’re also serving as a spy, too.”

“To be honest, I don’t care for that job very much, but...I don’t have a choice.”

Currently, while she helped out at the workshop, she was also acting as a courier between it and the people of the House of Dormентаire.

Apparently, the workshop run by Fermet’s associates was funded by multiple nobles. While their main supporter in this town was the Avaro Family, their largest patron as a whole was the House of Dormентаire.

“It sounds as though Fermet is checking into the unusual goings-on of Lotto Valentino and reporting on it. Sometimes, they have me deliver letters, too. I can’t read much, so I don’t know what’s written in them.” She hadn’t been allowed in her childhood. The girl narrowed her eyes slightly as she went on. “Well, I’m more than happy to help others learn more about everything wrong with this place, but...I didn’t really want to get involved with things here. That’s why I don’t care for the job.”

“Oh...”

“Oh, but don’t get me wrong. It’s fun talking with you, Elmer, and I know there are good people here as well, like Count Esperanza.”

Elmer had lowered his eyes apologetically, and she smiled reassuringly—but a hint of loneliness soon crept into that smile, and she murmured almost to herself.

“Really... I wonder where those two went. Monica and Huey.”

Then she turned back to face Elmer.

“I could be wrong, but...*Elmer, you know where they are, don’t you?*”

It was a frank question, and Elmer’s response was equally so.

“*Yeah. Of course I know.*”

Niki sighed in exasperation and shook her head.

“But you can’t tell anybody where they are. Is that it?”

“Yup, I promised.

“Still, I really think they’ve been staying in the same place too long. Both

physically and emotionally. They shouldn't hide forever."



That night Somewhere in town "And then I told Niki, 'G'on and smile more,' but she never smiled for me once. I guess I need more practice."

"You think practice will improve your chances?"

Two young men conversed by candlelight in a room.

One of them, Elmer, was wearing his usual smile, but the other—Huey—was perfectly expressionless. Before, he probably would have made his jab with a wry smile. But at the moment, there was not even a spark of emotion on his face. It wasn't much different from the mask he was toying with in his hands.

Elmer spoke to him just as he always did, as if he was making small talk.

"So how about it? You still don't feel like seeing Moni-Moni?"

"...No."

"Well, you're still playing the shadowy puppet master with the townsfolk as the Mask Maker, so your heart isn't completely broken. That's good," Elmer commented, but Huey's reply was almost more for his own benefit than his friend's.

"...I almost wish it were."



Several months before, he had gone to see a play.

Monica had invited him to the performance, which had been staged by a certain troupe.

The playwright had been Jean-Pierre Accardo, the town's own poet—and Huey and Monica had known the story. However, they *only knew that they knew* after the curtain had risen.

To Huey, they were personal memories of his past. To Monica, they were a secret Huey had once shared with her.

Not twenty minutes after the play started, Huey had realized it was based on his own life—while Monica had apparently come to the same realization at very

nearly the same time. Partway through, she'd begun trembling and occasionally glancing at Huey.

For his part, he'd stayed perfectly silent.

His face hadn't betrayed a hint of emotion, nor had he looked at Monica once.

He did nothing but watch intently as his own past was reenacted on the stage.

Even after the play was over, Huey hadn't said a word. He hadn't even tried to look at Monica.

Behind him, he'd heard a voice near tears. "No... This isn't what it looks like; it isn't, Huey... Huey..." Maybe she was already crying; maybe she wasn't. He didn't turn to check.

Huey had left without giving her a single answer—

—and the very next day, he'd stopped coming to the library.

In the same way—Monica had vanished as well.



"If you say breaking will help you smile from the bottom of your heart, I could help you out with that. Either way... If Moni-Moni had wanted to see you, she'd probably have come here already. Does that mean neither of you has the courage to face the other?"

"..."

"It's not like you never want to see her again, right?" Elmer murmured breezily, but Huey kept his mouth shut.

He'd gone into hiding at one of the Mask Makers' workshops, but the workshop wasn't exclusively his secret. Elmer and Monica shared his secrets, and they knew about this place.

As a matter of fact, Elmer had shown up here shortly after Huey had gone into hiding, but...

"You *want* her to come, don't you, Huey?" Elmer picked up one of the gold coins on the table and flipped it into the air. "Listen, I went to see that play, too.

The final performance was three days ago, but I asked Speran and managed to get tickets at the last minute. They started a new one yesterday.”

“...I see.”

“Maestro Dalton didn’t tell me everything, but I knew right away. That story was based on your past, wasn’t it?”

“...That’s right. I never told you about it. They were acting out things not even Dalton knew... Things I’d only told Monica. Down to the last detail.” Huey spoke as mechanically as an automaton.

Elmer finally stopped repeatedly flipping the coin and catching it, slapping it down on the table.

“So you suspect Monica?” he asked. “You’re wondering if she took a secret only you two shared and blabbed it to the scriptwriter. Then she took you to see the play and rub it in your face.”

“...”

His expression twitched slightly, as if he was desperately repressing some emotion bubbling up deep inside him.

Smiling at Huey, Elmer kept going.

“You already know this line of reasoning doesn’t make sense, right? If Monica knew what that play was about beforehand, she never would have taken you to see it... Well, it’s possible she wanted to help you break free from your past and decided to meddle in a big way, but I really don’t think Moni-Moni’s that type of person. I mean, that’s what you’d expect *me* to do.”

As Elmer laid out the facts, Huey stayed silent. Elmer didn’t seem to mind; his smile didn’t falter.

“Besides, I bet she likes even the part of you that hates the world. But all these arguments don’t matter. What matters is whether you trust Monica Campanella or not.”

“...Trust?”

“Do you believe she’d betray you? That’s what I’m asking you.”

Huey didn't nod in response, but he didn't shake his head, either. He just looked at Elmer quietly and began to speak.

"I've been betrayed enough for a lifetime. If you saw that play, then you know. The villagers who were kind to me, and that young woman—they all accused my mother of witchcraft. The play may not have shown everything I felt, but until that day, I knew how to trust. That young woman—I may even have been in love with her, or something like it."

"So are you saying you never want it to happen again? Liking somebody and getting stabbed in the back?"

"...Well, it isn't pleasant, you know. If people *are* going to turn on you, you might as well never believe in them at all and live your life in peace."

"Now there's a contradiction. A man who wants to destroy the world shouldn't be talking about peace. What, you don't trust me, either?"

The question sounded like a challenge, and Huey nodded easily.

"I never trusted you. I trust you less than anyone else in the world."

"Wait, what?!"

"No matter what promises we make, or what secrets we share, or what sort of mutually beneficial relationship we form... *If you had a chance to make someone smile, you'd stab me in the back in the most despicable ways without even blinking, wouldn't you?*"

Huey responded to the challenge with a test of his own.

After thinking hard for just a few seconds, Elmer nodded frankly, just as Huey had predicted.

"You're right! I certainly would! You're right, that won't do! You really shouldn't trust someone like me, Huey! You'd better be careful!" Elmer cried with genuine worry.

Huey gave a deep, deep sigh. "Maybe that's why I'm able to open up to you. Because I never trusted you to begin with."

"Can't you open up to Monica that way, too?"

“You’re an exception. She’s nowhere near as strange as you.”

As Elmer tried to steer the conversation back to Monica, Huey quickly suppressed the emotions that had nearly risen inside him.

“Let me change the question, then. Just a tiny bit.”

“...”

“Right. Next, I was going to ask you, *Do you want to trust Monica?* but that still doesn’t get to the core of it.”

Elmer paused briefly. Huey was attempting to close off his heart, but Elmer persisted in speaking to him the same way he always did.

“It doesn’t matter whether you believe Monica or not, or whether you want to believe her or not...”

Elmer gave a smile that was just a little mean, like a kid who’d thought of a prank.

He gave a small nod, then asked his friend a question that couldn’t have been more to the point— —and could not possibly have been more tactless.

“Do you love her?”



A few hours later An office in the Boroñal mansion “Hiya, Speran. I came over to while away some time.”

“Go home. I am too busy for the likes of you.”

Scowling, Esperanza glanced at Elmer as he straightened the documents on his desk.

“Or so I would say, if I were the one you had come to see...but I imagine that’s not the case.”

“Well done, Speran! It’s so helpful how quick you are!”

Elmer matter-of-factly told the aristocrat, his old acquaintance, what he was there for.

“I want to see Monica. Is now a good time?”

“...Yes. She’s calmed down now,” the count answered, signaling with his eyes to the butler standing nearby.

The man bowed respectfully to Elmer, then stepped out into the hall, preparing to guide him to a certain room.

As Elmer followed, Esperanza called after him.

“I loathe asking men for favors, but I cannot invoke my noble authority for this. Though it vexes me, I will ask.

“Please take care of my little sister...of Monica.”

His voice held an emotion he would ordinarily never reveal.

Elmer was curious about the expression Esperanza might be wearing as he said those words, but he didn’t turn around. He just called back over his shoulder.

“You’re asking the wrong person, Speran.

“If you want someone to take care of her, you should ask the one who was blushing when he told me he ‘wants to want to love Monica.’ What a cliché.”



A few minutes later Somewhere in the Boroñal mansion The mansion’s storage area was in the exact opposite direction from the office. The bedroom sequestered in its depths, behind a hidden door, was quiet. It was plain, yet tidy.

“Oh... Elmer... You came...,” said a woman’s voice.

Monica peeked her slightly gaunt face out from a blanket cocoon.

As she toyed with her Mask Maker mask in her hands, she gave Elmer the shadow of a smile.

The smile was pitiful, and she seemed to be emotionally unstable, or on the verge of becoming so. Her expression was so frail and ill that even an amateur would have been able to see something was wrong.

However, Elmer didn’t hesitate.

Giving her a smile that was as bright as could be, he waved at her casually.

“Hi there. I came over spend some time with you, Moni-Moni.”

Monica Campanella was Esperanza Boroñal’s younger sister. However, only a few of the people in town—such as the top members of the city police and the nobles—were aware of that fact. Officially, she was just an apprentice alchemist.

It was said she was his half sister, the child of a common mistress, and Esperanza himself didn’t want her existence made public. The nobles understood and refrained from mentioning her to others.

It wasn’t that they sympathized with her position or cared enough about Esperanza to be considerate. It was just that, to most people, Monica didn’t matter much at all.

Elmer was one of the few who knew about her circumstances, but Monica’s family tree didn’t matter to him one bit, for a different reason. He admired her both as a fellow member of the Mask Makers and as an ordinary friend from school.

And because that was the case, Elmer had been fairly sure that when Monica simply vanished, without returning to her lodgings, she had hidden herself away in this mansion.

Monica was frequently on the verge of breaking down, and between the day she’d stopped coming to the library and now, he’d only been allowed to see her five times.

“I saw Huey right before I came over.”

Elmer never was very good at being sensitive, and he casually dropped the name that would unsettle Monica’s heart.

“...!”

Monica’s face blanched, and she covered it with the mask in her hand. Completely hiding her own expression and forcibly erasing other signs of her emotions, she replied to Elmer.

“...And what about it?”

Her voice had shifted into the one she used as the Mask Maker. Elmer nodded

vigorously.

“Do you want to go see him, right now?”

“.....? ...?!”

“I mean, you’ve got a pretty good idea of where he is, too, don’t you?”

“Wh-what are you talking about?! Have you lost your mind?!” she snapped angrily, still speaking as the Mask Maker. *“It’s too late! How am I supposed to face my darling...Huey...?!”*

“Whoops, I think you’re getting your personas mixed up.”

“Shut up! Did you come here to mock me?!”

Monica glared at the cackling young man from behind her mask, but Elmer shook his head easily.

*“No. I didn’t come to laugh *at* you, I came to make *you* laugh.”*

“...You’re still going on about that?” Her slightly muffled voice wasn’t frustrated or mocking—just a little sad. *“Elmer C. Albatross... Are you seriously attempting to get a smile out of someone covering their face with a mask? What could this woman’s smile mean to you? Are you in love with her? Do you want to embrace her? I know you know that Monica Campanella’s heart belongs to only one! One who has rejected her. She has no dreams now; she does nothing but breathe. What could her smile possibly be worth?!”*

The words were meant to harm her; she was berating herself through the mask.

To Monica, the Mask Maker wasn’t a different personality. It was no more than one of her multiple true natures. These words were Monica’s own, and this was an act of self-harm.

Even in the face of that frenzied scream, the smile junkie ignored the mood and stayed true to his own ambitions.

“A smile is worth plenty just for existing.”

“...”

“Frankly speaking, all smiles are equal as far as I’m concerned. They could

belong to an unprecedented serial killer, or the ruler of an empire, or a slave, or somebody who's going to die in three seconds, or a saint or a god or a devil—as long as they're not faked."

"...You really are a self-centered man." The masked phantom shook its head in weary amazement.

If you imagined the blanket was a cloak, it almost seemed as if the infamous Mask Maker had returned for another death. However, the mysterious figure had none of the murderer's eeriness, and the voice behind the mask sounded lonely.

"That said...you may not be aware that Monica Campanella...has no right to be happy. She has no right to smile."

"I'm not so sure about that." Elmer walked up to Monica and snatched the mask away from her.

"Huh?! Ah, aaah... St-stop it; give it...back...", Monica stammered, tearing up.

Elmer put the mask on and murmured, "Young or old, man or woman, villain or saint—everyone has an equal right to smile. Even a condemned criminal about to be beheaded. If he thinks he's happy and smiles, nobody has the right to stop him."

"...You're just splitting hairs. If someone had stolen someone I loved, I'd never forgive them for smiling as they died."

"Right, but you don't need to forgive them. You can't stop them from smiling whether you forgive them or not. Unless you use your hands to hold their face in place by force. I guess you'd just have to wipe that smile off their face with despair—not that I'd do it, personally."

"I knew it... You really are funny, Elmer. You're not normal." Monica spoke accusingly, but there was a faint, wry smile on her face.

"If I'm funny, then laugh. C'mon, smile, smile."

Elmer hooked his index fingers into the corners of his lips and stretched them, exaggerating his own smile. But the trace of loneliness in Monica's expression didn't disappear.

Several seconds ticked by with that awkward tension in the air. Then Elmer sighed, as if he'd given up.

"...Well, if you don't want to see Huey, I won't force you. Don't you want to know the truth, though?"

"Huh?"

"A guy named Jean-Pierre Accardo wrote that script, remember?"

"I played a little trick on him. What would you do if I said I'd managed to get him outside tonight?"



One hour later An abandoned house, somewhere near town *Elmer said he'd bring him, but...will that poet really come here?*

The old, abandoned house on the outskirts of town was surrounded by forest, and there were no signs of human activity anywhere.

Originally, it had been the country house of an aristocrat, but the aristocrat had come to ruin several decades previously. No one took care of it anymore; it was the sort of place children dared one another to explore from time to time.

The idea of using it as a base of operations for the Mask Makers had come up several times, but the suggestion had always been tabled due to various reasons—such as the fact that the place wasn't much of a secret.

At present, Monica was dressed in her Mask Maker costume, and in her hand was her familiar stiletto.

She didn't know what the poet's intentions in writing that play had been, but before anything else, she had to find out whether or not he was hostile to Huey.

And if he is Huey's enemy, then...

Monica tightened her grip on the hilt of the stiletto, steeling herself behind her mask.

Through the eye holes, she saw movement.

A figure wrapped in a hooded cloak had entered the house. The moonlight filtering through the window provided only dim illumination, but she could

make out their movements clearly.

The new arrival seemed wary of something as well as they peered around cautiously.

Monica was watching from high above, lurking quietly on top of a chandelier with rusty chains. The enormous mass of metal didn't so much as creak.

If she even twitched, the brass would scrape together and alert the figure to her presence. But despite the extreme tension, Monica's mind was calm.

Where is Elmer? He said he was going to bring him here.

Don't tell me something happened to him...?

Fearing the worst, Monica decided to attack.

Launching herself from the chandelier, she dropped down onto the banister of the stairs in the entrance.

Naturally, the chains creaked and rattled up by the entryway ceiling, and the cloaked visitor, sensitized to noise by the darkness, reflexively looked up.

Taking advantage of that momentary vulnerability, she leaped from the stairs, sliding around behind her target and moving the tip of her stiletto toward their throat.

"Don't move."

Her voice was low and stifled as she brought the blade closer, but—
—with a light *click*, its tip struck something.

?

A mask?

As that question crossed her mind, the figure spoke. "Monica...? Is that you?"

The moment she heard that voice, her mind plunged into confusion.

—?!

After all, it belonged to the person she knew best.

She launched herself away from him, then took another look.

The moonlight filtering in through the window in the entryway softly illuminated the individual.

Monica knew this figure and his wooden mask well: He was a Mask Maker *who wasn't her*.

"H-Hu...Huey...?!"

"...What are you doing here, Monica?"

They were speaking through their masks, but their masked personas were nowhere to be found.

Monica sank to her knees, while Huey asked her a question.

"...Did that idiot Elmer tell you he was going to bring the playwright here?"

"Huh...?" Monica nodded; she had no idea what was going on. If she had been her usual, levelheaded Mask Maker self, she would probably have understood the situation immediately— But right now, she was seeing Huey's face for the first time in several months, and the two sides of her mask had gotten completely scrambled.

Meanwhile, Huey heaved a sigh, then murmured with some resignation.

"He got us... No, I think I almost expected this."

"What do you...mean?" Monica asked, her voice so tight, it was on the verge of shattering into pieces.

"I mean Elmer set us up. Both of us," Huey answered calmly.

"After all, he wouldn't care if we called him a liar."



Meanwhile In Lotto Valentino "I never thought they'd actually fall for that. They really are innocent."

In the darkness, the glow of a lantern was jauntily bobbing down the road.

As Elmer strolled nimbly through the alleyways, he was smiling cheerfully up at the sky.

"I hope nobody bad tricks them someday."

He was headed for a single destination alone, as if planning to take responsibility for his own lie.

Elmer was making straight for—

—the town's one and only poet, Jean-Pierre Accardo.



The abandoned house

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The silence between Huey and Monica seemed as if it might last for eternity.

The rhythmic creaking of the chandelier still sounded at intervals, the only proof to them that time hadn't stopped.

Monica wasn't staying silent by choice. There were scores of things she wanted to say, countless explanations she wanted to give.

It wasn't me. I haven't told your secret to anyone, Huey!

Please...believe me! Believe me! Believe me!

But she couldn't speak. She didn't even know if she had the right to.

For the past few months, she'd spoken only to Elmer, her brother, and the maids who brought her meals, having only brief, infrequent conversations, but it wasn't as if she'd forgotten how to speak. It was just that the pressure welling up inside her chest kept her heart and her tongue pinned, pushing her down into silence.

No, it's all right if you don't believe me. It's all right if you hate me!

I just— I just...

Even in her own mind, she was at a loss for words.

What was she hoping for from him? Did she want to love him? Did she want him to love her? Did she simply want him to stay by her side? Or did she want him to forgive her for living on despite her crimes?

When she saw Huey, she no longer understood what she wanted.

She'd even forgotten that until just a few minutes ago, the only thing she'd wished and hoped and longed for was to see him.

What is it...that I want from him?

Unlike Monica, Huey's silence was extremely calm.

I thought as much.

He'd had an inkling that Elmer was plotting something. He'd also thought Elmer was sticking in his nose where it didn't belong, and that it had something to do with Monica.

However, despite his doubts, he'd gone to the abandoned house as instructed.

Was I half hoping for this? Hoping to see Monica here...?

Huey's heart wavered, and it made him grind his teeth behind the mask.

In that moment, he had a thought. He'd avoided it for these past few months, but now that he was in this situation, it reached his mind.

What about me?

Did I...want to see Monica?

What the two of them had in common was that over the past few months, each had pushed away their thoughts of the other almost completely.

During Elmer's occasional visits, he would make them aware of each other again.

In the meantime, Monica had merely relived her memories with Huey, while Huey had done his best not to think of Monica. They had let their feelings turn stale.

But in this moment, the shackles had come off.

Everything that had built up in the depths of their hearts, beneath their awareness, came flooding out.

They said nothing; they hardly even moved.

However, their eyes were locked through their masks—and in their hearts, a

storm of emotions lashed and churned.

It was as if they were attempting to retake those lost months in the space of a few seconds.



Somewhere in Lotto Valentino

“Let’s see. From what Maiza said, this should be...that poet’s house.”

As he muttered to himself, Elmer stood in front of the building, looking up.

The place seemed to be built quite sturdily, but it wasn’t especially different from the houses around it; it didn’t really look like an artist’s residence.

The hour was so late that it was almost early again, a ridiculous time for a sudden visit. Not even Elmer could just barge right in; the man might actually call the city police.

Shall I introduce you? Maiza had offered. *I don’t know why you’ve taken an interest in Jean, but I think he’s been busy lately, so it may not be easy for you to meet him.* Unfortunately, Elmer would have had to tell Maiza about Huey’s past to take him up on the offer.

Elmer had managed to sidetrack Maiza and had come to the poet’s house alone, but he hadn’t considered what to do when he got there.

Hmm. What do I do? Should I sneak in? I’m not sure I can do it as well as Monica, though. Maybe I’ll go grab a Mask Maker costume.

That method would, in a way, be more of a nuisance than walking through the front door. Elmer hesitated in front of the house, just as the sound of distant footsteps reached his ears.

“? Is somebody out for a stroll at this time of night?”

Ignoring his own goals, Elmer took an interest in the nocturnal footsteps. He made no move to hide as they approached. To a casual observer, he would only look like a young man who’d stopped on the street to think, and even if someone thought he was suspicious, he probably wouldn’t get reported or suddenly hauled away.

That was the conclusion he’d come to, but the wheels of fate didn’t always

turn the way you might expect.

The owner of the footsteps turned out to be someone he knew.

“You’re...”

“Oh, Carla! Hiya, hello!”

The envoy had appeared in her full-dress uniform, holding a lantern, and Elmer hailed her as if she were a friend he’d known for years.

Even though several months had passed, her group was still in town.

Their ship did leave port from time to time, but most of the members of the envoy, Carla included, stayed in the city. As a matter of fact, every time the ship returned, the number of people wearing the hourglass crest increased.

However, over those few months, the townspeople had gradually grown less concerned; they seemed to have acclimated and decided it wasn’t a problem. At present, there were easily over a hundred envoy members staying in town, but it was no exaggeration to say she and the others had already been accepted as town residents. Maybe it was because of Carla’s trustworthiness as their leader.

Meanwhile, this disruptive bunch’s “search” didn’t seem to be yielding results.

Their leader sighed as she spoke. “...It’s the middle of the night. I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your voice down.”

She was holding the lantern in her left hand, but her right hand was free to draw her weapon at any time.

As one would expect, the fairly masculine way she dressed had sparked many rumors about her, and people said she’d been attacked multiple times while out patrolling at night by herself.

Of course, that was all during the first month.

The men were all unsuccessful, and some of them had lost a hand at the wrist or a particularly important masculine appendage.

After several incidents, the men in town had given a collective shudder at her.

At this point, the only ones who tried anything with her were sailors who were new in town and didn't know any better.

Even now, Carla stayed on her guard as she walked through town, ready to take on these insolent newcomers.

"Wow, am I glad to see someone I know! Walking alone at night really does make you nervous, doesn't it? It'll be fine now, though! I'm a lousy fighter, but I can keep you company, at least. So relax and smile, please."

"What are you talking about? Are you drunk?"

Elmer was puffing up proudly for some inexplicable reason, and Carla was perplexed.

They'd encountered each other several times in town, and she'd run him off the few instances he'd tried to board the ship, but she couldn't seem to make sense of the young man's personality. Since he had ties to both the House of Avaro and the Third Library, she was keeping an eye on him, but she didn't know whether he was harmless or dangerous. Her impression of him was that he was a man like a jellyfish.

"What are you doing here? Do you have business with someone in this house?"

"Well, yes, I do—but it's late, so I was trying to decide between coming back another time and sneaking in now."

"...Sneaking in?"

He'd said it so boldly that Carla thought she must have misheard him.

She was about to ask about his objectives again, but—

—just before she did so, the door of the poet's house opened.

"Did you need something?"

The individual who had poked his head outside, attracted by the voices talking in front of his house...

...was the young poet, Jean-Pierre Accardo himself.



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

That was my first encounter with Elmer C. Albatross.

We had apparently crossed paths on a few occasions previously, but that was the first time I remember speaking with him face-to-face. At that moment, I was not yet aware that he was an acquaintance of Maiza's, or a good friend of Monica Campanella.

I had surmised the reasons behind the visit from the member of the House of Dormентаire, so I was not especially surprised to see her.

As I had anticipated, Carla had noticed that a portion of my newest play seemed to have been modeled on the House of Dormентаire, and she had come to lodge a complaint.

However, I had already accounted for this. It was true that aristocrats modeled on the House of Dormентаire appeared in the new play, yes, but they only served as inspiration. There were no lines that would link them directly to the House of Dormентаire, and most importantly, the story was entirely fictitious.

She had been convinced, if not completely satisfied, and she took her leave.

This was all according to plan. I had planned it thus in order to buy a little time.

Although, to be accurate, Lebreau had advised me to do so.

In any event, the play being performed at that point in time was no more than an initial draft.

With that as my base, little by little, inconspicuously, I modified the script.

Since the title was the same, Carla and the members of the House of Dormентаire weren't likely to suspect it again. In that sense, one could say it was a stroke of luck that the leader of the envoy had been the first to see that initial script and came to me. Even if another member of the group grew doubtful of the play later on, they were unlikely to pursue the issue in depth if their leader was saying nothing about it.

Slowly, slowly, like a bud unfurling, I rewrote the play, bit by bit—until at last,

it blossomed into the flower of truth.

...I shall relate the contents of that play later on.

In any event, the young man named Elmer had visited to discuss my previous work and ask me directly whether that story had been based in truth.

Of course, my objective for the piece had been to spread that truth around the world...but I thought the church would make a nuisance of itself if I acknowledged this in so many words, so I replied with a bluff. I said I had used several stories as inspiration and then elaborated on them.

In truth, I may have been reluctant to admit my lauded work had been borrowed from someone else, and that was why I prevaricated.

I gave my answer with a smile—and I still remember what Elmer said.

Your smile just turned fake.

At that brief remark, I thought my heart might stop.

He was right. I had been smiling in order to put him off the scent; my own feelings left me incapable of smiling genuinely.

However, the fact that he had seen through it made me wonder if he had seen all the way down to my hidden depths.

To be honest, I wondered whether I would be forced to silence the young man on the spot. Granted, I was not in possession of such courage, but...he didn't pursue the issue further. As he left, he made one more remark:

Don't look so upset, all right? Smile, smile, he murmured, as if he were pacifying his own child.

And with that, he left.

I could not smile.

Inexplicably, I again began to wonder if I was doing the right thing, modifying the script as I mentioned previously. I had begun to suspect any smiles I could gain by doing so might be false ones.

In the end, I chose to forge ahead.

Over days and days and dozens of performances, slowly so as not to burden

the players...bit by bit, little by little, I changed the lines, the show, the story itself.

I shifted it closer to the truth.

Now that I reflect on it, perhaps I should have stopped.

Had I let myself be dissuaded when Elmer pointed out the lie in my smile... perhaps I might be smiling with my family now, with no need to leave these memoirs for posterity. I might have worn a genuine one from deep in my breast, from the bottom of my heart.

But now it is too late.

The consequences of my actions temporarily stole not just my own smile, but the smiles of many others.



The abandoned house

How much time had gone by? It might have been only a few minutes, or even a handful of seconds.

For the two Mask Makers, it felt like an eternity.

The first one to break the silence was Huey.

Quietly, he removed his wooden mask, and the moonlight coming through the window illuminated his nearly expressionless face.

“ ... ”

The sight left Monica petrified. The person standing before her was Huey Laforet.

Confronted with that immutable fact, she started trembling from head to toe. It was all she could do just to stay on her feet.

As Huey slowly approached her, she was so tense, she thought her skin might turn inside out.

She had to say something.

The more that thought grew, the more her body refused to listen to her, until finally, even breathing grew difficult.

In desperation, Monica momentarily considered suicide, but even that path was closed to her. The stiletto had slipped from her hand ages ago, and even if she tried to bite her tongue, her jaw was trembling and uncooperative.

She had no way out. Huey reached toward her face, and—

Slowly, the mask she wore was lifted away.

“Oh...”

Both their faces were bare in the faint light.

I have to...

I have to say something...

Summoning up her strength, Monica tried to at least say his name. Her lips worked.

“Hu...”

But she was cut off as Huey slowly pulled her into his arms.

“...!”

Just the way he had when he’d embraced her on the hilltop, a week before they’d gone to see the play.

But more firmly this time.

Huey held Monica tighter and tighter.

“I’ve been thinking...all this time,” Huey murmured into Monica’s ear. He might have been speaking to himself, but the words were for both of them. In his arms, Monica had become a part of him. “I don’t trust you.”

“...—!”

“I suspected you might have told someone about my past, and I can’t say I don’t still.”

Monica’s trembling had subsided the moment Huey’s arms wrapped around her. His confession made her sad—but she had no trouble finding a reply.

“...I know. It’s all right.”

“I’ll use you. That won’t change, either.”

"I know."

I don't mind. She was able to manage a nod. *Still... No, that's why...*

She couldn't bring herself to say the rest.

Please don't leave me again.

It was so short, so simple, but it was too much for her. Monica's tears spilled over as the sadness threatened to crush her heart.

And she had no mask to shield it from him.

She didn't want Huey to see her like this, but she was powerless to stop it. The despair washing over her was so keen that she might have killed herself on the spot given the chance.

But Huey wasn't finished.

"But...is it all right if I fall in love with you?"

"...What?"

At first, Monica didn't understand what he'd said.

Huey's embrace tightened, and he murmured as if seeking confirmation.

"I won't trust you. But even if you did betray me, even if you are my enemy... is it all right if I still love you?"

"Huey..."

"Could my love be good enough, Monica?"

A flood of tears fell from Monica's eyes, but these did not have the same meaning as before.

"That's not fair... You're not being fair, Huey..."

Tears ran down her cheeks, and her voice was shaking again. But the words she said were filled with incredible strength.

"I told you so a long time ago, didn't I? You know there's no way I could refuse you when you ask..."

"...I'm sorry."

“You really, really aren’t fair...Huey. Oh, Huey!”

As she cried out his name, she was remembering what had happened on that hilltop.

*Even if your true face gets exposed and the whole world turns against you—
—I’ll make you a new mask.*

However, as Monica wept, she felt certain.

She wouldn’t need a mask anymore. Not in front of Huey. She could show him her true face.

As these thoughts came to her, she just kept crying into Huey’s chest—



—and the young man, the Mask Maker, held her as tight as he could. He sensed her heart held the same things as his own.

The moonlight faded away, and inside the pitch-black abandoned house...

...the pair finally accepted each other's hearts.

CHAPTER 5

**“I’LL SHOW YOU
THE GREATEST SMILE
YOU’VE EVER SEEN.”**



CHAPTER 5

“I’LL SHOW YOU THE GREATEST SMILE YOU’VE EVER SEEN.”

1710 In a certain place Monica Campanella was dreaming.

Ever since the day Huey Laforet had accepted her, she’d dreamed every night.

As dreams went, it was trivial—just dim sensations of that moment, of being embraced.

How much time had passed since then?

Waking from her slumber, under the blankets, Monica suddenly wondered.

The long night when they’d affirmed their love together had broken—and the next day, Monica and Huey had reappeared at the library.

Surprised, the denizens of the library had peppered them with questions, but as Elmer casually deflected them, the rest of the group realized it might be boorish to ask, and peace had returned.

At that point, everyone around them was convinced the two of them were publicly courting, and they’d showered Monica with congratulations and teasing by turns.

As she thought back over those days, Monica smiled softly under the covers.

Oh... Oh... I was so happy.

All the things my schoolmates said... The teasing and the congratulations... made me so happy.

Until then, in her mind, everyone except Huey had been part of the same, faceless crowd. She may have interacted with them, but she felt nothing toward them.

Huey was all she needed. He was the only one who gave her peace of mind.

Or so she’d once believed, and yet all the comments from her classmates had

given her true joy.

I really was...happy..., she thought.

As she reminisced about the past, she quietly poked her head out from under the blanket...

...and remembered where she was now.

She was looking at a rather low ceiling. In the center of her small room was a little table and the plain bed on which she was lying.

The place was very similar to the hidden room in the back of the storeroom at the Boroñal mansion.

However, there was one clear difference:

The rough, iron bars that were set into the wall, in place of a door.



Let's turn back the clock a few months.

As they made their way down Lotto Valentino's market street, Monica took the arm of the young man next to her.

"...Hey, that makes it hard to walk."

"It's fine, Huey! If you start to fall, I'll hold you up!"

"That makes no sense whatsoever."

Huey sounded tired, but he didn't try to make her let go. Instead, his cheeks flushed very slightly, and he gazed toward the coast as if to hide his embarrassment.

It was a few months after their reunion in the abandoned house.

At this point, Monica and Huey's relationship was famous even in town.

Although they'd never paid much attention to the gossip themselves, apparently they'd individually cultivated a reputation for their relatively attractive looks for quite some time already. Naturally, the fact that they were now romantically involved with each other spread through the town. Even among people who didn't know them, many remembered the rather close couple who frequented the market.

That was probably about when it began. To Monica's eyes, the atmosphere of the town was changing, little by little.

Huey had been using his false gold to control a portion of the town's economy as a Mask Maker, and around that time, he had relaxed his restrictions on a few influential figures. It was no wonder Monica believed that was the cause of the newfound sense of life she was seeing around her, but— —objectively, Lotto Valentino had hardly changed at all.

Monica had no idea that the change had occurred in herself as she reveled in young love.

For a little while, she kept her past chained in the depths of her heart.

"Say, Huey? Where do you want to go today?" Monica asked.

Huey answered with a wry smile.

"Elmer says he found a map to Captain Kidd's treasure. He wouldn't shut up about it. Want to go laugh at him?"

"Watch it be the real thing."

"No, a sailor came through the other day with dozens of them, and he was selling them for a song. Even if it's genuine, I doubt it's worth anything."

Elmer was currently living in a vacant house in a corner of the town. He'd lived in the Boroñal mansion when he'd first come to the area, but Esperanza had eventually thrown him out, saying, *I can't let a man take up one of the guest rooms forever!* Ever since, Elmer had been moving around the city, living here and there.

As they made their way toward his house, Huey looked out to sea. "The salt wind's harsh today," he murmured, as if to himself.

His pace hadn't changed, but he felt Monica's hand suddenly stiffen on his arm.

"What is it? ...Oh."

When he looked, Monica's expression had clouded over slightly, and her eyes were fixed on a point out on the ocean.

An enormous, black ship was headed toward them from the open sea. Its golden hourglass crest reflected the sunlight, declaring its own triumphant return.

“I thought it had been gone for a while... It’s back again, hmm?”

“I wonder if it’s brought more people...,” Monica said gloomily, like a child who was frightened of the dark.

Huey still didn’t know why she was afraid of the House of Dormентаire, but she had given no indication that she was ready to talk about it. She’d only said, *Someday, when the time comes, I’ll tell you.*

“...I wonder if there’s a way to run them out of town.”

Huey narrowed his eyes, and Monica shook her head hastily.

“It’s all right, Huey. I’m fine!”

“...If you say so.”

Around that time, Huey was using his position as a Mask Maker to gradually gather information in town.

He wasn’t using the Mask Maker name directly. However, he was a familiar figure to some of the town’s influential members—as a mysterious individual who gave instructions involving the distribution of the false gold, and who controlled the flow of some of the capital that ran between the town and the outside world. The young man in the wooden mask was apparently believed to be a messenger of the Mask Maker “organization.”

Huey was in fact one of its core members, but he used the misunderstanding to his advantage and was gathering information as a member of “the mysterious, vast organization of Mask Makers,” while keeping his true identity as Huey Laforet hidden.

Some of information he wanted had to do with the man known as Jean-Pierre Accardo.

Despite what he said, he no longer harbored the slightest doubt about Monica.

In that case, how had that scriptwriter known about his past? The similarities

couldn't be passed off as simple coincidence. The most sensible assumption was that someone had told him.

If there's anyone besides me who knows about that incident...

...it's either a survivor from the village, or...

...that group of inquisitors.

His child's mind remembered the inquisitors, who had been dressed like knights. He'd only learned later that they hadn't been official church personnel.

From that perspective, one could have called them the root of all evil—but Huey had viewed the entire world as his enemy, so he hadn't held any special grudge against them in particular.

But things were different now.

If they're here in town...

As ominous thoughts seethed inside him, he carefully kept on gathering information.

However, word had it Jean-Pierre had vanished a short while ago, and no one knew where he'd gone. Still, he did seem to be participating in discussions about his script and keeping in touch with his actors through several avenues.

When it really counted, though, the other man's prudence reared its head, and Huey still hadn't even managed to make contact with him.

Elmer said he'd met him once, but...I don't think he learned anything important.

There was just one thing—if he trusted Elmer's sensibilities—that bothered him.

He remembered hearing, *I dunno everything he was thinking, but he was faking his smile. Jean was, I mean.*

He might simply have been masking his annoyance at Elmer, but it was true that many things about the poet seemed odd.

Huey had chosen to consider Jean-Pierre a person of interest and continued to collect information on him.

He also wanted to know what he could about the House of Dormентаire.

Huey was working carefully so as not to expose Monica's past, but he just couldn't seem to get a complete picture of their objective.

It sounded as if they were looking for someone, yet without requesting help from the city police or the aristocrats. Did that mean this search of theirs was simply an excuse while they worked toward some other goal?

Until their objective was clear, it would be unwise to act carelessly, he concluded.

For a short while now, Huey had cut back his primary activities as a Mask Maker, and he had given Monica and Elmer strict orders not to make any moves without his input.

Huey's instructions notwithstanding, Elmer still appeared to be contacting people who had no ties with the Mask Makers. He was also causing trouble for Maiza Avaro, one of the town's nobles.

Come to think of it, what made the leader of the Rotten Eggs start spending all his time in the library all of a sudden?

Is old Dalton plotting something...?

Nothing in this town is ever straightforward.

There were more causes for concern than he'd thought.

Huey was growing tired of spending his days constantly on the alert—and for him, Monica was rapidly becoming an irreplaceable source of emotional stability.

Considering the kind of person he'd been when he first started refining the false gold, this was an unthinkable turn of events. Yielding part of his own heart to another had been a line he would never cross.

If his past self had seen him now, he would have burst out with rage and shouted, *You degenerate!*

Even as he remembered his past self, Huey loved Monica.

They'd been estranged for several months between their first embrace on the

hilltop and the second when Elmer's scheme had reunited them, but now that he thought about it, maybe it was all for the best.

It didn't matter how they'd reached this point. Here and now, Huey could say Monica was part of his life.

He was strangely amused at the fact that someone like him, someone who had sworn vengeance on the world, had someone to love; he recalled just a little of his childhood self, and the happiness of his life with his mother, before the witch hunt had reached them.

"Don't worry. Even if it stops being fine...I'll find a way to fix it."

He wasn't just saying that to set her mind at ease. He believed it from the bottom of his heart.

"...Thank you."

As he looked at Monica's smile, Huey gave another crooked smile of his own.

He didn't notice the poison trickling through the town, sneering at the couple.

By this time, the vanity and good intentions of the poet Jean-Pierre had already paved the way to a small transformation.

Although no one had caught on to its effects yet—

—bit by bit, little by little...

...the venom of "the truth" had begun to eat away at Lotto Valentino.



Several weeks later The patisserie on the eastern avenue Monica still lived inside the patisserie—and it was here, amid its sweet smells, that the poison first appeared before her.

"I'm home! Auntie, is there anything I can help you with?"

When Monica returned from the Third Library, she was smiling and in high spirits.

The shop's plump mistress answered her cheerfully. "Welcome back, Monica. Oh, no need to help out here. Why not go somewhere with your Huey?"

"Oh, honestly, Auntie!"

“Don’t be so bashful. I don’t know what sort of job Huey will take after the alchemy lectures are over, but you’ll marry once he does, won’t you?”

“...! Muh...m-m-m-marry?!”

Monica was flustered and red-faced, and her landlady gave her a concerned smile.

“Goodness gracious, Monica. You may be a woman now, but you’re still a child on the inside, aren’t you? Still, if you’re going to get married, you should do it soon.”

“Huh...?”

“Well, *I don’t have to say why*, do I?”

“Um...well...no.” Monica looked down, embarrassed, and the mistress’s smile grew even wider.

“Well, never mind. Take your time and think it over.”

Nodding to her, Monica started up the stairs to her room, but—

“Oh yes, that’s right. Do you have a minute, Monica?”

As if she’d remembered something, the mistress’s smile vanished; she sounded rather worried.

“Yes?”

“You didn’t see anyone strange on your way home, did you?”

“Huh...? No, nobody...”

“I see. That’s all right, then. You see, I hear a group has been asking around after the children who attend the libraries nearby, particularly the girls. Came here, too, asking how long you’d been boarding with me, and how old Freya next door was when she started taking classes at the library. Finally, I threw flour at the nosy fellow and chased him off.”

Monica forced a smile at her mistress’s pluck—but internally, dread was building in her gut, enough to crush her.

It can’t be...

“Y-you don’t think they were from the House of Dormентаire?”

“Hmm? Nooo, I wouldn’t say so. I think they were local ne’er-do-wells. You know, many of those Dormентаire men are quite unsavory, but the young lady who’s in charge of them is polite. If someone like her was asking the questions, you can bet I wouldn’t be throwing flour.”

“Oh... I see.”

Sighing with relief, Monica slowly climbed the stairs.

But the slightest seed of unease had been planted in her heart.



One week later The Third Library She still felt uneasy, but no particularly suspicious signs had manifested over the past week, and the days had simply drifted by.

She listened to the alchemists’ lectures, talked with Huey, and got teased by Elmer and her other friends from school. It was the same peaceful routine day after day.

To Monica, that routine was true happiness.

However, the root of anxiety in her heart had made her just a little bit sensitive.

Perhaps that was why she listened to that conversation.

“Hey, my landlord went to see Jean-Pierre’s new play.”

In the private collection room, one of the pupils had struck up a conversation with Elmer.

Apparently envious, Elmer leaned in toward the other student.

“Yeah, I hear it’s incredibly popular! I want to see it, too, but I can’t seem to get a ticket! I asked a friend last time, but I hear this one’s an even bigger hit than the one before, so I’ll have to sit tight a while longer!”

“You’re lucky you’ve got connections at all. It sounds like my landlord finally got one by begging somebody with ties to the theater, too. Until Jean-Pierre started putting on real plays, that theater basically only did *commedia dell’arte*.

You know, masked improv. Most of us here have never seen plays like Jean-Pierre's."

"Huh. I like commedia dell'arte, too, though. Especially those fights by Pedrolino, the clown."

"You would, wouldn't you?"

It was a completely normal, everyday conversation.

When Jean-Pierre's name had come up, her heart had skipped a beat, but that alone wouldn't have affected her too much.

However, she was listening now, and the conversation continued—with a bit of Jean-Pierre's poison.

"Y'know, I heard a bit from my landlord... He was talking to people who'd seen it before, and the script's changed a little."

"Huh. Well, I hear they do make adjustments to the script during a play's run."

"No... It sort of sounds like Jean-Pierre's doing something really dangerous."

"Dangerous? Like what?"

"Well, uh... It was more vague in the older script, but... In the one my landlord saw, apparently it was completely obvious. *He says the last half of that play is based on our town and the people from that black ship.*"

— —!

Monica's neck was so tense that the bones creaked, and her fingers began to tremble slightly.

The black...ship.

Based on...the House of Dormентаire?

It felt as if a ghost had clamped its fingers around her heart, and the anxiety inside her grew thicker and thicker. Taking a few deep breaths to keep it hidden, Monica tried to make sense of the information she'd just overheard—but that only made it worse.

The play's...last half?

Then...what about its first half?

She knew.

She knew what it was that the people from the black ship were here to do.

Esperanza, her big brother, had told her.

And—if the last half of the play consisted of their arrival in town now, then did the first half show *the incident that had brought them to this town?*

It can't be.

It can't be.

She silently told herself, over and over.

However, she just couldn't dispel the unease.

And so, a few days later, with the help of the same connection as before, she slipped into the theater.

And then Monica—



Night An office in the Boroñal mansion "...Hmm? It's you, is it?"

Sensing someone nearby, Esperanza lifted his head and saw his little sister dressed as the Mask Maker.

"It's been quite a while since you appeared before me in that bizarre costume. If you've come to dress up and insult me again, your spirit must have recovered quite a bit... Should I be grateful to that fellow Elmer? To your sweetheart?"

Esperanza's remark conveniently ignored his own appearance. For a little while, the Mask Maker stayed silent. Finally, with her face lowered slightly, she murmured, "I've come to bid you farewell."

"...?"

That was sudden; Esperanza's hands paused in the middle of his paperwork. His eyebrows furrowed, he watched his sister carefully.

The Mask Maker stood in front of the door, completely motionless,

impassively continuing to speak in Monica's voice.

"Count Esperanza Boroñal. I am truly grateful for all the kindness you've shown to me despite my sins."

As the Mask Maker gave a respectful bow, Esperanza sensed something disquieting about her. Rising from his chair, he asked, "What are you saying? This isn't like you."

Something unusual was happening.

Esperanza could tell, and he tried to say something to her to keep her from leaving— —but just before he managed it, she removed the mask from her face. Her smile was somehow desolate, and she interrupted Esperanza before he could finish.

"Really. Thank you, my brother."

"Wait... What are you saying? Where is this coming from?"

"I've lived this long, and I was very happy. Thanks to you, I was able to meet all sorts of people... I know I don't really have the right, but I will tell you, and only you."

As she finished speaking, Esperanza thought he could see tears welling up in her eyes—but before he could be sure, she'd put the mask back on.

As she left the room, Monica's own voice spoke from beneath the mask.

"I was happy."

"*Maribel...* Wait! What are you going to do?!"

Hastily trying to stop her, Esperanza dashed out the office as well, but—the hallway was empty. One of the windows stood open, and the flames of the candlesticks flickered violently in the night wind.

That day, Monica Campanella vanished from the town once more.

This time, she didn't even tell Elmer or her blood relative Esperanza where she had gone— —and she didn't say good-bye to Huey Laforet, the person she loved most of all.



A few days later Huey's place "Are you all right, Huey? You don't look so great."

"..."

Unusually, Elmer wasn't smiling.

Huey didn't respond. He was fiddling with a device of some sort that he'd set on the table. His expression was dark. It looked as if by moving his hands, he was trying to keep his heart tethered to reality by force.

"It's been three days since Monica disappeared. She hasn't contacted you at all?"

"..."

"I see."

Guessing the answer from the other man's silence, Elmer gave a small sigh.

The previous day, a messenger from the Boroñal mansion had delivered a letter from Esperanza: *Monica's gone. Do you know anything about it?*

However, by that time, both Elmer and Huey had already realized something was wrong.

Monica hadn't come to school, so Huey and Elmer had visited the patisserie where she lived, worried she'd caught a cold.

"She hasn't been home since yesterday, actually. I just assumed she was with you, Huey."

After they'd said good-bye to the shop's worried-looking mistress, Elmer had spoken to Huey on the way home.

"Have you heard anything?"

"...No, nothing."

Monica hadn't told Huey anything at all. He was fairly sure everything had been fine a day ago.

They'd talked as usual, parted ways as usual.

She'd been happy. He was sure she was. Happy with him, anyway.

Could he have upset Monica without being aware of it?

Huey wondered, but he really couldn't think of what that transgression might have been.

One day went by, then two. They had nothing to go on as time moved ever forward.

They checked with Esperanza and the patisserie's mistress again, but both said nothing about Monica had seemed strange until that day. Nothing except what she'd said the previous day, similar to what she'd told Esperanza: *Thank you for all the care you've shown me. I'm very grateful.*

The proprietress had assumed the oddly formal remark simply meant Monica had decided to marry Huey and move out—but Huey himself had been left without a clue.

There was only one potential connection to her disappearance.

"...It isn't just our school. Did you know there's a group that's been snooping around, asking about the women in the alchemists' workshops?"

"Yeah, Maestro Archangelo said something about being careful, didn't he? ... You don't think they snatched Moni-Moni, do you?"

"I'd rather not think it, but..."

Huey's chair creaked as he shifted, and his face clouded visibly.

Before, he probably wouldn't have shown such human emotion. Even if Monica had disappeared, any darkness on his face would have been because he'd have one fewer pawn at his disposal, but now he was genuinely worried about her.

Elmer wanted to be happy about this change in his friend, but he pushed it down to focus on Monica.

In that sense, he was far less sentimental than Huey.

To the smile junkie, losing Monica meant less that he'd lost a loved one and more that there would be fewer smiles in the world. As if he'd lost a tool he could have used to engineer his own happiness. If anything happened to Monica, he wouldn't just lose her smiles. He'd lose Huey's, and Esperanza's, and

the woman from the patisserie's. To Elmer, this was the heaviest of blows.

Contrary to appearances, Huey was very human deep down, while Elmer had a strangely unemotional side, even though he was outwardly kinder than anyone. It was possible they got along so well because the warped parts of their personalities meshed neatly together, and each made up for what the other lacked.

Monica had belonged to this complementary relationship as well.

Huey and Elmer said nothing to each other.

But maybe they didn't need to say it aloud—they would find Monica, no matter what.

After that night, the two began hurrying through Lotto Valentino: Huey as a Mask Maker, and Elmer as a pupil at the private school.

Little by little, they began to detect the poison circulating through its streets.



A few days later Night Not even starlight could reach this back alley, but a flash of brilliant flames illuminated it for just a moment.

The orange gleam blasted the cheek of a man who was slumped against the wall. It was hot enough to made him want to turn away.

“Yee-yeeeagh?!”

The fire instantly vanished back into thin air, but the man's terror showed no sign of abating.

He didn't even understand what had happened—and the masked man whose right hand had *spat out* the flames spoke to him quietly.

“...Why are you spying on the alchemists?”

“O-oh, come on! So the Mask Maker really was in league with them?! B-buh—buh...but I didn't— Nuh...n-n-n-nobody told me you could use magic!”

As the man screamed, his lungs, throat, tongue, and jaw were all trembling.

The masked youth went on quietly. “I'll ask you one more time. Why are you spying on the alchemists?”

Slowly, he brought his right hand—and the device on it—closer to the man's face.

“W-w-w-wait! This is all a big misunderstanding! It's got nothing to do with you! We don't care about the men! We're looking for a woman! A woman!”

“Why are you looking for a female alchemist?”

“W-well, because that play's real, they said...”

“...The play?”

“Y-yeah! The new one from Jean-Pierre! I haven't seen it, but some of the guys who have were spreading rumors about it! They said it ain't a made-up story! It can't be! Anybody could see it's based on the Dormentaires...”

A play...?

The heart of the Mask Maker—Huey—shuddered violently.

That earlier play had finished its run, and a new one had begun a short while ago.

Why is Jean-Pierre's name coming up again now?

Suspicious, Huey had stopped moving while the man spilled his secrets. He had to be sure the poet man really and truly had nothing to do with this.

“They said they're looking for a girl who murdered an aristocrat, and anybody who finds her will get a fat reward from the House of Dormентаire...! Once the rumor reached the ports, all the sailors who aren't working right now jumped into the search for her—she's an alchemist!”



Meanwhile The drawing room of the Avaro mansion “Monica may be involved with the House of Dormентаire...?”

Even though Elmer had stopped by late at night, Maiza didn't look cross as he listened to him.

“I couldn't really tell before, not even when I sneaked onto the ship, but I was thinking they might have made some sort of big move recently.”

“Hmm... Aside from the fact that the ship returned from Spain a short while

ago, I haven't heard of any large disturbances..." Suddenly, Maiza put a hand to his mouth and thought for a long while in silence.

This struck Elmer as suspicious, and he started to say something, but Maiza quietly interrupted. "It can't be..." Then he explained what had occurred to him. "...Do you know about the play that's being staged at the theater in Lotto Valentino?"

"Yeah, Jean-Pierre's."

"I received an invitation soon after it opened, and I went to see it. Even at the time, it did remind me of the Dormentaires and us here. The story revolved around an eloping couple fleeing from aristocrats who seemed to be modeled on the House of Dormентаire."

With a heavy sigh, Maiza went on.

"However, when I spoke with an aristocrat friend who'd gone to see it more recently, I realized something. During its run, the play's script seems to have been rewritten several times."

"The script?"

"Yes. At first, it was subtle enough that only those who were very familiar with the House of Dormентаire would have thought they could have served as inspiration. Although, in the most recent draft, anyone who lives here or knows anything about the House of Dormентаire at all can tell it's them." Maiza sighed deeply, as if he didn't understand what his friend Jean was trying to do.

Elmer drained the last of the tea that had been set out on the table for him. "I wonder if the play's something special for the townspeople. If it is, I'd say tangling with the House of Dormентаire is too much of a risk... Oh, but if he really is trying to make the townspeople smile, I suppose I can relate."

"I hope that's all it is, but... It seems as though the play's actual plot is changing, little by little. I have a terrible feeling about all this... I'm concerned about Jean."

"What if you explained the situation to the actors? He's discussing the script with them, right?"

“The problem with that is, nobody’s seen him. The other day, he sent in a script with a message saying it was the complete version, and there’s been absolutely no word from him ever since.” Maiza’s expression grew chagrined. “I noticed nothing strange about him. While I was charmed by alchemy—or whatever Maestro Dalton’s magic is—I lost the ability to even see my friend clearly.”

“Maestro Dalton’s magic? What’s that?”

“Oh... No, I’m only talking to myself.”

“Well, it’s all right. Forget about it and smile, Maiza. Just think of it this way: Your friend grew while you weren’t looking. That’s kinda interesting, you know? People change. Maybe they turned into somebody different when you weren’t paying attention, but that doesn’t mean you have to be sad. He might be planning something that will help the town. Don’t be so pessimistic about everything.”

As always, Elmer failed to understand how to respond.

Maiza exhaled slightly, then smiled, as if Elmer’s comments had helped anyway.

“You, though. You really don’t change.”



Meanwhile On the private ship of the House of Dormентаire While the House of Dormентаire’s private vessel had the exterior of a battleship, there were special living quarters for nobles inside. For a residential area, it wasn’t very spacious. It was as if an ordinary bedroom had been removed from a manor, then condensed until it was as small as possible.

In addition to a bed, it held a chair, a table, and a cupboard. All of them were high-class articles that wouldn’t be found in an ordinary house, and it was difficult to believe this space was on a battleship armed with several dozen cannons.

However, the room had no windows, and there was only one door.

One could have called it a fortress for aristocrats, a safehouse enemy attacks couldn’t reach—but it could also be an inescapable prison.

And indeed, the woman inside was a captive.

A criminal who could never be forgiven, named Monica Campanella.

“...Mealtime,” a woman called.

Monica slowly lifted her head.

She had been slumped over the table, but her hair and clothes weren’t obviously disheveled.

Her eyes were strong, with no sadness or doubt.

The individual facing her was—

—a brown-skinned woman in a military-style uniform emblazoned with the crest of the House of Dormентаire.

“Thank you very much...um...Carla.”

“No need to thank me,” Carla said shortly before Monica could say anything else. She looked at the girl, her gaze sharp. “...You really don’t regret this?”

“Of course not.”

Monica nodded, smiling gracefully.

Carla narrowed her eyes slightly. She took a seat across the table from Monica, who was nibbling on some bread, and watched her unobtrusively.

No matter how hard she looked, Monica was a local girl, and she didn’t seem to have anything particularly aristocratic on her person.

This wasn’t confinement, and it wasn’t transportation.

This girl looked like someone chosen from the town at random.

However, she had sent a severe shock through Carla and the rest of the House of Dormентаire.

“...I’m still not convinced.” Carla looked straight into Monica’s eyes. “Are you really the criminal we’re looking for?”

Monica nodded once, smiling gently. “I...killed the House of Dormентаire’s eldest son...Gardi Dormентаire.”

“ ... ”

This didn't sit right with Carla. She couldn't simply nod and agree with the self-proclaimed "culprit" in front of her.

First, she wasn't a heinous criminal chased down and apprehended after a manhunt. To Carla, she had been a bolt from the blue.

Her group had been investigating the town under the pretext of searching for a criminal, as usual. When they'd returned to the ship, Monica had unexpectedly presented herself and said: "I'm the criminal you're looking for."

To be honest—Carla had already known about her.

A few of the people in town—the nobles and top members of the city police—knew she was Esperanza Boroñal's half sister.

"Publicly, you're a student living at a local shop, but I'm told you're actually Lord Boroñal's little sister. Even if that isn't widespread knowledge, this won't be taken lightly. It's not a joke."

"A joke... You're right. I still remember my crime; the sensation of stabbing someone and taking his life lingers in my hands— If only it were all someone's idea of a great big joke," Monica replied.

Carla watched her eyes and sighed deeply.

She'd known.

Carla had known this whole time.

According to reports from her spy, this girl was the most likely suspect behind the murder of a member of the House of Dormентаire.

However, that knowledge was the very reason she'd been able to avoid catching her. She'd been intentionally ignoring her.

After all, the mission she'd been given was not to apprehend her, but to carry off the town itself.

She was to search both the surface and the underbelly of the town with the manhunt as her excuse.

They would make the best possible use of their position, find the town's Achilles' heel, punch a hole in the alchemists' miniature garden, and deliver it

all into the hands of the House of Dormентаire. That was the reason she'd been sent here.

But this was a completely unforeseen development.

Their hunt for the criminal had been no more than an excuse. Carla had never dreamed the criminal would turn herself in.

"Let me introduce myself properly. My name is Monica Campanella. However, that name was given to me ten years ago."

"..."

"My true name...is *Maribel Boroñal*. The living ghost said to have died a decade ago, of the House of Boroñal. And—I am the one who stabbed a member of the House of Dormентаire, your masters, and killed him with my own hands."

Carla accepted this announcement with a sour expression.

Maribel Boroñal. So it was true.

Monica Campanella wasn't Esperanza's half sister, a child of his father's mistress. She was a member of the nobility, truly a blood relative born of the same parents.

However, according to records in Carla's home country—Maribel Boroñal was dead. Ten years ago, she and her parents had been unfortunate enough to witness Gardi Dormентаire being stabbed to death by a robber, and the villain had killed them as well. That was the official story.

In truth—she had changed her name, discarded her noble rank, and had begun another life in this town as an apprentice alchemist.

Monica watched for Carla's reaction, without starting on the meal she'd been brought.

Carla murmured, half to herself. "...Why?"

"Hmm?"

"Why did you turn yourself in now?"

It was a perfectly natural question.

Several months had passed since the ship from the House of Dormентаire had first arrived in port.

If she'd turned herself in because of a guilty conscience, the timing made very little sense.

Even Carla had doubted the spy's report.

The girl in front of her didn't appear to be twenty yet. At the time of the murders, she had to have been less than ten. Carla simply couldn't believe a little girl would have been responsible for an incident that resulted in the deaths of three people.

"In fact...what on earth happened that night? You said you killed Master Gardi Dormентаire, but what about your parents, the count and countess? The records say they were stabbed as well. Was that your doing, too?" Carla asked out of personal curiosity, and Monica tilted her head, perplexed.

"Wasn't it done on your instructions?"

"What do you mean?"

"The play at the theater now..."

Although Monica had been confident a moment ago, faint confusion began to show in her expression. However, she soon pulled herself together, gave a small sigh, and went on calmly.

"Jean-Pierre Accardo. Isn't he involved with you?"

"?"

"The script of the play here in Lotto Valentino recreates that abominable night... Weren't you the ones who provided it?"

"...? Wait just a minute. You mean the play that's running now? It's a tragedy about the elopement of two aristocrats, isn't it? I personally checked the script on the day it premiered, but there was nothing about that incident in it..."

"That was the original script. The play being performed in that theater now is completely different from the one you described, I think. Only its name is the same."

“Wha—...?”

Carla was speechless, and Monica began to lay out the facts.

The expression she wore wasn’t the girlish one she showed Huey, or her face as the Mask Maker.

It was the face of a hapless noble who’d been forced to flee from her own crime.

“I’ll tell you...everything.

“Everything in that play—everything about the crime I committed.”



Red.

She could see nothing but that color.

To be accurate, red covered only part of the scene—but it was all she could see.

From time to time, a flash of silver darted out of the color, then plunged back in.

She wasn’t yet ten years old; before her eyes, the red color danced and danced and danced to a distorted rhythm.

Until her parents were the same color, too.

Why had this happened?

She was too young to understand.

Gardi Dormентаire was the Dormентаire family’s oldest son.

He had a certain, unique proclivity, one which was a frequent problem for the members of the House of Dormентаire.

However, the family’s enormous power hushed up every issue until it was lost in obscurity. No one except the members of the House of Dormентаire knew about his tendencies.

Even if it had been explained to the young girl, she wouldn’t have understood.

She was the daughter of a certain aristocrat, accompanying her parents to a

soiree at the House of Dormентаire.

There, someone had spoken to her. He seemed kind.

It was the first time the girl had ever had a proper conversation with a man of the nobility besides her father or her older brother. She wasn't wary of him at all.

Neither her father nor her mother cautioned her about him, either. In fact, they smiled and bowed to him.

Neither she nor her parents knew about his true nature.

If an unjust god said ignorance was a sin, then everyone was guilty—
—and so they were all punished unjustly.

The nobleman led the girl to a room deeper in the mansion.

The route through this vast home was very complicated; the room seemed almost like a dead end in the heart of a labyrinth.

Why had the girl gone with him? Even she didn't know. She only knew he must be a fine person, if he seemed so kind and respected.

She had no way of knowing how wrong she was.

When she was ushered into the dark room, she saw someone on the floor. Another girl, about her own age. She wasn't even wearing clothes. *Isn't she cold?* the girl wondered.

"Damn. I forgot to clean up."

The man pushed the girl on the floor under the bed, as carelessly as he would a doll.

Finally, the girl then began to detect something eerie about the man. And about the girl, who was her own age and who hadn't so much as twitched at the rough treatment.

"No need to worry. All you need to do is be you. You can be proud. I've met you today; that means I'm saved. My sins have vanished."

The girl didn't understand what the man was saying, and she took an involuntary step backward.

“I mean, surely they must have? If God, if the world hadn’t forgiven me—then surely, I wouldn’t be here! I’d never have met such a magnificent creature as yourself! And yet here you are. Yes, my sins have been forgiven!”

He’s scary.

I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared!

At last, the girl realized something.



She should never have come here. She was with someone she should not be with.

Hastily turning away from the man, she tried to hurry to the door—but it was too late.

The man moved his big hand to cover her mouth, stifling her scream.

Lifting the struggling girl easily, the depraved noble pushed her down onto the bed, intending to turn this innocent child into his plaything—

“Maribel!”

Having realized something was wrong, her parents rushed into the pervert’s room.

They’d made it just in time.

And because they had, everything she saw was covered in red.



“He’d been strangling me, so I had to cough for a little while before I could see again. But when my eyes adjusted, I saw him...stabbing Father and Mother to death with a candlestick.”

“ ... ”

Monica was speaking impassively, but Carla felt her throat beginning to go dry.

For God’s sake.

Am I allowed...to hear this story?

The noblewoman who was her mistress hadn’t informed her of the particulars of Gardi Dormентаire’s death. On the contrary, his very name seemed to be considered taboo at the House of Dormентаire.

For that very reason, when the spy had told her the “criminal” was a girl this young, she’d had her doubts—but she felt a terrible heaviness behind Monica’s matter-of-fact words, and Carla could hardly imagine she was lying.

“It never crossed my mind that they were dead. I know you can’t save someone after they’ve been stabbed in the throat, but...”

“...”

“I had no idea. I didn’t know people died so easily.”

Monica lowered her eyes—and quietly shook her head.

“I managed to pick up a nearby candlestick, and I tried to rescue my parents... The candle was still burning, and it fell to the floor. Its red color was so bright. Then the bedclothes caught fire...!”



The red of the flames, and the red of the blood spraying out.

Two different shades stained the girl’s heart.

Startled by the spreading flames, the nobleman hastily turned to look behind him—

—and the spear-length candlestick *sank* into his throat.

She had thrust it out in desperation; the sensation as it pierced his flesh was stamped on her hands, her memories, her heart, as the wrong kind of softness.

There was a nasty *splutch* of a recoil, warm blood splattered the girl’s face—

—and more of that red color stung her eyes, fading her vision to black.

The heat of the blood on her face and the heat of the spreading flames were trying to burn her to ashes, body and soul.

She screamed her parents’ names, but there was no answer—

—and by the time she screamed her brother’s name, the blaze had spread to the corpses of her parents, and to the clothes of the dying nobleman.



“Just after that, I was rescued by Dormентаire servants who had noticed the fire. I told them everything I’d seen, and that I’d stabbed the man. I didn’t hide anything. I didn’t learn until much later that he was Gardi, the Dormентаire’s oldest son.”

“... And yet, you weren’t tried as a criminal.”

“From what I understand, they didn’t want their son’s crimes to become public knowledge. The House of Boroñal was a rather distinguished family, so if

there had been an official trial, they would have had to state that Gardi had killed my parents. Besides...the Boroñals had many influential relations, and it wouldn't have been easy to pin all of it on me."

"So they said everyone in the room had been killed by a mysterious robber. Is that it?" Carla murmured, supplementing the explanation for her own satisfaction.

Monica gave a small nod. "I ended up discarding my rank as a noble. The girl I'd seen...the dead girl was a child Gardi had bought somewhere. She had been burned beyond recognition, so she was declared to be Maribel Boroñal. I heard that was how they handled it."

"They let you go, but it would have been troublesome for them if, as an adult, you'd had the power of an aristocrat, so they took steps to prevent that."

If in the future, she had said, *I am a noble after all*, the House of Dormентаire would have charged her with her crime in the full knowledge of their relative's disgrace. For that reason, they wanted her to stay dead.

From the particulars, the girl didn't appear to be to blame in any way—but the power the House of Dormентаire held was so enormous that her innocence was irrelevant.

If they had merely wanted to suppress the affair, no doubt they would have done away with her—but the idea that a girl under the age of ten had killed four people was preposterous, and it probably would have been rather difficult to hush it up. The House of Dormентаire had chosen to *mask* her crime and use it for leverage.

"As a result, the House of Dormентаire stole the greater part of the source of the House of Boroñal's power. My brother...agreed to the deal, in order to protect me."

Clenching her hands on the fabric that covered her knees, Monica bit her lip in frustration.

"That's why he was exiled all the way out here. We'd always had a second residence up on that hill, but... The circumstances in this region are complicated, and not many nobles wanted to come here at all."

"I see. I understand the situation... Although, I mustn't simply believe everything you've said." Inwardly, Carla sympathized with the girl, but she kept the emotion out of her expression and voice. "I do have a question: If what you say is true, why did you turn yourself in to us?"

"...? You came here in search of me, didn't you?"

Only on paper.

That information nearly left Carla's throat, but she hastily shoved it back down.

"Given that I wasn't apprehended for several months, I assume my brother must have protected me again... At one point a few months ago, I despaired. Back then, I didn't care whether I was captured or not, and so I went to him, but..."

"..."

What is this?

I don't understand what she's getting at.

It was true that Carla had gone to speak with Esperanza in advance.

However, Esperanza had already seemed aware of everything.

As soon as she told him she had come to apprehend the criminal who killed Maribel, her parents, and Gardi Dormентаire, he'd responded, *Meaning you're going to be staying in town for an extended period, and you want me to overlook what you do while you're here, correct?*

After that, he'd continued: *I, too, have a duty to protect this town. There is a point at which a man must choose between protecting those he cares about and those he governs. Provided you do not cross that line, please do as you like.*

Carla hadn't yet obtained a solid grasp of the situation; to her, the remark had been incomprehensible—but now she understood completely.

Even then, she still struggled to make sense of all this.

How did she know we were looking for her? And if an "arrangement" had already been made, there's no need to be so fearful, is there?

When she asked, it was Monica's turn to look perplexed.

"Wasn't it you who had Jean-Pierre write that play?"

"...?"

"I did want to run away...if I could. I wanted to forget. But even a man like that noble mattered to someone, didn't he? If there's someone who wants me to face judgment, then I'll submit to it. So..."

At that point, Monica drew a breath, and for the first time, her emotions came pouring out in front of Carla.

"So please end that play immediately! I'm the only one in the wrong! Huey isn't— Huey has nothing to do with it! He doesn't even know about my past! So... So..."

Her feelings seemed to have jammed in her throat, and the rest of what she was trying to say wouldn't come out.

The emotion she'd shown was a little different from either anger or sadness. The best word for it might have been *pleading*.

Carla could see behind it how deeply she cared for her love.



A young girl had killed an important nobleman and faked her own death by putting her noble title onto a girl she didn't know.

She had then assumed the cover of a pupil studying under alchemists and lived in a certain town. Uneventfully, peacefully, as if that tragedy had been a dream.

Be that as it may, a ship belonging to that noble family appeared, and the mood in the town changed drastically.

The nobleman she had killed was a despicable villain who had attempted to assault a young girl, even killed her parents, and yet someone was unhappy with his death—the dead man's younger sister.

The woman made no attempt to believe in her brother's misdeeds. She had to find the culprit, no matter what it took.

However, the culprit was already dead, officially. The girl's family seemed very unlikely to talk. In that case—she had to locate the criminal in secret and do away with her in private.

Meanwhile, the girl was afraid of the nobleman's ship, but she couldn't afford to lose the happiness she'd worked so hard to obtain now.

That was when someone extended a helping hand to her.

The boy who had lost his mother in a witch hunt, who had been betrayed by all the villagers—and who had made a pact with a demon. The two joined forces, making a new contract with the demon, and burned the nobleman's ship to ashes. However, the flames spread to the town. In the end, the girl's happiness was lost, and both she and the boy vanished from the earth.

Onstage, skilled actors were playing out this tale.

In the audience, Huey glared wordlessly at the stage from beginning to end, while Elmer watched the play unfold with sadness in his eyes.

The performance finally ended, but even after most of the audience had left the theater, Huey stayed in his seat, looking down silently.

A soft creaking noise came from his right hand, which was hidden in his sleeve.

"Don't do it, Huey. Burning the theater down won't make anybody smile, and it won't save anybody, either." In the seat next to Huey, Elmer looked up at the ceiling. "Not you or Monica... Actually, I didn't realize you even brought that thing here."

"...Yes, I know. I know that," Huey replied, but the creaking from his hand didn't stop.

After seeing the play, he understood everything even without proof.

That play, particularly the first half, was probably based on Monica's past.

And like the previous play that had shown his own past, it was no doubt close to the truth.

"Jean-Pierre Accardo..."

“If I set him on fire and watch him die...I think that might make me smile a bit.”



“What...is this...?”

Carla had issued orders to a subordinate and acquired the script for the play that was currently being performed.

The story written on the pages was completely different from the one she’d seen.

It was likely that the script had gone through a series of gradual revisions while it was being performed.

She was furious, but she managed to keep her voice calm, and she gave her men one single order:

“Seize Jean-Pierre Accardo by the scruff of his neck and drag him here. Now.”

However, although more than a hundred members of the Dormентаire envoy were on the search—they weren’t able to secure Jean-Pierre’s person.

Not after days and days...



A certain day in 1710 Somewhere in Lotto Valentino

Right after Huey and Elmer saw the play, its run was ended and replaced by another at the theater. It was one of the masked, commedia dell’arte plays that had previously been popular, and Jean-Pierre had nothing to do with its content.

It wasn’t clear why a play had been canceled at the height of its popularity, but the townspeople had a good guess. The gossip soon began.

“So that really was a true story about the secrets of the House of Dormентаire.”

“Yes, and the Dormентаire lot in town started applying pressure on the theater.”

They had no proof, but they were certain. The disappearance of Jean-Pierre

Accardo lent an air of truth to the rumors.

However, with over a hundred Dormentaire men staying in town long-term, such things couldn't be said openly—and the rumors slowly spread through the town, traveling between close friends, relatives, lovers, and drinkers who'd shed their inhibitions.

Just like a poison that accumulated gradually over time.

"Did you find any clues?" Elmer asked.

"...It sounds as if Monica really is being held captive by the Dormentaires," Huey answered in one of the Mask Maker hideouts. His eyes were red and bloodshot, and his complexion wasn't good at all. "I hear someone from the Dormentaires bought several articles of women's clothing from the fabric shop on the market street. They were nothing like what that Carla person wears, so it's safe to assume they were purchased as spare outfits for someone else."

"That's fantastic! Now there's hope! It means they're at least letting her change clothes, and if they bought her several outfits, there's no need to worry about her life being in immediate danger!"

"Sometimes, I appreciate how quick you are to see the bright side."

Of course, he knew that was no more than a hope.

In the worst-case scenario, she'd been sent to the "nobleman's relative" mentioned in the play and had already been tortured and put to death.

However, the ship hadn't left port once, and it didn't seem to be preparing to set sail.

"Still... If Monica said good-bye to Speran and the patisserie's mistress, then she probably turned herself in voluntarily, didn't she?" Elmer had folded his arms and was brooding.

Huey looked down and murmured, "...So why didn't she say anything to me? Why would she need to turn herself over to them in the first place?"

"You already know, don't you? Even an oblivious bunny should be able to figure that one out."

"Just because I understand doesn't mean I've accepted it."

Yes, I understand. Monica saw that play, after all.

The play had featured a character who was clearly modeled on Huey. To the audience, he had been the protagonist of the previous play, one of the reasons that play had attracted so much attention despite its mixed reviews.

Monica must have seen the second play and assumed the townspeople would identify her right away. And once they took the play as truth, their deductions would take them not just to Monica—but to Huey Laforet.

The man depicted as a devil, who burned down the town at the end of the play, actually lived here. After the rumors started spreading, it wouldn't just be her. Huey might also be apprehended by the House of Dormентаire as her "accomplice."

The fact that it was understandable made it all the more mortifying.

The more sense it made, the less convinced he felt of her reason, and the more maddening it was.

He wanted to scream at Monica: *What kind of fool do you take me for?! Did you think that would even worry me?!*

But she wasn't here anymore.

Silence fell between Elmer and Huey, and the stillness in the hideout weighed heavy on Huey's heart.

How many seconds—minutes, hours—did they spend that way?

Elmer, who would ordinarily have been bantering, said nothing.

It was as if he was waiting for Huey to suggest something.

Then, just as one of the candles in the candelabra was about to burn out, Huey broke the silence. He had a resolution in mind.

"The truth is, for several days now...I've been thinking about sneaking onto that ship."

"..."

"But over the past few days, they've tightened their guard. It would have been one thing before, but I can't find any openings to exploit now. I also don't

have any political influence.”

“Speran said something like that, too. I think he knows Monica may be on that ship, but he’s the acting lord of this area, and the House of Dormентаire might as well be holding the townspeople hostage. He can’t make any careless moves.”

“Yes... It’s been several months since they kept coming and coming with more people wearing those eerie crests, but the locals don’t fear them as outsiders anymore. They probably seem like slightly unsettling neighbors, at most... And if worse comes to worst, making an enemy of the House of Dormентаire may mean the end of this town. I’ve done some checking around, and that family does seem to have the power to do it.”

He broke off for a moment—

—then he turned to face Elmer squarely, an intense resolution blazing in his eyes as he made a firm statement:

“But I’ll make an enemy of them anyway.”

“...”

Elmer was silent, and Huey continued. The light in his eyes resembled insanity.

“I will. I’m willing to sacrifice the whole town to fight them and save Monica. Jean-Pierre Accardo was right about me—for Monica’s sake, I could burn the whole city down!”

Then a trace of sadness crept into his expression, and he looked at Elmer.

“But...I could never do it alone. Which is why I’m planning to drag you into this. I’ll use everything at my disposal, for my selfish, prideful desire to save Monica! I’ll beg without shame. Please—”

Just then, Elmer stuck out a hand, interrupting Huey.

“...?”

“Hmm...”

Elmer had been listening seriously to what Huey said, and he smiled warmly,

genuinely.

He asked Huey a question.

“Would saving Monica make you happy?”

“...Of course it would.”

“If you get to see Monica again, will you smile?”

“I’ll show you the greatest smile you’ve ever seen.”

Huey answered with no hesitation whatsoever.

The response seemed to satisfy Elmer, and he cackled.

“That was all you ever had to say, you know. That’s enough for me.”



Carla was also worried, for reasons of her own.

What should I do?

She’d managed to get the play canceled, but thanks to the rumors, most of the townspeople were familiar with the story now. They didn’t know about the true objectives of the House of Dormентаire—immortality, the false gold, and the drug—but as a result, her group now had to accomplish their superficial goal. Which they had done when they apprehended Monica, which in turn meant they had no official reason to stay in the town.

However, they had made almost no headway with regard to the town’s secrets.

They could have claimed the girl had been delusional and released her, but it was already too late to settle the matter purely in private. If they tried, townspeople would locate Monica someday, motivated by the idea of a reward from the House of Dormентаire or by simple curiosity.

When that happened, people would wonder why the House of Dormентаire wasn’t taking action when they knew she was the criminal, and that would plant unnecessary suspicion in the minds of the town’s alchemists and nobles.

The most rational method would be to get rid of Monica in secret, then say the suspect had vanished—but at present, she didn’t have that much authority.

And if the stories from the play and Monica's account were true—frankly, Carla even felt sympathy for her.

Still... How was Jean-Pierre able to write a play like that?

Choosing to make an enemy of the House of Dormентаire is already inexplicable, but how did he know so much about Monica...about Maribel Boroñal's past?

Don't tell me... Could it be the people from the spy's alchemy workshop? I do hear someone from there is in touch with Jean-Pierre.

But it's hard to believe they would know about Master Gardi's proclivities when even I was never told.

The more she thought, the more confused she felt.

In the play, the House of Dormентаire had been searching for Monica because Gardi's little sister bore a grudge against the criminal, but nothing could be further from the truth.

After all, *that very sister* had told Carla the following.

The evildoer is no more than an excuse, so you mustn't search for them seriously. In fact, even if you do find them, you must leave them alone.

...And she'd smiled as she said it. If Carla's mistress meant her words, she felt nothing about her brother's death. Something about that had provoked a vague fear in Carla, and she remembered sweat breaking out on her back.

Why was that part of the play different from the truth?

The more she thought about it, the less she understood. Carla thumped the ship's hull lightly with her fist in frustration.

Dammit. I knew it. There's something wrong with this town.

Well, I have another priority now: apprehending Jean-Pierre.

Quietly calming herself, Carla decided to write a letter informing her mistress of the situation.

The end of this mission was nowhere in sight, and she wondered whether she'd end up being buried here.



Why haven't they killed me? Monica thought.

She shook her head; she didn't even care whether she lived or died at this point. Thinking about it was useless. Lying on the bed in her narrow cell of a room, she softly closed her eyes.

She was remembering her times with Huey.

Come to think of it... I wonder what it was that made me like him so much.

When she'd first arrived in this town after discarding her noble rank—she had given up on the world. And then, at a private alchemy school, she'd met a boy.

He was an isolated young man who smiled disingenuously, even as he built clear walls between himself and the people around him.

But she could see behind it; she knew his isolation was based in his hatred of the world. The look in his eyes reminded her of herself.

She might have grown curious about the boy fairly early on. She didn't know when that had turned to love, though, or when she had begun trying to strike up conversations with him.

I wonder if I thought I could change.

She had grown disillusioned with the world, acquired the face of the Mask Maker, and begun to peek into the dark side of the town.

One thing led to another, and in her own way, she had kept up her fight against this unjust world... Although, opinions on whether or not her methods had been correct would have been divided.

Maybe I simply thought, There's someone else like me. I'm not alone.

The recoil from her actions as the Mask Maker had begun to appear in her private life, in her feelings for Huey. Her longing for an ordinary love and an ordinary life may have spilled out from behind her mask.

In the end, maybe I only wanted to use Huey...to save myself.

When she'd thought that far, Monica clenched her hands on the bedsheets.

That doesn't matter anymore!

I want to see him.

I want to see you...Huey...

Realizing she was crying, Monica buried her face in the pillow.



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

Time spares no emotion for us.

Whatever mortals may think, the sun ever rises in the morning and sets in the evening. The sun is not bound to any promise that it will rise again, and yet we live our lives with the certainty that it will.

In the same way, the sun will inevitably rise on the morrows we wish to never see. We humans are powerless to stop it. So all the characters in this story were swept along to its conclusion by an irresistible current.

Monica Campanella—or perhaps I should say, Maribel Boroñal—was allowed to live on.

She had no freedom, unable to even see her town or let her beloved hear her voice. She was allowed her life and nothing more; it is a wonder she kept hold of her sanity.

If memory serves me right, she spent roughly half a year in confinement. The black ship did not set sail once; it remained as a great leviathan looming over the port town.

I am equally surprised that Huey Laforet managed to withstand his lot for that length of time. He did not fear that ship, but he was torn between his desire to see his love that very minute and the terror that she might be executed at any moment.

He was biding his time, waiting until all the pieces were in place and he could achieve his ambition.

He had a foolproof plan for retaking his beloved.

In that sense, it was a stroke of luck for both of them that Monica was not promptly executed. Although I did not know this at the time, Huey was particularly knowledgeable about gunpowder and the like, even for an

alchemist, and had the men of the House of Dormентаire attempted anything rash, he might easily have set the whole town ablaze and gone to join Monica in death.

By sheer coincidence, he would have played out the invented portion at the end of my script.

But no one can truly know their secret thoughts during that period. Time continued its merciless advance.

Earlier, I said time is impartial...but perhaps not so for Lotto Valentino. No doubt this is my mind playing tricks on me, and yet I am not convinced.

Within the walls of our garden, everyone seemed to move faster—and it was as if time itself was accelerated as well.

And so the fateful day arrived.

The moment when my sin would manifest in the town of Lotto Valentino.

Fate comes regardless of our wishes. Just as the morning sun rises.

Some are taken by surprise, while others are braced to accept whatever may come to them.



A certain month in 1710

On the House of Dormентаire's private ship

"...There's a strong wind today," Carla murmured darkly, looking at the high, heaving waves.

While it wasn't actually raining, the ship still rolled over the rough waves in the harbor.

She was on the ship to do some work, as it was one of the envoy's bases.

As she read through reports from her men, she gazed at a bundle of letters that sat on the desk—and thought of Monica.

She's still in confinement, but...

A few months ago, a letter had arrived from the noblewoman she served, answering her question regarding how to deal with Monica, or Maribel Boroñal.

However, that answer was not what she had hoped for.

If she had issued the callous order to kill Maribel, Carla would have reminded herself that serving such a mistress was her own choice and killed the girl. An order to release Maribel and return home for a spell would have felt like salvation for her and her prisoner.

Her mistress's response had been neither: *Remember what I told you? It really doesn't matter, Carla dear, so you may do with her as you see fit. Do continue on your mission. There's a good girl.* From the tone of the letter, she really couldn't have cared less about her brother's murderer.

I don't think that girl can take much more of this.

But if I let her go home... Will she be able to live as she did before?

If not, wouldn't it be better to...?

The thought was there, but Carla couldn't bring herself to venture into that particular territory.

She had been trained to serve as a guard. She had developed not the resolution to kill, but the readiness to stand in the line of fire and take an assassin's blade to protect her masters. From what she'd heard, Gardi had been a despicable human being despite his status as a Dormентаire.

If the individual in question had come to kill her mistress, Carla would have easily plunged her blade into the assassin's neck, no matter who they were—but not so with Monica.

...I'm weak.

I can't kill her, and I can't save her.

After a long period of hesitation, she had chosen to keep Monica in confinement. She reasoned that if they could at least complete their mission, there might be a way to save her.

Carla had told her men quite plainly that the girl was being kept locked up at her own discretion, and then she had issued a gag order.

Her subordinates obeyed her instructions without question. As always, she found that unsettling, but she decided to assume this was probably just what

the Dormentaire private army was like.

Whenever she looked at the sheaf of letters, she felt her chest constrict. Today was no exception.

I must expose the hidden side of this town, no matter what it takes. It sounds as if this strange organization known as the Mask Makers is involved with the false gold, but...

As she read through the reports, searching for a way to start demolishing the walls of this miniature garden, one of her subordinates rushed in.

“Madam Carla, there’s a problem.”

“? What is it?”

She frowned, but there was an uncharacteristic urgency in his demeanor. She quickly assumed a demeanor befitting a leader and interrogated him.

Possibly because he didn’t have a full grasp of the situation, either, her subordinate gave a rather incoherent response.

“The town... It’s under attack!”

“What?!”

An attack?

When she hastily ran out onto the deck, she was met by an unbelievable sight.

Smoke was rising from various points all across the town, and flames were leaping from some of the buildings.

She saw people fleeing through the market in confusion, while the actual assailants were nowhere to be seen.

What is this?! A surprise attack by the Austrian army?!

Had the horrors of war spread here so quickly that she hadn’t even seen them coming? No, this wasn’t quite the same as the battlefields she knew.

“Can you return to town immediately and get a report from the men stationed at our facilities there?”

“Well, uh...our buildings are the ones that are on fire!”

“What?! Who the hell...?”

“We don’t know! There have been no reported deaths yet, but they say the fires were set by a man wearing a strange mask...”

A mask...?

Carla had just been reading about the Mask Makers. A possible connection surfaced in her mind, but she quickly dismissed it and shouted at her subordinate.

“Don’t be ridiculous! No one could do a thing like this alone!”

After that outburst, one possibility occurred to her.

“Or...was he not alone?”

Remembering the Mask Makers might be an organization, she was convinced that it was the House of Dormентаire, and not the town, that was being targeted.

She turned, preparing to return to her office on the ship and take command—
—just as her subordinate toppled over beside her.

“?!”

Archers?! Guns?!

Stunned by the man’s abrupt collapse, Carla dropped into a crouch. He must have been sniped.

But I didn’t hear any.....? Wha...?

There were no wounds on the man’s body, she noticed, just as she also became aware that something was wrong with her own. Her arms and legs had gone weak and watery, and she found herself unable to stand up again.

When she looked around, it wasn’t just her subordinate. Every crew member on deck had collapsed in the same way.

What...the hell...is...?

Her thoughts grew muddled, and Carla blacked out.

Just before that happened—

—she saw a large, masked man emerge from the shadows on the deck, upwind from the rest of her group.

“Hmm... So it takes longer to affect some individuals than others. Gender may be a factor there.” As the masked man closed the lid on the paralysis potion, he looked at Carla and the crew members lying on the deck. “Well, it should be about an hour before they’re awake again. That does it for my role.”

Glancing at Carla, the masked man sighed and shook his head.

“I believe I warned you not to disrupt my students’ studies, lovely young lady. Don’t worry; there won’t be any aftereffects,” he said, though no one would hear him.

The man—Dalton—removed his mask and left the deck.

“For goodness’ sake, Elmer. You finally stop telling me to wear a hook—

—only to make me *wear a mask*. Unbelievable. The boy’s as demanding as ever.”



Meanwhile The port, warehouse district

On the roof of a certain storehouse, two figures were watching the ship and the pandemonium breaking out across town.

“Hey, it looks like Maestro Dalton pulled it off.”

Peering through a telescope—an article that was still expensive in the 1700s—Elmer spoke cheerfully from behind his mask.

Huey was standing beside him, also wearing a mask.

“We really only needed to borrow the paralysis potion from him, you know,” he said impassively.

“Well, he insisted he couldn’t let it be recreated and used for nefarious purposes, so he’d do it himself. We had to let him, you know? The effects are amazing; it’s more like a sleeping drug than a paralysis potion. And I only let him do it on the condition that he would wear a mask, so we should be all right.”

Nodding decisively, he looked at the town. “They really went all out on this, didn’t they? I hope we don’t end up hurting people any more than we have to.”

“...Mm-hmm.”

“So how many Mask Makers are there right now anyway?” Elmer asked, somewhat absently.

Huey’s answer was deadly serious.

“Three hundred and seventy-two.”



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

Yes.

Huey Laforet had done it.

In a mere six months, he had built the foundation for a criminal organization consisting of more than three hundred people.

You may find it incredible, and yet it is the truth. I myself was unable to believe it at first.

Lotto Valentino had relatively few criminal groups to begin with for a town of its size. The closest equivalent had been Maiza’s Rotten Eggs. It occurs to me now that this was another anomaly of that place.

But he had managed it all the same.

There were more than a hundred Dormentaire men in town, not to mention their hidden informers, and yet he had worked by feel to build an organization.

This from the young man who had once trusted no one and hated the world!

By distributing the capital he had raised with his counterfeit production, he had swiftly, yet with the greatest of care, increased the number of trustworthy Mask Makers. That was not his only method; his others could be very dubious, such as creating a new, legal substance to provide to nobles who still hungered after the drug...

But all of it was for the sake of his single, self-centered desire.

He wanted to see Monica Campanella again. Fueled by that obsession, he had

brought his plan to fruition.

It was possible she did not want to be rescued. Huey may have understood that as well, but no doubt, he did not care.

After all, this was his own selfish wish.



From under her blankets, Monica was gazing absently at the iron bars that took the place of a door. Something wasn't quite right, she realized, and she began listening carefully to the sounds filtering in from outside.

"...?"

At first, she'd assumed the noise was due to the strong wind.

Over the past few months, she'd grown accustomed to the rolling of the ship, and the sounds that reached her from outside were the only way she could know what was happening beyond her cell.

But she had realized this wasn't just the wind. Monica slipped out from under the blankets and got up from the bed.

At that exact moment—she heard footsteps approaching from the other side of the iron grate.

It didn't seem to be mealtime or any other routine visit.

Even though she didn't hold her own life dear anymore, she peered warily through the bars, wondering what in the world was happening.

When she saw the owner of the footsteps, her whole body stiffened.

Not from fear, but out of genuine astonishment and confusion.

The figure wore a black cloak and a white mask, just as she formerly had as the Mask Maker.

But this person wasn't the right height to be Huey or Elmer. A raw, bloody smell emanated from the large sack in their hands.

"It can't be... Why? Who are you...?"

"Hello there," the masked man said with relief. "We finally meet. I'm glad you're all right."

“Huh...?”

She didn’t recognize his voice. As Monica watched dubiously, the man removed his mask to reveal an unfamiliar face.

“I suppose I should say it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Jean-Pierre Accardo.”

“...? ...?! You’re the—?”

A storm of emotions instantly welled up within Monica.

If this had happened before she’d turned herself in, she might have left holes in both his hands and feet with her stiletto.

At this point, however, the questions flooding through her mind won out over her emotions.

“Why...why are you here?! No, I don’t care. What were you trying to achieve by writing *a thing like that*?!”

As Monica questioned him angrily, Jean-Pierre scratched his head and murmured:

“The truth is, I didn’t know the whole truth of what happened myself... I really am sorry. I doubt anything I can do would ever fully atone for what I’ve done to *either* of you, but for now, please listen to me.”

“...?”

Monica couldn’t tell what the man was after, and she scowled, still wary. As if to reassure her, the man unlocked the iron grate with a key he’d taken from inside his cloak.

“Huey Laforet. He told me to come to save you.”

“...?! Huey did...?!?”

As Monica widened her eyes in astonishment, Jean opened the sack and spoke apologetically.

“But if I’m going to, you need to die *one more time*.”



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

Embarrassing as it is to admit, I had taken refuge at Lebreau's house in order to conceal myself from the House of Dormентаire.

I do not deny I valued my own life. Nor do I deny my excuse resembled that of a newssheet scribe: If I die here, there will be no one left to expose the truth.

However, I had not anticipated an acquaintance of Huey and Elmer would be employed there, a girl by the name of Niki. She located me easily, and the very next day, I was abducted by Huey Laforet and Elmer C. Albatross. What happened after that...I shall refrain from setting down here. For the sake of their reputations, and my own unwillingness to relive the memory.

In exchange for my life, I was compelled to cooperate in Monica's rescue as a member of the Mask Makers.

What they wished to do was create the illusion that Monica had died again.

They would set the Dormентаire vessel on fire and throw a skeletal specimen composed of real human bones, the flesh of pigs, and women's clothing into the cell. A careful investigation of the remains would be unlikely. Of course, their intent in burning the ship was to sink it completely, so I was skeptical as to whether this was even necessary. Still, I obeyed their orders.

I became a member of the Mask Makers—a group that would eventually become a vile criminal organization.



"You are going to use the small boat that's waiting for you—a different one from ours—and make your escape. Huey should reach the ship soon. When he does, don't return to the town; run somewhere far away together. May you be truly reborn this time, so that no one will ever find you again."

"No... But I..."

"The last half of that play was my own invention. You aren't what the House of Dormентаire is after."

"What...?"

Monica was confused, and Jean-Pierre shook his head.

"There's only one part of it that did come true."

“The boy actually set the town on fire.”



“All right, let’s hurry up and get on that ship. Once Moni-Moni’s outside, we’ll have to carry all the unconscious crew members out before we torch it...,” Elmer said.

Wearing his mask, Huey gave a small nod. Frankly, he couldn’t have cared less about any lives besides Monica’s, but he didn’t want her to feel any more guilt toward the House of Dormентаire.

In the town, countless Mask Makers were still creating diversions or restraining the Dormентаire men. They were doing their best not to cause any injuries or deaths, but Huey had accepted both sides would suffer some losses.

Looking at Huey, Elmer thought, *He’s definitely not a good person.*

There was no telling how the Mask Makers organization would evolve from this point on, but as far as Elmer was concerned, that was trivial.

The information that the Dormентаire group had purchased more women’s clothing meant Monica was still being kept in confinement.

That knowledge had acted as the trigger, and Huey had put the power of his Mask Maker organization to work. If Monica had already been dead, he might have used that power to slaughter every last member of the House of Dormентаire.

But again, to Elmer, that was trivial.

“What are you going to say when you see Moni-Moni again?”

“I won’t say anything.”

Huey answered Elmer’s tactless question matter-of-factly.

“I’ll just hold her close.”

When he heard that answer, Elmer visualized what Huey and Monica’s faces would look like once they’d truly achieved their objective—

—and behind his mask, the smile junkie gave a grin that was completely inappropriate to the circumstances, as he always did.



She could see the sky.

Monica was taking in the first real view she'd seen in several months. On the stairs that led up to the deck, she drew a deep breath. She wanted to be sure she was truly standing here, in reality.

With each step she climbed, all sorts of emotions welled up inside her.

What should she say to Huey when she saw him next?

She was going to be erased again, her crime covered up. Should she reject the opportunity, or should she rejoice at being able to live on? She didn't know.

But even if she didn't know what to say—she knew what to do.

I'll smile. I'll give Huey the very best smile I've got.

With that resolution in mind, she climbed the stairs and tried desperately to remember how to make the expression.

Ah-ha-ha... I remembered Elmer's face. Oh no, Huey will be jealous.

As she imagined both her good friend and her lover, she was sure of it:

She was most definitely happy.

When she peeked out through the door to the deck, she saw someone standing there.

A Mask Maker, wearing that wonderfully familiar wooden mask.

Tears welled in her eyes. Turning her face to the world and the blue sky, she smiled radiantly as the sun.

EPILOGUE B



EPILOGUE B

The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

And so my story comes to an end.

What happened to Monica and Huey after that? I do not know, and doubtless it would be boorish to tell.

I have committed many crimes. That is a vital fact. Because of my choice to write that play, my choice to pursue glory with incomplete information, a portion of the blame for the creation of the Mask Makers lies with me.

I am also to blame for engendering the feud between the House of Dormентаire and Lotto Valentino. The following year was defined by the struggle between the two, but that tale is not mine to tell.

After all I have told you, I still committed one additional crime.

In an act of defiance...I revised that play one final time.

Despite the House of Dormентаire's orders to stop and attempts to exert pressure on me, I had it performed at the theater in Lotto Valentino.

I had modified the final scene.

At the end, the witch's son, the founder of the Mask Makers, stabbed my version of Monica and killed her, letting her burn along with the ship. He had feared she would let the secret of their magic slip to someone else.

I wrote the scene and had it performed.

To those who knew, the witch's son was clearly Huey Laforet. By writing this scene, I deceived the public into believing Monica had died.

I deliberately incorporated a lie into my work and tricked the world. This was both my final crime, and my atonement.

However, this truth must not be revealed yet.

Until the time of my own death at the very earliest, I had to deceive people into believing Monica had died at Huey's hands. Then she could live as someone else, somewhere far away.

Now that you have read this tale to its conclusion, I have a request for you.

I will not ask you to make this truth known throughout the world. I would be grateful for your assistance in clearing the name of Huey Laforet, but I will not compel you. Perhaps his name has already vanished from history in your time.

I simply wanted someone to know the truth. I wanted you, at least, to know.

I've taken up much of your time. It is high time I set down my pen.

My reader, my witness to this self-indulgent confession, I do not mind if you forget me.

I only want you to remember one thing. Monica Campanella was saved by Huey Laforet, and that is the truth.

That, and that alone, I hope you will keep in your memory.

With gratitude,

With my utmost thanks,

Jean-Pierre Accardo



Having read the entire document, the young man slowly set the sheaf of parchment down on the table.

Was that whole story true? He didn't know.

What had happened to the power of immortality described at the beginning? The youth no longer cared.

He had become acquainted with the character of his ancestor, and he was touched knowing the character of the Accardo line had been handed down all the way to him.

Having read all this, what did he think of it?

Had it brought about a change of heart?

He wasn't sure; he simply decided to pray.

The town of Lotto Valentino might have transformed in many ways, but the sun above him was one thing that was still the same. The young man looked up at it, squinting, and offered up a small prayer.

At least— At the very least, I want to believe Monica and Huey managed to live happy lives.

The man sent his prayer through the sun, toward the past, hoping to make it come true.

The sun makes no promises, and even today, it shines down over Lotto Valentino.

From the far past to the distant future, radiant and bright...

The End



Why could you not have left well enough alone?

EPILOGUE C



EPILOGUE C

The young man had sensed something wasn't quite right, and so he made his discovery.

When he was putting the sheaf of parchment away, he noticed the base of the chest seemed just a little too shallow. It bothered him, and he decided to try taking the chest apart.

As he'd anticipated, it had a false bottom. Inside it was yet another sheaf of parchment.

However, the story it told...was despair itself. The truth betrayed the youth's prayer entirely.



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

What I will set down beyond this point is the truth, and my atonement.

...My true atonement.

Why, oh why could you not have left well enough alone? Why did you have to find this memoir, too? Had you thrown it away instead, my crime would have gone unexposed.

You, my unseen reader—you, whom I will doubtless never meet—I despise you with all my soul. You have exposed the past I wished to erase for eternity.

I also thank you.

...For I am no longer a coward who fled until the bitter end.

In the memoir that I expect you've already read, I said I was not contemplating suicide. That was a lie.

Once I have finished writing this, I will end my own life. I will leave this memoir for posterity, as my farewell letter.

Please, I beg you, remember.

This is the will I left behind me, and my hope—and a self-inflicted curse.



1710

She ran and ran and ran.

Her legs were weak from her long confinement, and she nearly fell several times, but she kept running desperately across the deck.

I'll finally see Huey.

I want to talk to him.

Huey is there, right there, right in front of me.

Driven by that simple, pure thought—she finally reached *him*.

However—

—the voice behind the mask could not possibly have been Huey's.

“Did you really believe it would go that well?”

Her skin crawled, and she shuddered.

The unfamiliarity of the voice overwhelmed her, yes, but even worse was the astonishing human emotion in it.

It wasn't hatred, or sadness, or lunacy.

The brief remark had been saturated with genuine enjoyment.

Like a child stomping on ants, or spectators watching people killing each other in a coliseum, or a group that shouts in pure triumph after achieving some great objective.

It was joy. It was delight. It was pleasure. It was ecstasy.

The short comment had been filled with sheer happiness. For Monica, it was indescribably eerie. Then that sinister feeling manifested.

And a silver blade slid through the lower half of her field of vision.

If she had been in top form, the reflexes she'd cultivated as the Mask Maker

might have allowed her to evade the attack.

However, her hope at the prospect of seeing Huey had blunted her sense of danger.

Her long days in captivity had physically weakened her.

And due to *another factor*, she was nowhere near as strong as she had been when she was at her peak.

All the different elements came together.

That was all it was.

For that simple reason, she wasn't able to dodge the blade, and— "This was fun. Thank you."

—as the man gave these indifferent words, the silver knife plunged deep into her flesh.

Ironically—just as another weapon had done ten years earlier, when she had stabbed and killed a man.

The blade tore mercilessly through Monica's abdomen.



"Still... Don't you think digging up some stranger's bones from the public cemetery was going too far?"

"...I'll take the blame. You don't have to worry about it."

"I bet Monica's going to care, but... Well, I guess it's not so bad. You and Monica will match now. You've both sacrificed the corpse of some kid you don't know."

With that insensitive comment, Elmer carried a large sack onto the black ship.

"I hope somebody else's burned bones are enough to convince the Dormентаire people."

"If we're lucky, the ship will sink."

Multiple Mask Makers had boarded just as Dalton left, and they had already taken Carla and the others off the ship. Now all they had to do was access the nobles' private quarters. No one had gone in there yet.

“I hope Monica hasn’t inhaled that powder and passed out— Hey, Huey!”

Huey was already headed into the ship at a run, leaving Elmer behind.

But what he found was—

—an empty bedroom that showed no sign of recent use.

“...? Monica...? Where’s Monica?!”

As confusion swept over him, he imagined the worst.

Were they been too late? Had the clothes been a feint to hide how long ago they’d—?

As he nearly lost himself in hopeless imagined scenarios, a yell from Elmer, up on deck, pulled him back to reality.

“Huey, there’s trouble! The ship’s burning!

“Not this one! A ship across the way just set sail, and it’s on fire!!”



When Carla opened her eyes, she saw a mild, bespectacled face.

“Are you all right?”

“...Where...?!”

Remembering what she’d seen just before she collapsed, she sat up hastily. Her limbs still felt slightly numb, but she didn’t have time to worry about it.

Instead of the ship’s deck, she was now on the cobbled pavement of the port, where the ship had been moored.

She scanned her surroundings, including the man in front of her—and saw the vessel she’d been on a short while ago was floating in the harbor a short distance away.

Even more incomprehensibly, smoke was rising from another ship a little ways beyond theirs.

“?! What?! What on earth is happening? Answer me, Maiza Avaro!” she barked.

The man spoke slowly, as if trying to soothe her. “Calm down, please. I only

just arrived here myself.”

She was focused on the ship that was pulling out of the port, and she wasn’t listening to Maiza.

“So this...is Lotto Valentino’s answer...?” she murmured, narrowing her eyes.

Gravely, Maiza asked, “What is that ship? The one that’s on fire?”

“It’s a used vessel. We purchased it here in town to accompany the main ship. The only ones who know about it are myself, some of my subordinates...and the spy.”

“A spy? What are you really attempting to do here?”

“We’re—” She came to herself with a jolt. She was casually giving away information to someone who wasn’t even part of her group—perhaps the drug hadn’t fully worn off. “...What’s the point of asking? Do you really think I’ll answer?”

It wasn’t rational to direct her hostility at the man in front of her.

She knew this, but her agitation added a harshness to her voice anyway.

“We and Lotto Valentino are enemies now. There’s no need for me to answer or make any attempt to get along with you.”

“Carla...”

As Maiza tried to restrain her, she gave him a warning.

“Remember this. You people have made an enemy of the House of Dormентаire. You may not be aware of it. You may know nothing at all... But Lotto Valentino has made that choice.”

“ ...”

“Don’t expect this town to still exist in a year.”

Carla’s words were closer to a threat than pressure, but just a little of her true feelings still surfaced.

“So...tell the townspeople. They should start preparing to flee, right now.”



Huh?

What's the matter with me?

I feel weak.

Monica's mind was hazy, but she could feel a terrible heat welling up from the center of her body.

While clinging to the railing of the ship, she thought, *Oh. I'm going to die.*

As her fate became clearer to her, a realization slowly crossed Monica's mind: *Will I finally be able to atone for my crime, then?*

She hadn't done anything wrong, but she still wanted to make amends.

Not to the man she'd killed, but to the nameless girl who had been sacrificed in her place.

I'm sorry.

I didn't know what to do.

Maybe it was wrong of me to find happiness.

Or should I have tried to find enough for both of us?

Her consciousness was gradually fading—but then she heard a voice on the wind, pulling her attention back just a little.

Hmm?

That's Huey's voice.

Gripping the railing, she slowly raised her head.

What she saw was an enormous, black vessel, heading toward her— —and a man, standing on its deck. He was dressed as the Mask Maker, but he'd removed the mask. He was shouting her name, over and over.

...

Huey.

He came.

Oh, I'm so glad.

She didn't care whether he was a vision or the real thing. She knew she was dying—and she was truly glad that Huey was the last thing she would see.

Um.

What...was I...? Huh?

What was it I had to do?

As her mind struggled, she saw her friend standing beside Huey and yelling.

Oh, Elmer's here, too.

I'm glad to see him.

Looking at his face, Monica remembered what it was she'd resolved to do when she met Huey again.

And so—

—she smiled.

As her mind darkened toward death, Monica looked at Huey and Elmer, and she smiled.

Her smile was bright and powerful, filled with overwhelming gratitude.

Look, Huey. I can smile.

You too, Elmer. I'm not faking.

I can smile for real.

I know how to now.

It's all thanks to you, Huey. I was happy, you know.

The black ship was drawing nearer. It didn't frighten her anymore.

If Huey was onboard that ship, what was there to be afraid of?

But his expression made her a little sad.

You mustn't look so upset, Huey. Elmer will stick his nose in again.

And then I'll get jealous again.

Like a candle burning low, her heart summoned up the last of its strength.

I won't die, Huey.

I'm just going away for a while, that's all.

I'm sure we'll meet again someday.

So—so Huey, you smile, too.

Thank you, Huey.

Good-bye, Huey.

...Let's meet again.

At the very end, she murmured something.

From the faint, ever so faint motion of her lips, it looked as if she'd said, *Let's meet again.*

If there was a miracle that happened that day—it may have been that her last words managed to reach Huey and Elmer.

The ships were on the verge of making contact.

Monica's complexion revealed she was at death's door, yet she was smiling cheerfully.

It was the most radiant smile Huey and Elmer had ever seen.

Still wearing that smile—

—Monica slowly leaned over the edge of the ship and plummeted toward the heaving waves.

Huey didn't even have time to call her name, but the sight was strangely slow, a moment severed from the rest of time.

Her smile never faded, not even at the very end—

—and as the blood poured from her chest and dyed the water red, she disappeared between the rolling waves.

“_____ — _____ — _____”

Screaming soundlessly, Huey tried to throw himself into the ocean, possibly in an attempt to save Monica.

If Elmer hadn't jumped on him and held him back in the nick of time, he probably would have drowned as well.

"Let me go... *Let go of me, Elmerrrrrr!*"

Huey pressed his right hand to Elmer's stomach, and a little flame erupted from it.

A burn appeared on Elmer's stomach, and the smell of scorched flesh spread across the ship—but he didn't release Huey.

Huey tried to hit him next, but Elmer still didn't let go. He said nothing, only holding him back. He knew there was nothing he could say.

Until the other Mask Makers came over to them, wondering what was going on, and restrained Huey, Elmer stood his ground while his friend lashed out.

When they finally had him under control, Huey briefly fell silent, all his emotions gone— —and then, with a scream of unfathomable anguish, he fell to his hands and knees on the deck.



That scream...

Was he calling Monica's name?

Elmer sadly looked down, thinking. In his heart, he was grateful to Monica for her last moments.

Thank you, Monica.

Next time, I swear...I'll be the one to make Huey smile.

So...if there is an "other side"...I hope you can smile and watch over us.

Even as these thoughts went through his mind, the deck was shaking with his friend's cries.

This was the one and only time Elmer ever saw Huey scream.

In all his eventually immortal life, this was the first time, and the last.

Fortunately or unfortunately for him...Monica's body never washed up anywhere, even though she had fallen into the water near the port. In the end, they couldn't even confirm she was dead.

By a strange coincidence—

—it was just like Huey's mother, who had been plunged into a lake in order to prove her innocence, never to be seen again.



Long ago, the girl committed a crime.

The entire world conspired to hide it, heedless of her wishes.

And so she lived on.

She lived in peace, without a care.

She never aspired to be happy.

She never desired to atone.

She simply didn't know what she should do. That's all.

That was why—I extended a hand to her.

I never thought about what the results might be. I never even noticed the

precipice just ahead.

After all, I couldn't have cared less about the precipice.

I extended a hand to her, without knowing what I should do, and—followed my instincts.

I simply gave her a little push. And that's all it was.

What lay just ahead of her might have been a cliff, or it could have been the arms of her beloved.

I would not have minded either one.

After all, I was going to stab her in the back anyway.

Well, that was a rather enjoyable little game.

I am a little tired, though. I'll go see Czes; the boy's face is like a balm for the soul.



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

Yes, you are correct.

A few parts of my first memoir were fabricated.

Niki did not find me. Naturally, the part about my becoming a member of the Mask Makers was a falsehood. I was never tortured by Huey Laforet.

I told Monica that Huey had told me to come...because Lebreau had told me, If you tell her that, she'll trust you and follow quietly. And I believed him.

This alone, I hope you will believe: I truly did intend to save her.

According to Lebreau, I was in danger, and the Mask Makers would retaliate by killing me. If I wanted to avoid that fate, I had to personally save Monica and declare to the other group that I was not their enemy.

In retrospect, that was all far too convenient, but I was too frightened of what I'd done to doubt him. And I trusted Lebreau too deeply.

I really did revise the end of the play, again at a suggestion from Lebreau. If I showed to the townspeople that the Mask Maker had stabbed her, they would

not glorify that terrifying band of criminals—or so his logic went.

I can see the strangeness of it now. Why did I just accept it? Even as I write, I cannot say.

Yes, I know what you are thinking. You are exactly right... The statement that Monica survived was also a lie.

She died. I might as well have killed her myself.

You should hate me. Revile me.

It was not until years after that day that I understood the whole truth, but that is no excuse.

After all, no matter how many excuses I make, it does not change the fact of her death.

There is just one thing that I will set down here.

That girl, Monica Campanella, did not pass away without leaving anything behind.

There was a reason she had needed new clothing just a few days before we took action. And her clothes were not the only items purchased at the fabric shop.

...When she turned herself in, she had been with child.

I doubt I need mention whose child it was.

It is unclear whether she knew this when she surrendered herself, but...

...she truly did leave something in this world.

Proof that she had lived. A connection between herself and Huey.



“Say... Lebreau? What happened on the deck back there? She was so happy; why would she commit suicide?” Jean asked.

“I haven’t yet come to terms with it myself,” Lebreau answered sadly.

It was the day after the ship and the town had burned. After the incident, when a crowd of the Mask Makers had swarmed onboard from the black ship,

the two had slipped in among them and returned to the mainland that way.

What a terrible twist of fate. She's killed herself... How could this have happened?! Lebreau had said. Confused, Jean had done as he was told, and they had concealed themselves in the smoking ship and waited.

Inwardly, he had felt something wasn't quite right. But doubting Lebreau wasn't yet an option for him, and he had greater concerns at the moment.

"...So, uh... *What are you going to do with Monica's baby?*"

Jean's voice was filled with unease, but Lebreau replied firmly.

"I've discussed it with Carla and her subordinates. I will keep the child."

"I see... Is that all right?"

"I've told Begg that the baby is an orphan, the child of an acquaintance who died of an illness. Sweet little Czes was simply delighted to be a big brother. Niki will probably be the main caregiver...and I intend to inform her when the time is right. That the infant is Monica's, I mean."

"Oh... Of course. Niki and Monica knew each other, didn't they?"

Even in his deep depression, Jean was relieved that Monica had left a little hope behind. He clung to it, using it to buoy his spirits.

Watching him, Lebreau thought:

Well, now. This has produced some intriguing results.

At first, I just happened to spy someone who'd been in the village during the witch hunt, and I simply meant to tease him a little... I never dreamed things would become this entertaining.

Oh, those screams of his on the ship were a masterpiece. I didn't expect Monica to be smiling there at the end; that was truly excellent. Her strength of will could have cleansed my heart as well.

As he mused matter-of-factly to himself, the villain spent yet another day reveling in life.

In his heart, though, he felt the tiniest piddling doubt.

I thought Huey Laforet was more of a pessimist. Who'd have guessed the

leopard could change his spots? Certainly not me.

...Is it because of that Elmer fellow who was with him? That smile of his makes my skin crawl.

Was this the first time in his life that anyone had made him feel that way?

He felt just a trace of doubt over the feeling—then promptly decided to forget about it.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

Neither Huey nor Elmer knew the man's name yet.

He was the source of all the trouble, and the murderer responsible for Monica's death—but it would be a little while longer before they discovered this.

And in the grand scheme of the eternity they would eventually obtain—it was a very short while indeed.



The Memoirs of Jean-Pierre Accardo

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

If you have read my memoir up to this point, I urge you never to forget that name. It is the curse I have worked into these pages, and it is also hope.

Why do you suppose I related the anecdote about immortality at the beginning of my tale? It was not in order to clarify the House of Dormентаire's objectives.

Just the other day...Lebreau came to visit me.

The intervening ten years had changed him not a bit, and he inhabited an immortal body!

Yes, over the decade we were apart, I finally came to recognize the malice in him, rather like a spell slowly lifting from my heart.

...However, when he showed himself to me, it was because he knew that to be the case.

He said he had come simply to see how I fared as I lived on peacefully, in the

full knowledge of the mistake I had made.

I despaired, resolved to write this memoir—and end my life.

My unknown reader, he gained eternity.

You and I will never meet. After all, once I have finished writing this, I do not intend to live further. The other day, a son was born to me...and I have no intention of killing the child along with myself. However, should his line continue into the future, and the reader of these memoirs be one of my descendants—

Beware Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

You must not approach him, nor must you take your eyes off him.

I simply urge you to pray and pray he never takes an interest in you.

In closing...I do not feel I will have atoned for my sins when someone reads this. But if it means my death will not have been in vain, if it saves someone from Lebreau's clutches, then I will be satisfied.

I thank you. I am truly grateful to you. Though I despise you, I still thank you.

If I may, I would like to make just one more prayer to the future.

Huey Laforet and Monica Campanella.

I wrote this once in my first memoir, but I ask that you remember these two genuinely did love each other. Will you do that for me? I want one person to know the truth of them, at least.

That is the only lingering regret I will leave in this world.

To my unknown reader,

Jean-Pierre Accardo

After the young man had read the entire document, a question rose in his mind.

Had this man, Jean-Pierre Accardo, really killed himself?

The youth had to know.

The house had no computer, so he hopped on his bicycle and rode to the largest library in town. He'd visited it several times as he decoded Jean-Pierre's memoirs; it was an elegant place with a sign that read LOTTO VALENTINO THIRD LIBRARY.

The old, historic building was flanked by newer structures. The young man stepped inside, borrowed a book on the town's history, and began to comb through it for information regarding his ancestor—

—and just three minutes later, he found it.

Jean-Pierre Accardo had been blessed with a large family, including grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and had passed away at the age of ninety-eight.

You coward.

You coward! You coward!

The young man was on the verge of yelling out loud, but he thought better of it.

This was partly because he was in a library—but also because he'd realized he wasn't sure he would have been able to die if he had been in the same position.

Looking further into the town's history, he determined the House of Avaro, the House of Boroñal, the House of Dormентаire's interference, and the great fire had all been real.

In addition, in 1711, there had been a war with the House of Dormентаire—

As he was researching it, a man spoke from behind him.

"You've been visiting us quite a bit lately. Are you looking for something?"

It was an elderly gentleman with white whiskers and a sturdy build. On his

chest, he wore a tag that identified him as the chief librarian.

Remembering this place was called the Third Library, the young man wondered whether this man might be Dalton, the immortal—but then he realized the man had both hands and discarded that idea.

“We’ll be closing shortly, you see. Oh, I’ll put the books away for you.”

The old gentleman was rather intimidating, but his attitude was kindly. Thanking him, the young man left the library.

After he watched the youth go, the elderly man picked up a book from the table.

Apparently, the visitor had been researching Jean-Pierre Accardo, and the Dormentaires’ involvement with Lotto Valentino. Skimming the pages, the old gentlemen *reminisced about the affair*.

That takes me back.

I wore a hook for a little while back then, didn’t I? Rubbing his right hand, the old chief librarian thought, *Modern prosthetics are so well-made.*

At the same time, he remembered the death of one of his students, and he lowered his eyes for a few moments.

If there is a next life, Monica may be unhappy. After all, her beloved Huey will never join her there.

Silently, the Third Library’s chief librarian closed the book, then disappeared into the depths of the building.

Leaving its records and memories inside one library—

—the town of Lotto Valentino quietly continued creating its own history.

Swallowing up every sin committed in the past...

Baccano! 1710—*The End*

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's been a while. This is Narita. It really has been a long time for readers who are only following the *Baccano!* series, and I'm very sorry about that.

This book is a sequel to *1705*, and it covers the few years up to 1710. As always, the reading order is pretty complicated, but if you follow the volume numbers on the spine, you should be fine!

In this volume, I narrowed the perspective to focus on the pasts of Huey's group. It's a break from the norm in several ways, but that's just how the 1700-era volumes are.

*Warning: The following paragraphs contain spoilers.

This was the first time I'd written that sort of "end" in *Baccano!*, and I'm pretty sure it'll be the last time for this series. I was surprised at how reluctant I was to show the death of a major character. I'd already hinted this particular character was dead, though, and I didn't think I'd be able to move on without writing about it... Well, my policies tend to be flexible, so I can't go *Never doing that again!* with complete confidence. Even I can't tell where this series is going.

Fun fact: After I finished writing this manuscript, a certain character in a certain famous manga died in the same way and even said the same thing as in my story. I screamed and made a few corrections here and there, but what they are is a secret.

In any case, the next one will be *1711*. I'd like to tell the story of how the alchemists who show up in the 1930 and 2000 arcs all got assembled, and to give the perspective of the mastermind behind the 1710 incident (his motive, or rather, his objective, etc.), so please sit tight and wait patiently.

By the way, I've been getting questions about this a lot lately in fan letters, so: Although he's the mastermind, it's not as if he's to blame for absolutely everything. He has nothing to do with Renee being—well, Renee in the 1930s,

or with Ladd being a bloodthirsty killer, or with Graham being a nutcase, or with Firo being too naive, so please don't misunderstand. Actually, if that was true, he'd be as almighty as Ronny...

Now then, the *DRRR!!* anime is currently airing, so those of you who only buy *Baccano!*, absolutely take this opportunity to explore my other series! There are a lot of people who've seen the *DRRR!!* anime and then bought the *Baccano!* DVDs, and I'm really grateful!

To my editor, Wada (Papio)—for whom I made a heck of a lot of trouble this time, in the midst of a truly hellish schedule—as well as the copy editors, the publishing department, and everyone at the printer: I'm really, really sorry, and thank you very much!

I also forgot to say this in the last volume, but thanks to Minoru Kawakami for pointing me toward so much fantastic reference material for the 1930s-era books!

A big thank you to Katsumi Enami—to whom I'm indebted for all sorts of things, including the *Baccano! Art Book*, which is in stores now—for the terrific illustrations this time as well!

And finally, thank you very much to everyone who read this book all the way to the end!

February 2010—Writing a tribute story for Vol. 5 of *A Certain Scientific Railgun*

Ryohgo Narita

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