

BACCANO!

1935-C The Grateful Bet

RYOHGO
NARITA





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RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY
KATSUMI ENAMI

DIGRESSION 3 THE RESEARCH RESULTS AREN'T RELEASED

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The tricksters assemble at the heart of the disaster.
They generate new currents, leaving everything
around them in a state of flux.
If someone has intentionally set up this vortex of fate,
they'll regret pulling these guys in.



They have a "current" that's all their own.
No matter how the storm rages around them, they
keep rolling down the road they believe in.
Sometimes they become a muddy torrent themselves,
sweeping away every enemy in their path.
Anyone who stands in their way will have to make a choice:
go with the flow or be shattered entirely.

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1935-C The Grateful Bet

VOLUME 21

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI



NEW YORK

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BACCANO!, Volume 21: 1935-C THE GRATEFUL BET

RYOHGO NARITA

Translation by Taylor Engel Cover art by Katsumi Enami

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All right, it's time to gamble.

The moment to place your bets has arrived.

Use every means available to waste time and money with utter abandon.

Waste is proof that you're enjoying life, so feel thoroughly free to squander that life, too.

Want to test your luck with roulette?

Would you rather strategically knock each other down with poker?

How about a stoic one-on-one with the dealer at blackjack?

Will you face yourself at the slots?

Entrust your fate to the dice at cee-lo?

Have a brush with the secrets of the Far East through chou-han?

Glimpse the depths of a simple world with two-up?

Shout and cheer at a dog fight?

Or will you bet on horses in broad daylight?

You can even think up a new wager right here, if you'd like. There's a certain fairness when everyone is starting from square one.

It's time.

That's right—it's time to gamble!

Why wouldn't you enjoy it?!

Go on—bring that sting to each other's throats and the backs of your eyelids.

Deceive and mislead each other, but keep it clean. I'm not proposing a cheating free-for-all.

In one sense, gambling is leaving everything to chance, but befuddling your opponent is part of the job.

Put on your poker face, or calculate the odds, or watch the dealer's

expression.

Use every trick in the book until you have the others dancing in the palm of your hand.

Gambling may be fun, but it's no game.

Luck, courage, brains, your mettle as a human being—are proving grounds to assess all these things.

Who is it you want to measure? Yourself or somebody else?

Well, come on, enjoy yourselves.

After all, what you take from each other here will generally be money.

You can also change something more valuable into chips.

This could end up being the last game you ever play.

You may already have converted your lives into chips.

Well?

Isn't it such a delight to think about?

—The general manager of the Ra's Lance casino

Digression 3 The Research Results Aren't Released

2003 Somewhere in the world You want to hear about Szilard Quates?

...Who are you?

I thought you'd just taken one look at me and decided to come tease me for being in a bar.

Who told you about me?

...Well, that's all right. You don't look like you've come to kill me.

Here, let me introduce myself.

I'm Fil Nibiru.

My name used to be Feldt, and my gender's different these days. I think I was a little taller back then, too.

So, if you're bringing up Szilard Quates, are you an immortal?

...No? I see. Good for you.

You came straight to me instead of going to the Fils; I assume you must know at least a little about the situation. If you want immortality for yourself, you're barking up the wrong tree here.

...Lotto Valentino?

No, can't say I'm familiar. Although I get the feeling I heard something about it from old man Bilt...

Oh, I see.

That's where Maiza and the other alchemists are from, huh?

Right. I always meant to pay the place a visit someday. So you're a visitor from Lotto Valentino.

Why would a plain old traveler want to know about Szilard? Actually, how do

you know about the immortals at all?

What do you mean, “It’s a long story”? My story might run long, too.

Well, pay for my meal, and I’ll tell you what I know.

I’ve got no reason to take Szilard’s side, and nothing I’m about to tell you is worth hiding.

Wouldn’t it be faster to ask old man Bilt, though?

Bilt?

Bilt is Bilt.

Bilt Quates.

He’s a descendant of Szilard Quates—his great-great-great-grandson. I’m told he’s the spitting image, but I don’t really know how close the resemblance is.

I mean, if you keep going for enough generations, I guess you’ll eventually end up with a dead ringer for an ancestor.

Although, *if you’re born the way I was*, everybody ends up looking a lot alike.

Whoops, sorry about that. I got sidetracked.

So. What do you want to know about Szilard?

I still say old man Bilt knows more than I do, but I’ll tell you what I can.

...What was Szilard Quates trying to accomplish?

Hmm... That’s a good question.

What was he thinking when he made me and the other Fils? I’ve heard a little about it, but his overall goal was pretty vague.

If you really want to know about that, it would be faster to ask the guy who “ate” him.

Uh... No, if I told you his name, it might cause trouble for him. Next time I see him, I’ll ask if it’s okay to tell.

I have no obligations to Szilard, but I do owe the immortal who ate him.

This is what old Bilt told me, though.

Ever heard of homunculi? They call them “dwarves in the flask,” among other names. They come up quite a bit in films and novels, right?

Nah, I haven’t actually gone through too many movies or books myself yet, so I dunno how common it actually is. My acquaintance knows more about that mass-market stuff.

Homunculi can’t leave the flask they were born in, but in exchange, they know everything in the universe.

I guess they’re a little like the fairy elders that appear in fairy tales.

There’s a sketchy theory that they’re the will of the cosmos itself, made physical.

Yeah, that’s right. That’s what Szilard Quates was trying to make.

A minute ago, I said his overall goal was vague, but if I still had to sum it all up in one word, it would be...yeah. *Everything*.

Szilard Quates the alchemist *wanted everything in the world*.

Even though he already had an immortal body. Actually, it might have been because he was immortal.

He didn’t have a natural life span anymore, so maybe the only times he felt alive were the times when he wanted something.

Point is, Szilard wanted it all.

Money.

Power.

Food.

Women.

Freedom.

Knowledge.

Everything.

Oh, “respect from other people” might have been the one thing he didn’t want.

If he'd wanted that, the immortals' memories of him might have been slightly more positive.

Either that, or he figured people would respect him automatically as long as he had money and power. I mean, for some people, that's enough to win them some modicum of respect.

Whoops, I went off topic again.

In any case, it wasn't just "my place."

Szilard Quates's reach extended all around the world.

I hear he had more apprentices than you could count and over thirty laboratories in America and Europe alone—and that's just the ones Bilt knows about.

He tried to keep the liquor of immortality a strict secret, but otherwise, he left a whole lot of his research to other people.

That means I don't have a handle on all of it.

Bilt probably doesn't, either.

Even Szilard may not have had a comprehensive grasp of it.

He overextended himself.

Even after he got eaten, some of those hands and feet of his kept right on living.

In fact, the immortal who ate Szilard's memories didn't know about me.

Once an octopus tentacle has latched on to something, not even cutting it off will always make it let go.

Well, Szilard is dead.

If he'd survived, though, he might have gotten outfoxed by those limbs of his.

By guys like me, say.

...What? Was Lebreau working with Szilard?

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque, huh?

Sorry. I don't know much about where the other limbs reached or who they

connected with.

I've heard that name, though.

The smile junkie talked to the other Fils about him a lot.

Oh, yeah, sorry. I'll fill you in on the smile junkie some other time.

That story's a little too long to tack on to this one.

Chapter 15

Things Don't Go as Planned

Senator Manfred Beriam was notoriously talented, even among young politicians, but he almost never smiled in public. Sociability was a foreign concept to him. He'd maintained that aloof exterior with voters during his election campaign, too; a mannequin would have been friendlier.

How had he managed to win his way up through the election, securing money and power, when he was saddled with this negative reputation? The answer is simple—because he always got results.

Beriam had begun his career as an industrialist. He'd launched many businesses in and near his hometown, creating a huge number of jobs and bringing abundance to the regional economy.

When he'd declared his intent to run for office, the people he'd made wealthy thought he might be too young to reinvent himself, but they'd supported his campaign anyway in the hopes that he'd bring them new prosperity.

Although senators had formerly been selected by state legislatures, following a constitutional amendment in 1913, they began to be democratically elected. Less than a decade later, the people elected Beriam to the Senate. Once there, he engaged in various political endeavors, yielding greater results than anticipated in all of them.

He was broad-minded, and it was occasionally rumored that he had ties to the mafia. As a rule, though, he advertised himself as being tough on crime and staunchly anti-corruption.

If necessary, he'd meet with Bartolo Runorata, don of the Runorata Family, but it was not a show of obeisance. He went to issue his own demands.

In recent years, he'd poured most of his efforts into dealing with the criminal organization created by the terrorist Huey Laforet. Public interest was low; the whole affair had been kept mostly under wraps, and Huey himself had been

arrested in 1931.

However, the roots he'd put out ran deep.

Senator Beriam placed all the blame for this situation on his own shoulders.



February 1935 The Beriam residence

"Szilard Quates."

The name had issued from Beriam's unfriendly lips.

The furniture and equipment in his office all prioritized function over form, and there were very few tokens of extravagance. Standing in front of a sturdy desk by the window, the senator went on calmly. "That is the name of the first cancer to prey on this nation."

"Huh. It don't ring any bells."

The decidedly flippant response to Beriam's grave pronouncement came from a man who was leaning against the bookshelves by the wall. His name was Spike, and the cloth covering his eyes was patterned with crosshairs.

"I see. I thought you might have heard something from Huey Laforet."

"Eh, y'know how it is. I might just not remember. Haven't been around that crew in three years." Spike shrugged.

If Beriam felt anything in particular about this, he didn't show it. Instead, he spoke to yet another man who stood in the corner. "What about you? Do you recognize the name 'Szilard Quates'?"

"...I heard it just once, when I was working in New York." The blond man was dressed all in black, and he seemed to melt into the shadows. His black coat, black shoes, and jet-black suit looked like mourning attire. His hunting cap was pulled down low, and his face was hard to make out above the nose. He stayed in the shadows, as if hiding from the sunlight that streamed in through the window. "It sounded as if he was expanding on various underground connections. I hear some of his lackeys have even infiltrated Congress and the upper levels of the police."

"Shamefully, that's true." A hint of annoyance entered Beriam's tone. "I first

learned the immortals existed when I became involved in a feud between Szilard and another immortal in the Division of Investigation. And while I was focused on them, Huey Laforet's roots were deepening in our country."

"Hee-hee! Yeah, even the Lemures didn't know where his other organizations were or how many he had." Spike's laugh was sticky and unpleasant. "I dunno how much even that bastard Goose knew. As far as Huey was concerned, we were basically worthless."

"...Would he have made his own daughter part of a disposable organization?"

"I bet Huey didn't see her any different from your average drunk. Same with the rest of us. We were nothing but guinea pigs to that gink." Spike gave a self-deprecating smile.

"He has convinced himself the world is his laboratory. He must think of all living creatures—even the dead and the unborn—as his test subjects. Himself included." Erasing all emotion from his face, the senator spoke quietly. "It's an unforgivable crime. He must be condemned for it."

"....."

"....."

Neither Spike nor the man in black responded. They'd picked up on a weighty intent behind Beriam's words.

"This country does not belong to monsters like these immortals. It is a nation founded on law, by humans, for humans." Beriam tapped the desk once with his index finger. "If they conceal themselves in the darkness and live as other people do, I'll let them exist. However, they must not be allowed to treat the rest of us as their playthings."

"....."

The man wearing black said nothing. Meanwhile, Spike grinned blithely. "It'll be fine, Mr. Beriam. You've got enough power to wipe out the bogeys. You reward folks with money; that's easier to understand than Huey's philosophy or immortality or any of that stuff."

"Spare me the sycophancy. Still, if you do your job, I guarantee you'll be

appropriately compensated.”

“Gee, thanks for that.”

“Although it’s actually *your assistant* who’s doing the work, not you,” Beriam reminded him.

Spike hastily cut in. “Whoa, time out. Don’t go giving me the kiss-off and just using the kid from now on. I shouldn’t be saying this, but that little girl can’t do a thing without my instructions.”

At that, the man in black broke his long silence. “...She isn’t even a grown woman yet. I don’t understand how you can make her pull the trigger in your place.”

“Hey, Mr. Former Felix, don’t expect any guilt from me.” Spike grinned at the other man. “I’m not the one who made li’l Sonia what she is. It wasn’t the two dolls who were with her, either. From what I hear, her folks were real nutjobs.”

“.....”

“That girl ain’t no genius or ‘son of a gun’ or what have you. She *is* a gun. Her ma and pa were such blind fanatics that they made their own daughter a weapon. It’s enough to unsettle *me*, and I’m a sniper.” He cackled casually, then gave a sticky smile. “In that case, somebody’s gotta pull her trigger, yeah? Get me?”

“.....” The man in black responded with more silence.

After he’d watched this exchange play out, Beriam offered his opinion. “I don’t care.”

“When it comes to achieving objectives, it doesn’t matter who does what. The results are everything. I don’t have the authority to condemn you if you fail, but I do have the right not to pay you. Don’t forget that.”



“Haw-haw! Get a load of him. ‘The results are everything.’ At least our esteemed employer likes to keep it simple.”

“.....”

Once they were out in the hall, Spike turned to the man in black. They were

walking side by side, but the other man stayed silent, which made Spike appear to be talking to himself.

"I guess that's how it goes when you're hired hands. 'Specially if you don't get results."

"....."

"Well now, who do you s'pose I'll end up shooting on the day that casino opens?"

"You won't be the one doing the shooting." The man in black finally broke his silence to admonish Spike.

"C'mon, enough of that. I told you, the kid basically is a gun. She's just pulling the trigger for me, since I can't see."

"She's a genius sniper, then?"

"A genius? Nah, that ain't it. Almost, but not quite."

"Oh?" The abilities of Spike's "assistant" seemed to interest the man in black; he prompted him to continue.

"When you use a tool for years, people say it starts to feel like a part of you. Like those little sticks they use to eat with in the Far East, say. That's how it was for me. When I was holding my trusty ol' heater, it felt like a part of my arm."

"....."

"The kid's gone beyond that, though. It ain't just a part of her arm. It's like her gun is half her body... Like it ain't real clear whether the gun or the kid is in charge. That's how well she's made that thing hers. It's all experience, though. This ain't talent or technique; it's a whole 'nother ball game." Maybe because he was talking about guns, Spike waxed a little more enthusiastic than usual. "So, like I've been saying, the kid's a weapon. That means you don't need to trouble yourself. If you start feelin' sorry for your guns, you won't last in this business."

"This girl, Sonia. Is she satisfied with that?"

"Hmm? Oh, the kid doesn't think at all. Take Chané—she was Huey's tool, and she obsessed over him until she couldn't see anything else. Sonia's the opposite

type. She ain't got a care in the world, and she doesn't doubt anyone or anything. Not even a hinky fella like me." Spike was deeply amused by the thought of such an unsophisticated girl, and he kept snorting quietly with laughter. Then he stopped abruptly, turning to the bored-looking man in black. "By the way, she's mentioned a friend she used to have when she was little, and he's got the same name as this fella I know."

".....?"

"She smiles and tells me, 'I don't really know what's good and what's bad, but it's okay. If I do something wrong, Nader's a hero now, and he'll come and stop me'...! I tell ya, it's a laugh riot!"

"What's so funny about that?" The man in black looked perplexed.

Spike's smile widened with the most enjoyment he'd shown all day. "See, the Nader I knew was a two-bit crook. Couldn't be less of a hero if he tried. Chané chopped off his right hand, and I dusted the schmuck! If the kid's Nader turns out to be the same guy, she'll bawl her li'l eyes out!"

"....."

"Not that that could ever happen! Anyway, what I'm saying is, I bet the kid's childhood pal is the scum of the earth, too! It's not like heroes exist anyway!"

"....."

The man in black watched Spike with utter disgust, but he didn't say anything.

He knew.

Spike might be a lowlife, but he himself wasn't any better. He'd gotten his hands dirty as a hitman and was currently doing similar work.

He also knew their employer was no saint.

Senator Manfred Beriam probably wasn't lying. His efforts to "purify" America were definitely sincere. But the man would do whatever it took to make that happen.

He wouldn't balk at sacrificing innocent people to rid society of its undesirable elements.

No doubt he'd keep them to a minimum, but he wouldn't hesitate to write off those "minimal sacrifices."

If Huey Laforet thought of the world as a subject for his experiments, then Manfred Beriam saw it as a lamb to be sacrificed in the name of keeping society running smoothly.

More than anything, he'd convinced himself it was all right to sacrifice his own life for the social system. That was what allowed him to get his hands dirty without a second thought. He probably wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice himself or his own family.

In a sense, it might be an upright way to live. The man in black who'd once called himself Felix Walken genuinely thought this, but he just couldn't see Beriam as a saint. At the very least, he knew the senator's actions weren't based in any religious sense of morality.

Since he was following that man's orders, he'd never be a saint, either. On that understanding, once again, he resolved to keep silently doing the job in front of him.

He knew thinking about any future beyond it was pointless.



A firing range near the Beriam residence

There was a roar, and a dull shock shivered the surrounding air.

A sound like a lightning strike echoed over the firing range on Beriam's private land. Its source was a large rifle in the hands of a relatively young girl.

She'd been lying on her stomach to fire, and her bullet punched a hole through the center of the target at the very back of the range.

Two women were watching her, plugging their ears against the noise. Through the ringing in her ears, one of them called to the girl with the gun.

"Sonia. Sonia! Can you hear me?" called the one with glasses, who looked to be about twenty.

The woman next to her, who was about the same age, scolded her. "It won't work. She's wearing earplugs."

"Well, you don't know that! What if my voice is louder than a gunshot?"

"Then you'd need to shut up, and I'll deck you if I have to."

"Why are you so mean to me?!"

Noisy as the two were, the girl with the gun didn't register the pair's voices at first. Then, as if she'd sensed them there, she slowly got to her feet and removed her earplugs. "Huh? Lana, Pamela, what's the matter? Is it time to eat already?" she asked, shifting the oversize helmet she wore back into place. Her laid-back attitude struck a sharp contrast to the weapon she was holding.

Her name was Sonia Bake.

After her parents' deaths, the girl had hit the road, carrying their legacy in a wagon. It was extremely dangerous for a young girl to travel through the wilderness by herself, but the family legacy and her own peculiarities had worked well together, and she'd wandered the American continent without getting hurt.

That was when she'd met two fellow travelers: Lana and Pamela.

Lana tended to leap before she looked, while Pamela was careful about everything. Sonia had gotten dragged in by this odd couple and found a whole new life along the way.

She'd taken along her parents' legacy: over a hundred guns, collected from many different years and places.

"Wow, Sonia, I'm impressed you can do that every single day and not get bored," Lana told her.

Sonia cocked her head. "Bored with what?"

"With the guns! We've known you for three years and then some, and you've spent every day with one of them in your hands, from morning till night. And you spend every spare moment firing them off. Doesn't it get old?"

"Mm..." Sonia considered this a little.

But Pamela cut in, covering for her. "Well, of course not. With guns, they say you lose your edge if you go a day without touching them. If she skipped a day of practice, it would take her three days to recover her skills."

“I—I know that! I was just, um, testing you, Pamela!”

Lana was obviously bluffing, but Sonia still seemed impressed. “Huh! I didn’t know that.”

“.....”

Pamela hadn’t managed to cover for her after all, and she quietly averted her eyes.

Lana thought for a minute—then turned bright red and lit into Pamela. “So that wasn’t it! What’s the big idea, huh?! What were you testing me for?!”

“Oh, uh, I’m sorry. I was testing for a bunch of things, but you passed, Lana. Good job.”

Dealing with Lana was too much trouble, so Pamela said something random and offered her congratulations.

“Really? Well, that’s fine. As long as you know.” Just hearing *good job*, even when the words had no conviction behind them, had put Lana in a good mood.

Pamela sighed wearily.

During their exchange, Sonia had done even more thinking. “Oh, right, right! I shoot because I’m praying.”

“Praying?”

“Uh-huh. Dad and Mom said that guns are *gods*.”

“...That’s one hell of a religion.”

Pamela narrowed her eyes, but Sonia smiled and nodded emphatically. “They said as long as I shoot guns, I won’t have to worry about a thing. Dad said that if bad people shoot at me, I can shoot back, and when life gets tough, I can even kill myself. Mom said that what’s important isn’t addition or subtraction, history or science, the gospel or the law. It’s guns. As long as I believe in them, I’ll be happy my whole life long! They told me so every single day!”

As she listened to Sonia innocently relate her family’s “beliefs,” Pamela felt a chill. She’d known the girl for three years, and this was the first she’d heard about this. If she’d known about it back when they met, they might never have

traveled together at all.

The revelation was unsettling enough to put that thought in her mind, but after they had spent so long with each other, it would take more than that to make her reject her young companion.

“So you see, shooting guns is a form of prayer! Maybe that’s why I don’t get tired of it.”

It seemed a bit like the way people never got tired of eating or breathing or sleeping, Pamela thought. Saying so would have risked complicating the matter, though, so she kept that to herself.

Meanwhile, hearing Sonia’s story had puzzled Lana. “Ummm, in other words, you mean guns are amazing! I get it—I really do!” She nodded away, trying to convince herself.

Pamela was sure her partner had no idea how abnormal Sonia was. She shook her head weakly. “I wish I were as dumb as you, Lana...”

“What do you mean, dumb?! Only dumb people say other people are dumb!”

“Quit fighting,” Sonia said, gently shutting them down. Smiling, she picked up the gun—which was as long as she was tall—as if it weighed nothing. “Guns don’t cook for us or anything, but if they’re gods, that means they’re letting us use their bodies, doesn’t it?”

“? Yes, I suppose it would, but...”

“All I have to do is pull their triggers, and they fire bullets for me. I could never throw a bullet that fast in a million years.”

“?”

Pamela and Lana didn’t know what she was getting at.

Sonia puffed out her chest proudly. “That’s incredible, isn’t it?! People couldn’t do it, so it must be a miracle.”

Pamela had no idea how to respond to this proof arguing for the divinity of guns.

In her place, Lana nodded. "You've got a point there."

"See?"

"But if guns are gods, and you pray to them every day, you'd think they could bless you a little more. Our situation doesn't feel all that fortunate..."

"You think?" Sonia looked perplexed again; Lana had sounded rather dissatisfied.

"Yes, I do. After we picked up that 'gun teacher' of yours, we managed to get ourselves work here, but we had to give up our freedom. We're birds in a cage. Right, Pamela?"

"If you're asking which situation was better, I'd say it's six of one, half a dozen of the other, but..."

Pamela reviewed their circumstances.

The three of them weren't the kind of people who'd feel comfortable having a chat on a senator's private shooting range.

Just a few years earlier, they'd been a gang of petty bandits called Vanishing Bunny.

That had been their occupation until a couple years ago.

The trio hadn't originally had a name, but Lana had started introducing them by that one without bothering to check with the other two. Granted, when she tried to introduce them to anybody, Pamela would shut her up—sometimes with a whack—so the name wasn't exactly common knowledge.

In the beginning, Lana had been a petty luggage thief. She'd been caught by some ugly customers and almost killed once, but Pamela had saved her. After that, they'd teamed up.

Pamela had been a swindler who'd cheated and stolen from underground casinos; the Russo Family had even put a bounty on her head.

The pair had worked their way around the region, pulling minor heists from underground casinos and betting parlors. Out on the road, they'd met Sonia, a peculiar girl who was carrying around a whole lot of guns, which she claimed were mementos of her parents.

One thing led to another and another, until the three had ended up working as a bandit trio.

That said, none of their robberies had ever succeeded, and they'd relied almost entirely on Pamela's casino jobs for their living expenses. Sonia's guns had been their emergency muscle when they needed to make a getaway.

Sonia didn't genuinely seem to understand what Lana and Pamela were doing. Still, the fact that she could shoot without feeling a scrap of guilt made her a threat all by herself.

The women kept traveling, embracing the lifestyle of small-time crooks, but then—

It had happened after they'd been dragged into a certain incident.

In the process of fleeing the scene, they'd rescued a man they'd found lying beside the railroad tracks, and their own fates had changed course.

The man had been badly injured in general, but his head was in particularly awful shape.

He wore an expensive-looking black suit, and Lana had suggested that if they saved his life, he might pay them a bundle out of gratitude. Pamela had agreed, and they'd taken the man to a nearby doctor.

The doctor had told them the man's eyes were heavily damaged. It was likely he'd lost his sight completely.

The situation was far more serious than they'd imagined, but they were in too deep to turn back, so they stayed until the man regained consciousness.

The loss of his eyesight seemed to come as a shock, but after he'd calmed down, he'd made them a proposal.

"Hey, since you've rescued me, there's a place I'd like you to take me. That okay?"

"If everything goes well, you should end up with a hefty sum in your pockets..."

Taken in by his glib words, Lana had agreed without talking it over with the other two.

Pamela had tried to stop her, but the man was injured, so they'd ultimately decided to take him where he wanted to go.

On the way, though, something unexpected had happened.

Sonia had just returned from her daily firing practice when the man, who said his name was Spike, asked her a question.

“Was that a Villar Perosa I just heard? That’s quite a piece you’ve got there, young lady.”

The weapon Sonia had been using was indeed the submachine gun known as the Villar Perosa M1915.

The man had guessed what sort of gun Sonia had fired that day just from hearing it.

Lana and Pamela didn't know much about firearms, much less the names of any of Sonia's, so she was delighted to meet someone who could let her talk about her precious collection. Aside from her mother and father, she'd never met anyone she could have that sort of in-depth conversation with, so this was perfectly natural.

That wasn't all.

Sonia was more used to firing guns than anybody, but she hadn't been raised to be a sniper. Her parents had worshipped guns, but they hadn't had a talent for sniping, and there had been a limit to the skills they could teach her.

Spike was able to fill in that missing piece.

Blind as he was, he used the sounds and the results of Sonia's shots to analyze her quirks, then provide her with accurate coaching.

At first, it had probably been no more than a game to him, something to soften the shock of his lost sight. However, as he passed his sniping techniques on to her, he gradually took his role more seriously.

When they reached his destination, the town where Senator Manfred Beriam lived, they'd been dragged into several incidents—

—and the next thing they knew, it had been decided that the women would stay there as well.

"I was a complete fool to let you railroad me into this, Lana. 'He's a senator, so I smell money,' you said. We've been cleaning this mansion for three years, and the dough isn't exactly rolling in."

"Heh-heh. Not so fast, Pamela. Do you think all I've been doing here is cleaning?"

"I doubt you've even done much of that..." Pamela shot her a cold look.

Lana ignored it. "Oh, shut up. I was busy making friends with Mr. Beriam's wife and daughter and worming all sorts of information out of them. Anyway, my efforts paid off: I've got a humdinger of a wire."

"Do you? Let's hear this humdinger."

"They're building a new hotel in New York."

"In this economy?" Pamela met Lana's information with open suspicion.

Was any corporation daring enough to construct a new building during times like these? Plus, any information coming from Lana was inherently suspect.

Pamela was half convinced that the wire was bogus, but she decided to hear her out.

Lana did not notice this. Her expression was bursting with confidence as she nodded. "They're building a big restaurant under that hotel...or that's the cover story anyway. It's actually a casino! And it's run by a major mafia family!"

"...Huh? So who told you about this, Mrs. Beriam or Mary?"

"Mr. Beriam's men were talking about it on their way through. I eavesdropped."

"That's got nothing to do with how you set up your story!" Pamela yelled, temples twitching.

Lana just hummed, letting the criticism go in one ear and out the other. "Who cares about the setup? Never mind that. When the casino opens, they're going to hold an event that draws mobsters and rich folks from all over the East! You'd make a bundle with your tricks! I'll snitch their takings and run! It's a perfect plan—two birds with one stone."

“.....”

Pamela had no idea what about the plan was perfect or how, but she opted not to say so. She was well aware that Lana didn't actually know what the word *perfect* meant. Calling her out on that would accomplish nothing, though, so she eighty-sixed the idea from a different angle. "...Lana, listen. If Mr. Beriam's men were talking about it, they're obviously getting ready to crack down on the casino. If we saunter in there, we'll get ourselves handed over to the cops with the rest of them, and that'll be that."

“Huh?! Really?!”

“Look, you know how fastidious Mr. Beriam is. He hates the mafia. If he came across an invitation like that, don't you think he'd personally order the police to round up all the mobsters who showed?”

Frankly, even if Lana's wire was the real thing, Pamela had no intention of resuming the sort of casino breaking she'd done three years ago. There might be something fishy about the Beriam residence, but she'd found stable employment as a servant here.

As a matter of fact, she was annoyed with Lana for holding on to her dreams of getting rich quick.

“Plus, the idea of a casino so ridiculously huge it fills a hotel basement is pretty sketchy. So is any large gathering of mafiosi.”

“Mgh... But it's true, I tell you! There's gonna be an unbelievable amount of lettuce at this new hotel, Ra's Lance! If we don't take it off their hands, who will?!”

“It's not as if anybody has to...”

Lana was desperately standing her ground, and Pamela sighed, holding her temples—

—but when Sonia broke in, the situation took a sudden turn. “Ra's Lance? I know that place.”

“Huh?”

“He said we might have a job there soon... Teacher did, I mean.”

“.....”

When Sonia said *Teacher*, she meant Spike. Since he was instructing her in sniping techniques, Sonia innocently idolized him.

Pamela couldn't bring herself to like the man, though. She could tell he hadn't been using those skills in any officially sanctioned capacity. He'd probably been some syndicate's sharpshooter, maybe even assassin.

She'd wanted to avoid getting involved with anyone in that world long-term, but by the time she was sure about her suspicions, they were already in too deep.

On top of that, she knew he and Beriam took Sonia off somewhere every so often to do a “job.”

At first, she'd been afraid they might be making her do something indecent, but apparently it wasn't that sort of thing.

However, she'd soon realized that the work was dangerous in another sense when a beaming Sonia told her, “They let me fire a gun from up on top of a building today.”

Pamela had questioned Beriam about it once, but he'd told her, “Don't worry. The work will benefit the nation. Besides, she isn't being made to kill anyone.” He had been so intimidating that she hadn't been able to ask him anything else.

Still, when Pamela looked into Beriam's cold eyes, she was sure of it—he probably just wasn't making Sonia kill anyone yet.

Was he trying to gradually turn Sonia into a murder machine? A young girl like her would be able to get into all sorts of places without raising suspicions. Unless they actually saw her do it, the police would never suspect her of being a sniper.

The idea that the man was training her to be a convenient assassin made Pamela uneasy, and she'd paid extra attention to Sonia. Even so, she'd never imagined that Lana's idle gossip would be connected to Sonia's “work.”

“What kind of job?”

“Um, he said he doesn't know yet. He said something about an 'add hawk

approach.” Even as she spoke, the girl who lived to fire guns was loading bullets into her next one. “Teacher says he’ll tell me when and what to shoot on the day.”

“.....”

He couldn’t possibly mean to make this little girl shoot one of the millionaires or mafia dons, could he? With a fortune like Beriam’s, if all he wanted was someone dead, he could just hire a professional sniper... Or so Pamela thought, but she couldn’t completely reject the idea.

From personal experience, she knew “impossible” situations could happen. She’d already lived through several of them.

Just three years ago, they’d accidentally kidnapped the grandson of a major mafioso and then run into terrorists and an enormous bear.

In this world, maybe nothing was impossible. Nothing bad anyway.

Pamela had an overpowering sense of foreboding about this, and it was making her pessimistic.

Sonia had finished loading her gun and was heading back to her firing position. Pamela hastily called after her. “Can you turn that job down?”

“Huh? Why?”

“What if, and I do mean ‘if’...they tell you to shoot somebody? Could you do it?”

“Sure I could. Shooting’s what guns do,” the girl answered, far too easily.

Pamela shook her head. “No, that’s not it. I didn’t mean the gun. What about you, Sonia? If someone told you to kill a person, you’d be fine with it?”

From behind her, Lana put in two cents nobody needed. “What are you talking about, Pamela? When we were running from the mafia, Sonia’s guns saved us all a million times.”

“.....! Yes, but—! You can claim self-defense for that, or, um...”

In the first place, she’d only had Sonia fire warning shots while they made their getaway. None of her bullets had ever killed anybody outright. Pamela had

been sure that was the case. But wasn't it possible Sonia had killed a person or two without Pamela's knowledge?

She didn't know Sonia all that well, so she couldn't swear she would never take a life.

Sonia hesitated. "Mm... I'd hate it *a little* if somebody died, I guess. When Dad and Mom died, I hated it a whole lot."

...So just a little, Pamela thought, but for the moment, the answer came as a relief.

Not that it solved the problem.

"They might force you, though."

"You think?"

"Yes. In the worst case, they might even make you take the fall for them."

In the actual worst case, they'd silence her for good. I don't really get what Beriam's thinking, but...I wouldn't put it past Spike.

Should she take Lana and Sonia and just bail? Pamela began to give the idea serious consideration.

Ignoring Pamela's worries, the girl in the helmet put her earplugs back in and leveled her gun.

The deafening sound came an instant later.

".....!"

"~~~~~!"

Pamela and Lana hadn't plugged their ears in time, and all they could hear was a ringing whine.

The pair fell silent, holding their ears. When their hearing was almost back to normal, they heard Sonia speak softly. "It's okay."

With her eyes still on the target, she seemed to be talking to herself. She was smiling a genuine smile.

"If that happens, Nader will come save me."

Her childhood friend would come save her.

It sounded like a ridiculous, escapist fantasy.

Anyone who'd heard her say it for the first time would have thought she was refusing to face her choices, using hope as an excuse.

But Pamela and Lana had heard those words many, many times before. Whenever they were being chased by the mafia, and whenever they had the cops on their tail, Sonia had always said them and smiled.

Naturally, Nader hadn't come to save her once. Most of the time, Sonia had handled the situation herself, with the help of her guns.

Even so, she put more and more trust in her old friend.

Whoever this Nader was, he was a real jackass.

Pamela had never met Sonia's childhood friend, but her feelings about him were complicated. On that note, she made a resolution of her own. "...Whether we run or decide to get involved, we'll need to find out more about this."

"What do you mean?" Lana asked.

Pamela smiled in semi-resignation. "We've been spinning our wheels for three whole years. I'm saying it's about time Vanishing Bunny made a comeback."

Lana frowned. "...What vanishing bunny?" she asked.

"That's what you named our group!" With murder in her eyes, Pamela clamped an arm around Lana's neck.

"I-is it?! I—I was just testing yo-o-o-o-o-gweh-buh-buh." Even as she teared up, Lana tried to bluff her way through.

Sonia watched them awkwardly, then said the same thing she always did:

"Hey, quit fighting."

And so the women threw themselves into fate's great vortex.

They took a risk and joined the scramble into the casino—a place where there were no saints or heroes to be found, a place that churned with desires and malice.

They used their own lives as chips—although they couldn't say how much those chips were worth.

Chapter 16

The Hero Doesn't Show

There once was a man named Nader Schasschule.

He was a hopeless small-time crook who'd started out as a flimflam artist. He'd wormed his way into various organizations, then used his position in each as a stepping stone to get into a bigger outfit.

He'd sacrificed his former companions to accumulate trace amounts of power. Anybody could have killed him at any time, and it wouldn't have been the least bit surprising.

Even he had been a kid at one point, of course.

Was his villainy the result of a dark past? The answer was no. He'd been a regular boy, the sort you could find anywhere. He hadn't been abused by his parents or suffered anything traumatic, but as he grew, he'd drifted toward the bad. That was Nader for you.

But he hadn't always been a criminal.

It was back when he hadn't been all that warped, although he certainly hadn't been innocent. During his boyhood, just once, he'd told somebody about his dream.

I'm gonna be a hero.

It was a simple, truly childish dream, revealed to a younger girl who was his childhood friend.

Something very small had prompted his declaration.

The girl lived next door, and he'd seen that she was unusually discouraged. In an attempt to cheer her up, he'd said the first thing that popped into his head.

That was all it was.

On the other hand, the girl had been completely thrilled. "Nader, I just know

you can do it,” she’d said, beaming so brightly that the boy couldn’t back down.

At some point in his enthusiastic rambling, that irresponsible remark had become his real dream.

He’d become a hero and protect his young friend’s smile.

It was a pure, uncomplicated dream—which was why when the boy grew up, it didn’t take him long to forget it.

Still, Nader’s constant search for more power might have been a remnant of that dream.

You couldn’t be a hero without power.

Nader had *held on to that understanding* ever since he was a kid.

And now—

—he didn’t have enough power to claim the title of “hero.” He didn’t have the courage to overcome his weakness. He wasn’t even as kind as the average guy.

He was just a loser.

Now, after he’d realized he couldn’t acquire power as a villain, either, Nader’s old dream rose in his mind again.

He had spent many years bound by his current reality and his past, and there were things he still didn’t know.

One was just how deeply his childhood friend was counting on him.

Another was that she was being dragged into the same vortex of fate that had caught him.

And yet another—was that his own past mistakes were coming home to roost, in the form of murderous hatred.



Late at night A certain lodging house in Manhattan

“How did this even happen...?”

Nader had just returned from making a contract with Eve Genoard. He walked into the dining hall and immediately slumped facedown over a nearby table.

Roy Maddock, the lodging house's caretaker, called to him. "Hey, what's the matter? From the looks of you, I guess it didn't work out?"

"No... I got a contract. I'm gonna attend that casino party as one of the gamblers."

"Well, that's great."

"Like hell it is! Dammit... Why would anybody trust a guy like me that easily?" Nader had been dragged into all sorts of incidents, and his life wasn't going the way he wanted it to.

He hadn't known whether he should fight destiny or keep on running. Meanwhile, fate's vortex was trying to pull him toward the center of something huge.

That was why Nader had made up his mind: If he got one more push, he'd believe in this current and step into it voluntarily. He'd stand and fight Hilton and the rest of Huey Laforet's people.

"If I manage to trick one of the rich folks who got an invitation and sneak into the Runorata casino event, then I'll charge straight through to the end. Even if it means risking my life," he'd told himself.

In practical terms, it was impossible.

Nader had set that condition so he'd have a reason to run away. He probably wouldn't be able to connect with somebody rich in the first place.

But then, thanks to a confluence of coincidences, he'd gotten an introduction to the wealthy Eve Genoard.

Still, the girl had only inherited her parents' fortune. She wouldn't be attending a mafia party.

With a certainty that strongly resembled hope, Nader had assumed his struggles would end there.

"...All right. I do have some conditions."

"I don't need the money. In exchange, I want you to help me persuade my brother to let me take him home."

Nader had never dreamed he'd end up adding another problem to the collection he already had, but he'd stumbled even deeper into the swamp.

"How can she believe in some hood she just met?" Nader complained. He didn't know that the girl's older brother was a far bigger lowlife than he was, so Eve made no sense to him. He was terribly confused.

"That's the kinda girl she is. She's a good kid, but you just know she's not going to have an easy life," Roy said, as if this wasn't his problem. Nader felt like complaining about the lack of sympathy, but then he remembered it wasn't, in fact, Roy's problem, so he kept his face on the table.

"Now all I can do is brace myself for what comes next. Although it's more like I'm strangling myself."

"Hey, think positive. I risked my life doing something stupid way back when, but by some miracle, it worked out. Not that I remember much about what it is I actually did." Roy's eyes went to his wrist.

Raising his head slightly, Nader spotted a large scar there.

A suicide attempt, perhaps. He didn't know what had happened, but he understood that Roy had a colorful past of his own.

"...Risked your life, huh?" With a masochistic smile, Nader buried his face in the arms he'd crossed on the tabletop. His forehead came to rest on his false right hand; he felt its coolness just above his eye.

"It's no good. *I'm* no good." He began speaking through the gap between his face and the table, his voice like a draft. "I'd made up my mind to risk my life if things went well, but now that I've gotta go through with it, I'm scared out of my gourd. Christ, what the hell?"

As Nader kept complaining, Roy scratched his head. "I mean, it's not like I don't know how you feel... I tried dope, myself, but it just fucked up everything."

"My life's already fucked up, and I didn't even need dope. I knew there was no way a fella like me could ever be a hero."

"A hero, huh?" Roy sat down in a chair a little ways away. "That word can

mean a lot of different things. Some guys do nothing but whine and cry and run around in a panic, but they still get to be 'heroes' as long as they luck into victory and waltz off with the glory, you know what I mean? I can't exactly give you advice if I don't know what you're trying to do."

"Why would I be getting advice from some stranger?"

In response to this completely natural question, Roy said, "Well, I'm technically the caretaker here. Besides, the doc told me to look out for you. Don't wanna lose sleep 'cause you up and died on me."

"...Why does everybody bother with a nobody like me?" With his face still on his arms, Nader kept up the negativity. "It's not right. You've got it all wrong. People ain't supposed to be nice to schmucks. Upham told you what kind of lowlife I was, right?"

"....."

I'm not gonna get through to him no matter what I say, Roy thought. He decided to keep his mouth shut for a while, but then—

"...There was one," Nader muttered. His tone had changed just a little.

"Huh?" Roy couldn't see the other man's expression, as his face was still on the table.

"A fella who seemed like a hero among heroes. He wasn't a veteran soldier or nothin'. We just happened to run into each other on the street—some fancy-pants show-off out with his girl."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing important. I got into some trouble, had the Russo Family after me... And that fella saved me. A guy he didn't know from Adam." Nader's voice was barely audible, as if he were talking to himself. "It had nothing to do with him, but he broke right into a firefight, risked his life to save my ass. He didn't even want anything in return."

"...In times like these? That's really something."

"Frankly, I'd only just met the guy, but he was like a god to me. I might've cried a little." He chuckled, remembering. The smile soon disappeared, and he

started running himself down again. “Yeah, it really got to me. Heroes ain’t some fairy tale. Even a guy who’s just passing through can be one if he tries.” Clenching his left hand into a tight fist, Nader thumped the table with it. “And look at *me!* I can’t be anything!”

“Whoa there, calm down.”

“Why...? Why am I like this?! Why can’t I be like him?! Goddammit!”

“Mm... Well, I get it. I think those people are incredible, too.”

Nader’s thin shrieks sounded a little like sobs. Unsure how to react, Roy looked up at the ceiling. Then he just said what he thought, without trying to sugarcoat anything. “The thing is, becoming a hero ain’t easy. If you start goin’ on about courage and wind up in an early grave, you’re not a hero. You’re an idiot. It’s possible that the people who get called heroes are just the idiots who were lucky enough to survive.”

“.....”

He rejected Nader’s idea from its roots. “Now here’s a question: *Do you need to be one?* A hero, I mean.”

“...What?”

“Do you want to be a hero so the world will pat you on the back?”

“Are you screwing with me?” Lifting his head slightly, Nader glared through his dyed hair at Roy.

But Roy’s face was dead serious; his mind was working double-time as he spoke. “That ain’t it, is it? What I’m getting at is—the important thing isn’t becoming a hero in general. It’s who you’re becoming a hero *for*. Right?”

“.....”

“If there’s nobody you want to protect, then I’d say it’s fine to struggle and fight and do whatever it takes to stay alive. If you find somebody who fits the bill someday, you can start trying to impress ‘em then.” Roy gave a self-mocking smile. “Not that I can talk. I had a girl I cared about right there with me, and I never did manage to show her why I was worth it.”

Nader went quiet. Right now, he was far more grateful for those words than

he would have been for a clumsy attempt at comfort, a perfunctory *You can do it if you try*. That fact made him feel guilty.

I can't even do that, he thought.

"...Thanks. I appreciate the sentiment, pal." Nader had found his composure again, but he hadn't cheered up. His face was as glum as ever. "Still, I bet even doing whatever it takes to survive doesn't work unless you're Davy Crockett or something."

When Nader brought up the famous hero of the Alamo, Roy added, perhaps unnecessarily, "Crockett ended up dying in battle anyway."

"....."

"Whoops, sorry, sorry. Still, at least you're not in the Alamo, eh? I don't see the Mexican army around."

Texas had once been a Mexican territory, and during its fight for independence, the Alamo became the site of a ferocious (and eventually famous) battle. During this historically bloody fight, a defending force of less than three hundred men had been wiped out by at minimum fifteen hundred Mexican troops.

During their famed last stand, the defenders had inflicted heavy casualties surpassing their total number on their enemy, and the battle had since become the subject of numerous novels and movies.

The bottom line was that the defenders had been massacred, down to the last man.

Nader's chances of survival were almost certainly better.

He knew that.

That didn't mean he could picture himself surviving, though.

"...I wonder how that felt. Being surrounded by thousands of soldiers."

"Maybe they were all fired up and hell-bent on winning. Not that I'd know." Roy shrugged. "In a situation like that, an actual storybook hero would win. You and me, though—we don't have that kind of power. That's something we just have to accept."

"I know, but hearing it stings pretty bad."

"I'm including myself there, so hopefully that stings a little less. If you don't have any power, you just have to come to terms with that and compromise. Even if they don't have terrorists gunning for them, the way you do, people are starving or freezing to death out there these days." Roy was smiling, but he wasn't pulling his punches. "If a hero existed, he'd be saving those folks first."

It was a cruel fact, one he already knew well.

"At the very least, you can bet he wouldn't have time to save fellas like us."

"....."

"Let's do what it takes to stay alive. We can't do anything if we're dead."

Then everything began to converge...

...leaving no time for a hero to show up and save them all.

Chapter 17

The Nobles' Prosperity Is Unending

It was true that the House of Dormentaire had declined over the years—but only in comparison to its heyday.

The Dormentaires were a powerful family of European nobles who had reached the height of their prosperity around the year 1700. They'd held great power in Spain and the Italian peninsula, and while they hadn't rivaled the Medicis, the family had boasted quite enough glory.

Even now that the aristocracy had gone out of style, they had skillfully navigated the waves of industry, avoiding the loss of their power by shifting their finances in new directions.

They never let their desire to control the world show, though. Quietly yet steadily, they extended their reach into the global economy.

It was as if they were trying to entangle everything and draw it to themselves.

And now—

—a man whose family name was “Dormentaire” was attempting to extend a long, strong arm of power in the United States.

It certainly wasn't for the sake of the House of Dormentaire. It was simply for revenge and his own modest desires.



Somewhere on the East Coast

In a building near the port, one of the Division of Investigation's strongholds...

...a room was filling up with a certain man's frustration.

“Shit! Fuck! God fucking dammit! What the hell is going on here?!” Victor Talbot roared, temples twitching. “What the hell are the Dormentaires doing here?!”

As he yelled, he was remembering what he'd seen earlier that day.

During his pursuit of the squadron of seaplanes that had attacked Manhattan, Victor had spotted the crest of the House of Dormentaire on a ship that had been brought to his attention as "suspicious."

Before Victor gained immortality, the House of Dormentaire had employed him as their proprietary alchemist.

In 1711, a certain commotion had set him on his course toward the liquor of immortality. The uproar had enveloped the entire provincial city of Lotto Valentino, and behind the scenes, the House of Dormentaire had been deeply involved.

In a way, it was no exaggeration to say that the House of Dormentaire was one of the headwaters for the chain of incidents involving the immortals.

Now a ship owned by that family had turned up in New York, still bearing their hourglass crest.

This had come completely out of left field for Victor, and the fact was momentous enough that it threatened to overturn all the conjectures he'd made so far.

"If our luck goes south, we may have to throw all our theories out the window... If they're involved, this shit's international."

As Victor's angry yelling turned into groaning, a different man spoke up. "Uhhh... We're not positive they *are* involved, though."

The speaker was Victor's man Bill Sullivan. Despite what he'd said, he was fairly sure the Dormentaires were part of this, but they'd never get anywhere unless Victor calmed down. His intent had been to reassure, hollow as that consolation was, but—

"This is not a coincidence; that's for damn sure! If they seriously have nothing to do with it, then we're really headed to hell in a fucking handbasket!"

"Mm... What do you mean, sir?"

"Look, when they break out the hourglass, they're gonna do something huge! And it's never good!" Victor raked his fingers through his hair. "If they've got

nothing to do with the immortals, the shit we're in is twice as deep! Our department won't be able to field it all! Dammit... I'd heard they'd come down in the world. Why would they show up now, after all this time? It's like they're mocking me!"

At that point, Victor's expression suddenly turned serious, and he muttered to himself in a voice that was more subdued. "...They actually might be mocking me. The Dormentaires would do it."

"Ah... You sound like you have somebody specific in mind."

"A man's past is his business, all right?" He scowled at Bill.

Meanwhile, the door opened as Victor's other subordinate, Donald Brown, arrived.

"Assistant Director, a name with a link to our department has turned up. We've found a man with the last name Dormentaire."

"I knew it! What outfit is he with?!"

"The Runorata Family. He may also have ties to Huey's organization."

"Wha...?" The report left Victor speechless.

He'd guessed Huey's organization, due to his previous connections, or the remnants of Szilard's faction. Possibly even Maiza, since he'd been deeply involved with the Dormentaires in Lotto Valentino.

Frankly, he'd hoped it would be one of the three.

But the answer had turned out to be the worst possible one: Now even the Runorata Family was involved.

Whatever their lineage, the Runorata Family had currently put down roots in America. He'd gone back through Bartolo's family tree, but he hadn't found any trace of a connection to the Dormentaires or Lotto Valentino.

An enormous, independent syndicate in the American underworld and an influential (if less so now) family of European nobles—to Victor, the combination was nothing short of a nightmare. Even if he left the immortals out of the picture, one of the nation's leading mafia families had a pipeline to Europe through the House of Dormentaire. Obviously, nothing good would

come of this, and Victor imagined the worst. “Hey... Don’t tell me they’ve made contact with other mafia outfits, too. Hell, if they’re talking to Cosa Nostra...”

Cosa Nostra.

An enormous organization whose name meant “this thing of ours” in Italian, it was a group that existed in both Italy and America, through different lines.

While the gangster Al Capone had been famous throughout the U.S., Cosa Nostra, which had formed around Lucky Luciano, kept its existence very low-key. In the shadows, never standing out, they’d used various tricks to build a solid organization.

As a result, the Division of Investigation hadn’t really been effective against them. If they were involved as well, Victor’s department wouldn’t have the manpower to deal with them.

However, Donald shook his head at the idea that the enormous syndicate was part of the picture. “We’re still checking into it, but right now, the Runorata Family is the only place we’ve spotted the Dormentaire name.”

“Why didn’t we pick up on him before now?! What’s his link to them?!” Victor’s tone grew rough again, which meant the news came as a relief.

“He seems to have made contact with them only recently. Even within the organization, practically no one knows about him,” Donald said, holding out the case file.

Victor scanned it, and his eyes narrowed. “Melvi Dormentaire... The guy’s a dealer?”

“Yes. He’s a recent hire, and he’ll be acting as the Runorata Family’s main dealer at that casino party.”

“I figured Carlotta would be holding down that post.”

“Uh... She deals at the underground casino on the Runoratas’ home turf, right?”

“That’s the one. When I went in undercover this one time, she saw right through me and had me bounced. The dame is sharp.” Victor had spoken with a straight face, and Bill and Donald exchanged looks.

Then they corrected him, rather apologetically.

"Uh... It may have been less that she was sharp and more that undercover work is far from your forte, sir."

"...We got quite a few complaints from other departments, too. Said it wasn't our jurisdiction..."

"Shut the hell up! If we get a wire that the Runorata Family and Huey's outfit are meeting at a casino, that's absolutely our jurisdiction! ...The tip-off was false, as it turned out, but I guess this one's the real deal." Grinding his teeth over his subordinates' comments, Victor smacked the documents onto a nearby desk. "Anyway! Get all the dirt there is on this Melvi Dormentaire goon. I want everything from memories of his first love to how firm his pillow is!"

After his men had gotten their orders and left the room, Victor took another look at the report. "Melvi Dormentaire, huh...? Wonder if he's directly descended." Remembering one particular Dormentaire, his erstwhile lover, he hastily shook his head. "Dammit! I can't bring personal stuff into this. I know that."

He smacked his cheeks, then muttered to himself, "Still... The casino party at Ra's Lance..."

They'd gotten intel on that party a little while earlier.

Ordinarily, he'd have sent in a squad of cops and rounded up all the big-time gangsters at a stroke, but certain circumstances prevented him from doing so.

This was a chance to learn about links to the immortals. As a member of the Division of Investigation, he would have liked to gather intel at that party—but even before that, he was under pressure from multiple angles to let the Runoratas walk.

Even in the recession, quite a few wealthy people had managed to hang on to their power, and many of them would be attending the event. Several had probably made sure the politicians' and cops' hands were tied.

The pressure irked Victor, but he'd decided to prioritize the DOI's work for now and accept the limitations. However—

"If the Dormentaires are involved, that's a whole 'nother story."

Something was going to happen at the Ra's Lance casino, and it would involve the immortals.

Victor accepted this not as conjecture but as solid fact.

There were no coincidences with the Dormentaires. They had to have sent that dealer to the Runorata Family for a reason.

"Who gives a shit about tied hands? I don't care about Huey, the mafia, the Camorra, or the House of Dormentaire.

"I'll show 'em what it means to disturb the peace."



Somewhere in New York Below a warehouse

Up until a few years ago, this place had been highly significant.

It had been created in the basement of a certain warehouse in the suburbs of New York as a storage space for bootleg liquor.

Half of the storehouse had been used as a speakeasy during the last part of Prohibition, and there were three little tables in it. The place was horribly bleak for a bar, and the ceiling was so low that tall customers might have scraped their heads on it.

The only things in this basement were a bare-bones sales counter and a few naked lightbulbs. Now that the Prohibition Act had been abolished, there were empty barrels stacked against the wall, and the corners of the ceiling were strung with old cobwebs.

The company that owned the storehouse had gone under during the recession. The dusty cellar should have been forgotten until the economy revived, but...at present, there was a faint light in this dilapidated basement.

Under the flickering lightbulb sat a young woman in a black suit.

It was Firo Prochainezo's roommate Ennis, a homunculus created by Szilard Quates.

Her hands were cuffed behind the back of her chair. Barbed wire had been

wrapped around her legs, over her black slacks, so that she couldn't even struggle properly. The barbs bit into her flesh through the fabric, but there was no blood on the floor around her, thanks to her immortality. Although she was physically unharmed, her clothes were badly scorched and torn in multiple places.

Fully conscious, she glared up at the young man standing in front of her. Her eyes were wary more than hateful or contemptuous.

He gave her a scornful smile. "Please don't glare like that. You might scare someone."

He and Ennis were alone in the basement. Until the young man's arrival, several brawny men had been keeping an eye on the prisoner. However, when he'd come in a minute ago, he'd sent them away. They were currently on standby in the warehouse upstairs.

There was only one door anyway, so Ennis guessed that the young man had dismissed the others because he couldn't afford to have anyone overhear what he planned to say.

"...Who are you?" she asked.

This wasn't their first meeting. In terms of being in the same place at the same time, they'd crossed paths once before, at Firo's casino, but this was the first time they'd spoken.

"I believe I introduced myself at Prochainezo's casino. My name is Melvi, and I'm a dealer employed by the Runorata Family." Melvi shrugged.

"Assuming that's true, it doesn't explain why you'd kidnap me," Ennis told him.

"Really? I think it does that rather well, actually. For example, maybe the Runoratas have taken the family of a Martillo executive hostage so they can crush a potential rival."

"As I recall, the Runorata Family is enormous. I don't see why they'd have to do something so indirect."

In any case, Ennis didn't buy the idea that her kidnapping had been simple

mafia warfare.

After all, during the initial attack on Firo's apartment, the thugs had started with the explosives. If they'd been planning to kill her, that would have made sense. But if they'd meant to kidnap her, the attackers had to have known she was immortal.

That had immediately led her to suspect that an immortal was involved, but—

Melvi immediately confirmed her suspicions. "You 'recall,' hmm? Are those really your memories? Or did Szilard Quates give them to you?"

".....!"

"Or I suppose they could have belonged to someone you ate."

"I knew it... You're—!"

Melvi's tone had grown a bit lighter; Ennis tried to question him further, but he cut her off. "Do you recognize my face?"

There was no politeness in his words now.

Ennis took another look at the man. She did feel as if she'd seen him before, but she couldn't remember exactly where. Had he been in a movie or something? Or was he a regular at the Martillos' restaurant?

Seeing that she'd begun to puzzle it over in earnest, Melvi clicked his tongue as if she bored him. "Tch! Apparently, the alchemist you ate didn't pay much attention to people."

"What do you mean?"

She'd eaten an alchemist.

That memory roused the guilt that tormented her conscience. She could never escape it. She didn't even intend to ask for forgiveness, but no one had ever punished her.

Back when she was just an emotionless tool, she'd committed the crime on Szilard's orders.

Firo and the others in her life kept telling her she wasn't to blame.

But now that Ennis had gained emotions and knowledge, the deed carried far

too much weight for her to forget it. She never wanted to say much about her past, and Firo avoided bringing it up—

—but this man had waded right in.

“Oh, it’s quite simple. If you ate one of the alchemists who was on that ship, my face should have been part of the knowledge you gained. It’s possible that particular detail was too minor for him to remember, though. We were only together for a few months.”

“A few months...?”

“Plus, I don’t know whether my face is really identical to the one the alchemists saw.”

Melvi gave a self-deprecating smile, confusing Ennis even further. *What is he trying to say?*

Several hundred years ago...

Is he one of the alchemists from the Advena Avis?

Something doesn’t seem right, though.

As Ennis frowned, Melvi went on. “Well, even if you remembered whose face it was, you’re a homunculus who was born only recently, so it’s nothing to do with you.”

“Who are you...? What is your connection to Szilard?”

Melvi replied bluntly, with no hesitation. “I am *Szilard Quates*.”

“...?”

It was an extremely strange answer, and Ennis’s mouth hung open.

“Well, to be accurate, I was supposed to *become* Szilard Quates.”

“What...do you mean?”

“My full name is Melvi Dormentaire. Does the last name ring any bells?”

“The House of Dormentaire...!” Ennis gulped.

That name definitely was in the knowledge she possessed. Szilard had told her about the family a few times as well.

“They are no more than a foothold, there to be used. You must never be careless with them, though.”

“Once this country is under my control, I’ll take as much from them as I like.”

Szilard had planned to gain control of the United States.

It was sheer megalomania, but at the time, the words had sounded real to Ennis.

After all, Szilard had had the power to make them real.

If he’d succeeded in mass-producing the genuine liquor of immortality, he would have realized that ambition.

That was what Ennis believed, at least, and she was very glad it hadn’t happened.

Even to a homunculus like her, Szilard had seemed extremely dangerous.

However, this man had brought up his name, then claimed he was supposed to become him.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.” Ennis shook her head.

Melvi set a hand on her jaw and leaned in until his face was inches from hers. “Listen, homunculus. Do you think the alchemist you ate is alive inside you?”

“.....! What—?”

“It’s an important question. You inherited all his memories and knowledge. What he felt, and when; who he loved; who humiliated him. You stole all of it.” Melvi was trying to keep his voice level, but emotion crept in around the edges of his words; he couldn’t completely hide his excitement. “Well? Are you still the person you were before you ate him? Can you look me in the eye and say your personality—your ‘soul,’ so to speak—is the same?”

“.....”

“...Oh, right, I’m sorry. You’ve been trying not to think about it all this time, so there’s no way you have a ready answer.” The pressure in Melvi’s words eased, and he gave an unpleasant smile. “Take your time mulling it over. You’ll have *several days*.”

“.....”

“Conversations are games of catch, you know. Answer my questions, and I’ll answer yours.” He took a few steps toward the stairs. Then he stopped and spoke in a voice that held no emotion. “I was born as Szilard’s ‘spare.’”

“His spare...?”

“Yes. Or you could call it a new vessel.”

Ennis still didn’t understand what he was saying. She started to ask another question—but Melvi turned around, and when she saw his eyes, she swallowed the words back down.

Those eyes held none of the flippancy or exultation that had been there a moment earlier. They were terribly dark and stagnant, as if he was holding a grudge against the entire world. In truth, his hatred was focused on just one man.

“Firo Prochainezo. He stole my future. He killed me.”

“What are you saying?! Firo hasn’t done a thing to—”

“He ate Szilard. That’s all that matters. I just assumed Maiza had done it; I never dreamed it would be *him*.”

“How do you know it was...?”

Melvi responded impassively. “There’s the fact that he’s awfully solicitous toward you...but there are all sorts of other reasons.” Letting the emotion return to his voice, he smiled thinly. “Do you have any idea how many years I spent checking into your group?”

“What?”

“Your hangout, Alveare; the Martillo Family’s restaurant. How many of my companions do you think visited that place on the sly as customers? How many times?”

“No...!” Ennis hadn’t been expecting a shock from that direction, and she paled visibly. She felt as if the color was suddenly bleeding from her memories of a place where she’d spent so much of her time.

As he watched her, Melvi's lips curved in a satisfied smile. "Our reach is much longer than you imagine. Let me just say that if you think we're on the level of the Runorata Family, you're underestimating us." Melvi started toward the stairs again. As he went, he tossed a cheerful threat her way. "You're immortal as well. That means I can hurt you as much as I want. I'm not doing it because I still have it in me to be a gentleman. For now."

"Please wait. I'm not done—"

"I told you: Conversations are games of catch. Give and take. If you want to ask me something, think very carefully and come up with an answer that will allow me to keep treating you well." Then, as if he'd remembered, he added, "Oh, that's right. I'll be moving you somewhere else tomorrow. Somewhere better than this. You'll have the freedom to use the bathroom and shower by yourself."

"...?" Ennis was dubious. Even if all he did was loosen the bonds on her hands and feet, she'd have countless opportunities to run. Melvi didn't seem the type to be careless with his captives.

As if he'd sensed her doubts, Melvi went on. "If you run, I'll kill the one I nabbed along with you. Whether he's immortal or not."

"—!" Ennis thought of Czes, who'd been with her in the apartment.

She had no idea what had happened to him, and a nasty sweat broke out on her back. "Czes has nothing to do with this! Please let him go!"

"Are you thick? I'm telling you that I'll kill him if *you* run. I'm well aware that he has nothing to do with this." He was unrelenting as he laid out the situation. "If you think Czeslaw Meyer won't die because he's immortal, think again. Remember what I said? I'll kill him either way."

"What...do you mean?"

"That I have a way to kill immortals as well. *You're quite familiar with the method yourself, aren't you?*"

He smirked, and Ennis froze completely.

She felt her throat begin to burn.

If she believed what he was saying, either he was a true immortal or another member of his group was. But she couldn't decide how much to believe.

As a matter of fact, Czeslaw Meyer hadn't been taken prisoner.

She couldn't deny the possibility, though, and it bound her far more tightly than cuffs or chains ever could. Right now, she didn't have the freedom to learn the facts.

She'd realized something else, too.

Whether he was lying or telling the truth—this Melvi could kill someone in cold blood.

In that way, he really was just like Szilard.

That was the one thing Ennis understood as she watched him climb the stairs, laughing.

Nearly crushed by her anxiety that he might harm Firo, Czes, or somebody else and by her frustration at being helpless...

...Ennis could do nothing but watch Melvi's receding back.

Chapter 18

They Don't Go Back on Their Word

The day after Ennis's kidnapping, a sign that read ~~CLOSED~~ hung on Alveare's main door.

Even so, more people than usual were crowded into the restaurant.

The Martillo Family belonged to an organization known as the Camorra, an outfit with roots in Naples, Italy. However, these gangsters had evolved independently in America. Although their territory was a small one in a corner of New York, the mere fact that they were an independent syndicate in Manhattan was unusual.

People wondered how they and the Gandor Family managed to stay around; on the other hand, the outfit also tended to get mocked for being so small the big fish didn't feel the need to deal with it.

Alveare was a restaurant managed by the family. The place was aboveboard now, but before Prohibition was abolished, it had been a pretty famous speakeasy.

Inside, a crowd of visibly anxious young men had gathered. They were the most junior members of the Martillo Family's soldiers.

Some of them had been too intimidated by the executives to stop by the restaurant, so there were only thirty or so present. Considering the size of their territory, this was pretty good, though some people in the crowd were obviously not criminals. The group was a rather motley one.

Most of the members had been summoned, including the young men who worked at Firo's gambling den.

However, none of the camorristas—the executives—were present in the crowd. They were all in the room with the round table, under the restaurant.

As a rule, the group only assembled there to give their regular reports, or for

the “ritual” when someone was promoted to executive. Even the young soldiers knew that neither of those things was happening today.

The Runorata Family had issued a challenge to the Martillos’ underground casino.

The executives Yaguruma and Maiza had been attacked.

And then Firo’s roommate Ennis had been kidnapped.

All these things had happened in rapid succession, and word had reached even the lower levels of the organization. They put on a brave front, but most of them were scared.

The Martillo Family had always been a small outfit, and in recent years—ever since New York came under the control of the Five Families—they’d seen hardly any fighting at all.

Just once, they’d almost gone to the mattresses with the Gandor Family, but Molsa Martillo and Keith Gandor had met and managed to cool both families down in the nick of time.

They’d had an anti-war pact with the Gandors ever since, and it had never been broken.

Unfortunately, that made the recent attacks even more disconcerting for the family.

After all, the aggressors hadn’t been an outfit their own size. They were up against the Runorata Family, one of the biggest syndicates in the East—fear was perfectly natural. Plus, they didn’t know what had triggered the hostilities. All they could do was wait for the verdict of the executives who were meeting in the basement.

The timid ones briefly considered selling out to the Runorata Family, but they didn’t even know what the Runoratas were after. Realizing this meant they had no idea what to sell out or how, they started making plans to skip town instead.

Seina, the restaurant’s proprietor, had been watching the scattered reactions from behind the counter. She turned to Lia Lin-Shan, one of the waitresses. “Good grief. Look at these ninnies, all ready to run. Pathetic.”

"It really is."

The women knew all about the situation. They were aware that they might be targeted, but they were staying calm. Panicking wouldn't turn the situation in their favor.

"This is why we've gone four years without getting any new camorristas. I thought Firo was wet behind the ears before they promoted him, but he was a good sight better than this crew."

Grumbling, Seina worked alongside Lia to get the food ready. The restaurant might be closed for the day, but the two women had stayed there to cook for the Martillo Family.

The young men didn't seem to hear their complaints. They just kept on muttering among themselves in a mixture of unease and excitement.

Meanwhile, down in the basement, the executives' meeting was underway.



The basement of Alveare

Alveare had begun as a Prohibition-era speakeasy.

Until a few years ago, its large underground room had been a stern, forbidding place used only on special occasions, such as the promotion ritual for executives.

However, after Prohibition ended and the place began operating as a legitimate restaurant, the areas they could use for Camorra meetings gradually decreased. As a result, the forbidden room had been opened.

It was generally used when "guests" visited or for the meetings where they gave their regular reports, as well as for promotions. Although there had been no promotions since Firo Prochainezo.

A dozen men were gathered in that room: Molsa Martillo, the *caposocietà* of the family, and the other executives.

As a rule, Pezzo and Randy cracked jokes together in the restaurant, but now they were somber enough for a funeral.

Everyone was silent, and the tension in the room was winding tighter and

tighter. One of the men clenched his fists, wrestling down the impulse welling up inside him.

It was Firo Prochainezo, the one whose roommate had been abducted.

He might have been the youngest present, but he'd also won his way up to the rank of executive.

It would have been understandable if he'd ditched the meeting entirely, but he buckled down and toughed it out.

Granted, he had no idea where he would've gone. His only option would have been to fight his way into the Runorata Family. And there was no way a Camorra executive would attack the Runoratas on his own say-so. Firo loved Ennis; she was family—but so were the Martillos. He couldn't let his emotions put all of them in danger, too.

Biting his lip, Firo kept fighting the fire that blazed within.

After checking to see that everyone was present and that silence had fallen, Molsa Martillo spoke. "I doubt any of you need an explanation, but we do need to make sure we're all on the same page. Let's review the issue at hand."

The mere sound of his somber voice set the executives' skin buzzing with tension.

"We've been targeted by an open act of aggression from a certain quarter." With a deep sigh, Molsa narrowed his eyes slightly. "Or to put it more succinctly, they've picked a fight." Settling into his chair and making it creak, he coolly laid out the facts. "The one responsible is a kid who claims to be a casino dealer for the Runorata Family. He's going to be in charge of their area at the upcoming 'party.'"

The Runorata Family.

The information itself wasn't news to the executives, but hearing it directly from their boss's lips gave it extra weight.

"That said, we don't know whether he's acting on the Runoratas' orders or not. It may be he simply has an ax to grind."

Firo bit his lip even harder.

The dealer, Melvi, was an immortal, and this wasn't just territorial harassment from the Runoratas.

The last words Melvi had said to Firo over the telephone rose in his mind.

"That's simple. Because you ate Szilard Quates."

"You stole my future...and now you're going to give it back."

He'd said that was why he hated Firo.

The problem was—Firo had no idea what he was talking about.

Reluctantly, he rifled through Szilard's memories. The name "Melvi" didn't turn up, and the only face he could find was the one that belonged to Grett, Maiza's kid brother.

Dammit... After all this time, that damn geezer is still giving me grief?

Firo had only known Szilard for a few minutes.

During that brief time, the man had tried to kill him, and Firo had paid him back with interest—as a new immortal, he'd ended up devouring him with his right hand.

Even for somebody who wasn't immortal, it would have been just a passing encounter. A murderous thug had jumped him, and he'd killed his attacker in self-defense. For a gangster, those incidents were a dime a dozen.

But now, Firo felt as if Szilard had been his mortal enemy for many long years.

After all, the man had had the memories of all the alchemists he'd eaten, and every one of them had died hating Szilard. All of them were inside Firo now. Pulling those memories out too often would break his mind, so he kept them shut away whenever he could. He didn't have the skills it would take to forget everything except his own life, though. Every so often, he'd *remember a stranger's memory*, or sometimes a recollection of being eaten by Szilard would surface in the form of a nightmare.

Every time it happened, Firo had a certain thought.

He didn't want to think it. He knew he shouldn't. But the question would rise from the depths of his heart, whether he wanted it to or not.

Who am I anymore?

It was a question that shook his very foundation.

Inheriting someone else's knowledge meant inheriting their memories as well.

Some of those memories were from people with tastes Firo didn't have, who'd taken pleasure in completely different things.

Among them, Szilard's desires to control and destroy were particularly intense. He had enjoyed taking from others and laying waste to everything. Firo couldn't understand him.

But many of the others Szilard had eaten—both alchemists and the ordinary people he'd made into "failed" immortals specifically for the purpose—had been similar.

Szilard had eaten far too many people.

Sometimes Firo wondered whether a decision he'd made had actually been based on his own will. It didn't happen often, but when his own common sense didn't mesh with someone else's memories, he'd start questioning himself.

Conversely, this also meant that Szilard Quates had managed to maintain a clear sense of self even with the knowledge and ethics of so many others churning inside him.

Taking a casual look into the man's memories didn't leave Firo racked with guilt or anything of the sort.

Could that wrinkly bastard have been any greedier?

The problem was that all the glutton's memories were now inside him.

Was there really pleasure in destroying things?

He hadn't developed the same nature, had he?

As a test, he'd once wrecked a domino array Isaac and Miria had set up. Immediately after, he'd felt so bad about it that he wanted to knock his own lights out.

That disgust had come with a sense of relief, too. *I'm really not like Szilard,* he'd thought.

The man's memories weren't eating away at his heart—but now they'd brought disaster down on him in another way.

Melvi had told him to wager Szilard's knowledge in a gamble with him.

These memories had caused him nothing but trouble. If the guy wanted to take them off his hands, he would have happily given them away. However, to take that knowledge, Melvi would have to eat him—meaning Firo would die. And he couldn't agree to that.

Why had Melvi proposed a bet, though?

All he'd had to do was say, *If you value Ennis's life, let me eat you.*

Firo might be furious, but being around Molsa and the others had restored enough of his reason to let that question cross his mind.

Did the guy want to make him suffer more?

Or was he planning to make the most of his relationship with the Runorata Family by forcing him to participate in the casino party?

"Well, if you want to cheat, you could cobble together a homunculus, use your left hand to share some knowledge with it, then give it to me. That would be easy if you used Szilard's knowledge, wouldn't it?"

The man had said that, too, he remembered.

Szilard had created homunculi from his own cells, using the knowledge of another alchemist he'd eaten. Since it was born from the cells of an immortal, this type of homunculus could be called that immortal's clone.

Maybe because they seemed to have the same body, in a way, or possibly due to some caprice of the demon's, the creator was able to transfer knowledge to his homunculus at will through his left hand.

In other words, Melvi was telling him to make a sacrificial homunculus for him to eat.

As far as Firo was concerned, that wasn't an option.

To him, homunculi were no different from humans.

Say he did create and hand over a being like Ennis. If Ennis knew he'd done

something like that to save her, she'd be sad. Firo was sure of it. She might not give in to anger or hatred and blame him, but he could imagine multiple ways it would hurt her.

He couldn't force her to carry that sadness forever. Homunculi were prisoners to the same immortal fate as their creators.

The one difference was that there was another way Ennis could die, aside from being eaten.

If the immortal who was her host rejected her as "unnecessary," her pulse would immediately begin to weaken, and she'd die a slow death.

Ever since eating Szilard, he'd felt an odd connection with Ennis—less like a thread and more like having another self nearby. He could also sense a "switch" of sorts. It wasn't a physical switch, of course, but if he truly rejected Ennis, that switch would flip automatically and sever their connection.

As a matter of fact, Szilard had flipped that switch himself, a few minutes before Firo had eaten him. That moment—or, more specifically, the memory of it—was still inside Firo. So was the memory of how it had felt.

If he wanted to reenact that, he could do so immediately. He could kill Ennis from anywhere.

But obviously, he'd never wanted to.

It wasn't about the relationship between a homunculus and her host. Firo had never said so aloud, but he felt a genuine affection for Ennis. The emotion was so platonic that his friends ribbed him for being too innocent, while Ennis didn't seem to register his feelings for her as romantic ones. However, even if it was an unrequited love with no payoff, Firo could never abandon her.

Was Melvi testing to see what he'd do?

If Ennis had been taken hostage, no doubt Szilard would have summarily cut her off and shown his enemy that hostages would accomplish nothing.

Or maybe the guy was watching him to see what he did. Maybe he wanted to know if Firo would take his "sacrificial homunculus" suggestion to heart.

Was he trying to tip the scales of their gamble in his favor by learning more

about Firo?

Firo could imagine a range of possibilities, but he set them aside for now. At this stage, they were all just random guesses.

Quietly forcing himself to take steady breaths, the young camorrista focused on honing three emotions.

His hostility toward Melvi. His desire to save Ennis.

And his awareness that he belonged to the Martillo Family.

I can't cause trouble for everybody else.

I'll have to settle this on my own...

But how?

Is there any way to take on that shithead man-to-man instead of going to war with the Runoratas?

Just as he was thinking these things, Molsa spoke to him. "Firo. Do you remember the oath you swore during the ritual?"

"...Yes."

By *ritual*, he meant Firo's promotion to camorrista.

Molsa recited the oath from memory, confirming them again with Firo. "Your right foot is in prison. Your left foot is in your coffin. Even then, you wish to keep your eyes fixed on your own path, and to at times grasp honor with your right hand... You swore it to us, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You swore that, if necessary, you can use your left hand to take your own life for our sake."

"Of course."

Even allowing for his newfound immortality, Firo's resolution hadn't changed. The Martillo Family had made him who he was today. To repay them, he'd step onto any battlefield without a moment's pause.

Although, when I factor Ennis in, I can't let myself die that easily, Firo thought.

Molsa went on. “Firo Prochainezo. If your father killed one of our comrades, you said you could kill your father and avenge your comrade.”

Firo shuddered, feeling a nasty cold sweat break out on his back. “...I did.”

He could replace the word *father* with *family*.

Firo’s parents were dead, and he didn’t have any relatives.

Except, in a way, he did. With their bond as homunculus and host, he and Ennis were similar to blood relatives.

Molsa wasn’t going to tell him to abandon Ennis for the sake of the family, was he? What should he do if he did?

Just as his anxiety started transforming into outright fear, Molsa continued. “Yes, that is what you swore, right here.”

“.....” Firo gulped.

But Molsa’s next words weren’t what he was expecting. “You aren’t the only one. Everyone present swore that same oath.”

“.....?”

Of course they had; it was part of the promotion ritual. Molsa himself might have taken that oath somewhere else, before he formed the Martillo Family.

“Taken the other way around, unless your fathers turn against us, they’re no enemies of ours. All of you are members of my family, and they are your blood relatives.” Molsa addressed the executives coolly. “Ennis is Firo Prochainezo’s family. Firo is a Martillo Family camorrista, one of our own. Messing with his family is an act of clear hostility, and an insult to us.”

“...*Capo masto.*”

“You all swore that same oath. You are prepared to grasp honor with your right hands and to snuff out your own lives with your left.”

The executives watched Molsa silently. Even though they didn’t speak, their sharp, resolute eyes affirmed what he was saying.

“Let me ask you again. Are you prepared to risk your lives to save Ennis and reclaim our stolen honor?”

The perfectly dispassionate question left Firo stunned.

With grave faces, Maiza and the other executives gave their replies.

“Of course, sir.”

“Do we even need to say it?”

“Naturally.”

“Miss Ennis is practically family to us, too.”

“Yeah, what he said.”

When he heard them, Firo finally understood what was going on. “Fellas...”

“Your family is our family. Isn’t that right, Firo?”

“*Capo masto...*”

“Don’t insult us by trying to shoulder this on your own, Firo,” Molsa told him.

Firo hung his head, feeling deeply grateful. He was ashamed of ever fearing that they’d tell him to abandon Ennis. All sorts of emotions welled up inside him, and words seemed to stick in his throat. Still, he managed one brief remark. “...Thank you...so much, sir.”

He remembered.

He’d joined the Martillo Family because he’d admired its leader’s chivalrous spirit.

Then he was reminded of one more thing.

Molsa Martillo might be soft toward his own people, but that wasn’t all he was. He was also a gangster who’d started a syndicate here in New York City and had survived.

“Now, depending on the situation, we may end up making an enemy of the Runorata Family. They’re one of the leading outfits in the East. In terms of numbers, they’re probably a hundred times our size.”

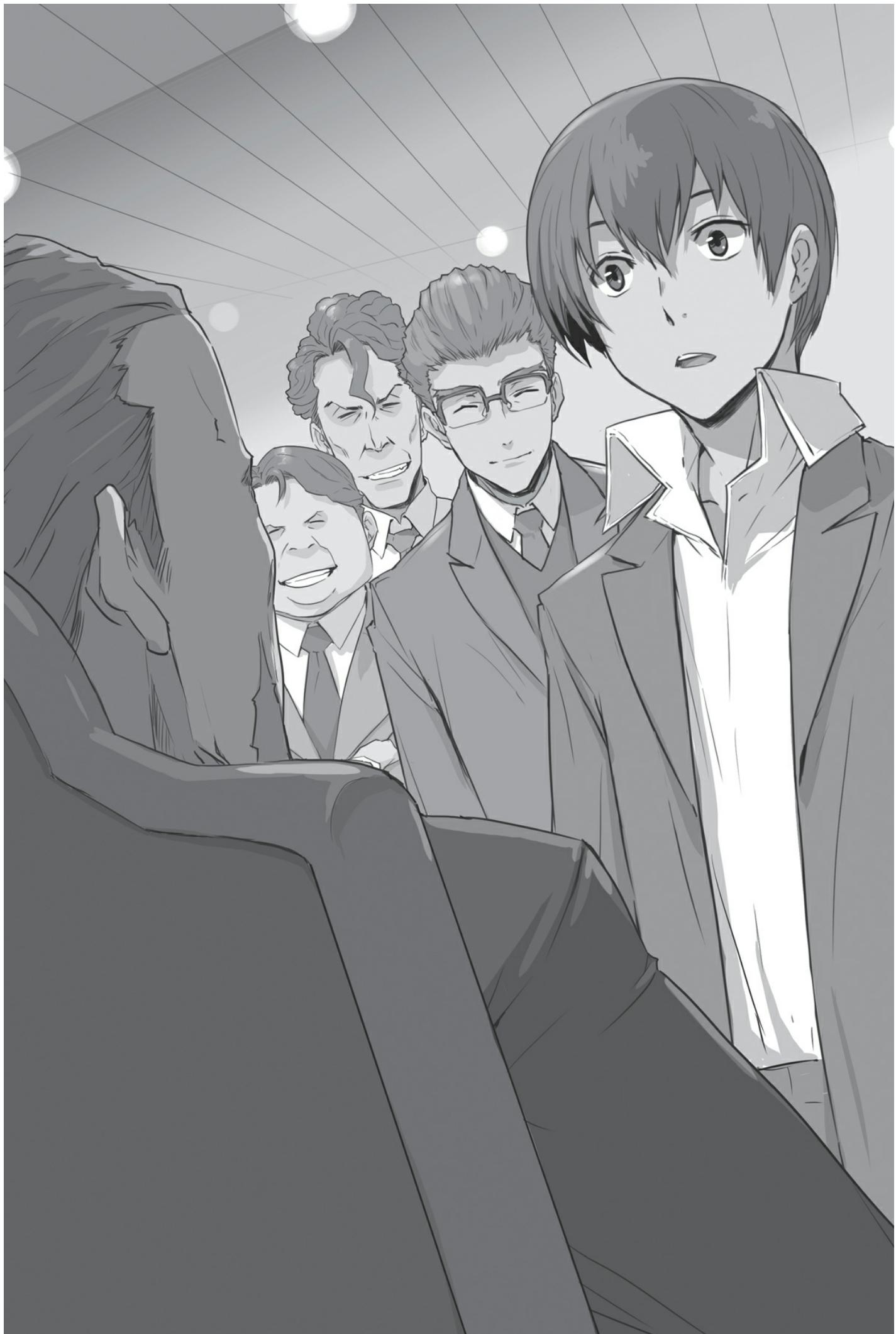
Molsa began to summarize the enemy’s threat in specific terms.

“Even in this day and age, they’ve got connections to the police, the papers, and the politicians. No doubt they can fake a crime and turn the public against

us whenever they want... In the worst case, we may end up making an enemy of the nation itself."

As his boss explained how formidable their opponent was, Firo gulped again.

Immortality wouldn't be enough to make them feel safe around an enemy like this. In fact, it was much likelier they'd be put through something worse than death.



Most of all, when Molsa had pointed out that America itself might turn against them, he hadn't been joking.

In the quiet room, one of the executives swallowed audibly. The scale of the Runorata threat had everyone on edge.

Meanwhile, Molsa Martillo gave them a dauntless smile. "See? *Even the worst case isn't all that bad.*"

Slowly, he got to his feet, but he didn't make a speech. His tone was casual; he could easily have been suggesting that they get ready for lunch.

"They spat in our eye, so let's give them hell. We'll make them wish they just had the rest of the world to deal with instead of us." Then he brought the meeting to a close. "I've got Ronny checking into it now." Ronny was the only executive who wasn't present. "I'll give you detailed instructions later."

Their boss's voice didn't hold a hint of false cheer or bravado, and the executives began to really believe they might have a shot at winning. Even against the Runoratas.

And maybe that confidence was unfounded, but one thing was certain.

They were no longer scared of the Runorata Family.

For all of them, Firo included, that just might turn out to be their greatest weapon.

No matter what results it brought them.



An hour later An apartment somewhere in New York

The stonework apartment building was a fifteen-minute walk from Alveare.

When Firo Prochainezo knocked on the door of the fourth-floor room, there was no response. He waited a little while, then knocked again, calling out this time. "It's me. Firo. Are you there, Annie?"

Inside, he heard something move.

After waiting a little longer, Firo set a hand on the doorknob. The door wasn't locked; it swung open easily.

“I’m coming in.”

He didn’t want to walk in on her when she was changing. He moved carefully, calling out again so she would know exactly what he was doing.

He eventually found her in the bedroom.

Annie wasn’t wearing her Alveare waitress’s uniform, or a negligee. She was dressed in ordinary street clothes.

“...Oh, I knew it. I knew you’d come.”

Her voice sounded childish; it wasn’t the way she usually spoke.

Firo knew why. She was Annie, a new waitress who’d joined up after Lia, but she also had a completely different person inside her.

...Which wasn’t to say she had a fractured identity.

A separate mind called Hilton had fused with Annie’s consciousness. Since Annie’s memories and values were still there, she was, for all intents and purposes, both people.

However, Firo didn’t address Annie or Hilton. Instead, he used the name of Hilton’s first personality, the young girl who was her main body.

“Leeza.”

“What’s the matter, Firo?”

Leeza Laforet.

She was Huey Laforet’s second daughter, Chané’s little sister.

She and Firo had met in Alcatraz, and their relationship was complicated; she’d tried to kill him, and he’d saved her from a deadly punch, courtesy of Ladd.

Although Firo knew he was talking to a ten-year-old, he apologized right away. “First off, sorry for walking into a lady’s room uninvited.”

Annie stared back for a moment. “Um... Yes, well. I expected you to come, so that’s fine.”

“I bet you know why I’m here, too.”

"Yes. Ennis, right?" As she spoke, she looked away. There were several different emotions in her voice when she said Ennis's name, but Firo didn't notice.

He gazed at Annie, his expression serious. "Did your dad...? Did Huey take her?"

Annie's eyes widened. "No! Father didn't do it!" she protested. "If he had, he wouldn't have sent that Melvi person. He'd come after you himself!"

It was clear from her voice that she was genuinely angry, and Firo apologized again. "I see. I shouldn't have doubted him. I'm sorry."

"Huh?! O-kay. That's fine; I forgive you."

She was so bewildered by his honest, up-front apology that she accepted it automatically.

Looking straight at her, Firo asked a second question. "Thanks. But, uh... You do know about Melvi, then?"

".....Yes."

"Huh. That was fast." Firo seemed rather deflated.

"I didn't expect this," Leeza told him. "I thought you'd kick down the door, grab me by the throat, and start making threats."

"I wouldn't have choked you, but I was planning to get answers out of you. And I'm not above threats." Sighing, Firo leaned back against the wall. "The thing is, Mr. Molsa got me calmed down. Besides, Melvi's a tough bastard. I gotta keep it together if I want to beat him."

When she looked into Firo's eyes, Leeza realized something.

He appeared calm, but not because he'd given up on Ennis. He was fighting down the desire to scream and truly trying to do everything in his power to rescue her.

.....

He really does cherish Ennis, doesn't he?

Privately, she was jealous, but she still couldn't hate the other woman

completely.

It had been a little while since she'd infiltrated Alveare as Annie.

At first, Ennis had been no more than a subject of observation. Leeza had been amused that Firo, the homunculus's host, was dizzy for her.

But after the incident at Alcatraz, Ennis had taken on a new significance for Leeza.

When Leeza had connected with her—first as an individual, then as a woman—she'd been caught off guard by Ennis's extreme, simple honesty. She was much too pure to pass for a human. That said, she wasn't an emotionless doll. She had feelings, and she was familiar with both the light and darkness of human society.

As a person, she was forthright and principled, and she tried to be sincere with everyone.

The only thing she kept hidden was the guilt she felt over various acts she'd committed on Szilard's orders. Even then, if you spent a little time with her, her regret was so obvious you might wonder whether she was actually trying to hide it at all.

Firo was such a late bloomer that his affection didn't seem to make sense to her. If Ennis did notice it, though, what would she do? Romantic feelings might be a bewildering thing for her—but at the very least, she'd try to respond to him sincerely.

Leeza understood this—which was mortifying to her.

Ennis, an artificial human, seemed far more noble than she and her cohort were.

Of course, the fact that Leeza was capable of feeling this way showed how she'd changed as well.

In the beginning, she'd lived only for her father. Huey's attention and praise had held her world together. That was why, when she took over the bodies of humans or birds and used them as Hilton, she hadn't cared how much anyone hated her.

But ever since the Alcatraz incident, some buried part of her had begun to care about interactions with other people.

For the most part, she was still dependent on her father, and if she'd had to choose between Huey and Firo, she would have picked Huey instantly. Even so, the presence of someone else in her heart at all was a clear change.

That was what had transformed the way she saw Ennis. She'd become conscious of the other woman's humanity, something she hadn't even tried to see before.

She was jealous of Ennis, but she also wished she could be like her.

Harboring these complicated emotions, Leeza had waited for Firo to visit her apartment.

She'd expected him to be furious, had even steeled herself to lose this body—but Firo was calmer than she'd anticipated. Not because he wasn't thinking of Ennis, but because he was. Realizing this, she sank back into her complicated feelings.

With no idea what was going through Leeza's mind, Firo spoke to her again, his expression earnest. "Please. Tell me what you know about Melvi. I won't tell Huey or anybody else about anything you say to me. I just want to save Ennis."

Leeza was silent for a little while. Then she responded, using Annie's body. "Is that really all you want?"

"Huh?"

"If you save Ennis, will you let Melvi go? Don't you want to kill him?"

"....." Firo thought for a little while. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't have it in for the guy. Frankly, I'd like to beat him to a pulp, and once wouldn't be anywhere near enough. If I can't save Ennis that way, though, she gets priority."

"Hmm..."

"Besides, he's not just my enemy now."

"Huh?" She tilted Annie's head, perplexed.

"The Martillo Family is officially hostile to him. If I got orders to stab him, I'd

do it even if I personally wanted to let him off the hook. On the other hand, if the boss says he's free to walk, then it doesn't matter how much I want him to die." After he'd said it, Firo remembered Leeza's actual age and hastily backpedaled. "Sorry. You're a kid; I shouldn't be sayin' this stuff to you."

"Don't treat me like a child. Besides, I hate him, too. If you beat him up for me, I'd be kinda happy about it," Leeza said, and Firo averted his eyes. "...But listen. Just hypothetically, what if Mr. Molsa told you to kill Ennis? Could you do it?"

Firo looked sad. After thinking for longer than he had earlier, he shook his head. "What *would* I do? I dunno. The boss isn't the sort of person who'd order a hit on Ennis for no reason, though. That's why I pledged my loyalty to him."

When Leeza saw the expression on his face, she fell silent. Even ignoring Firo's natural baby face, there was something especially childlike in the way he deflated. Blushing faintly, she tried to distract him.

"...If it were me instead of Ennis, you wouldn't think twice, would you?"

"Whoa, hey. I said I was sorry for treating you like a kid, so go easy on me." Sighing, Firo looked straight into Annie's eyes. "Besides, you shouldn't put your own life on the scales to test people."

"....."

Annie's face flushed even redder, and she turned away so that Firo wouldn't see. Setting her hand on the window frame, she looked outside.

"Melvi Dormentaire."

"Huh?"

"That's his full name. You've heard the name 'Dormentaire' before, haven't you?"

"Oh..."

She'd jumped to the main subject so abruptly that it threw Firo for a second, but he quickly remembered what the name "Dormentaire" meant. A second later, he registered the fact that the knowledge wasn't his; he'd pulled it out of the memories that had belonged to Szilard and the alchemists he'd eaten.

“Dormentaire... You mean *the* Dormentaires?”

“I think you probably know more about them than I do, Firo. Hilton doesn’t have any people who’ve interacted with them directly.”

“But...why now...?”

In Szilard’s memories, the House of Dormentaire periodically appeared as something important to him personally. It seemed as if they’d been using each other, but they’d had almost no contact after he started basing his activities in America. That was how things stood in his memories, at least.

The other alchemists and Maiza’s little brother had remembered the House of Dormentaire vividly as good-for-nothing aristocrats, but none of their memories provided a direct link to this incident, either.

However, considering Melvi’s strong resemblance to Gretto, there had to be a connection. The city of Lotto Valentino was Maiza and Gretto’s hometown, after all.

The town the House of Dormentaire had effectively occupied, and the family Maiza had left behind—what was the link here?

Firo thought desperately, but he couldn’t guess anything more from what he currently knew.

As he racked his brain, Leeza gave him some additional intel. “He approached Father fairly recently and said he was a messenger from the House of Dormentaire. He stole the position of Time’s leader from Croquis and the others.”

“Croquis? Time? What?”

“Um, wait a minute... More importantly, Mr. Firo, I assume Czes is fine?”

She’d abruptly reverted to Annie’s personality, which puzzled him. She didn’t seem to be simply derailing the conversation, though, so he went along with her. “Huh? Oh, yeah. Czes is with Maiza right now, so he should be okay.”

“I see... I hope he’s all right—Oh, Firo, sorry for the wait! Um, so Father says it’s okay to tell you about Time and the other things!”

The way she switched back to Leeza midsentence knocked Firo for a loop.

“Wait, were you asking Huey over there while you were talking with me over here?”

“If I couldn’t do that, I’d never manage as Hilton.”

“...Come to think of it, you did make several dozen birds work together, didn’t you?”

“Hilton” was the collective name for the women whose minds were synced with Leeza’s. Since they all lived their lives simultaneously, it wasn’t as if everyone else fell silent whenever one of them spoke. Having to function that way would have limited the number of people she could use.

It was possible that while Leeza withdrew, Annie’s original personality spoke by default.

Once Firo had put the pieces together, he had a sudden thought.

So...what does this mean, exactly?

Does it mean the women Hilton took over are dead?

Or are they still alive, as part of her?

The problem might have some bearing on his own situation, but he suspected that would be a complicated topic, so he decided to focus on Melvi for now.

“...So, Time. What kinda crew are they?”

“Ummm, first, the members of Rhythm develop new machines and homunculi and things. Then Larva and Time put the mass-produced versions of those things to practical use. Larva supervises people like Christopher and Chi, and then, um, Time systematically utilizes the mass-produced airplanes and weapons and things.”

She was using grown-up vocabulary, but the way she spoke was still childish.

As Firo took in that rather lopsided explanation, his eyebrows drew together. “...Airplanes? Hey, the day Melvi came to the casino—Are you sayin’ those planes were...?”

“I dunno. Hilton isn’t anywhere near him,” Leeza said; she sounded troubled. Then she jumped to another piece of information. “From what I hear, a lot of

the Runorata Family don't like him much, either. It's because he took a job from this lady named Carlotta. The people who think Melvi stinks are trying to kill him."

Firo pinched the bridge of his nose. "Great. Just what I needed."

It wasn't possible for mere mafiosi to physically kill Melvi. His immortality didn't even need to come into it; with Claire Stanfield as his bodyguard, he was essentially untouchable.

Plus, he didn't want Ennis to get hurt in any firefights. She wouldn't die, but she could still feel pain. He wanted to avoid putting her through even a few seconds of agony. Even worse, if Melvi mistook his attackers for the police or the Martillos, he might get violent with her.

Claire... Could I get in touch with him somehow?

Felix Walken—aka Claire—might be on the enemy's team now, but he was technically only working as Melvi's guard. If Firo asked him to help save Ennis without shirking his bodyguard duties, he might cooperate. The idea was ludicrously reckless, but pulling off reckless stunts like they were nothing was his childhood friend's specialty.

"I hate that redhead hitman!Huh? Oh, hang on a second!" The way Leeza spoke changed abruptly. "Um, listen! Firo, Father's speaking to me right now, and he says to ask you something."

"Ask me what?" The idea of a question from Huey made Firo even warier. He'd gouged out the man's eye in Alcatraz. There was no way he wasn't carrying a grudge after that. Steeling himself, Firo waited.

And then—the words Leeza relayed were more straightforward than he'd anticipated.

"So, um, Father says..., 'Can we meet now?'"



While Firo was trying to decide whether to go see Huey, one of the root causes of all this trouble—

—the Martillo Family was fielding another emergency.

Ronny Schiutto, the man who'd been checking into Melvi, had vanished.

He had called Molsa on the phone, though.

"It looks as if I won't be able to return to you for a while, capo masto. I've been pulled into some personal trouble that has nothing to do with the family. I am prepared to accept any punishment or reprimand for the delay in carrying out my duty, but the fact of the matter is that I can't come back at the moment."

That was the apology he'd given.

Upon hearing about this, Maiza frowned. "In trouble?" he murmured to himself, after he'd left Molsa's office. "...Ronny?"

Maiza knew what Ronny really was, and he wondered what trouble could possibly be serious enough to tie him down. He couldn't think of anything.

Ronny was a being many called "the demon," and he was effectively omnipotent. As soon as he got back, Maiza had been planning to ask him to at least guarantee Ennis's safety, even if it did go against his usual principles.

If Ronny made a serious attempt, he could probably make the Martillo Family the biggest syndicate in all of America overnight. However, because he respected—and was entertained by—human autonomy to a certain extent, he kept his hands off. And Maiza was fine with that.

Exactly what sort of trouble could someone with his abilities have been dragged into? It was definitely concerning.

If the disaster was big enough to cause problems for a demon, and it happened to be man-made—and if its instigator was Melvi, the man who had his brother's face—then that changed things completely.

After all, if Melvi turned that disaster on the Martillo Family, or on Firo specifically instead of on Ronny, he really didn't think they'd be able to cope.

The most serious part of this was the fact that Ronny Schiutto—an executive and the Martillos' greatest fighter—had left the front line.

There was no knowing when his "trouble" would be cleared up, but Maiza did know one thing: The Martillo Family wasn't the kind of syndicate that would

kiss up to Ronny and depend entirely on his abilities.

Even if the demon wasn't here, and even without the power of immortality that Maiza had accidentally brought them, the Martillos would still be the Martillos. He was sure of it.

Molsa Martillo and the camorristas he'd chosen had the strength for it.

That was why, although he'd avoided getting involved with people, he'd bent his own principles to join this syndicate. Remembering this—

—Maiza, the Martillo Family *contaiuolo*, made a quiet resolution.

It didn't matter if Melvi bore a strong resemblance to his younger brother.

Maiza would plunge into the fight without hesitation. Not as an immortal alchemist but as a spear and shield for the Martillo Family.

Maiza wasn't the only one.

Ronny Schiutto's absence had caught the executives off guard—but it ended up only solidifying the Martillo Family's foundation.

At the same time, Ronny's disappearance gave many of them a sense of what they were in for.

Whether or not this turned into a war, the most important part was bound to be the casino party at Ra's Lance.

And so they resolved to make for the casino, using their own destinies as chips, and take with their right hands the honor of protecting the family.

Chapter 19

The Tricky Customers Don't Hesitate

Late one night In Little Italy

A little ways off Mulberry Street, there was a jazz hall.

This was the office of the Gandor Family, an outfit as small-scale as that of the Martillos.

The establishment's name was Coraggioso, a word that meant "hero" in Italian, and the individuals who'd assembled in its basement were certainly strong enough to be worthy of the word.

That said, their personalities were pretty far from anybody's idea of a hero.

"All right, amigo. Is this everybody who's supposed to show today?" asked a woman, smiling brightly. She was dressed in a relatively masculine saloon girl costume, and she wore two Japanese katana at her waist.

Luck Gandor, the man she'd called "amigo," responded evenly. "We're expecting one more, but it sounds as if there's been a delay, so we'll begin now." Luck scanned the office's large hall.

This area was ordinarily used by the family, and there were pool tables in the center. A small group that had gathered around one of the tables was making the atmosphere in the office rather peculiar.

The members of the Gandor Family were hanging back, sneaking glances at them. Of course they were, Luck thought as he considered yet again just how odd the assembled individuals were.

His two older brothers, Keith and Berga Gandor, were seated on his left. As usual, Keith was silently shuffling and reshuffling a deck of cards, while Berga was tactlessly eating and drinking by himself.

His brothers did stand out a bit, but they always did; if they'd been the only ones, their men wouldn't even have noticed. The "guests" who'd gathered

today were far more bizarre than the Gandors.

It would have been hard to mistake them for law-abiding citizens.

They were the hired killers the Gandors had recruited for the casino party at Ra's Lance as extra muscle to join them in the fray.

First, there was the family's own bodyguard, Maria Barcelito.

Ordinarily, she performed sword dances at the bar as a saloon girl, and she was one of the family's most formidable members: a "master swordsman" who was extremely skilled with Japanese katana. She called her blades "Murasámia" and "Kochite," and she was tough enough that, in a small enough space, she could hold her own against multiple gangsters with guns.

The man who was exchanging occasional glares with this woman was Laz Smith, the self-styled "Gunmeister." Although he was indoors, he was still wearing a thick coat, and Luck knew it was because of the several dozen guns of various types stowed inside it. Laz also had countless ways to use all of them.

Luck didn't have a solid grasp of Smith's skills, but his men had seen him in mortal combat with Maria, and he'd recruited him on the strength of their opinions.

One thing made him rather apprehensive, though.

When they'd hired Smith, a boy who seemed to be around fifteen had come with him.

The kid was the one member of this crew who seemed to be on the right side of the law, and the others couldn't help but look at him.

However, once they'd taken in the sight of him, he caught their interest in a different way.

Without taking their eyes off him or approaching him, the Gandor Family men whispered together.

("Hey, that kid... Isn't that him? The one who got into the tussle with that newshound here...?")

("You mean that time with the ice pick?")

(“Come to think of it, what happened to that jackass?”)

(“I think they’ve got him buried under the floor. They said they were going to test new tortures on him whenever Tick came up with one...”)

Luck couldn’t hear the whispers, but he’d heard about the boy from another of his men earlier.

Specifically, that he’d once been involved in a certain string of murders that had been connected to the Gandors and the immortals.

He had no idea why the kid was going around with Smith now, but Smith had insisted. “This boy has one foot in my world. He’s my apprentice, and my assistant,” he’d said, so Luck had acquiesced and allowed him into the meeting.

He’d always known Smith wasn’t normal, but could he trust a hitman who took a kid to work with him? Although the question did cross his mind, he decided to just keep an eye on things for now.

After all, he’d hired Laz Smith *as an afterthought*.

The one the Gandors had really been after was the boozy old guy standing between Maria and Smith, ignoring the glares they were sending each other. People called him Alkins, but there was no telling whether that was his real name; Laz called him by the nickname “Alkie,” a slang term for an alcoholic.

He was somewhere between his late fifties and early sixties and so worn down from the liquor that he seemed older than that. Everyone called him an old man.

Still, Luck and his brothers had high opinions of him.

He was a bona fide hitman with skills that even Claire Stanfield acknowledged.

Ordinarily, he looked like a regular old drunk; it was impossible to believe he was a hitman. However, those who were familiar with his skills started to think his appearance was an act meant to throw people off.

As evidence to this point, while he was constantly tipsy, it didn’t matter how many bottles of strong liquor he emptied—he was never *completely drunk*.

“...’Scuse me, li’l lady. Gimme some hooch, wouldja? Liquor. I’ll take anything, long as it’s hard.”

“I’ll get you something right away.” Edith, who was helping out as a waitress today, was nervous around this particular crowd, but she performed her work smoothly. She was Roy Maddock’s girlfriend, and since she was helping him pay off his debt, the Gandors often sent waitressing jobs her way.

Today’s wages would be quite a bit higher than usual, and Edith could see why. All the assembled guests looked extremely sinister; at the very least, she was sure none of them were in a decent line of work. Even so, she conducted herself bravely, serving them as if they were any reputable customers.

There was something Edith hadn’t noticed yet: the fact that three of these guests had been deeply involved with the “war” she and Roy had gotten dragged into.

Maria, Smith, and Alkins.

This wasn’t the first time the Gandors and these hitmen had encountered one another. They’d once gone after the brothers’ lives as Runorata Family assassins. Hiring them was dangerous, but Luck felt that it would make them easier to control.

At the moment, the greatest threat they were facing was the Runorata Family. They were powerful all on their own, but that wasn’t the only cause for concern. That fellow Melvi, the immortal, was also unsettling. When the Runoratas saw that the hitmen they’d once hired were working for the Gandors—their former targets—they probably wouldn’t trust anybody who’d change employers so easily. That meant that even if Laz or Alkins did try to sell out the Gandors, the Runoratas wouldn’t necessarily accept. Luck had hired them partly as a check on the other family—

—but as a result, they’d picked up two completely unpredictable wild cards as well.

Said “wild cards” were sitting at the very back of the hall.

One was resting his metal prosthetic arm on the table, watching Luck and the others out of the corner of his eye. The other was languidly wagging an enormous wrench in front of a tower of cards he’d built himself.

Suddenly, the man with the wrench—Graham Specter—launched into a

speech. “Let me tell you a sad, sad story... Just now, I built a five-story tower out of cards, with utmost care...but what’s the right way to wreck it?! What am I supposed to do now?! Do I take it down from the top, one card at a time? Or should I knock it down all at once?! Knocking it down will be over quick, but that’s just demolition, not wrecking—ain’t it?!” Graham was trembling.

The Gandor men, who were hanging back and watching, frowned.

“Hey, Luck. What’s that kid yowling about?” Berga looked puzzled.

Putting a hand to his forehead, Luck answered in a low voice. “It’s better to just ignore him, Berga.”

Even as they were talking, Graham had continued his peculiar monologue. “I put it together, which means I should take it apart, which means there must be a proper way to do it. Holy moly... A long time ago, I remember my sister saying to me, ‘If you can’t put something together again, don’t break it,’ and whacking me with a hammer... Wrecking and construction are two sides of the same coin. Heads is tails, and tails is heads! That means if I can’t break it, I shouldn’t build it, and if I keep this up, my sister’s gonna deck me again; is that okay?! No, it is not!”

Graham had vanished into his own world, but there was another man who walked right in after him: Ladd Russo, the man with the metal left hand. “Just get rid of both sides of the coin, then.”

“What?! Is that even possible?!” Behind his thick bangs, Graham’s eyes widened.

Grinning, Ladd reached into his jacket and took out a box of matches. “If you set ‘em on fire, they won’t have heads, tails, or anything at all, yeah?”

“.....! That’s it! That’s the Ladd I know! While I was lost in the space between demolition and wrecking, you smashed up common sense and found a new answer! Are you trying to become a god?! I see... If the Tower of Babel burned down after a lightning strike, then this card tower is the first step toward godhood, which means setting it on fire has to be the right way to wreck it!”

Buzzing with delight, Graham took the matches from Ladd and began trying to strike one.

"Er, no fires inside, please." After shutting Graham down, Luck heaved a deep, deep sigh.

Ladd Russo and Graham Specter.

They'd just happened to be at the lodging house where Luck had found Laz and Alkins, but they'd overheard the conversation and wanted in on the action. Luck had hesitated, but since he'd seen what Ladd could do at Firo's casino, he'd decided to make him one of his hires.

That said, he'd also seen the man's utter lack of restraint, so the decision hadn't exactly given him much peace of mind.

The fellow in the blue coveralls had basically tagged along with Ladd, uninvited. However, Nicola, one of the Gandors' executives, had said, "...I'll vouch for his skill in a fight. If absolutely nothing else." That meant he couldn't be much different from Ladd, so for now, Luck had decided to include him.

As a result, the mood in the basement room was truly chaotic.

Taking another look at the assembly, Luck wanted to put his head in his hands. Thanks to Maria and Tick, he'd thought he was used to oddballs, but having this many in one place was quite a sight.

The *most normal-looking* member of the group was the boy who stood quietly behind Laz, and Keith was glaring at him.

Realizing what his brother's behavior meant, Luck explained in a low voice. "He's already involved with us. You remember the ice pick incident..."

"....."

That seemed to be enough of an explanation for Keith, but the look he turned on Luck said, *You're planning to drag him into this?*

Ladd had been watching their exchange. "Hey, why not?" he interjected. "We can handle having one kid around. Everybody dies if their number comes up—kids, dolls, and old geezers. Doesn't matter if we hear him out or not."

"....."

Keith gave him a cold glare. Ladd shrugged. "Whoa, that's a hell of a glare you've got there, pal. Maybe you're both mafia bosses, but my uncle's got

nothin' on you. Listen, chief. I just met that kid, and we haven't talked, but he ain't just any kid, see?"

Ladd glanced at the face of the boy who stood behind Laz.

The boy returned Ladd's look for a moment, but his eyes promptly went back to Luck.

Unfazed by the boy's reaction, Ladd offered his verdict. "He's got the eyes of someone who's died once. Who's prepared to kill and get killed. I dunno what life did to him to make him that way, but he may end up being a hundred times more useful than that confused gunman, if he's not careful," he said, chuckling.

Laz Smith slowly rose from his chair. "Well, well... You talk pretty big for a drifter who got picked up on a fluke."

"Hey, now. Don't hurt yourself showin' off for your apprentice and sworn brother here," Ladd taunted with open condescension.

The apprentice was the boy, and the "sworn brother" was probably Graham. Graham apparently looked up to both Ladd and Smith, but the two men couldn't have been a worse match for each other.

As Luck analyzed their relationships, he was trying to think of something that would shut the pair up, but—

—without a sound, the boy stepped forward to stand in the midst of the storm, and he calmly apologized to Ladd. "I'm sorry. My teacher's been rude to you." Then he turned back to Smith. "You should be careful, Teacher," he said in a low voice. "Your bloodlust is special. If you let it show openly in a place like this, you'll degrade the purity of your insanity."

Anyone who happened to overhear the boy's whisper would have wondered, *What the heck is he saying?* but the effect of his words was dramatic.

"...I see. You do have a point. No, I knew, I knew. I was just testing that boorish barbarian." Smith's eyes had been positively murderous, as if he might draw his guns at any moment—but the danger instantly vanished from his face, and he resumed his seat as though nothing had happened.

The boy took a nonchalant step back, returning to his former spot.

The deadpan exchange seemed to have taken Ladd off guard. He shrugged, muttering to himself. "Man, oh man. I can't tell which of you is older."

As if signaling that he didn't plan to waste any more time on Smith, Ladd turned to Luck. "And? You're gonna go over the job now, right? Who should I kill? If you want, I'll bust into the Runorata mansion right now and bring you back Bartolo's head."

It sounded like a joke, but Luck didn't assume it was. Whether or not it was actually possible, Ladd Russo probably would bust into the Runorata mansion at the first opportunity.

It wasn't just reckless courage. If a man like this had survived this long, he had to have something special about him.

Was it just luck, or a rare talent for educated guesswork? Or was it the sort of strength Claire had, the type that stripped the recklessness out of reckless courage? At this point, he didn't know.

We really will need to handle him with care, Luck thought, growing only warier of the other man.

Even Keith, who was meeting Ladd for the first time, seemed to have picked up on how dangerous he was. Luck could tell he hadn't let his guard down this whole time.

That said, he knew this only because he and his brother had lived together for years. To the Gandor Family men, Keith was terrifying and always on high alert.

After giving Keith a small nod, Luck drew a deep breath and got down to business. "I see. In that case, to answer half of your question, Mr. Russo, we may indeed order you to take out Bartolo Runorata. Depending on the circumstances."

Ladd whistled.

The Gandor men who were watching from a distance had heard that as well, and most of them stiffened.

Rubbing out Bartolo Runorata would be ridiculously rash. Even if such a play happened to succeed, the consequence would be a bloody war that would end

in annihilation.

Wordlessly, Luck's subordinates exchanged looks. Hoping to reassure them, he went on. "Only in the very worst case, however. We do understand the scale of our organization, and we want to avoid choices that would needlessly cost the lives of our men."

"Oho. Meaning in that worst-case scenario, we'll be charging the Runoratas, ready to go down fighting?" Ladd teased.

Luck kept his face blank. "No. 'Going down fighting' is out of the question."

"?"

"If we do that, I intend to obliterate the Runoratas in the process," Luck continued coolly. "Picking a fight we plan to lose would be worse than any worst-case scenario. We don't even need to add it to our list of options."

"You think you can win?" Smith asked. "Don't tell me you think the Runorata Family is all men on Gustavo's level." Gustavo was the name of the Runorata executive who'd once hired him.

"What I'm saying is that we won't make our move until we know we can win. Mr. Smith, are you implying that even with you on our side, we have no hope of defeating the Runoratas?"

".....!"

"I spoke to each of you because I believed you would be able to fight them, in the event that we found ourselves in that worst-case scenario." Luck shrugged.

Smith tugged his hat down lower, shaking his head. "You've got a point. We may have no hope of winning. I admit it: I'm weak. Yes, humility is essential in this line of work. However, the fate we've been handed is to cling to that humility and go up against powerful enemies anyway."

Ladd drew his eyebrows together and mumbled under his breath. "I think the fella's gotten even dumber..."

Smith didn't seem to have heard him; his apprentice had praised him ("That's just like you, Teacher") and put him in high spirits. Granted, his apprentice's expression was stone-cold, and his voice was something very near a monotone,

but Smith hadn't really noticed.

"May I continue?" Luck cleared his throat, then resumed. "To be honest, we don't know who our enemy will be. A variety of outfits may be involved in the trouble we'll most likely be facing. Due to our position, we've already made enemies of the police and the Division of Investigation. We may also find ourselves in conflict with a terrorist by the name of Huey Laforet, or with other mafia syndicates."

Huey Laforet.

The moment that name came up, Ladd's smile twisted slightly.

However, only Keith, Alkins, and Smith's apprentice noticed. Luck missed it as he went on with his explanation.

"We'd like to employ you so that it won't matter which enemies we ultimately face. Now, I want to confirm something with you. Depending on how this shakes out, you may spend the whole time standing by, or we may end up in conflict with a major syndicate, in which case your lives will repeatedly be at risk. The job itself will be a bit of a gamble. Will you take it?"

"In other words, it's up to chance?" Ladd shrugged, laughing.

Luck neither confirmed nor denied this. He simply went on outlining the job. "We'll keep an eye on the situation and determine who our enemy is. When the time comes, no matter who that enemy proves to be, we want to know we can count on you to do your jobs. That is all I'm going to ask of you."

"No matter who the enemy is, huh?" Ladd's smile changed to one less pleasant. "*Does that include your pal Firo Prochainezo?*"

It was a mean-spirited question.

But Luck answered immediately and firmly. "Of course." There was no coldness in his eyes, though.

He wouldn't hesitate to cut down a childhood friend, someone who was practically a blood relative, for the sake of the family. At the same time, he was also sure Firo wouldn't side against them. The determination in his stoic answer had managed to strike a balance between trust for his friend and responsibility

toward his family.

“Ha, yeah, I like it! I’ve got a soft spot for dramatic declarations.” Chuckling, Ladd went on. “New York is a riot. I was bored outta my skull in the Russo Family, and they were several times bigger’n your outfit. Yeah, I’m gonna have a good time here. I can feel it.”

“Not too good of a time, Mr. Russo. Keep in mind that if you and Firo Prochainezo were in the same position, we’d prioritize our good relations with the Martillos and loyalty to a longtime friend.”

“Ha! Honest bastard, ain’tcha.” Lips curving, Ladd spoke to all three brothers. “If you’re gonna lay it out for me, there’s one thing I need to spell out for you, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“The ginger—Claire or Felix, or whatever his name is. He’s your pal, right?”

Just then—

—the mood in the room underwent a palpable change.

Although no one said anything, when they heard the names “Claire” and “Felix,” everyone except Smith’s apprentice visualized a certain hitman.

Vino, the hired killer.

The name was so big that all freelance killers—including Alkins, Smith, and Maria—knew it.

He was a hitman, and yet he managed to be famous, still alive, free of criminal charges, and unharmed by any attempts at revenge all at the same time. That alone was enough to make him a singular figure in the underworld.

“...Yes, well.” That was when Luck remembered something else.

When Ladd had been tearing up Firo’s casino, Melvi hadn’t been his only target. Once Claire’s disguise had come off, Ladd had shown a distinct hostility toward him, too.

So he is going to bring that up.

After all, his feelings toward Claire had been enough to make him throw part

of a demolished gaming table at him. To Luck, the hostility seemed to go beyond a general murderous instinct.

“Come to think of it, you did say he’d done something to you. Or rather, to you and a young lady of your acquaintance.”

“That don’t matter; it’s gonna end the same. I’m killing that ginger bastard first chance I get. Hell, even if I don’t get a chance. That’s one of my goals in life at the moment, see.”

“.....”

“Huh?” said Berga. “Hey, Luck, did something happen between this fella and Claire?”

Keith was still silent, but Berga was puzzled. They both looked at Luck.

Luck was wondering how to handle this. Claire was a good friend, and they’d all grown up together, but he wasn’t a member of the Gandor Family. He was a freelancer, like Ladd and Smith. In fact, he was currently working as Melvi’s bodyguard.

“I won’t ask you about your quarrel with him. He was a hitman as well. I know he’s earned grudges from many different quarters, and there’s no reason for us to shield him from them.” Glancing down slightly, Luck spoke firmly. “However, speaking as your employer, I don’t recommend trying to kill him.”

“What’s that, your token gesture of friendship?”

“Perish the thought. We can’t afford *to lose a fighter*.”

Luck’s calm reply held a clear implication: *You people can’t beat Claire*.

“I can beat him!” Maria retorted. “I swear I can do it now! What, is he fighting for the other guys now? Just say the word, and this time I’ll kill him right! I can cut him down no problem, ami—”

Luck shut her down sharply, without even sparing a glance. “Be quiet, Maria.”

“But...”



"No buts. If you recall the time you actually fought him, you'll remember he's not an opponent you can beat with sheer enthusiasm."

Maria started to argue with her employer again—

—but Ladd beat her to it. "Are you talking to me, too?"

Ladd's voice had taken on a dangerous edge, but Luck didn't back down. He spoke plainly, as the employer in this situation.

"I personally saw you fight him at the casino. It was only for a moment, but I seem to recall he was leading you around by the nose."

Confronted with this fact, Ladd ground his teeth. Then he smiled. "...Damn. You don't think much of me at all. Well, you're right that I didn't kill him at Firo's casino, so I guess I can't exactly argue. I don't care what you think, though: I'm gonna be the one to kill him."

Then he looked around at Maria, Smith, and Alkins and issued a declaration. "You people seem to have a bone to pick with the redhead, too. Get in my way, and I'll take you out first."

"Ha!" Berga interjected with a snort. "No way a thug like you could beat Claire!"

"Uh... It looks like the hulk over there don't know about me."

"Huh?" When he heard himself called a "hulk," Berga's smile vanished.

Ladd narrowed his eyes slightly, beginning to rise to his feet. Luck moved to intervene, but a moment later, Graham poked Ladd in the shoulder with his enormous wrench.

"Hang on, Ladd. Berga Gandor's not wrong about us bein' thugs. He only just met you, but he's already got your number. That means he just might know us pretty well... Meaning he's a fan...? Yeah, maybe Berga Gandor's a fan of ours!"

Graham's eyes were so wide it was as if he was seeing into the end of the world itself. Deflating, Ladd sat back down.

The moment for retaliation had passed. Confused, Berga checked with his brother.

“...Hey, Luck. You sure about these fellas?”

“At the very least, we have Nicola’s word regarding the skills of the one in the blue coveralls.”

When Graham heard that, he started yelling excitedly. “Nicola! Wow, the nostalgia... Let me tell you a nostalgic story! It’s been a while since he and I went toe to toe! One win to six losses. When I remember that magnificent time, my blood boils, my flesh dances, and my bones would probably dance, too, even without flesh on them—and that’s a pretty scary image to think about! If I saw a dancing skeleton, I might dislocate all its joints out of fear!”

“...Hey, Luck. You sure about these fellas?”

Berga asked the exact same question he’d asked a few seconds ago, but he looked even more dubious this time.

Luck heaved a deep sigh, then murmured half to himself, “Probably.” Then, he whispered to his brother in hopes of diverting his attention. “...And you, Berga. Don’t fight with Smith, all right?”

Luck had noticed that Smith was shooting glances loaded with mingled fear and anger at Berga. Considering the large scar on Berga’s face, this was probably to be expected.

However, Berga gave Smith a puzzled look. “Hmm? Who was that guy again?”

“...Never mind. I’ll explain it later.”

Reminded of just how complicated their current situation was, Luck nearly heaved another big sigh but hastily swallowed it down. He might be their employer now, but it wouldn’t be a good idea to show weakness in front of them.

Any one of them might easily sell him out on a whim, at any time. Every member of this group was that type of person.

About half an hour later...

Just after he’d explained what they’d do next and what they’d be paid, one of his subordinates came downstairs. “Scuse me, boss. You’ve got a visitor,” the man whispered in his ear.

Luck gave a small nod and issued an order. "All right. Say it's okay to come down."

After he'd watched the man go back upstairs to summon the new arrival, Luck addressed Ladd and the others. "I'm glad you'll get to meet before you go your separate ways today."

"Huh? Is this that last person you were talking about earlier?"

"Yes. I suppose a lot's been going on."

At that point, they heard quiet footsteps at the top of the stairs.

The ones watching those stairs were a motley crew: the Gandor men; Edith, who'd been waiting tables; the hitmen and the apprentice; the wrecker, who'd come along for the fun of it.

And the one who walked down them, the focus of all that attention, was—



Several days later Evening

This villa belonged to the Runorata Family.

Although the place was located in the suburbs, the property it sat on was vast, and calling it a modest palace would have been apt.

One corner of its extensive grounds was occupied by something that seemed rather out of place.

It was an enormous tent, the sort used in small circuses or for sideshows. It wasn't as brightly colored as an actual circus tent, but it was the size of a small house, and it clashed a bit with the modern mansion.

Inside the tent stood a young man and a boy.

The boy was Carzelio, Bartolo Runorata's grandson, and he was conversing innocently with the redhead next to him. That said, the content of that conversation was far from innocent...

"Huh! So the puddles of blood looked like wine, and that's why they called you Vino."

"Yeah. Boy, was I young and reckless. Or maybe just a worrywart. I had to

keep going until it was really clear that they were dead, or I wouldn't feel right. I guess my standards for hits were too high. I wanted perfection."

"Do hitmen make a lot of money?"

"Money? Well, let's see... I made quite a bit, but some of 'em didn't bring in much even when a job was potentially deadly. I bet the pay range is pretty big."

The redhead, who was speaking far too openly about the ins and outs of killing for money, was Felix Walken. Aka the former Claire Stanfield.

Oblivious to the Gandors' growing conclave of hitmen who had bones to pick with him, he was enjoying some downtime after work.

The boy who was talking with Claire may or may not have believed what he was hearing. However, he listened with rapt attention, and his eyes were shining.

"So what's this about? You want to be a hitman, Cazze?"

"No, I...I don't know what I want to be yet, so I'd like to hear about all sorts of jobs!"

"I see. That's a good mind-set. You should talk to a doctor next, to balance things out. I hear saving folks makes for a good career, too. And people like doctors."

"Yes, sir!"

The boy he'd called Cazze was in his early teens, and he wasn't infatuated with picaresque novels. From his guileless expression, he was just having fun hearing about worlds that were new to him. His eyes would have shone the same way even if Claire had been telling him about his experiences as a conductor or a member of the circus.

Cazze's eyes stayed bright when the conversation turned to life and death, and then to crime. It was fair to call this abnormal.

That said, as the one detailing the life of a hitman in a loud, clear voice—and providing rather slanted information on the subject—Claire was plenty abnormal himself.

When they came to a lull in the conversation, Claire asked Cazze a question.

"So are you taking Cookie with you on the day of the party?" He was observing something inside the tent.

"Yes! I think we'll pitch a tent in the plaza beside the hotel, and I'll have Charlie balance on a ball."

"Yeah, that trick was his specialty. This guy's name is Cookie, though, not Charlie."

"Charlie' sounds cooler."

"Cookie' is cuter."

Cazze and Claire looked at each other for a moment, their faces expressionless. Then they both burst into laughter.

"Let's compromise and make it 'Charlie Cookie.'"

"Sure. 'Charkie' for short."

The pair smiled as they talked it over.

A boy who was ingenuous yet practical, and a *complete* adult who'd stayed a kid at heart.

In a way, their mental ages might not have been too different, and the two of them seemed to have hit it off. Cheerfully, they called to the individual they were discussing.

"Okay, Charlie. See you again at dinnertime!"

"Yeah, I'm glad you're doing so well, Cookie."

They were speaking to—

—an enormous beast who was excitedly shredding a truck tire in the back of the tent. Cocking his head, he stuck his tongue out and roared happily.

Although that roar would have made anyone who didn't know him fear for their lives.



In the Runorata villa

“.....”

A few men flinched at the sound.

“Tch... It’s that monster...”

Breaking out in cold sweats, they resumed their poker game at the small table.

“I can’t believe young Master Carzelio tamed that thing...”

“Never mind that—when are we gonna off that Melvi kid?”

“The timing’s everything. That redhead bodyguard of his keeps a tighter watch than we figured.”

They were supporters of a female dealer by the name of Carlotta, and they hadn’t been happy when Melvi showed up out of nowhere and stole an important job from her.

Although technically, that was a notion they’d developed on their own. Carlotta herself didn’t seem to bear Melvi any ill will. She might have had a few personal feelings about the matter, but she never let them show.

However, they had tunnel vision when it came to anything involving her, and so they were overlooking her efforts to keep the matter from growing out of proportion. They were also ignoring the fact that Carlotta thought nothing of her self-proclaimed devotees. They weren’t even trying to see that one.

These men were plotting to eliminate Melvi, both socially and physically.

He had been using his spare time in very odd ways. They had proof that he’d visited the Gandor Family on his own, and that he was in contact with some “House of Dormentaire,” a family that shared his last name. They could have started ugly rumors about him based on this information—but they were looking for a more direct method.

In short, they were attempting to frame Melvi as a spy for some other syndicate and kill him outright.

“Rumor has it he’s keeping some dame hostage.”

“...A woman?”

“Yeah, it’s something I got out of the information broker. Cost me an arm and a leg, though.”

“...That intel might be useful. Which mansion’s she in?” This was important information, and the group’s leader leaned forward.

But the man who’d brought in the story shook his head. “She’s not in a mansion.”

“Huh?”

“It’s gonna be hard to get into...but it’ll make the cleanup easy.”



A certain place

“.....”

In a room, Ennis was thinking about whether there was anything she could do. It had been several days already, and she hadn't found an answer.

At present, her hands and feet weren't tied, and she was free to move around within her quarters. It seemed like a first-class hotel room; it even had its own toilet and bathing facilities. The difference was the large men just outside, guarding the door around the clock in shifts. She was still a prisoner.

Of course, the men weren't the real obstacle.

If she tried to escape, Melvi had said he'd kill someone who had nothing to do with this. In Ennis's mind, that brief remark had become a heavy shackle.

That said, she was causing Firo and the others a whole lot of trouble just by being a captive.

He said he'd sent people to Alveare as customers. I never even noticed...

Out of nowhere, Ennis remembered the young person she'd met at Alveare before she was kidnapped—the child with the peculiar scars. They had said their name was Rail and made a comment about how she “didn't look like Szilard.”

She doubted the child was a spy, though.

For one thing, a spy wouldn't actively strike up a conversation with her. Then there was that interaction with Christopher when he came in. Her guess was that they probably had something to do with the immortals, from another angle.

She should have given more thought to what that meant.

If she'd realized that some sort of immortality-related incident was brewing, she might not have ended up in this mess.

If I'd been more cautious...

Once again, she was forced to see her own weakness, but she still couldn't think of anything to do.

Well, she had thought of one thing. The trouble was that it would be hard to execute, for several reasons.

If that man is an immortal, then...I could use my hand...and...

Her eyes went to her right hand.

Memories of the time she'd first "eaten" someone surfaced in her mind, and cold sweat broke out on her back.

Could she do it again, scarred as she was from that other time?

Really, the more fundamental issue was whether it would be possible at all if she wasn't fully committed to the act. The man's self-confidence wasn't empty vanity.

When dealing with him, she felt as if she should be just as wary as she would have been with Szilard Quates, or maybe even warier.

While Ennis was thinking, there was a sudden knock at the door. Before she had time to respond, it opened.

"Well, that's a shame. You weren't getting dressed."

Melvi cracked a vulgar joke as he came in, but he didn't actually seem to view Ennis with lust. He was looking at her the way he would have looked at a tool or a lab animal.

"Now then, have you found your answer?"

The "answer" was her response to the question he'd asked her in the underground storeroom.

"I'll ask you again. It's an important question. Both for me, and for your future."

Melvi seemed wary of Ennis's physical abilities; as he spoke to her, he kept a fixed distance between them. "Well? Are you still the person you were before you ate him? Can you look me in the eye and say your personality—your 'soul,' so to speak—is the same?"

It was the exact question he'd asked her in the storehouse, word for word.

A few days ago, Ennis hadn't been able to give him a response, but—today,

she'd found an answer.

"At the time, I didn't know how to define *soul*. However, you could say that I was a different person before I absorbed that alchemist."

"Huh. Then you admit that the person you were before died?"

"Possibly. But I'm not the same person today as I was yesterday, either."

".....?" Melvi cocked his head, smiling faintly.

Ennis went on in a matter-of-fact way. "What changes people is knowledge, experience, and the consequences of what they've done. I also think souls and hearts are observed by others, not the people they belong to. If no one sees you, you might as well be dead. The world would remain just the same."

"What are you getting at?"

"When that alchemist became part of me, his knowledge gave me a connection to the world. But I gained a connection in the truest sense when I met all those people on the day Szilard died. When my world expanded."

"....."

Melvi was silent, and Ennis simply went on with her answer. "People change in the absence of others, yes—but I think that's because they know what it's like not to be alone. If I were to give my own definition of something as abstract as a soul, separate from the definition of life, I would say my soul was the innumerable threads connecting me to the world."

Ennis intentionally said "my soul," not "the human soul." She still couldn't see herself as fully human.

It wasn't clear whether Melvi had caught this distinction; he only waited for her to go on.

"What makes me myself are the people who acknowledge my existence. As I continue to meet them, I expect I'll keep evolving."

"That's...awfully convenient for you, that mind-set. Do you think you'll be forgiven because you aren't the person you were before you knew what morality was?"

"No. The results of what I did are already connected to the world. If someone who had ties to the alchemist I absorbed accuses me of being a murderer, I'll have no response to give them."

"....."

Melvi gazed at her, that thin smile still pasted on his face.

But Ennis doubted it was genuine. Was he intentionally holding that expression to hide his emotions? The expression was so void of humanity that she couldn't help but wonder.

"By that logic, then, you wouldn't care if someone accused Firo of being a murderer, correct? After all, he killed Szilard Quates."

"That case was justified self-defense."

"Ha! Justified, is it? He's in the damn mafia! You're planning to claim 'justice' for a man who's done the awful things he's done?"

Melvi's words were scornful, but—

—in the next moment, his smile faded.

"I have one correction to make." Ennis's eyes had been passive up until then, but now they shone with strength. "He isn't mafia. He's Camorra. Both groups have roots in Italy, but the syndicate he belongs to is affiliated with the Camorra, which began in Naples, not with the Sicilian Mafia."

"...You think a stupid semantic distinction—?"

"It's important to him. It's not stupid," Ennis told him bluntly. Then she rebutted what he'd said earlier. "And yes, he is a member of the Martillo Family. He's involved in illegal gambling, and he's aware that he's committing a crime. There's nothing 'just' about Firo's job. But that's a completely different matter from the incident with Szilard."

"It is, is it? Thinking long-term, wouldn't the world have been better off if Szilard had wiped out the whole gang?"

"...I owe so much to Firo, but it's true that he might not be a good person in the eyes of the world. I know he's always prepared to do what he must, but I also don't believe that resolution can serve as a pardon." Ennis gave her honest

opinion of Firo's work; even so, she rejected what Melvi had said. "But everything I know about Szilard Quates has convinced me that there was no one more depraved or more driven. If he were alive, the world itself might be a different place."

"I see, I see. If that's the appraisal of a homunculus he created himself, then Szilard Quates really may have been an appalling evildoer." The man who claimed he should have become that evildoer gave another deeply twisted smile. "And all his knowledge and experience is inside Firo now. There's no telling how it will affect him. Don't you think Szilard Quates's memories may take over and make him just as twisted?"

In response to Melvi's spiteful question, Ennis shook her head. "Unlike me, Firo is strong."

"...That's a lot of trust," Melvi said, as if it bored him. Cracking his neck, he turned to leave. "Well, it doesn't matter. I didn't come to talk to you. I had another job here, so I stopped by on my way."

"Please wait!" Ennis called after him. "I truly want to know... Who are you?"

It was the same question she'd asked in the underground storehouse, but this time, she got a different response.

"I did promise our conversations would be games of catch, didn't I? All right, I'll tell you one thing about myself." Stopping near the door, Melvi spoke without emotion. "My name is Melvi Dormentaire. However, I have no Dormentaire blood in my veins."

".....?"

"I'm *an imperfect homunculus created by the House of Dormentaire*. Just like you."

".....?!" Ennis's eyes widened in astonishment.

Melvi continued. "You see, the House of Dormentaire got its hands on a little liquor of immortality. Only enough for a handful of people, mind you. One mouthful went to a greedy woman. Another went to an injured individual the woman had made into her plaything. The last went to the head of a certain family of fallen aristocrats. He had no idea he'd be used as a guinea pig for two

hundred years, in the service of creating me.” Melvi smirked, stroking his face as he watched Ennis. “Just as you were born from Szilard Quates’s cells, I was born from the cells of a lowlife who’d curried favor with the House of Dormentaire.”

Tracing the contours of his own face with his fingers, Melvi smiled again.

“Apparently, Maiza took after his mother, and *Gretto looked exactly like their father did when he was young.*”

“You can’t...mean...”

“See you around, puppet. I’m going to become ‘human’ soon.”

Turning his back on the speechless Ennis, Melvi started out of the room.

“As the original plan intended...I’ll be reborn as Szilard Quates.”

Once he was outside, Melvi spoke to the man who’d been standing guard. “She hasn’t tried to escape, has she?” He’d switched back to his customary level of courtesy.

The man, one of the House of Dormentaire’s private soldiers, told him, “No, she’s behaving herself.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear it.” With a breezy smile, Melvi looked around at the view. “I thought she might put up a little resistance, but... Well, it is a first-class room with its own attached bathroom. Perhaps she’s satisfied with that.”

He was gazing out at a vast sky and the blue ocean. Except for the horizon line that ran between them, there was nothing else to see.

The House of Dormentaire’s large private vessel was floating on the Atlantic Ocean.

“It isn’t as if escaping from this ship would do her much good anyway.”

There wasn’t so much as the shadow of an island in sight, let alone the American continent.

Several other ships surrounded their vessel at a distance. From the scale of their shadows, they appeared to be just as large.

Melvi seemed to be enjoying himself as he continued. “She may be an

immortal...but I doubt she could calculate where she'd wash up, or how many days it would take." He gave a satisfied nod, then warned the guard. "Whatever you do, though, don't get careless."

He was still wearing that breezy smile, but his words were cruel.

"If she happens to take control of the pilothouse, the surrounding ships will sink this one."

Melvi left the guard behind and walked across the deck, gazing at the other ships.

He knew what those five vessels carried: the army of seaplanes that had issued a challenge to the city of New York a week ago. In addition, large flying boats were hidden inside the specially constructed ships. Each ship carried one flying boat and seven seaplanes.

It was enough firepower to launch a modest war, but the planes and the ships had different owners. The ships transporting the seaplanes belonged to the House of Dormentaire, while the aircraft belonged to Time, Huey Laforet's organization.

"Now then...I wonder how much of our actions Huey has anticipated already. He can't possibly consider the Dormentaires a simple collaborator, but..."

Melvi was affiliated with three different organizations: the House of Dormentaire, Time, and now the Runorata Family. He savored the illusion that he had them all twisted around his little finger—

—and although he knew it wasn't real, he let his mind succumb to the idea for a while, out there in the sea wind.

"Huey Laforet... I can't wait," Melvi murmured to himself. The high wasn't completely satisfying. "Once I'm Szilard Quates...my first pleasure will be selling you out."

He went on quietly—too quiet for anyone else to hear.

"After that...as my master desires, I'll kill that Elmer C. Albatross fellow. Whoever he is."

Chapter 20

They Can't Avoid Getting Involved

Several days later Evening Millionaires' Row

In the district of Manhattan known as Millionaires' Row...

The street was lined with mansions whose owners had managed to hang on to their wealth, even in the midst of the deep recession—but the voice issuing from one of those opulent homes couldn't have been more depressing.

"This is bad... We're doomed..." Jacuzzi Splot was crouched in a corner of the Genoard residence's great hall. Stress-induced gastritis had him hugging his stomach.

"Honestly, Jacuzzi! This is no time for moaning. We only have a couple of days left until the casino party."

Tears were streaming down the tattoo on Jacuzzi's face. "W-well, Nice, I mean... We've learned the rules of the casino games and stuff, but if we do anything weird, they'll shoot us dead on the spot..."

"We're not going to cheat, so we'll be fine. Besides, we don't have to go anywhere dangerous; we'll just stay near the room Mr. Firo's group is running. No one's gonna shoot us at the Martillos' tables, even if we do something odd."

"B-but...I've been thinking. They told us to pretend to be gamblers and energize the place, but...j-just hypothetically, say...what if we go all in on a bet to try to make Mr. Firo's tables exciting, and we actually win? The Martillo Family would take a loss because of us, right? And if they got mad and broke out the machine guns..."

"It's all right. This is the Martillos we're talking about, not the Russos."

Jacuzzi's own pessimistic vision had made him go pale, and Nice admonished him gently, but—

—they were interrupted by an apology from a guest who'd come to stand

behind them before either of them noticed. "My grandfather really did make a terrible nuisance of himself, didn't he?"

"Oh— No, I'm sorry! I shouldn't have..."

Ricardo Russo, current head of the Russo Family, went on as if she wasn't bothered at all. "No, what he did was really unforgivable."

"Oh, n-no, we're sorry; we really regret it." Jacuzzi answered Ricardo's polite apology with a hasty apology of his own. "We've got nothing against you, Ricardo. And I mean, you're even paying for our food..."

"You're letting me stay in this magnificent house. Of course I'd pay rent."

Ever since arriving at the Genoard mansion, Ricardo Russo had been purchasing groceries for Jacuzzi's entire group out of her own pocket, calling it a rent payment. Jacuzzi suspected the amount was far too much for rent, but Ricardo didn't seem to be having any trouble with it.

Ricardo must have understood that her grandfather was all washed up. When she left Chicago, she'd taken quite a lot of the family's private assets with her, including their jewels. Thanks to Sham's knowledge, she'd also known about jewels her grandfather had hidden outside the mansion in order to evade taxes, and she'd managed to take the whole bundle.

As a result, in spite of the recession, Ricardo was the mansion resident whose assets were the best fit for Millionaires' Row.

She didn't let it go to her head, though. She wasn't frightened of the delinquents, either. Ricardo stoically helped out with the chores, discussing the casino party as she worked.

While the delinquents would ordinarily have been sponging money off her, no one had tried to mess with her. Jacuzzi and Nice hadn't even had to intervene.

The reason was the man who was always with her, Christopher Shaldred. He was very difficult to approach.

Christopher didn't seem to care and spent much of his time cackling and teasing Jacuzzi. Even now, as Jacuzzi rolled around hugging his stomach, he was watching with amusement.

"Well, well. What a natural thing, getting a stomachache from anxiety. It's only been about a decade since they started doing research on chronic gastritis, you know. When do you think human stomachs first started to hurt as a sign of worry? They accrue unnecessary stress because they're human, and they get stomachaches because they're stressed."

Going on and on, Christopher ambled up to Jacuzzi. Leaning in close with his red eyes and sharp teeth, he made a suggestion. "What do you say? If you stopped being human, I bet you'd feel better, and your stomach would stop hurting. Just let Nature take its course; let your instincts guide you! Now then, as a living and nonhuman creature, what's the first thing you want to do?"

Christopher bared his fangs in a smile. Jacuzzi stared back, shaking like a leaf. "R...r-r...right now, I'd like to get out of here."

"Keh-heh-heh... Do you suppose you'll manage that?"

"Eep?!"

"It's the law of the jungle in the natural world. The weak get weeded ou—ow-ow-ow?"

Once Jacuzzi's teeth started chattering, Ricardo had sighed and pulled on Christopher's hair. "...Excuse my subordinate."

"Wow. I made my boss apologize. Sorry about that. My apologies."

Christopher cackled away without a hint of contrition. Ricardo began to apologize to Jacuzzi's group again, but—

—just then, the doorbell rang.

"Who could that be? D-don't tell me it's a Runorata Family hitman...", Jacuzzi said, frightened by his own paranoid delusion. However, the voices he heard immediately afterward made his anxiety evaporate instantly.

"Heeey, Jacuzzi! You there? If you're there, say something."

"Yes, and if you're not there, tell us you're not!"

The voices were incredibly ingenuous, but they didn't belong to children.

Nice went to the front door and opened it. The innocently smiling pair was

just the one she'd expected.

"Hey! Nice, it's been forever! How've you been? We've been doing pretty well, I think!"

"Yes, nothing's more important than health!"

When Jacuzzi heard them, the tension in his face finally relaxed. "Isaac, Miria!" He rose, his legs shaking, and hobbled to the entryway, away from Christopher. "That's great. We hadn't seen you in a while; I was wondering what had happened."

"Yeah, we were transporting cargo and doing all sorts of odd jobs. And then we got jumped by a bunch of weirdos! It was one heck of a time."

"Yes, Who and Isaac got punched!"

"What?!" Jacuzzi cried out, startled.

The pair filled him in about the incident that had happened a few days earlier, as if they were reminiscing fondly about the past.

"I tell you, if Ladd hadn't dropped in, there's no telling what would have happened to us."

"Huh? Ladd?" Jacuzzi was startled to hear that name from Isaac all of a sudden. And their story only got more confusing.

"What do you suppose those people were anyway? They tried to snatch us out of nowhere. They were using smoke, too; do you suppose they were those Eastern 'ninja' types?"

"What'll we do if they were monsters, Isaac?!"

"Monsters?! L-like the Rail Tracer...?"

"Eeeeeek, Isaac, I'm scaaared!"

In the overwhelming torrent of words, Jacuzzi picked up on one particular name and shrieked. "Th-the Rail Tracer?!"

As he shook, Nice thumped him on the shoulder. "Calm down, Jacuzzi. That's not the part we should be concerned about."

"Huh? Oh, r-right. It's okay. I mean, it's not okay, but it's okay, Nice."

Even as he got more and more confused, Jacuzzi thought, *Transporting cargo? I wonder what they were carrying.*

It was a job the Martillo Family had set them up with. Did that mean they'd been transporting something risky? Could that have been why they were attacked?

Jacuzzi didn't know the "cargo" had simply been supplies for the lodging house, and his imagination kept expanding his fears. "Th-that's not safe! You should quit that job..."

"Huh? You think so?"

"Yes, I do!"

He tried to seize the chance to shoo the pair out of harm's way, but—

"Then a job your group found for us wouldn't be dangerous, Jacuzzi?"

—Miria's innocent question reminded him that he was the one in crisis.

"Aaaaaah, that's right... I'm in trouble, too..." Jacuzzi clutched at his head, and Isaac and Miria continued to be no help at all.

"I don't really get it, but don't worry, Jacuzzi! Whenever those doubts creep in, you should start by stopping the worrying. They say if you *shinto mekki*, even fire's cool!"

"Yes, you'll be cool!"

"Um... What does that mean?" Jacuzzi asked.

Isaac told him, "Well, it's a proverb from the Far East... In Japan, the word for gilding is *mekki*. *Shinto* is your mind and your body. And, uh, there was other stuff, too, right, Miria?"

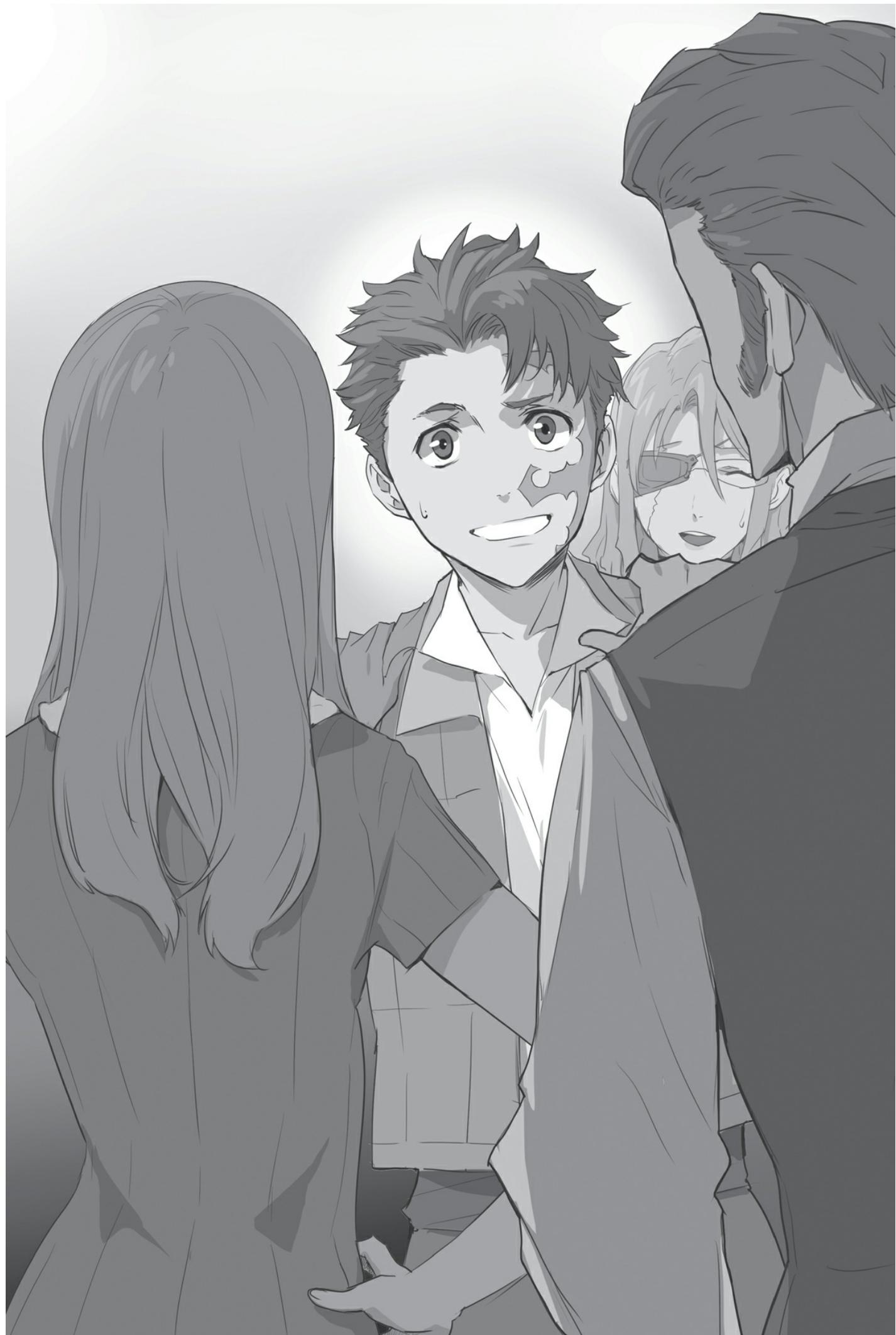
"Yes, there's Shinto the religion! And the *shinto* that means 'permeation'! And the *shinto* that means 'new sword'!"

Isaac and Miria rattled off all the meanings of the word *shinto* that they'd heard from Yaguruma and Ronny.

"I—I see..."

"That is to say—if you wrap yourself up in metal, then the gods permeate

your heart, and you are born anew with a Japanese sword in your hand! I bet you'd be incredible! To you, fire would feel cool and ice would burn! You'd be a samurai!"



“It’s Far Eastern magic!”

Apparently, they believed that objects were gilded by being painted with molten metal. From their enthusiasm, Isaac and Miria seemed ready to start smelting then and there.

Nice, who was listening in from the sidelines, was starting to get worried. Meanwhile, Jacuzzi found their enthusiasm contagious. “R-really...? Do you think I’d be a new me?”

“What are you talking about?! You’re already a samurai, Jacuzzi!”

“Huh? ...Oh!”

When he heard that, he remembered.

Several years ago, during the Flying Pussyfoot incident, he’d had a conversation along those lines with Isaac and Miria.

“But I don’t think I managed to get all that strong...”

“Jacuzzi, that’s not...” Nice tried to tell Jacuzzi that wasn’t true, but Isaac jumped in first.

“Samurai shouldn’t sweat the small stuff! You can just get stronger starting now!”

“Yes, it’s a growth spurt! ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’! Spring-Heeled Jack’s spring-heeled jump!”

“So we’ll *mekki* your *shinto* for you!”

“Isaac! That’s amazing!” Miria applauded, and Isaac nodded emphatically.

“Th-thank you so much,” Jacuzzi told them, as tears of joy beaded in his eyes.

Nice sighed, but she also smiled.

Still grinning, Isaac and Miria got the conversation back on track.

“So, Jacuzzi. What kind of danger are you in now, and why?”

“What sort of job are you doing?”

As Jacuzzi began to tell them about his situation, his face blanched again.

Christopher, who'd been watching the conversation from a little ways away, turned to Ricardo. "Those two are a riot, don't you think?"

"I don't base my opinions of people on how much they entertain me," she answered coldly. Then, under her breath, she added, "It's just..."

"They look like they're having fun, and you're jealous?"

"....." Ricardo said nothing; apparently, he'd hit the nail on the head.

"You know what you should do, Ricardo? You should make lots of friends. You can have nice, friendly chats with kids your age, fight about dumb little things, try to kill each other, all those childhood experiences." As he said the last, unsavory item on the list, Christopher seemed to realize something and looked around restlessly. "Speaking of, where did Rail go?"

"She stepped out." Ricardo told him, sounding uninterested. "She's been doing a little investigating ever since she saw the papers a few days back."



Somewhere in Little Italy Firo's apartment Firo lived in an old stone apartment building with Ennis and Czes.

Right now, though, his place really wasn't inhabitable.

It had been attacked a few days ago. The apartment had suddenly exploded, and Ennis had been snatched by Melvi's underlings. The door and furnishings had been blasted apart, and there were traces of small fires here and there. Even the sturdy kitchen table had been blown to splinters. It was a miracle the stone outer walls hadn't been destroyed.

Someone was standing amid the wreckage, surveying the horrendous damage, but it wasn't Firo.

It was Czeslaw Meyer, who'd actually been caught in the explosion.

The police had come to investigate, but Victor seemed to have pulled some strings, because they hadn't questioned Czes and Firo about the situation in detail.

Czes was currently staying in Maiza's apartment; however, he'd taken advantage of odd moments to come back here several times.

Naturally, he stayed on guard in case of a second attack—but he hadn't heard that anyone connected to the Martillos had been accosted since the day Ennis had been taken.

The fact that the Martillo executive Ronny Schiutto had dropped completely out of sight was concerning, but he was probably working on the problem covertly somewhere else. Czes didn't know that Ronny had disappeared, so he wasn't particularly concerned.

Taking in the ruined apartment from the empty doorway, he contemplated the situation.

During his visits here, he'd encountered the residents of the other apartments a few times, but none of them had really asked him anything.

It was likely that the landlord and the residents of this building were all under the Martillo Family's control.

He didn't know whether the Martillos had always anticipated that something like this might happen and had issued instructions in advance, or whether they'd paid out enough money after the incident to silence any complaints, or whether the residents simply felt obligated to them.

However, the deafening silence hurt Czes more than the alternative.

Dammit, what have I done? I'm really indebted to Firo and Ennis now.

As a matter of fact, although both Firo and Ennis worried about Czes, they weren't the sort of people who'd take him to task. Czes knew this, but it only worsened the feeling that he was leaning on their kindness, and he hated himself for it.

All those thoughts had put him in a bad mood.

Before coming to this city, he wouldn't have cared about something so minor. He'd made his childish appearance work for him, taken advantage of the kindness of others, and used them.

The Flying Pussyfoot incident had brought about a dramatic change in him.

That said, it wasn't a change that Czes himself had clearly processed.

He'd stepped inside and was looking around at the broken furniture. After

half a minute or so, he heard a young, innocent voice from the entrance. “Hellooooo... Oh.”

“?”

When Czes turned around, a kid was standing there. A familiar-looking kid. “You visited Firo’s casino with Ronny the other day, didn’t you?” Czes asked.

“Huh? Have we met?”

“No... I just saw you from a distance.”

Czes had only caught a glimpse of Ronny’s group when he’d spotted Ennis tailing them, but the distinctive scars on this kid’s face had left a deep impression on him.

The child looked like a boy at first glance, but that didn’t feel quite right to Czes, so he decided to just ask. “Say, are you a boy or a girl?”

“Does it matter? Oh, I’m Rail, by the way. Nice to meet you or whatever.” Playing dumb, the kid walked right into Firo’s apartment. “Rail” looked to be about the same age as Czes. “So do you live here? Or are you a nosy neighbor?”

“...I’m basically Firo’s kid brother.”

“I see. Too bad about your place. I’m just a rubbernecker.” Rail gave him a smile without much genuine sympathy, then seemed to notice something. “Hang on... If you live with Firo and Ennis, does that make you Czeslaw Meyer?”

Hearing his own name put Czes on high alert. Keeping up his “innocent little boy” act, he carefully sussed out the visitor. “Huh? H-how come you know my name?”

The bluff was a waste of time, though.

“Ha-ha! You don’t have to fake like you’re a kid. You’re actually a couple centuries old, right? You’re basically an old man.”

“.....”

They were sure about that. So they’re involved with the immortals?

In that case, there was no need to pretend. Czes heaved a deep sigh, then narrowed his eyes. “And? Who sent you to me? One of Szilard’s surviving

followers?"

"Oh, I'm just me. I'm not affiliated with anybody anymore. If I had to say, I'm with Chris... Er, Christopher."

"Christopher... Oh, the one who's going to be helping Firo on that job..."

"Yep. So you Martillos can think of me as an ally, if you want."

Rail never had said where they were from, so Czes kept his guard firmly in place. "Who told you about me?"

"...Aw, that doesn't matter. Oh, don't worry. I'm not immortal, and there's no way I could eat you."

"You expect me to just believe you?"

"Look, it's true. Just don't kill me to test it out, all right? You'll get the fuzz after ya." Rail snickered, then fluttered a hand at Czes, who still looked dubious. "Seriously, relax. I just saw in the papers that there'd been an explosion, and I got curious about what kind of bomb they'd used." Rail took a good look around the room, humming. "So the walls are still standing, and only the furniture got blown up. One of my bombs might have taken this whole place out."

"...Your bombs?" Czes frowned. That was an alarming phrase.

Rail took a small egg-shaped object out of a jacket pocket and rolled it between their fingers. "Yeah," they said cheerfully. "Wanna see what it does to you?"

"A bomb...? That thing?"

"Um, yes? Let's see... Here, this is what's in it."

Rail took something else out of their pocket. It was a tiny bottle about as big as the tip of their little finger, and it was filled with a pale-pink powder. "No smoking around this stuff. If I lit it now, it'd bring the entire building down." Rail waggled the little bottle back and forth with their fingertips—then paused and cocked their head.

A sharp change had come over Czes's face.

"That's...gunpowder?"

“? Yes?”

“Did you make it yourself?” Czes spoke in the tones of an adult, his expression hard.

A little intimidated, Rail answered seriously. “No. Unfortunately, I didn’t make the stuff. I bought it in Hollywood, but I hear somebody originally stole it off a train, while it was being shipped.” Nice had explained the situation, but Rail didn’t mention any names—perhaps due to some sort of indebtedness or loyalty to Jacuzzi’s group. “It’s in a whole different league from the regular explosives on the market. I dunno what it’s called, though.” They shrugged.

Czes lowered his eyes. “...Ice Pop.”

“Huh?”

“Strawberry Ice Pop. That’s what it’s called.”

Patented in 1924, ice pops were frozen treats on a stick, which Japan would later know and love as “ice candy.”

Rail finally frowned. “What...are you talking about?”

“How much do you know about me?”

“Well, um... You’re an immortal who looks like a kid. You’re a member of the group from the *Advena Avis*, and you live with another immortal named Firo and a homunculus named Ennis...and that’s about it.”

“I see. Only the superficial details, then.” Czes heaved a deep sigh. Tilting his head back, he gazed at the ceiling. “I was just a child during the voyage on the *Advena Avis*, but I’m also an alchemist who’s lived more than two centuries. I’m nowhere near the level of my father or Begg, but I’ve still picked up a few tricks.”

“.....”

“That stuff doesn’t just explode. It emits a unique flash of light as well, doesn’t it?”

“How do you know that?” Rail had half guessed already, but they asked to make sure.

Czes gave a self-deprecating smile. “My specialty is explosives, you see.”

Gazing at the pale-pink powder in Rail’s hand, the immortal who looked like a child spoke as if reminiscing about how young he’d been, just a handful of years earlier.

“I’m the one who made that stuff.”



The next day Fred’s clinic In front of the clinic Fred ran...

Components from the truck Graham had dismantled were still lying around by the gate, where Fred’s assistant Who was talking with another man.

“It’s a shame you’re quitting today.”

The second man—Lebreau—was carrying a big bag with his spare clothes and other possessions in it. He shook his head. “I’m sorry to leave you shorthanded on almost no notice.”

“Don’t worry about that. Your old man’s sick, right? Hurry on back to him.”

Lebreau had gotten word that his father down in Florida had collapsed, and he had to head back to take over the family business. As a result, he was leaving the clinic quite abruptly.

Who hadn’t known this guy very long, but the way he was quitting out of nowhere was a bit sad. He didn’t let it show, though, and saw Lebreau off with a smile. “Well, we did just get attacked by those nutcases. I couldn’t tell you what they were after, but it might be good to steer clear of this place for a while anyway.”

“Will you be all right, Who?”

“Not like I have anywhere else to go. Besides, that stuff used to happen around me all the time, back in the day when I was running around with Ladd.” Who shook his head glumly at the memory.

“Ladd...? Oh, he’s the fellow who saved us the other day, isn’t he? I would have liked to thank him properly.”

“Nah, I’ll tell him for you. It’s better not to get involved with that guy if you can help it.” Who glanced away, then changed the subject. “Don’t worry about

the job, by the way. Dr. Fred's back now, and those two new hires are hard workers."

"But I'm told they'll be taking three days off as well, starting tomorrow."

"Yeah... They said they have to help a friend out with his job or something. Well, the lodging house has enough supplies to tide it over until they're back, so it's no problem."

After finishing up the conversation, Lebreau said a polite farewell, then left the clinic behind him.

"....."

At first, he walked in silence. Once he'd turned the corner, he couldn't take it anymore and burst out laughing.

"Ha-ha! ...'My father has collapsed'?"

I'm impressed I managed to deliver that shameless bullshit with a straight face.

How had he appeared as he played the part of the devoted son? As he imagined it, Lebreau couldn't stop grinning.

Should I take over my father's business? Bringing witch hunts back into fashion would be entertaining in its own way, but I'll save that for another time.

Still, that pair, Isaac and Miria...

If they're taking three days off starting tomorrow, could they be attending "the event"?

Either way, this is bound to be interesting.

As the man chuckled, his eyes narrowed in a smile behind his heavy bangs, and he let his thoughts go to the future "current."

I tell you, this is better than I'd imagined.

This is what makes life fun. It's incredible.

I'm so glad I became an immortal.

I've managed to get Czes, Huey, and Maiza onto the stage quite neatly, too.

Not only that, but that lunatic smile junkie's not here. It's all so perfect!

Looking up at the night sky, Lebreau gave thanks to fate.

He didn't believe in God, but he wasn't an atheist, either.

If a god exists, that's fine. If it doesn't, that's fine, too. Whether things I can't see exist or not, it's all the same to me. That was his opinion on the matter, at least for now.

I like it. The Dormentaires, the Runoratas, Huey, and the Martillo Family are all tangled together nicely.

The ones I'll need to be wary of are Victor and Beriam. After all, they could upend the whole thing.

Although I imagine I'd see something entertaining in that case as well.

Now then, maybe I'll goad Upham a bit, too.

All sorts of thoughts ran through Lebreau's mind.

He wasn't running calculations and trying to control all the currents; he'd simply sown "seeds" in various places.

There was no telling how they would affect the three-day *casino party at Ra's Lance*, starting the next day. He didn't know whether they'd sprout at all.

He just wanted to see it—people being toyed with by fate.

He wanted to see innocent boys and girls and his favorite "players" in the many moments of life—laughing, crying, raging, despairing, and even the brief moment they believed in hope.

There was nothing else inside him.

Lebreau Fermet Viralesque.

He did technically have objectives and wishes, but he didn't have a shred of ambition. That was the one big difference between him and Huey Laforet.

Both men had dramatic plans that dragged in all sorts of people, and they would accept the results of those plans no matter what. But despite those superficial similarities, their natures were fundamentally different.

For the sake of his objective, Huey wanted to know everything.

For the sake of pleasure, Lebreau wanted *to watch* everything.

Huey had a great will, while Lebreau drowned in formless hedonism.

To Huey, people were no more than test subjects. To Lebreau, they were his lovable players.

And while Huey had no malice for those in his experiments, Lebreau held great malice for those in his plays.

Granted, for the people who got dragged into all this, each was as much of a nuisance as the other.

What was going to happen in New York City, which had caught the eye of these troublesome forces?

Not even the two at the heart of it all could predict what lay ahead.

And so the first die was cast.

Chapter 21

It's Not Like Nothing's Gonna Happen

One day in February In front of Ra's Lance

It really did look like a spear that pierced the sky.

On the coast of New York, not far from Manhattan.

Surrounded by several commercial establishments, the building towered proudly.

In two different senses of the word, the high-rise was cutting-edge. The farther up you went, the more the building tapered, and even among the skyscrapers of Manhattan, its design was avant-garde.

This structure, which had an even finer point than the Empire State Building, was an integrated commercial facility that included a hotel.

At present, tensions inside were high.

A few of the people involved knew why:

The building—which had been nicknamed “Ra’s Lance,” as in the spear of the Egyptian sun god—was the venue for an illegal casino party to which the local wealthy citizens had been invited.

Of course, the conscientiously law-abiding and those who had no interest in gambling weren’t participating. But they also weren’t foolish enough to report it to the police.

The invitations for this party had been issued by the Runorata Family, one of the East’s leading mafia syndicates. On top of that, many other outfits would be running rooms there. They couldn’t risk sticking their noses in and having somebody put the curse on them, so most of the wealthy kept their mouths shut.

There were quite a few people who seemed like the type to snitch—but the Runorata Family had somehow sussed out those with such a sense of justice

and avoided sending them invitations.

The tension around the building wouldn't dissipate in a day.

The casino party was being held for three days running.

The initial plan had been to hold the party only on the day of the building's grand opening. Maybe the number of participants had grown, or maybe the under-the-table negotiations with the police had succeeded, because the window had suddenly expanded to three days.

It was fine to attend for only a single day, of course, and several syndicates that were wary of police interference or a trap had refused to participate for all three. However, about half the syndicates had chosen to run rooms for the duration of the event.

The Martillo Family and the Gandor Family were in the second category.

The Martillos in particular had no reason to back down from the fight Melvi had picked with them.

A variety of other syndicates had chosen to accept the Runoratas' invitation, for reasons of their own—but gangsters and high-society types weren't the only ones attending.

Near evening, when it was almost time for the gambling dens to open...

...those who had been dragged into the “current” and those who'd created currents themselves began to gather around Ra's Lance, each with their own intentions.

The enormous spear thrust into the sky.

Everyone there seemed to believe they would be the one to pick up that weapon and impale their prey.



In the parking lot behind Ra's Lance

“The sharp yet dull blade pierced heaven's very eardrum, eviscerating the clouds... The gods are screaming! ‘Let us censure this raging appetite! Applaud it! Cheer it!’ Desires took the place of the gods, and the gods were returned to immaculate chaos!”

“.....”

“Thus men testified: ‘Men are men! Therefore, we cannot allow heaven to exist,’ quoth they, in choked screams! Come, let us climb! Scale the stairways that lead to this heavenly hell—Gwuff!”

“Shut up.”

The whiskered man in the hat—the Poet—had been yelling his unsettling nonsense, until the toes of a beautiful woman in a green dress—Sickle—slammed into the side of his head.

“Why can’t you just say ‘That’s a weird building’?”

“Gnrrrrgh... Frankness appears to be a virtue at first blush, but it is no more than deception in the guise of purity. It is casting a contemptuous glance at the world! They who do not doubt the world scream with their so-proclaimed ‘ingenuous’ hearts: ‘The world is as we see it! There’s no cause for doubt! Let us give thanks to ourselves, for having been blessed with a tepid year’s luck!’ Then they wield their power openly, with no suspicions whatsoever, striving to compel others to accept that world! Yes! Just as you are— Nwughruff!”

The Poet toppled over, screaming as he went, and Sickle slammed a heel into his back. “Maybe you should have some doubts for your own brain.”

The parking lot of Ra’s Lance was filled with the mafia’s luxury cars.

In one area of the lot, there was a growing group of very odd individuals. They were the members of Lamia, a subunit of Larva, one of Huey’s handpicked organizations.

When they heard the Poet and Sickle’s conversation, the ones who’d previously been silent began to put their two cents in.

“Um, i-is it okay for us to be somewhere this obvious?”

The speaker was Frank, an enormous young child over six feet tall. He’d been badly hurt during the Chicago incident, but he was back in action by now. He looked around, murmuring uneasily, “D-do you think Rail will be here, too?”

Although he was talking to himself, an Asian man—Chi—overheard. “I hear Rail’s with Christopher. That’s all that matters.”

"I see. Then I won't w-worry," Frank said, sounding rather relieved.

A girl who was all bundled up and wore a stocking cap pulled down over her eyes hung her head; she seemed lonely. "...Do you think Christopher's ever coming back to us?"

"No idea. Either way, Master Huey says it's fine to leave him alone, so it's not a problem," said a woman with a beautiful design tattooed on her face.

All sorts of others had joined the gathering: a man in a swallowtail coat, a muscular bespectacled fellow who was naked to the waist, and an individual in a skull mask whose gender and age were unclear.

Since there was a circus tent pitched in the nearby plaza, the passersby decided they were part of the troupe and went on their way without giving them much thought.

That said, the members of Lamia didn't know what that circus tent was actually for.



Inside the tent

A huge tent had been pitched beside Ra's Lance.

There was nothing special inside it. It was just a large, quiet space.

That space was populated by a few scattered shadows.

Two small figures stood side by side near the center of the tent: Bartolo Runorata's grandson, Cazze, and Senator Beriam's daughter, Mary.

"What are you going to use the tent for?" Mary asked, perplexed.

Cazze gave her a sunny smile. "It's a vacation house for my friend!"

"?"

"Eh-heh-heh! Just wait till you meet Charlie! He'll knock your socks off, Mary!"

Two men stood a little distance from the children, watching their conversation.

Their faces were identical, and they wore matching goggles on their heads.

These were Gabriel and Juliano, twins who were acting as Cazze's bodyguards on Bartolo's orders. Normally, they were part of Bartolo's personal security unit, and they worked with the other members to guard their boss's family in shifts. However, for the past month or so, Bartolo had assigned them exclusively to Cazze.

"Now then, when was Charlie due to arrive, I?" Gabriel asked.

"He'll get here sometime tonight, Me," Juliano told him.

Gabriel was a gentleman, while Juliano was more coarse in manner. They were close, though, and they referred to each other in a peculiar way, as "I" and "Me."

The two never hesitated to risk their lives for Bartolo or Cazze, but they had their concerns about this particular job. As they talked, they were scanning their surroundings with extra caution in their eyes.

"Why do you suppose Senator Beriam's daughter is here again today, I?"

"No clue. She's probably not here to game at the casino. Maybe the boss and Beriam struck some kind of deal, Me?"

"If this was by Mr. Bartolo's design, there's no need to ask about it."

"Yeah. No need to doubt it, either."

The two narrowed their eyes and nodded. Then they exchanged a brief glance.

"What will we do if Mr. Beriam proves to be plotting something, I?"

"Is that a suggestion to cut an ear off the little lady and send it to him, Me?"

"Perish the thought. She's young Master Cazze's friend. We'd never do something that would grieve him."

"Yeah, that's true. The young master would be crushed."

Looking away, they laughed.

"Which means we'll just have to dispose of Mr. Beriam directly."

"Yeah. Better to keep it simple, Me."

These two may have been guards, but they were also the Runorata Family's brilliant "hunters." As they fulfilled their duty of protecting Cazze, deep down, they couldn't wait.

They just couldn't wait for Bartolo or Cazze to sic them on a target.

And so the hunting dogs kept on waiting, ever so quietly.



The parking lot

"If you don't mind my asking, Sickle, where are Adele and Leeza?" asked the woman with the tattooed face.

Sickle gave her a dour look. "Why are you being so deferential? Knock it off. That crazy poet is another story, but there's nothing about me that's superior to you people."

She wasn't being modest; she was just saying what she thought. However, while Sickle had a hot temper, she was also a born leader and capable of taking the initiative. Many of the members of Lamia looked up to her.

Regarding the missing members, she said, "Adele is with Larva, guarding Tim, as usual. Leeza says she's looking for somebody."

"She is? Who?"

"Some guy who sold out the Lemures, way back when."



On the coast

"...Lotta birds flying around today," Spike muttered.

He was in the backseat of a moving car, and he could hear the birds' cries through the window.

Since he was blind, Sonia looked up at the sky for him from the next seat over. "Ohhh, you're right, Teacher. I've never seen that kind before, and there are lots and lots of them."

A multitude of nonnative birds were wheeling overhead. They hadn't formed a flock, though; individual birds were flying off on their own here and there

through the city. It was almost as if they were searching for something.

"I see, I see. Imagine shootin' 'em all down, then. Visualization counts as experience, too."

Spike gave her an ominous-sounding assignment, but Sonia didn't seem to think anything of it. "Okaaay."

In the driver's seat, Pamela frowned. "...You'd better not be encouraging her to imagine shooting living creatures so she'll be comfortable shooting humans," she said warily.

Spike grinned. "Well, who knows? She might have to shoot a person one of these days. After all, the target's gonna depend on the circumstances. If you don't want to be a murderer, take it to Mr. Beriam, not me."

"....." Pamela fell silent.

From the passenger seat, Lana spoke up. "Listen, I just thought of something."

"Whatever it is, you don't have to tell me. I'm pretty sure it'll be worthless."

"You know how they say birds are attracted to shiny things?"

"Okay, I think I get where you're going with this, so that's enough." Still driving, Pamela tried to shut the conversation down, but Lana went on anyway.

"So if we trained birds to collect jewels and things that got dropped on the street, I bet we could make a killing!"

"Yes, in a country populated entirely by millionaires careless enough to drop jewels and apathetic people who didn't pick them up, that might work."

"We could send them into the casino, and they might pick up chips for us."

"They'd really get shot dead then, and that would be that." Dealing with Lana was exhausting, but it was better than having a conversation with Spike. That's why she'd been going along with her companions' overly simplistic, off-the-cuff remarks, but then Spike broke in.

"Still, now you want to attend the casino party? What brought this on?"

"...Nothing in particular. I hit the jackpot at a casino once, a long time ago. I just wanted to test my luck. It's been a while."

She hadn't told Spike she used to cheat at casinos.

She couldn't say that she wanted money to fund their escape from Beriam, so she'd dodged the question with a plausible excuse, but—

"Excuse me?! What's this about a jackpot?! Pamela, have you been making money behind our backs?!"

"....." Hit with this accusation from an unexpected quarter, Pamela started trying to think up ways to cover Lana's mouth without pulling over.

"Well, I dunno what's going through your head, but don't have too much fun in there. There are gonna be loads of other syndicates around besides the Runoratas...and a ton of folks who aren't fans of Mr. Beriam. If that crowd finds out you're the cleaning ladies at his place, what do you think will happen to you?" Spike smirked, but Sonia turned to him.

"It's okay, Teacher."

"Huh?"

"If anything happens, Nader's sure to save us."

For a moment, Spike stared blankly back at her innocent declaration. Then he remembered the way the Nader he knew had died, and he burst out laughing.

"Haw-ha-ha-ha! That's rich! So your boyfriend Nader's a hero, and he's gonna mow down a building full of mafiosi!"

"Sure he is." Sonia nodded, still smiling.

Spike laughed even harder. "Hee-hee, hee-hee-ha-ha-ha! That's really somethin'! He's nothing like the guy I know."

After he'd laughed for a while, he got to thinking. *Eh, that Nader would never have put himself at this much risk to begin with.*

...Actually, no, he might have shown up. He had a knack for finding tough guys and sucking up to them.

Well, if a third-rate crook like him turned up here, I bet he wouldn't last the night anyway.



A restaurant on the third floor of Ra's Lance

"Um... Why are you being so careful to hide your face?" Eve Genoard asked.

Nader answered confidently. "So that people see as little of it as possible, naturally."

He was currently on standby with Eve in a restaurant inside Ra's Lance, before heading down to the casino party as a guest.

Benjamin and the other servants hadn't approved of her going anywhere alone with a strange gambler. However, Eve's determination to bring her brother back home seemed to have affected them, and now here she was.

The restaurant was a fairly high-class place, but even after Nader had taken his seat, he kept his hat pulled down low and his thick muffler on.

"Of your face?"

"That's right. The gambling's already underway. First-rate gamblers catch your habits and tells from all sorts of places, then use them against you. Everything from the expression on your face to the movements of your eyes, from how your lips tremble to the number of nose hairs you've got. People who know I'm your proxy may be here, at this very moment, to steal my tells."

Nader gave a random excuse, deflecting her question, but Eve seemed to believe him completely. She nodded energetically as she apologized. "Of course you're right! I'm so sorry. I didn't know..."

"Oh, don't worry about it. It's fine. These things are common sense for gamblers, but I know they look silly to folks like you." Nader shook his head shamelessly. On the inside, though, he was bursting with fear and unease that Hilton might find him. As he listened to himself successfully hide that anxiety and fluently lie to Eve, he realized he truly might have an aptitude for conning people, and he started to feel guilty.

To cover up his guilt about misrepresenting himself, Nader spoke to Eve impassively. "This is going to go for three days, so I'll spend today sizing up the place. Let's find out if your brother is here."

"Right!" Eve responded firmly. Then she turned her attention to Nader again.

“...Mr. Nader?”

“What?”

“Thank you so much for agreeing to my request. I know it was selfish of me to ask.”

“...It’s a formal contract. You don’t owe me thanks.”

Nader took one look at the innocent girl’s eyes, then averted his own. He felt unworthy.

What kind of fella puts such a sweet, earnest girl like her through all that trouble?

This Dallas bastard must be a scumbag and a half.

That was when Sonia’s face rose in his mind.

Oh, damn... Guess I can’t talk, huh?

Hadn’t he also left her and gone around lying and cheating and doing whatever he wanted?

Did he have the right to call anybody else a scumbag after all that?

Nader decided to suspend his prejudice against Dallas, at least until he actually met him.

...We might actually have a lot in common.



Ra’s Lance The second-floor lobby

While Nader was hiding his face—

—one man was letting his emotions show while hiding the rest of himself.

“Dammit... There’s no mistake. It’s them, all right!”

The man was watching a certain group, his eyes filled with hate—and terror.

He’d disguised himself with false whiskers he’d bought at a general store and a pair of costume glasses. He’d also pulled his hat down low on his head so that his face was completely obscured.

Hiding behind a pillar in the lobby, the man—Dallas Genoard—ground his

teeth.

He was keeping an eye on the three men who stood at the foot of the stairs that descended into the lobby. The Gandor brothers.

He'd once killed some of their men, and then he'd shot up the bosses themselves.

They'd retaliated, and Dallas had spent several years perpetually drowning on the bed of the Hudson River.

Even after he was freed, he hadn't repented of his dissipated lifestyle. The one thing he had learned was to give the Gandor Family a wide berth.

Since this casino party was being hosted by the Runorata Family, he'd never dreamed that the Gandors would put in an appearance.

What the hell?! I heard they were fighting the Runoratas!

For Dallas, this casino party had been a way to get some money fast, and that was it.

The Runorata Family had killed his father and older brother, and the idea of their party had made his little sister furious. On the other hand, Dallas didn't hold his relatives' deaths against them. His father and brother had considered him incompetent and shut him out, and he was happy somebody had bumped them off.

That was why he'd walked right into the Runoratas' casino party. He'd even considered marching up to them and trying to get money out of them: *I'll act like that business with my father and brother never happened, so... You get me, right?*

He'd drunk a liquor of immortality, incomplete as it was, so knives and guns couldn't kill him now. That trait had made him a little bolder toward the Runoratas.

...But the Gandors were another story.

To Dallas, they were far more troublesome.

Remembering the cold water at the bottom of the river, and the sensation of his lungs filling up, Dallas broke out in a cold, clammy sweat.

Thing is...chances like this don't come around every day.

He'd spent the last couple of weeks raising money through various unsavory methods. As far as he was concerned, it was too late to just give up.

After all, his pride as a thug didn't give him the option of tucking his tail between his legs and running from the Gandors.

So after Dallas had spotted them in the parking lot, he'd made tracks for a general store to buy the beard and glasses for his disguise, and here he was.

They'll never know it's me.

Oddly enough, his disguise was identical to the one a certain redhead fellow preferred to use—but at the moment, Dallas had no way of knowing that.



“Now, then... It's about time we started to set up.”

At the foot of the lobby stairs, Luck Gandor checked his watch.

“.....”

“All right, all right, all right, let's go wipe 'em out!”

The oldest brother was silent, while the middle brother was shouting about violence again. Luck found their unchanging natures reassuring. He let his eyes go from them to his subordinates.

“Say, if I see anybody weird, can I cut them? It's okay, right, amigo?”

“No.”

“Aww.”

“Especially not today. Don't draw your swords under any circumstances unless I give the signal.”

Maria was the only one of the hitmen who was with them now. All the hired killers' faces were far too memorable, so having the whole group together could easily have handicapped them. Ladd and the others were scattered around the hotel's perimeter to give them more freedom. In an emergency, they were supposed to assemble at Ra's Lance.

Not that they'll do what we want in any case, Luck thought.

Maria grumbled. "Tch! You really are stingy, amigo."

"There's no help for thaaat. This is a paaarty; there are all sorts of people here. If you start fighting, lots of them will get maaad at us." Tick Jefferson, the Gandors' torture expert, reproached her. Several pairs of scissors were secured to his belt with special fasteners, although he couldn't bring them out right now.

"Mgh... Fine, amigo. If you say so, I'll behave, Tick."

"Wow! Thanks, Maria." Maria's reluctant consent elicited a childlike smile from the young man.

Watching the two of them, Luck gave a small sigh.

After a certain incident two years ago, Maria usually listened to anything Tick told her. Tick was pretty messed up in his own right, but since he did function as part of a chain of command, he was significantly easier to deal with than Maria and the others. They'd brought him to the party for several reasons, one of which was to help keep Maria in line.

Luck had considered a variety of situations, and he was prepared to accept the results no matter what they might be. But personally, he hoped none of those situations would actually happen.

Granted, even he was dimly aware that this hope would be short-lived.



A port warehouse near Ra's Lance

"Listen up, you idiots. There's no way nothing's gonna happen. Make that your base assumption here."

A temporary branch of the Division of Investigation had been situated inside a warehouse.

Victor was the assistant director of a department that fielded incidents involving the immortals. As the person in charge of this site, he was briefing the row of men in front of him.

"If nothing happens here, that's a worst-case scenario. It'll mean there's

something going on that we missed.”

Thwacking the corkboard with his pointer, Victor glanced at the pictures and documents pinned to it. “If nothing else, remember the House of Dormentaire. Whatever you do, do *not* take your eyes off those people.”

One of the papers on the board held a drawing of the Dormentaire crest, which featured an hourglass.

“We picked up on this crew just the other day. They’ve been lying low. If they’ve suddenly surfaced, that means *their plans are far enough along that they can afford to.*”

“But, Assistant Director,” one of his subordinates said, “haven’t the higher-ups forbidden any investigation regarding their ship?”

“Yeah. Regarding the ship.”

“No, but an investigation into the House of Dormentaire itself...”

“Once they’re off the ship, who could tell Dormentaires apart from passing gangsters? I sure can’t. And if I can’t, there’s no way in hell you people can. Ain’t that right?”

Their boss’s suddenly very tenuous line of logic started raising a few eyebrows, but—

—Bill, the one who’d been working for Victor the longest, interjected evenly. “Uh... What the assistant director is trying to say is that he’ll take all responsibility for it, so fake like you’re investigating the mafia and watch that lot instead.”

“Don’t just say it, Bill! I’ve got an image to maintain!”

“Mm... I don’t believe you have any image to maintain, sir.”

Victor ground his teeth. “...You may be right about that. We’ve been playing catch-up all this time, and then we let Agent Edward Noah get worked over. At this point, we’re the dregs of the dregs.”

Admonishing himself, Victor turned to his men again.

“Which is why we’re gonna haul ourselves up out of this swamp. If they’re

convinced they're so above it all, we'll grab their ankles and drag every last one of 'em down into the mud. Then we'll see if they can call themselves winners. For us, there's nowhere to go but up.

"Let's go teach 'em that in the eyes of the law, there's no difference between the residents of heaven and hell."



The roof of a hotel near Ra's Lance

On the very top of a comparatively new hotel, just across the street from Ra's Lance, two women were gazing out at the reddening sky.

One was still a girl. The other was a young woman of about twenty.

The girl—Leeza—spoke crossly. "Honestly! Why do I have to patrol with you, Chané?"

Chané, who strongly resembled the girl, lowered her eyes in consternation. "....." She looked up again, at Leeza's back.

A little sister.

How could this happen so suddenly...?

After she'd reunited with her father, he'd introduced this girl to her as her little sister.

The family resemblance was clearly visible. However, Chané hadn't had any time to prepare herself emotionally before the introduction, and she hadn't been given any real explanation. She couldn't help but feel bewildered.

The prospect of having relatives besides her father had almost never crossed her mind.

Come to think of it, the woman who threw chakrams at Mist Wall was named Leeza, too, wasn't she? she remembered vaguely. It was about all she could do.

That said, the other Leeza's voice had been completely different, so she didn't think anything more of it.

It was likely that Chané had been given hints that this girl existed, but Huey had been such a priority to her that she had discarded the information as

unnecessary.

As a result, actually meeting her had left Chané with no idea how to act toward this “little sister.”

On top of that, apparently Leeza had known about her for quite a while already.

“How is that redhead fellow of yours? Is he well?” the girl had asked at their first meeting, catching Chané off guard.

Seeing her blush a little, Leeza had puffed out her cheeks. “Lucky you, Chané. You always get your way,” she’d said, sounding bored.

Why is she avoiding my eyes? Did I do something to make her hate me?

Chané didn’t know about her sister’s complicated situation, so she ruminated on the idea, sure that this must be her fault.

She seemed to have decided that this and the mission Huey had set for her were different matters, so she didn’t get disturbed enough for it to get in the way of her work. She wasn’t satisfied with that state of affairs, though.

The moment her heart was the slightest bit unsettled, she was no longer a perfect pawn that could fulfill her father’s expectations. She’d always been fine with her status, and she couldn’t stand to lose even a little of her edge.

...At least until four years ago.

I have to go back to that time.

After all, Father’s returned.

Unless I become who I was as well, my life will be meaningless.

As she was thinking these things, Leeza turned back. “Listen.”

“.....?”

“The other day, a man named Firo Prochainezo came to meet with Father. Remember?”

“.....”

Chané nodded.

A little while after her father had come back, a man named Firo Prochainezo had visited his hideout. Her father had summoned him, apparently, and they'd discussed something in private.

Chané knew the man, very slightly. He was a childhood friend of Claire Stanfield's; his name was constantly coming up in the old stories Claire told her, and she ran into him in town every so often. When trouble had broken out at Mist Wall in 1933, Firo had been there, too. She couldn't recall spending much time with him, and Claire only dropped in to say hello to the guy when he got the time.

It had seemed a little odd for him to come to visit her father. She didn't know what his relationship with her father was, but Huey hadn't seen him as an enemy in any way... At least that was the conclusion Chané had come to. She didn't know Firo was the one who'd gouged out Huey's eye, and Leeza didn't bother to tell her.

"I wonder what they talked about."

"....."

Chané shook her head to show she didn't know, either.

As a matter of fact, when the pair had finished their discussion and emerged from the other room, there hadn't been any signs of conflict. The bitterness on Firo's face had never left, but when he saw Chané, he'd sighed and said, "Tell Cla—Felix hi from me," before he left. Huey was in high spirits, and neither of his daughters suspected any sort of problem.

The relationship wasn't a hostile one. In that case, Chané decided, everything was fine.

Her father had probably laid the groundwork for some sort of scheme, but that happened all the time. It was nothing for her to worry about. Why would her little sister be concerned about this so long after the fact?

As Chané wondered, Leeza asked her a question. "Chané... Just hypothetically, if that redhead fought with Father...whose side would you take?"

".....!"



It was the sort of question she really didn't want to hear, and her tension showed on her face.

She'd remembered something.

In 1933, a member of Lamia—the other Leeza—had asked her a similar question during the Mist Wall incident.

Up until just a moment ago, she'd thought they only shared a name, but could they be connected somehow? She couldn't see a little girl like her up on the roof of a building throwing chakrams, though.

"So you really can't answer?"

"....."

The question was a weak point for Chané. When she'd heard it at Mist Wall, Claire had been there with her, and he'd answered it.

"What's the problem? Just carry out that order and choose me."

"If he tells her to kill me, she can just keep trying to kill me. I'll keep defending, and we can romance each other while we're doing that. Hey, that sounds a bit like true love."

Even now, she could remember it clearly—how very Claire that answer had been and how much it had reassured her.

Either way, it was something she preferred not to think about when she was by herself.

The matter she'd been mulling over in the shower, just before she'd reunited with her father, came back to her.

If that actually happened, what should she do?

If such a problem really arose—she'd probably side with her father. She'd try to bury her knife in Claire.

She was able to summon that resolve, even through her reluctance, because she believed in Claire.

His strength was superhuman, and she trusted him to dodge all her attacks completely.

At the same time, she wondered, *Is that really all right?*

Wasn't she just relieved because she knew he wouldn't die?

What if her father's orders were to poison Claire's drink?

He'd probably accept anything she gave him and drink it down without suspecting a thing.

Or would he figure it out from the look on her face?

It's no use. If I'm thinking like this, I'm...I'm already...!

Everything about her previous self was being erased—and it felt as if her new self was the very one eroding it.

The sensation that she was losing herself swept over her and left her a little dizzy.

Even now, if either Huey or Claire had been here, her heart might not have wavered. She might have been able to open up to them about everything—but neither of them was present now.

For the next three days, Claire would be at Ra's Lance with a man named Melvi. Her father was working on his “primary objective” at a location a little ways from here.

That meant the only one who could bring her back to center was herself.

Remember.

Remember who you were back then.

The one who was always Father's blade.

Remember the sensation of slicing through human flesh.

Remember the moment you ran your knife between their ribs.

Remember the instant you took a life.

The times you erased your opponents from the earth.

Remember condemning Father's enemies.

Remember, remember, remember—

“Chané, what’s the matter?”

“.....!”

At the sound of Leeza’s voice, Chané came to herself with a jolt.

“.....”

Should she write out an answer? Just as she was considering using her knife to scratch words into the nearby floor, Chané froze.

A noticeable change had come over Leeza.

“.....?”

As Chané was wondering what had happened, Leeza murmured to herself, “... Found him.”

“?”

“That guy... *Here...?!*”

Immediately afterward—when Chané heard the name Leeza uttered—a wind seemed to blow through her. All the hesitation left her face, and her eyes could have belonged to an automaton. On the wall beside Leeza, she scratched out the following words: *Let me kill him.*



“? What’s the matter, Mr. Nader?” Eve asked.

Nader was thinking hard. “Hmm? Oh, uh... No, it’s nothing, sorry.” Stealing glances at the window, he seemed puzzled. “There’s a bird out there. See it?”

“Oh, yes. ...You don’t often see that species around here.”

The bird they were looking at had perched on a tall streetlight.

It was staring right at them, and Nader felt an odd chill. “I, uh...I can’t shake the feeling that it’s glaring at me. Like it wants to...kill me or something...”



“I figured this place would have more, y’know, murder in the air.”

In the port near Manhattan Island, which had a good view of Ra’s Lance, Ladd was wandering down a road that ran beside the river. He sounded bored. “It’s

just a li'l bit of a letdown. Goddammit.”

Who was looking around nervously. “Hey, I’m sensin’ plenty of murder in the air. The only people we’ve passed for the last few minutes have been twitchy-looking gangsters.”

“That don’t count. I was thinking of something more like...like standing in an intersection with guys on every corner slingin’ lead at all the others.”

“I would say the murder is no longer just in the air at that point.”

Who had been cleaning up at the clinic when Ladd had half kidnapped him. “I’m bored,” he’d said. “Tell me about the crew in New York.” Fred had also been inconveniently considerate—“All of today’s exams are over, and you two did just meet up again. Go spend some time with your friend”—and so Who had reluctantly found himself taking a stroll through the port by Ra’s Lance.

“It’s about time to meet up with Kid Graham. Once I do that, you’re free to go, Who. The other hitmen should be loitering around here somewhere.”

“What did you do with Lua?”

“She’s in Ra’s Lance. In the restaurant or a café, probably.”

“...! Hey, hold up, isn’t that the most dangerous place to have her?!” After Who said it, he remembered the things Ladd had done in the past and sighed. “Oh, that’s right. You were always the type. You even took Lua along on the train robbery.” Then he asked another question. “Listen, fella, what are you planning to do with her after this?”

“Do with her? Same thing I’ve always done. We’ll just love each other, that’s all. I’m not thinking of anything else.”

That answer was Ladd all over.

However, Who followed up with a question that was a bit more personal.

Generally, he’d assumed he didn’t need to pry into this particular topic. That said, what he was sensing in the air was so ugly that he felt he might never get another chance. *“Like the time with Leila?”*

“.....”

Ladd's only response was silence.

Leila was a mutual childhood friend of theirs. She'd also been Ladd's girl, several years before he met Lua.

And now, she was dead.

Back when they were still basically kids, she and Ladd had eloped—and she'd ended up losing her life.

“.....”

“.....”

Unable to take the silence, Who sighed again. *He's still not gonna answer, huh?*

He was about to say *Sorry, forget I asked*, when Ladd spoke up.

“I was thinking. Back then, I thought too much. There was a stupid kid who didn't know the difference between loving somebody and idolizing her. That's all it was.”

“You mean when you eloped?”

“I'll tell you one thing, though: I'm not the one who killed Leila.”

“...I see.”

That was all the answer Who got, but he nodded as if he was satisfied.

He didn't say, *That's a relief*. He also didn't question Ladd.

Ladd hadn't forgotten about Leila. He hadn't written off the past the three of them had shared as if it had never been, and that was enough for Who. “I won't ask any more questions, then.”

“...’Preciate it.”

“Enough with the thanks. You're creeping me out,” he replied.

Ladd shrugged. He was walking in front of Who, so Who couldn't tell what expression he was wearing just then.

And he didn't need to.

That personality might have been the reason Who had managed to survive all

these years with Ladd.

"So was there anything else you wanted to know about the big fish in town?" Who asked, changing the subject.

"Nah, I basically get it." When Ladd turned around, his usual feral smile was back on his face. "Besides, other than my employers, I really only need to remember two of 'em today."

"Two?"

"Yeah, the Martillo Family and the Runorata Family." Giving the names of two syndicates of completely different sizes, Ladd seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself. "I sure hope this turns into one hell of a fight."

"...Why, exactly?" Who already knew why, but he asked anyway.

He got the exact answer he was expecting.

"The bigger the ruckus, the more fellas I'll be able to slaughter in the confusion, see?"

Then Ladd murmured to himself in a voice too low for Who to pick up.

"After that...there's the question of how a guy goes about killing immortals..."



And so they arrived.

A fleet of luxury cars pulled up boldly, stopping right in front of the main entrance to Ra's Lance.

The men who stepped out of them belonged to the Runorata Family. They were all wearing expensive suits. Don Bartolo Runorata was nowhere to be seen, but each man carried himself with uncommon dignity. Just the sight of them standing in a row was massively intimidating.

"...Now then, shall we enjoy this gamble?"

The speaker was one of the youngest men in the group: Melvi Dormentaire.

As the syndicate's main dealer, he took the lead, and the organized force stepped into the hotel.

The moment the Runorata Family entered the lobby, as if on cue, all the other

mafiosi went dead silent. Those who belonged to small outfits scurried out of the way, while those whose organizations were powerful enough to rival the Runoratas watched them like raptors. They were sizing them up carefully, weighing whether they were “prey” or “enemies.”

However, there were a few anomalies among the mobsters.

Even though their force was smaller than any other group there, the members of the Gandor Family stood in front of the Runorata group and blocked their way.

Most of their people were underground, setting up their room; only the three bosses, Maria, and Tick were in the lobby. Even so, despite being outnumbered several times over, none of them seemed intimidated by the Runoratas.

“...Well, well. Thank you for your hospitality the other day.”

“No, I’m sorry we weren’t able to give you a better welcome.” As Luck returned Melvi’s polite greeting, his face was expressionless.

The redhead standing behind Melvi gave the Gandors an easygoing wave. “Hey, you three. You look rarin’ to go.”

“Aaaah! Vino— Mrglmmphmmph.”

As Maria began to scream the name of the legendary hitman, Tick clapped both his hands over her mouth. She kicked and struggled, but Luck ignored her and replied coolly. “Of course we are. After all, when all the gambling is said and done, there may be fewer syndicates than there were before.”

Melvi interjected with a smile. “Don’t worry. We aren’t hunting you this time.” He maintained the gentlemanly facade, ignoring his own attempt to eat Luck the other day.

“A hunt, is it? I don’t know which organization you’re after, but it would be wiser not to assume the hunt will be one-sided.”

“No, no. Mafia syndicates are always preying on one another,” Melvi replied sardonically.

As Luck watched him, he was increasingly certain that the man wasn’t a member of the Runorata Family. No made man would carry himself with such

contempt for their entire trade.

Melvi's behavior wasn't self-deprecation. He was sneering at people he considered different from himself.

"You're the same as the Martillos. Just pray that your turn as our quarry won't be for a while."

"What the hell was that, you dirty sonuva—?" Veins bulging, Berga took a step toward Melvi.

An eruption was imminent.

All the mafiosi in the lobby saw a bloodbath in the immediate future—that, or a one-sided massacre of the Gandor Family by the Runoratas—and the tension was thick enough to taste.

But then—

—a voice spoke from behind the Runorata group, tangling those threads of tension into an even more complicated knot. "Forget it, Berga. Don't waste a punch on that guy."

"Huh?"

At the sound of a familiar voice, Berga stopped moving, and all the mafiosi turned to look at the speaker.

He was with a group that had come in after the Runoratas. There were about ten of them, a relatively awkward number to travel with but small compared with the Runorata delegation.

The young man at the front of that group pushed up the brim of his hat slightly. "I've got plenty I'd like to say to you, but I'll stick to making one correction." He gave Melvi an intrepid smile. "We're not mafia. We're Camorra."

"Well, look who's here. Welcome, Firo Prochainezo."

It was Firo and the Martillo Family entourage. Being from an outfit as small as the Gandor Family, they were a somewhat confusing presence; the surrounding mafiosi wondered what syndicate they were even from.

But without any information, they knew one thing for sure: Neither the Gandor Family nor this group of self-proclaimed Camorra was the least bit cowed by the Runoratas.

“You seem quite confident.”

“You shouldn’t be gambling at all if you’re not confident, wouldn’t you say?” Firo shrugged. His voice held none of the fury he’d shown when Ennis was kidnapped.

He’s oddly calm.

Melvi didn’t like this cool, casual Firo.

He can’t have given up on Ennis, can he?

This was his first guess, because it’s what he would have done in Firo’s shoes.

When Firo spoke again, though, he still had that assertive smile on his face. “I’m lookin’ forward to our gamble.”

“...Are you really? You can’t actually think you’ll win.”

“It’s not a gamble if there’s no chance of winning, right?”

“Yes, but fools never do.”

Threads of tension raced through the crowd, with Melvi and Firo as their focus.

Even people who knew nothing about the situation could tell from a glance at those two—one of them was destined to lose everything in the next few days.

The room froze again, and the three syndicates—Martillos, Runoratas, and Gandors—did not seem likely to back down anytime soon.

Then that atmosphere was instantly shattered.

“Hi there, Firo! Thank you so much for coming!”

A child’s voice, innocent but intelligent, echoed in the lobby.

Bartolo Runorata’s grandson Carzelio had come down the red-carpeted stairs.

“You remembered my name. I’m honored,” Firo said politely.

Cazze’s eyes were shining. “I’ll show you around. This way, please!”

His words sent a quiet stir through the crowd.

“Hey, ain’t that Mr. Bartolo’s grandkid?”

“So those guys are a big enough deal to get a personal tour?”

“They said they were Camorra...”

“I know ‘em. That’s the Martillo Family.”

“That dinky little outfit? Ain’t they as small as the Gandors’?”

“What’s going on here?”

“I hear their capo Ronny is real bad news.”

As a hubbub of questions and rumors rose around them, Firo and his crew started after Cazze.

Randy, Pezzo, and Maiza were in the group, but they seemed to be following Firo’s lead. They made their exit quietly, without any unnecessary comments.

Even Maiza only glanced at Melvi. He didn’t say a word, even though the man had the same face as his little brother.

...Interesting. So he’s keeping his personal feelings out of this?

Melvi had picked up on the Martillos’ resolution to some degree, and he murmured to Firo as he walked past. “...We’ll settle this on day three.”

“All right, then. I’ll be looking forward to that.”

“Make the most of your last two days with your family,” Melvi sneered, trying to rile him up— —but Firo responded in a voice like a knife blade, one that held no emotion at all.

“You took this a little too far.”

That was all he said.

He didn’t mention any specific punishment or threat of death.

But that voice was all it took.

He’d spoken softly enough that no one else caught the words, but when Melvi heard them, his right hand shot out as if it were spring-loaded. Fear had suddenly exploded deep inside him, and his body had reacted before he could

think.

You're going to die.

Kill him before he kills you.

Melvi's instincts drove him to act on reflex.

The immortal's right hand shot out for Firo's head at an incredible speed.

Just before it got there, though...

...with the same unnatural speed, Firo's own right hand intercepted Melvi's.

“.....!”

After capturing Melvi's hand, Firo shook it lightly.

“Let's make it a good match.”

Practically speaking, the handshake was all the people around them saw, and the threads of tension began to unravel.

However—even after Firo and the others had gone, Melvi didn't move. He couldn't.

The Gandor brothers seemed to have realized this. As they headed downstairs, they were smiling thinly.

“.....”

Melvi didn't even spare a glance for them. His eyes were on the palm of his own hand.

A nasty sweat was beading on his skin, as if he'd just startled awake from a nightmare.

“I think you really pissed him off,” his guard Felix said from behind him.

“.....”

Melvi's face was blank, and Felix grinned. “He's a tough one to beat when he's serious. In any kind of contest.”

Half as if it were somebody else's problem, he gave his friend the greatest compliment he knew: “He even gives me a run for my money.”



Oblivious to the flying sparks that might soon burn down the city—more and more guests arrived at Ra's Lance.

The wealthy citizens who'd received invitations from the Runoratas.

The relatives of individuals with mafia connections.

Politicians who'd taken bribes.

As the crafty and powerful gathered, yet another group reached the casino party.

“Ohhh! Wow, Miria, just look at it! It really does look like a lance!”

“Yes, Gungnir! And Gáe Bulg! And Amenonuboko!”

Isaac, in a coat and tails, and Miria, who was wearing an evening gown, looked up at the tall building and offered their candid commentary.

“Mgh... Well, that's it. We're here. It would've been fine by me if we'd never gotten here, but...”

Jacuzzi followed them, dragging his feet. A crowd of his delinquent friends trailed behind him, making their usual racket.

“Hey, guess this is my castle, huh?!”

“What's with you? Did you finally lose your marbles?”

“Don't be stupid. I'm going to master the art of gambling here, and then the whole world will be mine.”

“I predict that 3,423 seconds from now, you'll be stripped to your birthday suit and crying.”

“Yo, Melody, knock it off.”

“And then 6,983 seconds later, they'll have taken your skin, too. You'll be dead.”

“What's gonna happen to me?!”

“Hya-haah!” “Hya-haaaw.”

“Uhhh...can we all...go in?”

“Technically, we're here at the Martillos' invitation, so yeah.”

“Once we’re in, we’ll be home free. Let’s scatter and pull in as many gamblers as we can from other areas.”

“Let me remind you that picking pockets and swindling are absolutely forbidden. You especially, Melody. Watch yourself.”

“I turned over a new leaf 839,200 seconds ago.”

“...That seems relatively recent...”

“I’m kidding. Please don’t get mad, Miz Nice.”

“Hya-haah.” “Hya-haw!”

“Hmm? Hey, where’s Rail?”

“Said she’s working solo ’cause she’d attract too much attention.”

“Donny and Jacuzzi stand out worse.”

“Maybe she really is self-conscious about those scars on her face...”

“Hmm. I can’t tell whether the conversations these kids have are natural or unnatural. I worry I might even fall into a trance. How about you, Ricardo?”

“Not really...”

“Let’s do an experiment: Try screaming ‘Hya-haah’ or something. It might change your outlook on life.”

“I doubt that would change my life, but it might end it.”

Christopher was bringing up the rear of the delinquents’ group. As he talked with Ricardo, he looked up. “Well, well! This really does feel like an enemy of Nature! The sky is the greatest natural phenomenon there is, and this building is trying to shatter it... Or perhaps waiting for lightning to strike.”

After expressing his unique opinion of Ra’s Lance, Christopher murmured to himself. He was wearing a vicious smile. “You know, it might be fun to be that lightning.”

Ricardo heard that disturbing comment without responding.

Sham’s knowledge was offering a warning—one step into this building was a step into hell.

Actually, it was a safe bet that the entire area was already the same as the building.

The schemes of the many syndicates were jumbled together in a veritable tornado.

They had arrived.

On that point alone, their group, Firo's group, and Melvi's group were all equals.

They'd probably end up betting their fates here.

Praying that the bet would at least turn out to be a beneficial one—Ricardo stepped into Ra's Lance with the rest of Jacuzzi's group, by choice.



And the vortex of destiny raged.

The whirlpools belonging to each individual tangled with the others in intricate ways, and no one could tell which way the currents flowed.

Their force could easily have washed Ra's Lance itself away.

However, the man who had created one of the largest currents in this incident— —Huey Laforet—

—didn't show up.

This event revolved around the immortals, and it was missing one major piece that would have shown its full shape.

But even so—

—in a city transformed into a gambling den, the ruthless dice of destiny were cast.

Chapter 22

Maybe It Will, Maybe It Won't

As it turned out, day one of the casino party ended quite peacefully.

The event had begun with a speech from the manager of Ra's Lance.

This was proof that the entire building was under the control of the Runoratas. However, since practically nobody had ever thought otherwise, that fact didn't really surprise anyone.

The party was scheduled to take place over three days.

On that first day, almost everyone focused on waiting and watching.

And the gambling wasn't the only thing they were watching.

What was the Runorata Family plotting? Would the police really leave this party alone until it ended?

And—was there some larger scheme at work here?

Even as they harbored various doubts, they gradually began to wager their chips.

If I win this modest bet, I'm sure nothing's gonna happen.

Quite a few people tried to reassure themselves with these superstitious hopes—and the dealers began to prey on their small wishes, creating a new current.

A current of money that would set more desires in motion.

Both the Runoratas and the Martillos had created those currents quite nicely, starting on the very first day.

Even in diplomatic terms, no one could have called the room the Martillos had been assigned an advantageous site. They'd effectively been exiled to a corner of the basement, but they knew how to attract customers to places like that.

After all, the gambling den Firo ran was in a similar location: a small territory, pushed away by its neighbors.

All the syndicates did fairly well promoting their casinos on the first day, and some who didn't know about the underlying situation began to think, *Is this actually a handout from the Runorata Family?*

That thought would definitely come back to bite them.

Meanwhile, those who were extremely wary of the Runoratas assumed that the real contest would begin on day two.

Everybody knew that the first day was a time for sizing up the situation.

There weren't many important figures in Ra's Lance yet, and not all that much money.

The actual showdown would start the following night.

That was what everybody thought, and they were proved correct as the day drew to a close.

However—

—fate did begin to make some major changes.

The action wasn't in the casinos.

Instead, many different fates began to stir late that night. So many, in fact, that one might wonder if that wasn't the reason they'd decided the event should last three days.

The one whose fate began to shift most dramatically was—ironically—the man who'd tried hardest to escape its torrent.

Nader Schasschule.



The first day, Nader had devoted himself to observation.

He hadn't placed any large bets, just keeping an eye on the flow of money in each of the rooms.

From what he'd seen, there were no disturbances in the casino's financial currents. Winners won, losers lost, and the house turned a decent profit. The

only currents were ordinary ones.

Nader had spent long years slipping into places like these as a grifter; for him, this wasn't a glittering society gala where chips flew back and forth. It was more like a rough sketch that hadn't been colored yet.

He and Eve had split up to look for Dallas, the man in the photograph he'd been shown, but he'd had no luck on that front yet. The guy might be in disguise, or maybe he just wasn't participating today.

Nader had seen no sign of Huey's organization, either. The day might end without incident, and all he would have seen was the setting.

There was one thing he'd noticed, though.

Several singularities were developing in the flow of money.

A strangely energetic couple was ignoring the current and currying major wins and losses, over and over again. They were part of it, but what concerned Nader most was the woman who was lying low and devoting herself to watching—just as he was—and somehow still winning.

She might make a good “in.”

Nader grinned, then started observing the woman. He continued placing small bets, sticking with the general flow so that no one would notice what he was up to. He let himself fade into the background and become just another face in the crowd of “extras” who didn't make waves while he quietly analyzed what it was about the woman that was off.

Ever since he first set foot in Ra's Lance, he'd been reclaiming his past self, little by little. It almost felt like a miracle, worked by the casino's magic.

...And the conclusion he reached was a terribly simple one: *There's no mistake.*

That woman is cheating.

Late at night The port “Hey there, dollface. You have a minute?”

At the sound of Nader's voice, the woman slowly turned around. “...What is

it?" Her eyes were dubious and wary.

After the first day's festivities were over and Nader had said his good-byes to Eve, he'd tailed the woman. From the way she kept switching between deserted streets and heavily trafficked areas, she was trying to see whether she was being shadowed. Once he realized this, Nader had circled around ahead of her before she spotted him—and finally made his move when she'd reached a deserted street.

"First, let me make one thing clear: I'm not involved with the mafia or the cops. I'm a proxy gambler who's been hired by someone with plenty of money to spare."

"And what does a gambler want with me?"

"Would you be interested in teaming up?"

"Excuse me?" The woman frowned.

"You've got skills," Nader went on. "I bet I'm the only one who's got your number."

".....!"

The woman seemed to realize where this was going. The doubt vanished from her eyes, while the wariness rose.

"If you're pulling a stunt like that in the middle of all those mafiosi, you've got real guts. And brains. You win right up until they're about to get suspicious, then switch to another room. It's possible only because the event is hosted by multiple syndicates."

"...I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Look, if you want to play dumb, you go right ahead."

The composed smile on Nader's face was fake. On the inside, he was worried that one wrong step might spell the end of everything, and there was a thin slick of sweat on his palms and back. And yet not the slightest trace of those feelings showed; Nader was definitely reclaiming his past as a con artist. "Just consider this a pickup of sorts. It's not blackmail or a threat. I think I could make it worth your while."

"Then let's say I still have no idea about whatever it is you claim to have noticed. What exactly are you after? Just money?"

"...Well, in a sense, but that's not all."

"?" The woman looked perplexed.

"Strictly speaking, I'm not after you. You've got an invitation in that handbag. What I want are the people who gave that to a smooth operator like yourself."

".....!"

"I don't know what type of outfit they are. I'm just a guy with a wealthy employer. I don't have ties to any organization, and after this party is over, I won't be involved with the person who hired me. However, I think someone sharp enough to employ an enchanting lady like you might have a pretty good opinion of me, too."

As a rule, it wasn't possible to get into the underground casino without an invitation from the Runoratas or from one of the organizations running a gambling den.

He'd seen a group down there whose clothes seemed to be wearing them. Some outfit had probably hired them on the cheap to boost the energy of the place. They'd seemed a little weird—particularly the teary-eyed kid with the face tattoo—but he'd decided he didn't need to worry about them.

This woman was different, though.

She was clearly a specialist in *casino breaking*.

If somebody like her had managed to get in, it meant either that she'd been employed by someone rich and naïve, the way he had, or that she had a major backer with an objective of their own.

He doubted there was anyone except himself who fit the first category, so he'd decided it had to be the second.

It might be a mafia syndicate, or it might be an ambitious businessman, but he didn't care who it was if he could get in with them.

He'd just do what he'd done in the past.

He had to sink his teeth in, build strength in their organization, and claw his way up until he had enough rank to let him fight Huey Laforet's outfit.

That was the only way he could save himself now.

Remembering again what this was all for, Nader drew a deep breath, then introduced himself. "My name is Nader Schasschule. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He took the risk of telling her his real name because there was one thing he had to make sure of here, while they were alone.

And—

"Nader...Schasschule?"

—when the woman heard his name, she gasped.

"!"

She'd obviously recognized it, and Nader's face fell. *Dammit! Lucky I gave my real name, just in case! Did I flag down the wrong person?!*

If she knew his name, she was probably one of Huey's people. She hadn't said anything when she saw his face, which meant she wasn't one of the Hiltons, but the odds that she was involved were now sky-high.

"...Forget you ever saw me, all right?"

"Huh?! Wait just a minute!"

The woman sounded confused, but Nader turned on his heel.

His plan was done.

Since his enemies already knew he was in New York, he couldn't afford to silence the woman and make the commotion bigger.

Sorry, Miss Eve, but if this is how things stand, I've got to withdraw.

The case in his left hand held the windfall he'd picked up at Firo's casino.

He'd gambled away almost none of it still, so it might be enough to fund his escape.

He'd pitched himself to the wrong person.

He'd lost this round.

That meant he should bow out gracefully.

If he got in deeper, he'd just keep up the losing streak.

These and many other excuses popped into his head, and he started putting together an escape plan.

But that was when Nader Schasschule's fate reached its biggest turning point.

In the next moment, he learned he hadn't blown his gamble, and he hadn't hit the jackpot, either.

He'd caught hold of something far beyond either of those things—and had tossed it onto a dangerous roulette wheel.

Nader heard the woman call after him, trying to stop him. "Wait, you're not
—"

"....."

As he started running, the words reached him.

"—*Sonia's childhood friend?!*"

"....."

...*What?*

".....?"

What did that woman just...?

The confusion had stopped him in his tracks.

Sonia...

Sonia...?

".....—?!"

It took a moment before the shock ran through his brain—and he whipped back around as if he'd been stung. "You just... What did you say, just now?"

"...I knew it. No wonder the name sounded familiar."

"Hey... Is Sonia...?"

Instantly, his excuses for running all went out the window.

Nader started toward the woman, planning to learn everything he could from her— —but a second woman's voice spoke behind him, cutting him off.

"Found you, traitor."

"?!" Panicked, he turned around, but no one was there.

He knew he'd heard a woman's voice, but all he saw was the empty alley.

The casino breaker seemed to have heard it, too; she was looking around.

"What is it...? Who are you?!"

Traitor.

The voice had definitely said that word.

No...

An awful feeling welled up deep inside him, sending cold sweat trickling down his cheeks. "Is that...Hilton?" he choked out, while the voice replied cheerfully.

...And her answer filled Nader with despair.

"My, you knew. That's impressive. I'm 'Leeza' right now. It's a pleasure."

"....."

Trembling from head to toe, Nader kept scanning the street around him, but he couldn't see anyone who seemed to be the voice's owner.

However—

—the casino breaker had noticed something completely different, and her eyes widened. "What...the hell...?"

".....?"

She was looking up. Nader tipped his head back, following her gaze, and saw birds everywhere.

In the dim glow of the streetlamps, several dozen birds perched on the roofs or on the telephone wires or circled overhead. And every one of them was glaring at him.

“Ngh...”

It was dark, so he hadn’t been able to make them out at first. As soon as Nader noticed them, though, the sight was so eerie that he almost shrieked.

Were the birds related to hawks or kites? They weren’t native to these parts, at any rate.

Nader had a clear memory of the species, though.

One of them had been watching him through the window earlier that evening, while he and Eve were at the restaurant.

“What...the hell is...?” Nader’s mouth gaped uselessly.

Leeza’s voice echoed from everywhere and nowhere. “But you see, I’m not the one who’s going to kill you.”

“Wh...what...?”

“There’s someone who says killing you is her mission, and she’s really dead set on it.”

The voice spoke right by his ear, seductive and clinging—although the words themselves weren’t exactly sexy.

The next instant—

Shink. A sound like metal scraping against stone reached him from the depths of the alley.

Nader and the casino breaker both looked toward the noise at the same time.

Something was standing there in the darkness.

It was probably human, but the distance and apparently black clothing made the shape blend into the shadows, so he couldn’t tell for sure.

In the next moment—the figure dropped into a low crouch, then ran at him.

“!” The woman’s breath hitched at the shadow’s speed.

It moved more like an enormous cannonball than a black beast.

Cutting diagonally across the alley to avoid the casino breaker, the woman in black launched herself off the wall like a ricocheting bullet, closing in on Nader.

That was when he realized something.

Something he might have been better off not knowing.

Even in the dark, he recognized those superhuman movements. That killing machine.

“Cha...”

The motions of the woman who'd discarded her humanity for Huey Laforet.

“Chané...”

He couldn't even scream. All he could do was murmur her name in a daze.

The unwavering gleam of her blade bore down on his neck.

I'm gonna die? Me? Here?

Why is Chané—? No, that's not it.

Where did things go wrong? Oh, no, no, no, no—

Sonia.

A storm of fears and questions churned in his heart, but at the end, Nader remembered the name he'd heard just a moment ago, the name of his childhood friend— —and finally, his body moved.

He couldn't escape, and he couldn't dodge. He only tried to knock the knife away with his hand.

The woman in the black dress couldn't have cared less; she tried to cut right through it.

But when the knife connected with Nader's hand, there was a sharp metallic ring.

His prosthetic had blocked the knife.

“.....”

Chané didn't get flustered.

She didn't need to force her knife through that hand.

She could cut through his arm below the prosthetic, or simply avoid his hand and slash his throat. With skill like hers, a false hand wasn't much of an obstacle.

"E-eeeep!"

As Nader scrambled away, Chané stoically closed the distance between them, showing no emotion whatsoever.



The difference in speed was glaringly obvious, and in the space of a breath, she'd nearly overtaken Nader.

For a moment, though, her movements lost their edge.

She'd seen a strange object come flying out of the depths of the alley. It was shaped like an egg, and there was a small clock attached to it.

"Get back, Chané!"

The voice rang in Chané's ears, and one of the birds from the surrounding flock plunged into a steep dive.

"...?!"

Wordlessly, Chané took a great leap backward, and the bird snatched the egg-shaped thing out of the air and soared upward with it.

A few seconds later—

—the object exploded, taking the bird with it, and a bright flash and the noise of the blast reverberated in the dark street.

".....!" Chané gulped.

"What the hell?! Hey, what was that thing?!" Nader screamed, clapping his hands over his ringing ears. He had no idea what was going on, either.

The casino breaker had already taken to her heels, fleeing the scene.

Without giving them time to get a handle on the situation, a second object was tossed into the alley, and then a third.

However, these weren't bombs. When they burst, they released enormous billows of smoke.

"Smoke bombs... I'd recognize those anywhere." Leeza's resentful voice echoed in the alley. "What's the big idea, Rail?!"

But nobody answered her scream. Instead, yet another smoke bomb went off, obscuring a wide stretch of the dark street. Then the only ones left in the alley were several furious birds and Chané, who was still expressionless and on high alert in the cloud of smoke.

“Are you okay, Chané?” Leeza had reverted to speaking like herself, although she was still using that alluring voice.

Chané didn’t answer.

“.....”

Leeza couldn’t sense the slightest confusion or frustration from Chané at having let her prey escape. That was scarier than anything else, and all her bodies shuddered at once.



What’s this?

Who’s pulling me by the hand?

Nader kept on running through the smoke.

Who was holding his false hand? He couldn’t sense much strength behind the grip. It really felt as if a fairy or something were tugging him along as he wandered through the smoke’s white darkness.

When his hearing finally returned, Nader’s ears picked up the voice of a young child.

“Mister, can you hear me now?”

When he strained his eyes, he made out the child’s figure in the smoke.

Then, a little ways away, he heard another young voice. “That was utterly reckless!”

The juxtaposition of the boy’s childish timbre and grown-up words made an odd impression.

“Ah-ha-ha! Keep your shirt on, Czes. Can’t believe Leeza was actually birds. Priceless,” said the first child, whose exposed arms and neck were covered in suture scars. “Seriously,” the child called to someone else now, “how did you know about that, um...Mr. Shaft?”

This time, a young man spoke a little ways ahead of them. “Well, you know. One thing led to another.”

Nader recognized that voice and the name. “?! Hey... You’re Ladd’s sworn

brother..."

"Well, technically, I'm Mr. Graham's sworn brother, but yeah." In the depths of the smoke, the man sighed. Then he went on, sounding apologetic. "Sorry about all this trouble we're causing for you."

"?! ?! ?!"

Nader didn't know who any of these people really were—Shaft or the kids leading him by the hand. Yet again, he silently screamed the question that had occurred to him many times since he got out of jail.

What the hell have I gotten dragged into?!



"....."

In a room in the Ra's Lance hotel, Melvi was gazing out the window at the scenery.

Looking at the increasingly dense smoke that hung around the streetlamps, he frowned very slightly. "Nothing that happened today should have sparked such a dramatic fight..."

He didn't know yet.

The grand plot he'd designed was no more than a small piece of the magnificent crazy ruckus that had begun just a moment ago.



Fifteen minutes later

“Well, that’s one hell of an accident.”

“The driver blacked out, but he doesn’t seem to be injured all that badly.”

“What was he transporting at this hour anyway?”

Next to the alley where the explosion had occurred, a few police officers were sighing and inspecting the scene of a car crash. Startled by the smoke screen that had suddenly billowed up, the driver had yanked the steering wheel all the way to the side and rolled his truck.

“What’s with all the smoke?”

A faint haze still hung in the air. Waving it away with a hand, the officer looked at the bed of the truck, then realized that its canvas cover had been shredded. His eyebrows drew together.

“...? This didn’t happen in the accident.”

“It sort of looks like something busted through it.”

Just then, the policemen noticed something.

A wild, animalistic scent mingled with the smell of the smoke.

Breaking out in a light sweat, one of the officers muttered, “Christ... What was he carrying?”

As *he* shambled through the night, he quietly raised his head.

The sudden impact had startled him, and he’d burst out of the truck without thinking. Now he was searching for his friends, one slow step at a time.

Even though a truck had just tipped over, the darkness and smoke screen had camouflaged him well, and almost no one had seen him. Would that prove lucky for him and the town, or unlucky?

Without even attempting to guess what lay in store, he thought of his friends and gave one brief roar.

The friend Claire called Cookie and Cazze called Charlie.

The enormous grizzly, who was easily over nine feet in length, sent a

lonesome roar echoing through the city streets.

Destiny's gambling den had Ra's Lance at its heart and the whole town as its stage.

Like a loud signal that registration for this grand bet was now closed— —the huge beast's roar spread through the darkness, far and deep.

Linking Chapter the Scene

Masterminds Don't Appear at

In the darkness, Huey Laforet was standing on the roof of a building.

He was fairly high up, but the sharp spire of Ra's Lance in the distance was higher.

Looking out over the city lights from a rooftop somewhere in Manhattan, the man smiled quietly.

Was it because things were unfolding as he'd expected, or because he was pleased at some unanticipated development? No one knew what that smile meant.

After he'd spent a while taking in the view, he spoke over his shoulder to Salomé Carpenter, a man whose hair was sprinkled with white. "How are the preparations going?"

"Smooth as butter, sir," the leader of Rhythm responded courteously. Then he asked a question of his own. "Still...are you certain about this? The man from the House of Dormentaire is one thing, but using both of your daughters as 'decoys'..."

"Chané and Leeza both agreed to it."

"What did you tell them?"

"I haven't told them about the entire plan, only that I want them to be decoys. Of course, they have been informed of the mortal danger involved," Huey replied evenly.

Salomé's eyes shone. "And they were satisfied with that? Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but it's rather hard to imagine them being in agreement. Emotionally, Miss Chané's and Miss Leeza's personalities are polar opposites."

"Oh, that isn't true. Recently, they both seem to have begun integrating

emotions to which they aren't accustomed. If we're lucky, deepening their involvement with each other may catalyze a change."

"Splendid...! I'd expect no less of the ultimate masterpieces you and Renee Parmedes Branvillier created! They were raised as humans, but they're practically as uncomplicated as homunculi. Whatever emotions they ultimately acquire, I imagine they'll be fine samples for the homunculi Rhythm produces!" When Salomé had finished his excited rant, all expression abruptly left his face. "By the way. Which one do you intend to *present* to Madam Renee?"

"Frankly, I haven't decided yet." Huey's faint smile didn't even flicker. "I may change my answer depending on how this incident affects the emotional integration I mentioned earlier. If circumstances call for it, I could give both of them to Renee. Breaking my promise and giving her neither is also an option." His words were cold and wily, striking a contrast to his tranquil expression.

"I see..."

"Well, it all hinges on the results of this experiment." Huey took a rather large jar out of his jacket pocket.

Inside was an eyeball.

As he watched it squirm, attempting to return to its owner, Huey went on. "After all, she seems to be in town as well."

At that, Salomé dipped his head courteously. "I see. I can't afford to disgrace myself in front of my venerable leaders... I'll return to put the finishing touches on the preparations."

"Yes, please do. I'll get a little more fresh air, then join you."

For a few minutes after Salomé left, Huey walked around the roof, gazing at the city. He didn't seem to be taking the air so much as observing the heavens, with the scattered lights of the town as stars.

"....."

Sensing someone behind him, Huey turned around.

A man was standing in front of the door that led from the roof back into the building. There was no telling how long he'd been there. He seemed to blend

into the faint light from the moon.

“Hello there. It’s been a long time.”

The man greeted Huey as if he were an old friend.

Huey looked at the other man’s face, then shrugged and returned his greeting. “Yes, it has. I thought you might be in town.”

However, as far as Huey was concerned, this was no friend.

“Scheming again, Fermet?”

He was a mortal enemy who had tormented and killed the woman Huey loved.

“My, what an awful thing to say. I’m not one for scheming. That’s your specialty, isn’t it?”

With an unpleasant grin, Fermet quietly stepped forward. Passing Huey, he set a hand on the rooftop railing and gazed out over the city. A finger twirled around his thick bangs as he went on with audible amusement. “I don’t feel that I’m plotting anything. I’m just bringing about the things I want to see. Would you call it a ‘plot’ if a child dropped candy in the dirt so he could watch some ants?”

“If the candy were covered in insecticide, yes, I believe I would.” Even though the man who’d killed his lover was standing right behind him, Huey’s tone didn’t change.

Fermet shrugged at the jab, but maybe he couldn’t argue with it. Instead, he changed the subject. “And? That Elmer fellow isn’t in town, is he? I doubt it.”

“I really couldn’t say. It’s impossible to predict what he will do.”

“I ran into him on a train once, on my way to this very city... What an awful time that was.” Fermet shook his head, looking extremely put out.

The quality of Huey’s smile changed very slightly—so subtly that even he didn’t notice it. “Our lives are long, and paths will cross. No doubt he’d suggest a smile to celebrate the twist of fate.”

“.....”

Imagining the face of a certain immortal, Fermet *tsked* softly. “Well, that’s fine. If he does come, I’ll just make myself scarce. After all, I’m only the audience.”

“The audience?”

“Yes. I’m just here to watch.” The same nasty smile Fermet had worn earlier returned to his face. “You’ve spent several years setting up this experiment. Will it bear fruit, or will it all end in vain? How will you react when it happens? What will bring despair to the sweet little children you’ve forced to participate, and what will give them hope? I can’t wait! Oh, I’m looking forward to it! Just fantasizing about it has me all excited!” Fermet said with twisted glee.

Still smiling, Huey shook his head. “You haven’t changed.”

Keeping his back to the other man—he asked him a question.

“Were you smiling like that when you stabbed Monica?”

Silence fell, and the night wind blew across the roof.

The hush was broken by Fermet; he was biting back laughter. “What’s the point of asking that now? You want revenge for your lover? I’d say that ship has sailed.”

“No, not at all. I simply wanted to know about the life Monica lived in a little more detail.”

“I don’t remember, sad to say. What about you? What would those who’ve suffered for your research see on your face?” Chuckling, Fermet turned around and leaned against the railing. His eyes were on Huey’s back. “During this grand experiment you’re about to perform...*what would the seven million residents of New York see?*”

“.....”

Huey fell silent for a moment. Then he responded with his usual faint smile. “I doubt my expression will be any different from this. To me, it doesn’t have enough meaning to warrant anything more than this mask of a smile.”

“I see. Then I guess resting in peace won’t be an option for those unfortunate millions.”

"You talk as if I'm planning to blanket the city with poison gas."

"You're not?" Fermet taunted him, his smile broadening. "What you're attempting is an experiment that may not even have any real meaning. Meanwhile, these healthy people will never have normal, human lives again. Isn't that right?"

"....."

"Who'd ever have thought you'd *add the liquor of immortality to the New York City water supply*? Not even Szilard Quates would have come up with that one. Creating seven million immortals... That experiment's going to change the world."

It was an appalling prospect, but Fermet said it quite simply. He looked rather entertained. It was as if he was imagining the tragic comedy that would result from that experiment and amusing himself by visualizing the upheaval of the world.

"You've really done your homework." Eyes lowered, Huey smiled. Then he shook his head slightly. "Close, but not close enough. Your guess isn't quite accurate."

"...What?"

"I am after the water, but I won't be using the liquor of immortality. That was one idea, but...Renee already did something similar at Mist Wall, you see."

"Then what exactly *are you planning to put in the water*? You can't actually intend to poison it, can you? That's not quite in line with your philosophy. It's something a real terrorist would do." Fermet thought for a little while, then continued. "Not that I'd mind either way." His lips curved in a grin.

"...Naturally, you know about Sham and Hilton, don't you?" Huey asked.

"Of course. I cooperated a bit in the development of that techn—" Fermet broke off.

He'd finally realized what Huey was planning.

There was a moment of silence before he burst into raucous laughter. "Ha-ha... Gwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I see! So that's it! Just

becoming an immortal wasn't enough for you; you're trying to become something else entirely?"

After he'd had a few moments of cackling, he suddenly took on a more serious, subdued tone.

"Do you intend to become God?"

"That isn't the objective, and I can't imagine I'll be able to transcend humanity during this incident... It's an experiment. Nothing more. You understand that, don't you?"

"But you're experimenting for an objective, right?"

"My objective hasn't changed." Slowly, Huey turned to face Fermet. His golden eyes held no emotion. "Not since the day you took Monica from the world."

Huey's tone was mild. Fermet shrugged, then dissolved into laughter again. "Ha! ...Nobody likes a guy who doesn't know when to let go, you know."

"Pots and kettles, some might say."

"I don't need to be liked," he said shamelessly. He stepped away from the railing and walked past Huey again, heading for the door. "Okay. All I'm interested in is the uproar at Ra's Lance, which you've set up as a distraction. Whatever you do in the meantime, I've got no reason to interfere."

"That would be a great help, if it's true."

"Even I've only got one body, so I'll go wherever intrigues me the most... Although if that creepy smile junkie gets involved, that's going to change things."

The man who could be called the "root of all evil" spoke as if he had nothing to do with this.

Then he set his hand on the doorknob.

Huey watched Fermet go until he had disappeared into the building. The faint smile never faltered.

He never took his eyes off him.

"Oh dear. Who'd have thought he was planning something so dramatic...?"

As he descended the stairs, Fermet muttered to himself.

His vulgar smile was exactly the same as it had been 224 years earlier.

"...Come on. Of course I'm going to *interfere*."



New York A broad avenue

A few minutes after Fermet had left the building and vanished into the dark city—

—a lone woman appeared, walking the building's perimeter and looking around restlessly. "Hmm... I'm pretty sure I'm close, but..."

Holding a jar with Huey's eyeball inside it, Renee Parmedes Branvillier strolled through the Manhattan night.

She clearly wasn't dressed for this scene, but no thugs whistled as she passed.

A knife-wielding mugger or two had come up behind her, intending to drag her into the shadows—but whenever it happened, somebody dragged them into a dark alley instead and knocked them out with a blow to the head.

Meanwhile, the oblivious Renee continued sauntering down the dark streets as if she didn't have a care in the world. Watching her from a distance, her shadow bodyguard—Archangelo—heaved a deep sigh.

"...She really does have a total disregard for danger."



A few minutes after Renee and Archangelo had switched to a different street

—

"...This...is...the right...build...ing...isn't...it?"

Muttering to himself in a halting, broken way, a lone man climbed up to the high-rise where Huey waited. He was holding a large bag; from time to time, its contents made a noise like glass scraping together.

The man—Begg Garrott—glanced at the bag. Then he looked up the stairs, mumbling. "...That...louse...Huey. Is he...seri...ous? I never...thought...he'd...have

me...make such...a thing..."

More so than the others from the *Advena Avis*, Begg had a knowledge of pharmaceuticals that was top class, and so were his skills in compounding them. He seemed to have some sort of contract with Huey that involved this bag filled with a certain "drug" he'd made himself.

He'd definitely compounded it, although he hadn't tested it.

This was a substance that could never be tested, even on a guinea pig.

With this drug, the first subject was just that important.

In fact, *drug* might not even have been the word for the substance. *It belonged in the same category as the liquor of immortality.*

"Sor...ry, Maiza. Czes." Murmuring the names of his old friends, Begg smiled. "I really...am...a...worth...less...research...er.

"I...wanted...to...see whe...ther the...drug...I...made...w-would...change the...world."

On this night—the immortals also began to stir in the darkness.

It was as if, in a world crawling with humans, these abnormalities were drawing close to one another.

Granted, there was no possible way their community could be a peaceful one...



And so the dice *were thrown again and again.*

Ra's Lance and the island of Manhattan—the chain reactions of destiny that were based in these two neighboring locations began to move nearly simultaneously.

Using an enormous vortex he'd intentionally created as a distraction, Huey Laforet was attempting to whip up an even greater one.

His own subordinates, his daughters, the alchemists who had once been his companions, the Runorata Family and other giant syndicates, and even Victor's Division of Investigation—Huey threw all of them onto Fate's table as his wager.

...And the people in question were given no time to intervene.

But there was something Huey hadn't yet noticed.

Several of the intricately layered gears of Ra's Lance had meshed with gears on Manhattan Island.

These engagements, which even Huey didn't know about, were beginning to bend Fate in a peculiar direction—but so far, no one had picked up on it.

The gambling continued.

The time for placing bets had begun.

Using every means available, with everything they had, they wasted all they'd accumulated.

In order to win proof that they were enjoying life, proof that they were living...

...the immortals continued to bet infinite time.



AFTERWORD

Hello, and well done finishing all that reading. This is Narita.

So this was the third volume of *1935*.

In terms of the “introduction, development, twist, conclusion” structure, this was the “twist.” Everything has finally come together and started picking up speed—but since it has only just started, even yours truly isn’t sure how far it’s going to roll.

1935-D (or, if it rolls too far, *E*) will conclude the 1930s section of *Baccano!* *2003* will be a shorter, epilogue-type arc where the immortals settle their scores, so I hope you’ll stick with this crazy ruckus just a little longer.

Even though we’re getting close to the end, I’m running out of things to write about in my afterwords. Ordinarily, I’d have *Baccano!*-related things I wanted to tell you about, but I’ve got this weird feeling that if I start talking about them now, I’ll hit the “end” then and there.

I’ve realized that, as I reach the climax of the *Baccano!* series, I don’t know how I should feel about it.

Therefore, I’ll sink all those feelings into the work, then come back to them again once everything’s over... At any rate, those are the deep emotions I’ve been processing lately.

*The regular thank-yous start here.

To my supervising editor, Wada (Papio), and the rest of the Dengeki Bunko editorial department. To all the copy editors, for whom I always cause trouble by working too slowly, every single time. To the staff in all the departments at ASCII Media Works. This time, things were already insanely busy with the Great Dengeki Bunko Exhibition in Osaka and Nagoya, and then my manuscript caused chaos (again); I’m really sorry about that.

To the people who are constantly taking care of me: my family and friends,

and other writers and illustrators.

To Director Omori, Ginyuu Shijin, and everyone else I'm indebted to in anime, manga, games, and other mixed-media areas. In particular, Ginyuu Shijin's manga-original characters ended up changing Nader's fate in a big way!

In *Katsumi Enami Artworks*, Enami's second art book, I got to enjoy those super-colorful illustrations all over again—and then Enami drew splendid illustrations for this book as well. There were multiple illustrations from *Baccano!* in the art book, too; I couldn't have been more thrilled!

...And to everyone who read this book.

All the people I've just mentioned have my deepest gratitude. Thank you very much!

September 2013, Ryohgo Narita

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