



RYOHGO
NARITA

BACCANO!

1933 <First> The Slash -Cloudy to Rainy-



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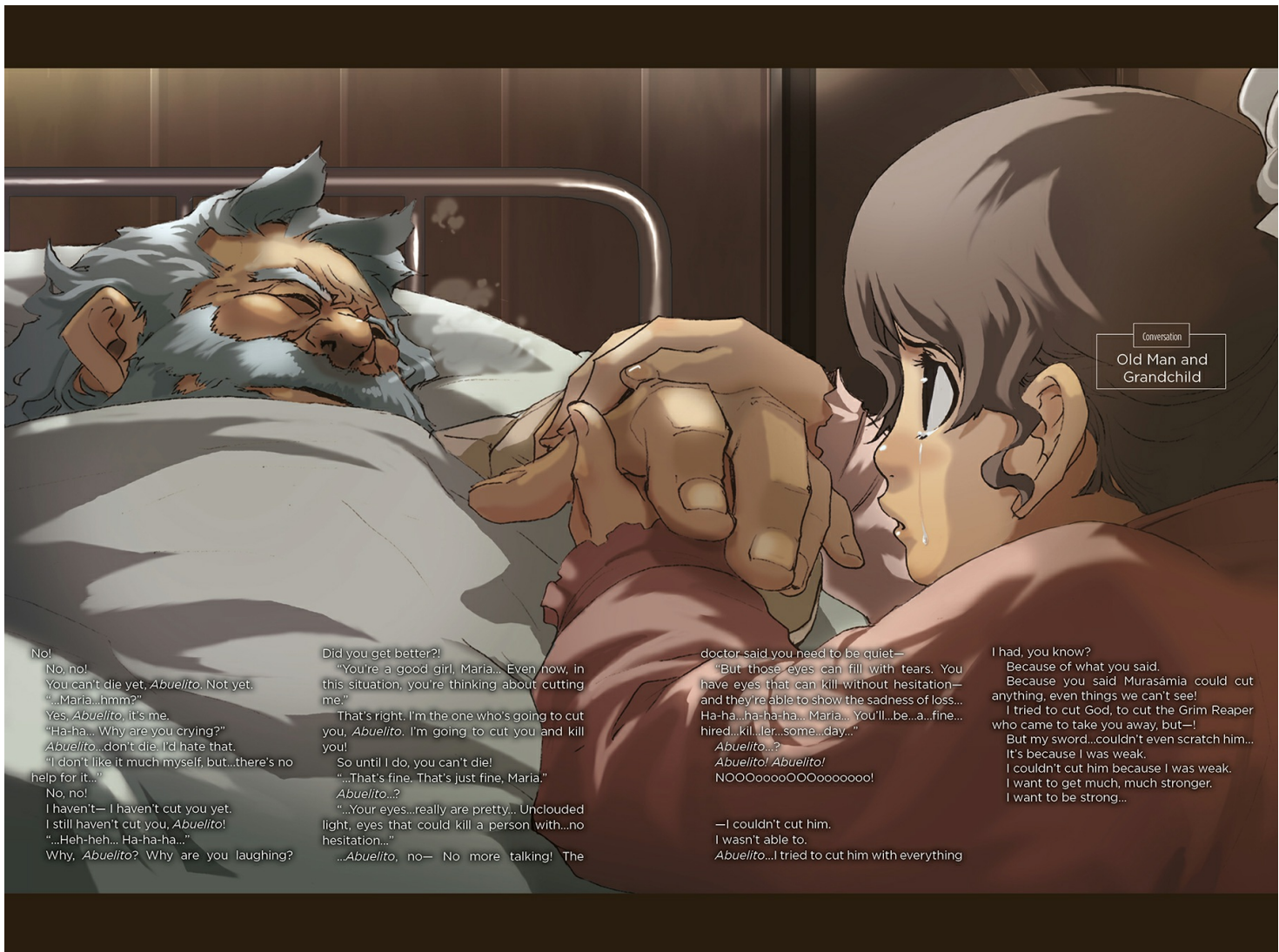
RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI

Conversation

Brothers

My big brother Tick—
“Whaaat?”
Why do you always, always carry scissors?
It’s weird.
It’s not normal.
“Mm. I wonder. I don’t really get it, either. Just like I don’t get why you’re so smaaart, Tock.”
Quit fooling around.
“Ah-ha-ha. Still, it’s like Mom said—people don’t need a reason for liking something.”
.....
“I ended up liking scissors.”
Nothing you say ever makes sense, Tick.
“Sorry. Maybe it’s ‘cos I’m dumb.”
Yeah, that’s right.
Everybody says so. They say you’re not made as well as I am. They say I’m a prodigy, but you’re just an ordinary kid. They say I took all your good things for myself when we were born.

“Ah. I see. Yeeeah, that could be it.”
...You’re not going to get mad?
“Mm... Why?”
Your own little brother is calling himself a prodigy and making fun of you, you know.
“Weeeell, but it’s true, isn’t it? You’re way, way smarter than me, Tock. I don’t think it’s a problem.”
...I don’t understand you one bit, Tick.
Even though you think you’re dumb, even though you think it from the bottom of your heart—
How? How can you look that happy?
Honestly, Tick, I’m jealous of you.
It feels like you have all the things I don’t.
And that’s—that’s why I hate you.



Conversation
Old Man and
Grandchild

No!
No, no!
You can't die yet, *Abuelito*. Not yet.
"...Maria...hmm?"
Yes, *Abuelito*, it's me.
"Ha-ha... Why are you crying?"
Abuelito, don't die. I'd hate that.
"I don't like it much myself, but...there's no help for it..."
No, no!
I haven't— I haven't cut you yet.
I still haven't cut you, *Abuelito*!
"...Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha..."
Why, *Abuelito*? Why are you laughing?

Did you get better?!

"You're a good girl, Maria... Even now, in this situation, you're thinking about cutting me."

That's right. I'm the one who's going to cut you, *Abuelito*. I'm going to cut you and kill you!

So until I do, you can't die!

"...That's fine. That's just fine, Maria."

Abuelito...?

"...Your eyes...really are pretty... Unclouded light, eyes that could kill a person with...no hesitation..."

...*Abuelito*, no— No more talking! The

doctor said you need to be quiet—

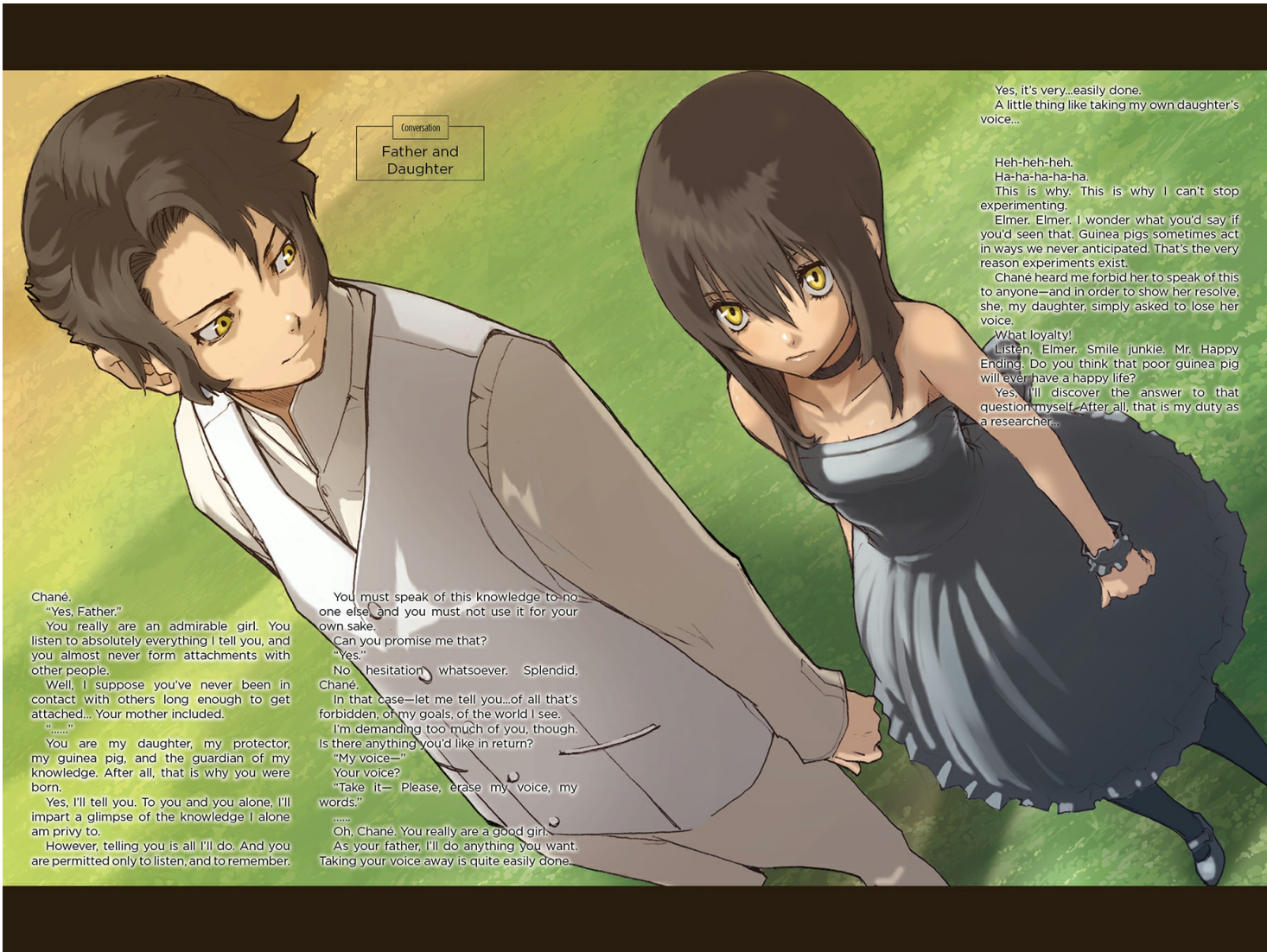
"But those eyes can fill with tears. You have eyes that can kill without hesitation—and they're able to show the sadness of loss... Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha... Maria... You'll...be...a...fine... hired...kill...er...some...day..."

Abuelito...?

Abuelito! *Abuelito!*
NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

—I couldn't cut him.
I wasn't able to.
Abuelito...I tried to cut him with everything

I had, you know?
Because of what you said.
Because you said *Murasamia* could cut anything, even things we can't see!
I tried to cut God, to cut the Grim Reaper who came to take you away, but—!
But my sword...couldn't even scratch him...
It's because I was weak.
I couldn't cut him because I was weak.
I want to get much, much stronger.
I want to be strong...



Conversation
Father and Daughter

Yes, it's very...easily done.
A little thing like taking my own daughter's voice...

Heh-heh-heh.
Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.
This is why. This is why I can't stop experimenting.

Elmer. Elmer. I wonder what you'd say if you'd seen that. Guinea pigs sometimes act in ways we never anticipated. That's the very reason experiments exist.

Chané heard me forbid her to speak of this to anyone—and in order to show her resolve, she, my daughter, simply asked to lose her voice.

What loyalty!
Listen, Elmer. Smile junkie. Mr. Happy Ending. Do you think that poor guinea pig will ever have a happy life?

Yes, I'll discover the answer to that question myself. After all, that is my duty as a researcher...

Chané.

"Yes, Father."

You really are an admirable girl. You listen to absolutely everything I tell you, and you almost never form attachments with other people.

Well, I suppose you've never been in contact with others long enough to get attached... Your mother included.

.....
You are my daughter, my protector, my guinea pig, and the guardian of my knowledge. After all, that is why you were born.

Yes, I'll tell you. To you and you alone, I'll impart a glimpse of the knowledge I alone am privy to.

However, telling you is all I'll do. And you are permitted only to listen, and to remember.

You must speak of this knowledge to no one else, and you must not use it for your own sake.

Can you promise me that?

"Yes."

No hesitation whatsoever. Splendid, Chané.

In that case—let me tell you...of all that's forbidden, of my goals, of the world I see.

I'm demanding too much of you, though. Is there anything you'd like in return?

"My voice—"

Your voice?

"Take it— Please, erase my voice, my words."

.....

Oh, Chané. You really are a good girl.

As your father, I'll do anything you want. Taking your voice away is quite easily done.

Conversation

Brother and Sister

Tch. Getting photos taken is a total pain.
"Dallas...have you been fighting again?"
Yeah, I have. What about it? 'S none of your beeswax.
But hey, I'm impressed you noticed. I didn't get hurt or nothin'.
"I can tell. You've had your left hand in your pocket this whole time... There's blood on it, isn't there?"
...It ain't my blood. It's nothin'.
"You know that isn't the problem! Why do you always, always fight, Dallas...?"

Look, I told you, it's none of your business. Can't you listen to what your big brother tells you—?
"....."
—Uh, kidding. Don't look at me like that.
"Promise me. Promise you won't fight anymore."
Yeah, sure, I promise.
"...Honestly. That must be the thirtieth

time you've made that promise."
Really? I'm pretty sure that was the first time.
Hey, what're you laughing about?
"Actually, you know, I'm a little happy... You came home without losing that fight."
.....
"And besides, I believe you. I believe that in the end, you'll really keep your promise!"
I dunno what you're talking about. If you keep saying sappy stuff like that, the neighborhood brats will bully you.
"If that happens, will you save me, Dallas?"
So, what? It's okay if I fight?
"Um...then I'll do my best on my own!"
Don't push yourself, Eve. All right, okay.
I won't let anyone mess with you, I promise. And I will keep that one.
"Ah-ha-ha... Even if you're lying, I'm happy! Thank you, Dallas!"
...Go on—just look at the camera, wouldja.

BACCANO!

1933 <First> The Slash -Cloudy to Rainy-

VOLUME 6

RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI



NEW YORK

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CHARACTERS

Tick Jefferson	The Gandor Family torturer. Uses scissors. Smiles constantly.
Tock Jefferson	Tick's younger brother.
Maria Barcelito	A guest of the Gandor Family. An ingenuous Mexican girl. A contract killer who uses <i>katanas</i> .
Luck Gandor	The youngest of the three brothers who run the Gandor Family. Not cut out for the mafia. Immortal.
Isaac Dian & Miria Harvent	Two people, one character. Immortals. No explanation necessary.
Firo Prochainezo	A young Martillo Family executive. Immortal. Fights with a knife.
Ennis	A rent-free lodger at Firo's house. A girl of marriageable age who's also part of Firo's body. Immortal. A skilled martial artist.
Maiza Avaro	The Martillo Family <i>contaiuolo</i> . An agreeable, mild-mannered young man. An immortal and former alchemist.
Ronny Schiatto	The Martillo Family <i>chiamatore</i> . The most dangerous man in the syndicate. His true strength is an unknown quantity. Demon.
Pezzo	A Martillo Family executive. Fat guy. Nicknamed Meatball. Immortal.
Randy	A Martillo Family executive. Scrawny guy. Nicknamed Ghost. Immortal.
Dallas Genoard	Human scum.
Eve Genoard	Dallas's little sister. Her personality is the polar opposite of her brother's.
Jacuzzi Splot	The leader of a gang of young thugs. Although he has a tattoo that covers half his face, he's incredibly timid.
Nice	Jacuzzi's companion and girlfriend. A mad bomber who wears glasses over an eye patch. Speaks politely to everyone except Jacuzzi.
Jon & Fang	Jacuzzi's friends—an Irishman and a Chinese guy. A bartender-and-cook duo.
Donny	Jacuzzi's friend. A giant, monstrously strong Mexican man.
Chané Laforet	Jacuzzi's friend. A silent knife user who's physically mute. Former terrorist.
Huey Laforet	A terrorist who was wanted across the U.S. Currently in police custody. An immortal and former alchemist.
Tim	The leader of Larva, a group that works for Huey.
Adele	A member of Larva. A woman who's timid, always seems nervous, and uses a cross-shaped spear.
"Vino"	A hitman who haunts Manhattan. Monster. Also known as the Rail Tracer.



PROLOGUE

Prologue

Eight Years Ago

Big Brother

Snip-snip-snick, snick, snip.

The scissors danced in the boy's hands.

As if they'd gone mad.

As if they'd gone mad.

September 1925 Somewhere in New York "I may be a child, but...I'm not here to play around, you know."

"No, no, no, I know. I'm wellllll aware of that, sir!"

On a fall afternoon that still held drowsy heat...

Voices that were in stark contrast to each other echoed in a rather small shop.

A large cash register sat on the counter, which was stained in places. The texture of its wood made it seem weighty, but it was badly scarred, and it looked patently cheap.

Two people were facing each other across that counter.

"Well, getting right to the point...we'd like you to pay what you owe."

The boy with almond-shaped eyes spoke his words in a way that was indistinguishable from an adult's.

"Now, now, now. Nownownownownow! Young master! That's not really, erm, you know... If we talk about your family's business in my storefront, I'll have a much harder time getting that money back to you!"

The middle-aged man, who was acting so subservient it seemed artificial, had to be at least three times the boy's age. His face was twisted obsequiously. He wore a waistcoat that gave no sense of the season, and he was dripping with cold sweat.

Conversely, the youngster was dressed for the wrong season: Although it was

only the very beginning of autumn, he was wearing a trench coat, and he had a gray fedora pulled down low on his forehead.

The man's smile seemed to be pleading for mercy, but the boy ignored it, speaking impassively.

"How can you be unable to pay a mere \$2,025.50? Especially when it's been twenty-three days, fourteen hours, thirty-four minutes, and nineteen seconds since the date we agreed on... If your shop's clocks are accurate, that is."

Having said that much without a pause, the kid fell silent, sharp eyes fixed on the middle-aged man.

The man hung his head, looking uncomfortable. Only the sounds of the clocks echoed around them.

Tick-tock Tick-tock

Tick tock tick tick-tock tick-t-t-tock-tick-tock-tick-tick-tock

The clocks' pendulums formed a strident, multilayered ensemble.

The dim space was lined with various clocks of all sizes, and it was clear at a glance that the shop's owner was a clock maker by trade.

Although the clocks were lined up so closely that they seemed to jostle each other, there wasn't much variety.

Brown, utilitarian wall clocks, the sort that were seen in every home. No matter which clock you looked at, it wasn't possible to list any further characteristics. If one had had to say, the only difference was whether the clocks were large or small.

In this shop filled with nothing but wall clocks, the boy—Luck Gandor—moved the conversation along to the next stage.

"...From your attitude, it's blindingly obvious that you don't have the money. Well? What do you intend to do?"

He understood, but he didn't sympathize.

Pinned by a gaze that was charged with that message, the clock maker felt a shudder run down his spine.

The man was completely overawed by the kid in front of him, and his forced smile grew drawn and tense. He was dripping with cold sweat.

“Ha...ha-ha... Well, uh, you see...”

“For now...”

Ignoring the owner’s attempt at an excuse, Luck coolly began making his “offer”: “Two thousand dollars is two months’ salary for a mere bank clerk. If you sold this shop, I imagine you’d have that much with change to spare. You could sell off the clocks as well, but it’s because they don’t sell that you can’t pay back your loan, correct? In that case, if we assume that the clocks are worthless and calculate the price of the land only...”

“W-w-w-wait just a minute, please, young master!”

“I wish you’d stop that ‘young master’ business.”

Luck narrowed his eyes crossly, and the clock maker shook his head, speaking all in a rush.

“N-no, terribly sorry about that, young ma—Mr. Gandor! But just, just wait, wait a minute! This shop is connected to my house, so if I sell the shop, I’ll be homeless!”

“Tell me—I’m genuinely curious. Do you really think an excuse like that will work, after you borrowed money from people like us? You citizens call us the mafia; do you imagine we sympathize when our debtors end up on the streets?”

Looking sincerely mystified, Luck, the youngest Gandor Family executive, leaned in very close to the proprietor of the clock shop.

There wasn’t a trace of childlike innocence in the boy’s eyes. The only thing in them was sharp, transparent coldness.

The Gandor Family.

It was a small outfit that claimed a very, very limited tract of Manhattan as its turf. Although its territory and number of members were nothing remarkable, in all other aspects, it radiated an atmosphere that did credit to the name “mafia,” and it was respected by the neighboring organizations.

The syndicate was run by Luck's two older brothers, Keith and Berga. Since Luck was still young, he acted as the syndicate's lowest executive.

Although he was young, he'd already been through many bloody fights, and there was no hesitation in his eyes. If the proprietor said anything that seemed to make light of his organization, he would immediately bring terror upon him.

The boy was steeped in the underworld, and the man unconsciously drew back from him, but even then, his tongue kept moving.

"N-no, no, that's not... Uh, I mean, I'm certainly not implying that you're heartless, you understand! I just... I'm just saying I have no intention of trying to use naïve sentiments like that to make you wait for your money!"

And then—the shopkeeper said something Luck hadn't anticipated.

"A-and so, I'll make up the shortage by paying, ahem, 'physically'!"

"...?"

For a moment, Luck couldn't understand what the other man was trying to say. He blinked, slowly.

The man must have picked up on his question from that gesture, because he hastily waved his hands.

"Oh! No! Don't get me wrong! I'm not saying I'll take up streetwalking at my age or anything. You know what I mean: I hear you're looking for people right now, Mr. Gandor!"

"...We certainly haven't sunk so low that we'd want you as a member."

The words were rude in the extreme, but the proprietor made no attempt to argue.

"Perish the thought! An old wreck like me! I know I'm worth nothing! So, you see, the one I'd like to sell is my son!"

"Excuse me?"

At the shopkeeper's words, for the first time, Luck's expression changed. He looked stunned, as if he truly couldn't understand what the other man was saying. Realizing how dumb he currently looked, he promptly compressed his

lips into a thin line.

However, the owner didn't see the change in the boy's expression. He turned and bellowed toward the back of the shop.

“—Tick! Tiiiick!”

Hearing the man call a name that sounded quite a bit like his own, Luck shifted his gaze to the shadows in the depths of the shop.

Then he noticed it.

From the back of a hall that was lined with nothing but clocks, he heard another noise, mixed into the sound of the pendulums.

Snick...

Snick...

It was the sound of polished metal surfaces sliding smoothly against each other. A sound that was somehow pleasant.

Luck realized what the noise was right away.

At the same time, he couldn't fathom why he was hearing it in a clock shop.

It was like the sound of a blade being sharpened, but crisper than that, and as it came closer...

From around the corner at the very back of the hall, a small silver mass appeared.

“Whaaat? Dad—”

The boy who'd appeared around the corner *was holding two pairs of scissors*.

It was nothing special: He gripped dressmaker's shears in each hand, and he was opening and closing them rhythmically, snipping and snicking away—that was all.

That was the whole of his first impression of the boy.

However, in the shadows, where the light in the shop didn't reach, only the shears in the boy's hands gleamed, and he was struck by the illusion that the boy's fingers and body were being controlled by those scissors.

In fact, Luck's gaze was riveted not on the boy—who was two or three years younger than himself—but on the movement of the silver blades he held.

“Huh? A customer?”

In contrast to the sharpness of the scissors, his tone was easygoing. It seemed to melt into the air.

The boy's voice brought Luck back to himself, and he took another look at his face.

His build was lanky, and it was hard to tell whether he was strong just by looking at him. He was wearing a good-natured expression, smiling away, with his threadlike eyes squinched up into caret marks.

Apart from that, he had no particular distinguishing features. The only thing that would draw attention to him was the shears he held in his hands.

In a word, the boy gave off the impression that the scissors were his true form, and his body was a sort of bonus.

“Um, hello.”

The kid's slightly drawn-out words made him seem younger than he looked. At the same time, the contrast with those shears gave him a rather eerie air.

“Erm... Shopkeeper?”

“Ah, Mr. Gandor! This here's my son Tick! He's got nimble fingers, and he's clever with all sorts of things; I'm positive he'll be useful to you. So, do you think you could take him as collateral?!”

“What sort of nonsense are you sp...?”

Ordinarily, Luck might have bellowed at him: *Are you trying to make a fool of me?!* However, he didn't do that this time.

This was partly because the shopkeeper's words had been so ludicrous that they'd flustered him, but more than that, the boy—Tick—interested him.

More accurately, what interested him were the scissors in Tick's hands.

Forcefully interpreting Luck's hesitation as consent, the shopkeeper rattled on, his face cheerful.

“Now, now, now! You know how it is! Didn’t you say as much when I borrowed that money?! ‘If it comes down to it,’ you said, ‘you’ll pay us back even if you have to sell your own family!’”

“That was only a figure of speech—”

“In any case! For now, just try using him, even if it’s only for a day! You see? If you decide he won’t do, well, I’m a man myself, and I’ll sell off this shop and the land and pay you back in full!”

“...That may have been naïve of me...”

As Luck went through the clock shop door, he muttered to himself with slumped shoulders. His tone held none of the maturity that had been there a moment before; he was speaking in a way that matched his age.

The sky was cloudy, and it looked as if it could rain at any minute. The street outside the shop was a broad one, and at the end of it, the Manhattan Bridge’s suspension towers loomed majestically. It was a comparatively new bridge, completed in the early 1900s, but its meticulous overall workmanship made it seem as if it had an imposing history.

The debt-ridden clock shop was on a broad avenue that led to that bridge, which had become a tourist draw. There was no problem with the location. On the contrary, one could say that the shop had been far too blessed. Luck decided that if a place like that had fallen so low it had to borrow money from the mob, either the man had very little talent for business or he’d had no luck.

For that very reason, he knew just how much this land was worth. He’d intended to put a little more pressure on him, then make him sell the lot, but—
“...By the way, why do you always carry scissors?”

“I like ’em.”

“I...I see.”

Why had this happened? Watching the boy who’d come outside with him out of the corner of his eye, Luck gave another big sigh.

“Ooooh, what’s the matter, Mr. Luck? Not feeling so good?”

The source of the drawling voice was Tick’s endlessly artless, smiling face.

As he watched Tick, whose eyes were more cheerful than necessary, Luck heaved an even bigger sigh.

No matter how I look at him, he really doesn't seem useful.

The fact that he still had those shears in both hands was creepy, but aside from that, the boy was nothing extraordinary. His eyes seemed good-natured, but they betrayed no particular intelligence, and Luck didn't think he'd be all that strong. Probably only about as strong as Luck was.

That was how he'd analyzed his first impression of the kid.

"Erm... Tick, wasn't it?"

"Yeees."

"Tick...do you understand the position you're in?"

Tick was still smiling brightly, so Luck asked him just to make sure.

"Um, Dad's in debt...and so he sold me to pay off that debt. To youuu, Mr. Luck."

"...As long as you know, that's fine."

As far as words went, he seemed to understand, but did he truly know what it meant, deep down? Luck wasn't so sure, but he began to walk, anyway, heading back toward his hideout.

At any rate, if this boy isn't useful, that clock shop owner is finished. We'll make him sell the shop, and we'll get our money for sure.

He really didn't think he'd be good for anything, and he could have just threatened the man there and made him sell the store, but— Luck had been terribly intrigued by this human being. The shears were part of it, but the man's sales pitch—"If it involves his fingers, the boy can do even the trickiest things neatly!"—had piqued his interest as well.

"Listen to me, Tick. If we decide that you will only burden the syndicate, we'll put a demand letter on you and lob you right back at the shop."

"Yeees. I'll do my beeest."

The reply was still easygoing, and as Luck responded, he was just a little

irritated.

“Do you really get it? Helping out with our business has nothing to do with how clever you are. I’m asking if you’re prepared to get involved with dirty work.”

Carried along by momentum, Luck continued with a rather spiteful question: “For example—if I told you to kill someone, could you kill them?”

He spoke indifferently, and his voice was cold. He’d expected the other boy to recoil, but...

“Yees. If you say to do something, Mr. Luck, I’ll do it.”

Tick answered without hesitation, then snipped the air with both pairs of shears.

“.....”

What’s going on here? Is he soft in the head after all?

Mouth half-open, Luck started to tell him something...but in the end, he shifted his gaze to the small crowd without saying anything.

Possibly because they were expecting rain, there wasn’t much foot traffic. The only things that hurried past were horse-drawn carts transporting cargo.

When a cart crossed in front of him, Luck realized there were two figures standing on the other side.

The pair consisted of an abnormally thin man and, in contrast, a man who was round and pudgy.

Luck knew those faces.

They were members of the Martillo Family, a small organization that had turf in the same neighborhood.

“What’s this, huh? If it ain’t the little Gandor kid.”

Spotting Luck, the skinny man—Randy—spoke to him, sneering.

“Runnin’ around collecting debts for your big brothers?”

The fat man, Pezzo, also spoke, following his buddy’s lead.

“Yes, that’s right... We appreciate all your hard work.”

Luck was younger than the pair, and they were clearly not taking him seriously, but he didn’t protest.

Why? Because, even though he was still a child, he was an active member of his organization. He understood that it seemed strange, and he hadn’t picked up on any unnecessary contempt in Randy’s and Pezzo’s attitudes.

He passed the pair and kept walking, making for his own destination, but—
“Hmm? It looks like those men have business at our place, toooo.”

Tick had turned around, and at the sound of his voice, Luck stopped walking and looked back.

And right then—the pair from the Martillo Family kicked in the clock shop door.

There was a terrific noise, and then Randy and Pezzo roared in threatening voices.

“Hey, hey, hey, clock makerrr! You’re gonna cough up all our money today!”

“Yeah, you’re gonna pay back that twelve-thousand-dollar debt you racked up at our gambling hall if you have to sell this place to do it!”

They were intentionally yelling loudly enough for the people around them to hear, and when he heard what they said, Luck’s eyes went wider than those of anybody else on the avenue.

“Wha...?!”

He’d cried out in spite of himself, and he hastily clapped a hand over his mouth.

Twelve thousand dollars?! That’s nearly six times what he owes us!

The man had foisted this scissors-boy onto him, and yet he owed an even larger debt to another syndicate.

Was it possible that he’d somehow managed to scrape together enough to pay the others back? However, he hadn’t had enough money to pay *Luck* back as well, and so he’d tricked him by pawning off this boy on him...

The shopkeeper's plan rose in his mind. Luck did an about-face then and there, starting back to show that smarmy shopkeeper exactly what his syndicate was made of, but— "It's noooo good."

As if he'd read Luck's mind, a drawling voice spoke from behind him.

"Dad's aaall washed up."

"...?"

"He never did have the money to pay anybody back. It isn't just thooose people. He owes money to lots and loots of other people, about eight of them. So much money that, even if he sold the shop, he'd never, ever, eeever be able to pay it all back."

Tick spoke matter-of-factly about the corner his own family had been driven into. He was still smiling.

At some point, the two of them had stopped moving, and they stood facing each other on the edge of the avenue.

"And sooo, I'm sure Dad's all washed up. All the people who are going to come after this, all of them, they're going to try to torment Dad, and hit him, and kill him, I think. And so, and so—"

At that point, Tick snicked his scissors, then went on. His expression hadn't changed in the slightest.

"I think Dad's planning to run toniiight."

Although Luck had been listening silently, he inhaled quietly and spoke to Tick, looking mystified.

"...Run? And leave you here? You're family."

"Well, I have a little brother."

The response didn't mesh. As Luck wondered what he was talking about, Tick continued.

"His name is Tock, but he's not like me. He's really, reeeally smart. He's an incredible genius, and he's good at eeeverthing he does. They say he's a prodigy, and he's much, muuuch more useful than an adult. So as long as he has

“Took, Dad thinks things will work out somehow.”

“.....”

“I hold them back, aaand they don’t need another mouth to feed, so he was planning on getting rid of me, anyway. That’s why he told me to go with youuu, Mr. Luck. To keep people from chasing him for a little while.”

Luck realized something. The boy in front of him had a far better understanding of his position than he’d thought.

“...How can you smile when you know that much? A father who’d throw you away is one thing, but do you hate your little brother as well?”

“Nooooo, I love both my dad and my brother. Why would you think that?”

“Why? ...No, that doesn’t matter. Now that I know what your father’s planning, I can’t just stand by and do nothing.”

With that, Luck started back toward the clock shop again.

However— Abruptly, Tick’s slim arm caught his hand.

With a dry, metallic click, the pair of shears he’d been holding all this time fell to the ground.

“...What?”

“You haven’t done it yet, right?”

“What haven’t I done?”

“You haven’t figured out what I’m worth yet, right, Mr. Luck? You haven’t seen whether I’m enough to settle the debt yet, right? But you said, Mr. Luck. You said you’d watch me all day today. You promised my dad. You promised you’d see if I could work well enough to make up for the money he borrowed, remember?”

The smile in Tick’s voice faded slightly, and a little worry crept in to take its place.

Even then, his squinty eyes didn’t stop beaming.

This kid... Apparently, he isn’t just a fool.

From those words, Luck understood that Tick wasn't merely an easygoing boy.

He understands the position he's in perfectly—and he's already steeled himself for it.

"If it turns out that we can't use you, and the clock maker runs out on us... we'll make you take responsibility for that debt."

The young Gandor Family executive felt even more intrigued by this boy. Out of respect for his resolve, instead of heading for the clock shop, he turned around again.

"...I guess I really am naïve..."

With a self-deprecating smile, Luck made for his own hideout, taking the scissors-boy with him. This time, he didn't look back at the clock shop. Instead, he headed straight for the place he needed to return to.

And from start to finish, the boy who was being sold for the equivalent of a mere month's salary kept moving the fingers that held those shears.

The metal that twined around his long, delicate fingers snipped and snicked in time with the motion.

Cheerfully, happily, he played the scissors as if they were instruments.

Privately, as Luck watched the boy, he pitied his future.

He probably wouldn't be able to become a member of the family. He was far too kind to be a denizen of the underworld.

Imagining what the boy's life would probably be like, Luck asked him a question: "But— Are you sure you're all right with this? You'll be parting with the family you're trying to protect, and you left without really saying good-bye."

"Protecting them? I'm not doing anything that impressive. It's nothing impressive, so I'm preeetty sure I don't have any regrets. Besides...the bonds between people aren't thaaat easy to cut. They're shapeless, like air, so even if you try to cut 'em, you can't..."

The boy was still smiling that easygoing smile, and it almost made Luck smile right along with him.

However—

“But you knooow, people’s bodies are pretty easy to cut up. ’Cos they do have shapes. My scissors break ’em real, reeeal easy. That makes me sad, and it’s fun, too.”

Tick gave a dopey, innocent smile, and Luck felt a chill race down his spine.

At the time, he didn’t understand what those words meant, but he found out soon enough.

The boy snipped with the scissors in his hands, and the sound of scraping metal echoed in the avenue.

The noise didn’t melt into the hubbub of the city. It ran far, far away, down the gloomy afternoon street.

It might have been hinting at the boy’s future.





Eight years later The basement of the Gandor Family office “Thaaat’s why I check.”

Murmuring those words, Tick beamed at the man in front of him.

The man’s response was—

“AaaaAAaaaAAaaaaaaaaAAAAAAaaaaaAAAAAAAaaaah——!”

A scream.

A scream like tearing cloth echoed around a small room with rough gray walls.

Smiling, Tick continued to relate his past to the man, who had begun to spasm. However, most of it was drowned out by the screams.

In an underground room, where no help could reach them, he slid his scissors through the flesh of a man whose name he didn’t even know.

The flesh split without a sound, and red appeared through the gaps.

“People’s heaaarts, people’s tiiies, those shapeless ‘booonds’ between ‘em... I check to see just how much ‘pain’ they can taaake. I want to see it, and it’s fuuun... So many, many, maaany people... I’m aalways testing it.”

With a smile that held a hint of sadness, Tick snicked his scissors closed.

“But people are straaange, you know? Some won’t sell out their obligations for aaany kind of pain, and others start blabbing away before anything hurts at aaall. Youuu’re the type that doesn’t sell out, aren’t you? That’s amazing. I really respect that.”

In the next instant, still smiling, he slid the blades...and the man’s skin split again.

He’d made the cut neatly parallel to the previous one, barely a millimeter away, transforming the man’s wound into something crueller.

“GaaaaaAAaAAAAAaaaaaaAaaaAAAAaaaah!”

As the man’s scream climbed an octave, the only door in the room opened, and Luck Gandor, a young man with eyes as sharp as knives, entered.

“Tick... Go ahead and take a break.”

“Yeeees, sir.”

Replying artlessly, Tick closed his snips with a *click* and left the room.

After he'd watched Tick's back disappear through the door, Luck turned toward the center of the room again and spoke to the man who lay there, covered in blood.

“...Now, then. The length of his break will depend to a great extent on your answer.”

The man might not have had the energy to scream anymore; a wheezing sound issued from his throat, and as he forced his voice out, his teeth chattered.

“Suh... Spuh... Spare me, please, I-I-I'll tell you anything! Ju—j-j-j-just keep that freak with the scissors away f-f-f-fro—aaaAAAaaaaAAAAaah!”

The man hadn't managed to put the last half into words, but what he was trying to say was painfully clear.

Sighing, Luck cracked his neck, deciding to wait for the man to calm down—but abruptly, the man screamed.

“GyaaaaaaAAAAaaaaah!”

“?”

When he turned around, following the man's gaze, there was Tick, leaning in through the door so that only his upper body was in the room.

“Oh, Tick. What is it?”

“Um... Mr. Luck? If you don't get a doctor to treat that man soooon...he might die.”

The smile had temporarily disappeared from the young man's squinty-eyed face, and he was gazing at the wounded man with genuine worry.

“Yes, yes, Tick, I understand. I'll take care of the rest. Go have a snack or something upstairs, if you would.”

“Yaaaaay, that's great to heear.”

At that point, Tick's smile returned, and he started up the staircase outside the room, humming.

His figure disappeared up the steps, a pair of scissors in each hand. After Luck had confirmed this, he smiled, speaking to the bloody man who was writhing on the floor as if he were making small talk.

"You're fortunate that Tick is a kind person."

As he spoke, Luck kicked the man's wound, hard.

A mass of air was expelled from the man's lungs, and his entire back spasmed violently.

"Unfortunately, I am not kind."

Tick really was a kindhearted man.

His character was singularly unsuited to the mafia, and he seemed to be innocence personified.

That said— He had one talent.

A talent for wounding people. For causing them pain.

Was that talent based in his innocence, or was it, as some said, the scissors' curse?

His fame as the Gandor Family's torture fiend began to spread barely a year after he'd been sold to the outfit.

Snip, snick snickety snick snip

Every time the boy snicked his scissors, as if in accompaniment, screams rose.

Even so, the boy kept smiling.

And with that innocent smile still on his face, he— *Snip-snip-snick, snick, snip.*

In the boy's hands, the scissors danced.

As if they'd gone mad.

As if they'd gone mad.

Prologue

Eight Years Ago

Little Brother

September 1925 The wharf

Thick clouds covered the night sky. The stars were hidden, and not even moonlight made its presence felt.

That said, it wasn't stormy, and the surrounding darkness was shrouded in silence.

Neither the neon light from the city streets nor the noise from the people in the speakeasies reached this place. Looking down at the river that flowed through the gloom, a boy murmured quietly: "The world really is big."

The water's surface reflected no light.

Turning, he gazed up at the starless sky.

The void completely filled his vision. His face still expressionless, he went on: "It looks like it's going to swallow me. No, I'm sure it already has."

I know.

I know Dad's planning to sell my brother tomorrow.

I know he's planning to sell him to those mafia brothers—the Gandors, or whatever their name is—for a measly two thousand dollars.

And I know he's planning to run and take me with him. Or, no, if it comes down to it...he's going to sell me to that Camorra group, the Martillos, for a much, much larger sum than my brother.

Apparently, I'm fairly bright.

It's not arrogance; I'm not full of myself. From what I hear, viewed subjectively, that's just what I am.

They called me a prodigy. I understood all my subjects at school before the teachers said anything, just from reading the textbooks. I even managed to

figure out things that weren't written in those textbooks on my own.

However, as far as I was concerned, there wasn't much value in that.

No matter how much talent I've got, if I can't get what I want, there's no point.

I just want to live happily, but...

Since our previous dad died, I haven't felt happy even once.

Our mom married our current dad—that good-for-nothing clock maker—and Tick and I moved to this new town. A new way of life, new encounters, new atmosphere.

The bonds of a new family formed between us and our new father, and I felt a new happiness.

...Or that's what should have happened.

But this city, New York, was far too big.

It was just too big.

Before I got used to New York, Mom died of tuberculosis.

Our current dad didn't feel anything for me and my brother. We were just his stepsons, and he even seemed to see us as nuisances.

However, when he heard the rumors about me, his attitude changed real fast. He probably concluded that I'd be a moneymaker in the future. That's not the sort of family bond I want, however.

I hate the dad I have now. Money's all he thinks about. I don't love him, and he doesn't love me, either.

Still, Tick sees the man as family.

That said, Dad only sees Tick as a tool.

The same. It's exactly the same.

It doesn't matter whether we try to love our dad or not: Our bonds with him only go one way.

I really hate Tick, too.

My brother's an innocent person. Too innocent. That's what makes him so hard to deal with.

That white rat I kept as a pet.

My precious, precious white rat Jimmy. Tick killed him.

He took those sinister scissors he carries in both hands and stuck them into that snowy-white back.

I don't know why he did it.

I don't even want to know.

Ever since that day, I haven't spoken to Tick once, and I don't plan to forgive him.

Only...I wonder what Tick thinks of me. I know he acknowledges Dad as family. I'm just not sure what he thinks about me.

Tick acts that way with everybody, so there's no way to know.

Even so—although I won't forgive him, I did want to believe that there were family ties, the bonds of brotherhood, between Tick and me. And so, even though I do hate him, I thought I'd keep on being his family.

But that ends today, too.

Dad's planning to use Tick as a sacrificial pawn and make a break for it tomorrow night. I don't want to live with a dad like that; don't want to spend my life as the goose that lays the golden eggs.

This isn't empty conceit. At the very least, I'm confident that I can earn more money than the kind of father who goes to underground casinos and runs up the sort of debts he'd have to sell the shop to settle. Even if what I had to do was illegal.

If I'm with my current dad, though, it won't work. No matter how much money I earn, I'll never be happy.

Just like deriving a new equation from the answers in my textbook, the futures I might have if I lived with that man well up inside my head, one after another.

Every future I can foresee is worthless. I'm pretty sure they're all the right

answer, too.

That's why I ran away.

I won't say I did it to find happiness or anything trite like that.

This is an experiment.

Using only my own strength, how long can I keep running from the things I don't want, from the unhappiness that's sure to come? It's an experiment, with myself as the guinea pig.

For that reason, no matter what results I get, I'll have no regrets. Then, next time, I'll change my methods and run the experiment again. Until I get the results I want.

Only...just a little bit.

There's something I'm hoping for, too, a very tiny bit.

It's been two hours since I left the house, and I think, just maybe, my brother might come to look for me.

Somebody might call my name, in the distance.

It's self-centered, but I'm interested in that as well.

Do family ties really exist?

Are they...the sort of things that will smile even on scum like me, who's shrewdly attempting to test their existence?

And so I'm hoping, just a little.

Hoping that, behind me, someone will call my name, and my experiment will come to an abrupt end.

If that happens, I'm planning on running away with him.

I hate Tick, but at the very least, between him and our current dad, he's much, much, much—

Just then: A voice spoke to the boy.

"Tock Jefferson. Age twelve, single."

Naturally, however, it wasn't his big brother's voice. It wasn't his father's

voice, either.

“—! Who’s there?!”

When he looked back from the dark sky to the earth, he saw a dim light.

“Whoops... I suppose it’s only natural that you’d be unmarried. No, let me inquire, anyway. After all, there isn’t a single phenomenon in this world that can be tidied away with the words *only natural*.”

A human figure stood at the center of the dim, wavering light.

“...‘Let me,’ hmm? Come to think of it, I wonder what Nile’s up to... Ah, I’m merely talking to myself; pay no attention.”

The light was coming from a round object the figure held in its hand, but the thing didn’t look like any lantern Tock had ever seen.

It was about the size of a human head. It was shaped like a moth cocoon, a slightly elongated sphere, and its surface was covered with a type of stiff white paper. On closer inspection, there seemed to be a spring-shaped framework in its interior, with several thin ribs running up its sides in layers.

Light flickered in the object’s interior. From the looks of it, there was probably a lamp or a candle or something inside.

Tock analyzed that much from one glance. He knew this wasn’t really the time for that sort of thing, but a sudden fear had left him unable to immediately look at the face of the figure who held the lantern.

“For that reason, I’ll ask you once again: Are you single?”

Paying no attention to the boy, who’d broken out in a cold sweat, the person asked his question quietly.

When he heard the query, the kid finally shifted his gaze upward.

The candlelight that shone through the paper illuminated...an even-featured face, a face that could have belonged to an angel in a painting.

It’s a man... At least, I think it is.

Tock had based his conclusion on the way the figure spoke. The voice itself was androgynous, and if he’d seen only that face, he might have decided that

the figure was a woman. The expression on the face was mature, but there was something childlike about the modeling of its physical features.

The man's clothes were mostly white, and they reflected the light in his hand, creating the illusion that his whole body was shining.

"I suppose it's troublesome to be confronted with a question like that out of nowhere. I'm sorry... Oh, does this light interest you? It's called a paper lantern. I heard stories about them from an old friend of mine who came from Japan, and I tried cobbling one together myself. I've never seen a real one, merely heard of them, so I'm not sure how accurate it is."

The man spoke slowly, then smiled kindly at the boy, as if to reassure him.

Tock tried to ask a question, but he couldn't put it into words. He felt a strange pressure from the man in front of him, and it made him hesitant to speak to him.

Seeing that Tock was opening and shutting his mouth uselessly, the man took a step closer to him. He was still smiling.

"The first thing I must tell you is this: Our meeting is no coincidence."

"Huh...?"

Tock didn't understand what the man was getting at. In spite of himself, he took a step back.

He didn't feel like carelessly approaching him. That said, he didn't feel like running away, either. The atmosphere that coiled around the man, something that could have been either pressure or magnetism, simply kept him where he was.

"Not a coincidence: I think that's very important. Yes, I was waiting for you to come. I was aware of the circumstances surrounding your family, and I anticipated that you would probably leave home today. While I did feel slightly bad about doing so, I've been observing your movements for the past month... I analyzed them, and as a result, here we are."

What in the world is this man saying?

Even as Tock desperately tried to get his head around the situation, the man

kept speaking.

It seemed more as if he were confirming his reasons for being there rather than addressing Tock.

“You see, you’re far more brilliant than either you or the people around you think you are. I came to this town because I’d heard rumors of a boy genius named Claire Stanfield, but apparently, he’s already left the city... And then, as if in exchange, I learned about you. You may be even more talented than young Claire, you know.”

The man came another step closer to the spot where Tock stood.

They were still several yards apart, but the man’s voice coiled around the boy’s heart as if he were whispering right in his ear.

“Your moderately unhappy situation is truly excellent. I also admire the way you’ve discarded the life you lived up to this point with no hesitation, before you saw despair. You’re quite an intriguing *subject*.”

“Who...are you, mister?”

Screwing up his courage, Tock finally managed to ask that question.

Once he’d spoken, the words welled up as if he’d been released from something. If he had that sort of leeway, it might have been better to run away, but Tock’s curiosity about the mysterious young man in front of him outweighed his concern for his own safety.

“Oh, me?”

Without changing his expression in the slightest, the man collapsed the lantern’s outer framework, exposing the large candle inside—and held his finger over it.

“I am—a monster.”

The man’s right hand supported the base of the lantern, and, with no hesitation, his left wandered in the candle flame.

If that had been all, Tock would have assumed it was an elementary magic trick: He’d cooled his hand with ice or something and was using the layer of moisture and air to temporarily block the heat.

However, the man's hand had actually started to scorch and peel.

And then—the skin he was sure had burned *began to regenerate at a speed he could see*.

The man's skin was still burning. However, it never burned *away*.

At the sight of the regeneration unfolding in the light of the flame, the boy gulped and, with calm eyes, began analyzing the situation.

"A trick...? No, but..."

After giving it a little thought, Tock used the simplest method of getting an explanation for the phenomenon.

In other words, he asked.

"I'm going to ask you one more time: What...are you?"

"Oho. If you can be that calm under these circumstances, you really are impressive. Most of the subjects who've met me grew emotionally disturbed. Even a fellow like Goose was startled more spectacularly... Although, with him, instead of using a lukewarm method like this one, I cut my carotid artery."

The man had completely derailed the conversation, but as he spoke, he actually sounded happy.

"It would have been fine if you'd decided I was something eldritch and run away. That is within the predicted range of actions for human subjects, so I wouldn't have been particularly discouraged—and in any case, I didn't intend to let you escape."

At that, the man shot a glance behind Tock.

As if he were being controlled, Tock turned to look behind him and saw a new figure standing there.

It was a girl about his own age, dressed in black.

Golden eyes shone from below her black bangs, and she was gazing at Tock from barely a meter away.

The girl watched Tock with emotionless, doll-like eyes.

"Chané. It looks as if he doesn't intend to run. Go back ahead of us."

Responding to the man's words with a quiet nod, the girl ran off into the darkness on soundless feet.

Silence filled the area as if no one had ever been there, and in the light of the lantern, only Tock's shadow remained in the place where the girl had been standing.

Am I dreaming?

The unrelenting abnormality of the situation had begun to give Tock the illusion that everything occurring around him was fake. He was losing his sense of reality, and it didn't just apply to his surroundings: He felt as though even his own body were made of thin paper.

Ironically, what pulled him back was the voice of the man who seemed to be the least real thing there.

"Now then, let's resume our introductions. My goal is to discover the limits of humans. To that end, I'm gathering a variety of subjects. Like you, for example —"



When he'd said that much, the man broke off, as if he'd remembered something.

By the time Tock turned back, both the man's hand and the paper lantern had returned to their original states, and it seemed as though the events of a few moments ago really might have been a dream.

"That won't do. I'd forgotten something vital."

The man's smile had vanished, and he was shaking his head with an expression that clearly said, *I've blown it*.

When it came to fostering a feeling of closeness in the other person, the gesture was much too perfect, and the action seemed to be entirely calculated.

"Huey. That's my... I mean, my name is Huey Laforet."

In addition to finally giving his name, the man stated his objective with extreme simplicity.

Just as if the useless exchange up until that point really had been a dream.

"I came from that world of happiness, the one you seek...to pick you up."

Prologue

Eight Years Ago

Only Child

September 1925 A certain small village in northern Mexico Far to the south of New York City, in a little village just across the border from America...

The sun had already set, and darkness had begun to slip over the village and its environs.

Ordinarily, there would have been a beautiful starry sky, but that sky was covered with clouds that made the darkness uniform.

The village was surrounded by farms, and with the coming of night, the pastoral atmosphere was growing more hushed.

On the outskirts of the village stood a house that blended very well with that atmosphere.

That evening, in front of a stove whose fire had gone out, an old man and a child were talking. Dinner sat ready on a table beside them, but they hadn't touched it; they were deep in conversation.

At first glance, it looked like a heartwarming scene, but in terms of this specific house on this specific day, it was a little different from the sort of thing you'd normally imagine.

"Listen to me, Maria. This isn't a child's toy."

The old man, who had a splendid beard, was crouched down in front of the girl.

In the lamplight, the two of them seemed like family, but then again, they might have been complete strangers.

"This is a weapon, an object with a soul, but it's also just a lump of iron."

Holding a stick-shaped object up with his right hand, the old man smiled as if to admonish the girl in front of him.

In contrast to the man's kind smile, the girl's eyes were full of tears. She was

listening to him intently.

“It’s not the sort of thing you can treat casually, like a plaything.”

“*Hic...* I’m sorry... *Abuelito*, I’m sorry... I, I, I didn’t know that would happen...”

Desperately, the girl—Maria—spoke in a strained, tearful voice.

“I didn’t mean it! I didn’t mean to hurt you, *Abuelito*! And it just...! I didn’t think...*hic*...anything like, like...like that would happen!”

The man’s left arm was wrapped in layer upon layer of bandages.

And although those bandages should have been white, more than half their surface was covered in a dark-red stain.

The old man had been listening silently as Maria spoke, but now, dexterously, he flipped the stick-shaped thing he held in his right hand around and smacked it against his wounded left arm.

“Say, Maria. That’s your biggest mistake yet.”

“...*Hic*... Huh...?”

Curiously, the girl looked up at him through her tears, and the old man’s smile deepened.

It was more than just a smile. He was beaming: a pure, innocent expression, like a kid who’d just stumbled onto something fun.

“Ha-ha!”

With a laugh, the old man caught one end of the stick with his right hand. He clamped the object in his left elbow to stabilize it, and then, in a vigorous flourish, he drew the sticklike thing—a Japanese *katana*—from its sheath right in front of the girl.

It reflected the lamplight with excessive brightness, and for a moment, the girl’s eyes were dazzled. She squinted, and when she opened her eyes again... the tip of the long blade was trained on her, right between her eyes.

“Ah...”

The girl stared at the silver that hovered in front of her face, not understanding what had happened.

Its sharp tip was pointing straight at her, and she felt an intense wrongness in the space between her eyes.

However, what the girl's eyes finally came to rest on wasn't the blade's tip. It was the congealed red spray near the middle of the sword.

This was the *katana* that she'd casually swung around a little while ago.

The *katana* that had cut her grandfather's left arm when he stepped in to stop her.

The blood hadn't been wiped off. It was drying on the silver blade. The chaotic splatter seemed to be accusing her. At the very least, that was what it felt like.

However...

"Listen to me, Maria. When you use this sword, you mustn't ever say, 'I didn't mean to hurt you'! When you wield it—no, the moment you *draw* it—always think this: 'I'll slash you apart!'"

Grinning, the old man began saying things that were the polar opposite of what a normal guardian would probably say.

"Look, Maria! That's my blood on this sword! Blood from my arm, from when you cut me a minute ago! Maria, listen. This is really something, you know that?"

"...?"

"I was trying to stop you in earnest, but you—you, who were dancing around, half playing—you slipped through my hands and got me!"

Shoulders hunching, the man chuckled, then wiped off the bloodstains with a cloth that had been hanging beside the chair. Naturally, since the sword had already been resheathed once, this wasn't enough. Blood had dripped down inside the scabbard, and it would probably damage both the scabbard and the blade.

However, the old man didn't seem the least bit concerned about that.

"I thought I'd be able to take a sword from a kid like you with no trouble at all, even if you were waving it around. But listen, you swung that sword in a way

that went far beyond my expectations! A Japanese *katana*! A slip of a girl like you! Maybe it's talent. I can't even tell you how happy that makes me!"

The man returned the sword, which he'd only wiped down briefly with the cloth, to its scabbard as if nothing had happened.

Then, firmly, he held the sword out to the flustered girl.

"Listen, Maria. Japanese swords can only cut a few people in a row. They get smeared with blood and fat, and they lose their edge before you can say Jack Robinson."

Looking grave, the old man leaned closer to the girl.

However, abruptly, his expression shifted into a grin, and he emphatically stated his conclusion: "*—That's what they say, but I'm sure they're lying!*"

Tossing the *katana* to Maria, the old man bolted up out of his chair. Then, like a drunk in a tavern, he bellowed his thoughts at the ceiling.

"If you believe, and if you've got the skill and the strength, you can cut human flesh with a tree branch or a scrap of paper. There's no way a *katana* can't do something even wood or a metal pipe could do, just because it has a little blood or fat on it!"

His theory was ridiculous, but there wasn't the slightest smell of liquor about the man. His face was red because he was excited, and he was currently 100 percent sober.

If he was drunk on anything, it was on himself as he spoke of his dreams.

"In your heart, tell yourself that the phrase 'I can't cut that' is a lie. Believe, all the way! Do that, and you'll be able to cut any number of people. You'll be able to keep cutting. Ten people, a hundred, a thousand or ten thousand, everything that exists on the land and in the sky and the sea, except you—no, including you! You'll be able to cut down absolutely all of humanity, including yourself!"

As he spun this abnormal pipe dream, the man kept his intense gaze fixed on empty space.

"And it isn't just people, Maria. If you want to, you can cut absolutely anything! As long as you have skills to match your belief! That's the sort of thing

that *katana* is!”

The man happily spread his arms wide, then thrust both hands forward and smacked the girl’s shoulders where she sat.

“Try it, try it! Cut this, that, and everything, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut— *Koff!*”

Running out of breath, the man choked a little.

However, he recovered quickly and, grinning, kept repeating the same word, rhythmically: “...Cut, cut—cut everything!”

At the time, the girl didn’t really understand what the old man was saying.

However, under his intense eyes, at some point, her hands had clenched around the sword she held.

Her tears were already dry. Sadness, regret, and fear were all gone, and the only thing left was adoration for her grandfather’s impassioned words.

“Maria! There isn’t a single thing that Japanese *katanas* can’t cut! That’s true even if the thing has no shape! If you believe, you can cut anything! Even water, even air, even a vacuum, human souls, the bonds between people, pent-up resentment, even regrets and hopes—you can cut anything!”

After he’d yelled that much, the man exhaled heavily and sat back down.

“Listen, Maria. You have the right to take that sword.”

“...The right?”

“Your parents were skilled hitmen, but they gave in to the allure of guns, and they didn’t pick up that sword! As a result, your father and mother died. *I cut them down with that katana!*”

Viewed objectively, what the old man said might have been shocking. However, it didn’t seem to stir the girl’s feelings in any particular way, and she responded calmly.

“Uh-huh, I know! It was when I was still little, right? I don’t really remember

it, but *Abuelita* told me all about it, lots and lots of times!”

“Yes, that’s right. Her story’s true. So you see, Maria. That sword was supposed to retire with my generation. But, Maria, when I saw you today, I changed my mind.”

Leaning far back in his chair, the old man spoke with a smile that seemed to say he was living the best moment of his life right now.

“When you saw that blood running from my arm, you got scared and started sobbing.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“I told you, don’t worry about that! What’s important is—your face.”

Pausing for just a moment, the old man grinned, showing his teeth.

“Maria, you know, when you were swinging that *katana* around and playing, even in the moment when you cut my arm, you looked really, truly *happy*! That, *that* is what’s important! All right, Maria. Take that sword, Murasámia—which has been handed down from person to person, without regard for family lines or teachers and students—and draw it!”

“...Okay!”

Obedying her grandfather, the girl drew the sword with the odd name. The sword left its sheath in a smooth motion that was so splendid it was hard to believe it had been drawn by a child’s short arms.

The next moment, the blade reflected the lamplight and illuminated the girl’s perfectly cloudless smile.

The old man gave an involuntary whistle, admiring the union of the girl and the blade from the bottom of his heart.

“Good, Maria! Once you draw that *katana*, don’t think about unnecessary stuff. Believe in cutting. Then enjoy slashing with all your heart and soul!”

“Okay! I will, *Abuelito*!”





A few years later Somewhere in Manhattan “Hey, what the hell...? What is this brat?!”

A big-city alley, shrouded in darkness.

In a place even the city lights barely reached, a lone man was screaming. Several people lay at his feet, their shapes perfectly still.

“What, huh?! What’s this; what the hell’s going on? Wh-what do you want, huh?”

Clouds covered the sky, and no moonlight reached the narrow street.

However, in the glow from the distant avenue: The man discovered that the figure in front of him was a young girl.

She held two blades, each reflecting the faint light.

As if catching the rhythm of that light, the girl, Maria, began to speak in a jaunty tone.

“Hi, amigo! I’m Maria. I’m a hired killer! Right now, I’m just starting to get famous! And, see, as a favor to this wacky young guy who believed in my skills and asked me to, I came here to kill you people!”

After introducing herself thoroughly, she began walking toward the man on soundless feet.

She stepped into the red blood that was flowing across the ground, but by virtue of the way she was moving, she didn’t make a single splash. Step by step, she was steadily closing the distance.

“And you’re the last one, amigo!”

“Y-you rotten brat! You better quit trying—”

The man immediately pulled out his gun, intending to put a bullet in his approaching adversary.

The next instant, the girl dropped into a low crouch, simultaneously swaying far to the right.

“—to screw with me!”

A gunshot.

At the same time, a sharp, metallic noise rang out.

The earsplitting sound seemed to surround the man—and the next thing he knew, the gun had been knocked out of his hand.

“Wha...?!”

The Japanese sword had come in much, much closer than he’d predicted and had struck the gun sharply just before he fired the bullet.

That’s nuts, the man thought, but just as he was about to say it, he remembered: The girl had been fighting with two swords.

So he realized...

One sword had sent his gun flying.

In that case, where was the second one—?

Just as the man tried to check, the answer ran right through his throat.

There was a brief pause, and then bright blood gushed into the alley.

At some point, the girl had circled around behind the man, and the spray of her victim’s blood didn’t touch her. She was gazing quietly at a black lump on the ground.

It was the gun that she’d knocked out of the man’s hand a moment earlier. She watched it for a while, but once the dead man fell to the ground, she stepped over his back and started walking.

“Phooey... I guess I’m not good enough to cut a gun in two yet...”

After uttering a murmur that sounded sincerely disappointed, the girl disappeared without another sound into the urban darkness.

There was almost no viscera on her naked swords, and they gleamed quietly in the dim light that seeped in from the city.

Wavering, ghostlike...

As if everything about the girl’s heart, and the sharpness of her blades, were melting into the dark streets...

CHAPTER 0 OIL DRUM



CHAPTER 0

OIL DRUM

September 1933 The Hudson River Riverside construction site
Manhattan lay between two enormous rivers.

The East River flowed along the neighborhood's east side, and this river, the Hudson, was on its west side.

This vast giant of a river was a symbol of New York, and currently, an impressive number of construction machines were lined up along a section of it. They seemed to be doing maintenance work on the riverbank, and massive dredging equipment had been assembled in various places.

A lone girl stood there, on the bank of the Hudson.

Under a mouse-gray sky thinly blanketed with clouds, Eve Genoard's heart raced with anticipation and unease.

The gray sky went well with the slightly timeworn construction equipment. The girl's pure-white clothes did not. She was watching the riverside construction as if eagerly hoping for something.

It was clear that she was a member of the upper class, not just from her clothes but simply from the way she stood. As if to prove this, a concerned voice hailed her from behind.

"Miss! Too much salt air may damage your constitution."

The old butler who stood behind the girl, his mistress, made a worried suggestion. However, the girl only shook her head quietly, and she didn't move from that spot.

"I'm sorry, Benjamin... I want to wait here a little longer, just a little longer."

At Eve's words, without pressing his point, the butler took a step back. Then, staying right where he was, standing out in the sea wind, he continued to watch

his mistress's back.

To the city government, this construction was merely part of its administrative work. However, to Eve, it was incredibly important: The fate of a family member depended on it.

Her older brother, who had been made immortal, was alive at the bottom of this river, drowning perpetually.

It sounded like total nonsense, but the girl was standing here because she believed it.

News of her brother, who she'd been told was dead. By getting pulled into a certain incident, the girl had arrived at a certain truth, and ever since, she'd lived with her eyes fixed on that truth.

It had already been a year and a half since she'd learned where her brother had been submerged. To the girl, this had seemed like an eternity, but when you considered the fact that she'd gotten them to perform riverbank maintenance that hadn't originally been scheduled, it certainly hadn't been too long.

Dredging this riverbed was an impossible task for one person, even if that person was wealthy.

For that reason, she'd supported the riverside construction plan—which the city had already had in the works—by providing funding. She'd quietly concealed her “self-centered request”—her brother's rescue—within the pretext of that civic work.

As a condition of her provision of funds, she'd earnestly entreated them to clean the riverbed and thoroughly dredge all sunken objects. She'd laid the groundwork in various other ways as well, and as the result of all that cumulative work, this day had arrived.

Of course, it was possible that the oil drum her brother was in had been washed down the river and was now far out at sea.

However, if there was even the slightest chance of saving her brother, the girl wanted to pin everything on that small hope.

Dreaming only of the moment when she'd see her brother again, the girl continued quietly watching the construction work.

And then: On the third day of the large-scale dredging that preceded the construction, a workman ran up to the girl.

"Uh, a-are you M-M-Miss Genoard?"

He must have been running with all his might. He was out of breath as he asked the question, and Eve nodded, feeling her own pulse quicken.

"W-well, uh, y'see. Just like they told us to, we— Oil drum, the oil drum...!"

The man's haste wasn't just because he was startled. He seemed to have seen something terrifying.

"Oh, d-did you find it?!"

"N-no, y-y-y-y'see, i-in the oil drum, there, there was a...a luh-l-l-l-live hu-hu-u-u...a live...hu—h-h-human!"

He must have been incredibly disturbed. His words were jumbled, but Eve was familiar with the circumstances, and she instantly understood what the man was trying to say.

After she'd managed—with great effort—to get the location of the site out of the quaking workman, she broke into a run, heading straight for it, ignoring her butler when he tried to stop her.

Dallas, Dallas!

An immortal body. Eve had seen what that meant with her own eyes.

He'd spent several years on the bottom of the river. She couldn't even imagine what sort of horrible state he might be in. However—she knew. The man from the mafia had told her everything, and if she believed what he'd said, at the very least, her brother's body wouldn't be damaged.

No, no matter how tragically he was changed, even if he was only bones and rotting flesh, as long as he was alive, then— Praying, the girl ran into the warehouse where the dredged-up objects were being temporarily stored.

However...

The sight that met her there was completely unlike what she had imagined.

“What...?”

What Eve saw were the figures of several workmen, sprawled on the warehouse floor...

...and three oil drums sitting in the middle of it.

The junk, rubble, and stone that had been pulled up so far was piled into an enormous heap at the back of the warehouse. In the area right in front of it, human bodies lay around like garbage.

“How awful...”

It was a startling, terrible sight, and Eve ran to the nearest workman and shook him slowly, trying to wake him. Although she did think it might not be a good idea to move him, she didn’t see any obvious external injuries, so she tried shaking him gently—but there was no response. He seemed to be breathing, but he was out cold.

The other workmen seemed to be merely unconscious as well, and apparently their lives weren’t in danger.

“What in the world could have...?”

Carefully laying the workman back down, she slowly walked over to the oil drums in the center of the warehouse.

Is Dallas...in there?

Gulping involuntarily, she examined them from a distance. One of the oil drums was lying on its side, and she didn’t see anything resembling a human figure inside it. For some reason, a book, chess pieces, and joker cards had spilled out of the drum’s opening, along with lots of rocks.

Even as she quailed a bit at the eerie, incomprehensible sight, Eve moved forward, gazing at the containers intently.

Gradually, the interiors of the standing drums came into view, and she caught a glimpse of what looked like human hair.

“Ughk...”

As she took another step closer, she began to hear something that sounded like groaning from inside the drum.

“Ah! Dallas?!”

At the sound of that voice, Eve dashed toward the container. Not caring that her hands and clothes were getting dirty, she clung to the lip of the drum and looked inside.

There was a man in that drum, a big guy who was curled up with his knees bent.

His hair was smeared with algae and mud, and his clothes were mostly in tatters, rotting away. However, his body wasn't decaying, and it didn't even seem waterlogged. He groaned every so often, and when he did, dirty water dribbled from his mouth and nose.

Even though she'd heard about it, the fact that a human could be alive in that condition was startling. If she hadn't known the circumstances, she probably wouldn't have believed that he'd just been pulled up from the riverbed.

His face was smeared with mud, but she could see it clearly.

After examining the features of the man in the oil drum, Eve murmured, looking mystified: “It...isn't Dallas?”

She'd been told that two of her brother's friends and accomplices had been sent to the bottom of the river along with him.

This was probably one of her brother's companions.

There were three oil drums in the warehouse. The numbers matched up. However...

The fact that one of them was already empty...

Hastily, Eve looked into the remaining oil drum. There was a man curled up inside that one as well—and he wasn't her brother, either.

“But... No...”

Unable to keep the shock out of her expression, Eve looked back at the tipped-over oil drum.

Maybe the workmen had pulled him out already, and he was lying on the floor with them?

On that thought, she looked around without even bothering to calm her rapid breathing—but the shapes on the floor were all workmen, and she didn't see anyone who looked like her brother.

"Miss! Wh-what is all this?"

The old butler had come running after her, and on seeing the awful sight inside the warehouse, he cried out.

Just as his shout echoed in the warehouse, part of the mountain of rubble in the back shifted, clattering.

"Eh?! Dallas?!"

Without thinking, Eve ran toward the spot. She circled around behind iron beams and automobile parts, and there, in the shadows, she saw a huddled, trembling figure.

However—it wasn't her brother. It was a young workman who'd been helping with the dredging.

"Yeeee!"

On seeing Eve, the man gave a short scream, but as he realized that the figure in front of him was a perfectly ordinary girl, his trembling gradually slowed.

"Calm down, please... Are you all right? What on earth happened here?"

The man was silent for a short while, his mouth flapping uselessly, but as Eve tended to him, he began to regain his composure. Little by little, he told her what had happened in the warehouse.

"O-o-one of my buddies ran off to go call you, and, and right after that...a, a, a weird bunch showed up and dragged somebody out of one of those drums... The guys who tried to stop them all got f-f-flattened before you could blink! Wh-what *was* that?! O-one of 'em was a woman. I-it was just like magic; sh-she drew something from her back, s-s-some sorta long stick, and, and then...it, it turned into this spear-thing, and she used the butt end and just j-j-j-jabbed everybody with it..."

After that point, he'd been hiding and shaking, so he didn't know what had happened.

Eve and the butler listened to the man's story in silence. Before long, possibly because they'd heard the noise, people who'd been working at other sites started to gather, and the inside of the warehouse instantly got noisier.

After she'd quietly left the warehouse, the girl murmured sadly to the butler, who was walking behind her.

"Why...? Just when I thought I'd be able to see my brother..."

"Miss..."

"...Still, I haven't given up. I don't know who kidnapped Dallas, but at the very least, I know that he really is alive now!"

It was painfully clear that she was doing her very best to seem strong.

However, the old butler didn't point this out. Instead, in the most cheerful voice he could manage, he said, "That's quite true, miss!" and bowed.

Nodding firmly in agreement, Eve took her next step toward her goal, continuing the search for her vanished brother. She had almost no clues regarding the mysterious group that had taken him. It was clear that further difficulties lay ahead.

However, her footsteps were very determined, and they didn't betray the slightest hint of regret or hesitation.

"But...why on earth would they take Dallas? Who besides me and the Gandors would have known about him...?"



The water.

The water's coming.

So fast.

It happened so fast.

On a dark night, they threw me into the river, and water gushed in over the rim of the can they'd shut me in.

On top of that, pain pressed down on me from head to toe—

I wonder how long it was before I finally blacked out.

Dammit. Aaaah, dammit.

Why do I remember stuff like that so clearly?

I don't need memories of how bad it hurt.

How come I can remember it this calmly? What the hell!

I wish I could at least forget all of it.

Every time I remember, the hurt and the pain and the fear all rise up inside me again, clear as crystal.

I'm not gonna remember that anymore. Damned if I will.

Something else. Think of something else.

Yeah, what I need to be thinking about right now is—

Where the hell am I?

"They say the oil drum was invented by a woman. Did you know that?"

A voice reached my brain.

Who's that? I dunno that voice.

*"Nellie Bly. That's a song, too, so maybe you know it. She was quite a lady; she took a shot at Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* and made it in seventy-two. Real impressive."*

I scanned the room, looking for the guy.

I was lying on a bed, apparently. I saw a ratty-looking lamp hanging from a drab wood ceiling.

There was nothing in the room. No dresser, no mirror. Just a chair, a table, and a bed. It felt like they'd put in the bare minimum of furniture. I doubted I'd find anything worth any dough here.

"And you got packed into one of the cans that woman designed and spent years soaking in it. Whether you feel honored, or whether you hold a misguided grudge against that woman and curse her instead, is entirely up to you."

Damn, this greaseball is saying some irritating stuff. Who the hell is he?

Found 'im. And would you look at that: He's just sitting there in that chair, bold as brass. Has flipped it around and is straddling it, arms folded on the back as he watches me.

The fella's wearing specs and a black cloth wrapped around his head. It looks like his head's shaved under that cloth. He's got some sort of flashy tattoo over the white skin on his temples and the back of his head. Freak. He's glaring at me through those glasses. What're you, a dead fish?

"I bet you looked pretty dumb, though. Choking and glubbing away down there on that dirty riverbed, not even able to die."

What the hell is with this guy?! Argh, my body's still not moving right. I want to slug that moron right this minute. Dammit.

"Keep your shirt on. I saved you, you know? I don't think I deserve that vengeful glare you're giving me."

He saved me? What, from the riverbed...? Come to think of it, seriously, where am I? You mean this ain't heaven?

Did I... Did I actually get rescued? I don't have to drown anymore?

No, hold it, calm down. Finding out whether I'm really a free man can wait until after I figure out who this loser is.

For starters, if I get out of here— Maybe I'll stop by and see my old man. It's been a while. Maybe he and my brother both croaked in an accident or something and I've got an inheritance waiting. All they have to leave are the property and the house, but... Well, that's fine. Then I'll pick up a souvenir for Eve, and— No. There's something else I gotta do first.

Revenge.

I'm gonna massacre all the mugs who made a fool of me.

The idiot Gandor brothers who dumped me in the river.

That old fart Szilard who worked me like a cart horse.

The bitch who trashed my rep, Ennis or whatever her name was.

The driver of the car that knocked me flying— No, I remember. I remember.

The ones in the car that rammed me were the cake eater I thrashed the day before and the skirt who was with him.

And more than anything, the punk who's the whole reason I—!!—ended up like this.

Firo. Firo Prochainezo.

Oh, good.

I'm so very, very glad I didn't forget that name. That's one punk I'm never gonna forgive.

I coulda sworn I offed him—but since the Gandors were alive, I'd probably better assume that punk's alive, too. Dammit, I thought I plugged him in the head... Did I miss or something?

Well, whatever. Either way. I'm absolutely gonna slaughter all the people I just remembered.

That's right: I'm immortal. If I work this right, I can kill 'em all with plenty to spare. With the immortal ones, Szilard and Ennis, I'll stuff 'em in oil drums and give 'em a taste of what I went through.

Let's see. First I'll take that cake eater and the broad, and— “I don't know what you're thinking about in this particular situation, but...”

What, huh? This is just getting good; butt out.

“Don't you have anything to ask me? Or are you still half-asleep?”

Eeeh, shut up. I ain't got no questions for a low-watt like you.

That's right. Where am I, and who is this moron?

He saved me? Don't gimme that crap.

I don't remember getting saved by nobody. This freak's a real joker.

“Dallas Genoard. Twenty-two. A two-bit thug with no real distinguishing features, although he was champion at the town billiards meet once, huh? Man, talk about doing stuff that doesn't suit you.”

All right. Die.

Whatever, just die. Who the hell are you, huh?

Dammit, my mouth won't open. I can't cuss this guy out.

"Don't glower like that. You're scaring me so bad I just might wet myself... Here I went to all that trouble to save you, and you don't look grateful at all. Tch. Maybe I should've brought the other two instead."

The other two? Who's that? ...Oh, come to think of it, they put somebody down there with me, huh? What were their names again?

Well, that doesn't matter.

What's important now is figuring out how I'm going to coldcock this loser and get out of this ho-hum, flat-broke room. Argh, my body's not moving...

"Oh, that's right. We doped you, so I doubt you can move yet. Don't push it."

I'll kill 'im. I'm gonna kill 'im.

"I told you, quit glaring. Listen, this is business. I'm bringing you a money-making opportunity."

Make money?

I decided to listen to a little of what the bald guy had to say.

"Well, the deal's real simple. If you help us, you'll get more than fair pay for it."

Oho. Money, huh? Money's good.

I don't like that 'more than fair pay' crap, though. Gimme hard numbers, you cruddy gink.

"And if you refuse this deal, there's another oil drum and a trip to the river waiting."

...Yeah, this idiot really is an idiot. Does he think he can scare me like that?

Sure, okay, I'll pretend to listen to him for now, and then once I've got the money, I'll make tracks.

"Not for you. For your little sister, Eve Genoard."

——.

_____?

_____!

“Ha-ha! What a face! See, when I was reading up on you, I was worried. I didn’t think a hostage would work on scum like you! But look at that! You abandon your friends like they’re nothing, but the moment your sister comes up, just look at your face. Yeah, that’s real good. That glare you’re giving me is far, far more real than the earlier one. That’s not just hate. That’s real anger, mixed with the fear of losing something.”

Dammit, dammit, dammit!

What the hell?! What the hell, you bastard?! Eve’s got nothing to do with this!

Dammit! Why am I this worked up?! Whatever happens to Eve, it shouldn’t matter to me! I decided it wouldn’t when I left home!

...Yeah, okay, I admit it. I’ll admit it, damn you!

My sister, Eve, she’s important to me! I don’t want you to kill her!

But since I’m admitting that, you know what it means, right, scumbag?! Lay one finger on Eve, and your name goes straight to the top of my hit list! I, I, I will absolutely murder you! Even if I forget about everybody else on my hit list — Hell, even if I have to team up with those guys, I will absolutely, positively slaughter you!

“Family ties, huh? Lucky. Frankly, if you’ve got something like that, I’m jealous.”

Who the hell cares?!

“Oh, right, I guess I should introduce our group. Hey, Adele! Go get everybody, would you?”

When the freak yelled, a door in the corner of the room opened, and several mugs and skirts came in. What are these losers? They all look like small-timers, every last one of ’em.

One especially meek-looking chick who seemed younger than me murmured, acting so nervous it ticked me off.

“U-um... Tim, are you sure he’s going to be all right? That’s a very fierce glare...”

“Don’t worry, Adele. He’s glaring because the hostage thing is working.”

So the freak’s name is Tim, huh? Got it. I’ll remember that. I’ll kill you.

“Oh, yeah: Relax. It’s not like we have your kid sister locked up or something.”

.....

“If you sell us out, or if you refuse to help us...Adele here will go straight over and kill your sister.”

This slow-looking frail? Are you screwing with me? What do you think I am?

When I glared at her, the Adele girl actually said, “I’m looking forward to working with you,” and bobbed her head at me. What’s with her? Is she a freak, too?

Dammit, what are these people, anyway?

What the hell do you want with me?! What did I do, huh?!

No, forget about me. The way I live, I’ve gotten myself on lots of people’s bad lists. That’s a fact. So what? I’ll send it all right back at ’em.

But listen... Listen: What did Eve ever do?!

Dammit, damn you, I am absolutely gonna slaughter you people! I’ll kill you, and it’s gonna hurt bad! I’ll make you regret this, and I’ll kill you! When that happens, it’s gonna be way too late for crying and begging, you morons!

“All right, let’s start the introductions. I’m Tim. I’m in charge of these guys, sort of their leader.”

I don’t care what your name is. Nobody cares, low-watt.

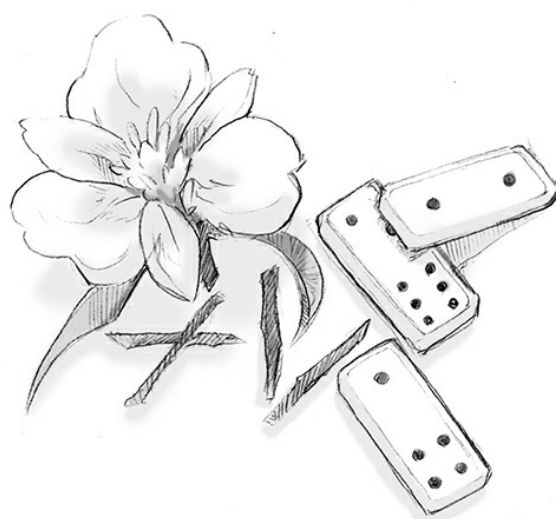
“Wha...the...hell...are...you...scumbags?”

I finally managed to say something. It took so much work to wring the question out that my throat felt like it was on fire, but Tim, that lousy bastard, answered it with sickening ease.

“We’re Larva.”

“We serve Mr. Huey Laforet—and we’re a band of psychotic weirdos.”





CHAPTER 1
FLOWERS AND
DOMINOS

CHAPTER 1

FLOWERS AND DOMINOS

“All right, Maria... If you have an excuse, let’s hear it.”

Luck spoke quietly. He was tapping his fingers on the edge of the table.

The young man’s lips were smiling gently, but his eyes were very, very steady.

The offices of the Gandor Family, the syndicate that controlled the area, were in the basement of a small jazz hall in a corner of Little Italy.

Music from the jazz hall upstairs filtered through the ceiling, and the mood in the room was relaxed. Several round tables were lined up in the spacious hall, and there was even a billiards table in one corner.

All the people in this underground space were obviously far from decent citizens, and the resulting atmosphere marked the place as one that ordinary people should not enter lightly.

However, one person in the office seemed different.

It was a woman dressed as a dancing girl. She was sitting at the round table in the center of the room, across from Luck. The young woman’s brown skin was exquisitely smooth, and it radiated healthy sex appeal to anyone who looked at her.

The woman, Maria Barcelito, muttered her response to Luck’s words, sounding unhappy.

“Well...”

“No ‘wells’!”

Luck smacked the table with the palm of his hand, as if he were lecturing a child. On seeing that, several of the gangsters in the office chuckled.

“Listen to me, Maria. Your job is to act as a dancing girl and bouncer at the casino. Do you understand that?”

“I understand, amigo! That’s why I dealt with that rough customer fast.”

“Dealing with him was fine. What I am asking you is why three slot machines, a baccarat table, the casino doors, and a chandelier were destroyed in the process.”

Faced with this incontrovertible fact, Maria uncomfortably averted her eyes.

“...Sort of by accident...”

“Don’t give me ‘by accident.’ No ‘by accidents’!”

Smacking the table again, Luck heaved a deep, deep sigh.

In contrast to Luck, whose smile had completely disappeared, Maria grinned artlessly, trying to comfort him.

“Don’t look so glum, amigo! You look much better when you smile, you know?”

“Whose fault do you think this is?”

“...*Lo siento*, amigo.”

Maria shrank down, as if her fire had gone out. On the outside, she looked like a mature beauty, but from her gestures alone, she seemed like she was still a little kid.

She was freeloading off the Gandor Family, and she was a former contract killer.

That said, since she’d never said she was quitting, it was safe to say she was still a killer for hire.

She’d gotten involved with the Gandor Family during an incident that had occurred over New Year’s last year, had been smitten by their boss Keith Gandor’s manliness, and had joined their outfit—or that was what she said. For all practical purposes, she was a freeloader.

On top of the fact that the office hadn’t had any women around before, she was also its first Mexican visitor, so in the beginning, there’d been some trouble...although most of the trouble had been brought on by her far-too-innocent personality and had had nothing to do with her sex or nationality.

However, each side seemed to have figured the other out, and almost no serious problems cropped up between the woman and the syndicate men anymore.

In exchange, though, there was more of the sort of trouble that was currently giving Luck grief.

“True, it’s good that you neutralized an unruly customer. You carried out your duties magnificently. However, couldn’t you apprehend him more efficiently?”

At that, Maria smiled bashfully and smacked the two *katanas* she wore at her waist. The Japanese swords seemed too long for her slim arms, and their glossy black sheaths looked out of place against her gaudy clothes.

“It’s Murasámia and Kochite. Once I draw them, they just slash away like there’s no tomorrow, all on their own!”

“Don’t blame this on your swords.”

“But—”

“No ‘buts’!”

He smacked the table a third time. The repeated exchange was beginning to look like a comedy skit, and several of the mafiosi were laughing out loud.

When Luck glared at them, they hastily averted their faces, but from the way their backs shook, it was patently obvious that they were choking back laughter. Ordinarily, Luck was far more coolheaded than this, but he seemed to have a particularly hard time dealing with Maria, and he always ended up lecturing her like a new teacher chastising a child.

There were probably more forceful methods available, but although Maria might not look it, she was currently the family’s strongest fighter. If you included nonmembers, they had a hired killer named Vino as well, but he was a mercurial guy, and he wasn’t reliable enough to be counted on as one of the family’s permanent soldiers. That was how Luck saw it, at any rate.

In short, even if he’d wanted to force her to obey, nobody in the office was stronger than she was. The only person she’d listen to obediently was Luck’s older brother Keith, but Keith was the type who only spoke a couple of times a

month, so he wasn't actively trying to reform Maria.

Berga, his other older brother, seemed to really like Maria's dynamic, generous personality, and all he'd say was, "Why not just let her do what she wants?"

As a result, Luck ended up having to scowl and lecture her all by himself.

"I hadn't gotten to move around in forever, and I sort of got all fired up... I mean, no enemies ever attack that casino, you know?"

"That is how it should be! We work very hard not to make enemies! Ideally, your job should consist merely of dancing on the casino stage, and enemies should never make an appearance."

That opinion seemed extreme, and naturally, Maria pounced on it.

"Boring! Boring, boring, boring, amigo! I'm a hired killer, you know? Remember? Don't you have any slashier, splashier, flashier jobs? Just dancing every single crummy day is boring! If this keeps up, when I see customers with nasty faces, I might slash 'em right across the eyes!"

"Please refrain from making such ominous remarks."

Realizing that saying any more would be useless, Luck quickly changed the subject.

"All right, Maria. If you insist, I'll put you on a different job."

"Huh?! Really?! Thanks, amigo! So which outfit's boss should I go behead?!"

"I have no jobs that preposterous."

"What? It's not preposterous. Look, that little group nearby, the Martillos or something. Want me to go get their boss's head?"

Maria had said something that might have sent them to the mattresses if an outsider had overheard it, and Luck folded his hands and hid his face, as if he were praying to God.

Sighing for the umpteenth time that day, he began speaking again, admonishing Maria.

"Maria, listen. We do everything we can to avoid conflicts like that... Just try

starting a dispute in this day and age. We'd catch the eye of Lucky Luciano's Cosa Nostra and be crushed in a heartbeat."

At the time, the mafia was undergoing abrupt modernization at the hands of a man named Lucky Luciano. An enormous mafia organization known as Cosa Nostra ran the underworld, and in order to kill traitors or start a fight with another outfit, syndicates that were affiliated with it had to get permission through the Commission.

The Gandor Family wasn't part of that system, but for that very reason, if they did anything too big, they'd probably get blown away before they could blink.

Luck, who held a position of responsibility in the organization, wanted to avoid that situation at all costs.

And as a trick to ensure that outcome, he'd decided to assign a certain job to this girl.

"Maria. If you want to cut loose that badly, let me give you a job where there's a possibility of trouble. You'll be rampaging at a location that isn't one of our facilities, with town thugs who aren't affiliated with any organization... Or you may be, at any rate. It depends on how the negotiations play out."

"What do you mean, amigo?"

A faint glow of interest had appeared in Maria's eyes.

Luck didn't let that chance escape him; he continued rapidly, without giving her time to respond.

"Since last year or so, a group of young thugs has been doing various 'jobs' in the area without our permission. It was rather cute, as if they were imitating us, but— As you know, Prohibition is being repealed this year."

"Huh? It is?"

"Yes!"

Prohibition: It was a law that had propelled various aspects of history in America ever since it came into effect in 1920, and it was said to have had an extraordinarily great influence on the growth of gangs.

...Not that it had curbed them. On the contrary, it had made the underworld

expand rapidly.

The Prohibition Act had been established through the influence of politicians and the ideals of a few citizen organizations, and even after its implementation, the demand for liquor in America hadn't decreased. As a result, speakeasies and bootleg liquor were rampant, and they became the largest source of revenue for the gangs that dealt in them.

Because of these trends, the opposition had gradually grown louder, and finally, in February 1933, a constitutional amendment made it through Congress. Afterward, Prohibition had been lifted in state after state, and once the state congress of Utah passed its amendment, the Prohibition Act would be completely abolished.

That moment hadn't yet arrived, but the fact that Prohibition was ending was already common knowledge, and taverns in New York could be seen openly ordering liquor from official brewers.

This meant the gangs that had been earning money with bootleg liquor would need to find new sources of funding. The Gandor Family had relied on income from its speakeasies and bootleg liquor as well, and Luck had been worrying about how to make that shift...

"Listen, Maria. The young hoodlums are engaging in various 'work' in this neighborhood without our permission. They're making bootleg liquor without asking, running underground horse races, buying up discounted goods... All sorts of things. Ordinarily, we'd simply need to threaten them a little, but their organization seems to be larger than we assumed... They're a rather troublesome opponent."

"Gotcha, amigo! I just have to go slash all of them, right?!"

"...I am extremely concerned about the sort of work you've been doing as a hired killer up till now. In any case, I'd rather not make the matter that big. If possible, I would prefer that you merely threaten the thugs' leader. Just enough to keep the option of defying us from seeming attractive, you see. Of course, if they're receptive to begin with, there's no need for that."

On hearing Luck's explanation, the girl thought hard for a minute, and then—"Okay, amigo! I'll slash one of them for starters, and if they strike back, I'll

assume they're hostile, and—”

“Maria.”

“...Sorry. I got a little carried away, amigo.”

Luck was smiling, but his eyes were completely devoid of emotion, and Maria apologized meekly. Possibly because she'd spent a long time in underworld society, she was very good at sensing the location of the “line” that, once crossed, would make the man in front of her angry in earnest.

“The problem is that, while they are doing these ‘jobs’ on our territory, their base is on another syndicate’s turf. We have a mutual noninterference agreement with that other syndicate. Be very careful not to do anything *overly flashy*.”

Maria lowered her head. Satisfied, with an expression that was somewhat more relaxed than it had been a moment ago, Luck continued describing the job.

“Your work will consist of guard duty. We’re having Tick handle the discussion and the threat making, and we want you to protect him while he does it.”

As Luck spoke, his gaze shifted to a corner of the office. As if pulled along, Maria followed his eyes.

He was looking at a small table. A young man was seated at it, making snipping noises with his scissors as he cut the flowers on the table to pieces.

The Gandor Family’s best torture expert—Tick Jefferson.

That was the young man’s name.

Although he’d been cheerfully cutting the flowers in the vase, he seemed to have felt their eyes on him, because he looked their way and raised his hand in a laid-back wave.

He held a pair of gleaming silver scissors in that hand, and as the blades waggled left and right, they reflected the lights, sketching a shining arc for Luck and Maria.

“Hiya, Luck and Mariaaaa. What’s the matter?”

From his voice and gestures alone, he seemed like an agreeable, slightly childlike young man. However, the scissors ruined that image.

Luck gave Tick a little smile, then promptly returned his gaze to Maria.

Wearing a smile that was as innocent as Tick's, she'd raised one hand and was fluttering her fingers at him.

So their mental ages are about the same, apparently.

Without voicing that thought, Luck wrapped up the discussion for Maria.

"I've already told Tick everything about the job. Thank you in advance for your efforts... One last thing! The Martillo Family have also had their territorial rights violated by this group, and they are also participating in this matter. From what I hear, they'll be sending someone over today as well, so whatever you do, do not—I repeat, do *not*—start any trouble with their people!"

"...Okaaay."

"Hi!"

When Luck had said everything he had to say, Maria immediately walked over to the table where Tick was sitting and, wearing a soft expression, sat down across from him.

"What are you doing, amigo?"

Maria sounded intensely interested; she was watching Tick work. He was sticking his scissors into the pretty bouquet of flowers in the vase, then casually closing the blades every now and then.

With a pleasant little *snick*, a flower was bisected halfway down its stem and fluttered soundlessly to the tabletop.

"Cutting them. The flowers."

Speaking indifferently, Tick picked up the fallen flower and stuck its stem back into the vase.

"Edith gave me these. She said she thought I'd look good as a florist."

Edith was a waitress at a tavern directly managed by the Gandor Family. She and Tick seemed to have become personally acquainted through a certain

incident, and now she'd given him flowers.

"Flowers are really neeeat, aren't they?"

Snick.

With the sound of scraping metal, another flower fell.

When Edith had given him the bouquet, Tick had said only, "I'll cut them very carefully," and he'd spent the last several days cutting flowers.

"Even if you cut the stem in two, if you stick it back in the water, it stays just fine."

The flowers had already been cut when Edith had given them to him, but although their stems had been severed in different places, not a single flower had completely withered yet.

The bouquet had shrunk to about half its initial length, and although the flowers' petals had all been on the same level to begin with, they now stood at different heights.

He'd been handed the bouquet with the comment that being a florist would suit him, but this certainly didn't look as if it would sell.

"Mm. Sure, they're neat, but I want to cut something that's sturdier than flowers, amigo."

Maria's answer was a total non sequitur. The members of the family had been spooked by Tick's actions and were just watching him from a ways away, but the young guy's abnormal behavior didn't seem to faze her at all.

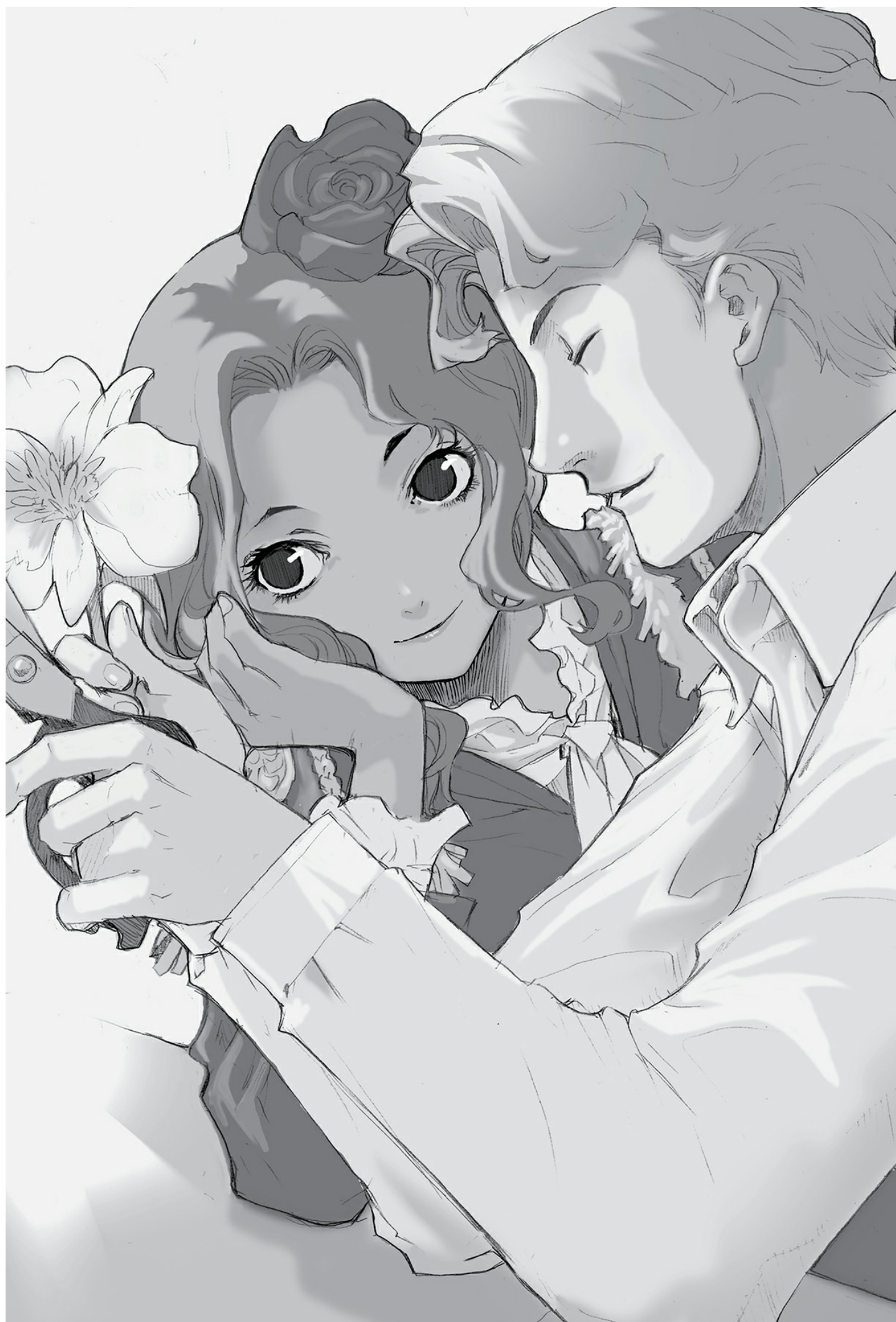
"So, about this job: When are we going, amigo?! 'Now,' of course, right? Right now, right?!"

Maria leaned closer, eyes sparkling, and the beautiful line of her jaw brushed the tips of the flowers.

If you just extracted that moment, the scene would have been as pretty as a picture, but it was the polar opposite of what they were actually talking about. The men who were watching from a distance heaved disappointed sighs —*"Now, if only she had a decent personality, too..."*—but Tick gave a genuine smile...

“Ooh, Maria. Those flowers look good on you. You’re really cute.”

...and expressed sentiments that were completely out of place.



“Really? You really think so? Gee, thanks!”

Maria seemed rather pleased, and for the first time, she took a good look at the flowers in the vase. The bouquet was a mixed assortment of different blooms, but it didn’t come off as gaudy, and the flowers’ colors were soothing.

“Hmm...”

Maria gazed down at the vase for a little while, but before long, as if she’d just remembered something, she took Tick’s arm.

“Well, I’ll take a good long look at the flowers after the job! Never mind that, let’s hurry and get to work! Okay?”

Maria pulled on Tick’s arm energetically, looking like a little kid who was about to go to some kind of festival.

Tick made no attempt to refuse her forceful invitation. He cut one last flower, then got up, murmuring quietly.

“...I wonder if these flowers have families, too...”

“Mm? Did you say something?”

“No. It’s nothing.”

Smiling even more softly than before, Tick let Maria begin to pull him up the stairs to the ground floor.

Whether or not they understood the substance of the job they were on their way to do, as the two of them climbed the stairs, there wasn’t a hint of fear or hesitation on their faces.

Even though if things went wrong, that job might deteriorate into a bloody tragedy...

In the office, after the pair had left, several of the mafiosi were shooting the breeze.

“Hey, is it really gonna be okay to send those two by themselves?”

“Yeah, they’re both pretty much kids. Well, they say the other guys are all kids, too, so I bet it’ll be fine. Besides, Tick may talk like that, but the guy ain’t dumb.”

“If Maria’s there, at least he won’t get clipped.”

“Those samurai swords are scarier than a lousy machine gun...”

All the syndicate members seemed to trust Maria’s skills to a certain extent, and not one of them was seriously worried about the pair’s lives.

However, Luck dashed cold water onto the cheerful mood in the office.

“Gentlemen... Aren’t you relying on her strength a bit too much?”

If the whole outfit depended entirely on one person, it would weaken their individual strength and their unity. That was a situation Luck wanted to avoid, no matter what. When Vino had come, he’d been worried that that sort of thing might happen, but Vino had immediately gone off somewhere, so the worry had evaporated.

However, there would be no point if they started to lean on Maria instead. They really couldn’t afford to have people starting ugly rumors about the Gandors’ fighting strength depending on one little girl.

“Yeah, but, Luck, she probably *could* get the Martillo *capo* all by her—”

“Do not make dangerous remarks. If you’d rather not live a long life, I suppose it doesn’t matter, but...”

In contrast to the way he’d spoken to Maria a moment ago, his words were hard-boiled, without the slightest trace of emotion. Pinned by their coldness, one of the syndicate men felt something frigid race down his spine.

“Besides, I wouldn’t underestimate the Martillos. After all, they have Ronny Schiatto, a man who rivals Vino, and Yaguruma and Maiza can’t be dealt with by ordinary methods, either.”

After admonishing everyone in the office, Luck added a few final words, as if talking to himself.

“The same is true of their youngest executive...Firo Prochainezo...”



At the same time The restaurant Alveare “That was mean, Firo!”

“Way too mean!”

“The worst!”

“Yes, it doesn’t get worse than that!”

The restaurant was located in the back of a honey shop on the corner of the broad street that ran between Little Italy and Chinatown.

A cast metal sign in the shape of a beehive hung at its entrance. The name written on that sign was *ALVEARE*, which meant “beehive” in Italian.

The Camorra was an Italian crime group. Its structure and customs were different from those of the mafia, and along with the Sicilian mafia and the ‘Ndrangheta, it was one of Italy’s three big criminal organizations.

The Martillo Family was one of its branch syndicates, an extremely minor group that had a small territory in Little Italy and Chinatown. Its main base was here, in this restaurant that was filled with the aroma of honey.

The establishment had originally been the territory’s largest speakeasy, but with the move to abolish Prohibition, it had reinvented itself as a legitimate watering hole. The interior was extravagantly splendid, with chandeliers that glittered like jewels, a bar and its tables adorned with stately carvings, oil lamps on the walls—and it was filled with the sweet smell of dishes prepared with honey.

It was noon, and ordinarily, the place would have been overflowing with people whose appetites had been whetted by the aromas... But today, things were just a little different.

“Look, like I keep saying, I’m sorry.”

Leaning against the bar, a man apologized, sounding tired.

He was about eighteen or nineteen, but there was still something very boyish about his face, and if you only looked at that, he seemed two or three years younger.

The young guy was surrounded by several men and women, and the couple in front of him had their voices and their hands raised in protest.

“You can’t clear this up with an apology!”

“Yes, it’s out of the question!”

The man of the couple was dressed in a tuxedo, like a stage magician. As if she'd coordinated her outfit to match the man's, the woman wore a dress that made her look as if she might be going to a ball.

Their outfits clearly didn't match the time or the location, but nobody questioned the pair's garment choices.

Seeing the young guy sigh, the man—Isaac Dian—shook his raised fists.

“Just how long do you think we spent setting up all those dominos?!”

Following his lead, the woman—Miria Harvent—also waved her fists around and shouted: “Yes, those were the product of our blood, sweat, and tears!”

The angry words they lobbed his way made the young guy—Firo Prochainezo—sigh even more deeply.

“You didn't shed any blood or tears over those.”

“You can't deceive the hot blood that flows in my veins with words like that!”

“Yes, and when those dominos fell, Isaac cried a little!”

The pair's words were rather dumb, but as if they sympathized, the people around them also began denouncing the young man.

“Firo, that was your fault.”

“Yeesh, you're such a klutz.”

“You lack concentration. You're neglecting your training; that's why these things happen.”

“Say, Firo? Big brother? I think you should apologize better than that.”

“Firo...”

“Aww... The cleanup's going to be awful, and it's all because of you, Firo.”

“Go home.”

“Get out.”

“Scram.”

“Fade.”

Firo had listened silently at first, but as his friends picked him to pieces, he grew unable to take it. He'd been wearing an uncomfortable expression, but it gradually shifted into something angrier.



I'm a Martillo Family executive, right?

So why did he have to get bawled out, not just by Pezzo and Randy, who were fellow executives, but by Czes (a freeloader) and the family's young guys (who weren't even executives), and on top of it, Lia the waitress too?

True, he'd been in the wrong, but still. Did they really have to give him this much grief for it?

These gloomy thoughts built up inside Firo—

"Pay us back for those dominos!"

"Yes, we're suing for damages!"

—and finally collapsed.

"Shaddup!"

"Eep!"

"Yeek!"

"All I did was knock over some dominos you were setting up; why are we talking compensation?! Did I *shatter* them? Did they break? Did the tiles I knocked over get pulverized into dust?! Did they?!"

At his sudden yell, Isaac and Miria flinched, freezing up.

Seeing this, Firo bore down harder.

"And anyway, this is a place for eating, not for messing around with dominos! We're letting you borrow space on our turf, so if we knock a few of 'em down, overlook it, wouldja?!"

After he'd said all that, Firo glared at Isaac and Miria, breathing hard.

Watching the furious boy, Randy and Pezzo whispered to each other.

"Now there's a classic case of the perp blowing up at the victims."

"Yeah, and he was having fun setting those things up, too..."

Firo's ears picked up their conversation, but he ignored them, and his expression stayed angry.

Isaac and Miria stood frozen for a little while, but then they both began trembling, and— “W-waaaaaaaaah! Stupid Firo!”

“Waaaaah! Firo, you *touhenboku*! Heathen! Abysmal plebeian ignoramus!”

Firing off every parting shot they could think of, they ran for the door, looking ready to burst into tears.

“*Tou, touhen...* What?”

Firo didn’t understand what Miria’s words had meant, and he got confused before he could get mad. Beside him, Yaguruma, who’d emigrated from Japan, muttered: “That Miria girl really knows her way around Japanese.”

As Isaac and Miria opened the door, they almost collided with a man who was on his way in. The man, who was holding a paper bag, dodged nimbly and slipped past the pair.

“What’s going on? ...Whoops.”

Just when the two of them seemed to have passed the man completely, Miria poked her head back in from behind him, stuck her tongue out at Firo, and hit him with another parting shot: “Bleeeeeh! Go get yourself kicked by Yagyo-san’s headless horse, Firo!”

After screaming those words, she trotted away lightly in pursuit of Isaac, who’d already gone outside.

As Miria ran away, dress streaming behind her, she looked like a fairy-tale Cinderella. While he watched her go, Firo held his head and sighed for the third time.

“Who’s Yagyo-san? Dammit... First they tick me off, then they confuse me on their way out...”

Grumbling, he turned around and saw that everyone in the restaurant was watching him coldly. Nobody said anything aloud, but their gazes were filled with obvious reproach.

“...Argh, fine. I was acting like a kid! I admit it, okay?!”

As Firo shook his head in irritation, the man with the paper bag who’d just come in spoke to him. He looked as if he didn’t understand the situation.

“Did something happen?”

“Oh, Ronny. No, it’s nothing. I knocked down Isaac and Miria’s dominos before they got them completely set up, that’s all.”

Firo, who’d been acting annoyed just a moment ago, changed his tone, abruptly becoming respectful.

The man he’d called Ronny held the position of *chiamatore* for the Martillo Family and was the outfit’s de facto Number Two.

“Hmm. I see... They may have run off, but where have they run to?”

“Oh, that’s nothing to worry about. They’ve got nowhere else to go. I bet they’ll come back when they get hungry.”

“...Well, never mind. I was just about to head out myself. If I see them, I’ll talk them down and bring them back.”

Coming from an upper-level executive, those were unexpected words, and Firo’s eyes went round in surprise.

“No, but...! Ronny, you don’t have to do all th—”

“It’s on my way. Don’t worry about it. If I don’t see them, then that’s that.”

Speaking indifferently, Ronny took a large quantity of pepper bottles out of the paper bag and lined them up neatly on top of the bar.

“Besides, I heard that a strange group attacked a crew of workmen at a riverside construction site yesterday. I won’t say things have gotten dangerous, but it’s best to be careful.”

After he’d emptied the paper bag of its contents, he immediately turned on his heel again.

As he headed out the door, a slender figure got to its feet, as if it meant to follow him.

“I’ll go look for them, too.”

“Ennis.”

Startled, Firo called to the girl in the black suit who’d stood up.

“It’s fine. Even if we leave ’em alone, they’ll come back.”

“But...there’s the matter Ronny just mentioned, too.”

The girl, Ennis, quietly broke into a run. She paused for a moment beside Firo and softly put her lips close to his ear.

“...In the meantime, think of a proper apology to give Isaac and Miria, all right?”

She’d spoken as if she were gently admonishing a child, and Firo didn’t get mad or argue. He just turned bright red and gave a small nod.

“Fine...”

Clicking his tongue, he turned his face away like a little kid. Watching the gesture with a kind smile, the girl in black slipped through the door, heading into the crowd on the street.

Firo watched her until she was out of sight, then turned around slowly, as if to check something.

But no one was looking at him coldly anymore. Everyone had begun to spend their time in their own ways, eating lunch or reading the newspaper.

Seeming vaguely relieved, Firo took a seat at the counter, intending to have some coffee.

However—as if he’d been waiting for this—a man sat down beside him.

“Hello.”

“Maiza...”

The tall, bespectacled man was Maiza Avaro, Firo’s superior and the organization’s *contaiuolo*.

Earlier, when Firo was being taken to task, Maiza had been the only one who hadn’t said anything. Was he planning to deliver his lecture now? Firo glanced at the man out of the corner of his eye, trying to guess his intentions.

After a beat, Maiza spoke. His expression was mild.

“Firo, back then—that was intentional, wasn’t it?”

“...What was?”

“When you knocked down the dominos they’d almost finished setting up.”

Silence.

His voice had been quiet, but it was clear. Firo glanced around to see if anyone else was listening to their conversation, but apparently, no one except the two of them was paying attention.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Firo.”

The man’s tone was kind, but it brooked no argument.

Although Firo was silent for a while, finally, as if he’d given up, he started to speak.

“.....Yeah.”

“Why did you do it?”

For a little while, the youth thought hard, as if he was searching for the answer inside himself. Then, bit by bit, he began to answer.

“Because I’m scared.”

“Scared?”

“The memories inside me, the ones from that old guy, Szilard. They’re way beyond anything I can understand.”

Szilard.

At the abrupt mention of that name, it was Maiza’s turn to fall silent.

“I wonder...if this is a sort of karma *laid down for us immortals.*”



“Seriously... We had to pay that information broker absolute stacks of lettuce to get them to cough up information on you. When it comes to intel about ‘immortals,’ they get as closemouthed as fossilized clams. We gave them ridiculous amounts of dough and info to find out where you’d been put under. Show a little gratitude, would you?”

“...Not my problem.”

“Ha-ha, true. Well then, why don’t I ask about something that does affect you? Dallas. How much do you know about those...‘immortals’?”

A group in eccentric clothes was walking along the broad avenue that led to Little Italy.

It was Tim and the members of Larva.

At first glance, they seemed like a band of town thugs, but several of them were dressed like bank clerks, so it was hard to describe them in a few words.

“When you became immortal, how much did Szilard Quates tell you?”

In the middle of a group of about ten people, Tim spoke to Dallas, who was right behind him.

“Hell if I know.”

Muttering shortly, Dallas kept walking, glaring at the back of Tim’s head.

“In that case, I’ll give you a quick rundown. The first important thing is that you’re not completely immortal. *It’s not that you don’t age; you just don’t die.* Once you get up there in years, you’ll die of old age. It’s sort of a half-assed immortality... In other words, you’re a failure.”

This gink keeps phrasing things so they’ll rub me the wrong way.

Dallas glared even harder, but naturally, the back of Tim’s head didn’t flinch.

“Real immortals were given a cup of liquor a group of alchemists asked a demon for, a little over two hundred years back.”

“Alchemists?”

“Whoa, I have to explain that, too? Adele, this is a pain in the neck. You go over that bit for him.”

“Oh, y-yessir!” Adele responded as she walked beside Dallas.

She was wearing an outfit that was mostly white and looked easy to move in, and she had an odd, stick-shaped thing bound to her back. It seemed to be some kind of weapon, but Dallas wasn’t able to visualize what it was, specifically. He didn’t intend to try, either.

The girl seemed constantly nervous, and Dallas really didn't like her. For starters, if something happened, this girl was apparently going to kill his little sister. He didn't just not like her; he felt like murdering her.

Although I doubt a frail like her could kill anybody...

When he'd thought that far, Dallas shook his head vigorously.

Three years ago, he'd been knocked out by a similar girl. Ennis. Dallas remembered her face vividly, and he spat, hating the memory.

"—So you see, by *alchemists*, we mean that type of... Um, a-are you listening?"

"Like I'd actually listen, you bim."

"Th-that's so mean..."

Letting the rest of the explanation go in one ear and out the other, Dallas sent an irritated question at Tim: "So what about these immortals?"

In response, Tim smirked.

"Long story short, there's a rumor that there are several immortals here, in this town. That's something Mr. Huey got out of the information broker. Apparently, Szilard, the old guy who made you immortal, already *got eaten* by one of 'em."

Got eaten. It was a weird expression, but Dallas was able to picture it easily.

He had a clear memory of it. When Dallas had been turned into a failed immortal, one of the guys who'd been working with him had gotten sucked into Szilard's right hand.

"Immortals are able to eat other immortals—including the failed type—with their right hands. However, failed immortals can't do that. You exist just to get exploited."

"Explanations like that are just gonna tick me off. Skip 'em."

"All right, okay. Don't blow your wig... Well, to put it briefly, our boss, Huey Laforet, is one of those full immortals."

Tim went on calmly revealing inside information on his organization to Dallas,

who was technically an outsider.

Dallas didn't seem interested, though. He spat, as if telling the man to hurry up and get on with it.

"You're not curious? Don't you want to know who ate Szilard the alchemist?"

"I don't give a rip."

Dallas snapped the words out as if he really didn't care, but Tim ignored his reaction and told him, anyway.

"Firo Prochainezo."

Dallas stopped in his tracks.

There, right in the middle of the road, he processed what those words meant.

One: That damn punk is still alive.

Two: That damn punk is a full immortal.

Three: That damn punk can kill me, but I can't kill him.

"What...did you just...?"

Desperately trying to deny the conclusion he'd reached, Dallas quietly broke out in a cold sweat.

He was assailed by the illusion that he'd become the weakest thing on the planet.



Immortal.

Firo Prochainezo was an immortal.

Three years ago, he'd gotten dragged into a struggle between alchemists and had gained immortality by accident.

He wasn't the only one. All the Martillo Family executives, and the three brothers who ran the Gandor Family. The robber couple, Isaac and Miria. Several of the executives' family members, who'd just happened to be at the party where the liquor of immortality had been consumed, and two Alveare employees. All these people had been pulled into the incident.

That crowd of people had been turned into immortals in a single night.

Szilard was one of the alchemists who'd been involved in that incident, and he'd been absorbed into Firo, memories, experiences, and all.

That's right: memories, experiences, and even his past—everything. Everything.

“That old guy's memories came flooding into me, and they're still there... He really was a scumbag, wasn't he? I've got memories of the stuff he enjoyed, and...to be honest, I can't understand any of 'em.”

Quietly stirring the coffee that had been set down in front of him, Firo confessed his thoughts to Maiza, little by little.

“That geezer... He stole everything other people had built up for themselves, and doing it made him happier than anything else ever did. Whether it was time or effort, the more of it they'd accumulated, the bigger the joy, the thrill, the sense that life was worth it. What he felt was lots of times greater than all the joy I've felt in my entire life! Frankly, it was a shock. That old fart was happier when he ate somebody than I was in the moment I made executive... That's what it's like in my memories.”

As the boy spoke, Maiza listened quietly, neither agreeing nor denying anything.

“Still, even those memories I can't understand—they're part of me now.”

At that point, for the first time, color came into Firo's expression. His face held nothing but pure terror, as if he were a frightened little kid.

“It's scary.”

“.....”

“Maiza, I'm scared! As long as those memories are inside me, someday, will I...will I do what he did, and—?”

Firo spoke as if begging him to see the terror that was bearing down on him, but Maiza softly held up a hand.

The palm that appeared in front of his eyes brought Firo back to himself. He looked down at his coffee again, extremely conscious of his surroundings.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“No... It’s fine.”

Before long, coffee was set down in front of Maiza, too. As he dissolved two sugar cubes into it, he murmured quietly, keeping his eyes on his coffee cup: “And so you began to want to make sure.”

“.....”

“You wanted to know whether, just maybe, you would find joy in stealing and destroying what others had built up, like Szilard.”

Maiza gave his interpretation calmly, and Firo didn’t try to argue any of it.

“But you couldn’t do that. Even so, the temptation remained. You might get pleasure out of it. It might be an incredible relief. In that case, why not try stealing something that wouldn’t affect anyone’s life and find out that way?”

When he’d gone that far, Firo started studying Maiza’s face closely.

“Maiza, are you reading my mind?”

“I only guessed.”

Chuckling, Maiza went on.

“And? How was it? How did it feel to steal what Isaac and Miria worked so hard to create?”

He skipped the conclusion and simply asked about the result.

Firo had seen the question coming, and he answered without hesitation.

“When I saw them looking like they were gonna cry, I wanted to deck myself.”

“Ha-ha, that’s a relief.”

Maiza smiled at Firo’s words without skipping a beat. He’d probably believed in him the whole time. Exchanging smiles, the two of them began drinking their coffee.

“I’ll try to forget everything about that geezer.”

“There’s no need to forget. You just have to accept it, then get past it. The question is whether you can give something up without hesitating if you think

it's holding you back."

Firo thought about Maiza's words for a little while before responding.

"I'll try."

Draining his coffee, the young guy asked Maiza another question.

"Only... Is it even possible to get over the past or give up emotions by yourself?"

"I think everybody worries about that, not just immortals."

Adding one more sugar cube, Maiza murmured with an expression that had turned just a little grave: "However, if it's a past you've actually lived through... it's probably best to give some thought to whether it's really something you should discard."

Sipping his coffee, which was now incredibly sweet, Maiza spoke, gazing into the distance.

"People have the power to get rid of sorrow and pain by themselves."

The man who'd summoned the demon on the ship and had been the first of his companions to become immortal murmured quietly, but with firm conviction: "That's what I believe."



"Curses!" Isaac shouted. "That rat Firo! How should we make him say *gyafun*?!"

"Yes, we need to put him through an argle-bargle!" Miria added.

"*Gyafun* and an argle-bargle, hmm...? Don't you think that might be a tad too cruel? A simple *gyafun* is enough! I intend to let him off with that!"

"Ooh, Isaac, you're so nice!"

Having dashed out of Alveare, Isaac and Miria were aimlessly wandering the streets of Little Italy.

"Let's see...," Isaac began. "We could give him a paper with *gyafun* written on it and ask him to read it. Or we could hunt up a fellow named Leonardo Gyafun and have them make friends."

“Perfect strategies! By the way, what’s a *gyafun*?”

In response to Miria’s fundamental question, Isaac puffed out his chest as if he’d been waiting for those words.

“From what I hear, *gyafun* is a traditional Japanese yell! They say it used to be *gyofun* up until the Edo period, but it was written as *gyafun* in a book by a Japanese fellow named Uchida Roan! The book’s title was something-something’s *Changing Faces*, so... I think it was probably like an Arsène Lupin story!”

“Wow, Isaac, you know everything!”

His partner’s praise seemed to have pleased him; as he continued, Isaac threw his chest out even farther.

“You bet I do! I can’t read Japanese, so I had old Yaguruma read it for me! It was perfect!”

“That’s what they call ‘tactics,’ isn’t it!”

“...Hmm? But you know, I’m not sure there was a gentleman thief in it...”

As Isaac worried, voicing a natural doubt, Miria yelled loudly with eyes that held no doubt at all: “I bet he was there, but since he’s a phantom thief, he hid himself really well so you couldn’t find him!”

“I see! Damn, I’d expect no less from someone with that many faces!”

“Even a hundred-eyed ogre couldn’t see through him!”

“Argh, no wonder he managed to steal my heart with such panache before I even noticed!”

As they worked their way through this completely screwy conversation, the two of them began discussing their next move.

“That said... Firo didn’t steal my heart. He stole something more important: my dreams and hope and time! He’s an archvillain! At any rate, we’re declaring war on Firo!”

“Eeeek, it’s a war!”

“He’s the enemy of our dominos, and we’ll make him apologize for every

single domino he knocked down! Until he does, we're not going back to where he is. You're prepared for that, right, Miria?!"

"Right! ...Oh!"

As they grew strangely hyper, Miria pointed out something that dashed cold water on their mood.

"But, but, Isaac, where should we sleep tonight? We left all our money and our things at the restaurant, you know?"

"Oh, that's nothing to worry about, Miria! There's an Eastern proverb that says, 'A boat at the crossing'!"

"What does that mean?"

Miria looked puzzled, and Isaac responded with an expression that was brimming over with confidence.

"Apparently, it means that when there's a big river you have to get across, there's always going to be a boat there... In other words, it'll all work out somehow!"

"Wow, Isaac, how reliable!"

His confidence bolstered by knowledge that was completely wrong, in an attempt to look cool in front of Miria, Isaac began to say whatever came into his head, without thinking about it.

"That's it! ...Heh-heh-heh. Miria. We were wandering and lost like Moses, and Noah's ark has come to us right off the bat!"

"So the Egyptians are getting a great flood!"

"Heh-heh, it's the Ten Commandments. We'll hit Firo with ten commands regarding dominos! In the name of the god of dominos!"

"Yes, Dominion, right?! And, and?! Hurry and tell me what God said, Isaac!"

Miria laughed happily, her eyes sparkling at her beau's bright idea.

"We have other friends we can count on, besides Firo's gang! We'll stay at their place tonight!"

"Ooh, brilliant! What a terrific idea!"

Making plans that clearly leaned on other people, the two of them broke into a run with no hesitation whatsoever.

Even though the sky was cloudy, their figures were dazzling—just as if the world revolved around them.



After a little while, another couple appeared where the pair had been a few moments earlier.

A man with sharp eyes who wore a coat, and a slim woman in a suit.

It was Ronny and Ennis, who'd left to go after Isaac and Miria.

It was hard to decide whether they were mismatched as a couple or well-suited to each other. They stopped in the middle of the street.

They looked around, eyes intent, but the other pair was already nowhere to be seen.

"Hmm. So we were too late... Well, never mind."

"Should we split up to search for them? ...Ronny?"

When Ennis turned around, Ronny was standing right in the middle of traffic with his eyes closed. He had his fingers pressed to his forehead, and he seemed to be thinking hard.

"Ronny? Um, is something the matter?"

At Ennis's concern, Ronny muttered, slowly opening his eyes.

"...They seem to be headed toward my destination... Well, never mind. They're this way."

"Huh? What?"

With no idea what was going on, Ennis followed her companion.

"Ronny, wait a minute! Ronny!"

Seeming perfectly sure of himself, Ronny set off, heading for the site of his "job."

As if he could see Isaac and Miria's movements clearly with his own eyes—as

if he had eyes that could see through everything.

Giving up on asking further questions, Ennis walked behind Ronny wordlessly.

What could it be? Ronny does this sort of thing sometimes. Whenever he's looking for something, he finds it right away, as if he can see things in distant places.

For quite a while now, Ennis had thought there was something strange about this executive, Ronny. She sensed a curious aura about him, as if he was something unlike ordinary humans, something closer to Maiza, Firo, and her former master, Szilard.

The strangest thing of all was that she seemed to remember meeting him somewhere before.

It wasn't a clear memory. It might have belonged to the other immortal Ennis had absorbed earlier.

On that thought, she tried to follow her own memories even deeper, but she just couldn't seem to remember Ronny Schiatto's past.

It was as if that past were territory she must not touch casually.



"So? Where the hell are we going?"

Tim answered Dallas's question easily, without obfuscation.

"Hmm? Millionaires' Row. What about it?"

"Millionaires' Row...?"

The name belonged to the classiest residential district in Manhattan, and Dallas was confused, unable to figure out the other guy's intentions. It was an area where the sort of people informally known as fat cats gathered. No matter how you looked at it, people like Tim couldn't possibly have much of a connection to the place.

However, this wasn't true for Dallas. He came from a wealthy family in New Jersey, and he knew that his grandfather had built a mansion to use as a second residence in that district.

Under normal circumstances, Dallas would have been a rich man's heir, but the only family member that he got along with was his little sister, and he'd left home.

Then he'd gotten dragged into the Szilard incident, and here he was.

"That's no place for paupers like you."

"...I've got serious respect for that arrogance of yours. I mean it."

Smiling wryly, Tim eyed Dallas as if he were looking at a mysterious life-form.

"I see. No wonder Mr. Huey chose you."

"Hunh...?"

"Whoops, you don't need to know about that. That's right... You've probably been to the place we're going a couple of times already."

Those words threw Dallas for a moment. Then, hitting on a likely possibility, he started yelling.

"You sonuva—! Don't tell me you're headed for my summer place! Why...? There's nobody there... Is somebody there?! Hey! You better not tell me Eve's there! You lousy pieces of..."

"You nailed the location. I applaud your brilliant reasoning. But...you were wrong about the last half."

Tim spoke as if to check Dallas, who was on the verge of screaming something. His expression grew serious.

"Relax. Your sister's not there now."

Tim smiled quietly, then muttered something that made no sense to Dallas.

"Instead, there's a crowd of nasty thugs—"

"Long story short... They're our sacrificial pawns."



"By the way, amigo. Where are these targets of ours, anyway?"

As they walked down Broadway, Maria sent a bored-sounding question at her partner.

Flyers blew around the street like flower petals, and signs of all colors were visible through the gaps between them. Many of the signs were so gaudy that it seemed as if neon lights were shining, even though it was broad daylight. Though some of them actually did have neon lights on them.

The beautiful embellishments drawn on the flyers appeared again as signs so huge you had to crane your neck to look up at them. Taken together, those signs formed a single advertisement for this place, this Broadway.

Even on that flashy street, Maria's appearance seemed to attract particular attention, and the men who walked past her looked back and whistled. They probably thought she was a stage actress.

Maria seemed completely oblivious to the situation. The only thoughts in her head were dangerous ones about how efficiently she'd need to wield her *katanas* in order to completely destroy the avenue.

After running through a full mental slashing simulation, she'd finally asked about the day's destination to stave off boredom.

"Is it an abandoned factory? A basement room? Where are we headed, amigo?"

It seemed much too late to be asking that question, but Tick answered it without looking annoyed.

"Welllllll, let's see. It's in a place called Millionaires' Rooow, and it's a second home that belongs to somebody named Genoard."

"Is that Genoard person our target? Can I cut them?"

As she asked the question, Maria was obviously excited, but Tick quietly shook his head.

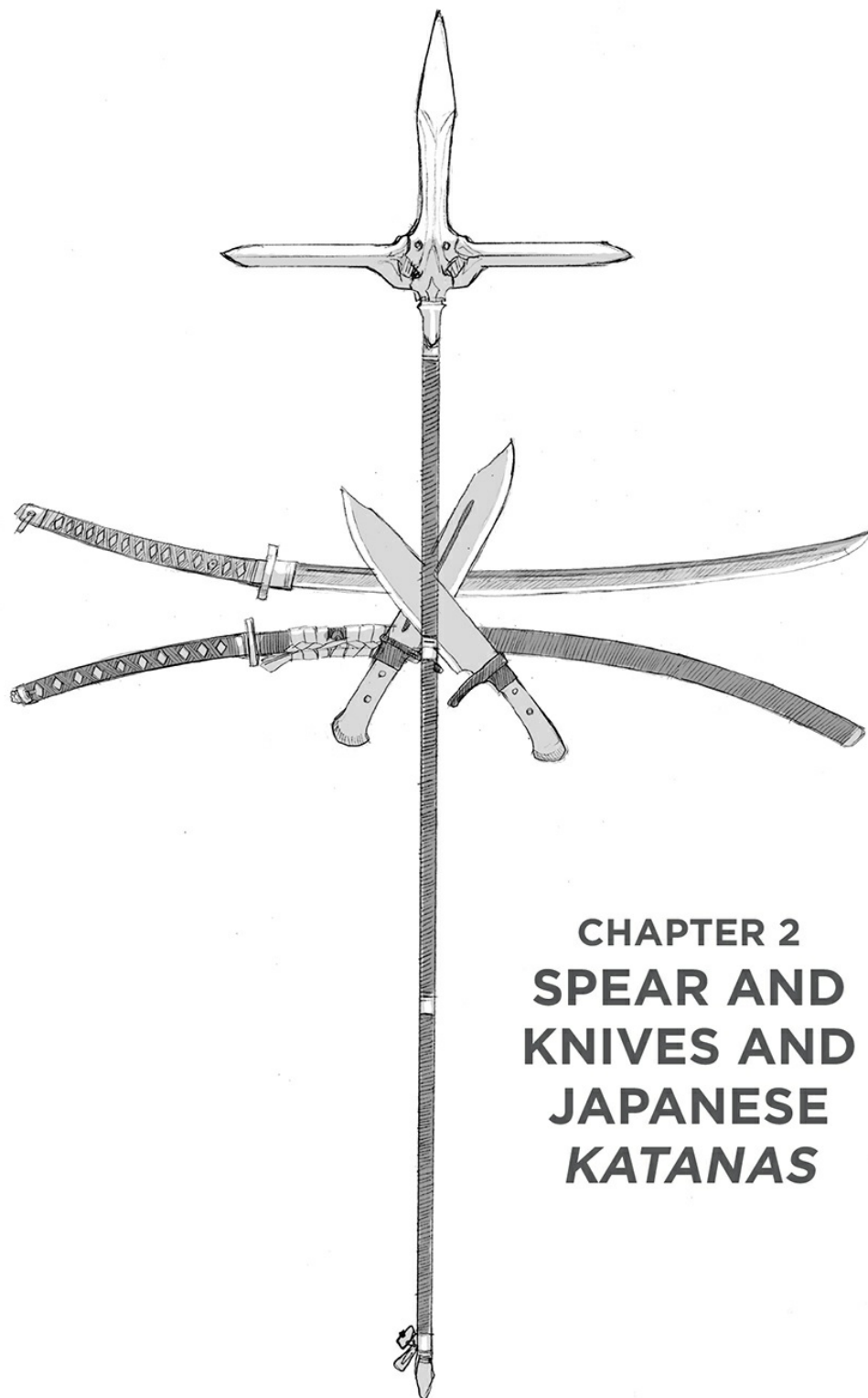
"Nooo, no. Um, see, the name of the person who's there now iiis..."

Tick fished a memo out of his pocket and read off the name that was written there.

"Um, he has a tattoo on his face..."

Reading all the way to the end of the memo, Tick finally found the noun he was looking for.

“That’s right: Jacuzzi! This says it’s a person named Mr. Jacuzzi Splot!”



CHAPTER 2
SPEAR AND
KNIVES AND
JAPANESE
KATANAS

CHAPTER 2

SPEAR AND KNIVES AND JAPANESE KATANAS

In all of New York City, Millionaires' Row in particular was a district populated entirely by "winners."

The area faced Grand Central Station, and it was no exaggeration to say that only the uncommonly fortunate members of the wealthy class made their homes there.

Among those houses, the Genoard Family's second residence towered majestically.

The building wasn't overly ornate, but this only highlighted the elegance of its design.

Its spacious garden made visitors forget that they were in the heart of Manhattan for a moment.

The house was so grand that it made you feel as if you'd wandered onto a movie set. Everyone who passed it envied the incredibly lucky, successful people who must live there, and sometimes they were flat-out jealous.

However, the resident of that fine mansion was currently...

...wearing an indescribably pathetic expression and crying, like an actor in a comedy film.

Big tears streamed from both his eyes, as if he were a little kid who'd been scolded.

The "winner" was crying up a storm.

"Ughk...*hic*... L-look, I mean, I...I—I was just... I just thought we should clean real thoroughly...and I...*hic*! I had n-no idea this would happen..."

Inside the mansion, in a corner of a hall that looked like it belonged in a state guest house, a guy was crying, and several other young people were standing

around him.

“I...I—I—I...I mean, this vase... Who even knows how much it cost...”

“Jacuzzi. Are you going to feel more or less sorry depending on the cost of that vase?”

“Eep! ...I...I—I, I’m sorry, I didn’t, that’s not what I...”

“Okay, I know, just don’t cry.”

The guy—Jacuzzi—glanced fearfully at the companions who stood around him.

He was still young enough that you could probably have called him a boy, and he had a distinctive sword-shaped tattoo over the left half of his face.

However, in sharp contrast to that tattoo, there was absolutely no spirit in the young guy’s expression, and the look in his eyes made even the people who saw it feel timid.

One individual who seemed to be the guy’s friend had been attempting to simultaneously lecture him and console him for a while now, but it really didn’t look as if he was going to stop crying anytime soon.

“S-so, so listen, Jon. *Hic*... I really can’t do thiiiis... I-if I have to live in a mansion like this one, my heart’s not gonna last much longer.”

“Jacuzzi, c’mon, how many times do you think you’ve said that already? Fang and I negotiated and got a place where we could all sleep. You guys got run out of Chicago, and now you get to live in a mansion like this for free; talk about unbelievable luck. I’m jealous.”

“You live here, too, Jon...”

Even as he sniveled, Jacuzzi argued, and the guy he’d called Jon shot back sharply.

“Quit your whining. You take care of this mansion properly, and in exchange, they let a shabby mob like you get away with living here. You’d better be grateful to Miss Eve.”

Jon was planning to keep grumbling for a good long time, but their other

friends had had enough, and they calmed him down.

“Let him be, Jon. We only found these jobs by accident, too. If the boss hadn’t mentioned them, we wouldn’t be here.”

“Uaah, Jon. You make Jacuzzi cry. That no good. Poor guy.”

One man was Asian, and the other was a brown-skinned giant. There were all kinds of other people in the mansion, and it wasn’t easy to say exactly what sort of group they were. The one clear thing about them was that no matter which of them you looked at, it was obvious that they weren’t upright citizens.

As if drawn by Jacuzzi’s tearful voice, one by one, the people in the mansion began to gather in the corner of the hall.

Jon, worried that the situation would get worse, shook his head and sighed deeply. Then he thumped Jacuzzi on the shoulder as if he’d given up.

“All right, Jacuzzi. I’m done yelling at you. I’ll tell Miss Eve about the vase, so you hurry and get this cleaned up.”

“O-okay. Thanks. But I’ll apologize to Eve myself, properly.”

“You moron. Are you planning to meet a sheltered young lady with that scary inked-up face of yours?”

“S-sorry...”

Their conversation petered out at that point, and Jacuzzi began picking up the shards of the vase in silence.

“What, it’s over already?”

“Boring.”

Muttering self-centered stuff, the young guys who’d gathered there began to scatter, going back to wherever they’d been earlier.

Watching them do as they pleased, Jon added one last comment: “Hunh. Selfish jerks. Jacuzzi, run a tighter ship, wouldja?”

“Uh... B-but...”

“You’re technically our leader, y’know.”



Jacuzzi Splot was a *half-fledged* gang leader.

Through hard work and his natural quick wits, he'd turned what had begun as a loose group of Chicago boys and girls without families into an organization that could stand up to a small mafia outfit all on its own.

It wasn't that he was particularly charismatic. People just tended to gravitate to him, for some reason. America's biggest crybaby gang leader, whose charm lay not in the fact that he was a man who could be relied on but in an unsteadiness that made people stick around because they were worried about him—that was Jacuzzi.

When their group, which had no name in particular, had arrived in Manhattan two winters ago, they'd been half running from trouble they'd made with the Chicago mafia.

Even though they were only boys and girls, their group had several dozen members, and the first thing they'd had to do was find a place to live. This issue, which had seemed like their most difficult problem, had found a solution in an unexpected place.

Their friends Jon and Fang were a bartender and cook, and through a certain connection, they'd found work at the Genoard Family's second residence—in other words, at this mansion.

Later, when the head of the family, Eve Genoard, had returned to her main residence in New Jersey, she'd asked Jon and Fang to act as caretakers for this house.

Eve had passed the job along to Jon and Fang because they'd won her trust during an incident that had occurred a short while earlier. Spotting an opportunity, Jon had asked, "As a matter of fact, we have some friends who are looking for a house. Since we'll be taking care of this big mansion, would it be all right if we had them help out?"

Eve hadn't suspected anything, and she'd agreed. In fact, Jon hadn't been lying. If there was a problem, it lay in the fact that he had several dozen "friends."

They obviously weren't all here, but at present, there were about twenty

people taking care of the mansion. They'd been making bootleg liquor and conducting other questionable activities, but clandestine jobs like those were conducted over in Little Italy, far away from this place, so as not to cause trouble for Eve.

Technically, they should have discussed it with the mafia who ran that area, but they'd had friends killed by the Chicago mafia in the past, and Jacuzzi was reluctant to join forces with them. The areas where they did their jobs were apparently run by minor outfits, the Gandor Family and the Martillo Family. Jacuzzi did have that information down properly.

They weren't syndicates with nasty reputations, but Jacuzzi had done his level best to keep from getting involved with them. If they ever did come into conflict, he'd thought (counting his chickens before they hatched) that they might be able to handle little outfits like those somehow, and that was why they were doing their jobs in their territories.

However...

"It's been nearly two years, and they haven't said anything, so it's probably okay, right...?"

Jacuzzi spent his days inwardly on edge, wondering whether a mafia bullet would come his way today, or whether the hitman would fire at him tomorrow.

Every time the doorbell rang, his spine stiffened, and every time there was a noise outside the window, he shrieked. Every single day.

And today, once again—he froze up at the sound of the doorbell.

Di-ding-di-ding-di-ding-di-ding.

It was a strident sound.

The bell was being rung so vigorously that you couldn't immediately tell it was a doorbell, and the noise was ill-mannered in the extreme.

That made Jacuzzi's reaction even faster.

A flashy doorbell. → Somebody's ringing it violently. → The mafia is violent. → The mafia is here to kill us. → That has to be it. → We've gotta hide!

"Hey, Jacuzzi... What're you doing down there all of a sudden?"

On seeing Jacuzzi, who had crouched down in the shadows of the table that the vase had been on, Jon spoke to him, sounding mystified.

“Shhh! E-e-everybody else needs to go hide, too! Now!”

Jacuzzi issued a rapid order, trying to secure his friends’ safety, but his tension was derailed by a woman’s voice that called from the entrance hall.

“Jacuzzi, Jacuzzi! Some familiar faces just dropped by!”

The voice belonged to a scar-covered woman who wore glasses over her eye patch.

It was Jacuzzi’s sweetheart, Nice. They were currently living together... And although it sounded good when you put it that way, there were about twenty other friends living with them, so it wasn’t exactly a spicy situation.

“Huh? N-N-Nice? What do you mean, familiar faces...?”

Jacuzzi looked perplexed, and then he heard yells from the people in question.

“Hey, Jacuzzi! Long time, no see!”

“Yes, it’s been ages!”

Timidly, Jacuzzi peeked into the entrance hall—and there stood a couple of friends he saw in town from time to time.

“Isaac, Miria!”

At the sight of his unexpected guests, Jacuzzi forgot that he’d been shaking and ran to the entryway.

“What’s the occasion?! If you’d told me you were coming, I would have had food waiting for you!”

“Heh-heh-heh, no need to trouble yourself about that! We’ve already had lunch!”

“Isaac, we were setting up dominos, so we didn’t eat.”

When Miria pointed this out, Isaac abruptly remembered that he was hungry.

“...Well, a samurai acts like he’s full, even when he isn’t!”

“Wow, Isaac, you’re a samurai?! Hara-kiri!”

“That’s right, Miria. No matter what a samurai eats, when he slits his stomach, it all comes out. That means there’s no point in eating anything! Don’t do pointless stuff; just grin and bear it. That’s the samurai way!”

“Yes, bushido!”

As his unexpected guests ran through this stupefying conversation, Jacuzzi began to smile, looking relieved.

“Wait, Isaac, weren’t you a gunslinger?”

Remembering his first encounter with the pair, Jacuzzi showed them into the Genoard mansion’s drawing room.

“Ooh...”

“This is amazing! It’s right up there with Alveare!”

When they saw the drawing room, Isaac and Miria marveled openly.

They’d initially been struck by how large the room was, but when they took in the rest of it, the ceiling, which was decorated with a painting of an angel, leaped out at them. It didn’t seem at all flamboyant; it was a pleasant landscape done in soft colors, with a seated angel in one corner.

The reliefs and paintings on the walls had been selected with an eye to how well they’d match the mood of the room, rather than simple opulence, and there was nothing overly fussy or nouveau riche about them.

The exquisite balance of the room resulted in a deeply elegant beauty that initially provoked admiration in those who saw it, then soothed them.

“This is fantastic, Jacuzzi! I heard you were living in a mansion, but I had no idea it was this swanky!”

“Yes, you’re really, really rich!”

“No, no...”

Jacuzzi had neither built nor bought the mansion, but he felt as if it were his own house that was being complimented, and he smiled bashfully.

“It didn’t look much different from my folks’ house on the outside, so I didn’t

realize it was such a nice place!”

“Oh... M-me too!”

“Huh? ...I-Isaac, Miria... Y-your families’ houses...?”

The pair’s unexpected comments bewildered Jacuzzi, but whether they hadn’t heard his question or were simply ignoring it, Isaac and Miria crossed to the center of the drawing room without answering.

Jacuzzi didn’t try to pursue the matter further, either. Instead, he hastily ran to the kitchen to make some tea for his friends, whom he hadn’t seen in a while.

Isaac, Miria, and Jacuzzi had first met at the end of 1931. On a long-distance train that was traveling from Chicago to New York, the three of them had made each other’s acquaintance and subsequently gotten pulled into a robbery of that train, executed by multiple groups (one of which had been none other than Jacuzzi’s gang).

More accurately, they’d gotten involved in the incident just after they’d greeted each other, and as the affair played out, both parties had greatly influenced each other.

After the train arrived at its destination, they’d been separated in the confusion, but afterward, they’d accidentally run into each other again in the city and had deepened their friendship. One was a couple who stood out even if they said nothing, and the other was a guy with a tattooed face who made his presence felt just by being there. They’d been able to spot each other easily just by passing on the street.

And today, the pair had visited Jacuzzi’s “home” for the first time, but— “Still, I really want to make that guy Firo say *gyafun* somehow!”

“Yes, so do I!”

—Jacuzzi had wanted to have a leisurely chat about the incident on the train and other things, but for the past little while, Isaac and Miria had done nothing but complain about a young man named Firo.

“That Firo person was pretty awful. Knocking your dominos down, and then

getting mad at you...”

Good-natured Jacuzzi just nodded along, agreeing with what they said, and he didn’t seem to have realized that this Firo fellow was a Martillo Family executive. Of course, it was doubtful whether Isaac and Miria remembered that, either.

“That’s it!”

“Ooh! What is it, Isaac?”

Isaac had slapped his knee and stood up, and Miria looked at him with eyes filled with expectation.

“I’d completely forgotten, but we’re thieves. Right, Miria?”

“Yes, serial robbers!”

“Huh...?”

Jacuzzi didn’t understand what they were saying; he cocked his head to one side, smiling vacantly.

Failing to notice their friend’s reaction, Isaac and Miria began to disappear into their own world, as usual.

“So, see, I decided we’re going to steal something that’s special to Firo!”

“Eeeeeek! How dastardly!”

“Well now, hold on, Miria. True, stealing because of a personal grudge isn’t a good thing. It’s as low as you can get. So here’s what we’ll do! First we’ll steal Firo’s special thing, and we’ll write a threatening note! Then we’ll say we got it back for him!”

“Ooh, a put-up job!”

——?

Realizing that the pair’s objective was beginning to get subtly distorted, Jacuzzi grew even more perplexed. Whether or not the pair noticed this, Isaac, eyes shining, was preparing to take the subject to its conclusion.

“If we do that, Firo will be happy, right? At a time like that, I’m positive we’ll be able to make up with him properly.”

“Yay! What a great plan!”

The conclusion was completely different from their original intent, and even though he knew it was tactless, Jacuzzi voiced his doubts in spite of himself.

“Huh? Didn’t you want to make him say *gyaa* or *gwuff* or something?”

At this accurate verbal jab from an outsider, for just a moment, Isaac and Miria glanced at Jacuzzi—and then they looked at each other and started saying “Hmm” and “Um” as if they were stumped.

“Drat. Miria. We hadn’t resolved the fundamental problem, had we?”

“*Gyafunnn.*”

“Hmm... No, hang on. I bet *gyafun* is a delighted yell! Let’s say that’s it, all right?!”

“...You two like that Firo guy, don’t you?”

As he spoke, Jacuzzi smiled cheerfully.

In response, without denying it, Isaac and Miria added confidently: “Right now, Firo is our enemy! But we like him a lot!”

“Yes, we really can’t hate him!”

The two gave absolutely cloudless smiles. They were contagious, and the young tattooed guy was on the verge of laughing out loud, when...

At that very moment—

Di-ding. Ding-ding-ding.

For the second time that day, the doorbell of the Genoard Family’s second residence rang.



As they approached the street that held Millionaires’ Row, Maria asked a question she’d already asked countless times.

“Say, Tick. Can I cut them?”

She spoke in the tone of a woman trying to coax a favor out of a man, and Tick responded in the negative, speaking like a child.

“Nooooo, you can’t. Todaaaay, we’re just going there to talk.”

“There’s no way it’s going to go well, amigo! We know it’ll turn into a fight, and victory always goes to the swift, so let’s cut about three of ’em! If we do that, they’re bound to settle down, you know?”

“Nooope. You’re not allowed to do anything that rough!”

Tick’s voice had gone a little stern, and Maria looked up at the clouds as if she was bored.

Gazing at the gray sky, where there wasn’t a shred of blue to be seen, Maria grumbled quietly to the young man who walked beside her.

“Tch... I thought you’d understand, Tick.”

“Understand what?”

“You’re always snipping people with your scissors, right? Like it’s a whole lot of fun! So, see, I thought maybe you’d understand how I feel when I want to cut people.”

Maria pouted as she spoke. When Tick answered, he sounded slightly troubled.

“...I don’t hurt just anybody, you know.”

He seemed different from usual. With her face still turned up to the sky, Maria glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Mm... Why do you want to cut people, Maria?”

It was rare for Tick to ask questions, and Maria answered instantly, without even thinking about it.

“Because it’s fun, amigo! Not just people; animals, or plants, or things that aren’t even alive! Iron’s fine, or anything else. Cutting things is incredibly fun, that’s all!”

Maria spoke without a shred of guilt. Smiling again, she turned to face Tick.

“When I cut things or people, I feel like I’ve gotten that much stronger! The tougher or harder the opponent is, the better I feel, amigo! There are things nobody’s ever managed to cut before, and I—or rather we, Murasámia and I—

are going to cut them! That's unbelievably fun! So, see, I can't stop. So let me cut them... Okay?"

She tried to steer the conversation back to the beginning, but seeing that Tick was silent, she exhaled, seeming to give up.

Then, although it wasn't possible to tell what her companion was thinking, this time it was Maria's turn to ask him a question.

"You mean it's not like that for you, amigo? You do it because it's fun for you, too, right? You're doing that job because you like hurting people and seeing blood, no?"

"—Yes. It's fun."

Maria's question had sounded mostly certain already, and as Tick answered, he was smiling faintly.

"But it's also really sad."

"What do you mean?"

"Say, Maria? Family ties, the bonds between people, duty and humanity... Do you believe in things like that? Do you believe in ties that can never be cut, no matter how badly people are wounded or how much pain they're in?"

He'd answered her question with a question, and after giving it just a little thought, Maria said: "I don't really understand stuff like that, and I've never thought about it. But...if you believe they exist, then they probably do, right? I think that sort of thing is different for everybody, amigo."

In a way, her words could have been taken as either a textbook answer or an evasion. Tick picked up one of the pairs of scissors he wore at his waist, and as he spoke, his eyes were reflected in the finely honed blades.

"What I like about it isn't the part where I cut people. It's the moments when I sense those 'things that have no shape.' That's what's fun for me."

".....?"

"You see—I can't believe in anything that doesn't have a shape."

There was a faraway look in Tick's eyes, and his voice seemed flat. The way he

spoke hadn't changed at all. However, to Maria, it seemed as if the soul inside the young man had been switched for one that belonged to a completely different person.

"Things that break are the only things I can believe in. If it can break, that means it really existed... I want to see that, to see the instant when human bonds break. That's why I hurt people. That's why I keep causing them pain."

Maria listened quietly to Tick.

They'd talked lots of times before now. She'd interacted with him for more than a year as a colleague who, although he was a little childish, was someone you couldn't hate.

However...she'd just realized something. For that entire year and a half, she hadn't known anything about this young guy. All she'd known was his surface, but his true nature was much, much deeper.

There hadn't been any special trigger. She'd simply asked, quite casually. Yet even so, Tick had confessed his own feelings easily.

Maria didn't know whether he just trusted her that much, or whether he would have told anybody who'd asked.

Everything about Tick's monologue had been unexpected, and Maria didn't know how to respond. She just listened. Listened very closely to the words that left the young man's lips.

"...But I want to believe."

Changing the cadence of his words a little, Tick murmured, looking up slightly.

"I want to believe there are things that will never, ever break, no matter how much pain someone takes, or how badly they're wounded."

"....."

"The things I felt for my dad and my brother, when my dad got rid of me... If someone hurt me, would my feelings for them have broken? Maybe that's all I want to know. And so, with all sorts of people, I take these scissors, and—"

Snick.

That sound ended Tick's speech.

His expression was no different from the way it always was, and the only thing in his squinty eyes was an innocent smile.

Maria thought for a while, but when she spoke, it was in her usual tone, and her expression wasn't particularly grave.

"Hmm. Yes, if you believe in them, I really do think they're probably there. Things that won't break, too! I mean, listening to you—it's not like anybody can prove they *don't* exist! That means it's just a question of whether you believe or not, amigo!"

Maria wasn't trying to console him or give him a superficial peace of mind. She just said what she felt, in a matter-of-fact way. Tick looked a little surprised. Then he smiled his usual, easygoing smile back at her.

"I wonder. I guess you're right. You sure are strong, Maria."

"Believing's important, amigo! A long time ago, my grandpa told me that as long as you believe, there's nothing in the world you can't cut!"

"But that would mean there really aren't any bonds that won't breeeak."

"Then it's a race! Let's see whose belief in their idea is stronger!"

Maria's smile was genuine, and Tick nodded firmly.

Then, as if amending his previous monologue, he added one thought: "Yes... I believe. That's why I've hurt aaall sorts of people up till now. And so, someday, I'm sure somebody will hurt and break me, too, you know? I'm prepared for that. Even today, the people we're going to meet might hurt me and kill me. Before that happens, like the people whose spirits I've broken, I get the feeling that the things inside me—my duty and my ties to you and the Gandors—might just crumble, and—"

Before he'd finished speaking, Tick felt something cold against his throat, and he stopped walking.

When he looked, Maria had soundlessly drawn her *katana* and was holding it against his thin throat.

"Whoa, Maria, what're you doing?"

There was no particular fear of death in his words. Maria stopped walking as well and spoke in a voice that held no intent to kill.

“None of that. You mustn’t think things like that.”

She was watching him with steady eyes, and Tick looked away, bashfully. It was as if he wasn’t even aware of the threat to his life at the base of his throat.

“I’m your guard, remember? I’m not about to lose to anybody, amigo! I lost to that Vino guy once before...but I’ll never lose again! Not to the people we’re going to see, and not to Vino. Never again! So, see, you couldn’t possibly get hurt, Tick. Believe that! That’s one thing we can both believe, isn’t it? There’s no contradiction there, amigo!”

The only thing Maria believed in was her own strength.

For that very reason, she wanted Tick, the person she was protecting, to believe in it, too.

To believe in her strength, to believe she was stronger than anything or anybody.

It wasn’t clear whether he’d picked up on that feeling or not, but Tick smiled quietly as he answered.

“Uh-huh, I believe. You’ll never lose to anybody, Maria.”

Tick nodded emphatically, with a smile that seemed to be directed at something inside himself.

The pair smiled at each other innocently, not realizing that they’d passed the house they were headed for quite a while earlier.

They had no idea what sort of visitors had just arrived at that house...



The Genoard Family second residence

“Uh, so, who’s Jacuzzi Splot?”

The moment he stepped into the entrance hall, the bespectacled guy with the black cloth tied around his head spoke insolently.

“Um, w-well... It’s...me.”

Jacuzzi identified himself nervously, scanning the faces of the visitors.

There were probably about ten of them. In an ordinary house, things would have felt cramped, but the mansion’s entryway still had room to spare. When he’d seen the first visitor—the man with the black cloth—he’d thought he might actually be a mafia hitman, but the sight of the timid-looking girl behind him offered some relief to that thought.

The people who’d come in behind those two were dressed in a variety of ways, and Jacuzzi decided that they seemed a little like his own group.

“U-um... What do you need?”

Even so, Jacuzzi didn’t let his guard down completely, and as he asked the others why they were there, his eyes were uneasy.

Isaac and Miria were still in the drawing room, discussing what “Firo’s special thing” might be. The only ones near the entryway were Jacuzzi, Nice, and a few of their companions who’d gathered to see what was up.

“Whoops, my apologies. I hadn’t introduced myself yet. I’m Tim. The folks behind me are my friends, and you can just ignore them.”

“Uh... Uh-huh.”

After giving them the bare minimum of information, Tim calmly stated his business.

“I’ll get right to the point—Do you people *want to become immortal?*”



About the time Jacuzzi was wondering, *Is this some sort of missionary visit...?* in one of the mansion’s inner rooms, a young woman had woken up.

It must have been the repeated sound of the doorbell that had done it. She’d

been sleeping shallowly and then slowly sat up in bed.

She'd only meant to rest for a little while, but apparently, she'd ended up falling asleep.

I have to hurry to the garden and get back to trimming the trees.

Even as she thought this, she recalled the dream she'd been having.

Her dream had faithfully re-created a certain scene she'd lived through nearly two years ago.

She'd been in a crowd.

There was a man who was said to have plotted a large-scale act of terrorism against the government, although the details of the act hadn't been released. This was a curious mob, people hoping to get a look at the man as he was transported under guard.

In that place, exposed to the eyes of a host of police officers, she was the only one who was there for another reason.

She'd come to rescue that terrorist, her own father...

There had been another plan, one in which the passengers of a certain train would have been taken hostage in order to demand his release.

However, because of the convergence of several factors, that plan had collapsed. She'd lost all her comrades as well. Or rather, it had been made clear to her that they had never been real comrades in the first place.

Still, she hadn't been very enthusiastic about that operation to begin with, and her heart hadn't been plunged into despair.

That said, she couldn't give her father up.

She'd gone to the site of his transport alone, prepared to crush every officer there.

The moment her father appeared and was made to climb into the police van, she took up the knives she wore at her waist, preparing to cut down the police officer in front of her and launch into a run, but— Just then, her father's lips moved.

As though he knew she was there, watching him, he moved his lips, his expression filled with calm self-confidence.

It was a brief phrase, just a couple of words:

<Don't worry.>

She hadn't mastered the art of lip reading. For that reason, she wasn't sure that was exactly what he'd said.

The one thing she was sure of...was that her father had no fears for his own future safety.

And—as a result, instead of breaking into a run, she'd hesitated and had lost her final chance.

As if looking down at her own figure, standing dazed and rooted to the spot, she woke.

Why did I dream about that now?

Come to think of it, the dress she was wearing today was the same black dress she'd worn on that train. She'd been wearing it simply because it was sleeveless and easy to move in. Could it have influenced that dream?

She still wasn't certain her decision had been the right one.

However, at this point, there was nothing to do but believe in that smile of her father's and wait. She lived from day to day with that thought in mind.

The new friends she'd met here in New York had taught her all sorts of different values, things she hadn't had in her life before. Crybaby Jacuzzi, Nice the mad bomber, fantastically strong Donny, the knife users Nick and Jack, Fang the cook, Jon the bartender, and...the Rail Tracer. Many other diverse people had gathered here as well, and every one of them was a type of person she'd never met before.

Beings who never jumped at shadows, who believed in each other with a purity that was almost excessive.

At first, she'd been constantly bewildered, and even so, they'd welcomed her warmly. This had made Chané a little happy. She'd been surprised that an emotion like that had welled up inside her, but it certainly hadn't felt bad.

She loved her father. In order to protect him, she thought she'd do anything.

And with equal intensity—she loved her current companions.

She spent her days wondering whether there was anything she could do for them. She felt as though, for the first time in her life, she'd found her own reason for living, and so she'd stayed with Jacuzzi's group.

She had wanted to make sure she wouldn't regret the present, the days she'd chosen to have.

To that end, as her contribution to their communal life, she was on her way out to tend the garden again today, but— When she glanced through a window into that garden, a clear sense of wrongness stopped her in her tracks.

There was someone at the mansion's back door.

Two people, a man and a woman.

She'd never seen their faces before, but there was one thing she could make out clearly, even at a distance.

The man was holding sharp scissors. The woman wore two swords at her waist.

A sharp light came into her eyes, and, wordlessly, she left the room.

She was gripping a knife, which she'd drawn from nowhere in particular, in each hand.

As the young woman—Chané Laforet—closed the door behind her, she had a singular thought in mind: She would eliminate anyone who hurt her friends and her current way of life. Even if she had to die to do it.

With that firm resolution in her heart, Chané quietly began to walk through the mansion.



"Immortal? That's, uh..."

"Oh, yeah, I know, I know. I get what you're trying to say... So you don't have to say it."

The guy who'd introduced himself as Tim checked Jacuzzi's words with a

hand, then, adjusting his glasses, went on with his spiel.

“Sure, if I say stuff like that out of the blue, of course you’ll think I’m a loony. But if I said it later, casual-like, you’d treat me like I was nuts, anyway, and actually, I’d come off looking worse that way. It’s tricky.”

“No, well, that’s true, but... I-if you know that, then you just shouldn’t say it at all...”

“So, what we’re here for is... Hey, Adele. Explain it.”

Ignoring what Jacuzzi had pointed out, Tim snapped his fingers, signaling to the woman who stood behind him. The woman’s eyes looked vacant; she seemed timid, and her expression was constantly sleepy.

The woman—Adele—flinched at Tim’s voice, then hastily took a step forward and bowed to Jacuzzi.

When she did, Jacuzzi saw some sort of stick-shaped implement on her back, but he didn’t especially bother himself about it. He only said “Um...” and ducked his head in a nod.

“Oh, y-yes. Then, well, um, I’ll explain things, so... Th-thank you for... listening...”

Maybe Adele was nervous; she was very nearly incoherent. Tim smiled with an expression that told her to get her act together, and the man in the suit jacket behind Tim and Adele was glaring at both of them with murder in his eyes.

Who are these people? They don’t look like they get along well, and they brought up immortality all of a sud—

When he’d thought that far, Jacuzzi remembered: He’d once heard about the existence of “immortals” from a local information broker.

On that transcontinental train, he and his friends had met a boy. The boy’s name had been Czeslaw Meyer, and apparently, he was an alchemist with an immortal body.

He’d had trouble believing that story when he heard it, and he hadn’t mentioned it to his friends.

Up until just now, it had dropped clear out of his memory...but in his heart, Jacuzzi remembered it again, and it made him hesitate to completely deny what these people were saying.

Without noticing Jacuzzi's complicated thoughts, Adele began talking in a detached way.

"Um...you were...being pursued by the Russo Family, and that's why you left Chicago and came here, correct? Um, I mean, if I'm wrong, I'm sorry..."

"?!"

How did she know that?

The fact she'd just mentioned should have been something only he and his friends knew. Even if one of those friends had blabbed about it at a tavern, why did this woman know about it?

Up until then, Nice, Jon, and the others had been watching with expressions that said, *Huh. Look at the shifty people*, but the moment they heard those words, their expressions grew tense.

If the visitors were somehow connected to the Russo Family, this was a flat-out emergency for Jacuzzi's group.

The atmosphere in the entrance hall had abruptly changed, but Adele went on in a feeble voice.

"U-um, please...don't misunderstand... We aren't related to the Russo Family in any way..."

Even after hearing that, Jacuzzi's group didn't let their guard down. Possibly because they'd picked up on the tension in the air, their other companions began to gather around the perimeter of the entrance hall, trickling in from other rooms.

"What's up, Jacuzzi?"

"Who are these guys?"

"Enemies? Are they enemies?"

"Should we get 'em?"

“Hya-haah!”

The latecomers didn't know what was going on, and they each said whatever they wanted to, but Jacuzzi was watching the other group silently.

Since there were more thugs now, Adele wore an expression like a frightened puppy. Even then, she kept speaking.

“Eep... Um... So you see, we've been...searching for people like you...”

As if to follow her, Tim spoke up, grinning.

“A group that's organized and has lots of members but isn't connected to any mafia outfit. We've been looking all over New York for something like that.”

In contrast to Adele's voice, a harsh vibe hung around Tim's words. He'd probably had her do the talking up until now so he could use that contrast to ensure that what he said made a vivid impact on the others.

“I'll be blunt: Team up with us. *Your reward will be immortal bodies.* That's enough, isn't it?”

And so the conversation came full circle. Although he'd added the *Team up with us* part, as long as the word *immortals* was in there, what they said didn't feel the slightest bit real.

“Listen, when you say *immortal*, what do you...?”

As if in answer to Jacuzzi's question, Tim looked around at the crowd of his friends who'd gathered in the hall, then raised his voice.

“Look at that. I'd say we've got enough of an audience for our magic trick... Adele!”

“Y-yessir!”

As she responded, Adele reached for the sticklike object on her back...and then ducked her head at Dallas, who was standing beside her.

“Um, I think this is probably going to hurt a lot, so I'll apologize now! I'm sorry!”

“Huh?”

Just as he was about to ask *What's that supposed to mean?* the sound of

inane voices reached his ears.

“Heeeey! I just heard someone say they’re doing magic tricks! Where, where?!”

“Yes, doves at full gallop!”

A couple who seemed to be dressed for a party poked their heads out of the drawing room.

The moment he saw their faces, a memory rose in Dallas’s mind.

A couple dressed to go to a party.

The couple who’d been in the car that had hit him that day, the day he’d been sent to the bottom of the river.

This information sparked inside Dallas, and he found himself face-to-face with a coincidence in progress.

“*You!* You’re the_____”

His hate-filled scream broke off in the middle.

Adele had been beside him, bowing, but a cross-shaped spear had suddenly appeared in her hand— —and had been violently thrust up through Dallas’s throat.

“Huh...?”

Unable to process the terrible sight in front of him, Jacuzzi made a brief, dim-sounding noise.

The next instant, when fresh blood splashed onto his tattoo—
“WaaaaaAAaaaaaah!”

With a scream that could have been either shock or a tearful wail, Jacuzzi fainted.

“Oh, come on. Is this guy really the boss of these punks?”

As Tim watched Jacuzzi collapse, knees first, he exhaled, sounding disgusted.

“Now’s a real inconvenient time to pass out on us, pal.”



Turn back the clock slightly.

“Sorry, sorry. It looks like we went one street too far.”

“Get it together, amigo.”

By the time Tick and Maria realized they’d gone past it, they were already a good distance from their destination.

This was because when they’d backtracked, they’d come from the street behind; thus, the nearest door ended up being the rear entrance.

“It’ll be a bit of a detour, but we should probably go around to the front, right?”

“Aww, why bother! Let’s just charge in through the back!”

“You can’t ‘charge iin.’”

Tick tried to stop her, but Maria stepped into the back garden through the small entrance without a second thought.

“It’ll be fine! We’re just talking and threatening them, anyway, right? In that case, we’ve got to make sure they know we have the upper hand first! My kills are always based on surprise attacks. I start with a sneak attack, clean up all the nearby mooks, then finally take on the target one-on-one, fair and square! It feels *fantastico*, amigo!”

“Uh-huh, but...”

Tick put out a hand to stop her. Then he realized he was still holding his scissors, so he withdrew his hand and put them back in his belt.

As he was doing that, Maria reached the back door. The garden was designed to run from side to side along the mansion, which meant there was hardly any distance at all between the back gate and the door.

With no hesitation, Maria strode forward, set her hand on the door, which was rather small for the back entrance of a mansion, and— “!”

Somebody’s there.

Soundlessly leaping back from the door, Maria set her fingers on the trusty *katanas* at her waist.

Click.

Just as she began to draw her swords, the mansion's back door slowly swung outward with a dull sound.

Standing there...was a woman with sharp eyes, wearing a black dress.

She was a pretty girl about Maria's age, with a good figure. If you looked at her appearance alone, that was the impression you got, but the light in her eyes was endlessly sharp. She probably would have been able to make a timid person freeze up just by looking at them.

"...Afternoon, amiga."

Quietly, Maria murmured to the woman who'd appeared at the back door. She hadn't spoken with her usual lightness; she was clearly wary.

The sharpness in the other woman's eyes concerned her—and so did the things she was holding in both hands.

They were hunting knives with blades that were easily over eight inches long, the sort that looked as if they'd be useful in a survival situation. The knife blades seemed a little too thick for a lady to brandish, but the woman in the dress held one in each hand.

Without relaxing her guard, Chané examined the Mexican girl's face.

I really don't know her.

She would have liked to settle the matter peaceably, but right before she opened the door, she'd heard the woman say "surprise attack" and "sneak attack." Whatever her reasons, if she was planning to attack this mansion, Chané would show her no mercy.

As a result of this resolution, Chané had opened the door with her knives already in her hands. Just as she'd anticipated, the Mexican girl was already on the point of drawing her swords, and she'd begun to radiate clear, murderous intent.

"What's the matter? Say something, amiga! I'll introduce myself, just for the record: I'm Maria, and I'm a hired killer!"

The Latina introduced herself in a way that was likely to start a fight, but

Chané made no attempt to respond.

More accurately, Chané was physically incapable of speaking.

That meant she couldn't introduce herself in return. Though even if she had been able to speak, she wouldn't have bothered.

"Tch! Silent types never get popular, y'know."

Muttering this, the woman who'd introduced herself as Maria smiled brightly and returned her half-drawn *katanas* to their sheaths.

The instant the small, metallic *click* of the guards reached Chané's ears—Maria had crouched down low *and was already right at her feet*.

In one fluid motion, she drew Murasámia and swept it sideways, aiming for Chané's ankles.

The tip of the blade drew an arc, seeming to lick the mansion's wall, and in the blink of an eye, passed through the space where Chané had been standing.

However, her legs were no longer there. A moment before Maria had drawn her sword, Chané had jumped up, and her shoes had come to rest on the handle of the wide-open door.

Then, in a flowing motion, she leaped, rotating as she passed over Maria, who was currently drawing her other blade.

Chané landed back-to-back with Maria, and even in that moment, her knives were already reaching behind her.

A metallic *clang*.

She'd struck with a knife as she turned around, and Maria's second sword had stopped it. There was no telling when she'd drawn it, but the long blade extended over her slim shoulder.

A second *clang*.

Maria had spun around, slashing with Murasámia, and Chané's other knife had caught it.



Sparks flew, and the two sprang apart, putting some distance between themselves.

However, in the next instant, they both launched themselves into motion, charging straight at each other in identical attitudes.

Yet another *clang*.

They leaped apart, then closed in on each other again with a force that seemed nearly magnetic.

Both seemed to fight right up close to their opponents as a rule, and both charged at each other, then jumped back.

Repetition. The metallic noises rang out again, and again, and again.

It was like watching a stringless clacker toy, and as he watched the affair play out, the lone bystander murmured, “Ooooh, pretty...”

However, as if he’d remembered something, his smile faded.

“Oh...”

Tilting his head in the midst of the *clangs* and clashes, Tick spoke, his hands hanging limply at his sides.

“What should I do? Hmm... This isn’t good.”

Although he spoke as if he were in trouble, neither his voice nor his expression held much anxiety. Even if he had been anxious, there was no way he could have stopped the pair. If he tried to check them by yelling, it was entirely possible that only Maria would stop, leaving a big vulnerability for the girl in the dress to exploit.

In other words, all Tick could do now was quietly watch events unfold. Stressing out would do nothing to improve the situation.

There was no telling whether he’d thought things through that far, but Tick kept impassively watching the two blade users clash with each other, not seeming particularly flustered.

However: The clanging noises, which had rung out as rhythmically as a metronome, were interrupted by a sudden scream.

“WaaaaaAAaaaaaah!”

When she heard the shriek from the opposite side of the mansion, in the direction of the front door, Chané leaped away from Maria and froze, all without giving her any openings.

That voice...

The tattooed guy who’d accepted her with a smile, even though he knew nothing about her.

The instant Chané registered the fact that the scream she’d just heard belonged to that good-natured chump, she launched herself into a run, completely ignoring her foe.

When she saw the woman in the dress suddenly turn on her heel, Maria’s eyes went round with surprise.

“Hey! No! Don’t run off, amiga!”

Yelling words that seemed a bit out of place, she ran into the mansion as well, chasing the woman in the dress.

Tick, left behind all by himself, sighed in apparent relief, then turned to head into the garden that ran beside the mansion.

“I don’t get it, but...”

Giving up on mentally putting the situation in order, the young man walked along, still taking things at his own speed.

“...it looks like it really is better to go in through the front.”



“Wha... What on earth do you think you’re doing?!”

Jacuzzi had passed out, and Nice shouted in his place, her voice a mixture of shock and bewilderment.

An atrocity was being committed right in front of her and a dozen or so of her friends.

The stick-shaped object that Adele had drawn from her back was a spear that had been collapsed to about a third of its true length. It wasn’t just a spear,

either: The moment she restored it to its unbroken length, its head opened out in the shape of a cross, transforming the weapon into a cross-shaped spear with vicious blades.

And...the tip of that spear had skewered the throat of the young tough who'd come in with the girl's group.

The spearhead had pierced the man's spinal cord as well, and it was protruding from the back of his skull.

The man who'd been impaled by his companion twitched for a while, but before long, his limbs fell limply, as if he were a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Whoa!"

"Wha, for real?"

"What're they doing?"

These and other comments came from Jacuzzi's friends. None of them seemed to really understand the situation, and no one else gave an exaggerated scream the way Jacuzzi had.

Isaac and Miria watched the scene blankly. Tim was smirking. Adele, who'd inflicted the damage, kept putting force behind her spear with no change of expression.

"That should do it, Adele. Take the spear out."

"Y-yessir."

At Tim's words, Adele finally pulled the spear out of Dallas's throat. Then she kicked his bloody corpse over, and it fell sprawling in the entryway.

"Okay. Now, then."

Spreading his arms theatrically in front of his dubious audience, Tim spoke.

"It's too soon to be startled."

Bowing deeply, he gestured to Dallas's corpse with his right hand.

"Didn't I tell you? We're about to show you...a magic trick."

Except for the unconscious Jacuzzi, everyone in the entrance hall looked at the corpse, which was bleeding from its throat— —and then they all witnessed a miracle.

“What...?”

The sight Nice’s left eye showed her was enough to take the values she’d cultivated in her life up to this point and flip them 180 degrees.

Flowing blood did not defy gravity. In the same way, once evicted, souls didn’t return to their bodies.

These two values, which she considered to be common sense, were about to be shattered.

The corpse of the thug that lay on the floor... At some point, the blood streaming from its throat had stopped.

No, it hasn’t...stopped...?

Through her glasses, Nice stared at the bloodstain that had spread across the carpet.

And she saw it. To her regret, she saw it.

The blood, which had spread far across the floor, was gradually retreating again.

The blood that she was sure had splashed onto Jacuzzi’s face had disappeared when she wasn’t looking.

Red blood was squirming on the fallen man’s neck like a swarm of red slugs.

Nice and the others watched the nightmarish scene in silence. None of them could move.

No one even tried.

A resurrection.

This felt nothing like that sort of divine miracle.

Each drop of blood writhed like a living creature, mingling with other drops and evolving into colonies. Each of these colonies joined with others, over and over, growing—until finally, as if returning to their own nest, they seeped into

the fallen man's wound.

Before long, all the blood was back inside the man, and as if to declare the end of the red march, the wound that had gaped at the base of his throat closed up.

Then all that remained was clean skin. There wasn't a single sign that an atrocity had been committed on the man's body.

No trace of blood or gore remained on the spear in Adele's hands, either. Silver that provoked visions of sharply honed edges shone without a single dull patch.

When he was sure that his surroundings had gone completely silent, Tim spoke with a satisfied smile.

"Well? Are you convinced now?"

Wearing a villainous expression, Tim kicked the fallen man's side roughly.

"Gahk!"

Although the man hadn't regained consciousness, the impact made him exhale as if he was in pain.

The man really should have been dead—but he was definitely breathing again.

Once he'd confirmed this, Tim went on quietly.

"Convinced that immortals really exist...?"

When she saw that sight, farther back in the hallway, Chané caught her breath.

That's...just like Father...

By the time she'd arrived, the man's wound had been nearly closed, but in that one moment, she knew.

The person lying there was *a being like her father*.

Actually, Dallas was something termed "a failure," but Chané didn't know about Szilard and the incomplete liquor of immortality, and so she assumed that the guy who was lying in the entryway was exactly the same sort of being

as her father, Huey Laforet.

Chané took a moment to think.

What did that group in the entrance hall want?

Why had Jacuzzi collapsed, and who had done it to him?

And—faced with an immortal, what on earth should she do?

On seeing the woman who had appeared at the back of the hall, Tim inwardly cocked his head, puzzled.

Hmm? That woman's eyes... I think I've seen her somewhere before...

He shuffled through his memories briefly, but he couldn't seem to remember. Telling himself that it was probably just his imagination, he slowly began to speak to the crowd in the entryway.

"All right: What I'm trying to say is—"

Clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap!

But his words were cut off by sudden applause.

The moment Tim opened his mouth, the weird couple that had been in the drawing room doorway had begun to clap vigorously, their eyes shining.

"Whooooa! I've never seen a magic trick like that one before! You're just like Howard Thurston!"

"Yes, it's the 'sawing an assistant in half' routine! Harry Houdini! Horace Goldin!"

Yelling the names of famous prestidigitators, Isaac and Miria squealed and jumped around like little kids.

At that, Jacuzzi's friends also began speaking again, little by little.

"Wait, that was a trick?"

"A magic trick... Well, yeah, right?"

"Baldy over there straight-up said it was a magic trick."

"Oh, I get it! Man, I thought he was a vampire or somethin'; that freaked me out."

“Hunh! Just a trick.”

“Hya-haah.”

Muttering various comments, they all began to smile again, seeming relieved. Not many of them had ever seen an actual magic show, and they were probably able to tidy all mysterious phenomena away as sleight of hand.

Nice and Jon were looking at each other, seeming unconvinced, but the others were starting to smile.

“Oh, come on! Are these guys idiots?”

The one who was flustered by the situation was Tim himself. He’d used the term *magic trick* ironically, and he’d never thought they’d actually buy it.

“Hmm... Ah. You look like you understood that.”

Tim put his fingers to his temples as if he was having trouble. Then he turned to Nice and began speaking to her one-on-one.

“Well, to sum up: Does your group want to sign on with us and become immortal, like this gentleman? That’s my offer. To make that happen, we want you to help us steal ‘liquor’ that’s being stored in a certain location... That said, uh, can we wait until your boss wakes up to go over the details?”

“—Our goal is to boost the number of immortals as far as possible, see.”

The words of the man with the shaved head reached Chané’s ears as well.

Instantly, in her mind, this man Tim became a definite enemy.

Boost the number of immortals.

That meant *increasing the number of beings who could kill her father, Huey*.

She didn’t know who they were, or why they wanted to make immortals.

However, they were attempting to seduce and use Jacuzzi’s group, her friends, in order to make more enemies for her father.

That alone was certain.

Soundlessly, she launched herself into a run and slipped through the crowd of companions who were standing around in the hall, attempting to get right up

close to Tim.

Naturally, she wasn't about to kill an unresisting opponent out of hand. She wouldn't have been able to get information out of him that way.

She tried to ram the hilt of her knife into his solar plexus—but just before it connected, a sharp flash passed between the two of them.

Instantly sensing danger, Chané leaned back, defending with her knives.

The next moment, there was a ferocious *clang*, and the tip of the cross-shaped spear skimmed past her cheek.

Chané's knives had caught the blades that stuck out on either side, keeping them from reaching her at the last moment.

However, the tip must have grazed her slightly: A faint red line ran across her cheek, and a moment later, blood seeped out like tears.

“.....”

“Um... You suddenly attacked, so...I just...”

If Chané hadn't leaned back, the spear would definitely have gone through her head. Even so, she didn't break out in a cold sweat. She only glared at the enemy in front of her.

A cross-shaped spear that was easily taller than she was. A girl with a timid-looking face, who was brandishing that weapon as if it weighed nothing.

She couldn't have been less natural, but even so, Chané quietly sized up her opponent.

She was gauging how she should move in order to defeat her efficiently.

At the same time, Adele was watching her new enemy as well.

She'd meant for that attack to hit home, but her opponent had almost completely avoided it. Apparently, the other woman was more skilled than she'd assumed.

Inwardly reaching that conclusion, Adele temporarily withdrew her spear and put some distance between them.

“Hey, Adele. Don't kill her,” Tim said from behind her.

Adele responded without turning back, in a voice that was exactly the same as it had been a moment before, “A-all right... Only... She’s strong, so it may be hard to hold back...”

As she murmured, a different thought rose in her mind.

Jet-black hair and gold eyes... She looks like Master Huey—

When, thinking this, she quietly retracted her spear...

From farther back in the hallway, a third person’s voice rang out: “Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! It looks like you’re doing something fun there, amigas!”

“...Who’s that?”

The mansion’s thugs and the members of Larva turned to look at the Mexican girl who’d abruptly appeared.

“Friend of yours, Donny?”

Someone checked with the hoodlum who was also from Mexico, but after giving it a little thought, the big, brown-skinned man shook his head as if to say he didn’t know her.

Paying no attention to the atmosphere in the mansion, Maria started down the hall with nimble steps, holding her drawn *katanas* at the ready.

“This place sure is big! I got a little lost trying to get here, amigos!”

She was speaking at the same tempo, but the rhythm with which she moved her feet was gradually increasing.

Adele was quietly monitoring the situation, while Chané was directing murderous glares at Maria and the members of Larva by turns.

Just as Maria was about to leap to a spot halfway between Chané and Adele—
Ting ting Ting Ting ting ting

The doorbell...

For the third time that day, the doorbell echoed through the second Genoard residence.

In contrast to Isaac and Miria’s ring, this one seemed quite laid-back.

At the sound of the bell, which reverberated through the entire mansion, the entrance hall went so quiet that time seemed to have stopped.

“What is it now...?”

Nice braced herself, face tense, wondering what sort of dangerous thing would present itself this time. Her hand had gone to her waist, and her fingers were clenched around a cylindrical object that was attached to the side of her belt.

Tim, Adele, Chané, Maria, Isaac, Miria, the young thugs, and even the members of Larva, who hadn't moved at all for the past few minutes—Everyone watched the door and waited, holding their breath, for the intruder to walk into this tense situation.

However...

“Um... Helloooo.”

What came in through the slowly opening door was a lazy-sounding voice and a good-natured young man who wore an innocent smile.

The man took a look around at the situation inside the mansion, and his eyes stopped on Maria, who'd frozen with her *katanas* in her hands. He spoke, sounding troubled.

“Mariaaa. I tooold you, you aren't s'posed to fight. Keith's gonna get mad at youuu.”

The words had been spoken in a childish tone, but at the name “Keith,” Maria's back flinched. She hemmed and muttered for a while, and then: “...All right, Tick. I don't want Keith to hate me.”

Muttering reluctantly, she returned her swords to the sheaths at her waist with twin *clinks*.

“.....”

Tim gazed at Tick for a few moments. Then he turned back to Adele and the others and jerked his chin, signaling for them to go outside.

“It looks like they're busy today. Give Mr. Jacuzzi our regards when he wakes up. We'll stop by again tomorrow, or—”

“Oh, wait, waaait.”

As Tim was saying his good-byes to Nice, Tick hastily flagged him down.

“...What?”

“Um, ummm, listen. If you have business with Jacuzzi and his friends, we’ll wait. You should get your business settled fiiirst.”

“.....?”

Not understanding what Tick was saying, Tim and the other members of Larva watched him coldly, waiting for him to go on.

Deflecting the frigid gazes with a smile, Tick spoke without a shred of hesitation.

“Um, seeee, depending on how our discussion goooes, *Jacuzzi’s group might not be around much looonger.*”

“Huh?”

Nice, who’d been listening in the hallway, made an indistinct noise.

The thugs also glanced at one another, then turned their eyes on Tick, looking as if they were watching some strange life-form.

“What does that m—?”

Just as Nice started to ask the mysterious guest a question...

Ding-ding Ding-ding Ding-ding-ding

The fourth time.

Counting from when Isaac and Miria had arrived, the doorbell rang for the fourth time that day.

“...What’s the matter with today, anyway?”

Quietly, Nice’s shoulders slumped. She sounded half-resigned and half-afraid.

Chané had tried to use the doorbell as an opportunity to move, but Adele wasn’t giving her any openings, and their deadlock held.

On the other hand, there were people whose voices didn’t hold a shred of tension.

“Ooh, Isaac! There are all sorts of visitors today!”

“I bet they’re all coming to see the magic show! Or maybe this one’s a new entertainer?”

Isaac and Miria seemed to think this entire situation was part of the entertainment, and they’d mistaken Chané and Maria for street performers of some sort.

As a matter of fact, Isaac and Miria had been on the train with Chané during that train robbery, but they’d only caught a glimpse of her group before boarding, and in the end, they hadn’t run into each other at all before their arrival in New York.

After the doorbell had rung a few times, whoever was standing outside fell silent, as if waiting for the people inside to respond.

Of course, this was the natural thing to do: Tick, who’d just opened the door, and Isaac and Miria, who’d kept leaning on the bell, were the ones who’d been lacking in common sense.

However... No matter how long they waited, there was no reaction from the people in the mansion.

As if they’d tired of waiting, the sound of the doorbell filtered in again.

Even then, nobody moved, and from outside, faintly, they heard a woman’s voice: “Could they be out...?”

“...A woman?”

Irritated by the static situation, Tim signaled to a Larva member with his chin.

The slender, dandyish man he’d glanced at nodded wordlessly, walked over to the door, and opened it.

From behind it: A pretty girl in a black suit appeared.

“Oh, good afternoon...?!”

On being shown in and registering the scene in the entrance hall, the woman caught her breath.

Nearly thirty people were gathered in the magnificent interior. Most of them

were thugs and hoodlums who looked out of place in the mansion, and on top of that, women holding spears and knives stood at the center of the group. Anyone with normal nerves would have been startled.

She's ordinary.

That was what most of them thought when they saw the girl in the suit. In this era, it was incredibly unusual for women to wear suits, but aside from that, she probably looked normal.

As she scanned the room, which was filled with abnormal individuals, the woman in the suit spotted a couple of familiar faces. They were looking back at her and waving.

“Heeeey, Ennis, here, over here!”

“Wow, Ennis came to see the magic show, too!”

“Isaac! Miria! ...Magic?”

On seeing the couple, Ennis smiled as if she was relieved, but she still hadn't managed to process the situation. She turned back toward the open door, as if looking for help.

“Huh?”

Just then—the ornate door opened even wider, and a man in a trench coat appeared from behind it.

...And time stopped.

In the past ten minutes or so, the atmosphere in the place had already frozen several times.

However, this time, the level was completely different.

Frozen didn't begin to describe it.

Stasis.

Perfect stasis.

The last man to appear had stolen not the air in the mansion, but time itself, as if he'd negated its passage up till that point.

It wasn't as if he'd done anything special. He'd just shown up.

He was a young man with sharp eyes, and everything—his expression, his gestures, the way he walked—exuded an extraordinary aura of intimidation. He was clearly not an honest citizen.

Outwardly, he looked no different from an ordinary human.

However...when he appeared, the air in the room froze instantly.

The young punks had been grinning foolishly, unable to process the situation, but when they saw that man, they seemed to pick up some sort of danger signal: Their eyes all sharpened, and their muscles tensed.

Adele, Chané, and Maria stared wide-eyed at the sudden intruder as well.

For just a moment, Adele's attention left Chané completely, but Chané's attention was also riveted on the man, and she couldn't move.

Before Maria was aware of it, her fingers were on her sheathed swords, poised to draw.

This is bad, really bad! This guy's bad news, amigo!

In the same way, the members of Larva had also lost their sense of time to the abrupt visitor.

What's up? What's with this guy?

All he's doing is standing by the door. He's just standing there, and yet... Why is he so...?!

Tim, who'd seemed completely at ease up until now, looked mystified for the first time and fell silent.

Looking unsatisfied by this state of affairs, but as if it were only to be expected...

Chiamatore Ronny Schiatto stepped inside.

He was a bona fide presence.

A being that had been born from darkness, breathed darkness, and had always lived in darkness.

A *something else* in human shape that encapsulated the presence of the mafia, or rather, of the entire underworld: Those were the sort of airs the man put on.



A lone entity that wasn't a thug like Jacuzzi's friends, or something enigmatic like Tim and Adele, or scum like Dallas.

No mere mafioso could have radiated such an alien feeling of pressure. What they felt from this final visitor to the mansion was something chaotic, a mixture of all sorts of other things—a presence that seemed almost inhuman.

However, within the time that had been stopped by that presence, there were exceptions: individuals whose own time was continuing to tick by.

So this is how impressive Ronny can be when he's working...

Right now, the man she had seen in Alveare, the one who was good at looking after others, was nowhere to be seen. Ronny looked completely different from who he was when he acted as Firo's knife instructor.

Ennis had never seen Ronny be imposing before, and even as it overwhelmed her, since she did know what he was usually like, she was managing to stay calm.

Isaac and Miria were smiling at Ronny, not seeming particularly bothered.

"Hey, Ronny, you're here, too? Hmm. Firo's not, is he?"

"These people are doing amazing magic tricks! You come and watch, too, Ronny!"

"?! You know him?!"

Nice spoke up, sounding startled. Isaac and Miria didn't seem to have noticed; they kept waving at Ronny, their faces ingenuous.

Aside from them and the people who were unconscious, only one other person was staying calm.

Tick, who'd been spacing out just inside the door, looked at Ronny and started talking to him in an easygoing way.

"Woow, Mr. Ronny, I didn't think you'd come in perrrrson."

Tick's comment completely failed to read the mood, and Ronny answered him without letting his atmosphere of domination flicker.

"I always do this sort of job, no matter how small the other party is... Still, to

think they'd send their outfit's best torture fiend... The Gandors are being admirably direct, too."

On hearing the pair greet each other, Jacuzzi's friends' expressions changed. Their attention came to focus on one noun.

"...The Gandors?"

"Did he just say *Gandors*?"

"That and something about a torture fiend..."

"What, this smiley guy?"

"Nah, couldn't be."

The Gandors were the mafia syndicate that ran the area where Jacuzzi's friends "worked," and although they hadn't attempted any sort of contact before now, the relationship between the two groups *was* technically a hostile one.

The murmur gradually grew. At that point, realizing who the others—or at least, Tick and Ronny—actually were, Nice hastily crouched down by Jacuzzi.

He was still out cold, and she began shaking him desperately, trying to wake him.

"Jacuzzi. Jacuzzi!"

"This doesn't look good."

Jon, who'd picked up on the atmosphere, ran over to them. Jacuzzi's eyes had rolled back in his head, but Jon hooked his arms under Jacuzzi's and pulled him up into a sitting position.

The punks had turned intense, focused gazes on Tick and Ronny. The members of Tim's group, Larva, had relocated to either side of the entryway and were watching the situation play out. Isaac and Miria were waiting for the rest of the "magic show," their faces brimming with curiosity, and the three girls who held blades had tense gazes trained on their respective enemies.

In this room, nearly thirty people were on the verge of drowning in the waves of their own confusion. Striding elegantly through those waves, Ronny spoke, as

if he were the ruler of that space.

“This seems like a fairly complicated situation... Well, never mind.”

Stopping in the center of the entrance hall, about a yard in front of Jacuzzi and Nice, he made a declaration to the assembled crowd.

“I am here as a messenger from the Martillo Family, as negotiator, judge, executor, and—as a witness to all that is about to occur.”

His tone was heavy and solemn, as if it had been designed to crush human spirits.

“The Gandor members and I understand our reasons for coming here best. I trust that you understand them very nearly as well. After all, in this industry, trust is important. When you offer a hand, you trust in the other party’s strength and honesty, and when you sink a fist into them, you trust in their weakness and sin. We do these things over and over again.”

What he said was so portentous that it sounded theatrical. However, in combination with the character that hung around the man, his words became definite power that dominated the mansion’s thugs.

“Well? Which will you choose? What card will you play with me? Will it be friendship or hostility? Depending on your answer, I will hand down a judgment on your past, and that will determine your present and the future that awaits you.”

He finished speaking, and as silence fell temporarily...in Jon’s arms, Jacuzzi woke from his short sleep and groaned.

“Ungh... Huh, wha, I...”

“Hey, Jacuzzi, you awake?”

“Oh, good... Although I’m afraid this isn’t the time to be saying that.”

“Huh?”

Getting to his feet without help, Jacuzzi saw the cold sweat that was trickling down Nice’s cheeks, then took in the situation in the entrance hall.

“Huh...? Are there more people in here now? And, um, huh? Wh-what about

the blood?! What about that guy?!”

Remembering what he’d seen right before he passed out, Jacuzzi looked at his sweetheart with eyes that seemed to be seeking an explanation.

In response, Nice pragmatically gave him a bare-bones outline, looking as if she didn’t feel convinced, either.

“The man who was run through with the spear healed up as if nothing had happened. And then...Chané and the woman with the spear started to fight, and then a strange woman with swords showed up, and—listen, Jacuzzi, this is the most important part.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she calmly told him the facts.

“People from the Gandors and the Martillos are here, and they say they want to talk to us.”

“.....Huh?”

At Nice’s words, Jacuzzi took another look at the people in the entrance hall.

One of them, Ronny, had a quality that marked him as someone who clearly wasn’t a decent person, and when Jacuzzi spotted him, his consciousness started to fade out again.

N-no, no, I can’t. I have to get it together!

Managing to head off the fainting spell at the last second, Jacuzzi quietly sorted the situation out.

Telling himself that the first thing he had to do was secure his friends’ safety, he slowly turned back to face Ronny.

Think. Think. What’s the least risky way out of this situation?

“Say, Miria? Why did Ronny start saying complicated stuff all of a sudden?”

“Maybe he’s in a bad mood...?”

In contrast to Jacuzzi, who was steeling himself, Isaac and Miria were having a conversation that completely failed to register the atmosphere.

“Oh, right. Seeing Ronny reminded me.”

“Of what?”

“Remember how we were talking about stealing Firo’s special things?”

“Uh-huh.”

Isaac had lowered his voice to a whisper, and as Miria responded, her expression was serious.

“Ronny’s Firo’s boss and his knife teacher, right?”

“Yes, his sensei!”

After thinking for a little while, Isaac murmured, as if he was looking for agreement.

“Listen, Miria.”

“Hmm?”

“Ronny and Ennis... To Firo, they’re both...”

When she’d heard that much, Miria realized what Isaac was getting at, and she cried out happily.

“...Special!”

I want to cut.

There are crowds of tough-looking people here. Tons of people that look hard to cut.

The knife girl in front of me, and the spear girl; it looks like she wounded the first girl.

And the man who showed up last, that Ronny guy from the Martillo Family.

How fantastic is this?! Look at all these people who are completely worth cutting!

In the midst of this tense space, Maria felt heat welling up inside her.

She didn’t want to know whether she was the strongest one here.

She already believed that; she was convinced that she was the strongest person present.

Maria just wanted to *make sure*.

To confirm her true skills, to confirm the power that lurked in her blades.

And in simpler terms: She wanted to cut.

There was no need for excessive logic. It all boiled down to that one phrase.

It was what she'd done up until now. Whenever someone had asked her to kill a strong hitman or mafioso, she'd smiled cheerfully, drawn her swords, and slashed through the target's flesh, their bones, and even their life.

She cut because she wanted to cut. She'd been able to cut, and to survive, on that reason alone.

As far as she was concerned, cutting because it was her job came second. She took jobs as a contract killer just to make a living, to keep herself fed from day to day. It let her combine pleasure and profit; she hadn't thought any other job would make as much sense.

The one and only time she'd failed was when she'd taken that request to kill Vino.

In the end, she hadn't managed to inflict a single cut on him, and he'd mopped the floor with her.

But I could win now.

She had no grounds for that belief, but she'd secretly continued to think it, and she'd been waiting for the day when somebody would ask her to kill Vino again.

Today, she might get to go all out for the first time in ages. She might get to cut people. She'd get to show off her own strength, Murasámia's strength. She'd be able to believe in her own strength.

She had the perfect opponents for it, right here. And there were so many of them!

Holding back the tension that was flooding her, she'd been quietly monitoring the breathing of the people in front of her.

She was watching for a chance, the mere opportunity to cut people.

Faster than anyone, stronger than anyone.

In order to live more keenly than anyone else.

With that resolution in her heart, the woman who had dedicated her whole life to her Japanese swords—no, to “cutting”—quietly narrowed her eyes.

Her heart shone like her blades.

Chané was sizing up the enemy.

The later visitors seemed to be uninvited guests as far as Jacuzzi’s group was concerned.

There was also a large possibility that the woman with the spear and her companions were her father’s enemies.

Which should she fight?

However...it wasn’t as though either group was beyond a shadow of a doubt her enemy.

She couldn’t begin to predict what actions the people who had come later would take, and the same went for the woman with the Japanese swords.

Everything would have to wait until they made a move.

What she did would depend entirely on the actions that were about to occur in this space. She couldn’t let that moment slip past unnoticed. In order to achieve her goal faster and more accurately than anyone else...

Chané narrowed her eyes, quietly continuing to read the people around her.

Tim, Adele, and the other members of Larva still hadn’t moved from where they stood.

At this point, they were probably the closest thing to “outsiders” present. There was a nutty-looking couple who were yelling about magic tricks and things, but in this situation, their group had the fewest points of contact with the others.

...But if that was the case, why had the woman with the knives tried to slash at them?

They didn’t understand her intentions. On top of that, both Tim and Adele

seemed to recognize her from somewhere.

Did the fact that she was hostile to them have something to do with that? If they found out who she was, it might all make sense, but this was a terrible time and place for calming down and trying to remember.

Either way, for now, it was probably best if they avoided making any moves.

On that thought, they began to quietly monitor the situation.

“Hmm? Why is everybody just standing arouuund?”

Tick, who hadn’t noticed the atmosphere, spoke in laid-back tones. But even then, the people around him didn’t move.

Isaac and Miria were whispering to each other about something, and Ronny was silent, waiting for Jacuzzi and his friends to respond. Everybody else was keeping an eye on the situation, their faces tense.

Time had stopped.

Ronny’s entrance had drained all temperature from everything.

Just when it seemed as if the standoff might last forever—

The one individual with the ability to set the situation moving again slowly began to get up.

“Gwaah... Dammit... Damn it to hell, you maggots... I swear I’m gonna murder you...”

The man who’d been on the ground beside Tim lifted his head, muttering in a bitter, angry voice.

“It was fuzzy, but...I heard that... You sonuva... You seriously pulled me into your group just for this, just so you could use me as a prop in your sales demo...?”

He didn’t seem to have recovered from the shock of getting killed yet; he was breathing roughly in the spaces between his words.

“That too. That wasn’t the only reason, though.”

“Bastard...!”

Dallas made a grab for Tim's shirtfront...then finally realized that the situation around them was strange.

"...? What?"

Everyone looked tense, and even though Dallas had gotten up, they were ignoring him. It was as if they didn't even see him.

"What happened?"

Looking around in an attempt to get a handle on the situation, he realized that one solitary person was watching him. It was the slim woman in the suit. Ennis.

Ennis was examining the face of the man who'd been on the ground until just a moment ago. She looked as if she was thinking hard, trying to remember something. For his part, when Dallas saw the woman's face, he felt, very intensely, that something was off.

After a brief silence...Ennis was the one who remembered first.

"Dallas...?"

The moment she said the name, her doubt changed to certainty.

I remember. I knew it—back then, three years ago...!

Back when she'd still been part of Szilard Quates, due to a variety of circumstances, they'd ended up using several thugs as pawns. This was the guy who'd been their leader, the guy who, in the end, had betrayed them and had filled her and Firo full of lead.

Ennis didn't know what had happened after that. The one thing she knew for sure was that that man was here, right in front of her, right now.

The moment Ennis said his name, Dallas also remembered, quite clearly, who she was.

"You little..."

And then—time began to move again with a vengeance.

It sped with the force of crashing waves or an avalanche, as if it were trying to make up for the time it had spent standing still.

“Huh?”

Recognizing Ennis, Dallas immediately scanned his surroundings, then *broke into a run, headed straight for Tick.*

“Gimme!”

Tick had several pairs of sharp, gleaming silver scissors at his waist.

Dallas was going for the most accessible weapon around.

Leaping at Tick like a starving stray dog, Dallas snatched a pair of scissors out of his belt.

“Wah...”

With a fuzzy little cry, Tick fell over backward and landed on his rear.

Paying no attention to him, Dallas promptly turned on his heel and began charging at Ennis.

However—someone grabbed his hand from behind, and he stalled massively.

When he turned back with murder in his eyes, there was Tick, still sitting on his can, one hand clenched around Dallas’s wrist.

“Don’t.”

Gazing at Dallas with sad eyes, Tick spoke in a voice that didn’t seem to hold the slightest hint of fear.

“Give me back my scissors.”

“Shaddup! Lemme go, moron!”

Dallas tried to shake him off by brute force, but Tick was stronger than he’d thought, and he wasn’t able to tear his hand away easily.

“Don’t use those scissors in hate or malice!”

Speaking as if he could see right through him, Tick protested, and his words were unusually adamant.

“You...”

Dallas raised the stolen scissors high, then brought them down, intending to stab them into the back of the hand Tick had on his arm— —and his right hand

flew all the way to the wall.

Splat.

With the sound of a moist collision, Dallas's hand struck the wall behind Tick. However, everything below the wrist was gone, and red blood was trickling from the hand, which still held the scissors.

"Uh...?"

Dallas made a short, stunned noise. Then he realized that his right hand had disappeared from the wrist up, and that blood was spurting from it with a soft hissing noise.

"GaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAaaaaah!"

The moment he registered what had happened to his arm, ferocious pain assaulted his brain.

As he screamed like a strangled goose, the person who'd cut off his hand spoke cheerfully.

"I had no choice that time, amigo!"

Giving Tick a little wink, Maria tapped her shoulder with the back of her *katana's* blade.

"Remember what I told you? I promised you wouldn't get hurt!"

Laughing quietly, Maria glanced at Dallas, who she assumed would still be bleeding—and froze.

The blood that had been spurting energetically from his wrist was beginning to flow back into it.

While no one was looking, the hand that had struck the wall had rolled back to the man's feet. It wriggled, as if it were being manipulated by the blood inside it, and the scissors it held slipped free and fell to the floor. A gluey string of blood stretched from the cut surface of the wrist, inserting its end into Dallas's arm, and as the strands of blood pulled each other closer, the hand rose from the ground into the air.

In the next instant, the cut surfaces collided with the speed of magnets, and

not only was there no sign that Dallas's arm had ever been severed, not a single scratch remained.

The pain seemed to have disappeared once he regenerated. As Dallas's harsh breathing quieted, he turned a murderous glare on Maria.

"Gahk... Ah... AAaaaAAaaaAAh! Bitch...!"

His body, which she knew she'd cut, had regenerated as if nothing had happened.

Maria hadn't seen the "magic trick" earlier, and so she looked Dallas up and down with startled eyes, and then...

"Aha!"

The next moment, as if she were a child who'd discovered a new toy, a guileless smile appeared on her face.

"Wow, how neat is that?! *You're made just like my bosses*, amigo!"

At Maria's casual comment, several people showed conspicuous reactions.

The members of Larva, who hadn't looked alarmed even when somebody's hand had flown off right in front of them, frowned openly at her words, and their eyes widened.

"...What did you just say?"

Tim murmured quietly, but Maria didn't seem to hear; she'd happily leveled her Japanese swords and was swaying on her feet.

From the things she'd said and done before now, she seemed to be affiliated with the Gandor Family.

According to the things they'd heard from the information broker and Dallas, it sounded as though the three brothers who ran the Gandor Family were immortals as well. However, since that particular news didn't seem to have gotten around at all, they'd assumed that it was being kept completely under wraps...

"So they're not keeping quiet about it? That's insane..."

Even they didn't know exactly who had become immortal during that incident

three years ago. All they knew was that Firo Prochainezo, who was believed to have “eaten” Szilard, and the three Gandor brothers, who were supposed to have been shot dead by Dallas, were immortal. From what the information broker said, there were others who had become immortal, but apparently, they hadn’t shelled out enough to learn about them.

When Tim glanced at Maria, mystified, she was smiling cheerfully and was in the very act of bringing down her *katana*.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! This is great! No matter how many times I cut you, you go right back!”

Dallas lunged at her, and Maria sent a silver flash at him.

Soundlessly, Dallas’s foot was lopped off at the ankle, and he pitched forward.

However, his ankle began to regenerate right away, and the blood and the wound writhed as if they were moving in time to Dallas’s scream.

“Wh-wh-what is that?! What *is* that?!”

On seeing it happen, Jacuzzi gave a piercing shriek. Since the other punks had seen it before, they weren’t as disturbed. However, gradually, everyone in the mansion was beginning to avert their eyes from the grotesque situation that had been unfolding for the past few minutes.

Turning an artless smile on Dallas, who’d finished regenerating, Maria said something very unsafe, sounding thoroughly entertained.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! No good, it’s no good, amigo! As long as your wounds heal up, I’ll cut you again and again! I’ll slice you! Over and over and over, every time you stand up, I’ll cut you and cut you and cut you and cut you and cut you and cut you and make you regret—”

The blade slashed through space, and Dallas’s left hand flew off.

“—that you ever became immortal, amigo!”

“Not good.”

As he watched the gruesome scene, Tim muttered to himself.

They’d been using the easy bait of “immortality” in order to recruit disposable

pawns who would work for them. However, the torment that was being inflicted on Dallas right in front of them—in which he'd be better off dead but was regenerating again and again whether he wanted to—might make immortality lose its attraction. Above all else, Tim wanted to avoid that.

Glancing at Adele, who was facing off with Chané, he whispered an order to her.

“Adele. Stop the samurai girl.”

“...Y-yessir.”

Even as she responded, the girl who'd been holding her spear at the ready had begun to move.

The blades at the tip of her cross-shaped spear drew a large circle, bearing down on Maria's shoulder as she turned.

“Whoa?!”

However, Maria had registered the motion a moment sooner, and she drew her second *katana*, catching it with the tip.

She'd escaped being slashed by a hairsbreadth, but the overwhelming impact of the spear's momentum ran through her entire body.

“Whoa, whoa!”

In spite of herself, she shifted her weight back, then tumbled backward energetically.

Her slender body rolled nimbly, and no sooner had she righted herself than she flew at the spear user.

From a stance so low she was practically crawling, she sent her blade at Adele's chest with the speed of a bullet.

But Adele had seen her coming.

Swinging the spear tip in an arc so that it pointed in her direction, she struck at Maria with the butt of its shaft, which had swung around to take its place.

The spear's simply decorated ferrule rushed toward Maria's face.

Maria swung her sword to strike it away, but just then, Adele took a big leap

back.

A feint?!

Maria's eyes widened in shock.

The murderous intent she'd felt just now had been genuine. That thrust really had been aimed right between her eyes.

However, when her muscles had begun to move in order to deflect it, the girl had instantly given up on the thrust and thrown herself backward. She'd seen Maria's movements and had changed her fighting style in real time.

The fact that she was able to make a snap decision like that convinced Maria that this woman was incredibly skilled.

Temporarily taking some distance, Maria looked at her opponent again.

In terms of body build, she was about the same as Maria herself. Maria fought with two swords, while Adele used one very long spear. In terms of weight, they were about the same: Both were using weapons whose weight didn't seem appropriate for their builds.

Adele's expression was perpetually timid, but there wasn't the slightest hesitation in the sharpness with which she wielded that spear.

"...I've never fought a spear before! This is real exciting, amiga!"

Leveling both her swords again, Maria flashed a taunting smile at Adele.

However, changing neither her expression nor her stance, Adele murmured apologetically: "That's...a lie, isn't it?"

"....."

Maria's smile vanished.

"What do you mean, amiga?"

"You're only pretending to be excited."

Adele spoke to Maria quietly, watching her with eyes like a frightened puppy's.

"You may actually have been excited up until a little while ago. But...when we

clashed, just now...you started to feel uncertain, didn't you? 'She may be stronger than me,' you thought."

"...What are you talking about? There's no way I'd—"

Maria snorted, attempting to deny it, but Adele talked right over her.

"And so you're bluffing like that, trying to convince yourself. Aren't you? That you're absolutely stronger than me, that your sword will definitely be able to cut me..."

"....."

In response to Adele's statement, Maria glared at her silently.

"Please don't worry. In terms of simple ability to kill, you're, um, at least twice as skilled as I am..."

After saying something that sounded like empty consolation, Adele went on, her expression still unchanged.

"But...did you know? In order to defeat a spear with a sword or *katana*—"

Instantly, a blade materialized right in front of Maria.

"—I'm told you have to be three times stronger than your opponent... Mm-hmm."

From a great distance away, Adele thrust forward in a straight line. That was all she'd done.

However, as the attack bore down on Maria, it turned into greater pressure than she'd expected.

Before she was aware of it, she'd been drawn into the way Adele spoke.

Maria synchronized her words, mood, speed, and everything else to her body's rhythm, and the rhythm of Adele's spirit and movements was nearly the polar opposite of her own.

Her nervous attitude and timid expression definitely weren't an act. However, her movements were faster and sharper than anyone could have imagined from her surface behavior.

The thrust had an edge to it that froze the hearts of anyone who saw it, and it

bore down on Maria, riding a silver blade.

“...Ghk!”

For the first time, Maria gave a frustrated grunt and brought both of her *katanas* around to guard, attempting to block the tip of the approaching spear.

However—the moment she moved, Adele’s eyes lit up as if she’d been waiting for that.

Shifting her wrists slightly, in a flowing motion, she rolled the spear tip, which had been parallel with the floor, so that it stood perpendicularly.

“?! ”

The three-bladed, cross-shaped tip spun like a windmill, slipping past Maria’s swords— And the next moment, a spray of bright blood danced in the entrance hall.

Unlike the other dark-red liquid that had been shed there earlier...

...no matter how much time passed, it made no attempt to return to its host.



“Hey, what’s going on here?! ”

“What the heck are they, anyway?! ”

“Jacuzzi, you loser, do something!”

“Hya-haah.”

Dallas’s actions a few moments earlier had plunged the entrance hall into deep confusion.

When the women had suddenly begun slashing at each other, the punks had moved back, forming a circle around them at a distance. Even so, no one flat-out cut and ran, and their gazes were gradually coming to focus on their leader, Jacuzzi.

Jacuzzi looked as if he had no idea what was going on. He murmured complaints as if he were talking to himself: “I’m begging you, do that somewhere else...”

Chané had taken a step back from Maria and Adele when they began slashing

at each other and was standing guard in a spot where she could protect Jacuzzi and Nice.

“Aaaah, Ch-Chané... You’re bleeding... Are you okay?”

Jacuzzi sounded worried about the cut on her cheek, and Chané nodded wordlessly.

Jacuzzi exhaled, relieved, and just then, a low voice spoke behind him.

“The situation has grown rather chaotic...”

Flinching, Jacuzzi turned around. The Martillo Family messenger was standing there, his eyes narrowed.

“—Ghk!”

“When did he—?!”

Jacuzzi and the others were startled, but Ronny ignored them, calmly stating his own business instead.

“Well, never mind. You were unconscious, so I’ll say it one more time for you: You already know why I’ve come here, don’t you?”

“.....”

“The details can wait. For now, just give me a simple answer. In short...will you be our syndicate’s enemies, or will you pledge allegiance to us?”

His tone brooked no argument, and Jacuzzi’s face twisted as if he was going to cry, but...shaking his head fiercely and psyching himself up, he mustered his courage and spoke to the man with the overwhelming aura.

“...We won’t be your enemies.”

“Oho...”

Ronny’s eyes seemed to say, *But that isn’t all, is it?* and Jacuzzi quietly clarified what he meant.

“Only...we won’t be subordinate to you, either.”

The young tattooed guy had given his conclusion before anything else, and Ronny smiled faintly.

Gazing silently into Jacuzzi's eyes, he decided to ask why he'd chosen that particular conclusion.

"We've...had friends killed by the mafia. And so...no matter what, as long as we exist as ourselves, we can't join a mafia syndicate."

Jacuzzi's voice wasn't trembling anymore.

On hearing that resolution, Nice, Jon, and several of the other young punks who'd been nearby nodded in agreement.

"I see."

Ronny looked Jacuzzi's group over as if they interested him. And then he said something odd.

"You seemed as if you were going to cry a moment ago, and yet now you wear the face of a warrior. Your companions appeared to be a loose collection of individuals, but at some point, they came together as if they were one living creature. Hmm... The fact that, occasionally, people like you exist is what makes humanity interesting... Well, never mind."

Speaking as if he himself wasn't human, Ronny went on with what he'd been saying earlier.

"I acknowledge the conclusion you've reached. However, it's asking a bit too much. You understand that, don't you?"

They wouldn't be their enemies, and they wouldn't be their allies. In other words, they wanted their groups to have nothing to do with each other, just as before.

However, if they left things at that, there would have been no point in him or Tick coming here.

Tensing his lips, which had relaxed a bit, Ronny looked around.

The two women were still slashing at each other, and the *clangs* that rang out from time to time reached everyone's ears equally.

"Well, never mind... Before we get into the details, I'll eliminate the distractions for you."

“Huh...?”

Jacuzzi sounded bewildered. Ignoring him, Ronny turned on his heel and started toward the two women, whose blades were clashing fiercely.

Heading for the heart of the storm of blood and flying blades, he took a step, just as if he were starting across a crosswalk.

...And time in the mansion stopped again.



In Alveare

“By the way...where did Ronny go today?”

The young executive’s question was directed at Maiza, his superior.

Firo’s coffee cup was long empty. The outlaws who’d gathered in the restaurant were currently spending their afternoon breaks in their own ways.

Maiza, who had been adding sugar to his third cup of coffee next to Firo, answered his question impassively.

“Well, there are some people who’ve been doing business in our territory without permission.”

“...Oh, the weird kids with Chicago accents who’ve been hanging around here since last year?”

“That’s right. We’ve ignored them up until now, but Prohibition is ending, and since we’ll be opening new lines of business, we need to do a little housecleaning. Ronny went to negotiate with those *newcomers*.”

“By himself?”

Looking a little surprised, Firo questioned him further.

“He always does that, doesn’t he? In the three years since I made executive, I’ve found out a few things about the work Ronny does. Whenever it looks like there might be a fight, he always goes. He’s always alone, too.”

“Yes, for the most part.”

“Isn’t that dangerous? I mean, I know exactly what sort of knife skills he’s got, and I know he drank the liquor and turned immortal with the rest of us, but...”

“Ha-ha. Firo, you’ve got one thing wrong.”

At Firo’s words, Maiza’s mild face softened further in a smile.

“What thing?”

“I thought you’d caught on long ago, since you have Szilard’s memories, but... I suppose he didn’t remember people’s faces. That may be particularly true if the individual isn’t a person.”

“What are you talking about? It’s great that it all makes sense to you, but fill me in, too, all right?”

Feeling as if he’d gotten left in the dust by himself, Firo snapped at his superior, looking cross.

However, Maiza ducked the younger man’s words with a smile.

“Well, when the time is right, I’m sure he’ll tell you himself. Besides, no matter what else he may be, Ronny is Ronny.”

“I don’t get it at all... Tch.”

Firo stretched hugely, then let his eyes drift to the restaurant window and the sky beyond it. Watching the darkening clouds, he murmured, and his voice sounded a little lonely.

“...It looks like it’s gonna rain.”



It’s a lie.

This can’t be true.

I don’t believe it, won’t believe it.

I know I can cut her—I know I can.

My katana, Murasámia, can cut this woman, no question.

If I can just reach her, if my blade gets even a little close to her—

But it won’t reach.

The blade won’t reach that woman.

No, it’s okay.

It’ll get there.

It’ll reach her.

If I reach her, I can cut her. I can beat this lady.

Just believe. I can do this.

I can reach this woman with my blade.

I can slip past the tip of that spear and get right up close to her.

I believe it: My arms will reach this woman—

Blade clashed against blade, and the sharp *clangs* echoed continuously in the Genoard mansion.

Maria and Adele's bout had already lasted several minutes. At first glance, it seemed like a brilliant match that wouldn't be easily settled, but in fact, it was immediately clear which combatant had the disadvantage.

"Could we stop now? ...This is, um...a waste of time..."

As she slashed with her spear, Adele spoke in a voice that was as bland as ever... Even though she'd been wielding a heavy spear in combat for a while now. She wasn't the slightest bit out of breath.

"Shut up... Shut up, amiga! I won't lose to somebody like you! I won't, I absolutely will not lose!"

On the other hand, Maria was breathing hard, and all four of her limbs were stained red with blood.

They'd clashed with each other over and over in the past few minutes, but Maria was the only one who ever got hurt. Each time she turned her blades on the other woman, they were deflected by the spear, and if she tried to launch a surprise attack, Adele sensed it and put more distance between them than was necessary.

Although she'd tried everything she could think of, Maria hadn't been able to shrink the space between them to something she was comfortable with.

However, her physical skills were impressive as well, and whenever her opponent loaded a thrust with genuine murderous intent, she evaded at the last moment.

Even so, the spear tip had grazed her arms and legs multiple times, and in terms of simple appearance, she seemed to be covered in wounds.

It was already clear which of them had the upper hand. Even so, there was still fire in Maria's eyes.

It was down to its final flicker, on the point of burning out.

In an attempt to extinguish even those flames, Adele hit her with freezing words.

“You’re trying to negate your fear by believing, aren’t you?”

“...No.”

“But...um, believing is, erm... *You’re just deluding yourself, you know.*”

“I am not!”

Screaming her denial, Maria leaned forward slightly, swinging her blades even faster.

However, even though the attack had her full power behind it, it didn’t reach her opponent. Just before she got within striking distance, the shaft of the spear slammed into her—and at the same time, Adele slipped to the side, moving out of Maria’s line of attack.

If her weapon hadn’t been a spear, or if it had been just a little shorter...

But she fought with a spear.

“As proof—you’re already beginning to doubt.”

Adele smiled.

At that point, she smiled for the first time.

“Deep in your heart, you’re already doubting. You aren’t able to believe.”

It was the smile of someone who was sure she’d won.

“Or, actually... You’re on the verge of believing one thing, aren’t you?”

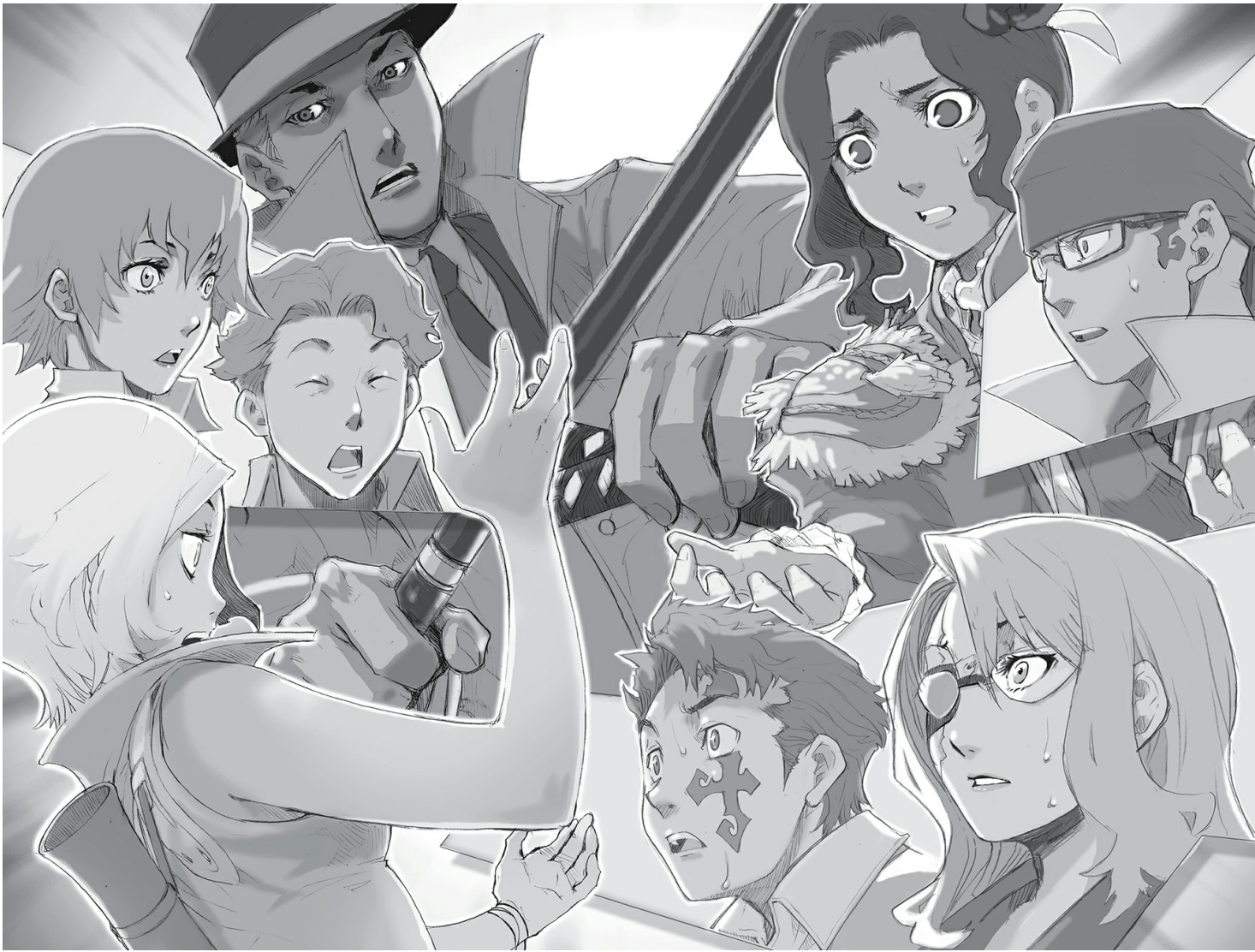
Her smile was filled with superiority. It was a smile of contempt for someone falling onto the path to defeat.

“You believe that you can’t defeat me... Or rather, you’re more skilled than I am, so it’s better to put it this way...”

Drawing the spear in her hands far back, Adele added one last remark: “You believe that with those blades, you’ll never defeat this spear.”

“_____!”

As if in denial of Adele’s words, Maria unleashed an emotion-driven attack.



The slash held more power and speed than any attack before it.

However, as a result, it left her just a little more vulnerable, and as if she'd been waiting for that, Adele's eyes shone.

The tip of the spear lashed out in a straight line, heading for Maria's heart in a lethal attack.

And—time stopped.



Wait. Don't kill her.

At this point, it would be a bad idea to make the matter any bigger. On that thought, Tim tried to shout at Adele, but her attack had already picked up speed, and it didn't seem possible to stop it now.

But the blade didn't pierce Maria's heart.

“?!”

Abruptly, Adele's arms were released from the weight of the spear.

Tim, Adele herself, and the members of Larva—who had been watching events unfold expressionlessly up until that point—stared, their eyes wide with astonishment.

“The spear just...?!”

If the miracle that had occurred in this mansion a few moments earlier had been Dallas's resurrection—then what had just happened to Adele was a *disappearance*.

When she'd thrust her cross-shaped spear at Maria, it had vanished right out of her hands like smoke.

“.....—!”

Adele wasn't the only one who was astonished. Maria was also reviewing what had happened to her with eyes that seemed to say she couldn't believe it.

The spear that had been thrust at her had abruptly evaporated—and then her two beloved *katanas* had disappeared from her own hands as well.

The feel of the swords' hilts had suddenly vanished from her palms, as if she'd been grasping smoke.

Unable to understand the situation, she fell to her knees right where she was.

"Why...?"

The confusion spread through the mansion like a contagion.

What on earth had happened? The ones with the most accurate grasp of the situation were Jacuzzi and the other bystanders.

"Wh-what...was that?"

However, even though they'd seen the whole thing from start to finish, comments like that were the best they could do.

What they'd seen had been extraordinarily simple, and for that very reason, they couldn't believe it.

The man who'd called himself Ronny had walked, with no hesitation, into a space that was filled with flying blades—and the next moment, he'd been holding the spear in his right hand and the two Japanese swords in his left.

Had he used some sort of technique to swiftly snatch them away?

No.

Right before the spear and swords had appeared in his hands, the weapons had definitely been out of his reach.

However, the next instant, there they were, neatly in his hands. No matter how you looked at it, the sight was impossible.

Setting the three weapons he'd acquired on the floor, Ronny spoke, slowly shaking his head.

"...Would you keep it down?"

After directing those words at the stunned Maria and Adele, he turned and headed back to Jacuzzi and the others as if nothing had happened.

"Nice..."

Staring at the man who was walking toward them, Jacuzzi murmured in a

voice so low that only his sweetheart, who was right beside him, could hear it.

“What...is that guy?”

Something was weird. He understood that instantly.

The man had done something that quite obviously ignored the laws of physics, and a terror that was different from what Jacuzzi had felt toward him a moment ago was welling up inside him.

This seemed to be true for Tim and the other members of Larva as well, and clear confusion was visible even in the faces of those who'd been watching the situation impassively a moment earlier.

“...Hey, Adele. What...just happened?”

“U-um, that's...what I would like to know...”

The situation had grown completely incomprehensible, and everyone looked at one another. However, nobody seemed to understand what Ronny had just done, and not a single person tried to speak.

Just when a grave, eerie atmosphere had filled the entrance hall— *Clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap!*

As if to sweep that atmosphere away, the sound of loud applause echoed through the mansion.

“Wow! Amazing, that was terrific! So you're a magician, too, Ronny!”

“What's this? Is today Magic Show Day at the mansion?!”

“The *sword dance* those dolls did earlier was also fantastic, really realistic. We chose the perfect time to visit.”

“Yes, it's our lucky day!”

Apparently, Isaac and Miria had written off everything that had been happening for the past little while as a party at the mansion. The issues weren't the sort that ordinary people would have been able to write off that way, but fortunately, their minds weren't quite what one would call “ordinary.”

They're a fun pair, as always.

The couple's words had completely failed to mesh with the atmosphere, and

Ronny smiled—but only faintly, so that no one else would notice.

Still clapping, Isaac and Miria walked up to Adele, who'd just retrieved her spear, and spoke to her sociably, even though they'd never met her before.

"Say, sister! That magic trick of yours was fantastic!"

"Yes, the human regeneration show!"

Isaac's and Miria's eyes were filled with respect and admiration, as if they were in the presence of a movie star.

However, ignoring what they said, Adele shifted her grip on her spear several times, then— —thrust it forward forcefully, so that it slipped past Isaac.

"Ow?!"

The blade that extended from the side of the cross-shaped spear grazed Isaac's finely shaped ear, and a small cut opened up in it.

"Waaaaaah! Isaac!"

Miria ran to him, looking worried, but Adele—the one who'd done the damage—was still gazing at her spear.

"There's...no problem with it...is there...?"

Unable to just stand by and watch any longer, Tim spoke, trying to cover for Adele's behavior.

"Do you get it now, pal? That was no magic trick—"

When he'd said about half of what he was planning to say, Isaac took his hand away from his ear, looking bewildered.

"Huh? ...It doesn't hurt."

"Ooh! Isaac! That scratch isn't there anymore!!"

"What?!"

The ones who were startled by those words were Tim, Adele, and the other members of Larva.

They could have sworn that Isaac's ear had been wounded. However, there was no sign of a cut on that ear, and the blood he'd shed had neatly vanished

from his palm as well.

“It can’t be...”

Looking as if she was seeing something unbelievable, Adele drew her spear back, preparing to thrust it at Isaac again, but...

Behind her, someone caught and held the shaft.

“...?”

When she looked back, the woman in the black suit was standing there, her face stern.

“...Apologize, please.”

“Huh?”

“Apologize to Isaac.”

Ennis pressed her, and her gaze was intense. Adele lowered her eyes as if troubled, then decided to shake off her opponent.

“I’m sorry... Um, you see, this really isn’t the time...”

Adele swiftly drew her spear back, and matching her move to that motion, Ennis darted around behind Adele.

“Apologize.”

“.....”

The other woman had moved much more skillfully than she’d expected, and Adele quietly leveled her spear again, her eyes growing wary.

The air between the two grew tense.

As if to break up the mood, Isaac’s and Miria’s voices rang out.

“Oh, hang on, Ennis, hold up! You’ve got it all wrong; she just did a magic trick for us, that’s all!”

“Yes, it’s a magic show!”

The pair didn’t understand the situation, and Ennis tried to say something to them—but before she could, Adele spoke, frowning.

“Ennis... A member of the Martillos, and...Ennis? Um, could you possibly be... *Szilard Quates’s—?*”

“Huh...?”

The familiar, detestable word had come out of nowhere.

Why did this woman know Szilard’s name? Ennis stared at the girl, but just then their conversation was interrupted again, this time by a man’s groan.

“Gaaah...gahk...”

Behind them, Dallas, who’d been unconscious, was slowly starting to sit up.

“Ghk... You...stinking piles of...”

The seeds of even more conflict had appeared, and just when it seemed as though things had gotten entirely out of control— “I’m sorry!”

Jacuzzi yelled in a voice that echoed through the whole mansion.

“L-listen! We’re only borrowing this house... We can’t have any more fighting in here!”

No duh, and also, it’s pretty late to bring that up.

Tim gave a mildly appalled smile—but in the next moment, his smile froze.

The woman with the eye patch and glasses who stood next to Jacuzzi had her hand raised, and there was something in it.

The things were bronze-colored cylinders. A black string stuck out of one end of each tube as if it were a candle—and the very tips of those strings were crackling audibly, scattering bright sparks.

“Ru...”

Tim immediately started to issue an order to his companions, but it was too late.

“I’m sorry, Ronny! As you can see, this really isn’t a good time, so we’ll talk later!”

As Jacuzzi shouted those words and turned on his heel, Nice tossed the cylindrical objects high into the entrance hall, where they scattered in midair.

And then—the sparks disappeared into the cylinders.

Boom Boom Ka-boom Boom

Muffled explosions echoed, and the entrance hall was filled with white smoke.

Seeing this, Tim shouted from where he'd taken cover on the floor: "A smoke screen?!"

His vision instantly went blank. Simultaneously, the mansion's sluggish time began moving again all at once.

The young punks scattered from the mansion like rabbits, fleeing into Millionaires' Row.

Chané was concerned about Tim and the others, and she hesitated, intending to stay behind. However, when she heard Jacuzzi yell, "Take care of everybody, please!" she left with painful reluctance.

"Don't panic! Get over to the walls and follow them until you're outside! Try not to breathe that smoke!"

After rapidly issuing orders to his companions, Tim got out of the mansion himself, staying low.

Just before the smoke screen spread completely, Tick found Maria, who was still kneeling on the floor, and took off running, pulling her with one hand and holding the two *katanas* in the other. Maria followed Tick, letting herself be tugged along, looking as if her spirit had abandoned her body.

The gray, murky smoke seeped out through the doors, blending nicely with the color of the sky, which was threatening to unleash rain any minute now.

It looked as though the entire mansion were wrapped in a rain cloud.

In an instant, like a nest whose rats had been smoked out of it, the once-crowded mansion lost almost every sign that humans had ever been present.

It was just like magic...

Even as his vision went completely white, Ronny walked on, not seeming the least bit flustered.

Realizing that he couldn't sense Jacuzzi's presence in the vicinity anymore, he murmured, smiling a little.

“Good grief... Impetuous, aren't they? Well, never mind. I'll try again tomo—”

Just then—someone caught Ronny's right wrist firmly.

Ronny's eyebrows twitched slightly, and in the midst of the smoke, he saw...



**LINKING
CHAPTER
RAIN
AND A
LETTER
AND
SCISSORS
AND
LOVE
AND...**

LINKING CHAPTER

RAIN AND A LETTER AND SCISSORS AND LOVE AND...

There is such a thing as a shattering moment.

Depending on the properties of the impact, even diamonds can shatter easily.

The instant when something hard breaks is truly gratifying.

And when something comes tumbling down, it always happens fast.

The more time something has spent building up, the more spectacularly—and ephemerally—it crumbles under its own weight. That's the way of the world.

That's exactly why I don't accumulate any more than I have to. I don't even want it.

I just wanted a place where I belonged, that's all. A modest foundation on which I could build up my necessary minimum of happiness.

That's why I'm here right now.

Tim, who was sitting on a set of stone steps near the entrance to Central Park, gazed up at the dark, lowering sky, lost in thought.

Adele and the other Larva members were sitting at short distances from one another, taking a brief rest.

Technically, they should already have been making their next move, but...too many unexpected things had happened. Clicking his tongue softly, Tim reviewed the various factors that had destroyed his plan.

All I want is the bare minimum, and I could've sworn I hadn't built up much.

However, in the space of this half day, all sorts of things had started to crumble inside him.

The first bad omen had been the couple who'd called the resurrection act a magic trick. At the end, when that ear had regenerated—had that been some

sort of mistake, or were they immortals as well? He'd need to check.

Then there was the girl who'd suddenly slashed at them with her knives. He was sure he recognized her from somewhere, but he couldn't remember where.

And the woman from the Gandor Family who'd brandished those Japanese swords at absolutely everybody. She'd been pretty wacko, but as long as Adele was there, she wasn't likely to be a problem.

And then...that gangster with the sharp eyes and the mysterious power.

"...Man... And Dallas ran off, so we have to hunt for him, too."

Once they'd gotten out of the smoke screen, they'd realized Dallas wasn't there. He'd probably woken up during that final uproar. All they knew was that, when they'd noticed he wasn't with them and had gone back, he was already nowhere to be seen.

That said... The thing that had destroyed something inside him was nothing so trivial.

An entity that threatened something more fundamental, his very existence, had most definitely been there.

Even though he'd changed everything about himself so that nobody would recognize him...

He'd discarded his face, his way of speaking, his style, his strength, everything, and had acquired new ones.

There probably wasn't anyone who would look at him now and remember his past self.

Tim had been convinced of this, and it was no exaggeration to say he'd been living in order to ensure it.

As a matter of fact, *that man didn't seem to have recognized him, either.*

However...although he'd changed absolutely everything, the other man hadn't changed at all.

Even though he'd been sure he'd gotten rid of his past, his name, and

everything else, he could still remember those squinty, good-natured eyes.

That easygoing voice that failed to read the atmosphere, the sharpness of the scissors he'd held— All of that was just the way it had been when he was a boy.

When he thought back over the incident at the mansion, the only thing he remembered vividly was Tick's face.

Tim—Tock Jefferson—*remembered the face of the older brother he'd just seen for the first time in eight years.*

"Why, oh why...was my brother there, hmm?"

An unexpected reunion with the past he'd thrown away.

As if to provide a visual for Tim's mind, which had begun to waver in complicated ways...

As he looked up at the sky, cold raindrops started falling quietly onto his cheeks.

As the sound of rain began to echo around them, one of his subordinates walked up to him. This particular companion had been moving separately from Tim and the others and hadn't been with them earlier.

"Tim."

"What is it?"

"We've made contact. It sounds as if Christopher's group will meet up with us this evening."

At the mention of that name, Tim scowled openly.

"Christopher? Did you say Christopher?!"

Unusually, there was anger in his tone, and the subordinate looked away uncomfortably.

"Why is *he* coming?! Do you have any idea what's going to happen if a guy that dangerous gets involved in this?"

"Orders from Master Huey."

".....!"

Orders from an individual who was supposedly in police custody.

It sounded impossible, but at his subordinate's words, although he clicked his tongue, Tim accepted the situation.

"Tch... So those psychos are coming, huh? Frankly, I'd rather not team up with them..."

"There's no help for that. Their Lamia group is sort of the core of our Larva."

Adele must have been listening in on their discussion; she'd been cleaning her spear, but she joined the conversation, looking vaguely happy.

"U-um... You mean Christopher and the others are coming?"

"...Yeah."

"Oh, good... *Then I'll be able to wreak as much havoc as I want?*"

Adele's voice was more cheerful than usual, and Tim shook his head, looking down.

"...God, those Lamia guys... Adele's the easiest one to deal with, and even *she's* like this."

Wiping off the rain that trickled down his cheeks with his hand, Tim quietly looked back up at the sky.

Thinking of his brother, of the companions they'd be meeting that afternoon, and of the "job" they'd been given, he muttered, as if trying to distract himself: "The rain... It looks like it's really going to pour."



"It's started coming down."

Gazing at the droplets falling outside the window, Firo muttered to himself, seeming a little restless: "I hope Ennis and company aren't getting wet..."

He sounded a bit uneasy, and Maiza spoke up, teasing him.

"Are you worried about them? Not just Ennis, but about Isaac and Miria?"

"... 'And company' was Ronny."

"Have you thought of a proper apology?"

“Just lemme alone, all right?”

Sulking to hide his embarrassment, Firo went over to the restaurant window and looked outside.

Up until last year, the window had been too small to really look through, but with the Prohibition Act in the process of being repealed, they'd done some large-scale remodeling to make the place feel more open.

Standing in front of a glass pane that was bigger than he was, Firo looked out at the rainy streetscape of Little Italy, and— An eerie sensation ran down his spine.

Something in what he was seeing seemed very wrong.

“.....?”

Searching for the source of the feeling, Firo examined the scene outside the window carefully.

Then he spotted a lone man on the other side of the street.

The moment he locked eyes with the man, Firo realized what was wrong.

The guy was young, an obvious thug, and he was standing in the rain without an umbrella, looking his way.

He was clearly glaring into the restaurant—no, at Firo himself—and his eyes were steady and focused.

In other words, the strange thing was that his look held so much murder and hatred that it was visible even at a distance.

“What’s that...?”

Feeling unsettled, Firo strained his eyes, trying to identify the man.

His face looked vaguely familiar.

“Did I run into him somewhere before...?”

Due to his line of work, Firo made enemies in all sorts of places, but it was rare for anyone to turn such a clear intent to kill on him.

He tried to get a better look at his face, but the guy on the street seemed to

have realized he was looking his way. He turned and, getting wet in the rain, strode rapidly into the crowd and disappeared.

“What the heck was that...?”

Still perplexed, Firo gazed out the window. Then, as if he’d given up, he went back to his seat at the counter.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Even as he smiled and gave that answer, he was desperately trying to remember the man’s face.

Who was he?

As he was sipping at a fresh cup of coffee and retracing his memories, Seina, the woman who ran the honey shop in the front, called to him.

“Firo, somebody left this on the shop counter.”

“? What is it?”

The envelope in Seina’s hand had the words *To Firo Prochainezo* written on it in mechanical-looking letters, and nothing else.

“What’s this...?”

Looking dubious, he opened the letter and ran his eyes over the scrap of paper inside.

The next instant—

Firo’s expression changed dramatically, and flinging the paper away, he shot out of the restaurant like a bullet from a gun.

“Firo?! What’s the matter?! Firo!”

Maiza’s shout didn’t reach him, and in the blink of an eye, Firo was out of sight.

When he picked up the scrap of paper the boy had thrown away, the following words were written on it in obviously faked handwriting: *I have Ennis and Ronny Schiatto.*

Just one line. The letter held no other words. There wasn't anything else written on it: Not only was the sender's name not there, it didn't include any demands or threats.

"They've been kidnapped? Ennis and...Ronny?"

Mulling over the meaning of the words in his mind, Maiza muttered his conclusion in a matter-of-fact voice: "...Not even possible."

Seina, who saw the letter next, murmured, sounding a little disgusted: "I bet he thinks he disguised his handwriting, but... Honestly. That Isaac. His writing's as crummy as ever."



I'll kill 'em.

I'll kill 'em all, every last one.

Make a monkey of me, will they? I'll kill 'em.

What, I can't beat anybody? I can't do anything?

When that katana woman was slicing me up, I felt helpless.

But, dammit. I remembered.

Seeing that guy's face brought it all back to me.

It was worth coming all the way to Little Italy.

Yeah, Firo Prochainezo. Seeing your face made me remember, loud and clear.

This is the urge to kill.

A definite will, made of nothing but the words I'll kill you, boiled down and concentrated.

I'm into this now.

The rain's beating down on me, but it doesn't bother me a bit. It feels good.

I don't care what I have to do—I'll kill you. I'll make you wish that you'd never been born, that you'd never existed.

I'll slaughter every single bastard who made a fool of me...!

I'll get that Tim guy and Adele first. I have to get rid of them before anybody

else.

If I don't, Eve'll be in danger.

Yeah, I like Eve. I'll protect her, no matter what it takes.

But listen, Eve. I'm dumb.

I can't think of any other way to protect you.

The only way I can think of is to kill every enemy you've got.

With that self-centered resolution inside him, Dallas Genoard disappeared into the rain-soaked town.

"Man, what's *with* this...?" In the street dominated by the sound of rain, Dallas grumbled quietly.

"In the end...this place ain't much different from the bottom of the river.

"It's pitch-black...and I can't see a thing."



As he bolted through the alleys of Little Italy, Firo was remembering the man's face in detail.

It's him—it's that guy!

The letter that said Ennis had been kidnapped. Firo had decided that it must have been sent by the bloodthirsty man from a moment ago. And when he'd ransacked his memories for someone who'd have a connection to Ennis as well...he'd vividly recalled the face of the man outside the window.

Dallas! Why is he...?!

The guy who'd killed him and Ennis with a tommy gun once, three years ago.

And—the one who'd been targeted for retaliation by the Gandor Family and had supposedly been sent to the bottom of the Hudson.

Why was a guy who should have still been drowning standing here in town, on his own two feet?

Questions rose in his mind, but none of them mattered.

Firo Prochainezo just ran.

He's got— He's got Ennis...!

Without thinking, in order to save the girl he loved, he ran and ran.

The pouring rain that ruled the town hid the sound of his footsteps completely and turned the street's colors dark and deep.

It was as if the town itself wanted the rain to keep falling forever.



"It's coming down real hard."

Inside an abandoned building that was fairly close to Grand Central Station...

The building was littered with rubble, as if it were in the process of being torn down, and Tick and Maria were sheltering from the rain there.

Tick was the same as always, but Maria had changed completely.

In a corner of the gray room, surrounded by concrete...

She was sitting on a pile of rubble, curled up small, her face buried in her knees.

She looked like a scolded child who'd hidden in her room.

Her wounds had been given first aid, but since they'd only been bound with cloth torn from their clothes, the dried bloodstains seemed even more pathetic.

"Are you okay?"

Tick walked over to her, looking worried, but Maria didn't lift her head.

Instead, she spoke to her companion in a voice so faint that it was wholly unlike her.

"Listen...Tick."

"Hmm?"

"I'm sorry... I lied, I guess. I said I wouldn't lose to anybody..."

"You didn't lie. You didn't lose to anybody, and you did save me, you know?"

It wasn't lip service or pity. He was just saying what he felt.

The words didn't seem to reach Maria, though. Her face was still lowered, and

she was clenching her fists tightly in frustration.

“Why, why...? Even when Vino beat me, I didn’t feel like this!”

She knew why. With Vino, it had been because she’d been outmatched on every front: strength, skill, speed, spirit, everything.

However...Adele, the girl she’d fought today, had clearly been weaker and slower than she was. She’d said as much herself.

Even so, in the end, she’d lost.

Had it been due to the difference in weapons, or had there been some other reason? At this point, she didn’t know. As far as Maria was concerned, she didn’t even want to know.

Tick was listening to her silently, and Maria went on, as if she were talking to herself.

“*Abuelito* told me...! He said if I had skills to match my belief, I’d be able to cut anything! He said there was nothing I wouldn’t be able to cut! But...I couldn’t tell whether I was getting better. I wasn’t able to cut *Abuelito* at first, and I thought if I managed that, it would prove I’d grown, but he got sick and died... And so I was scared. I didn’t know if I was really strong enough to cut everything. So cutting was the only way I could believe in my own strength...”

As she spoke, it was obvious that the spirit was gradually draining out of her voice. Her usual artless expression was nowhere to be seen, and both her heart and her body had shrunk in on themselves, as if she were a frightened kitten.

“But I lost. You saw it too, didn’t you, Tick? You saw that spear girl steamroll me...”

Tick thought a little while before responding to Maria’s question.

“I’m sooorry. I bet it’s myyy fault.”

“...Huh?”

“See, I bet I didn’t believe enough. You know: We said if we both believed, we’d be all right for sure, remember? But the whole time, I wasn’t sure if I could do something like that.”

Tick had started to say something odd, and Maria raised her head very slightly to look at him.

“‘Believing’ doesn’t have a physical shape, and I couldn’t believe in it. I bet that made you a little weaker, Maria... I’m sorry. I’ll try harder. I’ll do my best to believe in you. If I do that, I just know it’ll be fine next time. You see?”

Tick’s words still held the peculiar innocence of childhood. After giving them a little thought, Maria looked down and shook her head.

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“I’m scared that if I lose to that woman again, I might not be able to believe in Murasámia anymore... The idea that I might blame the fact that I lost on my sword is just...terrifying...”

Gripping the sword she’d set down by her side, in order to distract herself from her unease, she began to confess her innermost feelings to Tick. She knew it was just temporary, fragile consolation, but it felt as if her heart would break if she didn’t do it.

“These swords are all I’ve got. They’re all I am... If I deny them, it feels like I’ll lose my past and my pride and my convictions and my soul, everything—and it’s scary, amigo...”

The word she’d added at the end made it sound as if she was looking for help from a friend.

Tick didn’t deal with her gently, and he didn’t push her away sternly, either. He only said what he felt, quietly.

“Remember what I told you? I only believe in things that have a shape and can break.”

“.....”

“So I don’t believe in them. I mean, I haven’t seen those things break yet. Your pride or your soul, any of it. But you’re you, Maria. I’ve never thought you weren’t.”

The words didn’t hold any kind of answer, but Maria smiled just a little, then

murmured briefly to Tick: “You’re a nice guy, amigo.”

Then she lowered her head again and fell into a quiet sleep, beginning to let her fatigue heal itself.

Without checking to see whether she was awake, Tick murmured, as if he was talking to himself: “This has gotten really complicated.”

The view from the entrance of the abandoned building had been dyed the color of the rain, and Tick watched it all alone, lost in thought.

“When threads get all snarled together, the fastest way to undo them is to just cut them apart... If there were somebody, somebody with power sharp enough to cut through that solid knot...”

In the midst of the sound of the rain that filtered in from outside, Tick stood by the huddled Maria, holding still.

After a while, he took a pair of scissors from his belt, held them up, and slowly opened and closed the blades.

It was as if he was trying to cut something he couldn’t see.

Snick. The sound was rather lonely, and it dissolved easily into the sound of the pouring rain.

Even so... Wordlessly, Tick kept snipping the blades in midair.

Snip, snip Snick-snip

Snickety Snip



“...So?”

A man’s voice echoed from the depths of a gloomy room.

The thuggish guy who was standing in the doorway answered him, looking back into the darkness, his face tense.

“Well, uh, so... For now, Jacuzzi and the rest are hiding in an abandoned factory down by the river... A-anyway, that Ronny guy is a real nasty-looking customer! If you aren’t there, there’s no way we’re gonna be able to negotiate with him on equal terms!”

The thug, one of Jacuzzi's friends, was briefly going over what had happened to them.

"C'mon, I'm begging you! If you're there, it'll be like having a hundred more guys on our side!"

"A hundred million more guys."

Responding in a way that might have been either serious or a joke, the man in the shadows slowly got to his feet.

"Well, I don't have any particular obligation to you people, but...it's for my precious, precious fiancée. Sure, I'll go."

"Really?!"

"By the way—how's Chané?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. There were some other weirdos besides the guy from the Martillos, and she got into it with one of 'em, and her face got a little scratched..."

The next moment—the presence that had been deep in the room was abruptly right in front of the hoodlum.

"Is she okay? Is Chané okay?"

The next thing he knew, the punk had been hauled up by his shirtfront, and his answer sounded strangled.

"Sh-she's fine—she's just great!"

"She is, huh...? Well, good!"

The man abruptly let the thug go, watching him hit the floor out of the corner of his eye as he spoke.

"No, hang on. It's not good after all."

He thought, quietly, covering his mouth with a hand and tapping the tip of his nose with his index finger.

"Chané chose to live with me. She promised to become part of my world, to share a world with me."

As he said something strange, the man's eyes gradually narrowed.

"I can't let them get away with that. You said those 'enemies' hurt Chané's face? That's the same thing as hurting my world. The same as hurting me."

Even as he spoke, the man—who was feeling an incredibly roundabout anger at the fact that his girl had been wounded—was already starting to change clothes in preparation for going out.

"And actually, I'm not about to forgive anyone who hurts a woman's face. That guy's not fit to be called a man."

"Uh, no, the one who did it was a woman, too."

"...I'm a firm believer in gender equality!"

"You make no sense!!"

Ignoring the bewildered guy, the man finished getting ready to leave. Then, his expression vibrant, he went on with what he'd been saying earlier.

"All right, let's ring the opening bell. The show is me, the lead actor is also me, and the heroine is Chané."

His tone was joking, but his eyes were filled with cold fire.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet."



And so—

One of New York's most dangerous denizens began quietly slipping through the sound of the rain...

...in order to burn all the intricately tangled threads of the incident and return them to ash.

The man's name was Felix Walken.

His former name was Claire Stanfield.

However, those who knew him well referred to him by other names. Some said them with awe and respect, while others spoke them through tears of terror and despair.

"Vino," or... "the Rail Tracer."

The raindrops kept falling, showing no sign of stopping.

As if they meant to sink the whole town beneath the sound of rain.

The drizzle gradually became a downpour, acting as an omen of the coming storm.

The rain didn't stop. It enveloped both the people and the streets in dark colors.

Harder and harder—

—as if to slash the whole town apart...

To be continued

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's Narita; it's been a while. Thank you for picking up my book again!

All right: This is my tenth volume.

As it turns out, this book is the auspicious tenth volume.

It's been a full year and a half since my debut, and I finally managed to reach the ten-volume milestone.

This is all thanks to my readers, the people of Media Works, bookstores across the country, and all sorts of other individuals, and in order to repay that kindness, I plan to keep writing like crazy.

*The following includes spoilers.

...And so, for the landmark tenth volume, I decided to go back to my roots and write a *Baccano!* story. That said, it somehow morphed into a two-part book, and that's causing trouble on several fronts. I'm really sorry about that.

This time, the protagonists are Tick and Maria.

A torture expert and a hired killer. Dengeki Bunko's main target audience is middle-and high-schoolers, and this hero and heroine are far removed from their usual house style, but they were the ones I started wanting to write about, so there was really no help for it. Forgive me.

That said, as usual, other characters came in from lots of different angles, and the story got pretty jumbled. However, to the author, the protagonists are this odd couple, and I'm planning to develop part 2 around them as well, in a slashing and snicking sort of way... Only, I haven't started writing it yet, so there's no telling how it will turn out. There's a definite possibility that Vito or Ronny or the new character Christopher will end up becoming the center while I'm not paying attention, but please consider that a reason to look forward to part 2, if you would.

So those of you who read the Dengeki home page probably caught this, but...

this story includes the continuation of a four-panel manga drawn in Jin Shinonome's *Four-Panel Jack*, published in the home page issue 29.

That's right: I'm treating all information drawn in that *Four-Panel Jack* as fact.

Ha-ha-ha, well, you know, he toyed with my story, and I couldn't just let that lie, so this time, I toyed with his work, as payback. Thank you very much, Jin Shinonome, and also, I'm very sorry.

Even I thought I might have gone too far this time, but...

Me: "Chief Editor, *Four-Panel Jack* just did *Baccano!* didn't it?"

Chief Editor: "Yes. What about it?"

Me: "In the next *Baccano!*...could I maybe treat those four-panel jokes as if they were actual fact, not jokes?"

Chief Editor: "As long as it's interesting, sure."

As long as it's interesting, sure. That comment's a bit of a land mine.

It seems wonderful at first glance, as if I'm allowed to do absolutely anything, but if that "anything" turns out to be uninteresting and gets rejected, all the responsibility for it naturally falls on me. And if I think something is interesting but the readers and editors don't share my opinion, it will all come to nothing. Those words are a fairly risky bridge.

On top of that, I think Chief Editor Suzuki, who happens to be my supervising editor, uses that phrase—"As long as it's interesting, sure"—more than anyone else in the editorial department.

In other words, this first (probably) Dengeki Bunko collaboration with *Four-Panel Jack* was the hapless result of what must've been the thirtieth instance of "As long as it's interesting, sure."

Parenthetically, nobody cleared this with Mr. Shinonome.

I hope it'll be okay...

*As usual, everything from this point on is thank-yous.

To Chief Editor Suzuki and Wada (Papio Z) of the editorial department, for whom I'm constantly making trouble.

To the copy editors, for whom I'm always causing problems by being late, every single time. To the designers, who make my books look good. To H. from the marketing department, and to the people of the publicity department, the printing department, and Media Works as a whole.

To my family, friends, and acquaintances, who are always taking care of me in all sorts of ways, and particularly to everyone in S City.

To the Dengeki authors and illustrators, who help me out in lots of different situations.

To Katsumi Enami, who draws my far-too-numerous characters distinctively and brilliantly every time, even as jobs pour in from all over the place.

And to everyone who read this book.

Everyone mentioned above has my deepest gratitude. Thank you very much.

July 2004, at my place Listening to *Chronicle 2nd* (by Sound Horizon) on repeat and basking in its fantasy.

Ryohgo Narita

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

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