Enigma Boy

by Crossbowfinger

Summary

Despite being forgotten about, Terunosuke Miyamoto had not been killed. In fact, his own adventure was just about to begin.
On the eastern coast of Japan, a relatively small town, known as Morioh, usually exists in harmony. Lately however, that sleepy peace has been disrupted by the arrival of an artifact known as The Arrow. The Arrow has a rather peculiar and noteworthy ability to it. It could awaken those who were hit with it to a manifestation of their own psyche, commonly referred to as a Stand. These Stands are a physical reflection of the user’s personality, desires, and other things relating to them. Stands also allow the user to utilize an ability. These abilities can range from the simple and practical, to the insane and horrifying.

Of the many people struck by the arrow, there was a young boy that many people had forgotten about. This was most likely due to the fact that through an unfortunate series of events, the boy had been transformed into a book and donated to the local library. The boy, whose name was Terunosuke Miyamoto, controlled a stand called Enigma.

A few days had passed since the transformation had occurred, and Terunosuke was feeling rather calm at the moment.

Josuke will come back, I know it, he thought, he’s one of the good guys. Terunosuke nodded, sure of his thoughts, as much as a book can nod. I bet that he’ll be back by the end of the week. In the meantime, Terunosuke would relax, alone with his thoughts. Yeah… a week is perfect, just enough time for me to learn my lesson. Of course, I already know that capturing people is wrong, but I suppose that I can stay for a while. Either way, being a book isn’t so bad. He tried his best to move in the space that he was kept in, but to no success. Hmm… I guess I’ll have to work on movement later.

Without thinking about anything in particular, time passed by. Hours escaped as though they were only a few seconds. Hmm… I never knew how boring it was to be a book… only a few more days left and then I can be out of here... nothing to do but think, I gu-

“Huh?!” Terunosuke cried out as he suddenly felt himself be pulled out of the space he was contained in. Someone’s going to read me…? Alright… I guess. As he was set down on a table he felt his pages being leafed through.

“Wwhhaa aaaa yoo ooiinn?” Terunosuke asked in a very muffled way, multiple pages covering the middle of his book body, where his “face” was located.

“What? Who said that?” The person, who seemed to be a young girl, questioned.

“Aa daa.” The girl looked down and flipped through Terunosuke’s pages until she came to where his “face” was located and gasped softly.

“I didn’t know books could talk.” The girl’s priorities had to be appreciated for a brief moment. “Well I’m a special kind of book, a complete one of a kind.” As he said this, Terunosuke took the time to note the girl’s appearance. Her skin was about as dark as his had been, but her hair was a deep shade of brown, as opposed to his white hair. She was wearing a frilly pink dress and wore some pearls on her wrist.

“That’s so cool~! I wanna be like you.”

“Nah, it's pretty boring to be a book. I don't think you'd like it.”

“Aww… well, Mr. Book how'd you get to be able to talk?” Terunosuke paused before answering. It had been a day or two since he talked to someone else, he decided to have a little fun while he had the chance.

“There was a big demon! And he cast a spell to turn me into a book! You better watch out, or he'll get you too.”

“Wow!” Apparently the girl really enjoyed his story, but when he thought about it, it wasn't exactly made up. As he had this thought, he heard the voice of a woman call, likely the girl’s mother.

“Sorry Mr. Book, I have to leave now.” He was quickly closed and then delicately placed onto the
bookshelf that he had originally been on. He wished that she could stay a little longer and talk some more, but he decided that it wasn't too much of a problem. The brief encounter with the girl caused him to wonder how this entire situation came to pass. Was it when he broke into Josuke’s home? No, definitely before that… it must have been the day he was granted his stand. Yeah, I remember now. I was alone at the park… and I was reading…

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Terunosuke sat alone on a park bench, the midsummer wind blowing gently through his hair. He was reading, or at least trying to read, The Scarlet Letter. It was much more difficult than what he had usually enjoyed reading, but he would try as hard as he could. He was silently questioning to himself why Hester didn't just leave the village to try to live elsewhere, and how many commas that the author could possibly fit into one sentence, but his observations were cut short by a searing pain in his left shoulder that seemingly came out of nowhere. Looking back, Terunosuke noticed that there was a long arrow that had been completely run through him. Before he even had the chance to cry out in pain, he felt an explosion of energy run through his entire body. It caused his toes to curl in his shoes, his jaw to clench aggressively, and made him fall to the ground. Then, just as quickly as it had started, the pain ceased and left only silence in its place.

He reached over to feel his shoulder and noticed that the arrow was gone. Not only that, but there was absolutely no wound to be found anywhere on his body. Just as he was about to panic, he saw a photograph drift into his line of sight. From this photograph, a miniature man emerged. He was balding, and had gray hair on the sides of his head. Normally, a person would want to run away from this sort of situation, but Terunosuke was a unique individual. Ever since he was a child, Terunosuke had enjoyed nothing more than people being scared. Even his own fear gave rise to a sense of curiosity towards the man.

“You've been chosen by the arrow.” The man started, his voice not reflecting his stature. “Bring out your stand.” Terunosuke stumbled to his feet and wondered what in the world he was talking about.

“Stand? What are you saying?”

“Oh, of course. You have no clue what I'm talking about do you? My mistake.” In a quick moment, the photograph aggressively rushed towards Terunosuke. Instinctively, he grasped his book and raised it to swat the photograph down. However, as he brought it close to his face, the only thing that came was a folded sheet of paper. Noticing that something was out of the ordinary, the photograph man stopped to look at him with a satisfied stare. “Good. You appear to be able to control your ability.”

Far too many things were happening that Terunosuke wasn't getting the answer to, and his confusion only mixed with frustration.

“What do you mean? What is my ‘ability’? Who the hell are you?” He looked down at the paper in his hand. “And what the hell is this paper?”

The man gave him a brief lesson on what stands are, and what they can do. “So… I was chosen by that arrow you have…” This was an exciting time for Terunosuke. To think that he was different from everyone else in a good way was practically unthinkable up until this moment.

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Terunosuke looked at himself in the mirror. It had been a very strange day, and he was trying to make sure that he wasn't going insane. The words of the man echoed in his head. “Don't forget me. I'll need your help in the future.” Despite the explanations, Terunosuke still didn't really understand
why this was happening to him. After a while though, he figured that he'd just consider his problems later.

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Instead of going to school that day, Terunosuke decided that he would test out his new power. From what little he had seen, he apparently had the ability to convert things into paper. However, he had no clue what his limits were, or how he was supposed to go about activating his ability. He walked down an open street and looked around. Seeing an empty glass beer bottle, he picked it up and held it in his left hand. “Umm… go… paper.” He felt like a complete idiot. That old guy had to have been playing a trick on him somehow. There was no way…

He realized that the bottle that he was holding had turned into another sheet of folded paper. At this point, he knew that this was no trick. He examined the paper and unfolded it. When he did this, the bottle came out and bounced on the ground. This ability didn't make any sense. He was absolutely certain that when he held that paper, there was nothing inside of it. There couldn’t even have been a single centimeter between the two sides! He picked up the bottle again. “Alright… paper it.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an arm move towards the bottle. Terunosuke darted his eyes at the arm, but it had disappeared before he could see it. Again, he held a folded sheet of paper. So if he opened this paper… the bottle would turn back to normal. He unfolded the sheet once more and the bottle was there, just as predicted. What wasn’t there, was the sheet of paper. I guess it just disappears then. But what was that arm… was it making the paper?

“Where are you?” Terunosuke asked aloud, hoping nobody saw him talking to thin air. Slowly and gradually, a figure materialized before him. Its body was mostly purple with a bunch of magenta accessories all across. Most of these accessories looked like question marks, save for some on its hands that looked like line segments, and some that were heart shaped on its knees. The body was relatively human, but had a head that almost looked like a tall egg. It also had eyes that looked like blue speakers. All in all, it looked like something out of Alien… if the xenomorphs were purple. How his mind had managed to create something like this, was very strange. Despite this peculiarity, there was an odd familiarity in its presence. Enigma was something that was… Somehow, its name was known to him. It was named Enigma, no doubt about it. “H-hello there… Enigma.” The only response that was given was a vague sort of grunting sound that it made out of its eyes. If what the photograph man had said was true, then Terunosuke was really just talking to himself. “Let's move on then.” He tossed the bottle away and continued to walk down the street.

Why paper? Of all the things in the world, why paper? While he was in thought, he bumped into an intimidating man walking the opposite direction. “Watch where you're going, asshole.” “Shithead.” Terunosuke muttered under his breath. “You wanna say that again, bastard!?” The man questioned aggressively. Whether it was due to his new powers or because of plain stupidity, Terunosuke decided to provoke the man. “Yeah, I do. Shithead!” “You little bitch!” The man swung wildly at Terunosuke. There was barely any time to dodge before the attack reached him. He could only raise his arms to guard himself before the blow landed. It was around this time that he regretted saying anything at all. He considered just running away, but still, he was going to stay. He reached into a pocket in his pants and fished around for what he was looking for. “Still want more? Fine by me!”

The man swung again, this time at Terunosuke’s face. However, this was just what had been hoped for. Terunosuke swiftly pulled a pen out of his pocket and plunged it into the man’s hand as he swung. The pen made a small hole in between his middle and ring finger as it burrowed into his flesh. The man cried out in pain as blood seeped out, his eyes growing wide. “S-stop! Please!” The man begged. As he begged, he took on a strange aura, almost as if he wasn't a person anymore. He
was just like the bottle. Terunosuke twisted the pen again, with the man trying to pull his hand away, his eyes completely open at this point. Suddenly, Enigma emerged from Terunosuke and grasped the man. As it did this, the man was turned into paper, while Enigma dragged him in. When this process was concluded, the man had been... converted into a large sheet of paper. With close examination, it appeared that an image of the man was drawn onto the paper and copied in a repeating fashion. It looked familiar, but Terunosuke couldn't quite remember where it was from. However, the image was irrelevant right now. He closed the paper as it folded in on itself many times, seemingly automatically. Thus, Terunosuke was left standing alone. He glanced around the street to see if anyone had seen what had just occurred. It seemed that he was in the clear though, with the only other person he saw being a short child on his way to school, running to avoid being late. Terunosuke unfolded the paper until there was only one fold remaining.

“This doesn't make any sense... but... here goes...” Terunosuke flipped open the sheet as the man tumbled out onto the ground. The shock that was felt became a sense of satisfaction. Terunosuke, the kid who had always been the one to be picked on and bullied for being weak, had just knocked out some guy who was at least 20 cm taller than him. This sort of power was absolutely amazing. His imagination raced with ideas. If Enigma could turn people into paper, then there was absolutely no one who could push him around. He needed to try this out more!

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“Hello, sir.” The convenience store clerk said to him as he walked in. “Can I help you find something?”

“No, that's fine.” Terunosuke responded as he walked down an aisle. There were a lot of things that caught his eye that he would want to try. He settled on a package of Mitarashi Dango, memories of the sweet syrup sticking to his fingers when he had eaten it as a child. “Actually, I guess I'm fine, I don't really need anything.” He said, making his way towards the exit.

“Ahm. Sir? Didn't you pick up something just then? I could've sworn you did.”

“I put it back, honest.” He held his hands open to emphasize the point. The clerk only gave him a look of uneasiness. “Don't believe me? Here.” He then pulled out the pockets of his pants. “See. Nothing there.”

“I'm sorry for not believing you sir, my apologies.”

“No problem.” With that, he left the store and started to walk home.

He dug around in his pocket again to find the small paper he was looking for. Opening it up, the sweet snack package fell into his hands. This ability had some serious potential, with a little practice, he could have anything he wanted. Arriving home, Terunosuke tore into the package, pulled out a skewer, and started to munch on it. His father wouldn't be home until late that night, so he had a lot of time to relax. He lounged around in his room and noted how the cheap treat wasn't as great as he had remembered.

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A few days had passed, and Terunosuke was having an absolute blast. He had never had so much fun by just doing simple things. He messed with a group of kids by hiding their bikes in paper until they went to get their parents, and then he went on to return the bikes exactly as they were before the kids came back. The look on their faces was priceless when they saw that everything was normal. He played with a cat at the shrine and found out that animals were practically objects, since they could be immediately papered.

He also found out some very interesting information. If he turned something into paper and then poked a hole through it, nothing would change. But if he tore the paper into two distinct pieces, the original object would be ripped in half in the manner that the paper had been torn. This opened the door to a lot more scenarios that could happen. There was also the extremely exciting fact that if he
turned Enigma on himself, he could become a sheet of paper. This paper, however, was different from the others. He could see everything that the outside world had to offer, each side of the paper acting as an eye. If he wanted to move around, then he could simply will the paper to move around. He could even fly around like this, albeit in a very slow and difficult to sustain manner that was more akin to jumping. When he wanted to go back to normal, he'd simply emerge out of a single point from the sheet and be as good as new. The process of actually doing it however, was fairly unnerving to watch.

Perhaps the most important discovery, however, was how human paperization occurred. After a small amount of research, he figured that he had the “see” the person as a thing, rather than a human. The best way to go about doing this was of course, through fear. If he could elicit a sign of sheer terror, then the given person was under his control.

Enigma had quite a bit going on with himself. He somehow managed to make all of these elements work together seamlessly and naturally. Terunosuke decided that he shouldn't let Enigma be the only one to be interesting, he needed to pick up the slack. He started to fix his hair in an interesting way. Instead of wearing it down and having it look boring, he took long locks of his hair and crossed them over the center of his head to make a sort of criss cross pattern. However it looked fairly stupid just like that, so he decided to add hair gel to the tips to bring them out to a point that would point away from the ground. Now his hair looked interesting. Still, his wardrobe was way too bland. He would usually just wear a black shirt with black pants and hoped that nobody cared. However, it was pathetic to look at now. He needed to do something much better.

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"Your coat will be done by the end of the week." The tailor explained.
"Thank you."
"Yes, just come by then and pick it up." He had picked out a white and brown long coat with ringed chains across the front, with the word Enigma across the bottom of the interior. As he exited the business, he wondered what a boring life he had lead up until that point. Even shopping for clothes was now exponentially more exciting than what he had done before.

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Sleeping was a difficult thing to secure recently, not because of anything negative, but because Terunosuke’s mind raced with new ideas the second he laid down. What if I folded two papers on each other, or maybe try to contain more papers inside of another paper… The stream of ideas would have kept flowing, had it not been for the arrival of a certain photograph. “It's time for your support, I need you now.” He explained. Terunosuke looked at the window that he had left open that the man must have come through. He should have closed it.

"What do you mean by that? Help with what exactly?"
"There are certain people that threaten my way of life, as well as the way of life of my son."
"Your son? Who is he?"
"His name is Kira… and he has certain issues he carries with himself."
"Issues… like entrance exam anxiety or something? Or does he kill people and hide the bodies in the ocean?" That last response had been nothing but a simple joke that Terunosuke himself didn't even find all that funny, but still made anyway.
"...Yes… he does sometimes end the life of some people… but he is still my son."
"Wait… a-are you serious?" Terunosuke took a moment to absorb what he had just heard. “A serial killer… like Norman Bates… or Hannibal Lecter?!" "...You could possibly say that sort of thing about him."
"What's he like? What does he use to kill people? Can I meet him?" The revelation that there was a
serial killer in Morioh was incredible. Most people thought that the town was just unlucky, but this proved that it was more than that. Much, much more!

“No, at least not yet. If you help me with this, then you may meet him.”

“Alright. What do you want me to do for you?” The man briefly disappeared into his photo before reappearing with several papers with words written on them.

“I need you to take care of these threats. As long as you can guarantee their deaths or making them cease their efforts, I'll consider it a success and give you what you want. Study that information carefully, your time to strike is going to happen tomorrow.” Terunosuke examined the papers that he'd been given. Each page had information about a person, their picture, and other miscellaneous things.

“Anything I should try and…” The photograph man had already left by the time he had the thought. “Ok then.” He had left behind a few gifts however. A gun, a bottle of acid, and a cage filled with some order of crawling bugs, to be exact. Terunosuke picked up the gun and examined it carefully. The safety was on, so there was no need to worry about shooting something by accident. He fumbled around with the gun a bit more until the clip dropped onto the floor. Cursing to himself, he picked it back up and slide it back in. “He could have at least given me a silencer or something.” Though with a few seconds of thought, he saw the terror potential that a gunshot could hold. As for the acid and bugs, he really didn’t know how to implement that sort of thing. Maybe he could make the target open a paper that contained them and kill them that way? Speaking of the targets, he had studying he needed to do. For once in his life, Terunosuke was actually looking forward to studying.

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By the end of the night he had a clear grasp on who these targets were. Josuke Higashikata, Koichi Hirose, Nijimura, Kujo, Kishibe he knew them all. Even the smaller threats like Kobayashi and Yamagishi were clear. The comprehension didn’t stop there, as he understood everything he needed about the people labeled: Low Probability, such as Kanedaichi and Yuuya Fungami. Crazy Diamond, Echoes, Heaven’s Door, Highway Star, Earth Wind and Fire they all fit perfectly into Terunosuke’s mind.

Even the section labeled: Allies, fit just as well.

But there was something missing. A certain trump card. Something to make sure that victory was firmly in his grasp when the time came for it. When he realized what it was going to be, his face curled up in delight.

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The morning began early, as Terunosuke couldn’t wait to enact his ideas. He got dressed quickly, stored the gifts into his pockets, and started to head out the door.

“You sure are up early.” He stopped in his tracks, and turned around to see his father. “You don't have to be at school for another hour. What's the rush?” Terunosuke had planned for a lot of things today, but he didn't expect his dad to be home at this time.

“Oh... well I needed to get some studying done before class started.” He lied. In actuality, Terunosuke couldn't remember the last time he had attended school.

“Well good, I'm glad that you're working hard. How about when you get back, we can have dinner some place. Does that sound good?”

“Yeah, sounds great.” It had been an even longer time since his dad had been free for dinner.

“Can't wait.”

“Alright. I'll See you then.”

“Yeah, see you tonight.” He waved goodbye and walked out.
First Enigma, now Dad. So many things were happening to Terunosuke. Things that renewed his hope he held for his life. Sure he might have to do some dirty work, but if this was the result, he would gladly do it.

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If all went according to plan, everything would happen in a way that could be handled. Terunosuke would sneak into the Higashikata household and wait for Josuke Higashikata’s mother, Tomoko. He would kidnap her and then follow Josuke until he was alone. He would use his mother as a surprise and find Josuke’s fear and take him out. Rinse and repeat for all other targets until he had collected them all. Once he had done that, he'd deliver them to Kira’s Father and then have dinner with dad. If everything went smoothly, he wouldn't even need the gifts or his trump card.

A sudden bump shook him from his train of thought. “Oh sorry…” He couldn't believe his luck. The person he bumped into was Koichi Hirose.

“No no, it was my fault, I wasn't watching where I was going.” He needed to take this chance while he had it.

“AHHH!” Terunosuke screamed in his face.

“W-what's wrong? Are you hurt?” Koichi was obviously frightened by the sudden outburst, just as Terunosuke had hoped.

“Oh nothing, I'm fine.” Terunosuke expressed calmly as he walked away. The confusion on Koichi’s face was visible, along with his fear tell.

“A-Alright…” Without much more hesitation, Koichi began to walk to school again.

“AHHHHH!” Just as Koichi thought Terunosuke had left, the dark boy popped out in front of him again, and just as he had before, Koichi’s fear tell was displayed all across his face. Blinking twice was all it took for Koichi to be captured. Terunosuke hoped Kira’s Father was watching, he was going to capture everyone!

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Sneaking into the Higashikata household was a simple task. He simply turned into paper and slid under the front door. There was a bit of a problem, however, no one was home. It wasn't all bad though, it did give him plenty of time to plan his moves. He figured that if he had time, he would be able to use it to his advantage.

Sitting at the kitchen table, he fiddled around with the papers in his coat. Scorpions, a gun, a vile of acid, a taxi with a driver that had been stored neatly, and his trump card. These were the tools Terunosuke had in his possession to take the targets out… as well as a bowl of ramen that he was saving for later. It didn't seem like it would be quite enough, especially for some of the stronger targets. He needed something more. The fridge might hold some answers.

Unfortunately, all it held was cheap instant dinners and beer. He pulled out a can and set it on the table next to the papers. Koichi Hirose was still in stuck in his form, but he showed something quite interesting. The characters for his name were written clearly on the paper he was trapped in, but Terunosuke hadn't labeled him, it was done completely automatically. In fact, checking the other papers, this held consistent. This could be manipulated very easily. He turned the can into paper and scribbled out the word Beer, and in turn wrote Koichi Hirose. The real Koichi Hirose would go in his pocket, but the bait would stay close, a good bargaining chip for the future. This creativity was wonderful! All of a sudden, Terunosuke’s mind was racing with ideas once again. Who knew that sealing physical objects in paper could be so intricate? The original thought built upon new thoughts. Maybe things didn't have to be physical, or at least solid, to be sealed. Searching through some cabinets and closets, he found just what he was looking for, a can of air freshener. With a flick of a lighter and a spray from the can, flames burned at his command, and
just as he had predicted, they could be sealed. It was around this time that he started to get hungry. Cheap snacks would do well at this time. Pulling out some sort of sugary confection that he couldn't recall the name of, he realized that he didn't have a specific plan to capture Tomoko Higashikata. He sealed the treat for later. Perhaps some tea held a clue.

Something that would put her in the mood for fear… well, it was well known that a stranger having deeply personal information on someone causes large amounts of fear. That's what Perfect Blue was all about. Maybe he should find some family pictures and tear her face out of them, then scatter them in front of the doorway. That way, she'll be startled when she… no… she'd just walk past them without seeing them. Come on, think! What if… he raided her wardrobe… yeah, that could work. Putting his plan into action, he rifled through her clothes. Perhaps one of her nice shirts could be stained to look bloody. No, that would just annoy her, not to mention how long it would take. How about if he took a full ensemble of clothes and arranged it to look like an outfit. Then he would scatter some nails to… uhh… Damn it! Where was he going with any of this?!! He had to think of something that would actually work. Shirts and pants were out, nothing could be scared with those. It had to be intimate and private, something that, if shown to the world, would cause anyone to be frightened. With that criteria in mind, the answer was obvious. Her panties.

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Laying the folded garments on the kitchen counter, he felt satisfied. Alright, so she'd walk into the room, and then she'd see her panties on the counter and then he'd capture her… but what if she didn't notice them there or if she didn't think anything of it? Without really thinking the choice through, Terunosuke took out a pen and wrote YOUR PANTIES on the undergarments. Now she'd be completely unnerved when she saw that. Yeah, definitely. Satisfied yet again, he went back to the refrigerator and unwrapped one of the confections that he had picked up earlier and took a well deserved bite into it. That was a dreadful mistake. He chewed on the bite and struggled to not spit it out. Jesus Christ, it was absolutely terrible! Who in the hell could eat something like this? Since no one else was around to watch him, he carefully put the treat back into its wrapper and set it back in the fridge. He peered at a clock in the room that informed him that he still had a while to wait until anyone else would be there. He didn't mind the wait.

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A few hours later Terunosuke heard the front door open and someone kicking off their shoes. The thoughts of “What if she doesn't get scared” and “I really hope this works” ran through his head, but he forced them out the best he could. Tomoko would be scared, simple as that. As the footsteps approached the kitchen, Terunosuke could make out an outline. There she is! The side room that he was hiding in gave him a great vantage point of his target. As she opened the fridge, complained about bad manners, and began to snack on that shitty treat that he had bit into earlier, it was all seen. That disgusting treat was a little good for something at least, if he had taken a bite, and she took a bite as well, it would be like they were sharing food. Hunter and target, inadvertently sharing something sweet, even the thought of it would make her skin crawl. Without further delay, he silently slipped into paper and snuck across the kitchen and took a seat at the table. All he had to do now was wait for her to turn around and she'd see his smiling face! However, Terunosuke had been a bit too stealthy, as Tomoko still had her back turned to him. As he grew impatient, he decided he'd have to get her attention with words.

“Everybody is terrified of something.” In complete surprise, Tomoko rapidly spun to face the source of the noise. Terunosuke paused for just a brief second to wonder why he had chosen to explain how fear works in order to get Tomoko’s attention, but he figured that he could manage to scare her enough with it. “I'm not talking about just being startled. I mean something that you try and try to hide, but can't deny.” In response to these sudden words, Tomoko drew a kitchen knife
from a nearby knife block and pointed it at the strange person in front of her. “Who the hell are you?!” The knife shook in her hands as she tried desperately to hold her demeanor firm. “If you want money, you won't get any. Now get the hell out!” If Terunosuke had wanted money, he could have taken everything in the house, along with the house. “Do I look like I'm here for money? No, I'm here for something much better. This is great, I know you'll like it.” As he said this, he pulled out the paper that held the gun. He was going to… wait… this was the paper containing that shitty treat that he forgot to throw away. It didn't matter. If he stopped now, everything would go to hell. As he unfolded the paper, he saw that Tomoko was confused as to what he was planning to do. “Did you know that everyone in the world unconsciously performs some sort of action when they get scared?” To this, she said nothing, keeping her expression steady, though she probably didn't realize that it had started to turn to one of distress. “It could be any number of things. Maybe they'll shift their hands around aimlessly or clamp their eyes shut. For you though, you swallow.” “Wha-...what?!” “Just before you reached for that knife you swallowed, you probably didn't even know you did it, did you?” At this point, she had to have been completely petrified. To cap it all off, Terunosuke revealed the awful treat that he had accidentally selected and opened it up. Tomoko, having no knowledge of how this strange teenager had made one of her treats appear from a thin piece of paper, watched with fright. Terunosuke took a generous bite straight into the treat. Tomoko seemed only to be further confused by this, so to continue his act of terror, Terunosuke started to aggressively lick the cream from the treat. This surprising and random act elicited another swallow from Tomoko, much to Terunosuke’s pleasure. “Aha! You did it again! Now there's no doubt that when you're scared, you swallow.” Tomoko had reached her breaking point. Forget the knife, there was no telling what this guy might do next. She bolted for the exit trying to escape from this psycho. “You can run all you want, but Enigma will always capture you!” On command, Enigma emerged and grabbed Tomoko. She only had time to let out a single scream before her body was turned completely into paper. Having completed the first step in his plan, Terunosuke stood up and let out a satisfied sigh. With Tomoko in his pocket, Josuke would be easy to take down.

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It didn't take any effort at all to find him. Josuke and some other guy crouched at the very spot that Terunosuke had captured Koichi. He patted the drink that he had disguised and smiled to himself. The street corner that he was standing on provided a very nice view of the pair as they anxiously looked around. They were completely oblivious of him at this time, giving way to a sly thought. What if he just walked up to Josuke and shot him in the back of the head? He'd definitely die. Of course, Terunosuke didn't want to kill anyone, partially because it was messy, but more importantly, due to the fact that he really shouldn't do that sort of thing. He wanted to be feared, not vilified. What he was fine with doing, however, was walking up to them and saying something along the lines of “Looking for someone?” As he crossed the street to approach the duo, the one closer to the ground turned around and pointed directly at him.

This caught Terunosuke off guard for two reasons. The first being that despite giving no indication that he was guilty of anything, they had still figured him out. The second reason being that the person pointing at him was Yuuya Fungami, someone who had tried and failed to kill Josuke himself, and should be in the hospital this very minute. As both sets of eyes focused on him, Terunosuke stopped in his tracks and made an improvised effort to be imposing. He stood up as tall as he could despite only coming in at around 175 cm. Along with his stance, he cocked his head to one side and grasped his hands together. Sure it was sort of rushed and sloppy, but it got the job done. As he stared at them and they stared back, Terunosuke quickly lost his nerve. He'd rushed into a situation and now his plans were thrown through a loop. He decided to walk away and hope they hadn't noticed him.
His steps were calm and consistent, not letting on about how much he was sweating. When he heard footsteps approaching from behind him, he racked his brain for an idea. Closer now. What if he actually did shoot Josuke? No, Crazy Diamond would just catch the bullet, especially if it was right in front of him. The steps were getting even closer. Could he use Tomoko this early? The footsteps were only a meter away. He had to do it! In a quick move he opened up the paper that held Tomoko and released her. Combined with this movement, he sealed himself into paper and hid in her coat pocket.

The confusion was obvious, even without seeing anything, Terunosuke could tell without a doubt that Josuke was caught off guard, seeing your mother with no warning will do that to a person. “Mom?” Josuke questioned, a stunned expression painted on his face. “What the hell?!” From his position in Tomoko’s pocket, Terunosuke had a front row seat of Josuke’s bewildered expression. Eyes wide, sweating forehead, biting his bottom lip, it was wonderful! There’s nothing more frightening than the thought of one’s maternal figure in danger. Nothing. “Using my mom as a damn hostage?! Get out here and fight, you bastard! Stop hiding!”

“Be careful, Josuke. That guy is still around here somewhere.” Yuuya warned from afar.

“Where the hell did he go, Yuuya?!”

“He's somewhere nearby, Josuke. Just be careful!”

While the two panicked at one another, Terunosuke was figuring out plans. From his perspective, he thought that Josuke’s fear tell was biting his lip, but he wasn't certain. Still, throwing his mother at him must’ve freaked him out. He didn't look like the type to panic easily. At about that time, Josuke searched through his mother's coat in an attempt to find the enemy, but found only a blank piece of paper that he pulled out and examined. It was folded up multiple times, which disguised its relatively large size. In this second, Terunosuke was the one in control. If he so desired, he could simply hide inside of the paper and wait for Josuke to lower his guard. But he was feeling a bit too impatient for something like that. Instead, he drew the gun from his pocket and stuck it out, right in front of Josuke’s face.

“What the fu-!” Terunosuke pulled the trigger and was released from Josuke’s grip. For a fleeting second, he hoped that taking his target down would actually be that simple. Obviously though, when he looked back, Josuke’s face was not painted all over the sidewalk, Crazy Diamond having caught the shot. Josuke was close, but he wasn't going to show his fear tell again that easily. This would require another trick. Terunosuke distanced himself from his target and emerged from the paper, this time he stared Josuke in the eyes and refused to lose his nerve. “Well, you got some balls showing yourself like that. If you let Koichi go right now, I'll let you walk away.” Josuke was lying, no doubt about it. There’s no way he’d let Terunosuke off scot free like that.

“Why the hell would I just give up that easily? What, do you think my stand is just some trash that looks interesting?” Terunosuke’s gained a sly smile on his face. He needed to show Josuke the power of Enigma, to understand why it should be feared. What could he use? He'd need to tear something up, but what could he afford to throw away. He reached in blindly into his coat and pulled one of his papers out and quickly read it: Ramen. He’d completely forgotten about that, but it would work perfectly in this situation. “I think Enigma is a pretty useful stand, I can store things away until I need them again.” He held out the Ramen paper. “And when I’m finished with something, I can just tear it up and throw it away.” He tore the paper into shreds, scattering the food onto the ground. It was pretty wasteful, but he didn't mind too much. The demonstration had made one thing clear, if a paper containing a certain ally of Josuke’s got torn up, then he could kiss his life goodbye. He noted how much fun it was to use everyday objects in scenarios such as this, he'd be sure to remember that after he was done.

“Quit trying to stall with small talk and just surrender!” Josuke growled.

“I didn’t come out to surrender, dumbass.” Terunosuke pulled out the paper that had Koichi Hirose written on the side and held it between his fingers. “This paper here contains Koichi.” He flipped Josuke off. “come get it if you can, asshole.” Those taunts must’ve done the trick, because Josuke
Terunosuke jumped back and sealed himself into paper while managing to keep a grip on the paper he had taunted Josuke with. He then threw the paper towards the street, straight onto the path of an oncoming truck. Josuke, being the hot blooded idiot he was, didn't even hesitate to follow it, knowing full well the dangers that were involved with this decision.

“Josuke, stop! That isn't the real Koichi. It's bait!” Yuuya cried out.

“KOICHI!” That trick had done it. Josuke was completely comprised now, there was nothing stopping Enigma now. He'd bitten his lip and sealed his fate. Enigma rushed out and took ahold of Josuke.

“This is what I was waiting for! This... is Enigma!” Josuke wouldn't go down without a fight, however, as he brought out Crazy Diamond. Whole lot of good it would do for him. The stand sent out a barrage of fists straight into Enigma’s chest, but that just confirmed what was already happening.

“Once you show me your fear, you can attack me all you want, but it's useless in the face of Enigma!” Josuke thrashed around as his body started to become paper, struggling to get any sort of a hold onto anything. He desperately reached out and found a road light, or whatever those things were called, it didn't matter. What did matter is that it eventually broke under the weight, and Josuke could only slide away pathetically to his doom. The smile on Terunosuke’s face was impossible to suppress. Everything had gone completely as he'd planned it. As Josuke’s clenched fist finally slid into the paper, his defeat was assured. It was… what? In the middle of Terunosuke’s thought Josuke’s face reemerged from the paper, along with the road light he was holding. In fact, almost his entire chest had come back out. What the hell was going on?

“Y’know, I bet that paper that you threw out into the road was a decoy, wasn't it? Cause if I had got that page and was still standing, you'd be screwed. I figured that out pretty quick really. So you wanna know why I chased it anyway? It's because that's just who I am.” This bastard. There's no way in hell that he'd seen through Terunosuke's plan so easily. And why the hell was Enigma not pulling him down?! “You win… for now. But, I'll give you one last parting gift before I go. When you turn me to paper, you better tear me into a million pieces. Because if I get out…” He threw the light at Mach speed, straight at its original position. “I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!” And without another word, he was turned completely into paper.

Damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it, DAMN IT! Why had Enigma just stopped working like that? How had that bastard managed to figure out how to stop him? As far as Terunosuke knew, nothing could stop him. He peered over at the light, expecting there to be some massive crater, but low and behold, the light was perfectly fine. What the fuck?! But it suddenly made sense. Josuke’s Crazy Diamond could put things back together, couldn’t it? That was its ability, just like how Enigma could make things paper and Highway Star could move at high speeds. Everything made sense now. He'd simply held onto the light while he “fixed” it. That dragged him away. Heh, Terunosuke was getting riled up over nothing. He was still in control.

“Ha Ha Ha…! T-that bastard sure liked to act tough, b-but… he was no problem to take down!” At his feet, the decoy sheet danced around in the wind. He quickly stomped down on it and grinded it against the sidewalk, tearing it up and revealing the cheap beer that had served its purpose well.

“What the...?!” Terunosuke lifted his eyes to see Yuuya Fungami standing across the street from him, his hand on his chin. In all honesty, Terunosuke had forgotten he was there.

“Not stepping in to help Josuke was a smart move, Yuuya. I wasn't given any sort of instruction concerning you, so I'll let you be. If I were you, I'd stay out of this.” As he finished his warning, he pulled out the paper that contained the taxi that he had stored earlier.

There was reason to be proud for what had been accomplished so far. From what he had read, Josuke had never actually been defeated before. This was all the better for Terunosuke, to be the
first to topple a powerhouse was an incredible feeling. Now it was time to take another one down. He stepped into the vehicle and sat down comfortably into the leather seat. “Take me to the Morioh Grand Hotel, please.” He asked the taxi driver.

“Uh… what?” The driver must have been a bit perplexed as to why he was suddenly in a completely different part of town from where Terunosuke had picked up the car. However, he didn't seem to be overly disconnected. Enigma sure had a lot of facets to his ability. “Oh… yes. Right away, sir.” Jotaro was definitely going to be difficult to take down. There wasn't a whole lot of information that he had at his on him. There was always the opti-

“I can't let you do that.” Terunosuke turned his eyes to see a dark blue vaguely-Egyptian stand open the car door. Highway Star. Yuuya must want to play hero. How annoying. What was more annoying, though, was that it had snatched a paper out of his coat. Terunosuke had to admit, its speed was intimidating, but likewise, he knew its strength was pathetic. No reason to be worried. “This paper… it’s Josuke! Now where's Koichi?!?” Why did this have to happen? It'd be nice if things were easy.

“Your decision to follow me. It wasn't smart, Yuuya.”

“Tch! You think that people like you and Yoshikage Kira should be able to get off easy?! Just the thought pisses me off! Now, give Koichi back!” How insulting. Terunosuke had never killed a single person in his entire life. He wasn't even in the same ballpark as Kira. Just the comparison between the two was completely disrespectful. When he met the man, they'd have a laugh about the situation. The thought gave him a new confidence to face the situation with. “Y’know, I don't have to be the one who opens up the paper, anyone can do it.”

“What? Seriously?”

“Yeah, just open it up and Josuke will be restored. Easy right?” In response to his instructions, Highway Star began to open the sheet very delicately. This was what Terunosuke had hoped for. If his opponent knew how his stand worked, but couldn't stop it, the fear would come out like honey from a beehive. “Too bad… It won't be so easy for you!” He slammed the door straight into Highway Star’s chest, segmenting it into a bunch of smaller cross sections. He really needed to work on his one liners. Nothing ruins a moment faster than a poor choice of words.

Slamming aside, Highway Star was still coming after him. He may have Josuke and Koichi in his pocket, but it had an unbreakable tenacity, he'd have to do something about it sooner or later. The taxi sped away as he began to take action, if Yuuya wanted these two, he'd have to go through hell to get them. Everything he had at his disposal was going to be used. The scorpions, the acid, and especially the trump card. Terunosuke’s origami skills came to the surface as he folded the papers in on each other. Yuuya would have to go through each and every one of his traps to get those two, there's no way he'd be able to win. The taxi gained enough distance from Highway Star’s pursuit to give him the time he needed. “Pull over.” He told the driver, setting down the now finished trap bundle in his seat.

“Yes sir, just let me get to the end of the street.”

“No. Stop right here.” He brandished the pistol in order to really emphasize the point.

The driver complied with his demand and bolted from the car as soon as he could. Terunosuke barely had any time until Highway Star arrived, he had to move. He bolted out of the car just as fast as the driver had, and began to hide under the car right before he remembered the flames. The footsteps were approaching! He positioned the paper and slammed the door on it, then rushed under the car in his paper form, hiding between the inner workings of the vehicle. In no time at all he heard the footsteps above him. After a few minutes of waiting, Yuuya made his appearance. He approached the vehicle with caution and began to open the door.

“Wait Highway Star! We've gotta be careful.” As if to punctuate this, he exclaimed. “Right here! This paper in the door has to be a trap.”

Damn, he'd found that way too quickly. The sound of flames flying out of the paper was heard,
along with a dismissive grunt. “He must think we're idiots! No way we wouldn't see it.” About now, he should be looking at the bundle trap on the seat. This was where it would be decided. Either he would get scared and Terunosuke would win, or he would beat Terunosuke, and find a way to win. The former was going to happen, no doubt about it. “What the fuck?! He hid scorpions in there!” It sounded as though he was digging in already. Next up was the acid. “This liquid… what is this?” Terunosuke wasn't quite sure what would happen if the papers were burned through, but he guessed that it probably wouldn't be pretty. “Damn it! I don't even have a choice, do I.” He had to admit, Yuuya was determined to save those two, but he was about to unknowingly bring out the trump card, the object that would guarantee his defeat. A paper shredder! “Gah! What the hell?! You bastard!”

Terunosuke took the opportunity to come out of hiding and take in the scene. Yuuya was struggling to pull Josuke and Koichi out of the shredder’s grip, before they were torn apart. Terunosuke hadn't thought about it before, but if those papers went through, they would both be killed. Shit. But it didn't matter now, he had to finish what he started, it was too late to turn back! Highway Star tried to throw a few punches at the shredder, but it was useless, it was simply too weak to make any difference. “Josuke! Koichi!” At that moment, Yuuya touched his chin, inviting himself to be captured. Enigma came out to grab Yuuya from behind and forced him into paper.

“You know, it wasn't very difficult to bring out your fear, but to be fair, no one can stand up to Enigma!” Once again, Terunosuke felt his face twist into a smile that he didn't even attempt to suppress. “Everyone is easy prey to me!” This feeling of power was incredible! He was completely in control, nothing could even hope to stop him!

“Easy prey? Fine, I can live with that. But I let you win.” What? He had let Terunosuke win? What the hell was he talking about?

In the blink of an eye the papers that held Josuke and Koichi flew out of the shredder. “I couldn't reach into the shredder unless I was paper thin, now could I?” Fuck! This wasn't happening! “The papers…! No! Stop!” But they didn't stop, and the fist of Crazy Diamond meet his chin, pulverizing it like a cheap slab of meat. The pain was sharp and devastating. Right in front of him, the towering frame of Josuke Higashikata stood, looking down at him. The warning echoed in his head, I'm gonna fucking kill you if I get out!, and seeing him like this, Terunosuke didn't doubt his threat.

He had to do something or he was going to die right here on the side of the road. His eyes searched desperately for anything that might help. Yuuya! He held Yuuya’s paper in front of him, making sure that Josuke saw it.

“S-stay back!” He tried to mask the fear he was feeling, but in the end, he didn't even convince himself. “Yuuya is in here! I'll… I'll tear it up! I swear I will!” The ultimatum was clear, either Josuke would approach and he’d take Yuuya down with him, or Josuke stayed back and he'd make a break for it.

Unfortunately for him, Koichi’s Echoes took the third option, and weighed his hands down like brick in the ocean.

“Y'know, people like you really pissed me off. Taking hostages and making those kind of threats is just low.” Josuke’s face didn't even move as he said this, it just stayed steady and cold. To Terunosuke though, it was unimaginably horrifying. He was about to die. He was going to die here. Right here. Josuke was going to use Crazy Diamond on him and crush his skull into the dirt. The realization that these were his last moments forced his pride down his throat.

“S-stop! Please! I scare people because I find their reactions fascinating! When I got Enigma, I got drunk with power and got way too carried away! I… I get that now! I've learned my lesson! I'll never do anything like this ever again, as long as I live!” Was everything he just said just desperate begging, or was it genuine? Terunosuke wasn't quite sure himself.
“Heh, did you know when you're scared,” Josuke pointed at his eye, the look on his face remaining
ice cold. “You kinda squint one eye shut?” What the hell?! Terunosuke had only just recently
learned that about himself, and here this guy was, noticing it right off the bat. It made him sweat,
more than he had ever sweat before. “And when you get really fucking terrified, you close both of
them.” Crazy Diamond came out of Josuke, a harsh look fixed onto its face. This was it.
Terunosuke was about to die! He was about to be killed right here! In the dirt, like some animal!
“N- N- NOOOOO!” The barrage of fists came quickly and painfully. Every centimeter of his body
was beaten, his bones shattering beneath his skin. He was thrown into the paper shredder and
broke it just as fast as he was being broken, the attack still continuing to destroy his existence. Then
a strange thing started to happen. The paper that had been shredded previously was now starting to
meet his skin and... become it. His body... was becoming paper. “W- WHAT THE HELL!”

And then suddenly... the pain just stopped. He tried to move around, but found it impossible. He
looked around, but instead of seeing a pool of blood or mangled limbs, he saw paper pages. His
back didn't feel normal, it felt completely different, like he had just shrunk down to fit an unusually
small space. When he tried to breathe, he found that he couldn't, because he didn't have lungs
anymore.
“T- I- m... a... a book?”

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That’s how it all happened. The review of his decisions that had lead him to this form put him
in an upset mood. He'd accepted his situation so easily, and without a second thought. He didn’t
even think of disobeying his orders, he was simply too obsessed with his newfound power. He
wished he could go back and fix his mistakes, but he knew as well as anyone that that was
impossible. Besides, it's not like Josuke would keep him like this forever. There was probably only
about... actually... how much time had passed while he was remembering himself? It must have
been... well, let's see... it was probably... a month at least. Terunosuke was now forced to
confront a very difficult truth. Josuke wasn't coming back.

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What the hell? What the hell?! Why would he just leave me like this? Damn it, Josuke, what the
hell is your problem? Terunosuke attempted to shift around in the spot he was in, but he remained
unable to get anywhere. Damn it! Josuke you sick bastard! Do you think it's funny to do this to
someone?! To cut off their ability to move and then leave them to rot?! Huh? Well do you?! His
questions were heard by no one, save for himself. Sure I tried to kill you, but you're a good guy,
god damn it, you're not supposed to do shit like this! You're supposed to say something like “Don't
ever show your face ever again.” or put me in the hospital, not some sick torture! And who the hell
turns someone into a book?! Is that supposed to be some kind of divine irony?
The more anger his thoughts held, the more he wanted to escape from his prison, however, since
he couldn't escape, he grew more and more frustrated, which in turn, made his anger grow. He
tried to yell out and be heard, but his screams were muffled by his “body” and were not heard.
You're supposed to forgive people who wrong you, Josuke! That's what you did for Yuuya, so why
not me?! What did I do to deserve a punishment this harsh? I didn't kill anyone, in fact, everyone
was safe at the end of the day. Was it because I beat you? Huh, you child?! You couldn't handle
someone who could outsmart you? Couldn’t stand the idea of someone who knew how to beat
you, so you threw a temper tantrum like some brat! That's exactly it, isn’t it?! You're just some pick
who thought he was better than everybody, but I spat in your face and you did this to me. For a
little while, Terunosuke felt slightly smug in his deduction of Josuke’s reaction. This conclusion,
however, would pass, leaving him with an unsatisfied feeling hanging over him.

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Damn it… why is this happening? Why couldn't Josuke just beat the shit out of me and just be done with it? I would've stopped. I would've gone back to my regular life and been a regular student. I wouldn't tell anyone about Enigma and I wouldn't steal anything ever again. I'd tell the old man in the photograph that I didn't care about Kira and to find someone else to solve his problems. I'd get good grades, even in English class, and go off to University. I'd study something I liked, meet a nice girl, get married, find a good job, and have a family. I'd apologize for everything that I'd done. To Koichi, Tomoko, Yuuya, even Josuke. I'd right those wrongs. Everything I did, I'd do what I could to make up for it. Why can't I do that? Is there a reason, past Josuke’s anger, that I'm suffering? That has to be it. There was a reason for all of this. What is it? What could that reason possibly be? Am I supposed to learn a lesson from this? Don't look at people like they're things, this is how it feels. That would make sense, but if I'm not let out, how can I use it? Is it that... I shouldn't be let out? I've messed up so badly that I'm beyond saving, and the only option is this? The notion stewed in Terunosuke’s mind. His next thought didn't come until a considerable amount of time had passed. That's it. That's the reason. I can't be helped. This is what I deserve.

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Terunosuke did not try to shake out of his containment, in fact, he didn't try to do anything. I deserve to be here. There is no escape from this. This is what happens when you take hostages and do evil things. During this time, Terunosuke tried to cry. He tried to yell out and warn everyone of the pain his actions had caused him, but once again, he wasn't heard.

He remembered a memory from his childhood, a particularly saddening one, about a dog he once saw. The dog was locked in a cage, and was whimpering desperately. After a while, it began to gnaw at the bars, biting the metal until its mouth and teeth bled in a hopeless effort to escape the isolated containment. Eventually it started to cry out to try to get its master to let it out, but its owner did not come back. Terunosuke couldn't remember what became of the dog, but he did understand why he remembered it. He was just like that pathetic animal.

So for a little while, Terunosuke just sat in his own sadness and loathing, wishing desperately that he could change how everything turned out, but once again, he knew that wouldn't happen. While all of this was happening though, he hadn't noticed a hand grabbing him off of the shelf he was on, until it started to flip through his pages.

“Come on… there's gotta be something that'll help me with exams.” The raspy voice thought aloud. “Please, let there be something.” Terunosuke didn't care about whoever this was, he made no sound, and didn't attempt to ask for help. “Gghh! Damn it! Stupid book!” The owner of the voice was now flying through the pages. “It's all gibberish! Who the hell wrote a dumbass book like this?” His frustration grew and grew until finally, he pulled off Terunosuke’s front cover. The pain was awkward to feel, but that didn't stop it from burning. He didn't know how it would feel if he was still a person, but it would probably still hurt all the same. “Oh… oh shit…” The man who held him was feeling regret for acting so impulsive, and damaging a library book. “I gotta fix this!” Still, Terunosuke didn't care what happened to him anymore, but when he felt a cold gust of wind on his “body” he knew that something important was happening.

Where was this guy taking him? What was his plan? Eventually though, the answer became clear.

“Dude, hey! I need your help!” Who was this guy talking to exactly?

“Ah, Okuyasu. What do you need? Didja break your school desk again?” Okuyasu… that name. He was someone important… a local celebrity? A classmate he used to see sometimes?

“No man. I accidentally ripped this library book.” Terunosuke felt himself being moved around in a way that probably involved him being shown to Okuyasu’s friend.

“Accidentally? You sure it was on accident?”

“What?! Of course man! I just got annoyed, y'know.”

“Yeah yeah. I know. Lemme see that thing.” Okuyasu handed over both pieces of Terunosuke over
to his friend. “Alright, no sweat.” Was this guy going to stitch his cover back on? Terunosuke didn't really know how books were repaired. “Done.” Wait, what?
“Thanks man, I knew I could rely on you.” Terunosuke could feel his front cover again. This guy had somehow managed to put him back together right then and there. He felt like he should thank him.
“Hhnk yuh, saa.”
“What the hell!” Okuyasu exclaimed. “The book! It just said something! The book is possessed by a ghost!”
“Haaho”
“Ahhhh! It did it again!” Okuyasu dropped Terunosuke on the ground and ran off a bit. “I wonder if it knew Reimi.”
“T-there is someone in this book…” The friend picked Terunosuke off the ground and eyed him cautiously. “I'll try to get the spirit outta there.”
“What? How're you gonna do that? Destroy the book at a shrine or something?”
“No, nothing like that. You remember the time we first ate at Tonio’s and I thought your order of spaghetti was really weird?”
“Yeah, sure I remember.” What the hell are they even talking about?
“And so I reduced the entire meal back to its original ingredients. I'll just do the same thing here.”
Immediately, Terunosuke felt himself be thrown into the air and what felt like being punched with the force of a bullet. When he landed, he went face first into a pile of snow on the side of the road. It was dirty, it was cold, and it made his chest uncomfortable to lie down on… wait a second. 
Holy shit.

He reached his hand up and instead of touching paper, he felt fabric and flesh underneath. My body! I'm back! I'm free! I'M FREE! He pushed his hand into the snow. Instead of avoiding the freezing bite of the icy mound, he savored the sensation, savored the feeling, the pain was welcome. Overcome with emotion, he began to cry, not out of sorrow, but from joy. His body had been restored, his suffering had not been in vain, and he was not beyond redemption. I need to thank him, this man who saved me. Rolling over on his back, Terunosuke lifted his teary eyes to see the face of the man who had saved him.

His eyes shot wide in horror. His joy whiplashed straight into fear. His hand began to burn in the frost. Josuke Higashikata stood in front of him.
“Stop! Get away! No!”
“Gah! Easy there. I'm not gonna hurt you… Mr. Spirit.” Josuke held up his hands in an effort to be nonthreatening. Terunosuke scrambled to get to his feet, but his time as a book had hindered his coordination. All he could do was flail wildly in an attempt to get away. “Here, let me help you.”
“Ahhh! Stop it! Don't!” Josuke practically leapt back in response to this.
“I'll… uhh… check to make sure your book is alright.” Strangely, all that remained of the book was long strips of paper and a cover. Josuke picked the cover up and read the text on its spine.
“Enigma… huh. That's strange… wait… Enigma… Enig… ma… GHH! ENIGMA! I remember you!” Terunosuke could feel the fear well up inside him. He clamped both eyes shut and covered his head with his arms.
“You're going back in, you bastard!” He felt the paper strips and cover be thrown at him, providing him with a mortifying thought. Josuke was going to turn him back into a book. No… no! No! No! No! No! NOOOOO! He forced his eyes open and looked for something, anything, to bash his skull in with. He'd rather rip himself apart than go back. But despite his efforts Crazy Diamond showed itself and threw a barrage of fists at him.

However, for some reason, nothing changed, he was fine, the flurry had landed to his side, away from his body. “What? Okuyasu? What are you doing?!” Terunosuke looked to where Josuke was
looking and saw a blue stand holding its hand out.
“I don't get it, Josuke. Who is this guy? What did he do? Why are you so mad at him?” Okuyasu asked, his face in complete concern.
“This bastard kidnapped my mother and Koichi! He tried to kill me too!”
“I'm sorry!” Terunosuke cried out. “I'm so sorry for everything I did! I promise to never do it ever again!” He knelt down on his hands and knees in front of Josuke.
“Ghh! Quit doing that!” But Terunosuke continued to beg. “Come on, you bastard! I told you to stop doing that! Now cut it out!” Terunosuke whimpered as he begged. His eyes burned with tears. He wouldn't go back. He would do anything to make sure he didn't go back. He'd gouge his eyes out, he'd tear his limbs off with just his teeth, hell, he'd slam his face against the sidewalk until all that remained was a revolting mass of pulp if it helped him.
“Agghhh! Fine! Just… get out of my sight, you bastard.” Josuke gave him a restrained kick to the shoulder, as if he was warning him that the next kick would be much worse if he didn't leave.
Terunosuke didn't waste anytime to ask questions or give a response. He stumbled to his feet and awkwardly ran away in a random direction.

His legs burned as his sprint started to compose itself. His stride didn't matter. Josuke didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was free.

Free from the book.

Free from the pain.

Everything was going to be alright.
The consequences of evil

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything would not be alright, far from it in fact.

For starters, Terunosuke realized that if snow was on the ground, it must be winter, or at least close to it. Just how much time had been lost? At least four months, and even that was being lenient. He walked aimlessly down a street as he wondered this, snowflakes falling lightly on his head. Despite of what had happened, a slight smile found its way to his face. He looked up at the slowly darkening sky and let the tiny drops of joy coat his tongue. Usually, he would be too embarrassed to do such a childish thing in public. Now though, he figured that even if someone did see him, it didn’t really matter in the long run.

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Coming to a man reading a newspaper under a bus stop, Terunosuke decided to get some answers. “Excuse me, sir.” He asked politely. “What is today’s date?”

“Uhh…” The man looked at the front cover of the paper for a second. “Saturday, November 18th.” That wasn’t horrible. Sure it was a few months of his life that he wouldn’t get back, but it didn’t ruin anything major. He could still go back to school, his favorite manga probably hadn’t finished yet, and all the best movies would come out this time of year.

“November 18th, 1999. The new millennium is just around the corner, isn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?” The man looked at him as though he was looking at a complete idiot.

“Oh yeah, my mistake. The millennium starts at the year after that, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but it isn’t 1999.”

“What? Let me see the newspaper for a second.” Taking a quick peek at the print he read the date off of the top heading. 2000.11.18. November 18th, 2000.

“Have you been looking under a rock or something? How did you forget what year it was?” Just then, the bus arrived, leaving Terunosuke alone once again.

A year and a half. Terunosuke had lost a year and a half of his life. He slumped down to the seat that the man had just been sitting in and held his head in his palms. How had time passed so quickly without him being aware of what was happening? A year and a half. It was difficult to even think about. He had not changed at all during this time, his outfit reflecting this truth, but the rest of the world clearly had. What had happened in his absence? Did his friends get worried about him? Did the clerk at the movie rental store ask where he was, wondering why he wasn’t picking up horror movies once a week like he always did? Did Dad just… Shit, Dad! He had completely forgotten about his father. He shot up and began to race home. How had he coped with being alone? Terunosuke couldn’t even remember the last thing he had said to him before he had left. What could they have been? I'll see you later. Goodbye. I love you. He knew it had not been the last one. His pace increased to a sprint as his eyes welled up. He wasn't far now, only a few blocks more. How would he explain his absence? His father didn't know what stands were, he'd just know that his son had disappeared and hadn't come home. Terunosuke began to sprint, his legs burning from the disuse. Just one more street and he'd be home. Just a few more houses down, and he'd see his father's face once again. His legs practically begged him to stop, but he pressed on, his home within sight. It didn't matter why he was gone, all that mattered is that they would be reunited, he wouldn't be alone any more.
Finally, he reached his home as he doubled over in exhaustion from endless sprinting. But his
tiredness wasn't important now, his father was waiting for him. He pounded on the front door,
making as much noise as he could to be heard from the inside.
“Dad! It's me! It's Teru! I'm back! I'm here!” He slammed the door with his fist until it became red
and sore, yet he still went on. After a short time, the door finally opened, revealing a man that he
didn't recognize.
“Umm… hello.” The man said plainly, a look of confusion on his face.
“W-who are you?” There was no doubt that this was the right house, he knew he was at the right
place.
“I could ask you the same thing. What do you want?” Damn it, why was this taking so long?
“My father, where is he? He should be here.”
“Your father? No one here is… oh… oh Jesus. You're the son aren't you?” The man’s face shifted
completely, from confusion, to being visibly troubled. “You should come in.”
“Alright…” Something was wrong, very wrong.
“Honey?” A woman's voice asked from Terunosuke’s parents’ room. “Who was it?”
“Rumiko? You haven't called me that since we were dating. I couldn't call you Kiyomoto without
feeling strange.” The woman, who was very clearly pregnant, came into the living room and
noticed Terunosuke. “I don't think we've meet before, hello.” She bowed, as much as a heavily
pregnant woman could bow, and turned to face Kiyomoto. “Is he someone you work with?”
Kiyomoto quickly came close to her and began to whisper something to her. Her face slowly
changed from a smile, to one that was concerned and saddened. “Oh…”

“Hey,” Kiyomoto said, looking back at Terunosuke. “you should come see this.”
“What is it?” Terunosuke was getting tired of asking questions without receiving any answers. Yet,
he followed Kiyomoto down the familiar hallway, stopping right where his room had been when
he had left. He slid the door open and was greeted by a comforting sight. The room he had left was
the one that he looked at now, albeit one that was much cleaner and more organized. The TV in the
corner of the room, the bookshelf that held multiple years worth of volumes of Weekly Young
Magazine, and the bed in the center of the room that was almost unrecognizable due to how clean
it was, they were all welcome reminders of his past. But there was one more aspect about his past
that he needed to find out.
“My father… where is he? I need to know.” Kiyomoto frowned again, looking away before
answering.
“I need to get something for you. It'll answer what you want. Just wait here for a second.” He
exited the room, leaving Terunosuke alone with his thoughts. Had Dad been hurt? Was he in some
sort of accident? Did he move to another country? Is… is he dead? Terunosuke’s thoughts raced
wildly, their creativity mercilessly tormenting him.

After what felt like hours of agonizing waiting, Kiyomoto returned with a small cardboard box that
would usually be found in an office.
“I just want you to know that you can stay here for as long as you need. My wife said that she's
alright with it and you won't be a burden on us.”
“Thank…” Terunosuke stopped talking for a moment to wonder what would cause such a response.
“Thank you.” He took a seat on his bed and prepared himself for what might come next.
“Your questions can be answered by the items in here.” Kiyomoto set the box into Terunosuke’s
outstretched hands. “We kept this stuff for you, in case you ever came back here.” The contents of
the box included a few newspaper articles, what appeared to be a hand written paper, and a picture
of him and his parents that was taken when he was still in elementary school. It was a very
comforting memory, though he did feel a disheartening amount of sadness looking at it now.
Staring at the other contents of the box, he hesitated, fearful of what might be in store for him if he
decided to continue on. This trepidation, however, would not hold, as he picked up the first news
article and carefully read it.

‘Local High School Student Most Recent Victim In The String Of Disappearances That Have Plagued Morioh’. The title displayed. Skimming through the writing, he learned that in the days following his fight, the police had searched for him like they had searched for the countless other people that had disappeared before he had. Terunosuke only grew more upset from this information. Not only would they not have found anything, but there was probably no trail to even start on. Terunosuke continued onto the next article.

‘Search For Teen Officially Called Off’. After only a few weeks had passed, the police had concluded their efforts in trying to find him. Honestly, they couldn't be blamed. If Terunosuke had to try to find someone who had gone missing without as much as a single lead, he couldn't deny that pessimism would run rampant, especially in when same the scenario played out nearly one hundred times. So what would happen after that? Would everyone just go on with their everyday life? How had Dad handled all of this? This time, Terunosuke pulled out the paper and began to read it.

Teru.
I'm sorry for not protecting you like a father should. I sincerely hope that you don't have to read this, but at the same time, I'm glad that you're alright if you do. If you do find this, I'm sorry that I couldn't stay for longer, I just couldn't handle the loneliness anymore. I'm going to be with Mom now.
I love you.
Your father, Takanari Miyamoto.

What the fuck was this?! Be with Mom?! That can't be right! He frantically dug through the box and grabbed the final article, however, it wasn't so much a story as it was a listing. No, it wasn't a listing. Terunosuke's hands shook, his eyes welled up, he struggled to not break down into tears. It was an obituary.

“H-how… how did he die.” Terunosuke slowly asked. Kiyomoto was very hesitant to answer him, but he eventually gave in.
“Alcohol poisoning… he… he drank himself to death… I'm sorry.” For a little while, Terunosuke couldn't say anything at all. He just sat there and sobbed. “Would you like me to leave you alone?” Terunosuke could only nod. Once again, he was alone. He curled up tightly and crawled under the sheets, hoping to escape from the truth. It took a long time for him to fall asleep.

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Terunosuke awoke with a pain in his legs. He really shouldn’t try to run anymore. Suddenly, he forcefully gripped the sheets that surrounded him and gasped. He wasn’t a book! For the first time in God knows how long, he could feel the world as a human, not as a book. Then, just as fast as his joy had jumped, it came crashing back down, along with the memory of yesterday. The sadness returned with full force, causing him to curl up again and try to shut out everything surrounding him. He stayed like that for a considerable amount of time, until the sheets were pulled by someone. Looking back, he saw that it wasn't the man or his wife, but Enigma who had attempted to get him out. It had been far too long since Terunosuke had seen his stand, the sight of him somewhat alleviated his sadness. If stands were a reflection of their user's personality, then that would mean that he didn't want to stay this way, though granted, who would want to stay this way? He sat up and rubbed his teary eyes.

As he did, a glimpse of movement caught his attention. From the corner of his eye, he noticed a butterfly, its wings bright blue. It fluttered peacefully around his room, unaware of the boy who
shared the space with it. As it flew over his head, Terunosuke gently reached up and placed his left hand around it. He brought it close to his face for inspection, but when he opened his fingers, he was greeted by his bare palm, the butterfly being nowhere in sight.

What had just happened? Why had that butterfly disappeared? Had it even existed at all, its complete existence just a product of his mind? Terunosuke couldn’t begin to tell. What he could tell, was that he felt disgusting, yesterday's sprint having left a greasy film over his skin that only worsened by the minute. He threw of the sheets that covered him and walked across the hall to the bathroom. He was silently appreciative that he had not yet been noticed this morning. He couldn't be sure if he would be able to keep his composure if questions were asked.

Stepping into the shower, he let the heat of the water roll onto his skin, warming him and relaxing his sore limbs. Even though he was becoming cleaned by the water, Terunosuke had an overwhelming feeling that it was rejecting him. As if it were saying that he did not deserve to be clean, did not deserve to accept his circumstances so easily. He tried to ignore this feeling, but it stubbornly refused to leave. It burrowed itself into his mind like a sharpened screw, forcing its presence to be acknowledged. After a few seconds of this overpowering thought, Terunosuke slammed the water off, and rushed out of the shower. The dirt and grime may have been washed off, but he still felt more disgusted with himself than ever.

***

He didn't want to leave his room anymore. He would've liked to just be alone for a while and try to cope with his problems, but his stomach had different plans. Having gone without eating since he returned to this form, he had built up quite a hunger that he had tried unsuccessfully to suppress. What would he even say to those two? Thanks for taking me in, can I have some food? He felt like an intruder in his own home. He could only debate this topic for so long until he gave in and exited the safe confines of his room.

His feet silently shuffled into the living room, where he noticed Kiyomoto and his wife sitting at a table, their backs turned away from him. Perhaps if he was quiet enough, he wouldn't attract any attention. What Terunosuke had failed to consider, however, was the layout of the room. His room had been the only thing that remained unchanged from his time living here, so it came as a painful surprise when he jammed his bare toes straight into an unnoticed piece of wooden furniture. As he let out a tiny screech of pain, the couple that he was hiding from turned around and stared at him. Nobody involved wanted to be in this situation, but here they all were, forced to interact and acknowledge one another.

“I uh… hi…” Terunosuke started, the awkwardness practically dripping off his words.
“Oh, hello.” Kiyomoto’s wife, whose name Terunosuke couldn’t remember at the moment, responded. “Did you need something?” He didn’t know how to respond to this.
“Yeah…” He vaguely gestured at the fridge, hoping desperately that she would understand his intention.
“Hmm? What is it?” Fuck.
“I’m kinda hungry… do you mind if I get something?” At this, the woman stood up and walked close to him.
“No. you shouldn’t have to worry about food right now, I’ll make you something.” Terunosuke put a hand up in protest.
“That’s not necessary at all. I can manage.” But, she had already walked into the kitchen, willfully ignoring his objection.
“Don’t bother,” Kiyomoto said, still sitting at the table. “you won't be able to get her out of there until she's good and ready. I know from experience.” He pulled a seat and waved Terunosuke to sit down.
“So… how are you holding up?” Terunosuke absolutely hated that phrase. For one, when people asked it, they never cared about what the response might actually be. Secondly, the only response for such a question was ‘Fine’ or a different positive lie.

“I’m alright.”

“Good.” They sat there for without speaking for some time. Kiyomoto finally broke the silence with another question. “It always bugged me… what was the reason for your disappearance?”

Terunosuke was simultaneously appreciative and distraught by Kiyomoto’s sincerity. There was no good response to this, there was no way he knew about stands, if he tried to explain, Kiyomoto would think that he was lying through his teeth.

“I… I couldn't come back.” Terunosuke looked away. “I just… couldn't.” In a way, he wasn't lying. “I see... I won't ask anymore.” The sudden topic did provide Terunosuke with something important. After more silence, he voiced his request.

“Could I see them, my parents?”

“Your parents? But they’re… oh, like a visitation.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Absolutely.” Kiyomoto nodded acceptingly.

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The site wasn’t difficult to find, he’d been there multiple times before. It hadn’t changed in his absence. Actually, that wasn’t true. It hadn’t moved, but it had changed, there was now an addition that Terunosuke hadn’t seen before. Two small, stone monuments stood by one another. His mother and his father. Firoza and Takanari Miyamoto. January 29th, 1962-February 3rd, 1995 and August 31st, 1959-March 21st, 2000.

“I’d like to be alone for a while.” He told Kiyomoto and his wife, who had insisted that they accompany him. Thankfully, they both departed wordlessly.

He eased himself between the monuments, each shoulder pressing against stone. In solitude, his stable facade crumbled. He didn’t try to suppress his tears this time, they flowed chaotically down his face. If only he could go back. Before he threw everything away, he wished that he could be held in his father’s arms just one more time. He wanted to savor the comfort, the bliss, the ease he felt when he was with his mother. This path of thinking was pointless, he knew that, he’d known that for years, but he didn’t stop himself, he did not force himself to climb out of his despair. He just sat there, held by his parents, for hours. There was nothing left for him here. His family, his home, his friends, they had all left while he was gone. It was there that he decided that he would leave. He would find somewhere peaceful, somewhere that didn’t cause so much pain and sadness. But before he could leave, he needed to do some things. Certain mementos from his house that couldn’t be left behind, places he wanted to say goodbye to, people he wanted to make amends with.

But, there was also a desire deep inside of him. A desire to destroy, to lash out in hatred and revenge. His loss needed to be felt, and there was only one person who deserved to have his life ripped in two as well.

Josuke Higashikata.

Chapter End Notes

It is important to me to write in a style that runs parallel to the story. For example, when Terunosuke and Kiyomoto don't want to talk, the narrative becomes awkward to
read, which is how the characters felt.
This is why chapter 1 was so long, because it felt long to Terunosuke.
After saying his final goodbyes, Terunosuke departed from the cemetery. His legs, still sore from yesterday, forced his pace to remain slow and steady. Coming to a stopped crosswalk, Terunosuke encouraged his dark thoughts to brew. Maybe he could sneak into Josuke’s house once again and gouge his eyes out with a pair of scissors while he was asleep. Perhaps he could hide glass in his food and watch him tear his mouth to bloody shreds. Both thoughts were equally tempting.

In his fantasy indulgence, he had not noticed the world around him until a man’s voice called out to him.

“Hey kid, are you just going to stand there all day?” Turning to face the voice, Terunosuke saw a relatively tall man with a messenger’s bag on his shoulder. As he faced him, the man’s face took on a perplexed look, as if he were trying to remember something.

“How long was I standing there? I sometimes get really lost in thought.”

“Your Enigma’s user, aren’t you?” What the hell?! How did this man know about Enigma?!

“How do you know that?!” He became frightened by the thought of having to deal with a new threat.

“I saw it from Koichi, but he only saw you at your defeat, so it took me a little while to piece together your identity.” A friend of Koichi, and by extension, an ally of Josuke. “It’s nice to finally get the chance to meet you in person.”

“Nice to meet me…? Who the hell are you?!”

“My name is Rohan Kishibe, mangaka of Pink Dark Boy and Beating Hearts.” Terunosuke had heard of him before, apparently Pink Dark Boy was really popular with people his age.

“So what do you want with me, Mr. Mangaka?”

“I've heard that you have an obsession with fear. Someone with experience in a field that interests me is a very valuable asset.” Terunosuke wouldn't call it an obsession at all, more of an enthusiasm for the subject. ‘Obsession’ made it sound much worse than it was.

“What exactly would you want from me? Ideas?”

“Close. Just hold on for a second.” Suddenly, Terunosuke’s face erupted in a feeling that was all too familiar. He was turning into a book again! He panicked and tried to return himself to normal with Enigma, which surprisingly, managed to work. He felt his cheeks, the flesh and bone back having returned to normal.

“What THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!” He screamed at Rohan.

“Oh yes, that’s right. You were a book for a while, weren’t you? That is how my Heaven’s Door works. I won't do anything drastic. I don't work that way any longer.” It was only a stand. One that wasn't going to return him to that hell.

“Fine, but don't make my face explode so quickly like that.” On the second time around, the pages of his face flipped open gradually, and we're leafed through slowly.

“Terunosuke Miyamoto. Born March 20th, 1982. Favorite movie is The Silence of the Lambs. Favorite manga is Dragon Head. Favorite band is Electric Light Orchestra. Favorite color is Turquoise... Let's look at the interesting things.” Rohan turned a couple of his ‘face pages’. “When you were 7, your parents took you to a pet store where they bought you a hamster that peed on you the first time you held it. Hmm… When you talk other people, you hate it when they get too close to you. Interesting.” Terunosuke wished that he would finish soon. “During festivals, you wear 2 masks at a time, so when you jump out and scare people with one, you can scare them with the other one afterwards… that's an interesting idea… I like it.” His voice was very subdued for someone who was supposedly excited, though Terunosuke didn't really care, nor was he listening to him very closely.

“Alright, that's all I need. Do you want something for a reward?” Thinking about it, Terunosuke
couldn't come up with anything he wanted.
“I… not really… I'm not going to stay in Morioh for much longer anyway.”
“Really? How unfortunate, you seem like you have some interesting stories inside of you. Where do you plan on going? Tokyo? The U.S.?"
“I…” Terunosuke hadn't actually thought about it. Where would he go? “I'm not sure.”
“You could go to France, it's a very beautiful country.” The idea did seem nice, but there was a massive roadblock in his path He didn't speak French, or any foreign language for that matter.
“I can only speak Japanese, my options are a bit limited.”
“I see.” Terunosuke felt Rohan write something on his face pages.

I can speak any language fluently.

However, he quickly crossed it out and put down, I can speak any HUMAN language fluently.

“There you go, now you can go anywhere you want.” Terunosuke wasn't buying it, no way it could be that simple.
“What? You must think I'm an idiot.” Rohan pondered silently for a second.
“J'espère que tu aimes ton cadeau.” Now he was speaking French at him. How was he supposed to appreciate ‘his gift’ if he didn’t have the slightest clue… what he was… saying.
I hope you like your gift. That's what he just said.
“Thank… no… Merci beaucoup.”
“You're welcome. Just let me check out some library books before you go through with your plans.” With that, Rohan left him alone. For a few minutes, Terunosuke let language run through his mind. Merde, Scheisse, Shit. It wasn’t only known, it was familiar, like he had known it his entire life.

Finally, he snapped out of his thoughts and looked around. There wasn’t a single person in sight, and it had probably been that way for a while. He really needed to stop doing that, it wasn’t good to waste time so carelessly. He had probably been standing at this same street corner for more than an hour at this point, how embarrassing. Making his way back home, he wondered what Kiyomoto would say once he arrived. Hopefully nothing. But what would he say when he would tell him that he was going to leave Morioh, perhaps even Japan? Would he encourage him, or try to get him to stay and rebuild his life? It didn't matter anyway, regardless of his response, Terunosuke would still leave. He looked up at the dusky sky, sighing to himself, wishing that circumstances could be different.

***

Kiyomoto hadn't asked why he had taken so long to come back, thankfully. He simply gestured to a free seat as he and his wife, who Terunosuke found out was named, Rumiko, sat around the table and had dinner. He had to admit, Rumiko didn't seem to be one for hearing sad stories about his life, but her cooking was pretty good, which more than made up for it. It was too bad that the meal she had made was made solely of noodles and beef, and not a way to talk about how he was going to leave tomorrow, it would have solved a few problems. For longer than he was willing to admit, they all ate in silence. Terunosuke quietly chewed on the food in front of him until, finally, he set his chopsticks down and began to talk.

“I was planning on leaving tomorrow.” Kiyomoto, not expecting Terunosuke to say anything, was caught off guard by his sudden announcement.
“Uhh… where are you going?”
“I don't know yet, but I'm not going to stay here.” Terunosuke immediately regret phrasing it in that manner.
“Well, what's wrong with here?”
“I just… don’t feel welcome here… and I’m not talking about this house with you two, I mean here in Morioh, nothing can go back to how it was.” Kiyomoto didn't seem to know what to say to this, so he just look to the side and nodded.

“Alright… I’m not going to be able to change your mind about this, am I? You should do what you need to do.” Rumiko hadn’t even looked up during this. Terunosuke didn’t mind, she likely didn’t want to intrude on his affairs.

***

There was very little to pack. He would only take the things that he could carry on his person, and were too important to be left behind. In total, this amounted to just three things. The first was his favorite album by his favorite band. “Out of the Blue” by ELO. He couldn’t even begin to count the amount of times the CD in his hand had been played, thousands at least. Everytime he came home from school, he would put it on. If he couldn’t get to sleep, he would put it on. It was an absolute must. The second item was the picture of him and his parents. He didn’t even think twice about that one. The third item was his father’s old watch. He was always wearing this thing. The brown leather was worn down pretty badly, but it was all still in one piece. It would serve as a proper memento, he’d carry it with him and keep it safe.

Gathering all of these treasures up, he got out of bed, and exited his room. He regretted waiting until noon to face the world. Better late than never, he figured. Kiyomoto was waiting for him near the front door, staring out the window. It would be nice to just use Enigma and leave forever, but that was completely out of the question. He deserved a goodbye, at least. Hearing Terunosuke emerge from his hiding place, Kiyomoto turned to face him.

“So you’re going now?”

“Yeah, I wanted to say goodbye before I left.”

“Are you sure you want to leave? It’s a crazy world out there, and you’re more than welcome to stay here.” The offer did make sense. He could stay here, but he would never be able to escape the shadow of what happened.

“I’m sure. I can’t stay.” Kiyomoto gave a small sigh and reached into his pocket.

“You should take this, if you’re going to go, then you should be prepared.” He set an object into Terunosuke’s hands. Taking a look at it, he realized that had been handed a stack of bills. “It’s a gift, a little bit more than what you need for a one-way plane ticket.”

“No… I can’t take this, it’s too much. What about you, this can’t be alright.”

“Don’t worry about me, we’ll be fine without a little pocket change, you can worry about yourself.” How was he supposed to repay this? A simple thank you? A bow?

“I…” Before he could say anything else, he was pulled into a hug.

“Good luck.” Terunosuke hugged him back. For a man who had no reason to help him, Kiyomoto had done more than enough to help. After a time, both of them separated from each other.

“Be safe.” A voice chirped behind him. He hadn't noticed Rumiko, but he smiled softly and nodded all the same.

“I hope you’ll be a good parents.” He turned to the door. “Thank you… Goodbye.”

***

He wasn’t leaving Morioh quite yet, there were still some things that needed to be taken care of, such as the building that stood in front of him. He walked in calmly, many people already busy inside. They weren't likely to notice him, which was perfectly fine by him, he wasn’t looking for attention. In fact, he sought out a place in the building where he wouldn’t be seen. He wandered around for roughly half an hour before finding the perfect secluded location. Realizing where this spot actually was gave raise to a tiny fit of laughter. To think that this very spot was perfect now, when it had caused so much pain for him, the irony was hilarious, wasn’t it? Without a sound, he crouched down and took a plastic water bottle out of his long coat and unscrewed the cap. Though,
instead of a bottle full of refreshing clear water, this particular bottle held a pungent brown liquid. Pouring the liquid around the area, Terunosuke had a thought. What if he stuck around, right in this spot? But that thought was a dumb one. Kiyomoto and Rumiko would be disappointed, as well as emotionally devastated at his actions. Shoving the thought from his mind, he pulled another object from his long coat, a lighter. He took a step back from the puddle that he had made, touched the flame to the floor, and started to walk away. He looked around at the faces close to him, all buried in books or in work. It was nice, in some odd way, how they were oblivious to what he’d just done. While it was helpful that it allowed him to slip out unnoticed, he also enjoyed how everyone was blissfully unaware of the impending doom that this building was about to face. Good thing that it wasn’t a huge building. Just to make sure, he propped the door open as he left. Wouldn’t want anyone to be hurt.

***

The final part of his departure was considerably more unsavory than the other two, but it was far and away the most important to him. Revenge was like that, he couldn’t really explain it. Leaving his former home had been somber and bittersweet, like a graduation. The library felt symbolic, breaking the chains of oppression or something. It let him move on, albeit at great cost. The phrase “Burning bridges” had never been so fitting. Once he completed this last task and left Morioh, it would be a permanent departure. He’d make the most of it while he could.

As he neared that final location, he heard a voice, though it was more of a rough grunt. Looking around, he didn't see anyone around him. Again, the grunt was heard. Nobody was nearby, was he going insane? There was only the Anjuro rock nearby, he was at a complete loss for answers. “Hello?” The next grunt came from the rock, directly in front of him. Was this some sort of television prank? This couldn't be real, the rock was not alive. He approached it and laid his right hand on it, the stone feeling cold on his hand. “Was that you?” It took some time, but the rock eventually did respond with yet another grunt. He was being stupid again, this was obviously a dumb joke set up by some dumb kid… but what if it wasn't? “How did you get like this?” Rather than an unintelligible grunt, he received an actual sound this time. “Ja…” Ja? What was Ja? “...Sa…” There was more? Ja Sa. Was that a company? A name? “...Ka...” Ja Sa Ka. Ja Sa Ka. What did it mean? He waited patiently for the stone to continue, but it seemed to be finished.

“Ja Sa Ka.” Maybe that was katakana? He couldn't think of any words like that. Ja Sa Ka, Ja Sa Ka, JaSaKa, Jasaka… wait…

Jasaka.

Josuke.

“Josuke! Josuke did this to you!” The stone gave him a grunt that was scarily excited. Terunosuke was not alone in the world, someone else could perfectly understand what he had been through. He pressed his right hand to the lonely soul. “You are not just some rock, are you? You're called Anjuro rock because you are Anjuro.” Another excited grunt. “I am so sorry that you had to face this hell, no one, not even you, deserves something this cruel.” His eyes were starting to well up now. “I can give you an end, a merciful death… would you like that?” Anjuro let loose a pair of noises that could only be described as overwhelming happy. Without hesitation, Enigma came out and converted Anjuro into paper. Once the process finished, Terunosuke held him to his chest. He knew everything that Anjuro had done, all the murder, the rapes, and brutal crimes that he had committed. However, no one needed to suffer the way that he had, even Anjuro had earned a conclusion to his life. His life would end with dignity, Josuke be damned. Josuke. His focus sharpened. Josuke had a lot to answer for. All the pain in the last year and a half, his father, Anjuro, they were all Josuke’s fault. He had to pay for his actions.

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The anger that swelled up inside of him only grew as he reached the Higashikata household. Josuke was probably still in school at this time of the day, but his mother would likely be there. He kicked at the front door, summoning the person that would be essential to his plans. As the door opened, her voice raised up.

“Jeez, I’m right here, wha-” Before she could finish, Terunosuke slammed the door open and caused her to produce a small scream.

“Tomoko!”

“What the hell! Get back!” She started to run from him, but he simply sprinted at her, and pulled her by the hair with his left hand. This caused her to scream again, along with the response he was waiting for, a swallow. This minute response allowed Enigma to activate, contorting Tomoko’s body into a sheet that fit neatly in his hands. It was disappointingly easy. Hopefully Josuke’s response would make up for it

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He made no attempt to try and clean up the scene, it would provide a nice foundation for Josuke’s fear. Terunosuke figured that he would be home within the next hour, all he had to do now was wait. In the meantime, he would set the scene for this finale. Not counting the side room, there was only one doorway that led to the kitchen. If Josuke came in quickly and didn't stop to ask questions, Terunosuke would be done for. To inhibit this possibility, he moved the kitchen table in front of the doorway. It wasn’t enough to block it, but it would stop him for enough time.

This presented another question. When they were face to face, what would stop Josuke from killing him? Sure he had his mother, but that wouldn't be immediately clear. If this was going to happen the way he wanted it to happen, then he needed to be very careful about how he went about this. If he had something in his hands when Josuke saw him, he would ask what it was. That would keep him back for a bit, enough time for Terunosuke to call him out on all his crimes. However, he still didn't have the object he needed. He rifled through the cabinets and drawers, looking for the perfect tool. If he taped the paper that held Tomoko around a knife, he could slice her in half. But that required two hands, so maybe not. If he taped the paper around the bottom of a bottle, he could throw it against the wall, causing the glass to shatter and tear the paper. That would have to do.

As he poured out the soda of a bottle he had found in the fridge, he heard footsteps from the front door. His eyes darted to the clock in the room, Josuke shouldn't be here yet. Fortunately, he didn't know where he was just yet, Terunosuke finished his plan and took a deep breath. This was the moment he had been waiting for, a year and a half wasn't going to be wasted. He stood tall, clenched his fist around the bottle, and held it in front of him.

“In here, Josuke.” The footsteps rushed to the kitchen, and Josuke showed his cold face once again. His towering height standing behind the table.

“Enigma... what are you doing here?”

“Enigma? My stand is Enigma, Josuke. What do you think my name is?” He didn’t respond to this question. “My name is Terunosuke Miyamoto, and I am a person. But you would not understand that would you?”

“Tch! Fine, I'll admit it, I was wrong to try and put you back into your book state, it's not something I'm proud of.”

“So are you proud of torturing me for a year and a half?! Proud of turning a man into some depraved tourist attraction?! Are you glad you did those things?!!”

“Where's my mother?” Josuke tried to act unaffected by his words, but Terunosuke knew, deep down, he had to be crumbling.

“She is right here.” He tossed the bottle between his hands, making sure Josuke saw the paper. “Do not try to get closer if you want to keep her safe.” Josuke’s face gained a subtle look of anger and fear, exactly the goal Terunosuke was striving towards.
“You could've walked away from all of this, nobody was going to chase you.”
“And you could have given me a normal punishment, but you had to torture me. Our fight only lasted about 10 minutes, imagine what I could take away from you in that time.”

“Why the hell are you doing this?” Josuke’s hands balled up into fists. “You’re free now, I didn’t kill you, I’ve never killed anyone before.” What a fucking idiot.

“Did you think that I am just some cliché villain? I had a family! My father was all I had in the world, and he killed himself because of what you did! This is your fault, Josuke!” At this, Josuke’s expression became legitimately angry.

“You bastard, take some fucking ownership for your mistakes. Who's choice was it to follow Kira’s father? Who took my mother hostage, twice? Who tried to kill Koichi? It was you! You’re the one at fault here!”

“That does not prove anything-

“Yes it does! It's your fault this shit happened to you, you could've stayed out of all of this, but you choose to bring this upon yourself!” Terunosuke’s hands shook, his eye clinched shut. That wasn’t right, it couldn't be right. This was Josuke’s fault, none of this would've happened if he hadn't tortured him. Suddenly, Terunosuke realized a major problem with his plan. If he tore up Tomoko’s paper, Josuke could simply heal her with Crazy Diamond. He had to run!

His eyes darted around for an exit, which Josuke took as an opportunity to hop over the table and near him, Crazy Diamond having been brought out. Terunosuke needed a distraction. His back pressed against the kitchen sink.

“Stay back!” If he lost now, Anjuro would keep suffering. Anjuro! He searched for his paper and brought him out. Josuke was getting closer. He couldn’t tear him up by hand, he'd be crushed. But if something else ripped him up, he could get out! Josuke was close now. Terunosuke shoved the paper down the sink drain and jumped onto the counter. A few meters away. This was it. “Catch!”

Terunosuke threw the bottle directly at Josuke, which he easily caught and swiftly set down, out of harm's way. With nothing stopping him, Josuke charged straight ahead. Just what Terunosuke had hoped for. In a quick move, he flipped a switch next to the sink. Before anything else happened, he crashed through the kitchen window, and tumbled outside. As he escaped, the sink exploded with stone fragments, and a pit of regret settled in his chest. He had not given Anjuro a dignified death, but he had given him a death nonetheless.

As he sprinted away from the house, Josuke didn't chase after him. He didn't mind. What Josuke had said wasn't true. He told himself that, but he didn't know. There was no knowing who was right. He didn't stop running until he was at the outskirts of town.

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“Thank you for choosing Japan Airlines.” The flight attendant announced over the intercom. The taxi ride to Tokyo had lasted for hours, and the last thing he wanted to do was sit down for even longer. But he wasn't going to worry anymore, he was leaving Japan, his old life, behind. “We will make a brief stop in Russia before continuing on to our destination…” Terunosuke hadn't been paying attention when he entered the airport, he simply bought a ticket for the next flight that was leaving. His mind wandered while he waited for take off. The taxi driver must have been really pissed off when he used Enigma to slip away without paying for his fare. He also figured out why Josuke had gotten home so soon, the library burning down likely caused school to be concluded early. There was very little he regretted from his revenge streak, he wished he'd done it cleaner and better, but other than that, he was content. Again, he was telling himself that he was content, but he truly didn't know what he actually felt. The plane began it's take off as his thoughts continued on. He turned to the man seated next to him.

“I wasn't listening, where is this flight ending at?” The man looked back at him with a tired glance.

“Naples, Italy.”
Dropped in

Italy was a strange country. First and foremost, the people were extremely animated and lively. When they would have conversations, they would always talk really loudly and wave their hands around. For Terunosuke, it was a completely foreign experience. People in Japan didn’t act like this, had he been too impulsive in his decision to leave? The second problem he faced was financial in nature. Namely, he didn't have enough money left. The plane ticket had taken out most of the money that Kiyomoto had given him, though that was expected. However, when he exchanged the yen for euros, he discovered that the remaining amount was barely enough for a meal. If he didn’t want to starve, he'd have to find some way to support himself.

He could think about finding a job later. Right now, he would focus solely on eating the meal he had barely been able to afford. He had to admit, the Italian people didn't seem big on social courtesy, but the food seemed pretty incredible. This appreciation, however, didn't get the chance to last more than a minute. The people at the table sitting next to him started a shouting match that seemed to consist of who could yell louder than other. Despite his newly acquired knowledge in the language, Terunosuke had no clue what the pair was arguing over. The prospect of asking them to quiet down crossed his mind, but they might turn their aggression towards him if he did. He briefly looked around for an empty table to move over to, but the only one that wasn't densely crowded was one that had a man who was watching the conversation and laughing at the two participants. There was absolutely no way he that would go over and ask if he could sit with him. Jesus, this was middle school all over again.

Eventually, he decided to simply take his meal, plate and all, with him and leave. He wasn't going to let the staff see him, so he'd just use Enigma to sneak the food away. Without a second thought, he converted the meal into paper and stood up to leave. As he did this, the man who had been watching the conversation stood up as well and walked over to him.

“You know that's not a smart thing to do.” Terunosuke wasn’t sure what sort of social faux pas he had just committed, but he’d rather not be lectured for being an ignorant foreigner.


“Don’t play dumb, kid. You shouldn’t use your stand out in the open like that.”

“What?!” How in the hell did some random person halfway across the world know about stands?

“You... you know... you saw that.”

“Yeah, of course I saw it, hell, half of the city probably saw that. What department do you work for, they’ll need to know that they brought in a dumbass.” Department? What the hell was this guy saying?

“I... what?” The confusion must have been obvious enough for the man to understand.

“Are you new or something? Did you just get here?” Now he was starting to get it.

“Yeah... I just got here.”

“Oh, alright, just be more careful next time. So, where are you from?” Terunosuke thought about telling this man personal information about himself, but he decided against it. After all, he needed to be careful around someone who knew about stands.

“I’m from... Rome.” The man frowned in a way that would have been funny, if not for the fact that it was directed towards Terunosuke.

“With an accent like that, with skin as dark as that. You're Roman? Suuuuure, and I’m the Pope.” There didn’t seem to be a way to fool him, but more importantly, Terunosuke had an accent. How did this happen? More importantly than that, what did this accent sound like? “You’re not Italian at all. In fact, if I had to guess, you’re probably Algerian.” Algerian? Where the hell even was Algeria? This situation kept getting more and more tedious as it went on.

“No, I’m not Algerian, what the kind of guess is that?”

“Well, you’re African, and most African people I know are Algerian. So...” Did Terunosuke look
African?
“No, I’m not African. My mother wasn’t from… wait… why am I still talking to you?!?” This conversation was completely unimportant and had provided him with no answers whatsoever.

“Let’s get back on topic here, how exactly did you get a stand if you aren’t a member of Passione?” Again, he was asking questions that didn’t make any sense.

“What in the hell is Passione, sounds like some shitty nightclub.” Surprisingly, this garnered a laugh out of the man, who had, up to this point, carried himself rather seriously.
“Ahaahaha! Oh man, I said the exact same thing. That’s hilarious.” The conversation was still going nowhere. The man contained himself before continuing. “But seriously though, Passione is the most powerful organization in all of Italy, perhaps even all of Europe. If you haven’t heard of us, then you probably aren’t from Europe or Northern Africa. Where else is there for you to be from?” This guy was unbelievable, he was still trying to figure out where he was from.
“I’m from Japan.”
“Japan… Japan?! Don’t screw with me like that. If you’re gonna lie, at least try a little harder.” Terunosuke shook his head.
“That wasn’t a lie that time, I actually am Japanese.” The man examined him closely, a look of disbelief painted on his face. He seemed more upset at the fact that he was way off on his guesses than anything else.
“How in the… you know what forget it, you’re Japanese.” The man shook his head back and forth, apparently not able to accept the fact that this dark skinned teenager that was fluent in Italian hailed from halfway across the world. Even Terunosuke had to admit, it did seem difficult to accept that said teenager was actually him. Stranger and stranger. “Alright Mr. Japanese, answer me this. How did you get your stand.” He hesitated before answering, mulling over his options, should he really give this guy more information on himself. There wasn’t much in the way of alternative options, so Terunosuke relented the point.
“An arrow.” He tapped his left shoulder. “Shot me right here.” At this, the man raised his eyebrows.
“You got shot? I thought everyone got stabbed by the arrow.” He pressed his knuckles to his chin.
“You aren't lying, and you're definitely not a member of Scheggia, either.” Scheggia. Splinter?

“What was that about Scheggia? What is that?” The man recoiled slightly and shook his head again.
“Crap, you aren't supposed to hear about them, you're not in Passione.” Passione, Scheggia, what the hell were these organizations? Terunosuke needed answers.
“You work for Passione, right? But what actually is Passione.” The man’s expression changed from neutral, to one of smug enjoyment.
“Passione is the group that runs Italy, whether it be through strongarming competition, or just running them into the ground, we make sure we're always top dog.”
“Sounds cool, but WHAT are you guys?” The man crossed his arms and rolled his eyes.
“Do I seriously have to spell it out for you? We're the Mafia.” Jesus! Organized crime is something pretty serious.
“The Mafia! You mean you're a criminal?” Again, the man rolled his eyes.
“It's not illegal if the cops don't come after you. And we've got the police force in our pocket, so we're a perfectly clean operation.” Terunosuke thought for a moment. This guy at least seemed to be a legitimate person, though he wasn't sure about Passione. His stomach growled, reminding him that he still needed to find some sort of money after this crazy conversation.

Actually, he may have already found what he needed.
“Do you get paid for working with Passione?”
“Of course we do, why else would I work for them?”
“Do they have any job openings?” The man’s smug expression returned.
“We're always looking for new applicants. Are you sure you wanna join, it can be pretty crazy.”
Before Terunosuke had a chance to respond, the man started walking away from him. Simply
giving him a “Follow me.” Having no other options to choose from, Terunosuke followed behind
him. He looked back to see that the two men from before were still in the middle of their argument.

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As they walked down the street, Terunosuke took the opportunity to look over the man’s
appearance. His dark purple hair came down in three distinct, spiky points on the right side of his
face, while being brushed up across his forehead on the left side. He wore a dark purple waistcoat
over a cobalt blue undershirt. The sleeves of the undershirt had been rolled up to the man’s elbows,
creating an appearance that looked stylish, as well as comfortable. Tucked into his breast pocket
was a blue handkerchief that had the biohazard symbol embroidered onto it. In fact, he had the
same symbol on many spots of his outfit; both shoulders, the tops of his shoes, and even on the
face of his watch. If he was able to see Enigma, then he must have a stand of his own. What would
that look like?

Without saying anything, Enigma showed its form in the hope that this man would notice and do
the same. Thankfully, he did notice quickly, though his reaction was less than ideal.
“Were you born stupid, or did you study for it at university?”
“Uh… what?”
“Put your stand away, you never know who might be watching you. Your most trusted ally could
be a cop, or even a member of Scheggia.” Terunosuke did as he was told.
“So… what’s your stand like?” He hoped his curiosity wasn’t something that was frowned upon in
Passione. The man stopped at a crosswalk and looked back at him.
“What’s that got to do with anything?” Crap. Had he overstepped his boundaries? Just as he was
about to apologize, the man patted him on the shoulder. “You’re a pretty curious person. I can
appreciate that.” Terunosuke could have gone without being touched, but it was nice to be
complimented for a change.
“So… you're not going to tell me?” The man just looked forward and started walking across the
street, a smile finding itself on his face.
“Your shoulder might disagree.” His shoulder?
He checked where he had been touched. While he was expecting a handprint at most, he was
instead greeted with a colorful, spiked ball. He pulled on the sleeve of his long coat to get a better
view. It looked like some sort of seed that would fall from a tree, though the coloration was
completely different. Usually, seeds like that would be green, or dark brown if it had fallen off.
The seed on his coat, however, was purple at the needles and blue at the body, just like the man’s
clothing. He was pretty sure that these things would be called a “bur”.

Plucking the burr off of his sleeve, he was greeted with the sharp sting of the pointed needles
poking into his fingers. His hands recoiled away from the seed, yet the needles stayed lodged in his
skin, refusing to let go. As it stuck, his fingers started to go numb, almost as if the blood was
draining out of his hand.
“What the hell? Get off!” The man looked back at him again, a new look of both disbelief and
disappointment on his face.
“You weren't supposed to grab it, dumbass.” The bur vanished from his fingers, as if by the man’s
will, leaving only an entry wound in the skin. “Congratulations, you’re the first person to willfully
stab yourself on my stand.” The man laughed at Terunosuke’s foolish antics.
“Should I feel honored?”

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Terunosuke’s opinion on Italy had not changed. The first time he'd gone into a jail, he'd been given
a lighter by a colossal mountain of a person. The person himself didn't seem very upset by his location, rather he seemed very comfortable. Things were strange everywhere. Actually, no. Japan had been pretty out there, there was no denying that. But Italy on the other hand, Jesus Christ. He'd been in the country for less than a day and he was already questioning whether he was going crazy. ‘Strange’ didn't even begin to cover it. Deranged, unhinged, batshit insane; those fit the bill much better than just ‘strange’.

“What are you thinking about?” The man’s voice shook him away from his thought process. Terunosuke didn’t expect him to stick around, but here he was, leaning against the wall of the jail like he owned it.

“Italy. It's…” He waved his arms around, trying to convey his bewilderment in the country. “I don’t even know how to put it into words.”

“Don’t worry about it, just focus keeping that lighter safe.” He was right, this lighter was some sort of loyalty test. If he failed this, he could kiss his job opportunity goodbye.

To make sure nothing bad happened to the precious lighter, he had Enigma turn it into paper. The man only looked at the paper in disbelief.

“Are you serious?! How'd you even do that?!” He was strangely upset over something so trivial. He reminded Terunosuke of himself when one of his classmates would say something ignorant about one his favorite horror movies.

“That's how Enigma works, it's what my stand does.” This served to make the man more agitated than he already was.

“How'd you get a stand as useful as that? Damn it! Why can't Anthrax be that useful?!” That was interesting. Enigma was apparently very useful to this guy. What type of work did he do for Passione?

“Eh, it's not that useful, he's really complicated and doesn't have much to show for it.” He made sure to make his voice sound as condescending as possible. If he could provoke the man enough, he might let some information slip.

“Complicated? You just turned the lighter into a piece of paper! Think of all the other things you could do. You could sneak all sorts of metals onto a plane without bribing anyone, they'd never know! You could slip a whole arsenal under security and ship it overseas, all in the palm of your hand.” Transporting illegal weapons across borders… he could be an arms dealer, but maybe guns were just a single example. Let’s keep going.

“Nah, I couldn't beat security that easily.” Again, he talked down to the guy, looking for some bit of information that would reveal him.

“Then just bribe them. If I had that stand, transporting things would make security a walk in the park.” Transporting things. Illegal things. It was almost too easy.

“You're a smuggler.” Terunosuke realized that he had been unconsciously analysing the man and his mannerisms all throughout the conversation.

“Oh, shit.” The man put his hand to his face. “Yeah, you got me. Me and my big mouth. I'm the best smuggler in Passione, you ever need anything, talk to me.” Simply learning about the man wasn’t enough, Terunosuke wanted to go further in.

“Wow, seriously? You're the head of the smuggling department, how cool. The big guy in the jail explained departments to me, but… that's weird… I thought you had to be much older to be a leader.” It might have been a bad idea to play fast and loose with the facts like that, but when he finished talking, the man looked noticeably angry.

“Ghh! No, I'm not the leader of the department. But that guy wouldn't know the difference between a… wait a second… we're getting way too sidetracked here.” Darn it, right when it was getting really fun.

“You probably don't have a place to stay, do you?” Now, it was Terunosuke’s turn to go on the defensive.

“What? How'd you figure that out?” He hadn't let on that he had nowhere to go, had he?
“You a Japanese immigrant who jumped at an opportunity to work for the Mafia. You've got some serious money issues, or you have nowhere else to go. Either way, you'll need a place to stay for the night. You can stay at my place.” Terunosuke’s eyes shot up.

“Seriously? You're just gonna let me stay with you?”

“Yeah man, it has been way too long since I've had company that I didn't have to pay for, you're more than welcome.” Obviously, Terunosuke was surprised by the man's willingness to be hospitable. Come to think of it, despite talking with him for what felt like hours, he didn't have a name for this guy.

“That's really kind of you… uh…”

“Oh yeah, my name is Pane.” Pane. Pane?!

“Your parents named you, Bread?! Did they hate you?” Apparently, that was an exceedingly stupid question to ask.

“No, they didn't name me that. It's a codename, like 007, it's for secrecy. You can't go around using your real name unless you work directly with the community, which I don't. So, instead of using the name my parents, who loved me by the way, gave to me, I use Pane.” Interesting. Passione was really interesting when he dug deeper. As he had these thoughts, he felt raindrops pattering on his head.

“C'mon, let’s get going, unless you enjoy getting rained on.”

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What… what was this.

Terunosuke found himself in a room, or maybe a public square, that was difficult to look at. It was white and blurry in some instances, yet clearly pitch black elsewhere.

Though the figure standing next to him was more important.

The entirety of its body below the neck was entombed in disgusting brown bandages, septic fluid seeping between the gaps. Its head was equally horrifying, a thick coat of revolting sludge painted on. The word “head” was used hesitantly, more of a deformed wreck. Its neck stretched outwards, further than possible without snapping.

Without warning, the sickening mass charged at him. There was little to do but raise his arms in defense as the creature slammed into him, staining his bare arms with a greasy muck. Terunosuke shoved the being away, tearing away some bandages in the process. The thing stumbled backwards, the front of it's bandages ripping away violently, its organs pouring out as a result. It let out an ear-splitting screech and tried to gather up its spilled entrails. Without any success, it coughed up blood, straight onto Terunosuke’s bare chest. It fell to the shifting floor, its breached torso scattering more blood around the area. It writhed on the ground, seizing and thrashing without direction or purpose until, finally, its squirming died.

The threat was not over for Terunosuke. His chest began to itch. He scratched at it, but the scratching only made it worse. He clawed his fingernails against his skin until he scraped his chest open, exposing the bone. Still, the irritation wouldn’t stop, it burned his entire body, like he had been stung by a thousand hornets. The burning invaded his hands, his shoulders, even his eyes. He tore furiously at his body, desperate for relief!

***

Terunosuke fell out bed. His heart was beating out of his chest, which was all in one piece, albeit with a few scratches on it. He rubbed his eyes and stood up, rubbing his reddened skin as well. It wasn't typical for him to have nightmares, though it did happen from time to time. But that… that
wasn't normal, not even close.

Throwing his clothes on, he left the bedroom, entering the rest of the apartment. Pane was already awake, sitting at a table, eating bread and sipping on coffee. Hearing him emerge, he turned and smiled.

“Hey man, you sleep well?”

“Yeah, really well.”

“Good to hear, you want something to eat? I’ll even fix an espresso for you.” He'd been like this all night, hospitable as a hotel owner. For a Mafia member, he sure was good company.

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“So what do you think about Italy now?” Pane rested his ankle on his knee, reclining back in his chair. Terunosuke propped his hands behind his head and thought about the question.

“It’s still really crazy, there’s no getting past that.”

“You’ll get used to it, everybody does eventually.” Terunosuke wasn’t quite sure about that.

“Think about it, in the, what, two days that you’ve been here, you’ve already been hired by a powerful organization, moved into a studio apartment, and gained a new title. You’ve got to admit, you’re gonna fit right in, Carta.” Terunosuke groaned. What an annoying name. It wouldn’t have killed them to be a little more creative.

“Whatever… ok, fine, you do have a point.” Pane chuckled, apparently glad that he proved his point right to such a firm opposition.

“So…” Terunosuke scratched his head and looked around the cafe. “What do we do now?” Pane smirked at him.

“Isn’t it obvious? We smuggle ‘precious cargo’ into or out of high priority locations. Weren’t you listening when you were given the explanation?”

“I know WHAT we do, but WHEN do we do it?”

“Tomorrow.”

______________________________

Pane’s profile

Department: Smuggling
Stand Name: Anthrax
Favorite Movie: Il Postino
Favorite Actress: Whoopi Goldberg
Favorite Band: TLC
Favorite Color: Violet

A fervent gun nut, Pane’s hobby is collecting Beretta pistols. He makes sure to always be armed with at least two firearms, even when he’s bathing. He has a firm dislike for people who think gun control is a solution to gun violence, causing him to become angry at the person holding the opinion.

Whenever he is threatened, he stays fairly calm and takes care of the threat. However, when his family, friend, or partner is threatened, he exercises extreme violence against the attacker.
Giving Bad People Good Ideas

There were a lot of things that Italy had to offer that were phenomenal; cuisine, fashion, architecture, etc. However, dirty magazines were not among these things.

It wasn't that the models were unappealing, quite the opposite in fact, it was just that… they were different than what Terunosuke was used to. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but when he flipped through the pages, the women let him down. If he was now a professional smuggler, perhaps he could get his hands on some magazines from Japan. He might ask Pane for help, though he didn't see that conversation playing out very comfortably.

‘Hey man, I know I'm new and all, but could you help me get some foreign pornography?’

Speaking of Pane, a knock on his bedroom door shook Terunosuke back to reality.

“Carta, put some pants on, I need to talk to you.”

Terunosuke wasn't worried about decency at the moment, though he wasn't about to let his new roommate find out about his… interesting tastes. Converting the magazine into paper, he quickly shoved the piece into his coat pocket and tried his best to look nonchalant.

“Yeah, come on in.” Despite asking for decency, Pane wasn't wearing a shirt, displaying his toned muscles. The sight irked a pang of jealousy out of Terunosuke that arose in one second, and was shoved away the next.

“You're still in bed?”

“You're still not dressed?” Pane only rolled his eyes.

“I was working out. Yet, here you are, still lounging around. You're 18 now, when are you gonna move out and get a job. Don’t you know how hard it is to see someone spend years of their life doing nothing?” His voice whined comically, as if he were on a melodramatic soap opera.

“But I'm only 17.” Apparently, Pane had not accounted for this possibility.

“Then… uh… find a nice girl.” He was grasping at straws now, the joke wasn't funny anymore.

“Are there any girls in Passione?”

“There aren't any girls in Passione, but there are rough bitches. Besides, I only know of... 3... in the entire gang, so look somewhere else.” That was probably for the best, if a girl was in Passione, she was either going to be insane or a hardass, just like regular members. “Damn it. We got off topic again. How do we always do that?”

“Maybe we aren't cut out for serious topics.”

“You’re probably right. Anyway, we need get going soon, we've got an important mission tonight.”

It would be doubly important for Terunosuke. This would be his first mission and he was eager to make a positive impression.

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Pane was cheating.

It was subtle, extremely so. Terunosuke had only barely noticed it, but he definitely saw it. When he played his hands, he would stick one of his cards with an Anthrax bur, likely for the purpose of tracking. The catch was that the bur was much smaller than what he had seen a couple of days ago. Apparently, it wasn't easy to keep Anthrax in that state. His face would strain and redden, and when the dealer asked him a question and the pressure subsided, the bur would disappear. He must have planned this from the beginning. The playing cards with blue backs that he brought, his habit of fiddling with his the spiky hair on his forehead, even the conversation he carried with the dealer, they were all distractions to keep him from realizing Pane’s trick. It was nothing short of a miracle that he'd been able to notice it. This was just a simple game of Poker to pass the time, it was pretty
pointless to cheat. Though, that didn't stop Terunosuke from cheating as well.

His method was a bit too simple. Rather than throw his hand back to the dealer after the end of a round, he'd secretly turned a card into paper and quietly slipped it into his pocket. He wondered if Pane or the dealer had noticed, but he couldn't be sure.

“What do you think, Carta?” Terunosuke looked at Pane in confusion.

“What?”

“Weren't you listening at all? Who do you think was the most important person of the century.”

That was an interesting question. He would probably say something like some director that he liked or a musician that he thought was cool, but when pressed for an answer, his mind drew a black.

“I… don't really know.” He scratched his head sheepishly, slightly embarrassed from his lack of an answer.

“Salvatore says that it's Hitler.”

“Salvatore? Who's that.” Pane pointed at the dealer; who gave Terunosuke an upbeat wave.

He had barely noticed the man in the first place, but now that he looked at him, he appeared to be somewhat important. Both sides of his light brown hair were brushed together, creating a hairstyle that looked like an extreme widows peak. He wore a dark brown pea coat with 4 large buttons, each one having their own insignia etched into them. One had a raindrop, another had a hand mirror, the third had an angel, and the last had a simple heart. A pair of sunglasses rested on the top of his hair, perhaps acting as a headband. The edges of his mouth had smile wrinkles that almost felt emphasized, making the man appear older than he was. If Terunosuke had to guess, he would say that the man sitting beside him was in his 30’s, at least 10 years older than Pane.

“Who do you think it is?” Terunosuke asked Pane, genuinely curious as to how he would answer.

“I've thought about this one for a while now, and I've come to the conclusion that it's Gavrilo Princip.”

“Gavrilo Princip… is that some gun maker?”

“No, not even close.” Pane shook his head, dismissing the ignorance of the question. “He was the assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.”

“So… some guy who shot a politician. Doesn't seem very important.”

“You would be forgiven for thinking that way, but because of a single murdered politician, World War I was started. Then from the conclusion of that, World War II happened. Then the creation of nukes, the start of the Cold War, a ton of civil wars, and much more. All from 1 guy shooting some politician with a FN Model 1910.”

“Hmm… all from just that guy.”

“That's not really fair though.” Salvatore interjected.

“And why is that?” Pane fired back. Salvatore leaned forward, a determined grin on his face.

“Princip, and by extension, the Archduke, may have been the catalyst for World War I to start, but other than the start, he didn't provide anything else.” Pane scoffed at this inference.

“And Hitler provided anything other than starting and leading the Nazis?”

“Yes, in fact, he contributed a massive amount of beneficial aspects to history.” Pane and Terunosuke simultaneously rose an eyebrow at this. Salvatore cleared his throat and began to defend his claims. “First off, the invasion of Poland started World War II, which he ordered. Secondly, despite all the evil things he did, he unified Germany and gave them something to fight for, which led to all sorts of contributions to the world, including innovations to rockets, tanks, and encryption. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, he was pretty much the figurehead for the Axis powers. This galvanized the allies under a common enemy and they created a multitude of new technologies.”

It seemed as though Salvatore had thought of this topic before. Pane looked pretty off-put over
these answers, probably because they were much better than his.
“Gah, what do you think, Carta? Princip or Hitler.” The other two shifted their eyes to Terunosuke. It looked like he was going to be the tiebreaker here. However, this wasn’t a question of opinion, this was a question of gaining favor in Passione. In all honesty, he thought the subject was more than a bit pointless, nevertheless, he would still use it to his benefit.
“Sorry, Pane, gonna have to go with Salvatore on this one.” His partner shot him a glare that was surprisingly disappointed.
“Aww, c’mon man, how could you say something like that.” He almost looked like a child who had been told ‘No’.

“Hey, crybaby, let’s get this game back going.” Salvatore snapped. Pane only sighed and resigned himself to a defeat on an intellectual level; yet another tangential conversation coming and going with the wind. The cards were dealt and Terunosuke stifled a scream. Everything about his hand was abysmal, both cards being completely worthless for those that were in front of him now. He looked across to Pane, his face stone cold, victory in his future. Terunosuke wanted to fold, live to play another round, but he was playing for something important. While Pane was just having fun, Terunosuke was playing for respect. Salvatore as his witness, he was going to win this round.

“All In.” He pushed his small stack of chips, triumph riding on the tiny plastic circles.
“All In? Seriously?” From firm to disbelief. Even Salvatore seemed a bit surprised. Terunosuke only grinned. He had a trick up his sleeve, or rather, up his coat. Pane slowly meet his bet with a portion of his own chips. The fifth card showed itself and Terunosuke’s grin only grew sharper.
Pane focused on his hand and the cards in front of him.
Salvatore focused on Pane.
Terunosuke focused on winning.

Holding his hand below the table, he let a single card silently flutter down to the floor. Pane showed his hand. It was strong, but not strong enough. The two stared distracted at his hand, evaluating its worth. As their attention was diverted, Terunosuke reached into his pocket and grasped the card from earlier.

With this hand, he’d gain respect. With this hand, he’d be able to rise in the ranks of Passione. With this hand, his path to success would start!

He raised both cards above his head, his right hand containing success; catching the eyes of the two sitting next to him. With a triumphant expression, he shot up from his chair, and threw his hand to the table.
Pane gasped.
Salvatore leaned forward in awe.
Terunosuke put his face to his hand and groaned.
He had thrown his porn onto the table for the entire world to see.

“I don’t think that was a legal play.” Salvatore quipped. Pane picked up the magazine and flipped through it.
“Jeez, Carta, there are better ways of trying to cheat, y’know. Bribery will only get you so far.” He turned the pages vertically, stifling a fit of laughter. “Are you still into this type? That’s pretty childish.” Terunosuke could only snatch the publication from his partner’s grip, his face burning
red with humiliation.

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It had been Pane’s idea. Actually, that was a lie, it was his idea, but it was easier to act like Pane was the one who came up with it.

A man beckoned for him to refill his glass, and he did as requested. The hardest part about this operation was learning the customs of Italian dining so quickly. His superiors had been kind enough to supply a crash course, but he struggled to remember exactly what had been said. Pane had told him to act like he’d been a waiter his entire life and that waiting on customers was his purpose in life.

That didn't help much either.

Despite all of this, he seemed to be doing a decent job of blending in. Some of the fellow waiters carried on conversation during breaks, allowing him to chime in when appropriate. Though when he did, they asked him what country he was from to have an accent like his. He simply responded with ‘Algeria’.

None of these light moments made his goal any easier. All he had to do was deliver the paper to the bride and groom. That was it. At least there weren't any kids in the building.

The music was nice, the food was incredible, and the people were happy. They laughed, sang, and danced. An elderly woman even asked him to be her partner in the tarantella; whatever that was. He swiftly declined, citing that a black waiter's vest may look the part, but was far from prime dance wear. The woman wasn't the slightest bit upset about his denial. Without missing a beat, she joyfully pulled into the chaotic fray of movement.

The dance was scarcely more than rhythmic stepping. This didn’t mean that he knew what to expect, quite the opposite in fact. If anything, it made it harder to predict what would come next. He relied heavily on the circle that had formed around the dancers for cues on when to clap and when to cheer. As his confusion reorganized itself into competence, and eventually enjoyment, he became nauseous at the wonderful scene. Enjoying life with the men and women of Scheggia was the opposite of his mission.

As soon as the action died down and ended, he broke away from the crowd, making his way directly for the newlyweds’ table. Did they know about their families’ involvement in the Mafia? Perhaps the husband did, but the wife may very well be innocent. The two were sharing some orange flavored ice cream type treat together, feeding one another while staring into their spouse’s eyes. Terunosuke felt like he was going to puke. Taking the paper out of his vest pocket, he slid the horrible object towards the lovers, his left hand sealing their fate.

“Best wishes, you two.” The pair smiled and waved as he turned and calmly, yet hastily, darted to the men’s room.

Slipping into an empty stall at the end of the room, he took the time to put the seat up, and vomit violently into the toilet. After what felt like hours of disgusting organ draining, he wiped the bile from his chin and questioned if he could actually do this. At least half, if not more, of those people were probably innocent. Their fathers, brothers, sons, uncles, cousins. Those were the ones that Passione wanted gone. He flushed his contribution to the world and rubbed his forehead, trying to push the thought out of his head with his bare hands.

He sprawled onto the floor, covered his ears, and locked his eyelids together. He'd completed his part, just as he had been directed.
Just as he had suggested.

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Pane lived for this type of thing. Ironic, living for death. He'd tell that one to Carta later.

Being inside of the paper was hard to describe. He could move his body around, aim the SPAS-12 that he held in his hands, look around to see the rest of the people in the truck with him, it was all there, all available. But if he tried to exit the truck, he found that some sort of invisible wall stopped his exit. Weird. Carta’s Enigma sure was useful. It made him jealous. He rested his feet across the aisle and chatted with the guy next to him.

He pulled on his hair and bounced his foot up and down. 25 people would be enough, no matter how prepared the wedding security might think it was. Despite the clear advantage they had, he was still worrying like a dumbass. He checked his watch. Still there, no one had stolen it in the time since he'd checked previously. He took his sunglasses off and cleaned the lenses, blue eyes staring back. He hoped Salvatore wouldn't mind that he had swiped his shades while he wasn't looking.

He wished Salvatore had tagged along, he could really use the doctor's presence. Alas, he was standby in case someone got hurt.

Suddenly, Pane felt the walls start to shake. His sunglasses clattered against the floor as the truck shook. He fished the pair up off the floor and slapped them to his eyes.

It was fucking Go Time!

The walls tumbled, rattled, and rumbled until the crew was back out in the world. The truck came to rest in front of the bewildered, happy couple, the table in front of them having shattered under the weight. Pane pointed his firearm at the groom.

“Congratulazioni!” He pulled the trigger and sheared the groom’s head off.

***

Terunosuke shivered against the linoleum, the gunfire had finally started up. If he hadn't made the suggestion, they would've raided the building and killed everyone anyway. This way was better, he didn't have to kill anyone this way.

Nobody was dying because of him.

His shaking subsided.

The people out there were dead men… and women… and elderly. He rubbed his forehead again, forcing the invasive thought away. It wasn’t his fault, he just changed how things played out. He had nothing to feel guilty over.

Sitting up, he heard someone, a man, burst through the bathroom door, panting and sobbing hysterically.

“Help! Someone! I need help!” Terunosuke instinctively reached his right hand to open the stall door, but stopped short. What would he do if he hid this man? Save his life? Give him hope? Passione wanted him dead. He was going to die, whether Terunosuke interfered or not. His hand went back down.

Still, the man pleaded.

“Please! Is anyone here?! Help me!” The words tore into Terunosuke. This man wasn’t guilty, not
one bit.
“God damn it! Shut up!” He immediately wished he hadn't spoken. The man rushed to him and pulled on the stall door.
“Hey, hurry up and let me in.” His voice dripped with relief. Terunosuke didn’t move a muscle.
“C’mon, open up.” The man gasped softly, desperation replacing relief. “I can hear them just outside the door.” He didn't understand, he was already dead.
“I'm sorry.”

Terunosuke clasped his hands over his ears as the door swung open. The man screamed, a violent blast cracked through the room, and the man went silent.

Nobody was dying because of him.

“Alright Carta, you can come out now, that guy was the last one.” Pane. Terunosuke stood up and put his hands to his eyes. He exited slowly. Making sure he was turned away from where the body would be, he lowered his hands and took in the unsettling sight of Pane. The stylish outfit that his partner wore was absolutely drenched in blood. He removed the pair of sunglasses on his face, leaving a crude, red outline around his eyes. “Let’s get out of here, we’re torching this place once we all leave.” The two left the confines of the bathroom, but were far from clear from the carnage that the building contained. Terunosuke caught a brief glimpse of the main hall before he clamped his eyes shut once again. The smell… it was heavy and rancid. It choked his breath, forcing him to clasp his hands over his mouth and nose in a futile attempt to filter the stench.

Blood and shit.

“What are you doing?” Pane questioned, walking back to him, having obliviously walked ahead.
“I… I'm not looking at that, I won't see it.”
“You won't see it? Are you blind? Quit fooling around and open your eyes, we're leaving.” Pane didn't understand; Terunosuke wasn't blind, he was petrified of what his actions had caused these people.
“Damn it, Pane, help me.” His clamped eyes furrowed.
“What, like guide you to the exit? You're not a kid, you've been through this sort of thing before, it's not that bad.”
“I have not! I have never done this sort of thing before! I have never killed a person in my life!” Pane went silent for a little while.
“You've never done this?… Jesus, Carta, I'm sorry. I didn't know.” Pane took him by the arm and started to guide him. “Why didn't you tell me?”
“I thought you knew.” Pane scoffed, upset at that remark.
“You can't expect me to know that. If you're in Passione, you've probably killed some people.” Terunosuke thought about that fact. Was it true? Was the organization he had joined truly like that?

“What was all of this for? Why did so many people die tonight?” Without opening his eyes, Terunosuke could tell Pane was shaking his head.
“This wedding involved the son of a prominent Scheggia member. There were tons of members who attended, enough to slaughter to entire reception. You know that; it was in the briefing.” Terunosuke wondered if there was ever an amount that would justify what had happened.
“But why were we needed? Why not anyone else? What is the reason for the two of us to be here? This has nothing to do with smuggling.” He had simply followed the instructions for the assignment. He had not thought to question why HE was there.
“We have a heartbeat. What more do you need for this kind of mission?” That was it?! Because he was a warm body?!
“That… I…” Terunosuke stopped in his tracks, his eyes still closed for safety.
He felt his foot step into a puddle, a blood puddle. He stopped talking and gradually opened his eyes, peering down at the source of the disgusting noise.

The elderly woman.

He was standing in her blood.

Not 10 minutes ago, she offered him a dance. Now, she was face down on the floor, blood seeping out of a gaping hole in her chest and cheek, her eyes frozen open, terror solely occupying the empty shell of her final moment.

He recoiled instinctively, rapidly stepping away. His feet tripped over a table that had been shot to hell in the massacre, sending him plummeting to the floor. Fortunately, he avoided falling on any of the bodies that were strewn about all around him. Unfortunately, one body wasn't quite dead. A man, laying on the floor, at death’s door, with a bloody mess for a jaw and at least 4 entry wounds in his chest, grabbed Terunosuke by the hair and frantically flailed a pistol in front of his face. Terunosuke didn’t scream. He didn't pinch his eyes shut or try to swat the gun away. Instead, he simply stared into the man’s eyes; they looked furious and terrified at the same time.

Pane didn't hesitate. Without having to think, he swung the long gun in his hands and bashed the end into the man’s temple, causing him to release his grip on Terunosuke and throwing his head onto the floor. Following through the blow, Pane bashed the man’s head in, the skull crunching and squishing beneath the solid metal.

When he finished, Pane was panting, a sharp smile accented the new bloody artwork on his face. Terunosuke could only look up at him as he extended his hand, a gesture that made Terunosuke glad that he'd already thrown up everything in his stomach. He helped him to his feet when Terunosuke felt a sharp pain in his leg. The pain gave way to burning, which became a tortured incineration of his thigh. He pressed his hands to the epicenter, successfully making the pain grow exponentially. Blood was smeared all over his palms, his blood.

He had been shot.

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Salvatore shook his head, Terunosuke couldn't tell if he was joking or genuinely angry.

“You really shouldn't have done that, Carta.” It was already bad enough that he had to be almost naked for this, a lecture was the last thing he wanted. He futility attempted to cover his chest with his arms, but humiliatingly failed.

“C'mon, Doc, just take the bullet out and patch him up.” Pane had insisted on accompanying him to the examination, he even tried to sling Terunosuke over his shoulders and carry him all the way to the examination room, a gesture Terunosuke fiercely denied.

“Yeah.” Salvatore said casually, his stand emerging. It had sharp, finger-less arms that had white bone-like armor. Its legs consisted of a downward-facing spire, rather than actually legs. The head was simply a blue orb, though with striking green lines that were shaped like an eye. Its upper body had the same color as its head with a crude exoskeletal system lining that matched its arms. In one way, it was unnerving, especially if it belonged to a doctor, on another hand, it reminded Terunosuke of some sort of monster that he had seen or read about. “Under My Skin.” As Salvatore called his stand, slender wires flowed out of its finger-less arms and phased through Terunosuke’s leg, almost as if he wasn't even there.

“This will hurt.” Terunosuke didn't doubt the doctor's words.

“What is it going to do t-! Ahh!” He hadn't lied. Terunosuke could feel the bullet rising up his leg, Salvatore’s stand focusing its wires and its eye on the wound. He clenched the operating table
desperately, struggling to remain sane in the face of overwhelming pain. The bullet traveled excruciatingly slow, almost as if it was spinning while being extracted.

“Salvatore! Just take that fucking thing out already!” Pane must have felt really upset if he felt the need to snap at his friend like that. As if on cue, the bullet rose from the hole in Terunosuke’s thigh with Salvatore extracting the lead projectile with his gloved hands. As it departed, the bullet gave a nice memento; a bleeding wound and intense, burning pain that Terunosuke could call his own.

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Bath water did wonders for tired muscles.

Pane had a strange way of saying he was sorry. Terunosuke wouldn't have thought that anybody would express that they were sorry by taking a trip to a bathhouse, not in a million years. But, here they were, Pane, resting his head and arms on the stony edge of the pool, and Terunosuke, with his nose barely above the water, silently reflecting over the events of the previous night, his eyes closed. He pressed his fingers against his bandaged thigh, the soreness of the wound almost completely gone. The hole itself was less than half the size of what it had originally been. Whatever Salvatore had done, he had done it well.

“You said you were Japanese, right.” Pane broke the silence without warning. He better not try to guess Terunosuke’s race yet again.

“Yeah, so what?” Pane kept his steely focus trained on the ceiling.

“You should've been Korean. Those guys are the best.” Terunosuke didn't know how to feel about such a bizarre statement, though he did feel irrationally disappointed that he had somehow let his partner down.

“Wha...Why exactly?”

“Because Rooftop Koreans, man.” How was Pane keeping a straight face while saying such dumb shit? Was he having a stroke?

“Rooftop... Koreans?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?! What the hell? You can't expect me to know what you're talking about!” Pane sighed a relaxed breath.

“In 1992, the city of Los Angeles in the United States underwent some violent riots when the LA Kings lost the championship game in Hockey.”

“They must be really passionate about sports.” Terunosuke wasn't sure how Hockey was played, though it sounded like a funny word.

“You bet. Anyway, lots of people went to looting stores in all of the chaos. This ruined more than a couple businesses.” It's here that the Rooftop Koreans come into play. A bunch of Korean entrepreneurs had stores in the affected area, and they weren't going down silently.

“Did the make a barricade or something?”

“No, they did something better. They went up on the Roofs of their stores, hence the ‘Rooftop’ in the name, armed entirely with small rifles and shotguns. For the entirety of the riots, they defended their livelihoods by themselves. They were true heroes.” Pane had an uncanny way of making stupid things sound inspiring.

“I'm gonna step out for a second.” Pane stood up from the water, letting Terunosuke know that purple was his natural hair color, a fact that Terunosuke would have preferred remaining unconfirmed. He leaned against the wall and started to smoke a cigarette. Terunosuke thought quietly about the uplifting folk tale he'd been told. It filled him with hope, as well as a yearning of sorts. A yearning to be a true hero, just as the Rooftop Koreans had been.

He pulled himself out of the pool and walked over to the wall, having the decency to at least cover himself with a towel first.
“Let me have one of those.” He held out his left hand, requesting a cigarette.
“You ever smoke before? You don’t sound like the type.” Pane noted, obliging his partner’s wish. Terunosuke moved the end of the stick to a lighter’s flame and inhaled the smoke.
“No, this is my fir-!” He started to cough forcefully. Pane just laughed.
“Figures.” Terunosuke was determined, he took another drag and took another cough, then repeated the process again and again until he had nothing but a ashy stub. It was disgusting, frustrating, and exhausting, but at the same time, strangely cathartic. No wonder people smoked so much, this feeling was therapeutic.

“Let me try another one.”

Salvatore’s Profile

Department: Unaffiliated, works as a doctor and surgeon.
Stand Name: Under My Skin
Favorite Band: R.E.M.
Favorite Food: Biscotti Regina
Favorite Vacation Spot: Palermo (His Hometown)

Normally, Salvatore is a carefree and fun-loving person, but becomes upset when people risk their lives needlessly. He's well known for being a selfless humanitarian, even going as far as adopting a child whose parents had been killed due to gang violence. Having bypassed the police from arresting Passione members that required trips to a hospital, he has single-handedly saved the gang thousands of man hours and hundreds of thousands of euros, an accomplishment that has gained him respect throughout Passione.
Bloodletting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Terunosuke’s white hair was still damp from the bathhouse when Pane led him to a warehouse that he hadn’t seen before. Pane had been droning on about finding a new “Roxanne” for him to use, whatever that meant.

“Have you ever used a firearm?” Pane asked, breaking away from his rambling long enough to hold the warehouse door open.

“Uhh… no, I don’t think so. Guns are illegal in Japan.”

“Seriously? That’s a real shame. Then that means you’ve never had the—”

“Oh yeah,” Terunosuke interjected. “I once…” He stopped himself before he went any further.

“Once?” Pane prodded. Terunosuke’s face steeled itself, he wasn’t going to talk about that, not yet at least.

“Never mind. Doesn’t count.”

“Alright.” If there was one thing that Terunosuke liked about Pane, it was the fact that he didn’t push personal questions very often.

The pair stopped in front of a large wooden table that held all manner of ornate weaponry. Terunosuke stared wide-eyed at the steel tools that were clearly someone’s pride and joy. Countless more rows decorated the wall directly adjacent to the table. Pane was either insane or very passionate.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it.” The youth glanced to his partner, his purple eyes gazing lovingly at the sight displayed out in front of him.

“How many guns are here?”

“In this room or in this building?” There were more?!

“Jesus.”

“Jesus is right. Here…” He motioned for Terunosuke to stay put while he went off to fetch something. There was an intense, intrusive desire to touch and inspect the destructive instruments, to rub his hands all over the pristine, polished steel, marring it and laughing maniacally when his partner returned. Strange thought. He went with his better judgment and decided to look intensely at the arsenal. Pane was right, they were quite beautiful in their own way.

“Didn’t keep you waiting too long, did I?” Pane asked as he strolled back, walking in an obviously careful manner. One was black with white decorations on the handle, the other was the regular steel gun color with a regular black handle decorations. “Take a look at this girl here.” Pane requested, handing the regular-looking gun towards him, handle first. There were two holes at the end of the gun, both of which pointed at the cold, stone floor of the warehouse. Another hole adorned the section of the gun between the end and the handle. Seemed unsafe. Terunosuke had seen guns in movies and in manga before, but this one looked plain weird; how did it fire in this state? He shifted the weapon around in each hand. One was black with white decorations on the handle, the other was the regular steel gun color with a regular black handle decorations. “Take a look at this girl here.” Pane requested, handing the regular-looking gun towards him, handle first. There were two holes at the end of the gun, both of which pointed at the cold, stone floor of the warehouse. Another hole adorned the section of the gun between the end and the handle. Seemed unsafe. Terunosuke had seen guns in movies and in manga before, but this one looked plain weird; how did it fire in this state? He shifted the weapon around in each hand, squeezing the handle softly, getting a nice feel for the metal. He raised the gun up and looked down the sights, appreciating the lightness of it; felt lighter than half a kilogram, at least. Without warning, Pane punched him straight in the wrist, sending a wave of pain up his arm faster than any bullet could travel. The blow surprised Terunosuke so much, he was knocked off balance and fell onto the harsh floor.

“What the fuck are you doing, Carta?!” Pane shouted, bending down jaggedly to drive the effect home. Terunosuke rubbed his throbbing wrist, a bruise already starting to form.

“That’s my line. What the hell?”
“What the hell. What the hell?! You pointed your gun at me!” Pane fished the fallen gun off of the floor. “Even if it's unloaded and cocked back, you only point a firearm at someone that you want dead.” Terunosuke couldn’t even begin to contain his embarrassment. Up until now, he had avoided acting incorrectly since moving to Naples. He looked down sheepishly.

“Sorry. I didn’t know” What a shitty excuse, Pane was going to be angry at him for at least the rest of the day know.

“Live and learn, my friend.” Pane’s voice was as warm and soft as a blanket. Terunosuke faced forward so fast he thought he would snap his neck. Pane was cracking a carefree smile, his left hand extended to help bring his partner to his feet; nice of him to have the presence of mind to not help him up with the freshly bruised arm. “Try it again, but without the friendly fire.” As instructed, Terunosuke held the gun in his left hand, his right still feeling sore. Much to his surprise, his left hand gripped the weapon naturally, as though he had come out of his mother holding this very gun in his left hand. “So what are you gonna call her?”

“Call her? Call who?” Pane laughed, he sure seemed to do that a lot, especially at Terunosuke’s expense.

“That stock Beretta that you’re holding, Carta. What are you gonna call her.” Naming a gun? What a weird thought. Pane plucked the black and white gun off of the work table, making sure to keep it pointed at the wall. “This beautiful little number is named ‘Roxanne’. If you could marry weapons, we’d be a picture perfect couple.” Pane said, unironically.

“She looks like a normal gun.” Apparently, that was not the correct response.

“Well Mr. Ignorant, she’s a work of art.” Terunosuke felt as though he had opened Pandora’s box.

“Her trigger guard and trigger have been moved back about 4 centimeters to compensate for the size of my hand.” He held up his hand before Terunosuke could ask. They were indeed smaller than average. “Her grip has custom fitting finger grooves specifically designed for my right hand.”

“What's the use in that? Do you hold her in your sleep or something?” It had been meant as a joke, but Pane’s face stayed straight the entire time.

“Sometimes when I’m feeling lonely.”

“Uh,” That was a joke. Right? “move along.” Pane gladly accepted.

“Most 92’s are chambered for 9mm, but Roxanne here is chambered for .45 ACP. Some people will say that stopping power is the most important thing in a handgun. These people are what's referred to as: Wrong.”

“Oh, yeah? Then what's the most important thing?” It might have been rude to use such an obviously uninterested tone, but Pane didn’t seem to mind, or notice for that matter.

“Capacity, my friend. If you ever run dry in the middle of a shootout, you might as well just shoot yourself.”

“But you’ll be out of bullets…”

“Well…uh…” Pane hung his head and laughed. “Yeah, you’re right. Either way, you’ll be SOL.”

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“What were we talking about before this? We got off on another tangent.”

“N-names!” Terunosuke fought off sleep during Pane’s passionate monologue, desperate to end the long winded presentation.

“Oh yeah... any names you like? Be sure to make it good.” The only thing that he had ever named was his pet hamster, Maru, that he had as a child. Much different than a comfortable stock Beretta 92. Jesus, he was already learning gun lingo.

“Uh... Yuki... I guess.”

“Yuki... is that Japanese?”

“Yeah. Is something wrong with that?” Pane said very little in response other than an unamused ‘That’s fine’. Terunosuke once prided himself on his intellect and wit. Now he was coming up with innovative new ways to disappoint his friend.
He felt honored to have such a humbling privilege.

“I should probably teach you how to fire… that.” Pane led him towards what looked like a firing range, a staunch frown holding its position the entire way.

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Terunosuke exited the airport in a drowsy stupor. France had been fun, for the half hour he was allowed to spend away from work. The actual trip was spent walking from location after distant location throughout the French metropolis and handing small packages to specific, shady individuals. The accommodations had been little more than a single-room cottage with an uncomfortable bed in the far outskirts of the city. To make matters worse, he had been woken up at some ungodly hour in the middle of the night to catch a charter flight back to Naples. Pane had warned him that business trips were terrible, but he hadn't even come close to preparing Terunosuke for what he'd been through. The only saving grace of the trip was that it only lasted one day; he couldn't begin to imagine a task that would last much longer. And he did manage to complete his task, so it wasn't a complete shit show.

The sun was barely starting to show its face in the early, December morning. He fished through his long coat and pulled out a cigarette, lit the end and took a satisfying drag. He started to wake up. The streets were barren, save for some street urchins and working girls. He gradually made his way to the tiny phone station that Pane had told him to use when he returned. It was as barren as the street, save for an old man talking on one of the phones. Terunosuke went to the other and inserted appropriate change. Pane was supposed to pick up immediately after he called him, yet the dial tone rang for much longer than he liked before the other side picked up.

“What?!?” Pane’s voice moaned, obviously having just woken up.

“Pane, it's Carta. Are you on your way?”

“Huh… you're still in Nice until the 18th… right?”

“Today is the 18th.”

“Ah shit! Sorry, Carta! I thought for sure it was tomorrow.” As he said this, Terunosuke could hear another voice murmuring in the background.

“Is someone there with you, Pane?”

“Uh…” He paused for a minute before continuing. “Yeah, I have some company.” Terunosuke sighed. It was too early to deal with this. He took an extra long drag and expelled the smoke through his nose.

“You're gonna get some disease from that kind of lifestyle.” Pane took quite the offense to that comment.

“Hey hey hey, who said she was paid for?” Terunosuke raised his eyebrow at that, too bad his partner couldn't see his skepticism.

“So you actually managed to get a girl to sleep with you by her own choice?”

“Well… no. She is actually a prostitute… but don't just assume that they always are.”

“Well maybe you should… hey! Are you coming or not?” Sidetracked yet again.

“Yes, I had to make the girl leave before I got dressed.” Great, knowing Pane, that would take hours.

“While we're waiting, I'll grace you with a funny story about the department leader.” Terunosuke had meet the department leader briefly during his first week in Passione. From what he could tell, him and Pane didn't get along very well, though he seemed nice enough. “So did you know that he worked in Japan for a few months.” Terunosuke twirled the phone cord around his finger, took another drag, and leaned against the wall.

“I had no idea. What did he do there? Oh, and where did he work?” There was the sound of rustling clothes as Pane continued on.
“I think Tokyo, but I can't remember for sure. Anyways, he was some kind of producer for movies and other kind of things like that. This was before he rose high up in the gang, of course.”

“Alright, yeah. So what's the story?”

“Ok, so he's watching over some sort of dance thing... I don't know, and he talks to this aspiring actress after it finishes. They talk about some sorta role that she was auditioning for.” Terunosuke groaned comically.

“I think I know where this is going.”

“Definitely. He tells her, there's something that she can do to help get the movie role.”

“Sex, right.”

“You got it.” Hopefully Pane was close to fully dressed by now. “So they go to a hotel and get a room. Then they get down to it.” Terunosuke shifted awkwardly as Pane went into extreme detail about the foreplay of the bald man who was technically his boss. He glanced at an advertisement on the wall that said something about fruit, ‘Try The Oranges!’.

“Just as they're about to get down to it, they both hear a loud noise from outside the window. Then, BAM! A robot the size of the room reaches its hand through and grabs the actress and carries her off!” Hold on a second.

“What?! Where the hell did a giant robot come from?! That's total bullshit!”

“That’s what I told the department leader. But that guy swears his damn life on it, said he was never more positive about anything in his life. It happened.” Terunosuke didn't buy it for one second.

“Fine... then what happened?”

“So the department leader is just sitting there, room half destroyed, dick out in the wind, he's got no goddamn clue as to what the fuck just happened.” Sounded like a funny sight, though not enough to justify the entire story.

“Then what.” Pane started to crack up ever so slightly.

“Then the maid walks in a she says... are you ready for this one?” Terunosuke had to admit, despite the outrageous nature of the story, he absolutely wanted to hear the punchline.

“What is it?” His voice reflected his anticipation like a mirror.

“The maid says 'Is this-' Hey are you going to be done soon” Terunosuke looked back at the man behind him interrupted the story. Pane erupted in laughter, the punchline apparently living up to expectations. 

“Hey, say that again, I didn't hear you.” Pane didn't hear him over his own roaring laughter. The man who interrupted the joke questioned Terunosuke again.

“How long are you going to be?” What a prick. First he ruins a good time, then he asks rude questions.

“Ask someone else.” Terunosuke waved his hand dismissively to the man, not even bothering to face him and say it to his face.

“The other phone is taken by an elderly man, I can't rush him.” Jesus, he just wouldn't leave him alone. He wasn't even worth the effort.

“Pane, you still there?” Thankfully, his laughter had died down enough for the conversation to continue.

“Yeah, man. I'm just about to leave, I'll pick you up in a few minutes. See ya soon.”

“Wait! Before you hang.” The line went dead as soon as he started talking. He pounded his head against the wall for the better half of a minute before he hung up. The man behind him sighed and went to use the phone for himself.

“About time.” He said. Asshole. Terunosuke looked at the man.

He looked like an idiot.

Actually, he looked more like a jester. His hair was dark red, coming outwards in 4, thick sections that resembled a jester's hat; each section ended in a fine tip that was decorated with a gold, likely artificial, coloring. His shirt was a lighter red, its neckline coming down across his chest, wrapping
around his back, and ending at his left hip. His similarly-red pants didn’t fit. Terunosuke could see the man’s ankles under the end of his pant legs. The only article of clothing that wasn’t red, the man’s dark brown shoes, had a strange wave design around the perimeter of the leather, not in the sense of a logo, but a piece of metal that bordered the circumference of the leather. Why in the hell was his ensemble so red? And more importantly, just how much fucking hair gel did that hairstyle require on a daily basis? It hurt his eyes to have to look at him.

Terunosuke stared at the man as he walked away, making sure the man gave an evil eye of his own as he departed. While he was caught up in the stare down, Enigma silently extracted the phone, machine and all, from the wall. The paper floated effortless into Terunosuke’s hand as he walked out the door to the street. The stone sidewalk made a nice improvised ashtray as he flickered his cigarette away. He managed to get 6 steps away before hearing a deafening curse, followed by a door flying open, and then footsteps rushing in his direction.

“How the fuck did you steal that?!” He sounded more bewildered than angered, though an amount of agitation was still audible.

“I didn’t steal anything.” Feigning ignorance, unfortunately, was not one of Terunosuke’s strengths.

“Come on, you bastard. Just give the damn phone back.” Annoying and stupid. Even if he gave the phone back, it would be disconnected, but that shouldn’t stop the fun.

“You want it back, huh? Fine!” Making sure that the paper would fly open, Terunosuke turned and hurled the paper at the man, releasing the phone at high speed. The man barely dodged, an impressive feat in its own right. In the light from nearby street lamps, his face was now twisted with contempt. Without talking or making much noise at all the man fished around in his pant’s pocket, was he looking for a gun? Terunosuke held his hands close. Back in November, Pane had loaned him a fingerless, brown glove with a pocket on it’s backside. That pocket held his personal Beretta 92, Yuki, safe and sound, folded by Enigma’s ability, until he needed it. The glove was a bit too tight for his hand and Pane’s trademark purple hazard logo stuck out awkwardly, but it would be indispensable for stealth and quick draw purposes, so he bared with it. If this red guy so much as took another step towards him, he’d receive a nice round hole in his center of mass, just as he had practiced.

To Terunosuke’s surprise, the man didn’t bring out a firearm, but a scalpel. Was this idiot a surgeon or doctor? He felt sorry for the Italian medical industry if shitheads such as this could become qualified in a medical practice. He lowered the scalpel to his side.

“You with Scheggia?” The man asked suddenly. “Wouldn’t want to kill an ally.” Scheggia. Terunosuke was surprised to say the least. Scheggia was the group that broke away from Passione some years before he had joined. Aside from that, he knew nothing about them, except for the fact that it was not a pleasant schism.

“Passione, Smuggling department.” The man perked up in response.

“So then I can let loose and have some fun. No need to worry about repercussions.” What was his plan? Rush forward and use the scalpel as a knife? If he tried that, Terunosuke would blow him to bits. It might be a good idea to take the initiative and fire at him before he tried anything.

The man brought the slender, silver blade to his other hand. Terunosuke eyed his movements closely, ready to fire at any moment.

Then the man baffled Terunosuke.

Instead of attacking, the man made an incision on his right hand. Starting from the base of his thumb, he made a smooth cut across his palm, concluding just below the pinky. In spite of the newly made gash in his hand, there was absolutely no blood. He then proceeded to press his left hand against the back of his sliced right hand. In addition, he placed his right foot forward and set
his forearms against his torso. His stance almost looked like he was bracing for something, but what exactly?
“What the hell are you doing?” The thought that this man might be a Stand user came up in his mind. If that was the case, just what kind of ability did this guy possess?

Terunosuke’s question was answered almost immediately.

“Blood Creepin.” The man stated simply, in the way that Terunosuke would say ‘Enigma’. Terunosuke was painfully doused. Liquid blasted into his eyes and mouth before he could shut them. He was violently knocked off his feet, all semblance of balance was lost. Covering his head with his arms did little to abate the barrage. Where the hell was this coming from?! It felt like a firehouse was turned up to full blast and then pointed directly at him. Thankfully, the spray finally ceased, leaving him alone as a shaking, disgusting mess. The smell was heavy and familiar. Blood. The man in red had attacked him with blood. He wiped his eyes, but only succeeded in rubbing more blood in. The man laughed at his failure.

In that moment, Terunosuke made a decision. He silently pledged that he would kill the man in red. He deserved to die for this! His clothes were soaked through completely. His long coat took the brunt of the assault and was likely tattered at this point. Shame, he really liked it. Shaking his face dry like a wet dog, Terunosuke opened his eyes to see the man in red, the color having drained from his face. He looked at his hand. It didn’t make much sense. There were thick trails of blood, obviously, but as much as he looked, there was no wound to speak of, nor was there a scar. A strange thought sought to rectify this confusion. Was the blood that sat on him now… his blood? That would be impossible, he couldn’t spray this much without any suffering any effects, even if he did manage to find a way to shoot it out of his body. Had to be a stand. What had he called it? Blood Creepin? Fitting.

“Hey, are you going to just stare at me all night?” Terunosuke glared at the man and smiled a disgustingly smile.
“No, I’ll just kill you in five minutes.”
“Kill me in five minutes?” The man arched his head back and genuinely laughed. “Was that supposed to scare me? Try again next time.” He was right about that, even Pane had told him that his one liners were atrocious. He reached for his glove, a small amount of blood marring and soaking into the paper that held Yuki. There was a soft click that came from the man’s direction; he smiled his own smile, still standing confidently, his face no longer pale. In a flash, Terunosuke flipped the paper open, gripped Yuki in his left hand, a bullet preloaded in the chamber, pointed and pulled the trigger, hitting the man in his center of mass, just like he had practiced. From his position against the ground, the bullet entered near bottom of the man’s ribs, passed through his body, and exited through with plenty of force to spare. He sure as hell didn’t expect to be shot, the bastard. He pressed his hand to the wound and stumbled sideways a few steps. There wasn’t any blood… at first.

The man shot his hand away from the wound just in time for a brand new bloodstream to erupt from both sides of his body. Terunosuke rose to his feet and quietly thanked the powers that be that he wasn’t caught in its path again. Yuki was raised again as the man struggled to stay on his feet, but Terunosuke hesitated. As the man stumbled around with a column of blood rushing out of him, struggling to keep control, he felt nauseous. He ducked into a nearby alley, barely making it in before the bile hit his lips. He doubled over as he coughed out the vomit, almost as forcefully as the bloodstream. Inside the usual concoction of recent food and gastric acid was a horrific amount of blood mixed in that had been swallowed in the initial blast. How the hell did the man in red have so much blood?! Terunosuke had swallowed at least half a liter. How the hell was he still standing!

The sound of the bloodstream ceasing pulled him from his thoughts, the man was ready to go
again. He pressed himself to the corner of the near wall.
“How’d you like that?! Not so fun to take me lightly, is it?!” He taunted harshly, hoping to get under his skin.

“Not bad… whatever your name is.” The man’s voice sounded pretty weak. “Not bad at all.” “My name is Terun… Carta.” He wished that he could face the man directly. How would he react to that?

“I’m Sanguinoso. Nice to meet you.” What bullshit. Terunosuke risked a glance to peer at his newly acquainted foe. His face was pale once again. There was a small hole in his shirt, but the skin beneath it was completely fine, not a single scratch on it. His clothes shined with his own blood, but it blended in well enough to make it hard to notice. That answered the question of his color scheme at least.

Sanguinoso’s Profile

Former Alias: Vitello
Former Department in Passione: Gambling Oversight
Age as of 2000: 19
Stand Name: Blood Creepin
Favorite Band: Sonic Youth
Favorite Color: Cerulean
Favorite Topic For Discussion: Marxist Theory

After a brief moment spent gathering his breath, Terunosuke rolled his grip around Yuki and charged at Sanguinoso. He pointed at his head and went to pull the trigger, but was met quickly be his enemy’s fist, right below the chest. The blow forced every morsel of air from his lungs and stopped him dead in his tracks, causing him to double over once again, this time, right in front of the person he was trying to kill. Sanguinoso took the chance while he had it. While Terunosuke was bent over his fist struggling to breathe, he wrapped his arms around the Passione member's back and ribs, clasping both hands together where his fist had connected. With a swift movement, he raised Terunosuke up in the air. There was little the dark skinned smuggler could do but gasp raggedly for air and flail his legs. Despite his efforts, he felt his weight shift in less than a second and the rough sidewalk rushed to meet his body. For just a fleeting moment, he felt weightless.

His body was slammed brutally against the stone. Every single centimeter of his body screamed in agony. His ribs felt like they were being trampled, his knees shattered like glass, his forehead and nose poured blood from brand new wounds, his hands and forearms took the lion's share of the damage, gut wrenching snaps screeching from his bones. He prayed that he could die or fall into unconsciousness, but he stayed wide awake in his nightmare. There was a hideous screaming in his ears that sounded as if some animal had been run over in the street, but it was just him.

“This didn’t have to happen! I just wanted to call my associates!” Sanguinoso yelled over his screams. “All you had to do was walk away and you could have avoided this!” Terunosuke didn't give a damn what he said, he just wanted the agony to be cut short. Sanguinoso kneeled down to his level as he writhed. “I’m going to kill you now. I promise that there were no hard feelings.” So that was it. He was going to die right here. If this ordeal had happened a couple weeks ago, Terunosuke would have simply rolled over and greeted death with a thankful smile. Now though, he would kick his past self in the dick if he could. There was no way in hell that this bloody bastard was going to be the one to do him in. No Goddamn Way!
He suppressed his agonized shaking long enough to reach out for Yuki, who lied just in front of his face. Unfortunately, Sanguinoso figured what he was planning and swiftly kicked the gun away, stomping out Terunosuke’s chance of victory. Without further speaking, he gave the scalpel an encore appearance. If there was one upside to the situation, it was that Terunosuke would go down fighting. Through the wailing pain, Terunosuke went to rip Sanguinoso’s exposed ankle off with his teeth, but he was interrupted.

“Excuse me! I hope you didn’t forget about me!” With no warning, both combatants looked back to see a purple and blue blur approaching at lightning speed. Sanguinoso did a double take and made an attempt to defend, but the figure rammed into him before he could set up anything. As the bodies made contact, Terunosuke stared in awe at the baseball sized bur resting on the assailant’s shoulder, the exact spot that pierced into Sanguinoso’s cheek. Sanguinoso went flying backwards, his body making a satisfying scraping sound as he slid. The new figure picked up Terunosuke and slung him over his shoulder. He then rushed into the nearby alley and rested him against the wall, safely away from the Scheggia member.

“You saved my ass there, thanks, Pane.” Pane simply smiled. The nice moment didn't last long before Pane actually looked at Terunosuke.

“Holy shit! How much blood have you lost?!”

“Relax,” Terunosuke shifted uncomfortably against the wall, his injuries still throbbing. “this guy, Sanguinoso, he shoots his blood as his Stand Ability.”

“Jesus… blood? So all of that is his blood?” Terunosuke nodded, his neck flaring in pain as he did. He didn’t want Pane to know how bad he was really feeling. “Then how is he still alive? Nobody has THAT much blood.”

“Dunno. Probably regenerates it or something. Can't tell.”

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Pane pressed his back to the wall and looked out to see Sanguinoso rolling on the ground, a fountain of blood arcing out of his face where Anthrax had stabbed into him. The bur that Pane had rammed him with was currently on the ground near him, liters of blood flowing over and around its thorns. It must've touched the ground. It took too much concentration to keep his Stand in its enlarged state. If it wasn’t touching the enemy, it wouldn't poison him. He let it dissipate.

“Let's kill him from here.” He reached for Roxanne and stopped cold. He'd left her in the convertible... Goddamn it! What dumbass rookie thing to do!

“Carta,” He called to his friend. “can you stand?” In response, Carta steadied himself with his right hand and rose to his feet, albeit with quite a bit of shaking and stumbling. He was in absolutely no condition to fight, but Pane realized that he wouldn’t be giving up, not now, not ever. Pane loved that spirit. He cleared his throat and hoped Carta would enjoy the speech.

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“Alright Carta, it's time to show this fuck what you're made of. He might think you're a little bitch, but he doesn't know you. You've got something he doesn't have, know what it is?”

“Broken bones?” Even sarcasm caused Terunosuke pain.

“Not that, you've got the Japanese fighting spirit running through your veins! With that, anything you set your mind to can be accomplished.” Was Pane on drugs? “Exceed the arbitrary limits placed onto your shoulders that society deemed you responsible to bear. Wash the sins that stained your ego. From Japan with love! What do you think?” Usually, shit comes out of people’s asshole, but Pane had managed to find a way to spew it out of his mouth. Incredible. However, his words struck a chord deep within his soul. The pain in his body ceased to be debilitating, he could feel the power!

“Hell yeah!” He stood up straight, ready to take on any and all obstacles.
The Passione duo darted around the corner and charged at their bleeding opponent, his face having ended its crimson assault. To effectively move on his damaged legs, Terunosuke was forced to convert to paper and slide. Sanguinoso’s shock was obvious. As they stampeded towards him, he did another frantic double take.

That was it. His fear sign.

Ever since he came to Naples, Terunosuke had felt reluctant to ever use Enigma in any way other than for storage, but now was different! There could be only one winning team, and it wasn’t going to be Passione, Scheggia be damned. He couldn’t force himself to hold back any longer, he had to use every tool at his disposal.

Enigma revealed himself for the first time in weeks. If a frightened double take was all that was needed, then so be it. He phased through the air faster than Pane could sprint and met Sanguinoso with an unbreakable grip. The Scheggia bastard kicked his feet into Enigma’s body, but it made not difference, it was too late for him now. The Stand dragged him into a fresh piece of paper, and that was it. Pane zoomed past where their target had just been and turned in disbelief. Terunosuke returned to his normal form and easily picked the paper up off of the ground.

“So that’s what Enigma looks like in action. You took him down with zero effort.” Pane looked slightly disappointed that he had gotten excited for nothing. “Didn’t even need me.”

Terunosuke had forgotten how much fun it was to turn someone into paper. He twirled to piece lightly in his fingers, making absolutely sure that it didn’t open. They danced around gracefully, fluttering between the single fold like butterflies.

“Did you think that was impressive?” He asked, knowing full well how Pane would respond. “Hell yeah I did.” Pane patted him on the back. It didn’t hurt. It actually felt really good to be appreciated like that.

“Then you’ll love this.” All or nothing. With a swift flick of both hands, he tore the paper in two. The result was immediate and cataclysmic. Sanguinoso was ejected out, his body split at the waist. His halves made a disgusting slap as he hit the ground. His intestines spilled out along the end of his upper half. The sight was disheartening to say the least. It wasn't ideal, but it worked. Still. What an awful way to die.

Except he wasn’t dead.

Terunosuke’s screams may as well have been a tired sigh in comparison to Sanguinoso’s grotesque bellowing. It was obvious that he couldn’t handle the sight of his body in two parts. He started to cry in pain and panic as he desperately crawled for his disembodied legs, futility trying to put himself back together. He was just a torso with arms and a head. He didn’t even look human anymore.

The sight snapped Terunosuke out of his dark thoughts and forced him to take ownership for what he had done. This mess of a human fumbling around incoherently… what had he done to deserve this end? Terunosuke mentally kicked himself for letting Pane excite him with stupid bullshit.

Pane grabbed him by the shoulders and swung him around, facing him away from the gory scene. “You don’t need to look at that. Let’s go. We won.” His shoulders felt heavier than ever. He’d just killed someone for the first time in his life. The sound of continued screams practically begged to be witnessed. If Pane hadn’t kept a hold on him, he would have turned back, no doubt about it.

The screams gradually died down and the standing pair started to depart from the sad wreckage, the streetlamps guiding their exit. “Hey. I forgot Yuki back there.” Pane nodded wordlessly and loosened his grip. His eyes looked as if they held a great sympathy in them. As he turned, he kept his head low so as not to see the horrid
carnage that would lay before him. He found Yuki next to the curb of the sidewalk and approached her. It was stupid to act like this Beretta was some woman, as though it would give him any solace in the fact that what he had done was unforgivable. His steps bared down on his ears painfully. They were sluggish and labored, his feet dragging slightly against the stone. The pace sounded aggressive and foreign, as if it came from in front of him rather than below.

Wait…

"CARTA!"

The flash of moment in his peripheral vision was the only warning he received before he was drop kicked in his already sore ribs. He crumbled like a house of cards. His entire rib cage was shattered glass. The familiar fire-like devastation returned with a vengeance, reminding him what suffering felt like.

It wasn’t possible. It shouldn’t be possible. Sanguinoso was standing over him once again, his body complete and intact.

The sidewalk was a stone sledgehammer against his bones. He reached down to feel where he’d been hit and felt a horrific protrusion jutting out of his back. A fractured rib. Every breath he drew sent him to hell and back.

Pane met Sanguinoso with a savage tackle and the two bashed against the ground. They swung rapidly on the ground, rolling and flailing wildly with no organization of attack. Terunosuke had to help somehow! Through the tortuous anguish, he slithered his living corpse towards his Beretta. Frantically searching the area, the fight raged in the background. After an eternity, he came to the familiar polished steel piece and gathered it lovingly, wrapping his hand around its grip like it was the key to salvation.

When he looked back, the two continued to brawl, though they had both managed to get to their feet. Terunosuke was just meters away, thought with his body the way it was, they were practically an entire kilometer out of reach. He messily pointed his weapon at Sanguinoso, but Pane cried out in protest, eyeing him sideways.

“Stop! You might hit me!” He was right, both fighters were practically millimeters from one another. With the slightest movement, they could switch positions entirely. He held his fire for now. Pane and Sanguinoso stood face to face, their hands intertwined in vicious vice grips.

Suddenly, Sanguinoso’s footing faltered and he was forced back, his feet stepping back, one after another. Again, he rapidly stepped back, one foot, then another. Terunosuke couldn’t figure it out, why wasn't he trying to slice himself again to blast Pane, surely he remembered his own Ability. Then Terunosuke noticed something about Sanguinoso that he had overlooked. His shoes. The wavy piece of metal along the perimeters to be exact. Upon closer inspection, they looked razor sharp, sharp enough to cut through flesh with ease. Then, Terunosuke noticed the slashes on his exposed ankles, his short pants stopping just above them. A pair of bloodless cuts were exposed, why hadn't they erupted? A click came from Sanguinoso’s direction, electing a confident grin from the man.

It all made sense.

Blood Creepin had to recharge the blood that it shot out of Sanguinoso’s body once it stopped, otherwise he would simply keep opening new wounds. Once the ability finished, the slashed area would heal itself, allowing him to use it again. That was how he had put his body back together. After the bloodstream concluded, it would heal any injury in the damaged area. When Blood Creepin was recharging, it wouldn't activate again until it was ready and any body parts that were damaged during the recharge phase would stay damaged. Once it finished recharging, it would
produce a click to let Sanguinoso know it was ready to use once again.

For a third time Sanguinoso, stepped back, foot 1, foot 2. This time creating a third slash on the inside of his ankle. The ankle was on his foot, what could he possibly do with it? Then, Terunosuke’s eyes tracked in the direction that the slice was angled.

Pane’s heels were positioned next to each other, a perfect shot for the bloodstream.

“Pane! Feet! Your feet!” Terunosuke desperately screamed. But his warning came too late. The bloodstream blasted out and sliced through Pane’s Achilles Tendons like they were butter. Without resistance, the bloody man pressed his hand to Pane’s chest and pushed him to the ground, his feet crumpling like a paper bag. Sanguinoso turned his foot upwards and created a sadistic fountain from his ejecting blood. Pane curled up and covered his fresh wounds from the sanguine demonstration.

When Blood Creepin finished coating the area, Sanguinoso set his foot down and fell to his hands and knees, apparently exhausted. Despite his enviable position, Pane laughed. Even with shredded heels, he kept a shit eating grin splattered on his face.

“Feeling drained?”
“What did you do?! Why am I so tired now?!” Sanguinoso questioned desperately.
“That’s Anthrax! My Stand moves by catching a ride on unsuspecting shitheads like you. Whenever you touch it with your bare skin, you’ll feel the effects of its venom. As long as it stays on you, you’ll be poisoned to death!”
“So when I tipped you over…”
“I made a bur on my chest, right where your hand was about to touch.” Pane exclaimed with a triumph. Terunosuke felt honored to call the magnificent genius his friend.

“You say it moves when it touches things?” Sanguinoso questioned, the volume in his voice departing, pale skin taking its place. His hand weakly fished in his pant’s pocket and withdrew the scalpel. With a simple flick, he caught the Anthrax bur on the surgical tool and removed it from his afflicted hand. The change was immediate. Returning to his feet proved to be no problem. The scalpel was discarded to the ground without a second thought.

Pane was a fucking idiot, giving away his secret so easily.

Terunosuke silently converted his pistol to paper and clamped his mouth shut, he wasn’t revealing his secret to anyone until he could win with it.

Sanguinoso took the opportunity to stomp on Pane’s heels while Blood Creepin recharged. Without letting a word slip past his lips, Terunosuke ran his hand through the blood pool that had formed on the ground, splashing Sanguinoso with his own vile creation. The man in red turned back and smiled with a jarring authenticity. He held his fire

“You remind me of myself,” He approached casually. “you just refuse to give up. Give yourself a round of applause.” The bottom of his shoe met Terunosuke’s gut. He immediately coughed violently, barely holding back the urge to puke again by covering his mouth with his left hand. He held his fire. “I’m almost sorry to see you go.” Terunosuke let loose a soft chuckle, his left hand staying over his mouth.

“I feel the same way for you, to bad you have to leave so soon.”
“What? Look around… uh… Carta. You're done for.”
“Same could be said of you.”
“Did I ram you a little too hard? Can you even see anymore?” Terunosuke could see alright. In fact, he was looking at a dead man. “You don’t have your gun, and that paper trick won’t work again, you’re dead.”
“Don’t be…” Terunosuke spat out the paper he had smuggled in his mouth and flung it open, presenting Yuki’s beautiful form to his enemy’s forehead. “so sure!”
“W-what?!”

Before he could get far, Terunosuke pulled the trigger. The bullet ripped through Sanguinoso’s cheek. The trigger pulled again. That shattered his jaw. Again. A perfect hole blew into his forehead. Blood Creepin was still recharging. He wouldn’t be healing from this. More shots, more holes. By the time he heard the click of the empty weapon, Sanguinoso’s head had become disfigured beyond all recognition. There were holes scattered unevenly across its face. Its jaw hung on by a string of muscle, the place where the eyes had been were almost black. He could see the splintered skull poking through to be seen. Blood mixed with spit, with snot. The resulting concoction was a slurry of disgust that sat fermenting in the corpse’s face. It pissed itself when it died. For minutes, Terunosuke just laid on the ground, waiting for the corpse to spring back into action. But it didn’t. It truly was dead.

“Carta.” Pane’s voice sounded. “That was good.” The feeble compliment summed up how Terunosuke felt perfectly. There wasn’t any dread. No self-hatred or celebration. Just relief that the endeavor was finally over.

“Let’s go see Salvatore.”

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“You said his name was Sanguinoso?” Salvatore brought out his Stand, Under My Skin, and sent its wires down into Terunosuke’s arm, arranging the displaced bones back to their correct positions.

“Yeah. The bloody guy. Did you know him?” He thought he saw a flicker of sadness pass by the doctor’s face.

“Sort of, before he left Passione of course. He always donated blood if a nearby hospital needed some.” Terunosuke chuckled lightly as his bones were joined with one another, the pain subsiding slowly as the connected like puzzle pieces.

“He could probably fill an entire room with blood.” Salvatore must have enjoyed that, his frown disappeared and left him with an improved mood.

“Ha, yeah. He helped a lot of people out… last I heard, he was completely clean, so you don’t need to worry about blood borne diseases or anything like that.” Terunosuke should have felt relieved, but he couldn't help but feel guilty over the circumstances that led up to their confrontation. Looking back on it now, it seemed so petty, so unnecessary.

“Hey, Carta,” Salvatore said, moving his stand to repair Terunosuke’s damaged knee. “how exactly did you run into Sanguinoso?”

“Well, you see…” He started to sweat nervously, there was little he could do to make his story sound any less foolish than it was. Lying, after all, was not his strong suit.

“So you threw a phone at him for asking if he could use it?” Terunosuke held his hands up in false innocence.

“That isn’t an excuse, Carta! You easily could been killed. The members of Scheggia aren’t to be messed with. And now you’ve killed one of them. Do you have any idea what that means?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Passione is still around. As long as I’m a part of this gang, no one in Scheggia will fight me.”

“Carta, that is wrong.” His knee flared in pain. “You can’t have that attitude! If you keep thinking like that, you'll die for sure!” The pain became too much to bear at this point. Salvatore didn't realize that in his dismay, he was unwittingly torturing his patient.

“Gahh! Salvatore! Stop it! That hurts!” The doctor looked at what he was doing and stopped.
himself.
“Oh… I’m sorry. But I’m serious. You got lucky this time. Next time you face them, you might not
live.” Terunosuke nodded, the pain along his treated leg fading out. The man simply wanted him to
be careful. He could live with that.

Salvatore reminded him of his father.

Chapter End Notes

3 things.

1. I like commas, probably a bit too much.
2. I’m not sure why I threw a Megazone 23 joke in there, but, hey, that’s life.
3. The color scheme that I’ve been writing for is Terunosuke’s manga coloring of
white hair and a brown long coat. However, in the Great Days OP, he seems to have
brown hair with a purple long coat. I’m not sure if that’s how he’ll appear in the
anime, but his white and brown color scheme becomes relevant in the next chapter, so
I’ll be sticking with it either way.
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Whatever medical institution Salvatore had attended, it must have been prestigious. When Terunosuke awoke in the morning, he was amazed at how little pain there was. His arms, knees, and even his ribs seemed to forget that they had all been thoroughly battered yesterday. He would have to remember to thank the doctor for his services. Maybe get him a greeting card for his troubles.

He laid softly in his bed, silently appreciating the chill December morning. Thin bars of sunlight peeked through the drawn curtains, illuminating the otherwise dim bedroom. He wished that he could send Enigma out to grasp the cloth and shut out a light that dared to show itself. Sadly, the curtains were too far away for Enigma to them. Just as well. Enigma could barely move an ant his own, let alone a curtain.

Terunosuke’s stomach growled at him, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten in almost an entire day. He threw off the luxurious linen sheets that he had cocooned himself with and stood barefoot on the frosty hardwood. Another note to thank Salvatore for was that of his long coat. Under My Skin had managed to extract the entirety of the stained blood that had seeped into the fabric. Not a single drop could be found anymore. Its pockets had also been stitched back into place; interior as well as exterior. Suturing hundreds of gaping wounds must have given Salvatore a graceful touch for sewing. He threaded his arms into the loyal coat as he opened his door and left the solace of his room.

Pane was wiped out on the couch, an empty bottle of whisky comically balanced upside down on its mouth. His legs were propped up against one end of his impromptu bed, heavy bandages wrapped around his damaged ankles. He looked pretty silly. Terunosuke picked the bottle up, took it into the kitchen where he opened a window, and tossed the bottle out the window. It shattered with a satisfying crash, eliciting the angered hiss of a startled cat. He leaned against the countertop and looked at Pane as he slept. Normally, his friend was a loud and sometimes zany jokester who would keep his spirits high without trying. He’d saved his life, endangered it, and forced him to save himself the day before; Terunosuke still thought he was a fucking idiot, though it didn't change their friendship. It was strange to see him so peaceful. In the month that had gone by since his entrance into Passione, Pane had never once stopped trying to impress him. Whether by keeping up a constant stream of humor, cooking for each and every meal, or the hundreds of other little things he did, he always wore a genuine smile. It almost seemed like he was trying TOO hard, possibly fearing a single misstep could cause Terunosuke to despise him for the rest of his life.

Terunosuke’s stomach gnawed at his body, demanding to be fed. His thoughts about his friend could wait for a few minutes. There were more important matters to attend to.

***

Showers were bothersome these days. Terunosuke missed Japanese style showers. He missed sitting down and letting the steaming water flow over his body as he sat and thought about the world. Standing up was tiresome. How could people do it so easily? He missed Japan in general. He missed the movie store he would go to every Saturday, missed the convenience store that he depended on for dinner every night, missed going to school and seeing the faces that he was used to. Faces in Naples were so foreign; save for Pane, Salvatore, one or two other Passione members, he didn't know anyone.

He cranked the heat up and rested his head against the wall. The faces of his former classmates... what had they looked like? For years, he had attended class with those people, but now it was like
they'd never existed at all.

If he couldn’t remember them, would they remember him? What had they done when he stopped showing up for school? Did they get worried? Maybe they swung by his house and asked what had happened. Maybe they didn't even notice his absence. He tried to remember their faces.

Nothing.

No matter how hard he racked his brain, he couldn't remember what they looked like, what their names were, or even who they had been.

He turned the heat up to its maximum, hoping the scalding spray would pry the memories loose. What else was he forgetting? He tried to remember something unforgettably painful, something he knew for sure. The date that his old life was torn apart; the day he challenged Josuke. It was last year in 1999, that was a given. He could remember that it was in the summer. After that, everything was blank. Was it in April, maybe it was May? He pulled at his drenched hair, forcing an answer to pop into his head. But it didn't him with anything. He had forgotten the day completely. 

Was he forgetting his entire life?! That was possible; he knew it was. There was a movie or a book about that, memories could get screwed up with time and then the person wouldn't even realize they were false. Dammit! He couldn’t even remember what THAT was called!

When had his memory failed?! Was this always his life, a shitty criminal living with an alcoholic shithead?! He punched the wall, solving nothing as his left fist met solid tile. Could he be sure of what he remembered about that day or any day before it? The events that happened… did they happen as he thought they did, or was he wrong? He was just a kid that got carried away with power and received unjust retribution… wasn't he? Was he the evil one, the one who deserved to go to hell? Terunosuke was certain he was the former… but what did he know for sure?

Without even stopping the water, Terunosuke rushed out of the bathroom and ran to the desk in his room. Throwing open the drawer, he searched frantically, sifting through the miscellaneous items until he found what he was looking for. The photograph of his family, together and happy.

He had to have been 6 or 7 when this was taken; his hair was much shorter than what it was now, though even at that length, the strands naturally flicked upwards at their ends. Seeing his parents alive and happy evoked a harsh bittersweet feeling.

It was taken on an ordinary spring day. He sat on his father's shoulders and was laughing joyfully. His parents hugged one another close, each clearly in love with the other.

He knew that he would never be able to recapture the comfort of his old life. That had ended on the day he could no longer remember. But as he looked at the photograph, there was a faint glimmer of hope. Maybe if he just tried hard enough, things wouldn't be so bad.

Maybe.

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“So are you two doing alright today?” Salvatore asked the duo.
“I feel like I could die at any second, but other than that I'm in peak condition.” Pane responded, resting his forehead on the table and nursing his hangover with more alcohol. “Why the hell are you drinking when you're supposed to be recovering? Carta, how has your partner not gotten himself killed yet?” Terunosuke simply shrugged.
"Pane may be an idiot, but he's a resilient idiot. Maybe it's his thick skull that keeps him alive."
"I'm sitting right here!" Pane shouted, slamming his Bloody Mary against the glass tabletop.
"Just checking to make sure that you're still alive." Pane grumbled something under his breath and went back to wishing he was dead.

"Say," Salvatore started, "do you still have the sunglasses I lent you?" The pair that had once sat perched atop his head failed to appear. "It has been at least a month since you borrowed them and I keep forgetting to ask for them back."
"Uhh… maybe, lemme see." Pane fished around his pocket until he pulled out a pair of shades that had once been sleek and stylish, but now had bent frames, scratched lenses, and about a liter worth of dried blood caked into every nook and cranny possible.
"You idiot, they're completely wrecked!" The doctor snatched the glasses from Pane and evaluated the damage. "Did you wear these to a slaughterhouse?! What's the meaning of this?!"
"Not so loud, please." Pane pleaded with cupped ears. "Sorry man, I had those with me when we tore down that Scheggia wedding… and yesterday when we took on that Blood fucker."
Salvatore sighed heavily through gritted teeth.
"Haven't you ever heard the phrase ‘Leave it better than how you found it’ before in your life?" Pane looked ahead, straightfaced.
"No, why do you ask?" Salvatore threw his arms into the air in an exaggerated fashion, as if dealing with a half-drunk Pane was a divine trial of patience.
"Gah! You're unbelievable! Just… Carta!" Terunosuke shrank into his seat, hoping he hadn't incurred the wrath of a mad doctor.

"W-what?"
"Get him by the ankles, we’re gonna throw him into the gulf." The adult lifesaver shot behind Pane and hooked his arms into a full nelson hold, an uncharacteristically immature smile painted on his face. Mean spiritedness aside, Terunosuke was the perfect mood to play a joke on his sore partner. As the half-drunk buffoon struggled against the grip behind his neck, Terunosuke secured his flailing ankles and held on as if his life depended on it.
"I’ve got him!" It was nearly impossible to hold back his laughter as Pane flopped around. From the sound of things, Salvatore was equally challenged at containing his enjoyment.
"To the water!" From the cafe that the trio ate lunch, the Gulf of Naples was a stone’s throw away, or in this case, an idiot’s throw away. Speaking of idiots, Pane tried his hand at talking his way out of his situation.
"Ok ok ok! I’m sorry for fucking up your sunglasses! I’ll buy you a new pair! Come on guys, don’t throw me into the water." As much as he probably hated it, even Pane was laughing now, his flailing having subsided considerably.
He was still going into the water.

As they reached the lip of the gulf, Pane really started sweating bullets. The trio stood at the shoreline and began swinging the helpless man side to side.
"Guys! Stop! Please! I can't swim!" Now he was just saying anything to avoid getting wet.

Despite having all four of his limbs held and out of his control, he was starting to curl up and minimize himself. It was almost as if… oh. It stopped being fun. This was Pane’s fear sign.
"Alright, you convinced me. You’re free to go." He dropped his partner’s ankles and stepped back, Salvatore shot him a disappointed frown.
"Aww… why’d you have to ruin the fun, Carta? I’m sure he's just saying that to cover his ass." Pane struggled free and brushed himself off.
"Thanks man, I knew I could count on you." Pane said, grinning happily and giving a grateful thumbs up. “And… sorry for ruining your sunglasses.” Salvatore wiped the frown away and gave him a pat on the back.
“Glad that you could swallow you pride. Very mature. Just like me.” Salvatore chuckled. Terunosuke joined him, though to a much softer extent.

“Eat a dick.”

The three all shared an easygoing laugh.

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As they all stood up to go their separate ways, Salvatore took a letter out his coat and handed it to Pane.

“What's this?”

“Department leader told me to give it to you. Almost forgot about it.”

“Did you read it?” Terunosuke asked.

“No I didn't read it! I'm not part of the smuggling department. That's mail theft, you know.”

“I know, I know. It was only a joke.” It had not been an attempt at humor, Terunosuke was just that stupid. “Hey Pane, what's the job this time.” Pane had shed his usual happy-go-lucky temperament, leaving only a hollow stare. He didn't let loose a single sound as his eyes darted from word to word.

“Hey… what's wrong?” Terunosuke stood up on his tiptoes to try and see what the letter said, but Pane hid the words from him as he did so. As quickly as it had started, Pane’s shock evaporated away, allowing his normal expression to take over once again.

“Old Asshead wants us to do his chores again, same as usual.” He crumpled up the letter and threw it away before Terunosuke had an opportunity to read it himself.

The trio said their goodbyes properly and parted ways. As they departed, Terunosuke could see Salvatore wearing his sunglasses on top of his head, just like usual. He decided that things in his life weren't going to be so bad.

***

Pane had lied. They weren't off to do menial chores, they were preparing for wet work.

“How do you know this guy?” Terunosuke asked, leaning against a street post as they waited for the car to come pick them up. Pane took a drag on his cigarette and lowered it with a quivering hand.

“He used to be my partner before he got transferred to a different department.” The uncharacteristic, hollow stare had returned to his face. Terunosuke couldn't even begin to wonder what was going through his head. “They're taking too long.” Pane shot his gaze to his watch, the hands indicating that it was a few minutes before 7 PM.

“Calm down. They'll get here soon enough.”

“Shut up.” Terunosuke crossed his arms in effort to appear more serious.

“I mean it. You don't have to worry so much. Things won't be so bad.”

“I said to shut up.” Pane repeated, the agitation in his voice rising. He needed to hear this.

“Come on, you-” Pane grabbed Terunosuke roughly by the collar and brought his so close to his face that the cigarette clenched between his teeth nearly burnt him.

“Carta,” He said calmly and coldly, “shut the fuck up.” A coarse shove killed any attempt at support.

He'd never seen his partner in such a state. The way he pulled on his spiky hair, the uncomfortable stance he kept himself in, and especially his venomous speech patterns. They all pointed to the fact that he would kill to avoid doing this job.

The low rumbling of an engine brought the focus back to reality. A semi-muscular man with close cropped, reddish-brown hair stepped out and called out to Pane.

“Bro! It's been too long!” Pane’s mood instantaneously snapped back into place.
“Bro! Still as ugly as always I see!” The two embraced joyfully then performed some sort of secret handshake that concluded with them linking arms and spinning around at Mach speed. It was a strange sight, but Pane seemed to have let himself be happy again. From inside the car, Terunosuke saw another man with light blonde hair who sat in the driver's seat. He called out to the spinning duo.
“Are we gonna screw around like little kids, or are we going to eat?”
The pair cut their ritual short and took the back row seats, leaving Terunosuke the passenger seat. He took his spot with a side of unfamiliarity and anxiety towards the driver.

As the vehicle took off, the reunited couple ignited in passionate conversation, asking about current tasks, trading humorous stories, and making the most of their time together. They were like children who had been taken to a candy store and were told ‘Have whatever you want’. Terunosuke faced forward and peered at the blonde driver. He hated to admit it, but the man was much more handsome than he was. It wasn't even close. His features were sculpted and elegant, as if a Renaissance sculptor had given his face a blessing. In contrast, Terunosuke’s face was too long across the cheeks and forehead. Additionally, his nose was too wide and his lips were too big. In comparison, this man could probably take up modeling part time.

“So how long have you and Pane been working together?” The handsome man questioned, his voice carrying over the flurry of conversation that rose from the backseat. Even his damn voice was better!

“About a month. I only recently came to Italy.” Terunosuke regretted it as soon as he said it.
“Oh? You're from out of the country? Wouldn't have guessed. Lemme guess. You're from…”
“I'm not Algerian.” Stopped before it even started.
“Oh… crap… uh…” It seemed as though the gears had been rapidly jammed.
“I'd rather not say, if that's alright.”

Terunosuke had to bite his tongue to avoid making a bigger fool of himself.

***

As the four arrived at their destination, Pane pulled his partner aside, the hollow stare silently creeping back to his face.
“Remember what we're here for.” Terunosuke nodded keeping his expression tight and serious.
“When I ask you ‘Are you enjoying yourself?’ that's when we go. Got it?”
“I understand.” If they wanted to survive, they'd need to work together. Agreeing to follow every order was the easiest step in what was sure to be a difficult night.

He had withheld all information on these guys, a step that Terunosuke hadn't understood. Solo work would be suicide; he couldn't do anything without Pane. Whatever the reasoning, he intrusted his life was in his friend’s hands.

“Then let's get going, Carta.” Pane exclaimed, making it seem as though they had been talking about etiquette rather than maneuvers. The purple-clad smuggler darted back to his friend and seamlessly picked up where they had left off. Without any further delays, the four men walked through the grand doorway and into the home that would serve as a battleground.

It was a nice house. Nice probably wasn't doing it justice. From the moment he stepped in, he realized that it was home to a family. Personal trinkets were scattered across tables and counters, practically inviting close investigation. Pane and his former partner followed in and weaved around him like a stream flowing by a stone. They didn't even miss a single conversational beat. He walked beside the blond man, turning his head to talk, but keeping his eyes vigilant for secrets.
“I didn’t get your name.” He extended his hand and forced his eyes away from their reconnaissance to meet the man’s. “I’m Carta.” The man gripped his hand and shook proudly. “Nice to meet you Carta.” A small smile lifted onto his mouth. “I’m Prosciutto.”

A large den sprawled out in front of the entryway. Straight ahead of him, two other people sat on a leather chair and a black sofa respectively. The one in the chair had blue hair that was so curly that it seemed to be attempting to strangle his scalp. He wore red, thick-framed glasses and an annoyed sneer. It seemed as though he was trying to read a book, though the other man did his best to distract him from doing so. The talking man on the black sofa wore an eye veil that covered one eye, yet had a hole cut for the other. His hair was blond and flowing, giving him a very effeminate appearance. Neither one seemed to notice Terunosuke’s presence yet, not that he minded.

To his left, he could see a large dining room with a dinner table, ready to serve those that would draw upon its gifts. Although sadly, it appeared that no food or dishes had been set. The sound of clinking dishes and kitchen instruments rang out to his right. He could spot multiple shadows moving back and forth from behind a closed door. He hoped that food would be served soon; the lunch with Salvatore had been so enjoyable that he’d hardly eaten anything. A staircase that had been passed when he came in sang in his memory. What in the world could be up there? He wanted to cut away and explore, but that would be rude. Pane would probably scold him for being so antisocial.

The effeminate man suddenly noticed his presence and stared at him with piercing eyes, as if his gaze stabbed through his soul. He rose from his comfortable position and sauntered across the room to where Terunosuke was standing, still hanging between the den and entryway despite Prosciutto having left. Terunosuke had to repress the urge to reach into his glove and shoot the man before he got any closer. As he neared, the blue haired man grabbed him by the shoulder and started to growl at him.

"Melone, what did we say about guests?!"

“But, he has such an interesting phenotype. I’ve never seen such a fascinating specimen.”

Specimen?! This Melone guy viewed Terunosuke as a ‘specimen’?! Was he some sort of mad scientist hoping to find the perfect subject for a depraved experiment?

“Dammnit! It doesn’t matter what he looks like, you’ll freak him out if you stare at him like that!”

Even if he was right, the blue hair guy could be pretty loud. “He’s a normal guy.” He broke his staredown to glance at Terunosuke, giving a small nod. “You act like you’ve never seen a- wait! What?! Are you...” With no rhyme or reason, the blue haired man darted uncomfortably close to Terunosuke, examining him with a fine scrutiny. He studied his hair, gave his own brand of Melone’s piercing stare, and circled around to check what secrets his back might hold.

“You’re one to talk, eh, Ghiaccio?” The blond man joked, keeping his distance. Ghiaccio cut his examination short and moved back as suddenly as he had approached.

“Sorry about that. You look like a guy that we try to avoid.” Both of these men were irritating at best and downright unnerving at worst.

“Don’t you agree that his genetic expression is truly incredible? Hair as pure white as snow contrasted against skin like the earth. And his features, very good!”

“Is he usually like this?” Terunosuke asked Ghiaccio, hoping that he could wrangle the psychotic freak back into containment. “I don’t think I can have a meal with someone so deranged.”

“Only with new people, just bear with it for a while.” Great.

“If I had to take a guess,” Melone continued, “I’d say that your lineage is a bit multicultural. Am I correct?” That was bad. This guy could see right through him. If this lunatic zeroed in on him, there was no telling what might happen. Throw him off.

“No, I’m a native Roman.” As always, nobody was fooled by Terunosuke’s lies.

“Don’t lie to me. You’re part Indian, correct?” Melone smiled, Terunosuke clenched his teeth so tight that he thought he was going to shatter them. Who the hell did this guy think he was, bringing
up his family like that? He should stomp his head in for that!
“Go fuck yourself.”
“Oh, I think I struck a nerve there! And another part, somewhere east asian.” God dammit! He was reading him like a… it was too easy for him! Terunosuke tried to pull himself back down, getting pissed off wasn't going to help his situation.
“He’s Japanese too.” Ghiaccio answered.
“Huh?!” How in the hell?!” How can you tell that! I don’t ‘look’ Japanese!” Was this some sort of hidden camera show? Did Pane tell them beforehand?
“You have an accent.” The curly haired jerkoff responded coolly. “Did you not notice? I thought it was obvious. I had a Japanese tutor for a while and you sound just like him.” Terunosuke was done with this. Being read like this pissed him off more than anything.

He gave no goodbye when he withdrew from the blistering examination, nor did he bother to see the reaction of the bastards as he stomped away. Pane was still chatting away with his partner.
“Where’s the restroom in this place?” Terunosuke cut in abruptly. Pane looked up to see his friend in an agitated state, though his own mood didn’t seem disturbed by the sight.
“Upstairs and down the hall. Second to last door on the right” The ugly former partner responded, slightly off put at the suddenness of the inquiry.

Without waiting another heartbeat, Terunosuke made a beeline to the stairs, raced up, and proceeded down the hall as instructed. The bathroom was shabby in comparison to the rest of the home. Clothes, hair products, and other shit crowded the counter and floor. There was a window just above the toilet. He fumbled the lock free and threw the glass open. From his long coat, he produced a pack of cigarettes. Taking one in his left hand, lighting it, and taking a prolonged drag, he finally began to calm down.

As he expelled the calming smoke from his lungs, he thought about the conversation that had just played out. Melone was disturbing, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Ghiaccio was peculiar in his own way; Terunosuke was still baffled at the impromptu examination. All in all, they annoyed him, but they were still tolerable.

Until they brought up his past.

They probably didn't even know the reasons of his knee-jerk reaction and it was going to stay that way. Still. The sudden reminder left a sour taste in his mouth. They had pinpointed his history by just looking and listening. Mom’s Indian side and Dad's Japanese side may as well have been displayed on his face with a neon sign.

He wasn’t too proud about his exit either.

They must think that he was a childish brat who couldn't stand being looked at without running away to his little safe room to tell himself that he was a big boy. That wasn’t like him at all…

Before he could let that thought take root, he flicked the cigarette out the window and pushed himself back into the real world.

As he passed through the hallway, he noticed that the door to someone’s room was halfway open. The light blue door demanded Terunosuke to open it all the way and learn the secrets that it contained. How could he refuse a direct order?

Peeking his head in slowly, he took in the sight around him. Before he knew it, he had begun to sift through the room with a fine-tooth comb. It was clearly someone’s bedroom. The disheveled bed sat against the near wall, several books scattered both around and on it. A desk with a computer and more books stood along the far side of the room. Whoever this room belonged to sure enjoyed
reading. A short distance from the bed, a bookshelf and a display case rose so high that they nearly grazed the ceiling. The bookshelf was practically overflowing with titles, half of which he didn't recognize, and half of which he had at least heard about. The Divine Comedy, The Prince, The Iliad & The Odyssey, No Longer Human, Beyond Good and Evil, and countless others littered the vast shelves, all neatly organized by genre and the author's last name. This person really liked world literature; was this an amateur library? There were contemporary stories as well. The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, Dune, and even I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream found spots on the shelves. What a strange collection. Many of the stories weren't even written in Italian.

Directly adjacent to the bookshelf, a mighty display case stood tall. A dense plexiglass sheet guarded the precious cargo that was contained inside. It even had its own lock. As he drew closer to investigate, he felt his foot step on something. Looking down, he noticed that he had accidentally stepped on a pamphlet. When he reached down to grab it, he was mildly surprised to find that it wasn't written in Italian, but in English, though with the reading material on the bookshelf, it didn't seem out of place. It advertised a travel destination for a place called… Salt Lake City. It seemed to be in the United States, but that only raised more questions than it answered. What the hell was an Italian assassin doing with this? The mysteries just kept piling up.

He carefully set the pamphlet down onto the desk, careful not to make it seem like he'd touched it. Back to the task at hand.

The display case was filled top to bottom with personal memorabilia. Photographs, souvenirs, a certificate of some kind, and a few language textbooks for no apparent reason. The photographs made it obvious that the display case, as well as the room, belonged to Ghiaccio. It would probably be a good idea to leave before someone found him poking around without permission. Yeah, it would be, but Terunosuke opted to continue poking around.

“Who said you could be in here?” The sudden question caused Terunosuke to nearly jump out of his skin. He frantically looked back to see the owner of the room standing in the doorway. Ghiaccio didn't look happy in the slightest. Terunosuke had been trespassing in the innermost sanctum and hadn't even asked permission to enter.

“I… uh…” He had to think of something! Who knew what this guy would do?! “I…” His eyes searched back and met the display case. “... saw the books. I just couldn't help myself.” Ghiaccio’s face softened.

“Oh? Do you read very much?” The intimidation toned down as he leaned against the doorframe while still maintaining an air of hostility.

“I've fallen out of the habit recently, but I used to love reading.” Technically, not a lie.

“Interesting.” Ghiaccio’s tone betrayed his words. “So you’re telling me you saw the bookcase through the opening in the door, thought that walking in would be a good idea, and then went through my things. Do I have that correct?” Shit! He was screwed. Ghiaccio probably thought that he was here to learn secrets or plan sabotage.

“W-well… when you put it like that, anything might be sorta suspicious if you look at it from that angle.” Terunosuke needed an exit. Fast. “I really love books… I just can't keep my hands off of them.”

“So you came in to steal my books?” Fuck, shit, and goddammit. If it was possible to shove one's entire foot into their own mouth, Terunosuke would be the undisputed featherweight of the world. He should see if Passione had a urban construction department; he was already naturally skilled in digging himself into holes.

“Absolutely not!” He gave a bow out of sheer reflex. “I’d never steal another person’s possessions!” He might be terrible at lying, but he could act, and that was all that he needed.

“Uh… alright…” Animosity changed to discomfort. Maybe apologies were a foreign concept to Italians. “So… which books were you looking at?”

“The horror books.” Terunosuke answered instinctively. Still keeping his body at a bowed 90
degree angle.

“Horror, huh?” Ghiaccio drew a title from the shelf and handed it to the young smuggler. “Ever read this one before?” Terunosuke was handed the copy of I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream. It was in English, but that didn't matter.

“I’ve only heard of it, but I know it's really good.” He skimmed through the pages as he silently wished that he could skip out on dinner to read instead.

“If you like that I can recommend a ton of others. What languages can you read?” Terunosuke suppressed a chuckle.

“I know all languages.” He hadn't thought about it for a long time, but that was true. Rohan Kishibe had given him that gift right before he left Japan. He wished he could use it more effectively. He barely used it outside of just talking and reading in Italian. Who knew what the limits of his new ability were?

“Are you trying to be cute or something?” Agitation made an encore appearance. “No one speaks EVERY language.” Ghiaccio was hilariously easy to piss off. All Terunosuke needed to do was act nonchalant and the blue haired man would blow a fuse.

“Well I guess I'm just better than everyone else.” That really did it. In a flash, Ghiaccio snatched the novel from Terunosuke’s hands and pulled a pencil out of his pocket.

“If you can read anything, then what's this say?” He scribbled a word out on the front cover and let him see it.

“I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.” Ghiaccio didn't laugh.

“The word I just wrote, dumbass!” Terunosuke glanced at the scribble. It was in some brand of Arabic that he couldn't quite identify. Didn't stop him understanding what it said.

“It says ‘Shit’.” Too easy. Ghiaccio pulled the book back and wrote another word.

“How about this?” More profanity; how immature.

“Greek, huh…”

“Nh! It's Russian! They don't even look remotely similar!”

“Jackass.”

“The hell did you... oh... yeah. Correct.” This guy was too much fun. He would overreact at the slightest provocation. When he got pissed off he would tighten his grip and stomp his foot on the floor.

“Third time's the charm.” He revealed the gibberish. “Just try and figure it out.” The confusing jumble of characters were connected in a line with different dashes sweeping down to distinguish the difference between them, or maybe it was one big letter. What the hell kind of language was this? Whatever language it actually was, it looked overly complicated and pointlessly hard to use.

“That's, ‘Hello’.”

In an instant, Ghiaccio was on his hands and knees bowing in respect. Terunosuke almost expected him say something like ‘I am not worthy, oh Great One.’

“You have to tell me. What did you do to learn every language on earth?” Looked like Terunosuke passed.

“Oh, you know. Usual stuff. Verb memorization, conjunction rules, stands imbuing information into you and the like. Besides, I don't KNOW every language instantly, I have to actually think about this. It's not something you'd want to be burdened with.” As far as Ghiaccio was concerned, this wasn't a matter that could be shrugged off.

“What stand, who was the user, and where can I find him?!” He was excited before, but now he was getting ravenous.

“He's in Japan.” Terunosuke raised his hands in both protest and uneasiness. “Besides, I think I was the only one to cash in on this deal.” Ghiaccio pulled at the wispy curls of his hair.

“Japan... no way in hell I can afford that. Between expanding my collection and the trip to SLC, I'm drained of personal funds for the foreseeable future.” As fun as it was to watch a frustrated Ghiaccio, the topic hit a little too close to home. The conversation might bleed into a more
personal area. It was time to change it.

“So… tell me about your book collection.”

Ghiaccio’s profile:

Languages Spoken: Italian, French, English, Turkish
Favorite Novel: Babel-17
Favorite Author: Dante Alighire
Least favorite language: Japanese

Terunosuke learned quite a bit from the blue haired man. Apparently, he bore a striking resemblance to an enemy member in Passione; this being Ghiaccio’s reasoning for the inspection earlier. He also learned things about the team. Prosciutto was Catholic and was generally considered to be the best looking of the group. No surprise. Melone used to be a physician and was the one that nobody liked. Formaggio was Pane’s former partner, and was a shitty comedian. As for the three members that Terunosuke hadn't met yet: Pesci was the weak link of the squad, Illuso was the one that thought he was the most intelligent when in reality that award went to Ghiaccio, and Risotto was the leader. All in all, they seemed like a fairly normal, if a bit wacky, group of friends… and Melone was there too.

The conversation had shifted from teammates and partners, to a much more engaging topic: movies, specifically of the horror genre.

“I'm telling you, Carta, slasher flicks have their own special charm. They're supposed to be stupid.” Now it was Terunosuke’s turn to be agitated.
“I don't want to see how many cliches a director can fit into a single piece of trash. If I wanted to see a shitshow, I would've just watched a kung-fu flick or something.” Ghiaccio was reclining on his bed at this point.
“Kung-fu movies aren’t THAT bad...”
“The only ‘slasher’ movie that I would give the time of day to is Halloween.” Terunosuke continued. “But that's due solely because of John Carpenter’s legacy. The way that it-” Suddenly, the door to the room was opened and Prosciutto poked his head in.
“Hey you two, stop being hermits and come downstairs. Dinner is ready.” Without saying any more, the handsome man left the two in silence. How long had they been holed up in this room, just talking about books and movies? Probably too long. Terunosuke stood up from the floor and stretched his sleeping legs. As the two left their shared solitude, Ghiaccio didn't notice him convert a book into paper and sneak it into his pocket. He was a criminal smuggler after all. They continued their opinionated conversation as they descended the stairs and met with everyone else in the dining room.

Pane and Formaggio were already seated and still engaged in intense reminiscing to the point that Terunosuke started to think that it might be some sort of elaborate joke. How much could they actually reminisce about? There had to be a limit eventually… right? He almost felt left out. Aside from those two, Melone was still being a “fucking weirdo”, as Ghiaccio would put it, by staring at Terunosuke from the other side of the dining room. A man with hair that resembled a palm tree, Pesci most likely, scanned over the utensils and diningware that had been set out, correcting any and all errors that had slipped through the cracks.
The guy with the pillowy clothing was messing around with the fireplace, gently stoking the warming flames with a metal poker; if he wasn't mistaken, that was Illuso. Then the only one left…
“Ah, you must be Carta.” A voice said from behind Terunosuke. Had to be Risotto Nero. “Yes sir, that’s me.” He turned around and looked the man in the eyes. “You must- SHIT!” There was an panicked yelp as he saw the pitch-black eyes and blood red irises of the squad’s leader. Risotto seemed disappointed at the reaction. “I… uh… I…” Terunosuke couldn’t think of anything to say; those fucking eyes! Crap, he was being rude. “You don’t need to apologize, that is a common reaction.” Risotto assured, a hand raised to resolve concern. “I realize that my eyes sometimes scare people.” Alright. Terunosuke wasn’t doing well in the maturity department tonight. “It was my fault for not warning you beforehand.” “Y-yeah.” Christ, he should at least try to say something else.

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Meals in Italy were too complicated. In Japan, people sat down, said a thanks, and then ate. That's how it should be done if it were up to Terunosuke.

Despite his qualms, he gladly partook in the authentic cuisine. Apparently, there were stages to a meal that had a set order. Antipasto is what Pesci had called it, and frankly, Japan could learn a thing or two from these people. The world around him melted away as he delighted in the thin slices of smoked salmon. How could something this thin taste so rich? The flavors practically exploded with every bite he took! He should be upset that he wasn't introduced to this earlier. When this mission was-

“Earth to Carta.” An elbow to the ribs slammed him back into reality. “Wha…?” The entire table was staring at him with varying levels of amusement. He wished his face wouldn't burst into flames. “Are you enjoying the meal?” Ghiaccio asked, an obvious grin playing on his face. Pane spoke up next. “I'm not surprised. He's Japanese after all. They don't have Italian cooking out there.” He owned Pane for that one; he couldn't have said it better himself. At least half of the table collectively had the thought of ‘He's Japanese?’ Nothing new. “So how does Italy compare to Japan?” Prosciutto inquired. Terunosuke didn’t know what made him sweat more: the fire, or the spotlight. “Well… there's definitely more space here. Japan is kinda cramped in comparison.” “Hey now,” Pane practically growled. “didn't anyone ever tell you that it was rude to ask someone about their past?” A friend indeed. What would Terunosuke do without him. “My apologies, Carta. I didn’t mean to offend.” He wanted to say that it was fine and to not worry, but doing so might cause him to put his foot in his mouth...

“Yeah.”

Truly a poet for the modern age.

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Once the Antipasto was completed, it was onto the main course. The salmon had only served to whet Terunosuke’s appetite to a fever pitch. Table manners be damned, he was liable to wolf down anything placed in front of his face.

“Do you enjoy liver, Carta?” Risotto asked. “Liver? I've never had it before.” Terunosuke didn’t even know that people ate animal livers. It made as much sense as eating an eye. He was rather excited to see what the meal would be like in spite of his reservations. “Liver?!” Formaggio questioned with fright. “Why liver, Risotto? Is it really necessary?” Terunosuke’s appetite for liver lowered. Was it an acquired taste or something?
“Fegato alla Veneziana is a safe dish. If any problems arise we will take care of them.” That didn’t seem to satisfy the concerned man, but he didn’t raise any further questions. Risotto murmured something to the man sitting beside him... Illuso. Terunosuke couldn't hear what was said, but when he finished, Illuso just gave a small nod and looked behind him. A grand mirror hung over the mantle of the fireplace. It was probably significant to refined tastes, but Terunosuke had zero appreciation for it. Furniture was furniture.

“I hope you're all hungry!” Pesci exclaimed as he brought the first plates out to the proving ground. The smell drove Terunosuke partially insane. How in the hell could food smell so incredible?! It took everything he had to keep his composure steady. Pesci placed the first masterpiece in front of the dark eyed leader and requested the captain to enjoy himself. The second plate went to Illuso and the order was repeated, though with a casual tone. Prosciutto brought out the next two plates as Pesci made his way back to the kitchen. Melone and Ghiaccio received their meals without any additional pleasantries from the handsome blond. After this, Pesci returned with plates for Formaggio and Pane. As he set them before the pair, he repeated his kind mantra. Finally, Prosciutto brought plates for Pesci and himself. The only one to be barred from the wondrous fate of receiving dinner was Terunosuke himself. Did everyone forget he existed? It wouldn't be the first time. Just as he was about to ask for a recount, Pesci appeared from behind his back and presented the aromatic delicacy to him.

Terunosuke was positively ecstatic to finally be able to indulge in the wonders of Italian cooking. However, the meal was not yet started, much to his chagrin. Along with his plate, Pesci had brought a wine bottle to the table. Risotto poured the red wine into his own glass and passed it to his left, and Illuso filled his own glass as well. It continued for the entire table. Pesci to Prosciutto, Prosciutto to Formaggio, Formaggio to Pane, and inevitably, Pane to Terunosuke. What the hell was he supposed to do?! There was no fucking way he was going to drink alcohol, but he couldn't refuse the bottle. He froze in place, wine bottle in hand, racking his brain for any solution that would get him away of this problem.

“Just pour it in the glass.” Pane whispered. “The glass, Carta. Right in front of you.” Pane was too considerate and completely inconsiderate at the same time.

“Ah… I'm too young to drink.” Terunosuke started. Not a lie, good job. “So I shouldn't have this.” He attempted to pass the bottle to Ghiaccio, but the blue haired man rejected his movement.

“I don't know how things operate in Japan, but you're in Italy now, so you'll operate under our rules.” Terunosuke silently pleaded for Pane to bail him out of the confrontation.

“Ghiaccio, what's your favorite color?” The purple haired miracle worker interjected.

“Uh… blue or white... I guess. Why?” What was Pane trying to accomplish by bringing up colors? “Well mine is purple.” He tugged on a purple-colored strand of his hair to emphasize his point.

“So what? Is that supposed to mean something?”

“Yeah. It means that people can have differing opinions about things and there's nothing wrong about it.” Strange way to illustrate the point, but Terunosuke wasn't complaining.

“Alright.” Ghiaccio dropped the subject like a thousand kilogram weight. With a cool swipe, the bottle was taken from Terunosuke’s hands before the smuggler could even register the conversation’s conclusion. The bottle then completed its journey before Risotto.

There was no good reason for it, no reason at all, but Terunosuke was completely and utterly on edge.

His and Pane’s backs were both pointed towards the doorway. Maybe they could make a break for it before anything happened...
Fegato alla Veneziana was fucking incredible.

The liver was gamey and tender at the same time, the onions were sautéed and seasoned to perfection, and the mushrooms could be scraped off to the side without any worry. He should be worried about choking while eating at the rate he was going, but stopping was a fool's errand. There was scarcely enough time between swallows to allow a swift drink of orange juice before he returned to the delicious domain. The others had warned that that drink and food combination wouldn't pair well, but they were wrong, dead wrong. The outside world was an illusion. All that mattered was the food.

“Carta!” Pane called, waving a hand in front of his eyes. “Are you still there? I haven't seen you take a breath yet.” Breathing was for the weak.

“Iss jusss ooo gua.” Shit. Terunosuke swallowed the mouthful and tried that sentence again. “It's just too good. I can't stop until it's gone!” Pane chuckled at this.

“Alright, alright. Don't stop on my account.” As all good things must, the meal was finished in record time. He almost expected a cheering round of applause and a rose ovation. In reality, it was doubtful if anyone noticed him finish.

What now? He didn't know what to do so he figured he might as well wait and see what happened next.

“Melone… where do you come up with these ‘jokes’?” Ghiaccio asked the blond sociopath.

“Do you not enjoy them? I could try a more avant-garde style.”

“That was your NORMAL humor?!” Terunosuke didn’t enjoy having a single similarity between himself and Melone. Provoking reactions was both a tool and a hobby of his; was he a sociopath too? No, that was stupid. Ghiaccio walked away from the conversation in a static sense of the phrase and peered over to the boy sitting to his right. “The mushrooms aren't a garnishing ingredient, you're supposed to eat them.”

“I don't like mushrooms.” The blue haired man shot an icy glare into the very depths of Terunosuke’s soul.

“First you won't accept the Aglianico, now you're telling me you won't eat mushrooms? Goddamn mushrooms?!” His voice twisted into a nasally squawk as he yelled, drawing the attention of others. “Italy not good enough for you?! FUCK! People like you really piss me off!” If it had been simple prodding, the act would’ve been dropped by now, but this was no game. Few things drew Terunosuke’s hatred. Mushrooms topped that list with alcohol close by. Now that Terunosuke thought about it, if he traced things back far enough, mushrooms may have been the origin of every piece of shit that landed on his head for almost a decade. They were even responsible for him being here right now. Fuck mushrooms!

“You can stop now, Ghiaccio.” Risotto said with simplicity, as if he were flicking the lights off. He didn't even look up. And at the leader’s order, Ghiaccio backed away from Terunosuke’s personal space and resumed his meal where he had left off.

They couldn't fool him. Like Melone, they were probing for reactions, testing to see what came out under the conditions forced onto him. The fuckers. Did they think he would break that easy? But… why would they want to know what he would do? Suspicion only went so far. If they wanted to bait an attack to allow for a destructive retaliation, why give any respite whatsoever? He second guessed himself, third guessed himself, and eventually came to the conclusion that it was just Ghiaccio being a maniac.

“Are you done eating?” Pane whispered to his friend, hiding the conversation from the others.

“No. I was going to eat the plate, did you want a bite?”

“Jeez, no need for sarcasm.” From the corner of his eye, Terunosuke noticed Risotto gesture
towards him.
“Carta. Would you pass the Aglianico to me?” Terunosuke saw that the wine bottle was halfway between him and Ghiaccio, and the icy hothead was occupied by his warm conversation with Melone.
“Sure. Yeah.” He grasped the bottle and went to hand it over, but Pane snatched it away before he could finish his task.
“Sorry, but I need a refill.” Pane lied. His glass wasn't even half empty. Sensing this on his own, Pane put his mouth to the cup and chugged down the remaining wine. Terunosuke was no expert, but he was positive that that was looked down upon in most social circles. Nevertheless, Pane tipped the neck of the bottle to the lip of the glass and returned to where he had started. Perhaps Pane’s stand should be called Enigma; what the hell was that all about? Once he was finished, he handed the bottle over to Risotto, who was about as perplexed as Terunosuke.
“Yes… thank you.” The leader took the bottle and filled up his glass like Pane had and took a sip.

Terunosuke shifted in his seat. The fireplace made things heavy and uncomfortable. He considered taking his long coat off, but he would just feel too exposed. Pane leaned close to him.
“Are you enjoying yourself?” He asked calmly.

And that was it. It was time to fulfill the duty that they had come for: to bring death to assassins. He took a deep breath and nodded.

“Let’s go.” In the blink of an eye, a muffled scream came from Risotto’s direction, instantly drawing the attention of everyone in the room. A blue and purple Anthrax bur the size of a golf ball pierced into his lips and prevented him from even opening his mouth. While the rest of the table was distracted, Pane grabbed Terunosuke’s glass of orange juice and emptied the contents onto his partner and did the same to himself with his own wine. Without explaining his actions, he grabbed Terunosuke by the collar and dragged him a few meters away from the table.

“Take Yuki out of your glove.” Pane commanded. Terunosuke obeyed, readying his personal Beretta. “Point it at Prosciutto.” His hands aimed at the startled blond, the sleeves of his long coat sticking uncomfortably to his arms. From his kneeled viewpoint, it looked like Pane was aiming his dual Berettas at Ghiaccio and Risotto.

By now, the focus had shifted from Risotto to the two guys brandishing guns.

“That wine doesn’t taste too good now, does it?” Prosciutto glared daggers at Terunosuke. “There was a reason for the little wine ceremony I did just then.” Pane continued. “I couldn’t walk up and touch you directly, nor could I throw a bur at you, so I had to get creative.” Risotto was fidgeting painfully at the needles lodged in his skin. Maybe he was wondering if ripping it off would solve his problem. “When you requested the bottle from Carta, I got a little idea. I didn’t down that glass of wine for fun, no, I did it to place a bur on the lip of the glass.” The lip of the glass… that meant… “And when I poured my refill, the bur hitched a ride on the neck of the bottle, right where you placed the bottle to fill your own glass!” Pane was a genius! “So when your lips met the glass, I remotely expanded the size of the bur to what it is now.” The purple-clad mastermind was incredible! Terunosuke was floored by his intelligence.

“What about the drinks? Why spill them on ourselves? What’s the idea there?” Terunosuke asked, curious of his brilliant friend's plans that not even his intellect could decipher.

“That fireplace is turned up way higher than normal.” Pane answered, pointing to the heavy flames. “Prosciutto could use his stand, Grateful Dead, to turn us into saggy geezers. The hotter you are, the worse things get, the drinks help to cool us down.” Pane was ten chess moves ahead of everyone in the room, it wasn't even close.

The assassins were right where the pair wanted them. Nothing could stop the two friends… except for another friend.
“Bro…” Formaggio asked, doubting the sight in front of him. “what are you doing?” The words cut deep. If Terunosuke felt hurt by the question that wasn't even directed towards him, then what would Pane be feeling? Without turning his head, he glanced at his partner. His face had taken on a foreign, stone-cold appearance that Terunosuke knew was a facade.

“Formaggio… if you leave now you won’t get hurt.” His eyes stayed planted on Ghiaccio. “If not…” His voice trailed off without finishing. Risotto started to shake; the venom was kicking in. Shit, this wasn’t good. If he got close to dying, the other members would get desperate and try something dangerous. The entire room could go to hell in a matter of seconds. A second passed, then another. It felt as though an inactive eternity passed.

“Pane. What do I do? I need an answer here.” Maybe it was the tension, but Terunosuke was able to keep the anxiety from polluting his voice.

“You’ve got what you need.” Pane responded. His confidence was completely gone.

“What?! What does that mean?!” Shit! He was starting to panic!

“Carta… I… I…” Pane turned his head to meet Terunosuke’s eyes. He was starting to minimize himself; curling up slightly, trying to look smaller than he was. He was scared out of his wits.

In the split second that the two were distracted, the opposing side seized the opportunity.

A flash of motion in the corner of his eye snapped Terunosuke’s focus back to the mission. The grand mirror that hung over the mantle flew at Risotto. Before it crashed into him, Illuso wrapped his arms around the leader and the pair disappeared into the glass.

The gunslingers gasped in unison, neither one was prepared for that. They were gone. Completely gone. One second they were there and the next… nothing. Terunosuke could feel one eye starting to squeeze shut. There was nothing he could do to stop it. His aim was shaking like a piece of paper in a typhoon.

“Pane… what now?! What do we do?!” His shot his gaze to Ghiaccio who stood just meters away, leaning nonchalantly on the table with an annoyed look on his face. He wasn't scared in the slightest. What was going to happen next?!

Terunosuke’s question was answered by Risotto and Illuso climbing out of the ground. The Anthrax bur on Risotto’s mouth was nowhere to be found.

“Shit!” Pane exclaimed. How the hell did that happen?! What did they just do?!

Run, Run, RUN! Terunosuke tried to will himself to move, but it was like his limbs were bolted to the ground. He couldn’t do a thing except shake.

“Formaggio,” Risotto called to his subordinate. “slice his throat.”

“Ri-Risotto! He's… I can’t…” Formaggio was cut down the middle.

“So be it.” What was Risotto going to do? Dammit! Pane should have told him what the assassins could do!

From behind the intimidating monster named Risotto, a blur of motion darted at Terunosuke. He recognized it as the metal poker that Illuso was using before. It was about to skewer him. Enigma rushed out and converted the projectile to paper with ease. Maybe they could beat these assassins after all! That thought took a backseat as another came from the side, coming straight for his head.

There wasn’t enough time to convert it. He had to dodge!

Terunosuke placed his foot forward and barreled straight. Then his foot met ice. He couldn’t stay up. Instead of rushing to safety, he began to fall towards the table, right to where the assassins awaited like starving lions. But he never hit the table.

Pane reached forward, grabbed him by the collar, and threw him towards the doorway where it was
safe. In doing so, the purple-clad gunslinger swung himself around and into danger, his back completely exposed.

Terunosuke hit the ground and saw his partner in stunned, speechless fear. The dual Berettas he held rose up from his hands and ejected their magazines and chambered bullets. “Out of ammo.” Pane whispered.

A sickening crunch pierced through the room.

Pane tried to scream out, but not a sound escaped. He took a fragile step towards the doorway, towards safety, but slipped on the iced ground and fell forward.

A giant screw was impaled in his back. Terunosuke could identify the twisted wreckage of anatomy that lay before him. Shredded ligaments, a purple waistcoat torn into confetti, and a mangled spine split in two.

There were footsteps in front of him. “You aren't the only one who can set a trap.” It was Risotto’s voice. “You were clever enough to see through Prosciutto’s fireplace trick, I'll give you that much. But you weren't clever enough to understand why liver was served.” The meal? What did they do? “Liver has one of the highest levels of iron amongst foods. Once you entered my range, I could use the meal in your stomach to end confrontation with ease.” Terunosuke didn’t understand in the slightest. The tricks, the stands, he was completely in the dark.

Risotto was standing over them now. Terunosuke still couldn't move. There was nothing keeping him attached to the ground, but all he could do was stare at the massive protrusion jutting out of Pane’s back.

“Risotto!” That was Formaggio’s voice. “You don’t need to kill them! It won't solve anything!” The two men looked at one another, desperation and distaste.

“Leave.” Risotto turned his back and walked away. Pane would shoot him… PANE! His partner laid sprawled out against the floor, the screw still embedded in his back. Without hesitation, Enigma converted the screw to paper and tossed it away. Big mistake. Pane had held back on crying out in pain despite being impaled, but now the floodgates were opened. His whole body above the waist rattled grotesquely, every centimeter seizing violently. The spinal wound that had been plugged up began to release blood like a firehose. If this kept up, he was dead.

“Carta!” Pane reached up frantically and held tight to Terunosuke’s shirt. “I need Salvatore! Help!” How? HOW?! He couldn't be carried or dragged, Terunosuke wasn't strong enough, and he would bleed even more if he tried.

“I… how Pane?!”

“Turn me into paper.”

The words rolled off of his tongue so easily, but he didn't understand a single thing. Paper conversion was for THINGS, not people, let alone friends. But what else was there that he could do?

Pane was right as always. Terunosuke could do this, he knew how Pane reacted when he got scared. In a flash, Pane’s ripped skin became paper and his entire body leapt into the safety that Enigma provided.

“Don’t let him die.” Formaggio commanded. The two stared across at each other in silence. He owed the man his life.

“I won't.” Terunosuke gave a swift nod.
He darted for the exit, his tail between his legs. Salvatore could solve this, he could solve anything.

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“Carta? What brings you here? Did you already complete that mission?” The doctor let him in his office and casually took a seat.

“No. Pane’s injured bad. He needs help.” Terunosuke replied between gasps for air.

“Pane? Where is he?” The tone of his voice shifting into gear. Terunosuke reached into his pocket and retrieved the folded page that secured his partner. As long as he was in this page, he would be safe and wouldn’t bleed out.

“He got impaled in the back. It’s gonna be bad when I open this.” Salvatore looked at the floor and murmured something to himself. He shot out of his chair and left the room. There was a frantic rattle from beyond the hallway for a few minutes.

“Carta! Come over here!” Terunosuke obeyed and went into the hallway and saw Salvatore motioning for him to come to the operating room at the end of the hall. Salvatore was already dressed in full surgeon’s garb, had set up an array of strange surgery tools, and even had an assistant ready and waiting. “Go ahead and let him out.” Terunosuke laid the paper down on the operating table and gently unfolded it, letting his friend come out safely.

The gaping hole was worse in direct light. Much worse. It was a challenge to not break down in complete panic right then and there.

“Jesus… let’s get going.” Salvatore picked up an instrument, but before he could do anything, Pane’s hand shot forward and took hold of Terunosuke’s wrist.

“Carta… if I die… I want you to know… my real name…” Pane forced himself through every syllable. “My name is Sergio.” Oh yeah, ‘Pane’ was just a codename used to protect his true identity. If someone trusted him enough to show his true self, Terunosuke would return the favor, no questions asked.

“Sergio, I’m Terunosuke.” Pane… Sergio smiled and winced.

“Nice name. Terunosuke… I’m glad… we didn’t… win. Thanks… for saving me.”

“Sorry to break this up, but you need to go.” Salvatore insisted. Sergio let go of Terunosuke’s hand as he exited the room. The doors closed the second he left.

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Waiting was torture. He couldn’t help, couldn’t see, couldn’t ask how things were going, nothing. All he could do was sit and smoke. Hell, he would accept someone coming to reprimand him for smoking in a doctor’s clinic if it meant finding out how things were going. As soon as he burned through one cigarette, he would snub it out, pick out a fresh one from his packet, and light that one. It didn’t help, didn’t even take the edge off.

Pane/Sergio had wanted to lose. Was it because of Formaggio? Now that he thought about it, the clues had been there before. Withholding vital information like that would only end in disaster… and it had. He had understood what the risks were and still choose to lose on purpose, just for the sake of his old partner. Terunosuke hoped that his friend would pull through.

“Carta.” Terunosuke’s eyes jerked to attention, ready to take the news. Sadly, it was just the department leader. The tall, bald man stood in the front doorway of the clinic with his arms crossed. “Neither one of you answered the apartment phone so I figured you had to be here or still on the mission.” What a damn genius he was. “How did it go?” Terunosuke rubbed his forehead.

“Complete failure. We didn't take out a single guy.” The department leader’s face scrunched up in anger.

“Dammit! If you would have taken those guys out, I would’ve been promoted for sure! I would’ve
been the guy who took out a Scheggia member and the entirety of La Squadra back to back! So close!" Terunosuke didn’t like how his boss was trying to cash in on him committing murder, but he didn't care enough to yell at him.

“Did you want to talk to me or something?”
“Oh… yes.” The man snapped back to focus. “Due to recent activities, the smuggling department will be having a meeting. Every member who is not on assignment or on medical leave must attend. The meeting is at 4PM sharp, tomorrow afternoon. We will meet at Piazza Dante. Do I make myself clear?” It was clear that he was an annoying asshole.

“Yes sir.” Satisfied, the cheerful narcissist exited Salvatore’s office and marched out into the world, likely going off to inform other members.

Some leader he was. He hadn’t even asked how Pane was.

***

It was nearly midnight when the assistant came out to deliver the news.

“Teruno- err… I mean… Carta.” Terunosuke fidgeted anxiously. What was this guy about to tell him? “Pane is going to live.”

The weight of the world rolled off his shoulders. Everything would be fine.

“But he suffered a debilitating amount of spinal damage. Salvatore’s Under My Skin has the ability to speed up recovery, but a spine in the condition is completely different from a simple broken bone.”

“So… how long will he be out of commission?”

“It's hard to give an accurate timetable.” The assistant’s eyes were obscured by his surgical clothing, though slight tufts of inky black hair poked through. “Could be months, could be years. All we know for sure is that it won't be a quick process.” Months or years? Jesus. Just the thought was completely alien. How would that change things? Would he still be the same friend he knew?

“He's still under sedation. I’d suggest going home and getting some sleep, sitting here won't do much good for anybody. And you have a meeting tomorrow, right?” The assistant was right, he could already feel his eyelids drooping, asking him to lie down and take a rest.

“Yeah… and uh… thanks.” He put his hand out for a handshake, but the assistant simply stared at him uncomfortably until he pulled it back. It was getting late, social conventions didn’t matter anymore.

As he made his way home and up the stairs, he thought about how the day to day would be altered if Pane wouldn't be able to walk. Their apartment was on the third floor and the complex didn't have an elevator. He turned the key in the lock and went straight to his room. Would they have to change housing? What was going to happen?

Terunosuke had no clue.

He laid out on his bed and ran his fingers through his hair. The department leader said that tomorrow's meeting was at 4 PM, sharp, but he didn't have a clock in his room. It would be pretty ridiculous if he overslept that far into the day… but still. Fortunately, he remembered that he did have a watch, though it wasn't quite correct to call it HIS watch.

He went over to the dresser where his family picture sat. He pulled out the drawer and dug around until he found the second memento he had brought from Japan: his father’s old watch.

The leather strap was brown and worn down in some places. Even after so much time had passed, the hands ticked by in working order. Terunosuke pulled off Pane’s gun glove from his right hand and looped the timekeeper around his wrist. It was a little loose, but it worked well and looked
good, so he didn't mind.

Despite what had happened, Terunosuke still felt a sliver of hope. The future wouldn’t be SO bad.

***

Sunlight filtered through the curtains, shining on his eyes. He rolled around and scratched his chest. What time was it? It was an overly difficult task to unravel from the bundle of sheets and blankets he had encased himself with, but he eventually conquered the ensnaring fabric and pulled his right arm out. The tiny hands were blurry with freshly awoken eyes. Still, he made out the time.

3:46 PM.

What… WHAT?! SHIT! That couldn’t be right. He checked again.

3:47 PM.

How was this happening?! This was a bad dream in real life!

He hopped out of bed, threw on his shirt and long coat, slipped his shoes on, and bolted out the door. Food could wait. His legs pumped at a wild, uneven pace as he tried to cook up an excuse for being late. ‘Sorry, my clock failed for 7 hours.’ or maybe ‘There was an enemy stand user.’ That might work.

***

It took just under 20 minutes to make it to Piazza Dante.

4:04 PM.

The stone statue of Dante Alighire guaranteed the square was correct… and yet… not a single member was around. Was the department leader being literal when he said 4 PM sharp. Was the meeting over already?! No. They couldn't have a meeting in 4 minutes and clear out instantly, it wasn't possible. They hadn't started yet. Something about being fashionably late.

Terunosuke alleviated his legs on an open bench. He'd stay for a while and see how things turned out. He couldn’t wander off, there weren't many people around, and he was getting kinda hungry.

Suddenly, he remembered that he had a stolen book hidden away from last night's escapades with Ghiaccio. The blue haired assassin had so many books, he wouldn’t miss just one. Terunosuke had always wanted to read I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream, but from his long coat, he brought out an entirely different book. Instead, a book titled Dreamsnake emerged. Enigma had grabbed the wrong book. Stupid stand.

4:07 PM.

Dreamsnake would suffice. He settled into the blown-out world that the book was set in. The story dealt with a woman who used magical snakes and healed people. Terunosuke scoffed at the concept, though if his past self could see what his life was now, he'd probably laugh. Nevertheless, he was completely engrossed in the blink of an eye.

In no time at all, the world passed by like a speeding bullet. He forced his eyes off of the pages for a brief second to check the time.

5:12 PM.
He mentally kicked himself. He really had missed the meeting. Maybe it had been cancelled or rescheduled and just slept through the notification. No one to blame but himself.

He would just be waiting around for nothing. His legs had since recovered from his mad dash and were fit to walk on again.

***

5:53 PM

He shuffled back into the apartment with a gnawing stomach. A buttered roll made for an improvised breakfast, or would it be lunch at this point? The novel beckoned him to continue reading, but running and walking multiple kilometers in less than two hours left him ready to fall back asleep. The book was laid on the dresser and Terunosuke laid on his bed, not even bothering to pull off his shirt. Damn, if a few kilometers wore him out, then he was really out of shape. It should probably bother him… but it really didn’t.

***

There were voices from down on the street; sounded like a crowd. They were loud enough to rouse him from his nap, but not enough to keep him awake. If they needed him, they would just come get him.

He went back to sleep.

***

The telephone was ringing. Terunosuke’s groggy mind could process that without needing to open his eyes. Whatever it was, it could wait. There was an answering machine. Whoever was calling could use that.

***

There was a banging on the apartment door.

Terunosuke forced himself to sit up and rub the sand from his eyes. Must be whoever was calling. The sun had moved on from shining in his face, but was still high enough to light up the sky. He trudged out of his room and went to the front door, the person still continuing their assault on the door. Terunosuke was silently appreciative that his past self was too lazy to take his clothes off completely to nap, it made things so much more convenient. With the long coat draped on his shoulders Terunosuke opened the door to see a very frightened Salvatore.

“Terunosuke! You're alright!” The doctor practically screamed.

“Yeah… of course.”

“Did anyone else make it out?” Make it out? Make it out of what?

“Salvatore… what are you talking about? Is Pane doing well?” Changing the subject did nothing to help.

“You don’t even know what happened, do you?” Salvatore went wide-eyed with surprise. It was subtle, but Terunosuke could see the tears forming at the edge of his eyes.

“Something happened?” Wait… NO! “Pane! How is he?!”

“Pane is fine.” Salvatore waved his hand dismissively. “But a lot of people are dead.” The mood relieved and tightened itself in a split second.

“People? Ghh! Stop being so dodgy and just tell me what happened Dammit!” He hadn't meant to snap like that, but he needed answers.

“The smuggling department… they're all dead.”
It didn't seem real. Like a dream that he could easily tell was fake, but couldn't shake himself out of. They were all dead? All of them? That couldn't be right.

“Salvatore… you're serious… h-how… how'd they all die at once?”
“The department had a meeting this afternoon. From what I've seen, members from Scheggia attacked the group attacked slaughtered them all.”
“The meeting… wait, no. The meeting didn't happen today. It was cancelled.”
“What are you talking about? The meeting wasn't cancelled. It was scheduled and started at 4 PM sharp.” That was wrong.
“But I was there a 4! I even started wearing this watch so I wouldn't be late.” He peered at it to prove how false Salvatore’s story was.

12:25 AM.

Terunosuke had slept for… no… that was wrong. It couldn't be past midnight, the sun was still out.
“The watch.” He stared intensely at his father's watch as all the pieces of the puzzle clicked into place. “It's fast! Oh! That's right!” Terunosuke had completely forgotten. If the watch was Japanese, then that would mean… “It's set to Japanese standard time!”

Salvatore looked shocked once again, but the look faded into bittersweetness.
“That watch saved your life. If it was set to Italian time, you wouldn't be here right now.”

His dad, even though he had passed away, had protected him.

The thought brought a happy tear to his eye. Then, his eyes started to water. Soon enough, he was crying right in front of his friend. Rather than make fun of him, Salvatore wrapped his arms around the crying boy and pulled him into a hug and they happily cried together.

***

“Are you ready to go?” Salvatore asked. The doctor patted him, Terunosuke’s paper form secured him in the surgeon’s coat pocket. A crescent moon streaked outside the window.
“Yeah, all set.” He'd been on small charter flights many times in the last month, though never as luggage. “How's Sicily in December?”
“Warmer than Naples. Hell, it's always great there.” Salvatore gave him another pat.

It wasn't ideal, but it was the only guarantee for safety. If Scheggia found him, he wouldn't survive; hiding was best for everyone. Pane would heal, Passione and Scheggia would duke it out, and he would hide himself away in Sicily. “Any idea on how long I'll be there?”
“Until you're given the all clear to return. So enjoy yourself while you can.”
“Are you going to stay there with me?” The whispering paper hoped that his friend would stick around to keep him company.
“Sorry. If I do that Scheggia will be suspicious and track us both down. No dice.” Terunosuke held back a rueful sigh. “I'm sure you'll make friends with the locals though.”

As Salvatore settled into his seat, Terunosuke started to daydream. Sicily would be relaxing at best and mind-numbingly boring at worst. Things wouldn't be so bad.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We're here.” Salvatore finally said, the car concluding its journey in front of a secluded house. Terunosuke, who had been dozing off nearly the entire ride, gladly welcomed the opportunity to stand up, pop his stiff joints, and inhale a lungful of fresh countryside air.

“Thought I would spend the rest of my life in that thing.” Almost an entire day spent in transit left him with an aching desire to lie down and sleep until the world ended.

The sun had just began to set on the horizon, painting the sky with a warm, comforting glow. “Hell of a view, isn’t it?” The doctor asked. With Sicily being his birthplace, he would know. Standing there, watching the peaceful backdrop, the real world seemed so distant and far away, he thought it might stop existing altogether.

“It's pretty crazy when you think about it.” Terunosuke started. “If I hadn't met Pane when I first arrived in Italy, I'd probably be working some quiet office job right now. You wouldn't have to worry about keeping me out of harm's way.” He notably left out the concern of being one of only two people left alive from the smuggling department.

“Terunosuke.” Salvatore laid his hand on the worried boy’s shoulder. “It's best not to think like that. Whether we like it or not, the life we have now is the one that we've chosen. We just have to accept things for what they are. The only thing we can change is the future.” Terunosuke wished there was something, anything, that he could do to change things, but the past was gone. Salvatore was right.

“You're right. Anyway, I should unload my things before I forget.” Best not to dwell on such a serious topic.

There wasn't much to unload. A bag or two, a case of spare clothes that Salvatore graciously provided, and various loose items. Once everything was squared away, Terunosuke took a look around the place.

It was old, probably 30 years at least. There was a small television with a built-in VCR, a couch, two bedrooms, a cabinet filled with peculiar board games, and a backyard that stretched out for a kilometer. Cobwebs marred the walls and dust was plentiful on every surface. Did Passione own this? It felt a bit too lived in for that.

“What's the story behind this place?” Terunosuke inquired. “This place…” Salvatore looked around. “This used to be my family's summer house when I was a kid.” The doctor paced up and down the creaky wooden floor as if he was reenacting his childhood. He ran his hand along the wall while he paced, feeling the age and memories, but also dirtying his hand with dust and dirt. “Lot's of good times here…” His head hung down as he reminisced. Eventually, the energy that usually followed him returned and he motioned towards the game cabinet. “Time to make some new memories. Wanna play some chess?”

Noce was a pitiful opponent. Wherever Cielo moved, Noce would practically throw pieces at him, leading him to become frustrated, which would lead him to act more impulsively, which would lose him pieces, which would cause him to become frustrated even more, and so on and so forth. “Slow down already.” The calculating strategist offered carefully, taking care to not make his suggestion sound like a taunt.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” The green-haired man moved his queen to take Cielo’s bishop. A decent
move in isolation, but failed to account for the pawn standing in opportune position to take her. Once again: pitiful. “Damn it!” Noce tugged on his bushy sideburn, likely acknowledging that he was all but done for. “I could go for a… hmm.” He swiftly moved his king to take a nearby rook, ignoring the other bishop and knight that were set to commit regicide. A simple L-shaped maneuver ended the disappointing match.

“Checkmate.” Cielo stated softly.

“Huh?!“ Noce rapidly scanned the board for any sort of escape route, but found nothing. He flicked over his king, officially admitting defeat. “How long did that game last?” Cielo glanced over at the wall clock.

“8 minutes.”

“Phew. At least I lasted longer this time.” Cielo shook his head.

“Let’s go again. Try to get more than 3 of my pieces this time.” Noce muttered an insult under his breath and charged headlong into failure.

***

It had been a day or two since Salvatore went back to Naples and Terunosuke was in the full grip of boredom. The weather was practically that of spring, but he knew it was late December. Sicily was in another world.

Even though the weather was nice, he didn’t have anything to do. Everyone was a stranger and he didn't know of any local attractions.

After playing 100 consecutive rounds of Solitaire, he was well and truly out of things to do. “I'll go walk to the nearest town. I should get out.” He announced to the empty homestead.

Salvatore had informed him that there was a town within walking distance of the house. All he had to do was turn left at the end of the path, walk a few minutes, and he’d be surrounded by country souls.

The road leading up to his temporary house was windy and steep, numerous pitfalls threatened to swallow him whole. When he made it to the end, he realized that he didn't really want to do anything within the ballpark of meeting people. Deciding against forcing himself to socialize, he marched back up the path, nearly slipping off the sharp side when his attention wandered for a split second. Returning to the top gave him the familiar feeling of boredom and apathy. There was another realization: almost falling off the path was more exciting than he'd expected.

Making sure no one was around to see him, he walked along the cliffed edge like a tightrope walker. It reminded him of walking on street curbs. If he fell off, it would be a 1000 meter drop to the valley below. Of course, it was actually less than 1, but it was important to use one's imagination, even as a teenager. He continued his balancing act until he made it to the end of his road. There was nothing to his right and nothing to his left, save for paved road. So he turned back and balance-walked back up his road. Hours flew by as he walked up and down. It wasn't particularly fun or interesting, but there was an enjoyment, a childlike enjoyment, that he got from it, so he continued on. He even brought out Enigma to walk behind him, though he was floating rather than balancing.

After a while, the pointless activity lost its fun in the same way gum loses its flavor. His foot slipped off the edge and his boot crashed down to the ground, slapping messily against a mud puddle. The sludge splashed up and dirtied his pants, shirt, and most importantly, his white long coat. His right foot was now submerged in mud as well. He glanced at his watch for the time and found that he had been playing around for more than 3 hours; well into the afternoon.

With his clothes soiled and his body coated in sweat, he decided to bathe.
Noce hated showering at the safehouse. Not because the water pressure was weak or anything, it was just cold.

Noce hated the cold.

He cleaned himself quickly, taking time only to shampoo his sideburns. After 3 minutes of freezing, he hopped out as a wet and shivering mess. Once he wrapped himself in 3 or 4 heated towels, however, his mood improved.

December weather sucked. December showers with a broken water heater sucked even more. At a normal time, a repairman could be called down and would have the problem fixed in the blink of an eye. Too bad he was in hiding at the moment, it put a gigantic damper on his day-to-day life.

He'd probably have to do it himself, or get Cielo to do it for him, or maybe he'd just kick the pipes until they worked properly again. So many options, so little time.

He sat on the floor, baking in the warmth of the towels and weighed his choices.

“Skibitty-bop bee. Skibitty doo.” Terunosuke sang, drying himself off. “La-la-la. Li-le-lo.” His clothes were stained pretty badly, he couldn't wear them even after he washed them multiple times. This left him in a clothless state, though he didn't really mind; there was no one around to see him walk around stark naked. Salvatore would have to extract the mud with his stand, but when would they see one another again? Who knew. “I wanna fly like a bird in the sky. Up up up… real high!” If voices could kill, he'd be a pacifist.

To avoid breaking any eardrums, he hiked off to bed. Talk about a wasted day.

As he tied himself up in the bedsheets, he thought about how long he would stay in this place. He also thought about how uncomfortable it felt to sleep in shaggy sheets while naked. Not a good feeling.

If it was late December, then it should probably take a month or so for things in Naples to cool off. Late January, early February.

What was a month from today? January… hell, what day was today? If the day of departure had been the such and such day of January… and it had been a day or two since then… so… today had been the 25th.

January 25th. He'd probably return at that day. Alrighty then.

Terunosuke turned over and closed his eyes. His freshly tested mind went over everything again for confirmation. Today, December 25th plus a month…

Wait… December 25th…

He sat up and shot his eyes open.

It had been Christmas; the day that he spent alone was Christmas.

He had wasted Christmas doing pointless, childish bullshit.

How fucking pathetic.
The sun sneered into Terunosuke’s eyes. He rolled over, but the room was too bright to ignore. The sheets itched. His stomach growled. The bed was getting hot. He'd spent Christmas alone like a revolting freak.

Goddammit.

He tore the irritating fabric off and fell out of bed. Still completely naked, he consulted the bag that Salvatore had left for him. Inside was a brand new ensemble that he could use while his regular outfit was unwearable. It wasn't ideal, but very few things in his life went ideally anymore.

The ensemble consisted of a tan newsboy’s cap, a white long-sleeved shirt, a pair of gray slacks with brown suspenders attached, and a pair of dark brown shoes. Did any of this match? He knew next to nothing about high fashion, so maybe it was a seasonal look. If nothing else, it would help him blend in. It even seemed as though the clothes had actually been lived in. The pants had sewn on patches of cloth that covered up tears and holes, the shirt was slightly discolored, and there was dried dirt on the bottom of the shoes. It was all very quaint, he had to admit.

After dressing, there was still nothing to spend his time on.

9:02 AM

The prospect of socializing still lingered over him like a ghost. If anything, it would provide a change of scenery.

It couldn't hurt to try.

The path that he'd walked up and down yesterday was still fresh with his footprints. It would be fine if he relaxed for one more day, wouldn't it? No. If he did that, he'd end up as a hermit.

The nearest town was to the left. He forced his feet to move in that direction. One foot stepped in front of the other as he inched his way from safety and shoved himself toward uncertainty. It wouldn't be so bad. As he trekked along at a snail's pace, he watched his feet march forward. If he didn't stay alert, they were liable to reverse direction and return to isolation.

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Sicily was much warmer than Naples. Too warm. Terunosuke had been accustomed to normal December weather; chilly winds, snow flurries, freezing rains and the like. Here, it was practically summer, and it was brutal. Yesterday had been bearable, but today pushed his limits too far. The sweat began to well up against his back and neck, forming a salty lake. It was a good thing that he could use his hat like a fan, he might burst into flames otherwise.

Eventually, he made it to the village. He greeted the small community with a doubled over pant. He needed to quit smoking. Without hesitation, he headed straight for the nearest source of water. Fortunately, he didn't need to search far. A café greeted him with open arms.

Once he was situated and served, he took to people watching. Though there weren't many people around, the village kept him mildly entertained as he let the heat escape. A boy with a terrible looking haircut trudged by next to his mother, an embarrassed look frozen onto his face as he covered his head with his arms and hands. A couple that both appeared to be in their 30's passed by, hand in hand. The man looked humorous with red, bushy eyebrows that were unnaturally large, while the woman looked even sillier with light brown hair that swept up into a spiral and formed two horn-like spikes on either side of her head. Sicilians were just like Italians: they both had
insane fashion choices.

As he watched the circus walk by, a small dog came up to him and started to sniff at him. Terunosuke generally didn't like animals, but dogs and gerbils were the exception. It was a small breed, not even one meter from head to tail. Its short fur was white with light brown spots that were scattered all across its body. It was someone's pet, as evidenced by the blue collar around its neck; the tag had the word “Prince” etched into it. It was probably a boy with a name like that. He scratched behind the panting dog's ear and flapped his hat in his direction, providing the canine with a nice breeze.

“Good boy.”

“There it is!” A voice shouted from in front of him. Terunosuke jumped at the sudden sound and looked up to see a young boy power walking towards him. “Give me back my hat.” Terunosuke was confused to say the least. The hat/fan that he was currently wielding wasn't stolen. The child was mistaken.

“Listen here, kid.” He countered with the most intimidating tone he could muster. “This is my hat. You've got it all wrong.” The boy standing before him was 9 or 10 by his estimation. His hair went down to his ears, oddly long for a boy his age. Its color was a mix between brown and red with a heavier emphasis on brown. His facial features were small and smooth, like he was wearing makeup. He was wearing a white undershirt and red overalls so worn down that they were a step away from being pink. What a stupid looking brat.

***

“Honey, is it really necessary for us to hide along the side of the building like this?”

“Of course, darling. If we were hiding BEHIND the café, we wouldn't be able to see them.”

Two heads poked around the corner of the café, one head possessing bushy eyebrows, and the other possessing horn-like hair.

“Did we raise our child well enough for this?”

“Darling, you're over thinking this. It's about watching the progress that we've made as parents. Just watch, that young man will understand what is going on and will end the argument in no time.”

Satisfied with his point, the couple turned back to see the young child become physically violent.

“Honey…” With a resigned sigh, the husband admitted defeat.

“I know, I know. Let's go get her.”

***

“Don't call me a kid! I'm not a kid anymore! I'm almost 12 years old!” Terunosuke wished that Pane was here to bail him out, he would effortlessly solve the situation in no time. As he prepared to retort, a hand grabbed his shoulder and he jerked back reflexively. The hand belonged to the eyebrow man that had walked by with his wife earlier, and due to Terunosuke’s adverse reaction, was holding said hands in the air in surprise.

“Didn't mean to scare you.” Terunosuke just looked away. “Is my daughter bothering you?” He asked simply.

Daughter?

Terunosuke looked at the young boy again, noting that he was actually a young girl. That explained a few things in the appearance department. Despite his adversary being at least 5 years younger than he was, he couldn't hold himself back from unleashing a serving of petty torment.

“That's a girl?!” He exclaimed in an over the top voice of surprise. “I never would've guessed.” She reacted negatively, just as planned.
“I'm not a boy! I'm not a boy! I'm not a boy!” She chanted as she tried to punch him. Fortunately, she had the strength of a little girl, making her blows easy to deflect.
“Maddalena.” Her mother scolded lightly. “What did we say about hitting.” The girl looked down in embarrassment and muttered a disingenuous apology.

“I apologize for this, sir. She can be like this when she hasn't eaten in awhile. The father explained. “Oh, and sweetie, you dropped this earlier.” He pulled a hat that looked almost exactly like Terunosuke’s from his back pocket and handed it to her.
“Dad, don't make me sound like a baby.” The man just chuckled as she covered her head.
“Ah, well, I hope we can meet again soon, sir.” He held out his right hand for a handshake and Terunosuke met the motion with his own. “This is my wife, Olivia, and my daughter, Maddalena, who I’m sure you're already familiar with. I am Oscar Rosso.” They seemed nice enough, their daughter notwithstanding.
“Nice to meet you all.” Terunosuke responded.

As they waved goodbye, Terunosuke glanced at his watch and noticed that a couple of hours had passed since he had last checked. Maybe Sicily would be entertaining after all.

***

Cielo didn't know what Noce liked to eat. It was his turn to make dinner for them and the obvious answers had been exhausted. He couldn’t just fly off to McDonald's either, not while in hiding. He should really just ask him what he wanted and make that. Yes, that would be the normal thing to do. Sadly, Cielo had as much ability with words as a blind man has with sight.

He was being neurotic again. He'd been told him to relax when that happened. Calm down, look at the situation, and take the best course of action. He thought through his options.

He was uncomfortable with talking to Noce directly. Perhaps he could get an answer from him via different methods. Noce was a impulsive person, he'd likely enjoy something he could dig his teeth into. Meat was easy to do well and spices were plentiful. Though, what spices Cielo would use remained an overarching mystery. The aforementioned impulsive nature could be exploited quite easily; not much depth of flavor was required for adequate results.

Noce walked into the kitchen without warning.
“What's for dinner?” He asked, groggily scratching under his bandana.
“Beef Stroganoff.” Cielo answered with gunshot speed.
“Great. Tell me when it's ready.” After he left, Cielo nearly collapsed from the stress of a split second decision.
“So this is what a heart attack feels like.”

***

Terunosuke didn’t really have a plan when he walked back into town the next day. In all honesty, he wished that the Rosso family would cross paths with him again. Like last time, he sat alone at a café table. It might seem a bit pathetic to wait for people that he'd only met yesterday, but the thought didn't hamper his decision. So, for what felt like hours, he sat, sipped his coffee, waited, watched the inhabitants of the village walk by, waited, and grew bored.

He took a long sip and suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder. The table was given a sudden coffee and saliva painting.
“Sorry, didn't mean to scare you again.” Oscar sat down beside him and smiled sheepishly. “It’s been some time since I last saw you.”
“It hasn't been that long. We saw each other yesterday.” Terunosuke replied after wiping his mouth.
“No. It's definitely been some time. About 24 hours worth to be exact.” There was a certain charm to a joke as corny as that. Who thought of something like that? Oscar did, apparently. Terunosuke appreciated the joke and groaned.

“That was terrible.”
“I agree, yet you can't say I'm wrong, can you,... uh, what was your name?” Terunosuke hadn't planned for this. He wouldn't give his real name, nor could he say his name was Carta, that would raise too many questions. Why couldn't Pane be here to help. He was just a boy in... yeah, just a boy!

“Ragazzo. My name is Ragazzo... Enigma.” Oscar pulled on his fluffy eyebrow as if he were a sage pulling on his beard.

“You name is... Enigma Boy?” When he said it aloud, it sounded as if he was some sort of superhero. “What an interesting name! I've never heard of a name so exceptional and intriguing.”

Oscar was like a child in a grown man’s body. In comparison, his daughter seemed more mature than him. What was his wife like?

“Well, Ragazzo Enigma, do you enjoy home cooked meals?” He tilted back his chair as he asked.

“Of course I do. Who doesn't? Are you offering?”

“Indeed I am. It would be rude of me not to. Does tomorrow night work for you?” It was probably best that Oscar didn't know that he had no friends yet.

“It might be tight, but I think I can make some room in my schedule.”

“Wonderful, I'll see you then! Also do yo- WHOA!” Mid-sentence, Oscar fell backwards, his chair clattering against the ground. Terunosuke stared on in disbelief. He'd done that sort of thing before... in elementary school!

“A-are you alright?”

“Perfectly fine.” To illustrate his point, Oscar did a handstand. Terunosuke rubbed his eyes.

“Well... we'll see you tomorrow night.” The father casually walked away... on his hands. Terunosuke's eyes were glued to him as he left; all the way until he couldn't see him anymore.

That man was responsible for someone's life.

For the sake of his daughter, he hoped his wife was more mature.

***

Maddalena sighed as her father walked into the house on his hands. How many people saw him like that? With her luck, it was the entire town.

“Maddie, do you remember the white-haired boy from the other day? The one you were yelling at.” Maddalena’s face burned at the mention of the boy.

“Yeah... why?” What had Dad done this time?

“He's coming for dinner tomorrow.”

“What?! Why would you do that?! He's such a jerk and you're bringing him here?!" The girl was seething when her mother walked in.

“What's all the yelling for?” She asked.

“I don’t want you to see him ever again!”

“Thank you, darling. I knew you'd enjoy the idea.”

He was still standing on his hands.

***

There was one problem Terunosuke faced with dinner. It wasn't his ineptitude at socializing, nor his apprehension from the last dinner he had attended. Neither of these affected anything. He simply didn't know where Oscar and his family actually lived.
Solitaire was good for two things: passing the time and brainstorming. Maybe if he went to the café again… no way, he wouldn't get lucky for a third time. He set down a Queen of Hearts. It was possible that he could go out and actually look for their house, but that would be highly inefficient. He set down a 5 of Spades. What if he tried to ask around the village? Hell no. Never in a million years would he be able to do that. It was a blessing that Maddalena talked to him in the first place. He set down a Joker.

Either way it fell, playing Solitaire all day would get him nowhere. Besides, he didn't actually know how to play the game.

***

Maddalena hated her parents. Why did they make her go to the jerk’s house to invite him over for dinner? The hill stretched before her like a mountain, though it was only 100 meters at most. Her dog, Prince, looked up at her and whined softly, as if he was asking what she planned to do. “Could you do it for me?” Prince just panted at her. “Ugh… fine…” She forced her feet to move. “Honestly, how stupid do you have to be to think that I was a boy?” Prince wisely kept quiet. Finally, she stopped in front of the house and huffed. Maybe she could walk back to her parents and say that he didn't want to come. No, that wouldn't work. Dad would sprint out at full speed and ask the jerk again and again until he broke down and accepted. It was easier this way.

***

Terunosuke was running low on food. The refrigerator that Salvatore had stocked before he left was a barren wasteland save for an entire jar of pickled beets, unopened, as they would stay for the rest of time. All hope was not lost, however. Apples in Sicily were cheap and plentiful. So for lunch, he ate nothing but apples.

All of a sudden, there was a knock on the door. With a carnivorous bite into the sweet fruit, he inched the door open a few centimeters. Through the tiny opening, he spotted a panting, white-furred dog. Was he smart enough to knock on doors?! What a good boy! In a thoroughly excited state, he threw the door open and was greeted by disappointment in the form of a boyish girl. “Oh… hey, kid.”
“I told you I'm not not a kid anymore!” Not exactly the best way to greet someone. “Yeah… hey there, boy.”
“You jerk! You know I'm not a boy!” Too easy.
“Calm down, I was talking to royalty.” He went down on one knee and offered his snack to the furry companion. “You like apples?” Prince gave an attack of grateful licks. “How did you find where I live?” He asked without looking up.
“Are you asking me or Prince? And FYI, he was named after the Machiavelli novel, not the royal position.” She was already nitpicking him. Victory was on his side. “Answer the question or I'm going back inside.”
“Jerk. When you walk up and down that hill while wearing a stupid costume, you're pretty hard to ignore. Didn't you have anything better to do on Christmas?”

She saw him doing that?! That was before they formally met… Jesus Christ! How many people witnessed his immaturity?! The urge to scream was scarcely stomped down.

“T-that’s not important! What the hell do you want with me?!” Terunosuke growled, knowing full well what the little brat was here for.
“My dad invited you to dinner.” She didn't continue beyond that.
“Yeah, I know. So you came by to tell me things I already know?”
“Well do you know how to get there?!” Dammit, right into her hand. She had a point, but he wasn't
going to let her have the satisfaction, no matter how small.
“Yeah, I know how.” Maddalena saw through his bluff like it was glass.
“Alright. See you tonight.” She turned around and began to depart. Shit! What now?! Think!
Think, you dumbass!

Oh, of course. He'd almost forgotten.

“Wait…” He called out weakly. She turned around smugly. “You dropped your hat again.” The tan cap sat snugly in his grip.
“Huh?!” Maddalena’s hands shot up to her now bare head. “W-when did you… how…”
Terunosuke spun the stolen treasure around his finger and stood up.
“I’m fast.” Bragging came easier than lying. In truth, it had nothing to do with speed. It was all about utilizing Enigma’s ability.
“Give it back, you jerk!” The little girl rushed him and aimed for her hat, but the smug thief pulled it above her reach before she could get to it. She tried to jump for it, but he'd simply raise it just a centimeter beyond her hands. “Stop it! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!” This was more fun than he would admit, even Prince was waging his tail in excitement.
“My memory has been kinda bad recently, think you could tell me your address again?”
“OK! OK! Just let me have my hat back!”
“Ah ah ah. He taunted. “Information first.”

***

What a jerk. What a big, stupid, annoying, sneaky, immature jerk! Stealing her hat while her back was turned was completely unfair. How had he even managed to move that fast? It was actually kinda cool… wait, no! That jerk couldn't be cool!
“Ghh! What do you think?” She asked Prince. Her friend had an apple between his teeth, the same apple that the jerk had given him. “So you’re on his side?! I can't believe you!” Prince whined dismissively.

***

Noce threw the ball too hard. If it hadn't been made of foam, it probably would have shattered a window and caused world of problems. Cleaning up the glass would be a breeze, but making any loud noise could be dangerous. They were in hiding after all.

As he was distracted by the thought, the return throw sailed over his head, just a centimeter above his grasp.
“Couldn't you have used your stand to catch that?” Cielo questioned coldly.
“Do you want this place to burn to the ground?” A simple game of Catch definitely didn't require the use of Abracadabra. “Why don't you use Shining Star? The extra reach might come in handy.”
Noce returned, tossing the foam ball back at his associate.
“I might knock something over.”
“And I wouldn't?” Cielo ran a hand through the curly, cream-blond jungle of his hair.
“Correct. At worst, you'd start a small fire. Nothing to worry about.” Oh, yeah, who ever got hurt from a little fire?! Burn scars build character, after all! The foam ball slapped into his face while he was distracted. “Noce, are you paying attention?” He sighed heavily and shook his head.

Algerians didn't make any damn sense.

***

Would it be rude to smoke in front of everyone? Terunosuke mulled over the question while his teeth pinched a cigarette, the Rosso household standing a few paces in front of him. Maddalena
already disliked him, smoking might not be the best method of mending her opinion. Screw it, they probably wouldn't even see him if he did it outside. He grabbed his lighter with his left hand and eased the flame onto the cigarette. His lungs inhaled a smooth and satisfying breath.

“Ew.” A voice stated flatly. Terunosuke opened his eyes and saw that Maddalena was standing in the doorway. So much for staying out of sight. “Couldn't you go away to do that?”

“Couldn't you grow up?” He quipped back.

“W-what? What does have to do with anything?!” Insecure about age, eh? He stomped the young cigarette out and walked over to her.

“I wouldn't expect a little kid to know.” To top it off, he pet the top of her hat as if she was a cute puppy. As he walked in, he could hear the sound of the child fuming behind him.

An apron-clad Olivia greeted him far warmer than her daughter had.

“Ah, Ragazzo! I'm glad you made it.” The maternal voice almost made him sorry that such a peaceful and normal woman could be married to an extreme and eccentric man. What was Oscar's secret? “Your timing is great.” Olivia dashed away to the kitchen and returned carrying a plate of muffins. “Would you try one? It's been ages since someone new has had the chance to enjoy my cooking.” How lucky could he be? First he gets invited to dinner, then a delightful woman bakes treats just for him. He gladly bit in.

“Mmm!...hmm...ghhh…” What the hell? The muffins tasted… odd. It didn't taste terrible per se, but he didn't want anything to do with this… thing… ever again. It was sour and tart, but simultaneously unbearably sweet. His taste buds felt like they were being rung out like a wet towel with every chew. When he looked back down at his hand, he saw that the inside of the baked monstrosity was purple, not the warm brown that its outside advertised.

After a very hesitant swallow, he decided to cut his loses.

“T-thank you for that delicious… present. But I think I'll save room for dinner.”

Olivia suddenly started to weep, her horn-like hair flopped downwards, forming a frown shape.

“You liar. You only took one bite and you already hate it.” Jesus Christ. Terunosuke felt like a monster for making her cry. She set the plate down and crumbled down to her hands and knees, her head hanging low, the tears flowing like a river.

Behind him, Maddalena groaned.

“Way to go, idiot. Dad! Can you come here for a minute.” Oscar appeared and recognized the scene as though it was an everyday occurrence.

“Muffins?” He asked.

“Muffin. Only one.”

“Dear God. We've got our work cut out for us this time.” The two each plucked up a repulsive creation and took massive bites.

“Wow! This is incredible, darling! I've never tasted anything better!”

“You're amazing, Mom! I hope I can make something as spectacular as this one day!” They were lying through their clenched teeth, Olivia wouldn't believe them for a second.

“Really? Thank you!” The downturned woman sprang to her feet, a blissful smile plastered on her face. Her hair now beaming an upturned smile shape. “Don't worry, Ragazzo. Like important things in life, the first time is always the hardest. You just have to get used to it to truly enjoy them.” Terunosuke was at a loss for words. “I'll go prepare the table now.” As she walked off, she began to hum a bright tune.

The millisecond she was out of earshot, Oscar and Maddalena let out pained cries and violently spit the mouthfuls out.

“Why does God hate us, Dad! Are Mom's muffins hell?!” Maddalena rubbed her hands along her tongue in a vain effort to save her burning tongue.
“You always hurt the ones you love. Your Mother just loves us more than we can handle.” The grimacing man pulled out a flask from his back pocket and began to down its alcoholic contents.

Terunosuke understood Oscar's secret to winning Oliva’s love.

He managed to be less insane than her.

***

The meal, which, thankfully, was made by Oscar, proved to be more than filling. After almost a week of living off of pre-made meals, Terunosuke was extremely appreciative of such a kind offering.

“So, Ragazzo, what brings you to our tiny village?” Oscar started suddenly, once everyone had finished eating.

“I needed to get away from work for a while.” That definitely was the truth. “My job gets really stressful sometimes, so I take any break I can get.”

“Oh, you have a job?” Olivia inquired curiously. “What do you do? Is it interesting?” What should he say to that?

“I work in… shipping. If a product needs moved, they ask me to do it.” Good one.

“So you’re like a truck driver?” Terunosuke shook his head.

“No, nothing like that. I don't even know how to drive.”

“What?! You don’t know how to drive?” She exclaimed. “How young are you?!” Terunosuke put his hands up defensively.

“I'm 17! It's not like I'm a grown man yet. Besides, my job doesn't require any driving.” Oscar nodded his head in complete understanding.

“You foreigners truly are one of a kind.”

“Foreigners?” Maddalena questioned. “You mean you aren't Italian?” Apparently, she was quite baffled by such a revelation. How stupid was she? An infant could recognize that Terunosuke wasn't from Italy. “Then where are you from?”

“Oh! Oh!” Oscar perked up suddenly. “Let me take a guess!” Terunosuke silently bet 500 yen that he would guess Algerian. “I'll only need to ask a few questions in order to narrow it down. Are you up for it?” Terunosuke nodded in agreement.

“What's your favorite sport?” Terunosuke didn’t really like sports, though he had gone to a baseball game once before.

“I liked the Giants when I was a kid, so probably baseball.”

“Baseball?” Maddalena asked with a blank face. “What's that?”

“It's like tag.” Olivia explained. “But instead of an exciting game of running around that everyone can enjoy, people watch it to fall asleep.” Well, to each their own.

“Moving on.” Oscar continued, refocusing the conversation. “What is your favorite kind of food?” After years of microwave dinners, Terunosuke had come to appreciate the finer things in life, such as a cup of instant noodles with 2 packets of seasoning.

“Noodles.”

“What an Italian answer.” Oscar mused, straying further from the truth by the word.

“Final question!” Oscar exclaimed overdramatically. “If I'm driving a car that's 100 km away from one you're driving, and I'm going 15 kph, while you're going 20 kph, how long will it take for us to get into a car accident with one another?”

“What the hell kind of question is that?! I already told you I don't know how to drive!” Terunosuke contested.

“So that means you'd get into an accident long before you could get close to Oscar.” Olivia interjected, as if it helped.
“That sounds like an excuse for not being able to figure out the problem. I know exactly where you're from now! You're an American!” Oscar declared triumphantly. “They don't know how to use the metric system!”

Terunosuke stared in complete awe at his surroundings. Olivia and Oscar cheered together, Maddalena grinned and clapped along with them, even Prince barked excitedly.

“Sorry to rain on your parade, but I'm not American.” The celebration stopped dead in its tracks. “I wasn't talking about some American Giants baseball team, I was talking about the Yomiuri Giants. And I wasn't talking about spaghetti or linguine, I was talking about ramen noodles.” With all that, everything should be more than obvious.

“So…” Oscar wondered aloud. “Where are you from?” It was a mistake to think that anything was obvious for these people. He hesitated before answering, but Terunosuke somehow knew he could trust these people, eccentric qualities and all. It wasn't like they were friends with his sworn enemies or something.

“I'm Japanese; from Japan.”

“Huh.” They all replied in unison.

“That's pretty unexpected.” Olivia stated.

“What's a Yomiuri?” Maddalena added.

“Arf!” Prince continued.

“You managed to fool all of us.” Oscar concluded.

Somehow, Terunosuke wasn't very surprised that he'd accomplished such a feat.

***

Through the night, Terunosuke enjoyed himself quite a bit. The conversation bounced from a rudimentary explanation of baseball to childhood memories of Morioh and everywhere inbetween. He also came to know a few interesting facts about the Rosso clan. Olivia wanted to be a teacher when she grew up despite the fact that she was 35. The only thing that Oscar loved more than his family was his extensive collection of matchbooks, which amounted to a grand total of 3.

Maddalena demanded that Terunosuke teach her the ways of the samurai. He was, after all, a man from Japan, which meant he held an intimate knowledge of every sword technique known to man, never mind the fact that he'd never touched a blade in his life. It seemed that quirkiness was an inherited trait.

Once a lull in the conversation came around, he checked his watch. Much to his surprise, little under an hour had passed since his arrival. In stark contradiction to the proverb, time had slowed down while he was having fun. Crazy.

“It’s been really fun, but I need to get going.” He announced, standing up to leave.

“Aww… do you have to go so soon?” Maddalena inquired with a blue tone. It was strange how an hour could change someone’s opinion so quickly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be around for a while.”

“I hope so.” Oscar cried. “You’re a part of this family now!”

“Family?!” Terunosuke was shocked at how casually he said that. He’d known them for less than a week, and yet here they were, calling him ‘Family’.

“That's right.” Olivia softly added. “From now on, we're here for you.” What was with these people?! They just met him, they knew next to nothing about him, and he hadn't given them any reason to believe that he was trustworthy. He should just tell them to open their eyes and be done with him…

And yet…
Having a family wouldn't be so bad, if only for a while. Besides, he was rapidly running out of food. He didn't want to starve while on vacation. If nothing else, they were a steady source of warm meals, though it might be dangerous if Olivia was the one cooking.

“I guess that's alright.”

***

As he waved goodbye, the sun started to set.
“See you tomorrow.” Oscar cheered.
“I'll be there.” He shot back.
“Good night, Ragazzo Enigma.”

That last line, if only for a second, made him stop in his tracks. Did they actually think his name was Enigma Boy? Unlike his codename in Passione, Carta, Terunosuke wasn't required to use Ragazzo. There was no reason to continue to operate under the alias any longer; the two-way road of trust was paved.

The topic bounced around his mind as he reached his destination and walked in. Oddly, things felt off. Maybe it was the contrast between visiting friends and isolation that made him uncomfortable in solitude. Everywhere he looked, it seemed as though things had been shuffled around. Granted, he'd been a bit fidgety before he left, but this was completely different. For example, the grocery list on the refrigerator.

The lines were covered with scribbles of vegetables and fruits, meats, cheeses, milk, and numerous varieties of bread. The list itself was nothing weird, Terunosuke made grocery lists on occasion. The problem was that the handwriting wasn't his own. Rohan Kishibe’s gift of omnilingualism had only reached his speech, and even in that regard he had an apparently obvious accent. Where it didn't cover was his writing. Italian was complicated to write out. He knew how words were spelled, but aside from how to write the letters, his calligraphy left much to be desired. As a result, anything unimportant that he'd have to write, such as a grocery list, would be filled out with Japanese. The list in front of him was not in Japanese, but perfect, native Italian.

He wasn't alone.

From his front pocket, he retrieved his hidden pistol, gripping it tightly with his left hand. Were they still here? What was the purpose of writing a grocery list? To psyche him out? Terunosuke hoped to figure out the answer to all of these questions as he crept through the house.

A bit further in, he could hear a faint voice coming from a bedroom. It almost sounded like it was talking to someone. As he reached the closed door, he found that it wasn't talking, but humming a song. He wasn't very good at it; really off key. After patently listening for clues, he decided to take action. He turned Enigma’s ability against himself and slid under the gap between the door and the floorboards.

With his worm’s-eye view, he saw a tone-deaf man with his back turned. If Terunosuke had passed the man on the street, it was doubtful that he'd look at him even once. His clothes looked so plain and forgettable that Terunosuke wondered if it was intentional. Dodging suspicion by looking completely innocuous could be a priceless attribute if used by the right person. This guy was from Scheggia, no doubt about it.

Terunosuke silently emerged from the paper and pressed his gun against the back of the intruder’s head.
“Who the hell are you?” He asked in a voice that would petrify even the most fearless of men. The
intruder didn't even flinch, simply turning his head to see the gunslinger behind him.
“Hey, Terunosuke.” The man said flatly. “It has been a little while?” Was this guy blind? More importantly, how did he know Terunosuke’s real name?
“What the hell are you here for?! To try to kill me?”
“What do you not recognize me?” As he said that, Terunosuke took a closer look at the man: inky black hair with a hat tucked down so low that it obscured his eyes. Yeah, he recognized him.
“You're Salvatore’s assistant.”
“Correct. Could you lower the gun now.”
“Oh shit, sorry!” Why the hell would he come here like this, unannounced and unseen. As he looked around the bedroom, Terunosuke noticed that he'd been unpacking a few suitcases of his own. Was he going to be living here from now on? He asked him as much.
“For as long as the hideaway order lasts.” He went back to unpacking his clothes. Terunosuke didn’t trust the guy very much, but since he'd helped to save Pane’s life, he figured that that opinion would be kept hidden away.
“What's your name by the way. Codename that is.”
“Name?” He thought for a minute. “Just call me Nessuno.” He wanted to be known as ‘Nobody’? He supposed he didn't have the right to judge while he was using Enigma Boy.
“Alright… Nessuno.”

Terunosuke then walked out of the room, giving his new roommate some privacy.

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Nessuno’s profile:

Department: N/A (Not an official member of Passione)
Hobby: ?
Favorite Music Genre: ?
Favorite Color: ?
Hometown: ?
Favorite Novel: 120 Days of Sodom

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“Hey, Nessuno.” Terunosuke started once Nessuno had finished and settled down an hour or two later. “What do you know about Scheggia?” His own knowledge of the group was highly limited, despite having personally killed one of its members.
“Scheggia?!” Nessuno shifted uncomfortably in his seat, as if to say that such a topic was off limits. Fortunately, such a conclusion wasn't made. “Scheggia is a splinter group of Passione. Hence the name. It is the word for splinter in Italian.”
“Yeah, I could figure that out.” Terunosuke brushed aside.
“Right. The split took place a few years ago, headed by a man known today as Padre.”
“Padre? What was his name before he defected?”
“If we knew that, the group would not last very long. We would simply track him down based upon his former identity. Because of th-”
“I know how it'd work.” Terunosuke interrupted. This guy had a really annoying habit of rambling on. “So… what does Scheggia actually do?” Nessuno scratched his neck.
“We… do not know…” What? How the hell did that happen? “They are exceedingly secretive. While Passione has more than five hundred members, Scheggia, in comparison, has no more than one hundred by liberal estimates.” One hundred?!
“So what about the wedding we raided a while ago? How does that account for things? We had to have taken out one hundred at the very least.” If Nessuno hadn't been uncomfortable yet, he sure as hell was now. He crossed his arms across his waist, turned his head away, and grinded his teeth
“Did you not know?” Terunosuke only gave a confused stare in response. “That massacre only murdered around ten Scheggia members. The rest were innocent.”

What?

“How the hell could that be possible?” He voiced in distrust. “There were tons of people there! That couldn’t have amounted to just ten!”

“They brought their families. Grandparents, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, spouses. Not everyone had firsthand involvement.” How the hell was he staying so calm?! Through the entire conversation, his tone of voice hardly ever lifted.

“E-either way… let’s talk about something else.” Hearing about how his involvement had caused such a horrible result burned a hole in his gut.

“Alright, what do you want to know?” Terunosuke wanted to know why the man sitting in front of him always had his eyes shielded.

What the hell is your problem? Why are you so mysterious looking? Why do you talk like a robot? Terunosuke wanted to ask those questions. He wanted to vault over and slam his foot into Nessuno’s face as payment for making him feel like shit. In the end, he decided to calm down and ask a normal question.

“Tell me about you, what's do you do for Passione?”

“I am not at liberty to say.” He dodged.

“Fine, how about something less incriminating. What do you like to do in your spare time?”

“It is probably not a good idea to tell you.” Quit being evasive and answer the damn questions!

“What do you think is the meaning of life?! That can’t be used against you so it'll be fine to answer.”

“I am a nihilist; I do not believe that life has a meaning.”

“Fine, I get it.” Terunosuke looked at his watch in frustration. How many hours had passed since Nessuno started talking with him? Two or three? In actuality, it was just under ten minutes. “I'm pretty tired, so I'll be going to bed. Night.”

As he closed the door without waiting for a reply, he collapsed onto his bed with an spent sigh. Could he live with that guy for a month? Everytime he spoke, Terunosuke wanted to cut his ears off to avoid hearing the rambling drone on and on. These thoughts pushed themselves into the background of his consciousness as he drifted off.

***

“Morning, Terunosuke.” Nessuno greeted with his back turned away, not bothering to turn around and face him. “You slept in pretty late. You should probably get to bed at a better time. When you go back to Naples, you'll ha-”

“Don’t use my real name.”

“Oh… sorry, Carta.” All of this was said with a flat tone of voice. “So what do you plan on doing today?” He’d probably continue to stare at Nessuno’s back and wonder if the person living with him even had eyes. The shadowy pest was currently tearing into the can of pickled beets and swallowing them down like they were candy. “Carta? Are you going to answer me?”

“Oh, sorry. I'll probably visit with some friends that I made.”

“You made some friends? What did you make them out of? Leaves and rocks? Ha ha.” Christ, even his laugh was flat.

“No, just some normal people.”

“Do they know what you do for a living?” He didn't mince words, did he?
“I told them that I was in shipping. They also think think of me as a nice person, so th-”
“It is not good to mislead people like that.” Nessuno interrupted on his own. He still had his back turned, voice flat, eyes covered.
“Well… if I told them I was a member of Passione, they’d prob-”
“I was not talking about that. You are not a good person.” Just then, Nessuno had added a cutting edge to his remark.

“W-what?” Terunosuke had no response. Why the hell would he say that?!
“You are not a good person. Do not lead other people to believe that you are something that you are not.” What the fuck was wrong with this guy?! Nobody says that to someone’s face without looking them in the eye!
“How can you say that?! What did I ever do to be considered a bad person?!” Nessuno finally turned to face him, his eyes still hidden. He approached with a rough pace and stood face-to-face with Terunosuke.

“People like you are making the world a worse place.”
“Why?! What have I done?! Explain yourself, goddammit!”
“You are a hypocrite. A rather disgusting one at that.”
“Bullshit! I’m no hypocrite!”
“Really? Tell me, how did you react when you killed Sanguinoso?” Why was he bringing that up?!
“Relieved. I lived and he didn't.” No need to think about it anymore than that.
“And when Pane got injured? How did you feel then?”
“What? I felt terrible, obviously! He was protecting me when I couldn't even help myself. Anybody would feel guilty about getting their best friend crippled!”
“See? Hypocrite. You feel relief at murder, but guilt at something minor.” That pissed him off more than anything else. He took a fistful of Nessuno’s shirt into his left hand and yelled into the bastard’s face.
“Something minor?! Getting crippled is something minor to you?! And your comparison is absolute shit! Pane is one of my only friends! Sanguinoso was just some human garbage that I killed without a second thought!”

Nessuno hammered his fist straight into Terunosuke’s jaw. The sudden blow knocked him off of his feet and threw him to the ground, his grip breaking away like a twig. A furious hand pulled him by the hair and a voice whispered in his ear.
“If you ever talk like that again, I WILL gouge your eyes out with my bare fingers.” As if in response, Terunosuke’s eyes slammed shut.
After plainly stating his threat, Nessuno strolled back to his room and drew the door shut.

***

Good news: the punch had only left an invisible bruise that wasn’t exceedingly tender to the touch.
Bad news: Nessuno was still living in the same house as him. Terunosuke would stay out of the house for the day.
He rubbed his scalp and mulled over the harsh words that had been leveled against him.
‘Not a good person. Hypocrite.’ They sounded too familiar for comfort. What was it that Josuke Higashikata had said to him? ‘You bastard, take some fucking ownership for your mistakes!’ The similarities made him shiver. One foot in front of the other. Forget about it.

In a quicker fashion than usual, he reached the village and crumbled into his café seat. Coffee would only fray his nerves further. Despite knowing this, he still downed a cup without regret.

At that moment, Olivia walked into his line of sight. Her carefree presence was exactly what he needed.
“Olivia. Nice to see you again.” He called out. The silly mother turned in response and smiled at him.
“Good afternoon, Ragazzo. Fancy meeting you here.” Ragazzo… dammit. ‘You aren’t a good person. Don't lead other people to believe that you're anything else.’ Those lies wouldn't leave his mind.
“Yeah. What's the plan for you guys today?”
“I'm glad you asked. We were planning on going swimming today.”
“Oh, is there a swimming pool nearby?” Olivia looked at him the same way he had looked at her when he discovered her scatterbrained personality.
“A swimming pool? No, we're going to the sea.” The look of disbelief felt pretty insulting, especially coming from her. Did Sicilians even know what swimming pools were?
“The sea sounds like a lot of fun.” The idea of a beach, the warm sun, and cool water sounded extremely appealing. Wasn't it late December? Sicily was on another new planet altogether, wasn't it?! “I think I'll go there today, too.” Olivia’s expression shifted back to the cheerful display that it usually was; so perky and upbeat that she looked 10 years younger anytime she smiled.
“That's great! We'll see you there!”
“Yeah. See you there.”

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The sea was easy to find. Instead of turning towards town from his house, he simply walked the other direction. This tactic went on for 30 minutes before he could smell the seawater. After another 10 minutes, he was staring down at a stretch of sea with no end in sight. He stood atop a cliff that was just high enough to make him want to be careful.

He flopped down on the bed of grass and gazed out to the shimmering blue eternity. The Rosso family hadn't shown up yet, so he figured he had some time to kill before they showed up.

‘You are not a good person.’

Dammit. Those words were like an intrusive itch that couldn't be scratched no matter how hard he tried. They just looped over and over in his head.

He breathed in, taking in the strong scent of grass and dirt.

He breathed out, unraveling some of the tension in his body.

‘You are not a good person.’

God fucking dammit!

He pulled up a clump of dirt from the ground and threw it off the edge of the cliff. After a few seconds, it made a satisfying plopping sound when it hit the water. He did it again. Another handful off the edge, another satisfying plop. The process was repeated until he had carved out a sizeable crater in the earth. It took his mind away from the issue at hand. However, the moment he stopped…

‘You are not a good person.’

He laid down on his back and stared up at the bright blue sky above him. Throwing dirt off of a cliff was fun and all, but it only got him so far. There was a logical progression to follow.

He hoisted himself up to his feet and sighed. Nothing to worry about. He peeled his shoes and socks off, then his hat and shirt. Wouldn't want those to be damaged.
He took a few steps back, dancing his bare feet into the velvety grass. In a flash, he darted forward, pushing himself with every muscle in his body. Straight to the edge. No slowing down, no stopping. Pure sprint.

He vaulted across the crater and zipped by his discarded clothes. The edge was rapidly approaching. If anything, he sped up. As he reached the finish line, he planted his foot on the edge and kicked himself forward. For a few moments, he actually believed that the weightlessness would continue on forever. Inevitably, he started to descend. Using the dirt as a reference, it would take him five or six seconds to hit the water. He'd use four.

In those four seconds, he thought about everything he felt was important to him. Pane and Salvatore, the Rossos, Enigma, and the memory of his family. Just those things.

With less than a second before he slammed into the water, he used Enigma’s ability and converted himself into a thin piece of paper. His near-weightless body fluttered down harmlessly and landed on a stray rock that poked out of the water's surface. He converted back into his original body and sat peacefully on the warm stone. His heart was racing, but he was completely safe. He searched his thoughts.

‘I hope I didn’t tear my pants.’

The virus had been wiped from his system for now.

Then he heard someone shriek.

It was from the cliff if he wasn't mistaken. Who could… oh. Oops. In his self-absorbed thoughts, he'd neglected the possibility that someone might see him. When he jumped of the cliff, it caused the person to panic and scream. He could guess who that scream belonged to: Maddalena or Olivia, though he put his money on Maddalena.

“Ragazzo!” Olivia cried out, poking her head out beyond the cliff’s edge. It must have been a confusing surprise to see him lounging peacefully on a rock, legs crossed and hands waving. Another scream rang out. He had guessed right! The look on Maddalena’s face would be priceless. As he had the thought, the short bulb of her hair came into view. Her hands shielded her eyes; she didn't want to see what was left of him… shit… was that her fear sign?

Dammit. He felt guilty for scaring her like that. Why hadn't he been more careful? As she brought down her hands and saw him waving, her face glowed with relief.

“I'm fine!” He shouted, hoping to ease their worries. “I'm completely fine!”

Then, another scream sounded. Strange. Olivia and Maddalena were both looking at him with relief. Who was still screaming in horror?

A third face popped out. The sloppy mess of tears, wailing, and shaking belonged to none other than the strong and courageous Oscar.

“Ragazzo Enigma! You're alive!” Even from a distance, his screaming voice hurt Terunosuke’s ears.

“You bet! I don’t die easily!” The blabbering fool wiped his face on his sleeve and seemed to regain his some of his composure.

“Stay right there! We'll be down in a few seconds!” The trio disappeared again and reappeared after a couple minutes.

Crap. Terunosuke should have at least kept his shirt on. He felt way too exposed to the quickly approaching family.
Then he saw that the trio that was approaching him wasn't a trio at all. It was a duo. Oscar's bright red eyebrows and tearful sobbing coupled with Olivia’s overjoyed smile closed in quickly, but left out a certain overbearing child. Where was Maddalena? He looked back up at the cliff and noticed that she was camped out near the edge, unmoved. While her parents were dressed in peculiar swimsuits, she was still clothed in her pink overalls. If he squinted, he was almost sure that she was pouting. Back to the old ways, huh?

“Ragazzo!” Oscar swam out to the rock Terunosuke was sitting on and pulled him into a crushing technique that might be misinterpreted as a hug. “Don’t ever scare me like that again! I thought you killed yourself!” The tears, and disgustingly enough, snot, dripped onto his exposed shoulder as Oscar held him. The hug was as gentle as a vice.

“I would never do that. I just wanted to…” What should he say? He wanted to kick out intrusive thoughts that may be true about how he was misleading them into believing he was exactly as he said he was. Even if he said all that, they'd just assume that he was taking them for fools. He half lied. “I just wanted to see what happened when I jumped from that height. Pretty dumb, huh?” “No kidding.” Olivia, who had made her way to him, responded. “You’re lucky you didn't die.”

The three gave a collective sigh at his safety. The true reason for his leap wasn't needed; it didn't matter.

“Now… who wants to swim?” Leave it to Oscar to flip 180 degrees in mere seconds. The sudden shift was endearing. Without needing to respond, Terunosuke dove headfirst into the salty ocean. The cool water rushed over his body, covering him from head to toe.

“Crap.” He stated dully once he surfaced.

“What's wrong?” Olivia asked.

“I just remembered… I forgot to take out my lighter before I dove in.”

***

Stupid idiot. She should've known that he was just messing with her. Maddalena considered “accidentally” throwing his discarded socks into the water. One surprise for another, what do you say, idiot?

She sighed. Looking at him, splashing around without a care in the world, annoyed her more than any insult he had thrown at her. Not 10 minutes ago, he scared her half to death and almost made her cry as hard as her dad. She should drench his shoes too!

Her elbows soon became sore and she resorted to a simple chin rest; the grass was soft enough. She peered right over the towering edge. How the heck did he make that jump without smashing into a million pieces? Was he a magician or something? It didn't really matter. She was too scared to try it either way, not that she'd ever let anyone know.

She grabbed a handful of squishy dirt from the nearby hole in the ground and rolled it around in her hands, eventually making a crude ball. Could she hit him from this distance? Only one way to find out! She pounced to her feet and took aim at the idiot 100 meters below. Like lightning, her arm whipped forward, jetting the dirt ball down like a laser beam. Sadly, her aim was off. The ball didn't go out very far, breaking apart on the rocks.

Hearing her unsuccessful efforts crumble to pieces, the idiot looked up at her like a dog looking at a treat. She stuck her tongue out at him. How do you like that?! In response, he mimicked her taunt. The two made crude gestures at one another for quite some time.

He was so immature.
Maddalena was such a little kid. She tried to act like a grownup, but Terunosuke saw through the act in a heartbeat. Too easy.

“So, Ragazzo? What's your answer?” Olivia asked, expecting an answer as she sunbathed on a rock.

“Oh, sorry. I was distracted by... the sun. Could you repeat that?”

“Certainly. Do you believe in God?” God? What prompted such a serious topic from Olivia of all people?

“Hmm… well… to tell the truth, I haven't really thought about it for a long time. I'm sure I did when I was younger…” He notably trailed off. The mood shifted into an uncomfortable position. He thought of running away from the conversation by sinking underneath the waves, but that wouldn't help anything.

What did he believe in?

Mom, Dad, his time in the book, Josuke, Passione, Pane, Salvatore. All of it was supposedly made by God, right? If so, did God deserve to be worshipped? Past that, what was the point in worshiping God? To reach heaven or hell? That's what it seemed to be, but did he want that? One thing was made clear.

“I… don't want there to be a hell… or a heaven.” Olivia cocked her head in confusion.

“No heaven? Why not?”

“Eternity. I don't think that I could bear such an unending existence. No end, no finish, days melting into weeks into months into years… I wouldn't be able to take it. Death should be the finale. After that, souls should rest in peace. That's what I hope for anyway.” It was oddly calming to open up to someone else like that. Sharing his fears was something he'd done only a handful of times in his life. He felt like his soul had just been sewn back together like a ripped blanket. What was the word for this feeling? Cata-… car-... cahra-... oh yeah… catharsis.

He felt catharsis.

“I understand.” Olivia responded with no further need for words. She placed her hand on Terunosuke’s shoulder and nodded a nod that practically said ‘Thank you’.

For a while, they just stayed like that. Terunosuke in the water, thinking about the world, God, and the afterlife. Olivia sitting on a rock, quieter than she had even been.

Then there was a loud splash.

The two instinctively looked over to the location that the sound had come from: the bottom of the cliff. Weird. Wonder what caused it. A dislodged rock or something? Probably. Whatever it was, it derailed his train of thought.

“Holy shit.” Olivia spoke softly, almost whispering. It was completely unlike her to curse. Terunosuke looked up at her. The woman's face was twisted in abject terror as she gazed up at the top of the cliff. What was up there?

Peering up himself, Terunosuke was greeted with the sight of Maddalena dangling over the side of the collapsed cliffside, one arm holding on for dear life, the other flailing in panic trying to find any sort of hold.

Without waiting, he raced to the meeting point of the cliff and the water. He would climb up and help her.
Maddalena wanted to cry. She wanted to scream out and be safe again. One second she was lying down and dozing off, the next, half of the cliff collapses! It was a miracle that she was even holding on right now.

She could feel herself start to cry. Dang it! She wasn't a baby! Stop it and hold on! Her arm hurt; the tips of her fingers were getting pinched together. It was going to slip out. She was going to fall and die! Her arm trembled at the thought. The trembling made her grasp slip more and more.

***

Terunosuke clawed his way up, little by little. The rocky cliff had cracked openings just large enough to reach into and form a grip. With that, he climbed, but at an agonizingly slow pace. He forced himself to speed up, embracing the pain that unguarded climbing caused his bare fingers and toes. They started to bleed. He didn't stop, Maddalena wouldn't hold on much longer.

Ten meters away. He could see her shaking. Get closer dammit!

Eight meters. He could do it!

Seven meters. She was crying out in fear. Go faster!

Six meters. Almost there!

Five meters. Her grip faltered and she fell.

He didn't waste any time. As soon as he registered that she was falling, he pushed off with his bloody hands. He wasn't going to let her die! In her rapid descent, Maddalena covered her face and eyes with her hands. Exactly what he needed! He hated to do it to someone he cared about without consulting them, but he couldn't worry about that. Enigma emerged from his outstretched right hand, hugging Maddalena and covering her in the safety of paper. The millisecond that the process finished, he shielded the sheet with his body and converted to paper himself. The two pages fluttered down safely onto the rock he'd landed on previously.


He did it.

In triumph, the page opened, setting Maddalena into his arms, unconscious.

“Hey, can you hear me?” It wouldn't take long for her to regain her senses. People who didn't have stands could still endure Enigma’s process just fine, though, evidently, it put some stress on their minds.

Suddenly, he felt the stares of four eyes on him. Oscar and Olivia gaped in shock. The boy that they'd only met a few days ago had saved their daughter by turning her and himself into sheets of paper. Anyone would be speechless.

“R-Ragazzo…” Oscar tried to start, his sense of reality straining to stay intact. “What did you… that… how…?” Terunosuke had had the same response the first time he'd witnessed a stand’s power.

“I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier.” He avoided the man's eyes. “I thought that I wouldn't have to use it while I was here. But…” Almost in response, Maddalena came to.

“Mmm?” She rubbed her foggy eyes in confusion. “Oh… hi.” For someone who had nearly died a minute ago, she was taking things surprisingly well.
Then she opened her eyes enough to realize that he was cradling her.

“Hey! Let go of me you idiot!” A flail of limbs bashed against Terunosuke’s chest. It would probably be unacceptable to say ‘If you say so!’ and then toss her into the water, right? The thought was filed away as he gave his actual sentiment.

“I didn’t think it was possible to nearly get killed by lying down and relaxing, but you make the impossible possible, don’t you?”

The tension evaporated into the bright blue sky.

“I said let me go! Are you deaf and dumb!”

“Don't talk bad about the deaf and dumb. It's rude to insult your peers!”

***

“Why is it bad to write with a broken pencil?” Cielo asked, almost sounding a bit excited. Noce looked up from the newspaper in confusion. He wondered whether that question was actually directed at him or if it was just a case of his friend thinking out loud.

“Why do you ask?”

“It's a joke. Just guess.” He'd never known Cielo to ever tell an honest-to-God joke before. Was the boredom really that bad?

“Umm… I give up. Why?”

“Because it's pointless.”

“Pointless, huh?” Noce ran his hand under his bandana, twirling his finger around a strand of hair. Cielo was good at quite a few things. Combat, mathematics, strategizing, etc. They were all qualities that surpassed Noce’s own level of skill. Inversely, there were some subjects that he was terrible at. Humor was one such subject.

“I've got one for you. Why did the chicken cross the road?” Noce asked.

“To get to the other side.”

“No. It was to get away from the guy telling shitty jokes.” Noce stuck his nose back into the newspaper.

***

“So let me get this straight.” Oscar said, tugging on his bushy eyebrow. “Your magic ability…”

“Stand.” Terunosuke swiftly corrected.

“Your stand… turns objects into pages of paper. Then if you see someone scared, you can turn them into a sheet of paper too. Do I have that right so far?” Terunosuke nodded. “And your real name isn't Ragazzo Enigma, but Teranasku-”

“Terunosuke Miyamoto.” Olivia amended.

“Yeah. That. Finally, you don't work in shipping, but smuggling. And not for some no-name corporation, but for Passione. Is all of what I just said true?”

“You’re exactly right.” Dammit. What were they going to do now that all of his lies were exposed?

“Well, Terunosuke, I'm surprised.” Oscar sighed heavily. “You’re much cooler than I ever could've imagined.”

What?

“He's right!” Olivia shouted as though she had been holding her breath in for an hour straight. Her hair horns sprung straight up as if they were excited antennas. “I always thought superpowers were just in movies and books, but you're completely genuine!” These people weren't kidding around. He felt like he should feel offended for some reason.

“Ruff! Arf!” Prince included with equal excitement. Even the dog.
“I can't believe I'm saying this.” Maddalena pinched her eyes shut and went red in the face. “I think you're really cool!” Her attempt at surfacing buried feelings was slightly dampered by the fact that she turned away from him while shouting.

Though he felt uncomfortable and undeserving for such an enthusiastic reception, he didn't want it to end. It sure as hell beat the alternative. Would their opinion about him change if they knew what he had done before? If they were around for every step of his journey, would they still be singing his praises?

He ignored the thought.

***

When he finally made it back to the house, Nessuno greeted him with food. “Hope you like stew.” With his eyes still obscured from view, he handed Terunosuke a bowl. It was a regional variety. The kind that had veal, nuts, and peas. The kind that seemed gross at first, but upon trying it, tasted exactly as expected. The kind that was tolerable when one had forgotten to eat all day.

“Thanks.” Nessuno didn't really seem like he would bring up the morning's conversation. Fine by Terunosuke. As he moved the odd concoction into his mouth, Nessuno started a conversation as he sat down across from him.

“What did you do today?” What would he say if Terunosuke told the truth. He had no clue. Hell, he didn't know how he would react to anything.

“I spent time with the friends that I made.”

“Did you enjoy swimming?”

“Yeah... it was a lot of fun.” He hadn't said anything about going to the sea or swimming. How much did this guy know?

“Did anything special happen?” Nessuno wolfed down a few bites while asking.

“The daughter nearly fell off of a cliff. I saved her by using Enigma.”

“Good job.”

Wait… what the hell? Was this the same person that sucker punched him earlier today? Did he have split personality disorder? It didn't seem entirely out of the equation. Why was he congratulating him?

“I did not think that you would do something heroic like that. Did I make you want to act differently?” This was asked during a furious act of drinking water that could be viewed as an attempt at self-drowning.

“Maybe. I always want to try to save people if I can.” Nessuno gave a fake laugh at that.

“Do not lie to me.” Nessuno never changed his tone when he talked. Every word came out with the same level of enthusiasm as the last.

“Sorry…”

“Is the food good?” Nessuno asked out of the blue. Terunosuke didn’t want to bring it up, but Nessuno’s idea of conversation was completely scattered. Even if he had step by step instructions, it would be an extreme trial of patience to follow his haphazard thought process.

“Yeah. Its really tasty.”

“You are welcome.”

For some reason, Terunosuke felt like he was being toyed with. Nessuno was controlling the conversation like a conductor controlled an orchestra. He decided to push back.

“What does your stand do?” Instantly, the topic flipped the mood.

“I… do not talk about it.” He had hesitated! It seemed that the stone cold expression was nothing
more than a facade. Keep the pressure on.
“ But you do have a stand, right?” Nessuno paused to gather his thoughts.
“Yes, that is corr-”
“And you use it in your position as Salvatore’s assistant.”
“C-correct.”
“I see. I understand now.” With the most cheerful smile he could summon, he dealt the finishing blow. “Thanks for the information.”

It was small and perhaps the slightest bit petty, but Terunosuke had sent a message that read ‘Don't Fuck With Me’ in big neon letters.

“I am going to bed now. Goodnight.” Nessuno spat out as a parting gift. If Terunosuke was correct, a few beads of sweat were building up along his hairline. His tone hadn't faltered at all, but there were definitely some cracks in his armor. It was just a matter of breaking them open.

***

A few days had passed since the truth had been revealed to the Rosso family. Currently, no problems had arisen from the revelation. If anything, it made the family all the more eager to spend time with him.”
“Hey, Terunosuke! Did you have a fun New Year's?” Maddalena greeted, already seated at the café… in his usual seat.
“Yeah, it was great. I had a dream that I was being carried by a hawk’s talons all the way across Mount Fuji. Then when she dropped me from an altitude of a kilometer up, I fell, but landed safely in an eggplant farm.” None of that was true, nor was it even the correct day to be having that type of dream.
“Wow! I wish my dreams were that fun.” No wonder they actually believed his name was Enigma Boy. He could say that his lineage included a shogunate, an astronaut, and a heavyweight boxer and she'd still think that he was being completely honest.
“Yeah. It was really excit-”

“Hey! In your opinion, what’s the best type of flower?”

It was like she was taking notes from Nessuno.
“I’m not really sure.” Flowers weren't really important. He hadn't cared about them in five years, but that wasn't important right now. “Roses, I guess.” He sounded about as confident as a priest undergoing a crisis of faith.
“Wrong answer!” Maddalena instantly declared.
“What?! You asked for my opinion! It's not possible to have an opinion that’s not correct.”
“You just used a double negative. That proves your guilt!” It impressed him that someone could be so sure of something that they knew nothing about. “Anyway. The answer was carnations. You get 0 points for that, giving you a grand total of 0 points.” Now she was keeping score? Where did the madness end?

“Does any of this have a point or did you just want to insult me for free?”

“Of course it has a point! We're going flower hunting in the woods today.” Flower HUNTING? What, were they going to lash out with thorny vines when they tried to pick them? That'd be one hell of a stand ability to have to deal with. “Hey! Are you listening to me?! Stop staring off into space every time that I say something!”

“What if I don't want to do this. I'd really rather take it easy today.”
“Go ahead and say it. Say ‘I don't want to go.’” Was she serious? Maybe she would actually let him off the hook…
“I don't want to go flower hunti-”
“Too bad! You're going anyway whether you like it or not.”
He should have known better.

***

Despite his claims to the contrary, Terunosuke thought the idea of hunting for carnations sounded like a lot of fun. Of course, Maddalena would never be informed of that opinion. Wouldn't want her to get a big head.

The woods weren't far from the village; a few minutes with the sun in his eyes was all it took. When they arrived, the plan started immediately.
“‘The idea is to find as many carnations as we can. Got it?’ She sounded like a general demanding an answer from his troops.
“Understood.” He cheered back in a blithe manner.
“Sound off like you mean it!”
“Sir, I get it already, sir!”
“Much better. Let's move out.”

Not a minute into the floral expedition had passed before an overlooked detail sprouted into his head.
“Don’t flowers grow in wide open fields?” Maddalena turned around, brow pinched down, arms behind her back.
“You really are an idi-...” She looked down as if she had suddenly discovered that she was wrong.
“I just remembered something. Carnations usually grow in wide open fields. Why did you waste our time by taking us out to the woods?” Damn brat! She was the one leading the entire time! Take some responsibility!
“Sorry. Which way to a field that has a lot of flowers, sir?”

Maddalena looked to her left, then to her right. Behind her, in front of her. Then she held her closed her eyes, building intense focus. Finally, her eyes bolted open revealing the answer.
“Back towards town.”

Terunosuke contemplated what life would be like if it were socially acceptable to throw children off of cliffs.

***

After a tedious return to their starting point, the leader marched forward as the follower was dragged by the ankle. A lush field consisting of every shade of green stretched as far as his eyes could see. It seemed like he would've noticed an area this expansive, though to be honest, he hadn't really been looking very hard.

“Take two! And... action.” Maddalena exclaimed with a movie director’s voice. First a drill sergeant, now this. Terunosuke mentally predicted that the next persona would be that of a sports announcer. “Come on, kid, we’re rolling.”
“Who are you calling ‘kid’? I'm clearly older than you.”
“Oh yeah?” She prodded while examining a weed with the utmost scrutiny. “Just how old are you?”
“17.” He shot back.
“Hmm…” Her face froze in place as the gears spun slower than a turtle.

“Age doesn't matter in this industry. Experience is key! I'm at least a decade older than you in that regard.” Crap. He didn't have a witty counter to that. Instead of responding at all, he just went along with the mission and began to scan the landscape for carnations. “What's the matter with you, kid? Did the truth finna- Hey! Don't just stare at the ground like an idiot! Answer me!”
“I don’t see a problem, Madam Director.” A great, shit-eating grin twirled onto his face. “I’m just gaining experience.”

She nodded with intense respect before searching alongside him.

***

After the fierce battle of sarcastic quips and excited outbursts came to a close, the two idiots finally found the treasure at the end of the rainbow: a beautiful group of red carnations. But something was definitely off. Namely, the fact that every individual flower was planted in neat rows. There was even a wire fence to keep wild animals away.

“You see!” Maddalena proclaimed as though she had won the argument. “I knew we would find them if we looked long enough. Take it all in, this is what nature looks like.” She wasn't even trying to hide her lies, was she?

“Nature? Give me a break! This is obviously someone's flower garden.”

“You're getting hung up on unimportant details. Now let's harvest these babies!” She flashed a garden trowel, eager to dig up the beauties by their roots.

“What exactly do you have in mind? You can't expect me to carry all of these. There's more than 25 at least.”

“Again, you're hung up on the unimportant. Just use your paper superpower and stuff them in your pocket. Simple.” Jeez, she was pretty quick on the draw to think up a scheme like that. She hadn't even known about Enigma for a whole week yet. She'd probably become a successful entrepreneur when she got older.

“Alright. So you figured out the ‘how’, but tell me the ‘why’ to all of this. Did you just want to vandalize some old lady's hobby for giggles? I can't really partake in something like that.”

Maddalena sighed.

“Are you a smuggler for the mafia? This is your job for crying out loud!”

“What kind of vacation would it be if I worked during it?” Bullseye! There was no counter to that!

She visibly tried to construct a comeback, even opening her mouth, ready to let loose, only to clamp it shut. It seemed as though he'd finally showed her the error of her ways. ‘Seemed’ being the key word.

Instead of saying “Fine…” or “We'll do something else”, she silently walked over to one of the rows and drove the trowel into the soil.

“H-hey! What are you doing?! I said I wasn't going to help.” She looked back and smirked.

“Then don't help. I can take care of this by myself.” What a pigheaded, self-serving, disrespectful, childish, little brat! She was completely showing him up! If he had a tenth of her confidence, he could be leading Passione by the afternoon.

With a defeated sigh, he crouched down beside her and began to dig.

***

The process took less than 5 minutes to complete, but it felt 10 times longer due to the constant possibility of someone appearing from the grass.

“Good job.” Maddalena said after scooping the last flower from the last row. They had only dug them up by the roots, leaving 25 perfectly healthy carnations exposed to the elements.

“So I guess this is the part where I convert them to paper.”

“You catch on fast.” Simply using Enigma’s power in the standard fare would be tedious. He decided that the ritual could afford to be a bit more interesting.

“Oh great flower God, Nakamikado! I call upon your blessings to transmute these incredible
creations of the earth! Will you help me?!” For added flare, he threw his hands up to the sky. “W-what the heck are you doing?! Are you actually summoning a demon?!” This was going to be fun.

“Foolish child. Did you think that the world we live in was the only dimension in all of existence? Of course not! If you simply call upon a force higher than yourself, you can achieve anything in this world.” Maddalena looked as though she had seen the second coming of Christ. “Now to finish it! I'll chant the ritual code! Here I go! URI, DAIKON, EBI, HAKUMAI!” He let his body go limp at the last word, giving the impression that he’d drained himself of all strength as he crumpled to the ground.

“Whoa… what did all that mean?” It was his grocery list.

“The sacred words used to channel, Nobunaga. With th- Hey! Don't ask questions right now! Can't you see I'm temporarily paralyzed!”

“You don't sound very paralyzed.” She observed while poking him in the side with her dirty trowel.

“Stop that, you'll anger Narukami if you damage his avatar.” The warning just made her poke harder.

Suddenly, there was a nearby rustling in the grass. Someone was coming to tend to their now ruined garden. He wasn't planning on getting caught. With a quick flip into his paper form, Terunosuke disappeared behind a tree right as the owner emerged.

“Maddie? What are you doing out here?” It sounded like a man’s voice. “And what happened to our carnations?!” The voice was extremely familiar, almost as if...

“Hey, Dad. I'm surprised too.” Of course. She had talked him into digging up her own garden. The kid was going places.

“Do you know who did this?” Oscar inquired with panicked urgency.

“Ask Terun-...” She stopped mid-sentence, not expecting him to have vanished so smoothly. “Uh… crap… the person who dug up that carnations stole Terunosuke. He was right here a second ago.” What was she trying to pull? There was no way th-

“Oh my God!” Oscar shrieked. “Will we be next?! Are we safe?!” How had he survived this long without forgetting to breathe?

“I think they're still around, Dad. I'd be careful if I were you.” The fear was too much for the moron to bear. Terunosuke had never seen anyone run as fast as Oscar did when he was scared.

Was Maddalena adopted? It didn't seem possible that a child so crafty and sly could be the result of the cowardly idiot who ran away without seeing any danger with his own eyes. Nature worked in mysterious ways.

“Tell me that was a joke you two have between each other.” He asked while he reemerged.

“Absolutely not! You should have been around when a spider crawled into our house. I thought he'd keep screaming until he died!” How much of that was fact untouched by her cunning lies was up for debate. However, one thing was guaranteed.

He needed to see how Oscar would react when he woke up with a centipede on his face.

***

“What are you going to do when we can leave?” Noce asked while balancing a broken pencil on his nose. Cielo hadn't thought very long on that subject. He'd thought about the things he could do if he were out this second, but had given little thought to what he WOULD do when it was safe to go out again.

“Probably go to a restaurant. I can't stand cooking anymore.”

“I could tell. Last night's soup nearly made me puke.”

“No. You nearly puked because you had a bottle of vodka with your meal. And you drank the entire bottle!”
“Oh. Right. I was wondering where that bottle went…” The pencil fell off of his nose. “Ugh… this is taking forever. Things need to hurry up already! I'm bored, dammit!”

“Quiet down, someone might hear you. And learn some patience. We might be here for another month.”

“GODDAMMIT! Don't joke around like that! I can't take much more of this!” Cielo sighed. He wasn't getting through to his associate whatsoever.

If Noce hadn't downed it all, a drink would've been nice.

***

Terunosuke was having a spectacular vacation. The daylight was bright and warm, even in late January. Nessuno was easier to get along with, the two of them even installed the carnations that Maddalena insisted he plant at his house. Speaking of, Maddalena had still dragged him on near-daily adventures until she had to go back to school, not that it stopped her completely. Oscar and Olivia continued their wild antics to no surprise.

All in all, it was the best getaway that he could’ve hoped for.

Of course, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end.

“I talked with Salvatore last night; only a couple days left until we can go home.” Nessuno announced over breakfast.

“What?” Terunosuke replied. “A couple of days?”

“That is what I just said.” Not a hint of sarcasm. “It is about time, don't you agree? I was getting pretty bored here.” Terunosuke didn’t say anything back.

Dammit.

So the carefree days were numbered after all. In less than a week’s time, he’d be back in Naples. He’d have to continue shuttling packages to shady people, work long hours just to barely meet quotas.

Goddammit.

“I'm going out. I'll be back tonight.” He tossed out as he bolted through the door.

***

“A day or two?! That's it?!” Oscar couldn't believe what he was hearing.

“Is there anything you can do to get a little more time?” Olivia pleaded. She looked like her favorite television show had been cancelled.

“Mmmmm” Prince whined. Terunosuke scratched behind his ear, giving his sympathies.

“I'm sorry to spring this upon you guys so suddenly, but this is how things are. I hate it as much as you do.” If Oscar and Olivia had a reaction this disheartening, how would Maddalena react?

He really didn't want to think about that.

***

Whether he thought about it or not made no difference. It would happen either way.

The little girl with dark red hair was walking closer and closer, her lips upturned with a familiar smirk.

“What do you call a bear with no ears?” She let out without any leadup.
“Whatever you want, he couldn't hear you.” A soft giggle.
“Close. You'd call it a B. Get it?” Of course he got it. He would've at least humored her with a cheap chuckle if he wasn't distracted with more important matters.

“I've got something to tell you.” The stern shift away from humor wiped the smile from her face.
“Terunosuke, don't be so serious. If you hate my jokes that much, then maybe you should find a new best friend.”
“I'm not joking. This is important.” From smirk to frown in just three sentences.
“Alright… what is it?”

It was best to say it without beating around the bush. He'd never get it out if he danced around the issue.

“The day after tomorrow, I have to go back home.” Like ripping off a bandage.
“Huh? So you're staying over for an entire day? That'll be a lo-”
“No. Home as in Naples, Italy. My vacation is ending.”
“You… you are… going to leave?” She couldn't believe it. To her, it was a mean joke, one that needed to stop ASAP. “This isn't funny. Cut it out.” Her head dipped low, hiding her eyes behind her hat.
“Maddalena… I'm sorry.” He drew near her, hoping to comfort her. “I only learned about it today. If I ha-”
“SHUT UP!” She erupted. Her hand balled into a fist and slammed into Terunosuke’s stomach. Blow after blow, she yelled for him to drop the act. After more strikes than he could count, his own hands wrapped around the attacker and pulled her close. He said nothing as she weakly knocked her fist against him in struggled protest.

Time passed as they stood there. The wind blew, the sun shined, and clouds passed.

Maddalena cried.

“You can't leave.” Her fist unclenched as she latched onto his shirt. “I won't let you go away.” If that were an option, she'd actually do it.

But this was reality. The place where parents died, dreams were shattered, and lives were destroyed with a single choice. The uncaring world that would tear someone apart without a second thought and laugh at the shredded remains. Terunosuke knew that world all too well.

No one else needed to come anywhere close to it.

“Hey. You know what? We still have a couple of days left.” The sobbing child looked up at him with gloomy red eyes. “We can still have 2 more adventures at least.”

It worked.

“T-that’s right!” She wiped the tears away and replaced them with an excited gaze. “Let's make the most of the time we have left together!”

For once, he followed her lead with no complaints.

***

Then it was time to leave.

His bag had been packed for hours, yet he still couldn't bring himself to admit that there was less than an hour left. Salvatore would arrive, the three of them would all drive to an airport, take a
plane to Naples, and life would resume as it had. The daily adventures would end, and he wouldn't see the Rosso family again.

He checked his watch.


Where had the time gone?

Was it possible for someone to live across the sea while working for Passione? He asked Nessuno as much.
“There were some rumors about a guy in the smuggling department who was doing that. I did not buy into them, however.”

No help.

Taking matters into his own hands, he set out for the friendly household one last time. At the end of the winding hill, he found that the family trio was coming to him at the same time.
“Thank God. We were scared that you’d left before we said our farewells.” Oscar spilled, pulling Terunosuke in for a bone-crushing embrace.
“He's right. We wouldn't be able to live with ourselves if we missed you.” Olivia added as she created a group hug.
“Don't scare us like that, idiot.” Maddalena finished, following suit.
“Ruff! Arf!” Prince cheered.

Terunosuke felt warm inside. Mostly due to the heartwarming nature of everyone's cherishment, but also because the body heat of 3 people in sunny weather started to cook him.

“Can't… breathe…” He half-joked.
“One more minute.” Oscar insisted.

After nearly collapsing from heatstroke, the group trekked up the hill together. Olivia and Oscar took ahold of Maddalena’s hands and launched her up while they climbed. His parents had done that sort of thing with him when he was a child. Seeing the playful act from a family that was secure and unfractured gave him a sense of hope for his own life. Maybe he could reclaim a morsel of joy that had been lost a long time ago.

No. Not maybe.

He would.

***

“So how was your stay?” Salvatore asked, his gaze peeking back to Terunosuke in the rearview mirror.
“Boring.” Nessuno yawned from the passenger’s seat. “There was nothing to do but watch old VHS tapes all day.”
“You didn't go out much, huh? That's alright. What about you, Terunosuke? Did you have fun?”

He gathered his thoughts on the month that he'd spent in rural country. The time that had rushed by was some of the happiest of his life. Maddalena, Oscar, Olivia, Prince, and even Nessuno made his time worthwhile with their wild antics, but also with the sincerity they possessed. People in Sicily were practically from another planet.

All of these factors made it that much harder to walk away. However, he didn't sink into despair.
Instead, he reached into the pocket of his cleaned long coat. Plucking out a single page from the
dozens, he unfolded it and let out a fragrant red carnation, his memento of carefree days. In fact,
he'd taken the entire garden with him and stuffed it in his pocket, Maddalena had insisted after all.

“I had a lot of fun… I can't wait to go back.”

***

“What the fuck is wrong with people today?” Noce spat out as he lost sight of the last assailant.
“I've seen shit before, but this…” Cielo trailed off.
“They were fucking KIDS! How could they do that sort of shit to someone at that age?! They're
goddamn monsters!” The green-haired hothead wasn't the most agreeable person in the world, but
now, he knew that Cielo felt the exact same way.
“I don't care about them anymore. Did you see where that woman went?”
“No. I lost track of her in the madness.” He sighed, kicking himself for not doing more. “She was
just a single woman! And those bastards curbstomped her!”
“What's the minimum age to join Passione?” Cielo rubbed his face with his hands. Noce didn't see
the point.
“Fourteen. Why?”
“With attitudes and brutality like that, I wouldn't be surprised if those kids were members.” It fit
into place. The sons of bitches were Passione scum!
“I understand now.” Noce growled, jaw clenched. “Then that means we'll kill every member of that
godforsaken gang!”
Cielo just looked away, agreeing wordlessly.

***

It was bitterly cold in Naples.

The first thing that Terunosuke did when he left the airport was light up a cigarette. It had been a
week or two since he'd been able to smoke; the taste was terrible and wonderful at the same time.
How was that even possible? It didn't matter, he inhaled and exhaled like normal.

Pane was still recovering in the hospital, so there was no one waiting for him back at the
apartment. There was too much sunlight out to sleep, and it was too far into the day to do anything
interesting. Coming to this conclusion, he decided that the wandering the streets would suffice as a
timewaster.

Without a set goal, he allowed instinct to take over as one foot stepped in front of the other.
Background thoughts came to the foreground. What was he going to do now? Frankly, he didn't
have the slightest clue. Surely someone from Passione would resume giving him assignments, but
for now, his future was as aimless as his present… hell, he should write that down. Pane might get
a kick out of it.

He hadn't done it on purpose, he knew that, but he couldn't explain how he had ended up in an all-
too-familiar location: a certain pay phone station that had served as a battleground more than a
month prior.

He stopped dead in his tracks, recognizing the scenery.

Was his subconscious trying to tell him something? “Repent for your sins” or some bullshit? Fuck
that. He wasn't in the wrong. Sanguinoso the Blood Bastard died because of a shitty chance
encounter. It could've just as easily been him.
He forced himself to stop thinking about the problem.

He looked down at his feet to help clear his mind. On the ground, he saw something. Something dark red, in a chaotic trail of tiny and fat pools that marched on out of view behind, and in front of him.

There was no way...

To clear away the illusion, he pressed his left hand to the ground and wiped the mirage out of existence… or at least he would have if it hadn't smeared across the pavement. There was no longer any room to believe that it was fake. He was looking at reality. But even reality seemed impossible. How had Sanguinoso’s blood stayed around more than a month after his death? After a millisecond of rational thought, the answer became obvious.

It wasn't his blood.

From the look of things, someone had been bleeding while walking along the sidewalk. Was it gang warfare, Passione vs Scheggia? If that were the case, the victim would be an associate or an enemy. Either way, he decided to investigate further.

He followed the trail until it lead into an alley. There, it led into a public restroom. Suddenly, a businessman exited the facility with a flat expression, as if he was inconvenienced by whatever was within its walls.

“Hey. What’s in there?” Terunosuke called out. The man faced him quickly, then shook his head and walked off.

Was that a coworker that Terunosuke didn't know? An enemy he should take a shot at? There wasn't any blood on him, so was it probably safe to think that the man was as uninvolved in the matter as he was? He had no answers as he walked out of sight.

Ignoring the warning signs, he pressed on into the restroom and looked in.

There was a body.

He flinched back behind the wall, his heart now racing with anxiety. It wasn't too late to walk away. He could simply turn tail away from here, go back to the apartment, and forget any of this ever happened. Part of him wanted nothing more than to do that, yet another part yelled at him to finish what he'd started.

He decided to take another look at the corpse; if he couldn't stand the sight of it, there was no way in hell he'd be able to get close to it.

He cautiously peeked around the corner at the lifeless body.

It had been a woman. One with a dark, fake tan and bleached blonde hair that had been neglected as mismatched brown roots grew out of her scalp. That was the appearance of a streetwalking corner girl. The body slumped against the wall next to the sink, a pool of blood gathering under it. Its pants had been stripped off and its shirt had been ripped open at the buttons, bearing everything that might have once seemed alluring.

Without thinking, he neared it for closer examination.

Jesus Christ. It had been pregnant… had.

There were three or four circular wounds on its stomach that leaked blood at a nauseating rate.
Lower, more blood was flowing out from its nether regions, despite having no bruises or signs of trauma around that area. He knew what that meant. The fact stabbed a knife into his gut.

Seeing the broken remains of someone who should've been helped and supported by a loving family burned his eyes with outrage. What kind of sick twisted bastard would murder a pregnant woman?!

Then she coughed.

He fell over himself in surprise. She was still alive!

“Are you alright?” He asked, knowing the answer before he let the words slip from his tongue.

“Ghh… Hannah… you… who are you?” She was missing a front tooth and her mouth and nose were both caked with dried blood.

“I'm… it doesn't matter. Who did this to you?” He crouched down to the battered mother.

“I… kids… kicked and… one had a gun.” Dammit, she was a nobody, why were his eyes welling up with tears?! There was no reason to care about her, none at all! Yet, he stayed by her side, hopeless to help.

“What is this?” The woman asked as she pressed her hand to her own blood. “N-no…” She looked down to where the crimson fluid had originated from. Pure defeat was splattered onto her face. “Hannah… Mommy's sorry.”

He'd never seen someone cry so hopelessly. To lose someone important was horrible, heart-wrenching, devastating, and every other awful feeling in the world, but to be powerless to protect one's own child...

“Please… kill me.” She whispered between sobs.

“What the hell?! How can you ask me to do that?!” There was no way he would ever do that to someone like her! Not now, not ever! It might be too late for the child, but she could still recover. Salvatore could definitely keep her alive.

“Please! I have nothing else now. No money, no home, no family… please… please…” She just kept begging as she wept. “Please… please… please…” Each plea chipped away at his hope.

Goddammit! This wasn't his problem! Walk away already! Do it!

But he couldn't go through with it. The begging continued unhindered. There was no changing this. It was either leave or continue.

He stayed.

“Alright… I'll do it.” She didn't thank him or stop weeping, but she became silent. “It'll take a minute or two. Then…” She nodded.

He breathed in. He breathed out. He steeled himself, already knowing it wouldn't help

He took ahold of her hand and guided her into a horizontal, lying position on the ground. With both hands, he covered her mouth and nose, blocking all air. As he held, the woman made weak thrashing motions. He had to constantly remind himself that they were made out of pure instinct. It was a fierce struggle to keep his hands steady as she bucked against him. Even though she fought him, he could feel that it was out of compulsion alone. There was no resistance beyond that. She really did want her life to end. Gradually, the flailing reaches subsided down, leaving only an occasional twitch. After a little time, though, her movement ceased completely. Once a few minutes had gone by, he pulled his hands off and put his ear to her nose.
Nothing; she had departed.

If there was anything that tore him up inside, it was the smile on her now lifeless face. So peaceful and serene, it was a tragedy that she couldn't find that sort of happiness during her life.

In some filthy backstreet restroom, a woman had seen true happiness during her final moment. It wasn't fair for her to have her final resting spot be on the disgusting floor.

“Enigma.” She was not a thing to be turned into paper, but it was only temporary. He'd ensure that she could rest peacefully forever.

***

The burial process didn't take long, ten or twenty minutes at the most. There wasn't much to say, he hadn't even known her name. When he took a step back and looked at what he had done, all he could see was an unmarked grave hidden in a public park. Leaving things like that would unacceptable. As a sign of respect the unknown woman, he planted a brilliant red carnation. Her death would give it life. That thought was the only thing stopping him from completely breaking down.

While standing before her grave, Terunosuke realized something. A realization that had been staring at him for years, rearing its disgusting face from time to time.

This is the way it has always been.

Something would in his life that brought him happiness, only for something else to come around and completely destroy his joy.

The first thirteen years of his life were as carefree and enjoyable as and kid could ask for. Then his mother was killed.

He was granted a stand and felt truly special for the first time in his life. Then he was turned into a mere object.

He was let out of that hell and resolved to live his life as best as he could. Then he found out that his father committed suicide out of misplaced guilt.

He left all that behind and flew to Italy where he found his first genuine friend. Then that friend was crippled while selflessly saving his sorry ass.

He hid away in Sicily and found a new family who loved him unconditionally. Then he left them behind and killed a hooker that didn't matter to anyone, yet he still cried over her grave.

Yeah, this kind of thing happened constantly; nothing new. Now that he knew about it, he could prevent it from happening again. When something new and exciting came across his path, he'd keep it at arm's length. He wouldn't let it get all the way to his heart, only for it to inevitably beat him down. This way, he wouldn't have to feel the cruelty that reality threw at him.

The decision put a smile onto his face as tears rolled down his cheeks.

Chapter End Notes
I had a quite a few sources of inspiration for the rural countryside setting in this chapter. Among the many, the 3 that I consider the most influential are a french film called Jean de Florette, Turn A Gundam, and the music video to Enigma's "Return to Innocence"
Terunosuke didn't have anything left in his system once he stumbled back into the apartment and collapsed onto his bed. Before his head even slammed into the pillow, he passed out.

***

A blank, empty landscape stretched out as far as the eye could see. He realized that he was dreaming, yet he didn't try to wake himself. A few meters in front of him, there was a person sitting down, facing away from him. He walked over to the figure and tapped their shoulder, trying to figure out who it was supposed to be.

As soon as his fingers met the being’s bare skin, it shrieked out as if he'd shot it.

Instantly, the scenery changed around him. The all-white dimension gave way to an endless dirt field. The figure changed as well, reshaping itself from a silhouette to a woman. Rather than grabbing a formless shadow’s shoulder, he was now pressing his hand to a woman's mouth.

Looking over the being, he noticed that it wasn't just any random person, she was the pregnant woman he had mercy killed just a few hours ago.

He recoiled his hand back as if he was tearing away a heavy bandage. The woman's mouth ripped away along with it, sticking to his wrist. Instead of a disfigured jaw, her torn lips unveiled a serene smile.

Her body began to violently quake as he stepped back. A thin line formed over her stomach and ran down towards her crotch. The line grew in thickness until the pressure proved too great and the woman's body ripped in half. Instead of a geyser of blood rocketing out from her womb, a bed of blazing red carnations were neatly arranged inside of her hollow insides. An arm reached out of the bed and grabbed a fistful of dirt, pulling its way out. It wasn't a infant’s arm, but an arm of a grown man. A second arm shot out and clawed the ground in hopes of escape. Both appendages flailed hopelessly until a man's head rose from underneath the flowers.

Nessuno’s concealed face scowled at Terunosuke with utter disgust. “Murderer.” He spat out flatly.

***

Terunosuke’s eyes slowly eased open. The most surprising detail wasn't the content of the dream, the fact that he'd had it in the first place, or even the recent frequency of nightmares.

No, the surprising part was that he was wasn't phased by any of it. His heart wasn't racing, he didn't need to vomit, and he felt no desire to swear off meat anytime soon.

It was hard to tell if this was good or bad.

***

“Nice to hear from you, Carta.” Salvatore greeted on the other line. “Same here.” Terunosuke responded between cigarette drags.
“Good news!” The doctor cheered. “Pane is in a stable state, so you can see him at any time. In fact, he's been asking where you've been.” That sounded like Pane, alright.
“I think I can carve out some space in my busy schedule.”
“Carta, you don't have a schedule. All smuggling operations have ceased for the time being. Please don't make excuses.”
“It's just an expression. You don't have to be so insistent.” He drew another lungful in.
“Sorry. Just get here soon. Please.”

***

When he made it to Salvatore’s clinic, he was greeted to the all-too-familiar shrouded face of Nessuno. The aid sat behind a secretary desk, waiting patiently for someone other than Terunosuke to ask for something.
“Hello.” The assistant stated flatly.
“Hello.” Terunosuke parroted.

“I have a joke for you.” Was the robot serious? The smuggler prepared himself for inevitable disappointment. “So you know how you were in hiding recently?” Terunosuke nodded with annoyance.
“You were there with me.”
“I guess you could say you were given Carta Blanche.” Nessuno gave a genuine smile that looked completely out of place.
“Carta... what?”
“CARTA Blanche… instead of… Carte Blanche.”
“What's Carte Blanche? Is that some sort of dessert?” He'd been right to expect a failure.
“No, it is… never mind.” He sighed while getting up and walking away.

Acting like the conversation had never happened, he made his way to Pane’s room and opened the door. The curtains were drawn and the lights were off, making it difficult to see anything. The only thing he could make out was a hunched over outline of a man sitting in a chair. Did he have the wrong room?
“Close the door, Fuckface.” That was Pane’s voice. He probably thought that he was dealing with Nessuno.

Terunosuke fumbled around in the dark, running his hands up and down the walls as he searched for the light switch. Finding it and flicking it on, he was barraged with posters that covered every centimeter of the walls. Each and every one had beautiful women in various states of undress, some in bikinis, some baring it all. Was this room always like this? Did Pane make it this way?

“Goddammit, Fuckface! Turn the lights off!” Pane spun around in his seat, which wasn't a seat, but a wheelchair. “Wha-? Terunosuke?” When his eyes landed on his friend, he was left speeches for a few passing moments. It looked like he didn't believe his own eyes.

“Terunosuke! You're finally back!” Pane wheeled over in a heartbeat and pulled him in for a tight hug. “You've been gone way too long!” He released him after an uncomfortable amount of time and flashed a bright smile. “How was Sicily? Did you have fun? You meet any sexy women while you were there? Was the food good? Have any trouble with the locals?”
“Jeez, let me get a word in. I can't keep up with that pace!”
“My bad, it's been a while, you know. Won't happen again. So how've you been?” He leaned back in his wheelchair, easing his tempo back to normal levels.

“Pretty good…” He trailed off. Why had Pane been sitting in the dark before he walked in? It was a few minutes before noon, he wouldn't be sleeping at a time like this. “Hey… Pane…”
“Come on. You don't need to use codenames anymore. Just call me Sergio.” That was his real name, wasn't it. He felt like a bad friend for almost forgetting.

“Sergio… what was with the gloomy atmosphere before? Don't tell me that's an everyday thing.”

The purple-haired patient waved his hand dismissively.

“It's fine, nothing to worry over. Life gets pretty boring if you can't go outside or even walk around. All I could do was shoot the shit with Salvatore and Fuckface the whole time. I'm pretty used to it, though, so don't worry.”

In direct violation of his orders, Terunosuke went on worrying for his friend. Outwardly, he appeared to be his normal self, save for the hospital scrubs in place of his usual stylish attire. Internally, however, was a complete mystery. Was he really as fine as he said? His eyes wandered around the room as he silently contemplated the question.

“So what's with the posters?” He asked while staring at a model who was using her hands as a bra.

“These?” Pane chuckled. “I haven't seen a flesh and blood woman in 40 some-odd days. You can't expect me to leave behind all the lovely ladies of the world at a moment's notice!” As far as coping mechanism went, Pane was incredibly thorough. Hell, he'd had the ENTIRE room covered. Even the ceiling.

***

Pane was still Pane… or… rather… Sergio was still Sergio.

“And that's why I'm no longer welcome in Vatican City.”

“Jesus! How did you even lose 11 guns that easily??”

“Eh. I was a lot more laid back in my younger years.” Terunosuke doubted the possibility of that considering that his partner was only 21.

“So why didn't they kick you out of Passione for that?”

“Are you kidding? People fuck up their missions all the time. You're a pretty special case since you haven't failed one yet. Though I guess you've only been around for a month or two.”

“Failure is that common? How many assignments have you failed?” The wheelchair-bound partner visibly pondered the question.

“Probably… one out of every four.”

“A fourth?! How the hell is that possible??”

“Basic hindrances. Stuff like missed flights, losing the goods, almost getting a new asshole where my stomach used to be… actually, that last one did happen.” His humorous attitude towards his incapacitation was a placating comfort for Terunosuke. They shared a laugh.

Even though he couldn't walk, he could still laugh. Talk about taking things in stride.

“I guess we failed our last mission, didn't we? Sorry that I ruined your perfect record.” They both chuckled, quieter than last time.

“When you get back on your feet, we'll do our best together. How's that sound?” Terunosuke forwarded, hoping to keep Sergio focus on the future. The white-haired boy laughed again, Sergio frowned.

“Hey, Terunosuke. Did you not hear yet?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“I'm no longer your partner. With the state I'm in, I can only do a select few tasks. I'd only slow you down.”

“What? So I'm supposed to work alone from now on?!” Shit. That really took the wind out of his sails.

“No. You'll have a partner, but it won't be me.”
“Hold on a second. I thought we were the only two people in the smuggling department to survive the surprise attack. What gives? Where has this guy been the whole time?” Sergio just shrugged.

“Beats me. Guess he was out of the country or on an assignment when the shit hit the fan. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Hmm… do you know what he's like?” Again, Sergio shrugged.

“I never met him, but I've heard he's an annoying cunt.” One bit of information was better than nothing, even if it was that negative. “His name is Tira Misu.”

“Like the dessert?”

“Yep. He'll meet you in a day or two so enjoy your freedom while it lasts.”

Relaxation was pretty much the only thing he could ask for at this point. He reached his hand into his long coat pocket, shuffling the pages that held the garden of carnations that Maddalena had gifted to him.

His best friend was alive and in high spirits, some new guy would be his partner in a few days, and the January stars were cloaked by the city lights.

There was nothing to worry about.

“I'll be sure to come back to visit in a couple of days.” Terunosuke promised, standing up to depart.

“Leaving so soon? Feels like you just got here.” He must have really enjoyed his company. Almost 10 hours had passed since they started talking. To think that it he felt it had rushed by was astounding.

“You're crazy… I'll see you soon.”

“Yeah… see you.” Sergio’s voice ached with melancholy as Terunosuke departed.

***

Terunosuke laid underneath the sheets of his bed, wondering what this Tira Misu guy would be like. Would he be someone mysterious and guarded? A psychopathic murderer? A laid-back guy with no worries?

If he had his way, he'd choose the psychopath.

***

There was no goal in mind when he slipped out of bed. No one had given him any assignments yet; who even would do that now? The former department leader was dead and there hadn't been anyone who was appointed as a replacement. Instead of worrying, he simply flopped onto the living room couch and lounged without any goal in mind.

When the phone suddenly rang, he nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Hello.” He answered. The person on the other line sighed into the receiver. “Hello?” He repeated with a grain of insistence. The other person still kept quiet, their breathing serving as the only indication that they were still there. Maybe it was a wrong number. “I'm hanging up.” He announced. Before he could set the phone down, a man’s voice blasted out.

“HOLD ON!” Placing the phone back to his ear, he pressed the no-longer-silent man for answers.

“Who the hell is this? I'll hang up if you don't answer me in 5 seconds.” The man groaned faintly before answering.

“If I were to tell you that there is no scientific measurement for how cold an object is, what would you say?” A nasally voice asked. What the hell kind of a question was that?!

“I'd say that you're full of bullshit. Science calculates damn near everything. A measurement for how cold something is has to be centuries old.”
“You'd actually be wrong about that. The way to find out the temperature of a given object is by measuring the amount of energy its particles have. Thus, it's only possible to measure heat. Coldness is just a feeling that normal people cooked up independent from any academic applications. Measuring how cold something is would be akin to measuring how slow something is going.” The man sounded increasingly smug as he went on.

“How educational.” Terunosuke had to hold the receiver with both hands to prevent his impulsive thoughts from chucking the phone out the window.

Just who was this person? The world's worst salesman? A cult member?

Suddenly, he put 2 and 2 together.

“Hey! Are you Tira Misu?”

“Are you serious, Carta? You don't recognize my voice?” He took that as a ‘NO’.

“It's Ghiaccio.” THE Ghiaccio? The one with a temper so volatile, he could be confused for a stick of TNT?

“How'd you get my number?”

“I started a 0 and counted up until I could get ahold of you.” Ask a stupid question. “I have sources, you know? They told me when you got back in town, where you live, what your phone number was, the brand of toothpaste you use, and what kind of shirts you wear while you sleep.” A week ago, Terunosuke would've been deeply disturbed by how easy it was for someone he barely knew to find his life story. However, the only current reaction he had was one of jealousy and curiosity. Would it be difficult to find an informant of his own?

“I don't wear shirts while I sleep.”

“It's an example.” Strange. The Ghiaccio Terunosuke knew would've added an “idiot” to the end of that.

“What do you need me to do, Ghiaccio?”

“Was it that obvious? Actually, don't answer that. Before I tell you, let me treat you to lunch. If I ask you face-to-face, you're more likely to agree.”

“Are you asking me out on a date? If so, I'll let you know now that I don't swing that way.”

“That's not what this is, Shit-for-brains!” Ghiaccio screeched. Terunosuke snickered in response. That was the Ghiaccio he was used to.

***

A thin trail of smoke trickled out of Terunosuke’s mouth as he stood waiting on the sidewalk. When he really thought about what he'd agreed to, it seemed like an agreement made by a suicidal moron. He was entrusting his life with an assassin who had recently tried to kill him. Hell, the man knew where he lived for Christ's sake!

Despite that, Terunosuke felt that Ghiaccio would likely refrain from using his intestines as a jump rope. If he wanted the smuggler dead, he wouldn't bother calling.

He peaked at his watch.

11:32 AM. The same time it had been when he looked 30 seconds ago.

“Hey! Paper Boy! Over here!” He heard a voice call. An expensive convertible rolled into his line of sight. Ghiaccio was hanging out the window, barking out to him. “Don't just stand there with your mouth open! Get in the car!”
Weren't criminals supposed to keep a low profile? The masterpiece the curly-haired assassin was driving looked like it had a sign painted on it that said “Look at me! I’m important!”

***

“Hello?” Cielo greeted, setting his magazine down to answer the phone.
“Cielo. It's Noce.”
“Yeah, I recognized your voice. What's up? Are you running some errands?”
“You could say that… did you not hear yet?” The hothead questioned after hesitating.
“Hear what? I didn't miss anything important, did I?” Cielo was usually on the up-and-up about important events. What was he missing?
“Carta is back in town.” He said softly.
“Noce, don't you dare!” Cielo exclaimed, knowing exactly what his friend was planning before he said it. “Padre told us to stay far, far away from him. Why in the world would you even think about that?”
“That bastard murdered Sanguinoso! I can't let him walk free after he did that. Listen, ever since he was killed, everything has been falling apart at the seams. This is the chance to mop up the blood that Carta spilled!”
“What?! With more blood?! Resorting to revenge will get you killed! I'm not going to help you no matter how much you beg!”
“Dammit! I know all that! This is for my revenge only. I don't want you to help either. And if Padre finds out, then he finds out. No matter what happens, I'm going to kill that bastard.”

Cielo knew he wouldn't be able to talk his friend away from violence; Noce was too damn stubborn.
“Can you actually do it? Are you prepared or are you going to wing it?”
“I've planned more tricks than a magician. My stand is ‘Abracadabra’ after all.”
“Heh, you're right…” Noce would be know how the entire situation affected Cielo just by that single forced laugh. “Do me a favor.”
“What is it?” Noce asked hesitantly.
“Don't you dare get killed.”

***

“What am I saying?” Ghiaccio asked in French, presumably as a test of Terunosuke’s language ability.
“You just said, ‘My coworkers make me sore in many ways.’” Terunosuke answered in Italian, sipping on a cup of coffee.

“Have you ever seen the television show ‘Star Trek’?” The bespectacled man slowly asked in some peculiar-sounding language--Arabic, maybe?
“I've heard of it, but I can't say that I've ever seen an episode.”
“A-are you serious? That wasn't a joke, was it?” Terunosuke rolled his eyes.
“Why would I lie about something like that?” Ghiaccio nearly dropped his coffee.
“You're actually serious. Holy shit! That's incredible! You could actually understand that last question?”
“The answer is still yes. Are you even listening? What? Did you yell so much that you broke your eardrums?”
“Paper Boy, I didn't ask if you'd seen Star Trek with French or Italian or anything like that. I used an inorganic language known as Klingon. If you seriously haven't seen the show before, then that means you can understand artificial languages even if you've never heard them before!” Ghiaccio was too excited about all this.
“Y-yeah? Alright… cool.”
“Come on! Get excited about this! If you could understand that, I wonder if you could decipher crittografie without assistance.” Ghiaccio usually didn't make any sense, but now he was using perplexing words that Terunosuke didn't understand.
“Critical… what?” Now it was Ghiaccio’s turn to look confused.
“Crittografie? Do you not know what to see are?” Terunosuke shook his head. “It's like a way to protect information by changing it in a specific way that usually can't be deciphered by an outside party. Governments and corporations use it a ton.” Terunosuke felt like he understood the concept with the simple explanation.
“So you think I could figure these things out? I don't know.”
“Maybe… hey… you couldn't understand ‘Crittografie’, but you could understand a fake language…” He paused for a second, trying to find some sort of answer for a question he had.

“Encryptions. What does that word mean?” He said suddenly, using English.
“The same as Crittografie, just in English instead of Italian.” Ghiaccio went wide-eyed.
“So if you don't know what a word means… you can't comprehend its meaning in any language… but when you figure it out, you comprehend it all across the board. This is incredible!” Ghiaccio’s eyes looked as though they were going to ooze out of his skull.

“W-E. As the French would say.” Terunosuke offered, trying to match the level of enthusiasm of the man sitting across from him. Ghiaccio just chuckled.
“Are you trying to say ‘Yes’ in French? That would be ‘Oui’.” Terunosuke blamed the Japanese school system for that mistake.
“What did I spell?”
“That would be English for ‘Us’.” Terunosuke decided to have some fun with the man sitting across from him.

This was going to be a bit challenging to keep track of.

“I thought ‘Us’ was spelled N-E-W in French.” Ghiaccio shook his head as if he were a wet dog.
“There's so much wrong with that! First off, the English word, ‘Us’, would be translated as ‘Nous’ in French. Secondly, you misspelled it! In fact, you circled back to English and spelled a word that means ‘Current’. You did that on purpose, didn't you?” All of the English and French was making Terunosuke’s head hemorrhage. He braced himself for one last joke.
“Who... knew?”

Fortunately, Ghiaccio let loose and burst into laughter.
“You're lucky that I don't get to use my linguistic skills very often. Thanks for the laugh.”

***

Noce had no fucking clue what those two were saying.

They just started spouting off foreign words that he didn't understand without warning. Did they know that he was listening to them? They were doing a damn fine job at confusing him if that was their goal!

It seemed as though they were finished with the gibberish as he focus back on their conversation. He leaned closer in his chair, hoping to catch more details.

He’d strike soon enough.

***
“So why did you invite me to lunch? I doubt you wanted to hear me make bilingual puns for an afternoon.” Terunosuke inquired, sipping his coffee that had become cold after many minutes of neglect.

“Ah yes.” Ghiaccio took a sip of his mimosa. “I need you to get me a specific item that I can’t acquire on my own.” Straight to the point.

“Is it something like a buried treasure? Maybe a map to Atlantis? Come on, spill the beans.”

“It’s a plane ticket.”

“…” Terunosuke sighed. “It was my fault for getting my hopes up.” He took another sip of coffee, wondering what he did in a previous life in order to deserve such a fate. “Where and when?”

“Salt Lake City, USA. February 2002.”

“Salt Lake City… you were researching that place previously, right? I remember seeing a pamphlet in your room that had information about that place. What do you want to do halfway around the world a year from now?”

“You know what the Olympics are, don't you?”

“Yes. Are you competing?”

“Don't get ahead of yourself. I’m simply going to cheer on a friend who is competing in some speed skating events.”

“A friend?” Terunosuke asked with a suspicious tone.

“Yes. A friend. What? Assassins can have friends too.”

“So you just so happen to be friends with an Olympic athlete… seems a bit too convenient.” Ghiaccio rolled his eyes.

“You're too untrusting. The higher-ups in the gang had him give me lessons in order to use my stand properly.” This topic of conversation was getting boring at an alarming rate.

“So why do you need my help? Just go to a travel agent and book the tickets on your own.”

“No can do.” Ghiaccio stated, shaking his head side-to-side. “Assassins like me earn a ton of enemies by doing our jobs. If I book a flight—even under an alias—the flight would be bombed.”

Terunosuke scoffed at that. What kind of pathetic security would allow a bomb on a plane? Nevertheless, a question was still hanging over his head.

“Why me in particular? Can't you just hire some warm body off the street to do it?” Ghiaccio stared at him as if he had just insulted his mother.

“Are you retarded?” The sincerity with which he asked was astounding. “Above everything, I can't trust some random, mouth-breathing troglodyte to handle a sensitive mission. Secondly, if could easily kill you if you try to fuck me over, but you're probably competent enough to know that that would be a waste of time. Thirdly, I don't want people to know where I'm going, not even my squadmates. So do me a favor and don't tell anyone about this. If you do, you'll wake up one day with an intimate knowledge of the word ‘castration’.” He made a compelling argument, Terunosuke had to admit.

Still, there was one more question that begged to be asked.

“What's in it for me if I help you? I'm not a very charitable person, so don't expect me to help you out of the kindness of my heart.” He prodded.

“I figured you would say that. Allow me to answer your question with another question. Have you ever been to a cathouse?” Terunosuke blinked at the question.

“Like a pet store?” Ghiaccio tried his damndest to suppress a laughing fit.

“That's missing the mark just a bit. How about a brothel, ever hear of that?” Terunosuke nodded confidently.

“Of course. It's a soup kitchen. Everyone knows that.” Despite his best efforts, Ghiaccio couldn't contain himself as he belted out a flurry of nasally cackles.

“I'm going to kill you if you do that again.” He warned, wiping the laughter tears from his eyes.

“So… a brothel is my reward… is there a reason for such a sinful prize?” Instead of responding,
Ghiaccio fished a pink business card out of his pocket and slid it across the glass tabletop. “I did some favors for the owner. He gave me this free pass as a token of his gratitude. Of course, I'll pay you when you complete the job, but consider this an advanced bonus.” He handed the gift to Terunosuke. The smuggler had even more questions than before. What kind of favor did you do for him? Why didn't he use it for himself? What kind of sicko names a brothel, ‘The Angel Nest’? He expressed all of these concerns with a highly perplexed tone of voice.

“The favors I did were classified, but I'll tell you that I killed one of his direct competitors.” Did Ghiaccio know what “classified” meant?

“I tried to use the ‘services’ a previous time, but every single woman there threatened to quit the second they laid eyes on me.” Was it because of his unfashionable glasses? His face? Probably his gaudy hair.

“I have no idea why he named the place that. Frankly, I doubt angels congregate in nests, though I've never had the opportunity to personally ask one.”

Terunosuke figured that he was being told the truth.

***

Noce was close to pulling his hair out. How much longer were they going to keep talking about stupid bullshit?! They'd have to take a move on to something important eventually… right?!

He massaged his temples, trying in vain to calm down. So far, they either didn't notice the man sitting a single table away from them, or they just didn't care. Whichever one it was, his patience was at the end of its rope.

He'd strike whether they were ready or not.

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“So after 3 years worth of lessons, I finally gave up on trying to learn Japanese.” Ghiaccio explained. “Instead, I just learned to speak Turkish. It was like shooting fish in a barrel in comparison.”

“You speak Turkish as well? Say something.”

“I am of the people from Italian.” The assassin confidently mispronounced, butchering the Turkish language. “What is the feel of you?” Terunosuke shook his head in disappointment.

“I really hope you didn’t have to pay for those lessons.”

“That's fucking it!” A voice screamed from behind them. Most of the patrons of the café turned to see an angry man who had been sitting right behind Ghiaccio and Terunosuke, his fists clenched and face scrunched in rage as he stood tall. His emerald hair was almost completely hidden by a silver bandana that had a vertical zig-zag pattern. The only hair that could be seen was a pair of sideburns that almost looked like tiny bushes growing off of his face. Rather than wearing a coat like a normal person would in the chilly January weather, the man wore a thin, green jacket that had been left unzipped, had its sleeves completely rolled up, and possessed similar zig-zag lines running up and down. Underneath the jacket, he had made the conscious decision to put on a mesh shirt… and nothing else. As an odd consolation, the see-through fabric gave a clear view of the man's toned physique. Terunosuke felt a drop of envy.

All in all, it was clear that the man was insane and needed to be made fun of for choosing such a ridiculous ensemble.
“... and this is the reason why society is going down the shitter!” The man had apparently been ranting while Terunosuke examined him. Maybe he should ignore him on purpose rather than do it on accident.

“Hey, Howler Monkey, are you going to get to the point today, or should I tell my mother that I won't make it for dinner?” Ghiaccio asked in the most wry tone he could summon.

“My name is Noce! You better remember it, Ghiaccio!” This guy knew Ghiaccio? Did he know Terunosuke?

Rather than being worried that some strange man knew him by name, the bespectacled assassin calmly leaned over to Terunosuke.

“Follow my lead.” He whispered mischievously. Was he about to attack?!

“Che, was it? Like Che Guevara? I'm honored to meet a real-life communist, I thought they went extinct.” What an idiot. Those insults wouldn't even offend a sea slug.

“What the fuck are you talking about?!” Noce screeched. “It's NOce, not Che!” Apparently, the man standing before him was lower than a sea slug.

It was Terunosuke’s turn.

“You can say whatever you want, Mr. Communist. Everyone knows that Che Guevara had hideous sideburns. Judging by your appearance, I'd say you're fit to lead a Colombian revolution any day of the week.”

There were a couple of intentional errors in that sentence, Terunosuke wondered which ones the hothead would jump on.

“Guevara was Cuban, not Colombian, dumbass!” What odd priorities.

Ghiaccio tagged back in.

“Either way, they speak Spanish over in that corner of the globe. You probably know the proverb 'Que sera, sera', don't you? Whatever will be, will be! There's no need to get upset over every little thing.” Ghiaccio was committing to the joke with full force. Terunosuke was impressed to say the least.

“I don't speak Spanish or any other language except Italian! I was born here in Naples for Christ's sake!” Noce retorted while starting to get red in the face.

“Hmm… that's right! Hey, Carta.” Ghiaccio tilted his neck back at Terunosuke. “Tell the class what the word 'Noce' means.” A blind man could where he was going with that question.

“It means ‘Nut’. As in a peanut or an almond.” He orated as if in school.

“So it's safe to say that this man is nuts?” Terunosuke rolled his eyes. He'd execute the punslinger when he found the opportunity.

Noce’s rage was visibly building. On top of his reddening face, his fists clenched together and his teeth bit themselves. He reached between his bandana and his moss-colored hair, pulling out a cigarette and lighter. Terunosuke wasn't the only one to calm themselves by smoking, it seemed.

The two seemed to differ on how to ease their nerves, however. Terunosuke usually inhaled the tobacco smoke for a few minutes, while Noce preferred to press the lit end of the cigarette to his bare finger.

The lunatic flipped the pair off, pointing his seared middle finger at Ghiaccio in particular. In response, the subject of hatred bit his tongue to keep from devolving into a giggling mess. He turned to Terunosuke with a face that said “Are you seeing this too?”

A few drops of liquid splashed onto Terunosuke’s face and Ghiaccio cried out in pain, falling forward onto the table suddenly. The pain likely had something to do with the lengthy glass shard
The was jutting out from the back of his neck.

In an instant, the shard ripped itself from the assassin’s neck and flew toward Noce, who grabbed it without looking. It seemed as though the removal was a moderately painful ordeal based on Ghiaccio’s second yelp.

“Still want to make jokes, asswipe?” Noce taunted.

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Noce’s profile

Former Codename: Noce
Former Department in Passione: Extortion

Age as of 2001: 17

Stand Name: Abracadabra
Favorite Foods: Tabasco Sauce, Toast
Favorite School Subject: World History

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In response, Ghiaccio tore out of his chair and charged at the attacker. Mid-sprint, a set of white armor encased upon his body. As the two opponents met, Ghiaccio kicked his foot forward, throwing an ice skate directly at Noce’s body. As if he knew that this exact situation would occur, Noce grabbed the table he’d been seated at and flipped it onto Ghiaccio’s bladed foot.

The glass surface shattered into ten thousand shards, slashing at Noce, who had the unenviable position of standing directly in front of the shower of shimmering blades. However, rather than becoming a bloody geyser, Noce’s skin was left intact, as if it had mistaken combat for vacation.

Ghiaccio’s leg became caught in the metal frame of the demolished table. Noce used the opening to swipe a cup of steaming coffee from an enthralled spectator’s hands.

What was he planning?! Throw it in Ghiaccio’s face? Drink it as a message of smug power? Terunosuke was petrified with curiosity.

Noce poured the piping-hot beverage on his head. The caffeinated drink flowed past his forehead, slid down his eyes and nose, darted along his mesh shirt, and made a small brown pool on the ground after running down his leg.

“That’s the stuff!” He exclaimed with spirited fervor.

Terunosuke was at a loss for words.

Ghiaccio, undisturbed by display the public indecency, freed his leg and resumed his assaulting charge. Noce watched with a smug grin as the armor-clad man raced toward him.

When the fist met his face, Noce did not fly back in pain, but shattered into glass, just like the table had. Understandably, both Terunosuke and Ghiaccio were perplexed by the sudden destruction of the man. Ghiaccio even ran his armored hand through the shards, trying to salvage even the tiniest amount of sense from the scene.

“I used to be an amateur magician before I started gang shit. You could say that I still have some cards up my sleeve.” Noce’s voice bragged, sounding as though he was everywhere at once.
“So that was some sort of fake? Neat trick. Can't imagine that you'll want to come out and get your ass kicked.” Ghiaccio glared around the area, searching for spots that might hide the enemy.

“So Carta! Don't just stand there! Look around for the bastard!” He barked. Terunosuke scanned the café with a fine-tooth comb. An uncomfortable amount of patrons were staring directly at him; the sight of a man turning into a glass distraction was quite the sight to see.

A flick of movement from the corner of his eye seized his attention.

The scattered shards of the fake Noce began to draw together. It was a stand ability, obviously. As the pieces came together, a body began to take shape and rise up from the ground; hips, a waist, a back, arms and shoulders, and, finally, a bandana-clad head.

Noce. The real one.

His back was turned away from Terunosuke, looking directly at Ghiaccio’s as the assassin was distracted with searching for the stand user right behind him. With a razor-sharp piece of glass in his hand, Noce blitzed toward Ghiaccio’s neck before Terunosuke could even open his mouth to scream a warning.

A quiet splitting sound brushed his ears, followed by a bloodcurdling howl from the stabbed assassin.

Terunosuke was useless. The most he had done in the fight so far had been limited to a petty insults. Ghiaccio could only do so much on his own.

It was time to help!

Ghiaccio squirmed away from the glass weapon that had been stained with his blood, nearly collapsing as he stumbled forward. Terunosuke saw his opportunity. At the distance Noce was at, it would be next to impossible for Terunosuke to miss.

He unholstered his hidden pistol with his left hand, aimed for a headshot, and pulled the trigger.

Noce had two reactions when the bullet ripped through the back of his head: he pitched forward like he'd been shoved, and he turned around with a sneering frown. One of his eyes had been blasted out, yet he still stood firm. Rather than a bloody wound, the hole was surrounded by shattered glass. Terunosuke could see Ghiaccio gritting his teeth through Noce’s head.

Bullets annoyed him, brutal punches couldn't do anything to him. What was this guy made of other than glass?! There had to be a secret to his stand. Until he figured it out, Terunosuke was powerless to stop him.

Once he finished reeling from his stab wound, Ghiaccio recomposed himself. Around his skates, a pool of ice began to grow. Several wild spikes split off from the asphalt, creating a miniature field of frosty stalagmites. Breaking one off to use as a dagger, the armored madman raced headlong into glassy danger, a path of ice continually forming in front of his feet as he sliced along on his bladed feet.

“Tch! I hate the cold.” Noce remarked, shifting his attention back to the assassin. He turned his back to the approaching threat. Raising his hands toward the roof of the café, he started to convert to glass. It reminded Terunosuke of a chameleon changing its colors.

Noce’s glassy arms, face, and thighs floated forward. They propelled at a frightening speed; anything caught in their path would be cut into ribbons.
Then the glass shards floated forward.

Terunosuke rubbed his eyes; this was going to be terrible.

The shards propelled up at frightening speed. Anything caught in their path would be cut to ribbons in the blink of an eye. They reached the roof of the café, at which point Noce reassembled himself, his scowling face looking down upon the pair, and disappeared atop the two-story building.

“Dammit!” Ghiaccio swore. “I was just about to finish him off.” He dropped the makeshift weapon and faced Terunosuke.

“I know how to beat him.”

“Already?! How’d you figure it out so quickly?” Terunosuke questioned, bowled over at Ghiaccio’s towering intelligence.

“He uses heat to activate his stand. He could’ve easily gone crazy on us, but he didn’t attack until he had heated up. The cigarette, the coffee, both of those were burning hot, yet he applied them to his bare skin. It’s easy to spot when you see it done multiple times. Prosciutto uses the coffee trick to heat up a target all the time during missions.” Prosciutto… who was that guy again?

“Yeah, he would do that.” Terunosuke feigned comprehension.

Terunosuke looked around. Most of the patrons of the café had scurried away, yet a few stubborn cockroaches had stayed put. If they died, it would be their own fault. Terunosuke raised his pistol and fired a trio of warning shots into the noon air.

“Get out of here, shitheads!” He screaming at the idiotic spectators, flushing them out of danger.

***

Noce drenched himself.

Of all the goddamn bastards in the world, the one that was buddy-buddy with Carta had to be Ghiaccio: the ONE person who could directly counter Abracadabra. Luck just wasn’t on his side.

He peeked over the edge of the building. The two were talking, distracted with words. Ghiaccio was protected by his White Album and Carta waved around a pistol.

It would be the perfect time to take a potshot at Ghiaccio’s weak spot again or slice Carta’s jugular vein. However, he was fizzled out; no glass attacks were available.

For a minute, the voice in the back of his head urged him to run away and play things safe in the face of desperate odds. He burned the distractions out of mind.

No matter, he’d go all out in a minute.

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Terunosuke caught a blur of motion jump off the café roof. Noce rang the bell to start round two. “Don’t shoot him.” Ghiaccio advised. “You’ll only make him hotter.” If he couldn’t shoot someone, then Terunosuke’s combat options were severely hindered.

“Did I keep you waiting.” Noce taunted, landing the two-story jump without breaking a single bone. There was something off about him. Why was he soaked with water? There was a trick hidden in his sleeve. The only question was what the trick actually was.

No one moved. All three fighters stood petrified in place, waiting to see what the other party would try.
“Hey, Ghiaccio, what is he going to do?”
“How the hell should I know?! Ask him yourself.”
“Alright.” Terunosuke turned to the man in the bandana. “Hey, Nutcracker! What are you going to do next?”
“I WAS BEING SARCASTIC, DUMBASS!” Ghiaccio yelled.

Noce laughed, a large smile shining on his face.
“Take a deep breath in and tell me what you smell.” The smile shifted into a sharp, calculating grin.

The two did as they were told. If Terunosuke wasn't making a mistake, then he might be in trouble.
“I can't really smell anything while this is on.” Ghiaccio explained, tapping a finger on his face mask. “Did he shit his pants or something?”
“No. Worse. It's gasoline.”
“Gasoline? Did he cover the place with it?”
“No, again. He covered himself.”

“Ding ding ding!” Noce mocked, stuffing his hand into his pocket. “That's correct, bastard.” He pulled his hand back out, a matchbook pinched between his fingers.

“Now let me show you the deadly potential that my stand, Abracadabra, can reach.” He flipped the matchbook open, ripped a red-tipped stick from the pack, and flicked it along the ground.

The flames exploded forth in an instant.

“WHAT THE FUCK!” Terunosuke heard someone shout, not realizing that the voice was his own.

The initial flash seared his unprepared eyes, forcing them to seal shut. Reeling from the sudden blinding, a stern hand patted him in the back, nearly throwing him off of his feet.
“Try not to get killed.” Ghiaccio advised before skating away in Noce’s direction.

Holding a hand in front of his eyes, he spectated the brawl. Noce, who was still engulfed in complete inferno, traded blows with Ghiaccio, who was engulfed with his ice-making armor.

Noce delivered a perfect kick in the middle of Ghiaccio’s chest, knocking the skater to the ground. He then raised his hands towards the noon sun. The walking bonfire’s hands dissolved into shards that levitated into the air once they reformed back into hands. Then his arms, shoulders, head, and the rest of his body rose up from the ground. The mosaic of limbs pieced themselves back together; Noce’s grinning and burning body stood suspended in the air like a magician. When the final segment of his feet rejoined the rest of his body, he hurled towards the earth as if gravity was making up for lost time.

Ghiaccio, who was on the direct path of death, somersaulted out of the way. Noce slammed the ground with an ear-splitting fragmentation. The thousand piece puzzle that made Noce’s body flew apart in every direction. Terunosuke was unfortunate enough to be too close to the explosive chaos. Though he tried to evade, a shard found a way to lodge itself where his right shoulder met his neck.

He was being branded with a white-hot iron. Before he could even scream in pain, he ripped out the piece of hell with his bare fingers, singeing part of his hand as a result.

Just as soon as it had started, the shard zipped back to the reforming assailant, the flames raging on.

The clash between Ghiaccio and Noce resumed. Noce had the upper hand by launching all sorts of disfiguring movements at Ghiaccio. He whipped a kick across Ghiaccio’s face mask, stunning him
as his leg shattered. In the next second, he reformed his leg and slammed another kick into the back of Ghiaccio’s neck. However, the assassin had managed to get a grip around Noce’s ankle. With a dramatic display of force, the knight in icy armor pulled the assailant over his head and slammed him to the ground. Unfortunately, the glass man shattered apart as he met the ground, minimizing damage and slipping out of Ghiaccio’s hold.

Despite his acrobatic attacking, Noce didn't seem to cause any lasting damage to the man in armor, but he pressed his assault nonetheless. To his credit, Ghiaccio was holding his own. Even with the the armor, it would break a regular person.

A flurry of rapid-fire blows collided against every centimeter of his guarded body. His hands were stomped on, his head was whiplashed forward, his stomach was used as a punching bag, a spot on the back of his neck that his armor left exposed was targeted relentlessly, a few bladed glass shards managing to strike the opening.

Terunosuke felt completely useless while he watched the two clash. Thankfully, an opportunity arose. The precious combustion that fueled Noce’s stand began to peter out. The glaring danger dimmed down to an approachable whimper.

He seized the chance. While the two continued their frenzied dueling, Terunosuke scurried across the barren café, grabbing an overturned chair by the legs.

If heat was the catalyst, then blazing gunshots would only deepen the problem. A metal chair wouldn't cause a single spark. It was the perfect weapon for this situation.

Noce’s back was turned, his stance firm as he rained his fists down upon the defending Ghiaccio. Terunosuke crept closer, giving the flames more time to quell down. Soon, he was a few paces behind his oblivious target. Ghiaccio’s eyes locked onto Terunosuke’s approaching figure.

When the gasoline finally burned itself out, the two struck as one. Ghiaccio formed a gripping ice rink around Noce’s ankles and a crude pair of handcuffs on his wrists, freezing him in place and binding his hands together. The halted man thrashed against his bindings before noticing Terunosuke’s approaching attack. For a split second, Noce tried to separate into glass; the newly formed patches of frost on his hands and feet dashed his hopes and his heat. Powerless to dodge, Noce braced himself.

Terunosuke swung the metal chair with every drop of strength he could muster. With a satisfying crunch, Noce flew back in one piece, the blow ripping him out of his icy restraints. Terunosuke moved to follow through, but his foot slipped on the frozen circle of stone that Noce had been trapped in just a moment ago.

Terunosuke, Noce, Ghiaccio, they were all on the ground.

Noce rose first with Ghiaccio quickly following. His ankles had been torn open by the ice, causing a waterfall of blood to stain his silver shoes. He struggled to walk, refraining from putting weight on either foot. Ghiaccio, however, seemed complete unaffected by the beating he took. The curly-haired assassin stood over the hobbling man. He took great pleasure in slicing into the exposed ankle flesh with his ice skate. Terunosuke found the act distasteful, though he'd likely do something similar given the chance.

It hadn't been immediately obvious, but Noce was tenacious to a degree that seemed inhuman. While being slashed and stomped, he crawled along on his forearms towards the café. When he reached the brick wall, he kicked Ghiaccio away with the foot that had been horrifyingly disfigured, sanguine lines of blood and exposed tendons were plentiful. How could he manage to
move his leg without crumbling into wailing wreck?

Ghiaccio seemed caught off guard by the power of the kick, stumbling back a step or two. Terunosuke neared the scene, taking a spot next to his ally.

The two were equally impressed when Noce somehow propped himself up on his other foot, which had taken a glutinous share of abuse of its own. He kept his balance by leaning a hand on the front window of the café. Some of his blood smeared onto the letters that were imprinted on it.

“I've been wondering about this.” Terunosuke started. “What's a stand user like you doing at a random café? This wasn't a chance encounter, was it.” Noce chuckled.

“Nope. I followed you here. You can get a lot accomplished by bribing a waiter.” The bleeding madman explained. “I've been keeping tabs on you ever since you killed Sanguinoso.”

“You mean you and Scheggia?”

“Right again.”

“What the hell is Scheggia?” Ghiaccio prodded, feeling left out of the loop.

“Splinter group of Passione, broke off a few years ago. I fought a member, killed him, they killed some of my coworkers, and this guy is trying to kill me.”

“So what do you want with me!?” Ghiaccio blasted, still trailing behind everyone else.

“You just got in the way, nothing personal on you, Ghiaccio. Though we do stay semi-informed on the other members in Passione, so we know enough to stay safe if need be.”

In all honesty, Terunosuke was getting tired of this.

“Let's get this over with.” He ordered. Ghiaccio nodded in agreement.

“Hey, you have to kill me for this to end.” Noce explained. “Don't expect me to just roll over and be extinguished!” The green-haired man brought his fist to the café window at blinding speed, breaking it into a glass shower with a single swing. The guy was strong, clearly, but he was still a deadman.

Delaying the inevitable, Noce pulled himself through the new opening, his ankles still bloody and unreliable. As if taking pity for the weak, neither Ghiaccio nor Terunosuke made an enthusiastic attempt to stamp out the pathetic man. They walked through the front door casually, a small bell chiming at their entrance.

When they looked back down at Noce, they didn't see a defeated, beaten wreck, but a tall man, standing freely and sternly, his ankles showing light, healthy skin.

“Good as new.” He announced triumphantly.

“Shit! He can heal himself with glass!?” Ghiaccio shouted, mirroring Terunosuke’s thoughts. Noce didn't say another word as he bolted to the back of the restaurant.

Terunosuke took the lead as he and Ghiaccio pursued. As they made it to a hallway that led into the kitchen, they both saw their quarry reach inside a cabinet and retrieve a opaque, plastic tub with a black lid that would look right at home in a chemistry lab.

Noce sprinkled the contents of the tub onto himself, a grayish dust coating him from head to toe. The two continued to close in before Ghiaccio suddenly halted in place, his eyes wide and panicked.

“What's wrong?” Terunosuke whispered to his associate.

“What the fuck is that?” Ghiaccio asked, completely ignoring the question. An evil smile twisted itself onto Noce’s face.


“Some powder?” Terunosuke rolled his eyes. “Big deal. Are we honestly supposed to be scare-..”

Ghiaccio sprinted out the door, leaving the oblivious smuggler dazed and confused.
“What the hell?!” Terunosuke demanded, running after the fleeing assassin. “Why are you running?!”

“The bastard had Thermite!” Ghiaccio shouted back without turning his head. “Gasoline burns at around 200 degrees, Thermite burns at around 2000.”

“2000?!” The two made it out and looked back at the building, waiting for their enemy to emerge.

“I can use White Album to lower temperatures, but I'm not sure I can take on something that hot.”

There was a hissing sound that came from the inside of the café. When Noce was on fire, it hurt to look at him. When Terunosuke gazed at the white-hot, burning figure that walked out the door, his eyes felt as if they were the ones on fire. Noce was no longer a green-haired man who wore a bandana and had a short temper. He was a demon who had crawled out of the deepest pit of hell to annihilate everything in his path. His eyes blazed white, just as the rest of his body did. The stone ground that he walked upon was scorched black.

Terunosuke was going to die.

Ghiaccio formed a small block of ice on the ground, his armor stand encasing him again. Pointed icicles grew out of the pillar as if they were lethal branches growing from a sinister oak tree. The armored man broke one off and tossed it to Terunosuke.

“If worst comes to worst, use this.”

“What am I supposed to do with this?” He replied, not expecting to receive an answer.

In the brief moment they were distracted, Noce had closed the gap. He ran his hand along the ice tree, melting it in the blink of an eye. There was no speed in his actions. Everything was done with a sloth-like leisure that devastated Terunosuke’s already frayed nerves. The man was like a killer that had crawled out of a slasher movie.

Ghiaccio didn't waste anytime in forming a monolithic pillar of ice in front of the walking inferno. Noce was unfettered by the hindrance, simply melting the obstacle in seconds with a single touch.

Recognizing that nothing would be solved this way, Ghiaccio dashed forward, his skates cutting through a path of ice that he formed in front of him. He activated White Album’s ability all around Noce’s crackling bursts of thermite. However, the blazing substance brushed off the icy barrage as if it were a swarm of sick gnats.

Noce raised both arms towards Ghiaccio, signaling that he would separate into pieces and attempt to stab through White Album’s opening. Ghiaccio thought along the same lines. He raised one arm in front of himself and placed a hand to cover the back of his neck.

“Bring it, Shithead! I'm ready!”

Terunosuke blinked; Ghiaccio was slammed into the ground. Noce stood behind the armored man, a single hand gripping Ghiaccio’s head.

“If I can't cut through your armor, I'll just use it against you.” A demonic voice guaranteed, slamming Ghiaccio’s protected head into the ground over and over with blinding speed.

Terunosuke realized that White Album was hardy; it wouldn't be beaten by anything that was stupid enough to hit it, including Ghiaccio’s skull. At the rate it was being abused, his brain would be reduced to mush in a matter of minutes.

Terunosuke rushed at the assailant. It was a terrible idea, he knew that extremely well. However, it was the only idea he had. Risking fourth-degree burns, he reached his arms out to tackle Noce to the ground.

He missed.
No, he passed right through the chaos and hit the ground with an humiliating thud. Noce had so much heat available, he was able to deform and reform around Terunosuke without even touching him.

Terunosuke couldn't do a thing to him. He was useless.

“Pathetic.” Noce’s demonic voice provoked. Terunosuke turned his gaze to see Noce sitting on Ghiaccio’s back as if it were a high throne. “Now I'll do what I came here for.” He rose to his feet and began to step towards Terunosuke.

“Hey, bastard.” Ghiaccio grabbed onto Noce’s ankle, halting his movement. One hand on Noce’s ankle, the other guarding the opening on the back of his neck. “Don't you try to forget about me.” Noce cackled excitedly.

“If you have a death wish, I'll be happy to grant it.”

The demon ripped Ghiaccio’s hand away from White Album’s neck opening, exposing raw, bloody flesh. Terunosuke could only watch.

Suddenly, another pillar of ice exploded from the ground and rose straight at Noce’s burning form. The man dispatched it with a single flick of his finger. Another pillar rose up; Noce batted it away with ease again. A third, a fourth, and a fifth all frantically bolted at the man. Without worry, Noce continually brushed off pillar after pillar with a single hand. Ghiaccio’s desperation was plain.

He was about to die.

Eventually, the pillars ceased. The last ditch effort had failed.

“Did you think that I wouldn't have the strength to reject each and every one of your pitiful attacks?! You're life is over!”

Noce reached his arm out and pointed his hand down to Ghiaccio’s unprotected weakness. “Burn in hell where you belong!”

A single glass shard shot from Noce’s middle finger. As if time had slowed down, Terunosuke could track it as it flew down to sever Ghiaccio’s spine. He couldn't watch, yet his eyes wouldn't look away.

A harsh cracking sound snapped out.

Not the cracking of broken bones, but of cracking ice.

Terunosuke eyes bore witness to a flooring reversal. The shard hadn't pierced Ghiaccio’s neck, but had been stopped by a thick sheet of permafrost that had been created atop his entire back.

“W-what?! Why isn't the ice melting?!” Noce demanded, panic tainting his words.

“Do you know the saying 'The candle that burns twice as bright burns half as long'?” Ghiaccio responded defiantly, pushing his body into a kneeling position. “Those ice columns weren’t just to slow you down. They were all used with the sole intention of lowering your temperature to manageable levels. Say, have you looked at your right hand recently?” All three pairs of eyes were directed to Noce’s bare hand, no longer burning.

“The thermite! It’s been expended!” Noce wasn't even trying to hide his panic anymore.

Seizing the moment, a devastating trail of ice snaked up Noce’s right arm. Instead of melting away like it had before, it stayed put until Noce pressed his left hand to the sturdy frost.
His left arm ended its crackling display. Then, his chest. And his midsection, his hips, his legs. Finally, his head reverted back to its original state, his silver bandana fluttering slightly in the wind.

“Tch! It's not over yet. I still have enough left to finish you off!” Noce turned back and sprinted back to the restaurant.

“Carta! Stop him!” Ghiaccio ordered.

Terunosuke was in a fortunate position. Having tackled through Noce’s body, he was kneeling between his opponent and the remaining thermite.

He wouldn't let the demon reappear.

As the bastard was about to run past, Terunosuke picked up a nearby chair and brutally clubbed Noce in the chest. Sadly, he shattered away harmlessly, only to repair a second later on the ground.

He seized the opportunity the moment that he was able. If Noce’s Abracadabra needed heat to function, then it stood to reason that he'd eventually cool down if he wasn't heated by anything. To that end, Terunosuke raced to keep the thermite away.

His leg was sliced open.

He crumpled down like a demolished building. A group of shards flew back and reformed as Noce’s hand. Terunosuke forced himself to continue, hobbling forward with only his unharmed leg to bear his weight.

Noce rose to his feet, aggressively charging past the limping smuggler. Too close. Terunosuke reached both hands out and constricted his opponent’s leg. A great deal of heat was still in Noce’s body; specifically in his legs. This heat seared and devastated his hands, but he still hung on nevertheless; he was dead if he let go.

Noce didn't appreciate being hampered so stubbornly.

“No need to rush me, I'll massacre you in a few seconds.” He sent down a jagged present through express delivery: a red-hot shard, straight into the left shoulder. The pain that shot out of his slashed nerves and tendons wailed through his body.

His fingers lost their grip, freeing the executioner to go retrieve his guillotine. Noce returned to his original task. As an added bonus, he called the embedded shard back to his body, taking a chunk of Terunosuke’s shoulder along with it.

The young boy who was currently splayed out on the stone ground had taken glass shrapnel to the neck, had been sliced in the right calf, had a hole ripped into his left shoulder, and had received two different hand searings.

He couldn't pinpoint the reason why he forced himself to stand again. Death was nothing new, so maybe he had some sort of destiny down the road that was waiting to be fulfilled.

The thought put a bad taste in his mouth.

“What did the intel say about me?” He shouted out, drawing Noce’s surprised attention as he stumbled forward. “Did it say ‘He's immortal! Stay away at all costs!’? If not, I'll make sure that it gets added.”

“I'll have to say, you're pretty impressive for a common bastard.” Noce complemented as Terunosuke inched closer and closer. “But it won't be enough!” He retrieved the remaining thermite triumphantly.
Just a few more steps!

“Pray that God will be merciful to your soul.”

“Enigma!”

At maximum range, the stand leapt forth from Terunosuke’s bloodied body. He swiped the chemical container from Noce’s grasp, converting it to paper and gifting it to Terunosuke. “Wha-! Ha! Nice trick. Looks like I got a little cocky.” Noce was uncharacteristically forthcoming in admitting his overconfidence. Terunosuke braced himself, tightening his grip on the paper. “Too bad bullshit tricks get you killed in the end!”

Terunosuke preemptively hobbled out of the path of an oncoming shard assault. His intuition had been correct. The glass pieces returned to Noce’s hands without a single drop of blood coating their glinting edges. It must’ve been a devastating shot to the ego judging by the assailant’s twisted facial expression.

“Gah! Fuck you! No more stalling! Time to die!” Noce disintegrated into a savage bombardment of blistering shards, all racing to turn Terunosuke into a pincushion. Terunosuke used Enigma’s ability on himself, hiding as an unnoticeable page on the ground.

Noce reformed and looked around, baffled that his opponent could disappear with such speed. “Get out here and die, you bastard!”

Terunosuke obeyed the order, emerging from a small piece of paper on the ground.

“Ha. Didn't expect that to actually work. Now why don't you hand over the thermite. I promise I'll be nice if you do.” The unreasonable request sparked an idea. It disappointed him that the fight had forced him into such a situation, but there weren't many options remaining.

“Your wish is my command!” Terunosuke exclaimed, false excitement decorating his words. “If you can find it, it's yours!”

Maddalena would be upset if she saw him execute his plan.

He reached into his right pocket and pulled out an entire garden’s worth of carnations concealed in folded papers. With a frantic toss, a total of twenty-six papers scattered all around Noce’s feet. A few opened prematurely, letting their flowers escape, however, a majority of the papers carried out their task and spread to every angle around the heated man. Silently, Terunosuke enacted his plan as he crept through the paper minefield.

“What the hell did I just fucking say?! Bullshit tricks get you killed in the end! I wasn't fucking around!” Multiple shards shot out at frightening speeds, shredding several pages worth of carnations.

“Dammit! Where the hell are you?!” Noce grabbed a page off of the ground and tore it into two pieces. Another carnation.

This plan required patience, stealth, and time.

Terunosuke had stealth.

Noce’s was reaching the boiling point. He ripped through each page one by one, frantically seeking the paper that hid the bastard he’d sworn to kill.

Terunosuke crept closer.
Soon, only three pages remained. Noce stomped the first against the stone ground.

A carnation.

Terunosuke needed just a little more time.

Noce unfolded the second page.

Another carnation.

Terunosuke was nearly there! Almost!

Noce flicked the final sheet open. A victorious grin tore across his face.

Thermite.

Now!

Crack!

Noce stumbled. He felt slightly off-balance. For some reason, his chest felt achy and sore. His fingers couldn't keep their grip on the thermite container. It slipped out of his hand and the metal powder spilled onto the ground.

What was going on? He had won, right? Why did he feel so weak?

He pressed a hand to his chest and felt a hand; another person against his chest! He flung his jacket off as quick as he could manage in his drowsy state.

A paper with a left hand jutting out of it sat perched on top of his mesh shirt.

The hand held onto an icicle that was plunged into Noce chest, right where the heart would be. “You fucking bastard!” He tried to shout. Strangely, it came out as, “You... fu...in... ba...”

He pulled the icicle out of his heart and crumpled to his knees. He needed heat or glass. ASAP! When he tried to stand, his legs ignored the order. He crawled along the stone ground like a stray dog. The noon sun wasn't hot enough to warm him up in the chilly January weather.

He sat down, propping himself up against the cool, brick wall of the café. He'd rest here until he got his strength back.

Self-immolation always worked up a thirst. Luckily for him, a discarded champagne flute was turned over in front of him. It contained a few drops of mimosa; Noce cheered on the inside. He tipped the glass to his lips, flowing the few remaining drops of orange juice and champagne down his parched throat. Once he'd finished the drink, he rubbed the glass against his chest, barely managing to heal to skin on his chest, let alone repair his pierced heart.

A thin trail of blood trickled out of his mouth. It was really annoying to think that the tempo of combat would slip away from him so quickly and so violently. Carta would pay for killing Sanguinoso… right after Noce finished his rest.

Padre would be extremely upset and probably lecture him for five hours straight. Cielo would be really annoyed if he found out Noce had died.

Damn it.

Two pairs of feet walked into his fading field of vision. One wore annoying red and black boots
that had some mud stains, while the other pair had ice skates on.

Noce hated the cold. His feet and hands started to go cold and numb. The discomfort travelled up his limbs and sapped the energy from his muscles.

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“We should finish him off.” Ghiaccio warned, the repeated blows to the head not slowing him down a single step.
“He looks so peaceful. I don't think we'll even need to. He's fading pretty fast.” Terunosuke supplied.

“Sorry…” Noce whispered.

“No? For what?” Ghiaccio questioned harshly. “For picking a fight with us? I fucking bet you are!”

Noce only responded by slumping forward.

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The streets of Naples didn't look very picturesque from inside a car.

“So then I'll call you in a month or two to see the status of the ticket. When you get it to me, I'll reimburse triple for your trouble.”
“Huh? Triple for what?” Terunosuke hadn't been listening since his driver had started talking.
“The 2002 Olympic ticket. Salt Lake City. Remember?” Ghiaccio repeated. “Have you been ignoring me this entire time?” Terunosuke didn't answer the question.

“Anyway… there's no point beating yourself up over this. It was us or him, and in the end, it was him. Case closed, end of story, throw the book out the window.”

That approach had served Terunosuke well in his day-to-day life for years. But, in regards to violent death, the method left him a bit… hollow.

“We're here.” Ghiaccio said impatiently, as if repeating himself. “Here” was a safe distance away from Salvatore’s clinic.

Terunosuke opened the door and swiveled his legs out of the car, hesitantly resting his feet on the sidewalk.

“Do you mind if I ask you something, Ghiaccio.”
“I probably will mind. What's the question?” He didn't skip a beat.
“Ghiaccio is a codename, an alias given to you to hide your true identity.” Neither one of them tried to make eye contact. “Would you please tell me your real name?”

Despite burying his head in the sand the second anything unsavory crossed his path, Terunosuke had not passed the point-of-no-return. A few select people had managed to crumble his defenses and see him for who he really was. If others could do it, he could do it too.

“My real name?” Ghiaccio seemed puzzled as to why anyone would ask for something so private yet inconsequential. “If you really want to know… it's Neveo Glaceau.”

It was foolish to think that Ghiaccio, an experienced assassin, would reveal anything personal about himself to someone like Terunosuke. “Neveo Glaceau” was just another alias. Snow and Ice. He knew that Terunosuke would know exactly what it meant.
“I'll see you in a few months, I suppose.” He stood up on the sidewalk, his gaze still pointed away from his business associate.

Ghiaccio sighed before answering back.

“I'll see you then.”

Then, Ghiaccio drove away.

Despite fighting on the same side, he really couldn't say that they had fought together. When he and Pane had fought together, his friend had placed Terunosuke’s safety at the top of his priority list. In stark contrast, he and Ghiaccio had simply fought the same enemy.

Maybe it was wrong to worry about the topic. Maybe it was wrong to even have the expectation of trust in the first place. It was pretty pathetic to worry about the acceptance of someone he barely knew.

One aching foot in front of the other; the clinic was getting closer.

The topic wasn't worth the time. He put it out of his head and entered the clinic.

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Of the 6 billion people in the world and 57 million living in Italy, the person sitting at the clinic's reception desk was none other than Terunosuke’s former roommate: Nessuno.

“H-hey. Is Salvatore in?” The bleeding teen asked.

“Yes.” Nessuno replied, his voice carrying no concern whatsoever.

“Well… can I see him? I've got some wounds that need treatment.” The nasty gash on his shoulder dripped blood onto the linoleum floor, as if giving proof of his condition.

“What did you do?” Nessuno still didn't stand to go get help, nor did he do much of anything.

“Were you in a car crash?”

“I can't drive.” It was like talking to a brick wall. A brick wall that made him want to grow his hair out to insane lengths just so he could strangle himself. “If you must know, I was attacked by a Scheggia member. I managed to kill him before he killed me. Happy now?”

“You… you what?!” Just for a heartbeat, Nessuno sounded angry. Genuinely angry. “You killed another person?”

“Weren't you listening? He was a breath away from killing me!” Nessuno countered by digging his nails into Terunosuke’s long coat, bunching up the material and pulling him too close for comfort.

“That does not matter. You still ended the life of a human being.”

Goddamn robotic bastard. What right did he have to call him a murderer of all things? A criminal: sure; a bad person: he'd already done that; a murderer: no way in hell!

Nessuno didn't deserve a reply. He didn't even deserve a shred of respect. Even if Terunosuke saved 10,000 innocent lives, the bastard would still regard him as a murderer. Why even bother defending himself? In fact, why not rub Nessuno’s nose into the dirt?

“So what if I killed someone? He was probably going to get killed by someone stronger than me anyway.”

“Do you not see the value in human life? Are you that blind?” He was really getting riled up now!

“Yeah, I see the value in human life. It's a good thing a pathetic bastard like that didn't have any value to begin with.”
Nessuno quivered frantically. “You... you... you are less than human!” He screamed, shedding his stoic demeanor. “You are the scum of the earth! The worst of the worst! Hell is not enough for a monster like you!” This was perfect! It was unthinkable that Nessuno of all people would burst like this. All that remained was the coup de grâce! “You can insult me all you want.” He started with an uncaring tone. “It won't bring anyone back to life.”

“IIIIIAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!” Nessuno screeched. He didn't yell, shout or even scream. He fucking screeched like a murderous banshee.

“MICHAEL!” A voice called out, cutting through the otherworldly horror. Salvatore rushed into the reception area and wrapped his arms around Nessuno. The screeching ceased the second he was hugged. “Shh. It's alright, it's alright.” Salvatore lullabied.

What the hell was this? Why was Salvatore doing this? Was his assistant that important to him?

Terunosuke felt a guilty stabbing feeling in his stomach. A wave of realization hit him at once. Nessuno was a person, not an emotionless robot. What was the point in antagonizing him so much?

The two walked off to a room and disappeared inside. Terunosuke was left alone, blood still silently trickling down his skin. If it hadn't happened to him, he would have been impressed at how fast the mood completely shifted from provocation to regret.

Nessuno had been right all along. He was a hypocrite. He expected others to open up and play nice with him, but anyone who called him out would be ripped apart.

After a time, Salvatore reappeared alone. “I'm sorry.” They both apologized at the same time. Terunosuke blinked at the bowing doctor. What was Salvatore sorry for? “I didn't know that you two were at each other's throats like that since the beginning. I... I should've done more.”

For some reason, the doctor started to tear up, but dried his eyes on his sleeve before he started crying.

“You look pretty worse for wear. I can help you with that.”

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“He's your son?!” Terunosuke gasped. “He was adopted, but yes, I am Michael’s father.”

Nessuno--whose real name was actually Michael--was Salvatore’s son.

Salvatore looked at him with an uncomfortably serious expression before he continued on. “When Michael was a few years old his parents were drained of every cent they had by greedy gang members--’protection money’ is what the monsters called it. When they couldn't pay anymore, they abducted him as collateral. While he was in their dirty hands... they... they...” Salvatore looked as if he would break down as he tried to force himself forward. “I understand.” Terunosuke urged, ushering his friend past the painful details. “Yeah... Unfortunately, his parents urgently tried to get him back through forceful means...”

The two exchanged a quick glance; the next part of the story was obvious and equally tragic.
“Anyway… I caught wind of the entire ordeal shortly after they were murdered. If there's one thing that I can be proud of in all the years I've been alive, it would be the fact that I killed those bastards and saved Michael’s life.”

Salvatore had killed before? Somehow, it seemed almost unthinkable that SALVATORE could do something like that.

“Of course, there were complications. The men were members of a very young Passione. While I had provided care for a few of their members in the past, I wasn't apart of them until that day. That was almost ten years ago.” He forced a smile. “I’m sure that if I asked the right people, I could leave this all behind… but… sometimes I feel that I NEED to stay here. Other times, I wonder if what I'm doing is ‘good’. For every life I heal in the ER, at least two more are shot down or ruined by the same boys I save.”

“But… didn't you tell me that it was better to look forward to the future, rather than resent the past?” Terunosuke argued.

“Ha. I guess I can't take my own advice.”

If Terunosuke hadn't felt guilty yet, he sure as hell did now.

Neither one of them said anything while Salvatore tended to Terunosuke’s wounds. They were both there, unsure of what to say.

“Terunosuke.” Salvatore hesitantly started. “I know that you didn't get these cuts and burns from an explosion or some freak car accident; I'm not that naive anymore. I know that you were in a life or death situation.” He sighed as if it pained him to keep talking. “It may have been life or death, but there was a third option that you could have taken.”

Did he mean negotiation? Should he have tried to talk Noce down?

“I'm not calling you weak by any means… but you could've run away.” Terunosuke had never considered running away from any of the fights he'd ever been in. Not once.

“It isn't obvious, but Michael values human life above everything else in the world. If someone acts dismissively towards mankind… well… I think you know his reaction by now.” Michael? As in Nessuno Michael? Not someone COMPLETELY different?

The layers of guilt just kept piling higher and higher.

“So… I think it's in everyone's best interests if you try to run as far as you can the next time some misguided soul tries to kill you.”

There wasn't much of a choice in the matter. Who knew what the next guy would be like? He'd almost died twice now. If death was the one rolling the dice, he likely wouldn’t stay lucky. If he could avoid the conflict altogether, he might survive.

“I'll try.” Just two words. That's all that was necessary.

“Thank you, Terunosuke. And… please… don't end up like me.” Salvatore patted him on the shoulder, right along a bloody gash that he failed to notice.

“AAGGHH!” Terunosuke yelped in pain.

Salvatore apologized for 5 minutes straight.

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The dark-skinned man searched frantically through the city, clamoring to find what he was looking
for. He'd been steadfast and confident less than an hour ago, but the extended silence left his imagination to spiral into bottomless dread.

Please, for the love of God, be alive.

It was a reasonable request until he saw the police tape.

An unremarkable café on the corner of two unremarkable streets sat scorched and ruined. Heavy, black burn streaks marred the ground, tables and silverware were scattered around like confetti, and a single body sat silently against a wall, a group of police investigators staring at the river of blood that had flowed out of the man’s chest.

The blond man stopped where he stood. Sharp, acidic, tears rolled down his face without his approval.

His best friend was dead.

Cielo was an idiot. He was a retarded, selfish piece of garbage. A piece of garbage that refused to stop his best friend from running into his inevitable death.

The police were shoved aside as he rushed to the body of his fallen brother. Noce’s skin was still warm, as if he were just resting his eyes. Cielo pressed his forehead to Noce’s, wrapped his arms around him, and wept harder.

“I'm sorry… I'm so sorry, Uboldo!” His friend would usually snap at him for using his embarrassing real name in public like that, but circumstances had changed. Hopefully, he wouldn't mind if it was just this once.

“I won't forgive him for this.” It was a desperate struggle to say anything, let alone make promises.

“I'm sorry… I… wasn't there for you when you needed me. But now I understand! I'll find a way to grant your wish! I'll make Carta pay!”

***

A blank, empty landscape stretched out as far as the eye could see. Terunosuke dreaded how common this setting had become.

Why couldn't he sleep peacefully?

His simple request was ignored by an inferno that flared up behind him. The hellish flames roared in a sudden fit of outrage. Terunosuke bolted away before they could mount a proper attack.

He rushed forward for a few seconds before he realized that he was ascending upwards as well. Rather than a smooth, flat path, he was climbing an endless staircase. An endless staircase made of glass.

There was no handrail to hold onto, no walls to lean on. If he lost his balance, he'd fall into a nebulous eternity that had spawned below his feet.

The roaring inferno prevented him from asking questions. He leapt up the stairs with a frightened pace. Every step caused the glass to crack and snap angrily at him. He chanced a swift glance over his shoulder; the fire was chasing him. The first few steps had been swallowed up like candy, yet the flames still ate and ate.
Terunosuke increased his pace.

Eventually, the fire started to gain on him. He'd go rush up two steps, the flames would engulf three. He'd sprint up four, the fire would eat five. It didn't take a mathematician to figure out that he wasn't going to win. No matter how high he climbed, he still couldn't see the top.

Eager flames began to lick at his shoes. He could feel the excited heat radiating against his back. If he slowed down for less than one second, he was toast.

In desperation, he planted both feet and rocketed himself up and forward. For a moment he was free of the assault. Then gravity took over and he smashed back into the staircase.

When his feet met the glass, shards exploded out in every direction. He stumbled to balance as the pieces of hell ripped into his clothes and his skin, tearing both open.

Behind him, the flames retreated back down the stairs, as if they were afraid of being cut. A victorious grin slashed across Terunosuke’s face. Bleeding cuts were harmless in comparison to a vengeful bonfire.

He took a proud step forward. Instantly, the glass beneath his feet fell apart, sending him through the staircase and down into the hungry void. A desperate, reaching hand shot up, gripping the jagged glass edge of the hole he'd just made. All five of his fingers on his right hand were ripped open as if he was reaching inside of a paper shredder.

Terrified strength swelled up inside his body. With it, he managed to raise himself to relative safety.

Crouching on his knees, he stared in horror at his hand, if it could even be called a hand anymore. Each one was weeping crimson sludge. A few bones were visible through the remains of his skin. His pinkie was dangling on a thin string of skin.

He blinked.

His hand was still mangled beyond all recognition.

So why didn't it hurt?!

There was no pain. No debilitating agony. Nothing.

He slammed the wreck against the stairs. Still, no discomfort. Everything he tried resulted in failure; he felt fine, comfortable.

The stairs wouldn't end, he couldn't feel pain. There was only one option left.

Without hesitating, Terunosuke dove back through the opening to eternity.

Wind rushed through the long strands of his hair as his stomach flew up into his mouth. The nebulous abyss opened up its jaws and swallowed him whole.

He landed in a chair.

If he was being honest, he hoped he would've gone for longer. The freefall had lasted for ten seconds at most, barely enough time to register what was happening.

Looking around, he found that he was sitting in some sort of bedroom. The comfortable chair he found himself in was surrounded by a bed, a dresser, an open door that led to a personal bathroom,
and an identical chair sitting across from him. Not only was the opposite chair black leather as well, Terunosuke was also sitting in it… another Terunosuke.

It was unmistakable. Long white strands of hair that flicked up at the ends; piercing blue eyes; dark skin; a white and brown long coat that had the word “Enigma” stitched into the interior. It was him.

Only… it wasn't him.

Rather than looking directly forward as he was right now, the Terunosuke before him stared up at the ceiling.

It wasn't a mirrored reflection or an illusion as far as he could tell.

“Are you having a nice dream?” The replica asked sarcastically, peering down at him. “I'd say it's been pretty exciting so far, not like that dumb shit that we usually have to slog through. A fire, a glass staircase, a black hole, now this? I wonder what Freud would think about all of this.”

“Are you supposed to be me?” The real Terunosuke tensely questioned.

“Pretty much. There's other symbolism at play, but that's basically the gist of it.”

So it was a… metaphor? How weird. Was there any meaning behind any of this?

“I'm really more of a manifestation… or a repressed aspect of your personality--one of mmmmany. And who are you calling 'weird'?”

“W-what?! I didn't say that out loud! You can read my thoughts?!” Terunosuke shot up out of his chair. The fake rolled his eyes.

“I'm a part you. If you think it, I think it. One mind, y'know. Oh, and to answer your question: None of this is real, so stop acting like a scared little puppy and live a little.”

Live a little? How?

As if to answer, a voice that sounded identical to his own spoke in his head.

“I wanna drop all my responsibilities and play with Madalena again. Working is such a hassle! I don't wanna go back to that tedious bullshit! I haven't seen someone's fear reaction in a long time. I'll scare the next little kid I see on the street. I should check out that strip club that Ghiaccio mentioned. These dangerous fights are incredible! I seriously get to kill real people! I can't wait to pick on this Tira Misu guy! It's gonna be so hilarious!”

There was no way in hell he felt like this! It was bullshit! He wasn't someone who thought such vile things. He was a righteous, responsible person.

“Are you even hearing yourself right now? I'm your misanthropic side, it's not like you can trick me.” The fake stated while picking his nose. “Honestly, you're not cut out for this gang shit. You had just resolved to not rely on others for anything after burying that woman. Then a few days later, you end some bastard and ask Ghiaccio if he wants to be your buddy. Face the facts, you're pretty pathetic.”

“Go to hell, you bastard!” He changed forward at the fake and unexpectedly slammed into an invisible wall. Sidestepping past the barrier, he reached his left hand toward the imposter, only to be greeted with the image of an empty chair.

“Goddamn… I know we're the same person, but why are you such a dumbass? Also, I am you. You are me. Calling me a bastard equates to calling yourself a bastard.” The voice prodded. “Look through the window again, dumbass.” Taking the advice, he sat back down in his original chair;
the fake reappeared. “This is starting to get really tedious. We're not getting anywhere. Just wake up already, this is dragging on way too long.”
“How the hell am I supposed to wake up?” The real Terunosuke demanded with a thoroughly frustrated tone.
“It’s obvious to everyone with more than 2 brain cells.” The fake pointed at the bed. “Just go to sleep.”

Going to sleep in a dream in order to wake up. How needlessly complex could things get?

“You’re the one you dreamed about a woman giving birth to flowers. You don’t have any room to talk about needless complexity.”

Shrugging off the point, Terunosuke climbed under the sheets and closed his eyes.

“Night night, little angel.”

***

When he opened his eyes, he was still in the bedroom. The key difference was that he was now alone.

What did it all mean? Was the replica really part of him? Why were his dreams damn stressful?

None of these questions could be answered.

Rather than dwell on things he couldn't change, he fell out of bed, slung on his shirt and long coat, and sifted through his pockets. His hand located the sacred ticket and revealed its holy presence for the world.

“I complimentary visit to the Angel Nest gentleman's club.” The pink voucher read, the text floating in the speech bubble of a seductive woman who had misplaced most of her clothes.

This was his payment for helping Ghiaccio. Should he actually use it? A part of him said, “Imagine if Nessuno or Salvatore found out! You'd never hear the end of it!” However, a different part of him screamed, “Who fucking cares what they think?! Let's go!”

The disparity was tearing his fragile mind asunder. He took a seat on the couch in the living room, set the voucher on the coffee table, and shot eye lasers through the pink paper.

What to do… what to do…

***

“Hello, Pane speaking.” The man spoke with a dull tone.
“Hey, Pane, it's Carta.”
“Whoa!” He instantly changed his tune. “How's it going, Terunosuke? What're you calling me for? Are you that desperate to hear my voice?”
“Don't get any lofty ideas from a simple phone call. I just called to inform you that I can't come visit you today.”
“Really? That sucks.” Back to dull. He must've set some sort of record. “What are you busy with?”

Should he lie? Maybe. But then again, it was Pane. If anyone, he was the one person that could be trusted to keep a secret.

“I'm uh… going to a… gentleman's club.” He murmured under his breath.
“A... gentlemen's club? I'm not sure that I've ever heard of- YOOOO! YOU'RE GOING TO A STRIP CLUB?!” Right back to excited again.
“Shut it! Don't let anyone hear you say that!”
“Hey, Salvatore! Terunosuke’s going to a strip club! Can you believe it?!”
“Pane!”
“Ahaha! Yeah, I'll tell him. Salvatore says it's a step up from using department store catalogs.”
“That was a one time occurrence! You weren't even supposed to see it!”
“You're the one who threw it on the poker table for everyo--... Seriously? Yeah, I'll tell him.”
“Huh? Now what?”
“Salvatore told me to tell you that the Tira Misu guy arrived in the country today.”
“Oh? What's he like?”
“Dunno, haven't met him yet.”
“Well... I'm still going.”
“Hell, kill 2 birds with 1 stone. Just meet the man there.” There...? Seriously?! "I'm not sure that's a good idea... actually I'm positive that that is an atrocious idea.”
“Look at it this way, you can mix work with fun. If the conversation gets awkward, just focus on the entertainment for a while.”
“I really don't think th-”
“I'll have Salvatore arrange everything. You guys better have fun for me!”
“Pane, wait. I ca-”

Click.

...

What the hell...

Why was he losing control over his own life?

He used half the day to contemplate that very question.

***

It was a few hours past noon when Terunosuke made it to the strip club. In contrast to his preconceived expectations, the establishment was nothing like he had imagined. It was clean, well lit, and smelled like vanilla.

What a nice surprise.

“Good afternoon, sir.” A female greeter greeted.

This was the part that had caused so much mental anguish. The thought that another person, this official-looking, bespectacled woman for example, would see him indulging in hedonistic depravity.

“Have you been here previously, or is this your first time with us?”
“Uh... the second one.” Terunosuke mumbled.
“Alright. Then I won't tell you things you already know.” Wait... no she misunderstood. The second option, not his second time! He had to correct her, fast!
“T-thank you.” Fuck!

“Uh... I have this...” Hopefully, the woman wouldn't see how much he was shaking as he handed
over the voucher. She briefly examined the slip before looking back up at him. “Oh, you’re Mr. Carta. We were told you would be here today.” At least he could be thankful for Pane’s insistence for once. “Please follow me.” The woman led him through the main hall.

What a sight…

Everywhere he glanced, there were women in various states of undress and just as many patrons appreciating the view. In those brief few seconds, he felt like he truly understood the secrets to the universe.

Tragically, the greeter woman stopped at a curtain on the wall and peeled it back, revealing a small room. She motioned for him to take a seat, which he did with hesitation.

“Your companion will be here shortly. If you need anything, do not hesitate to ask.”

With that, she bowed and closed the curtain as she departed, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

What did she mean by “companion”? Was that Tira Misu… or a girl?

Ignoring the important questions, he noted his surroundings. It was a very compact fit, almost reminiscent of some rooms he’d seen in Japan. A purple, cushioned, semi-circular booth surrounded a trend, round, metal table, allowing people to face one another if the sat on either side. Along the wall, an ample tray packed with various alcoholic beverages stood ready to serve anyone who wished for a drink.

Terunosuke filled a glass with water and ice, added a straw, and felt like a child. Here he was, at a goddamn strip club, drinking water and feeling more anxious at the prospect of spending time with a woman than he was during a life or death confrontation. In the seventeen years that he’d been walking the earth, he had never once had a girlfriend. It wasn't like he was gay or anything, it was just… girls were scary. He’d never learned how to talk to one properly, so they remained a force of anxiety throughout his life, and would likely remain that way for the remainder of his pathetic life. It was best not to even try and give up all hope. Besides, it wasn't like a beautiful girl would just fall into his lap and marry him.

“What bullshit.” A soft voice cursed from behind the curtain. Was that Tira Misu? Terunosuke set his drink down and crept closer to eavesdrop. “This guy better not be a disgusting pervert.” The person on the other side was whispering to themself, making it impossible to discern their identity.

There was only one way to find out the truth.

With a shaking hand and nerves like tissue paper, he pulled aside the curtain to see a beautiful girl holding the curtain as well, their hands touching.

…Uh…

“S-sorry!” He reeled his hand back after a momentary eternity. The girl looked at him with a perplexed stare, as if she didn't know what to think of the sight. Suddenly, she let out a soft giggle. The giggle quickly progressed into a full laughing fit, much to Terunosuke’s dismay.

“That's so cute!” Of all the things she could have said, it had to be that. He could actually feel his prideshriveling up. “I guess you won't be bad at all.”

“Alright… good.” Alright good?! What the fuck was he saying?! He needed to say something cool, something non-cute! Girls care a lot about appearances, he should say something on that! “You look… cute.”

“Aha… ahahaha!” She was starting to cry with laughter. “Thank you, that's the nicest compliment
I've received all day."

Sliding the curtain shut, she pulled on his arm, leading him to sit down. Terunosuke’s mind went blank while she touched him.

Taking a seat across from her, he noted the girl's appearance, just as he had noted the room's appearance earlier.

The feature that caught his eye the most was her brilliant orange hair. It flowed freely past her shoulders and rested on her back. There was the slightest bit of waviness in the bright locks. The feature that caught his eye the second most was her similarly orange feather boa that she wore around her neck like a scarf. Haphazardly distributed gold feathers radiated prominently from the rest of the orange field. Her clothes didn't amount to much. A sequined bikini top and bottom were the only articles of clothing that preserved her decency. Both the top and the bottom were orange, obviously. It seemed like the only part about her that wasn't orange were her eyes, which were an alluring shade of red.

“Are you enjoying the view?” She asked sliding a few centimeters in his direction.

“N-no! Ah... I mean y-yes!” He was stammering and stuttering more than an auctioneer. Again, the girl giggled at his anxious words.

“I didn't think guys could be so innocent.” Another few centimeters. “Are you actually in Passione?”

“Yes. I am. Smuggling department.”

“Good. Then you're exactly the person I'm here for.” She brought her legs up onto the seat and laid out next to him.

At this point, Terunosuke’s heart had thrown away all semblance of restraint and had thrown itself into overdrive.

His forward stare was set in stone, averting his eyes from causing guaranteed embarrassment.

“Hey. Shouldn't we wait for Tira Misu to get here? It'd be pretty awkward if he walked in right now.” Yet again, the girl let out a fit of giggles.

“I doubt Tira will mind.” She danced her fingers up along his arm, tugging and pulling pure embarrassment from his rigid form.

Why was she so eager?! Was this what all strip clubs were like? Was she a special exception? Did he do something to get her to this state? If so, could he reverse the process?

With no answers to the pilling list of questions, he just stayed locked into his pathetically hopeless position, a single bead of sweat cascading down his forehead.

“Hey, Carta.” The girl slid her hand up to his cheek, running her thumb up and down slightly. Her hand was so soft! “Please, look at me.” She guided his head to turn and face her. His eyes soon followed. Immediately, he was horrified at how close she was. The centimeters of separation could be counted on one hand.

Despite, being so close already, the girl crept closer and closer towards him, all the while, their eyes were locked into one another’s gaze.

He would never say it out loud, but in that moment, he could help but find the girl extremely cute. Being so close wasn't such a bad thing anymore. In fact, he was almost enjoying her overwhelming presence.

“Are you ready?” She asked, her breath tickling his chin. Ready? Ready for what?! To go further?!
Did that mean…? That?
“Y-yes.” He answered honestly. It wouldn't be so bad if their lips met.

Contrary to expectations, the girl moved back and stood up, her closeness gone in a snap. She looked down at him with a mischievous grin that all but said that she knew exactly how he had felt a second ago.

She held her hand out as he felt a blush paint his face bright red.
“Glad to meet you, Carta. I'll be your partner.”
“Partner?” He responded, concerned at her word choice.
“Heh, not like THAT kind of partner. Your business partner.”

He still didn't understand what she was saying.
“Maybe this will help you get it.” She leaned in close again and whispered in his ear. “I'm Tira Misu.”

Their eyes met again once she pulled back, smirking smugly.
“What?”

Chapter End Notes

The random bit about Che Guevara was intended as a subtle pronunciation guide for Noce's name. It's pronounced "No-Chay" rather than "No-chi", "Knock", or "No-say".

And just in case you had made the mistake, Pane's name is pronounced "Pa-Nay", not "Pain".
Normal days

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hello. Pane speaking.”
“Hey, Pane, it's Carta again.”
“Oh! What's up, Terunosuke?”
“Don't ‘What's up?’ me! What kind of game are you playing, Pane?”
“Just call me Sergio. We're friends!”
“Answer. The. Question. Pane.”
“What do you mean? What happened?”
“Tira Misu.”
“… What about him? I told you he was a cunt.”
“That's the problem! It's not that he IS a cunt, it's that he HAS one!”
“… Uh… w-what?”
“Tira Misu is a girl!”
“Seriously?! Is she hot?”
“That's not important! Are you trying to tell me you DIDN'T know?”
“No way. I had no idea. The profile doesn't say anything about his… er… her gender.”
“You have her profile? What does it say?”
“Glad you asked. Let's see here… her favorite singer is Diana Ross… her favorite color is orange… her stand is named Genesis…”
“Genesis?”
“Yeah, like in the Bible… alright, here. It has this description: ‘Tira Misu is a widely disliked member of Passione. The animosity likely stems from an overly cheerful and teasing personality. Due to said immature personality, other members openly express their disdain. Because of this issue (among others), Tira is currently stationed in Algeria as the only member in the country.’ You see? It says nothing about her being a girl.”
“Who in the hell writes these profiles?! They don't make any sense!”
“Right?! This damn thing is just one page! Hell! It doesn't even say anything useful! Whoever writes these things deserves to be fired.”

The nonsensical conversation was going to give Terunosuke an aneurysm.

“Anyway, back to the important matters at hand.” Pane continued. “Is she hot?”
“What the hell is with your priorities?”
“Terunosuke, please! I haven't seen a real woman in months! Throw the dog a bone!”
“F-fine… she's… cute, I guess.”
“Cute?! Cute how?!” It sounded as if he were foaming at the mouth.
“Well… you know… she looks cute… and kind of acts cute too.”
“Goddammit, goddammit, goddammit! I'm so jealous of you! If you don't fuck her, I'll try the first chance I get!”
“Jesus, man! Stop being so crude!”
“Ghugh… sorry… well… thanks for that. I really appreciate it.”
“Uh… yeah.”
“Well, I'll see you soon. Goodbye.”
“Yeah, bye.”

Was Pane alright? He'd been constrained to a hospital room and a wheelchair for quite a while. It was understandable that he'd be a bit desperate.
Walking out of the cramped phone booth, Terunosuke spotted the object of Pane’s incessancy exiting the strip club. Thankfully, most of her body was clothed and covered this time around. In fact, her entire look had changed. Save for basic qualities like her hair color, it was as if she was a completely different person.

Her hair had straightened out, giving it a very glossy sheen, however, one or two thin strands had managed to stick up like an insect’s antennae. The back of her orange locks had been tied back into a characteristically cute ponytail with a golden bow. A radiantly bright flower was on the side on her bangs. Obviously, said flower was orange. Her equally orange feather boa still sat wrapped around her neck. The gaudy bikini she had been wearing had been replaced with a much more conservative ensemble. Her blouse was backless, allowing a view of her pearly skin up to her sides. Surprisingly, she was covering nearly her entire body below the neck with a heavy wool coat. It was equally surprising when he noticed that the coat was neither orange or gold, but fuchsia.
Terunosuke didn’t know much about women’s fashion, but even he knew her color palette clashed with itself.

There were 2 possibilities involving her outfit.

1: She had no sense of fashion and had thrown erratic pieces of clothing together.
2: The current chic styles of Italy could not be comprehended by an unsophisticated, Japanese plebeian.

It was probably possibility 2.

“Hey, Cartaaaa!” She exclaimed cheerfully as she practically skipped toward him, waving all the while. “Did I keep you waiting?”
“No.”
“Well then I guess I'll have to take longer next time. It'll build anticipation.” What was she talking about? Anticipation for what? Her? The only thing Terunosuke was anticipating was the end of the conversation.
“Yeah…”

Instead of prolonging the dead-end conversation exchange, Terunosuke decided to indulge in the delightfully detrimental act of smoking. As he pinched a cigarette between his lips, Tira Misu gave him an inquisitive look.
“Are you about to smoke?”
“No, I'm going to eat it.” He rolled his eyes and brought his lighter to his bare lips. The cigarette was nowhere to be found. “What the hell?!”
“You really shouldn't smoke. It causes all sorts of health problems. Don't you care about your future at all?” Terunosuke glared at his new partner, narrowing his eyes at her feather boa. She had somehow managed to steal his cigarette and wrap her accessory around it in less than a second. He ignored the complaints and reached out to reclaim his property. When his hand came close, a sharp hissing sound rang out. The other end of the feathered accessory curled up and sprouted a pair of slitted, red eyes that bit into his soul. The tail end that was curled around his cigarette began to shake, creating a threatening rattling noise.

As he pulled his hand away in shock, Tira Misu let out a soft giggle while she lovingly stroked the orange threat.
“I guess you haven't formally met her yet, have you? Well, no time like the present. Carta, meet Genesis. Genesis, Carta.”
“Hello… snake.”

Genesis just hissed again.
Unfavorable first impressions happen. It was an inevitability in life. No matter how hard a given person might try to put their best self forward, there was always a chance for others to dislike them, regardless of any effort made to achieve the contrary.

Tira Misu was not like that.
EVERYTHING she did was grating. From the way she teased Terunosuke relentlessly, to the fact the she always seemed to have a carefree smile, to the eye-burning nature of her ultra-orange outfit, to the way she seemed to converse with Genesis.

Every single aspect about the girl drove Terunosuke up a wall.

What right did she have to be so goddamn happy? A little dose of optimism was welcome. Any amount of smiling could be tolerated. A girl who belonged in a fairy tale? Unbearable.

“So what about me is cute?” Terunosuke barely managed to keep his cool at the 5th conversation starter. As they walked to his apartment, Tira Misu kept an uncomfortably close distance.

“The way your face looks when you don't speak.”
“You didn't act like when we were alone.”
“That was before I learned about your personality.”
“You're pretty good at denying the truth.”
“You're pretty good at not taking a hint.”

The two strands of hair that shot up from her scalp reminded Terunosuke of a cockroach that had crawled into his bed one night while he'd been in Sicily. The only difference was that the cockroach had the common decency to not talk for 20 minutes straight.

Terunosuke quickly darted inside the apartment and retreated to the quiet safety of his room. He would be able to keep his sanity if he just stayed there for the rest of the night. Perhaps he could stay sane by not coming out for the rest of his life, though he instantly nixed the consideration due to the fact that he'd eventually need to eat. Then he wondered how long he could hold out if he ate his boots.

“Hey, Carta? Can you help me out?” Tira Misu asked through the door.

“What?”

“Moving all the old stuff out so that I can move in.”

She was going to remove Pane’s possessions and replace them with her own. Up until this point, the thought that he'd have a different partner hadn't quite registered. Maybe it was because of this failure to come to terms with this reality that he dismayed Tira Misu so vehemently.

What would Salvatore say in this situation? Something like, “The fundamental nature of human beings is one of unending misunderstandings.”

No. He'd probably say something along the lines of, “If you swallow your pride and hold out an olive branch, you'll be surprised at the things you can accomplish together.”

Yeah, he'd say that.

“Cartaaaa? Are you in there?”
Now or never.

“Yeah, I'm here.” As he opened his door, Tira Misu’s face glittered gleefully. “I knew you couldn't resist me for long.”

Terunosuke slammed the door so hard, it nearly fell off of its hinges.

***

“Thank you for coming this afternoon. I know that you're busy.” Cielo humbly started. “If you believe that this is necessary, than I have more than enough time.” The boss answered. “Thank you, Padre.”

On one end of a boardroom table, a foreigner with blond hair sat across from his leader, Padre, and the leader’s right-hand man, Fan. A few weeks ago, this setup would dig a pit into the foreigner’s stomach from fear of scrutinization. In the recent time period--especially yesterday--the pit was filled with a new brand of worry. A worry that reminded the foreigner that the lives of those around him were fragile threads in the hand of God. With the faintest of breezes, those threads could be blown away.

The foreigner had been powerless to tighten the Lord's hand. Yet, it was easier to stop the wind from blowing than it was to challenge God's judgment.

“I'll get right to my point. Padre, I believe that the best course of action would be to monitor Carta.” Immediately, Cielo knew that the words pinched a nerve in his leader. “You aren't thinking rationally, Cielo.” Rationally? There was nothing except calculated logic in his proposal. “Sir… Padre, I urge you to reconsider.”

“What would you have me consider? The value of a single Passione member? A single moment spent thinking about that man would be two moments wasted.” The leader didn't understand what he was saying. How could he ignore the crimes that had been committed by the man? “Padre! Noce and Sanguinoso died at his hands! How could you forget that?!”

Padre slammed his hands on the table and shot out of his chair, his features twisted up in a complex expression. “Cielo, listen to me right now. I know better than anyone that we've lost close friends because of that man. I'm trying to make sure that no one else dies by his hand. If we follow down your path, then all three of us will end up dead, guaranteed! Don't let the prospect of revenge lead you to believe anything else.”

“You ha-”

“I'm not done speaking, Cielo! I know that Noce’s death deeply affected you. It hurt me just as much, and I'm sure that everyone who knew him personally feels the same way.” Fan solemnly nodded in agreement. “There is absolutely no problem with grieving over a lost friend; we've done it countless times at this point. However, I've always advised to never use someone's death as an excuse to make rash decisions. If you truly believe that monitoring Carta is the best course of action, then suggest the idea one month from now.”

One month?

Dammit.

Cielo knew Padre was right. Fan knew he was right.

That didn't make the truth any easier to swallow. Carta would walk free for at least a month. There
was nothing Cielo could do about it.

“Attend to your regular duties and think about what is important to you.”
“Understood, Padre.”

Cielo already understood all that he needed to know.

In one month, he'd be one step closer to bringing Carta’s reign of terror to an abrupt end.

***

Thankfully, Terunosuke had managed to avoid contributing to the previous night’s moving efforts by locking himself inside his room. Equally deserving of thanks was Tira Misu’s lack of insistence.

When he finally exited the guarding solitude of his room at noon the next morning, the apartment had undergone subtle, yet major changes. For starters, the entire area was spotless. Not even Pane had managed to force the apartment to neatly align itself. This point could be credited to the necessities of moving, but things just didn't seem right. Furthermore, the area had a certain new scent to it. It wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t overwhelmingly pleasant, like the smell of a classroom or a post office: neutral and unremarkable, but with just enough weight to be noticed. He hated it. Even more, the furniture had been moved around. There was no need to explain why that was a glaring issue.

“Oh! Good morning, Carta.” Tira Misu greeted from the fridge, wearing slightly less clothing than Terunosuke was comfortable with. He silently appreciated that the kitchen had not been tampered with in the sudden remodeling project.

“Morning, Tira Misu.” He replied.

“Tira Misu? Just ‘Tira’ is fine.” She gave him a look that made him think that that was implied to be a given.

“Well… morning… Tira.”

Tira Mi-... Tira had already made herself at home in less than a day, a process that Terunosuke still hadn’t completed himself. It could be that she was just eager to be back in Italy; she had been in Algeria if he remembered correctly. That fact would likely be used to craft a joke at the intentional misinterpretation of his heritage, making his stomach requ-

“Why are you staring at me?” Tira questioned, shaking him out of his jetstreaming thoughts. As she said, he’d been staring at her since he noticed her. In fact, he was still staring... maybe he should stop doing that at some point.

“Sorry.” He apologized, his gaze unwavering.

“Ohhhh. I see how it is. You were toying with me yesterday. Now that you’ve come to your senses, you can’t take your eyes off me, can you?”

“Good point.” He turned around and went back to his room.

“…Hmm”

Before he crossed the threshold back into his sanctum, he pivoted around and walked back to the waiting girl.

“You got me; I’m just joking.” He stated with a grin. She mirrored the expression, though with a much brighter execution.

“I knew it, you really can’t keep your eyes off me.” To this, Terunosuke smiled harder.

“Don’t misunderstand.” He reached into the refrigerator and pulled out half a sandwich he had saved for himself before he went to Sicily. Hopefully it was still good. With the treasure in hand, he withdrew from the forum, officially heading back to his room.

“Huh? What are you doing?” Tira called out to his back.
“What’s not to get? I told you I was joking.”

When he closed the door this time, he made certain that she could see his smirk as he eased the door shut.

***

Eventually, he fully untethered from the comfortable trappings of his room and started his duties alongside Tira with all of the sloth-like reluctance he had previously demonstrated. “Duties” in this sense was reporting to the volunteer, interim leader of the smuggling department: Salvatore. Even with a grand total of 0 assigned operations, the doctor was certainly a step up from the obnoxious leader previously in charge, Pollo.

...

Haha, operations.

“...” Tira didn’t say, observing Terunosuke’s disdain towards her rendition of the spoken word. He was equally lacking in speech, an attribute that pleased him greatly. “How’s Sal doing nowadays? I feel like I haven’t talked to him in weeks.” She had to ruin everything, silence included, didn’t she? “You know him personally?” “Oh, yeah! We go way back. He and I were super close before I got shipped overseas. He’s like a second stand to me.” When she said that last part, Genesis made a sound that could only be described as “snake whimpering”. “Wha?! I didn’t actually mean that! You’re the only one that I need! Who’s a sweet snake? I think it’s this girl here!” To all of this, Genesis made “happy snake noises”.

It struck Terunosuke as odd that Tira would refer to her stand as a girl. Stands were simply manifestations of one’s psyche, not actual, organic organisms. By definition, they were genderless.

If Enigma could comment on the matter, would he find the practice odd?

***

“Tira!”
“Sal!”

The two embraced as if they were long-lost siblings who had been reunited for the first time in their decades.

“It's been so long. You've changed a ton.”
“I’ve changed? You're the one who's different! You're practically an old man!” Rather than taking offense at the comment, Salvatore beamed a smile as Tira pulled on his cheeks.

How many personalities did this guy have? Responsible doctor, retributional killer, excitable babysitter, what was next?

“Sorry that you had to go undercover yesterday, I tried to get the higher-ups to change their minds, but they couldn't be persuaded.” So that stunt wasn't Tira’s own perverse concoction? Interesting. “Aww, I know, I know. You'd never do something so mean. But I know that someone enjoyed it.” Tira glanced over at Terunosuke. Salvatore grinned knowingly at his expense. “How about it, Terunosuke? Did you enjoy the ‘experience’?” Now he was teasing him too?!

“Hey, Salvatore. You've clearly known Tira for a while, right.” Terunosuke’s tone was as even as his stone face.
“That's right. It must be about… 5 years since we met.”
“Fascinating. So if you knew exactly who she was, then why didn't you tell me she was a girl?”
“You didn't ask me about it. I thought you knew something that obvious.”
“HOW WOULD I KNOW THAT IF I'VE NEVER MET HER?!”

Terunosuke then proceeded to do his best impression of a rabid dog.

Once he came back down to earth, the pair were nearly crying from laughter. Clearly, they were laughing at him, not with him.

“Calm down, Terunosuke,” Salvatore placated. “She's perfectly harmless. I swear there's nothing that she'll do to make you upset once you give her a chance.”
“He's right… Tera… Ternaskay.”

OH SHIT!

“Salvatore! You dumbass! You gave away my real name!”
“What?! I didn't mean to! It was an accident!”

Terunosuke hadn't been aware of the fact beforehand, but nervous breakdowns made him exhausted.

***

“She IS a girl!” Pane announced in awe, his eyes bearing witness to the first live female he had seen in an eternity. “Will you go out with me?! I’ll pay you! Name your price!”
“That’s not funny, idiot.” Salvatore scolded, tugging on Pane’s ear as if he was Tira’s overprotective father.
“T-that’s alright. Perfectly fine” Tira replied with an absolutely mortified expression. Pane’s effect on women couldn’t be understated.
“I apologize. It’s been a long time since I last saw a real woman.”
“When you say it like that, you sound like a creep who stays in his room and watches dirty movies all day.” Terunosuke goaded.
“Only on Tuesdays.” Pane replied with a disconcerting amount of seriousness.

As if sensing the mood shift from entertained to appalled, Pane hastily changed the subject.

“Are you sure she's ACTUALLY a girl? Some of the guys in this country can be a bit… ambiguous.”
“I was a girl the last time I checked.” Tira reported while petting Genesis’s feathers… or would they be scales.
“She definitely looks like a guy to me.” Salvatore decided after a moment of consideration.
“The snake might be symbolic towards her true nature.” Terunosuke chimed in. “Serpents definitely evoke the image of a certain body part.” Genesis hissed in his direction.
“Very funny, boys. At least my jokes are funny.”

“That's doubtful.” Terunosuke reasoned.
“That's a lie.” Salvatore scolded.
“That's not what the word ‘funny’ means.” Pane finished.

The trio all high-fived one another at the shared improvisation.

Tira and Genesis just gave displeased stares.

***
“Enough fun. It’s time for work.” Salvatore stated, shifting his tone to a sternness that was befitting of a department leader, or at least an interim leader.

“Augh.” The 3 subordinates groaned in submission. After more than a month of getting paid without having to lift a finger, no one was eager to return to work.

“Can’t we put this off until tomorrow?” Pane suggested as he leaned back in his wheelchair.

“No.” Salvatore shot back.

“Could we mayb-”

“No.”

“What abou-”

“No.” The doctor stated for the third time.

“U-understood…” Pane compiled in defeat.

“Now, if there are no more interruptions, I’ll explain your assignments.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“Go ahead, Sal.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Good. To start, Carta and Tira Misu will be intrusted with all assignments outside of Naples. Conversely, Pane will handle everything within the city.” Salvatore was even using their full aliases now. How official.

“Out of town deliveries, huh? That probably means a lot of driving, don’t you think?” Tira asked in seeming earnest.

“I suppose so. Is that a problem?” Terunosuke answered.

“I don’t have my license, sssssoo it looks like you’ll be my personal chauffeur for a while.” The grin that slithered onto her face was so hideous, it could be classified as a war crime.

“What makes you think I have my license either?”

“How?”

“I’ve never even driven a car before.”

“Are you kidding me? Sal! How are we supposed to get around Naples, let alone the rest of the country?!” Salvatore made an expression that was equal parts satisfaction and sadism.

“Glad you asked. I’ve prepared a little gift for the two of you.” The doctor dug around in his coat pocket for roughly 30 seconds before pulling his hand back out. He revealed a pair of laminated cards and handed both to Terunosuke. “Take these and tell me what they say.”

Were these a pair of coupons to a car dealership that was owned by Passione? Maybe the business card to a high-end taxi service that owed lots of favors to the gang?

“Ahem. It says ‘Premium Bus Pass’.”

What?

“Carta. You aren’t joking right now, are you?” Tira asked, a bulging vein sticking out of her forehead.

“Salvatore… what is the meaning of this?” Terunosuke could feel a similar outrage welling up inside of his stomach.

“Hmm? What’s the matter with you two? Public transportation has become highly reliable in recent years. You have nothing to worry about.”

Terunosuke and Tira glanced at one another. Both were clearly less than pleased with the arrangement. A combination of not having appropriate transportation and the casual manner the problem was “solved” for them irked the pair disgustingly.
Leaving the predicament unresolved, Salvatore turned his attention to the man in the wheelchair.

“Don’t feel left out, Pane. I know you can’t drive while you’re in a wheelchair, so I pulled some strings to get you this.” Again, Salvatore pulled out a laminated business card, this time handing it to Pane.

“This one says ‘Colburn Private Transportation Company’. Whoa! Does this mean I get my own chauffeur?!” The childlike gleam on his face was almost as heartwarming as it was ignorant. He was not getting his own personal driver.

“That’s exactly right!” Salvatore confirmed with equal excitement. “You’re getting your own personal driver!”

Terunosuke could physically feel the color drain from his face.

“Are you serious, Sal?! Why does Pane get a servant while Carta and I get a bus?” Tira voiced indignantly.

“Because Pane is confined to a wheelchair for the time being.”

“And?”

“And he can’t walk on his own two feet. If someone were to attack him, he’d be defenseless.”

“Wait.” Pane interjected. “I have a gu-”

“Plus! The driver is already paid for two months of service.” Salvatore interrupted. “By that time, he’ll be on crutches if lady luck smiles down on him.”

That still didn’t answer the matter at hand.

“So why can’t we have a driver of our own?” Terunosuke asked with building frustration.

“Carta, who is the department leader?”

“That’s no-”

“Carta, who is the department leader?” Salvatore repeated, more rigid the second time around.

“Y-you are…”

“Good. Now that that’s settled, Michael will give you the packages for you to deliver and the relevant information to go along with it. He’s waiting patiently at the reception desk. Work hard, you two!”

With overheating tempers and scowls slicing across their faces, Tira and Terunosuke fumed out of the room.

***

The second the door closed behind the exiting pair, Salvatore breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Doc.” Pane prodded. “Why didn't they get a private driver like I did?”

“They were supposed to.”

“‘Supposed’? What changed?”

“I… uh… forgot.”

Pane blinked.

“Hahaha! You had me going there. Seriously though, wha-”

“That wasn’t a joke.” Salvatore replied, straight-faced.

Pane rubbed his eyes and gawked at the doctor, as if trying to wake himself up from an absurd dream.

“You just forgo-"
“WORK HARD!” Salvatore shouted as he power walked out of the room.

***

Thankfully, Michael didn't say anything about the incident when he handed over the information and package, nor did he say anything at all for that matter. The same could not be said for Tira. “What’s the assignment?” “You got the information too. Look at it yourself.” Terunosuke sniped, not knowing the answer himself.

As per his suggestion, Tira flipped through her small informational pamphlet, murmuring to herself all the while. “Rome, huh? That’s only a bit over 200 kilometers from here. If we get there by bus, we can make it by noon!” She was way too excited to be working again. “So almost 3 hours? At least we can catch some sleep during the ride… that is… if the bus ever arrives.” Terunosuke offered. “As if! I plan on using the time we have together to get to know you like the back of my tongue. You won’t be sleeping for days!” “That’s not how the saying go-” “You’ll have fun! Whether you want to or not.” Tira declared, headstrong and overconfident.

Before the demands really got out of tongue, the bus arrived like a guardian angel. Ushering Tira forward as a means to shut her up, the pair flashed their “Premium” bus passes at the grey-haired driver.

“What the hell? Why can’t I ride?” “Your bus pass expired a month ago.”

What the fuck?!

Terunosuke, Tira, and Genesis all examined his bus pass with disbelieving gawks.

“This bus pass good until: 31/12/2000.”

New Year’s Eve?!

Terunosuke crumbled up the worthless, laminated garbage and threw it out onto the sidewalk.

“Salvatore you traitorous bastard!”

***

Cielo was a pathetic child.

It wasn't until his best friend had died that he discovered how reliant he was on the brash hothead. He paced around the lonely halls of his house, listless and aimless. With nothing to take his attention away from his circular ruminations, he obsessed over the exact same thoughts over and over, just as he wandered along the same halls over and over.

There was a clear focus in his cyclical thought process: Carta.

The countless souls killed in the wedding massacre, Sanguinoso, and now Noce. Every single
death could be traced back to that one man—a single retched soul in the demonic pit known as Passione.

Carta.

Cielo had never seen what the man looked, acted, or sounded like. How old he was, where he was born, or why he joined Passione. Despite the lack of concrete information, he felt as though he knew the bastard better than he knew himself.

Step. Step.

Carta. Carta.

What were his goals? Unknown.

What would he do next? Unknown.

How had he survived this long? The devil's luck.

Cielo clenched his fists. Having worked himself into a fury without any means of alleviation, his only option was to clench his jaw and wait for the frustration to pass, unsatisfied and despondent.

Carta. Carta.

***

“Brrr!” Tira mumbled through clattering teeth. Without her eye-searing coat, she was rubbing her arms and hopping in place in a desperate effort to warm up. It wasn’t that cold; Terunosuke couldn’t even see his own breath. She was probably used to the perpetual warmth and comfort of Algeria. The display of discomfort gave him a minute delight.

“C-c-can I borrow your coat? P-please.”
“No. It’s your fault for forgetting yours on the bus.”
“I promise I w-won’t talk for an hour if you give it to me.” Now, THAT was a tempting offer.
“Are you serious? If you try to take it and then start teasing me, I’ll dump a bucket of ice water on you.”
“I won’t do anything like that! I swear!” She begged.

A demon poofed into existence on his left shoulder.
“Don’t give it to her. Let her squirm. It’ll be hilarious.” He whispered into Terunosuke’s ear.

Suddenly, an angel popped into being and perched himself on his right shoulder.
“Fuck that bitch! She deserves to feel what it’s like to feel uncomfortable.”

Terunosuke and the demon stared in shock at the angel’s unexpected ferocity.
“What?! Just because I’m good doesn’t make me nice.” The servant of God barked before disappearing into thin air.
“He’s such an asshole.” The demon complained as he burst into a cloud of red smoke and left the world behind.

What the hell was that?

“Cartaaaaa! Stop staring off into space and answer me!” Oops.
“Sorry about that.” He apologized.
“Are you sorry enough to g-give me your c-coat?”
“Ahahaha! Hell no. Not even close.”

She was actually pretty funny when she tried to make him laugh. For blocks, he couldn’t contain his laughter, much to her shivering dismay.

***

The process of delivering a package for the smuggling department was a fairly straightforward affair.

The address the pair had been given led to a inconspicuous antiques store in an unremarkable corner of Rome. A bell above the door rang as they entered, drawing the shop owner’s attention away from a miniature statue he had been tinkering with.

“Hello.” He said plainly in a way that made it clear that he was used to greeting every single person who walked through the door. “How can I help you today?”

Terunosuke scanned the surroundings of the shop before answering. Aside from him and Tira, there was a wealthy-looking pair of newlyweds perusing a display of kitschy mirrors. The husband seemed much more enthused when compared to the wife. There was no danger here.

“You're the one who ordered the ‘figurines’, right? We're here to deliver them.” The man's expression shifted from warm and welcoming to stern and serious.

“What took you guys so goddamn long? I put that order in three months ago?”

“We had a few complications that came up.” Tira explained sarcastically. “Having 90% of your employees getting murdered at the same time will cause a few hiccups for any business.”

How inconsiderate could she be? Terunosuke was never a social butterfly, but even he knew better than to say such harsh words. What was her problem?

“It doesn’t matter if it’s late. Pay up.” Tira ordered. The owner balked.

“I need to see the ‘figurines’ before I pay! Do you even know how to do your job?”

“Give the man what he wants, Carta.” She ignored the insult with a forceful snap of her fingers in Terunosuke’s direction.

Whatever “figurines” was code for, the thought didn’t exactly sit comfortably. Nevertheless, the young man did as he was told due to the fact that defying orders was an action reserved for people with spines.

He opened up a paper that had been dedicated to keeping the package secure and handed it to the owner. “Package” in this context was a postal box. The owner muttered a soft thanks before slicing the carrier with a letter opener. The contents were spilled onto the counter rather loudly, causing Terunosuke’s neck to tense up at the thought of the other customers overhearing the unfolding deal.

The owner examined the numerous plastic packets that contained a mysterious substance as if he were using an invisible microscope. Every grunt and snort sent waves of doubt over Terunosuke’s mind. Did they deliver the wrong package? No. Michael gave them the package and information. If there was anything wrong, it was on him.

They hadn’t made a mistake.

The owner crossed his arms.

“There’s been a mistake.”

Terunosuke felt the words stab into his gut like a storm of knives.
“W-w-w-what would make you think such a thing, sir?! I assure you, there’s absolutely nothing wro-” Tira motioned for Terunosuke to stop talking. She leaned close to the owner, her face wearing an unusual frown.

“Nice try, fuckwit. You think you can jerk me around like I’m some sort of brain-dead bimbo? I don’t believe that bullshit for a second.”

What the hell…? Who was this vulgar woman and what did she do with Tira? Was this an act… or was this something completely different?

“T-tira? What’s going on right now? He said we brought the wrong package.”

“Fuck no we didn’t.” The girl snarled. “It’s an underhanded scam designed to waste our time and money. He ‘says’ it’s wrong even though it’s exactly what he ordered. Then we’ll have to go back to Naples, get the ‘correct’ package, come back here again on a later date, and then have this asswipe tell us he won’t pay full price for ‘such lousy service’. And if we don’t bend over backwards for him, he’ll threaten to discontinue service unless he’s given a discount on all future transactions.”

Terunosuke had to admire the cleverness of the plot. If the smuggling department was in peak operating order, exploitations such as this would be crushed underfoot in the blink of an eye. However, with the department in the state of disarray it was in, consumers could afford to steal the power.

“I’ll give you a choice, geezer.” Tira continued. “Either you pay full price, or we break both of your kneecaps.” The old man looked devastated at the ultimatum. The situation was no surprise. The two of them had a choice of their own: comply or fight back. With no security guards in the store, the choice was as clear as the sun in the sky.

“H-hold on now…” The man was shaking in his boots. “I’ll call the cops in here! You’ll both be arrested!” Both Tira and Terunosuke began laughing in unison.

“You’d call the police on the people you were trying to buy illegal goods from?! How do you plan on explaining the situation?” Terunosuke mocked.

“Did you forget that the entire Italian police force is in Passione’s pocket? We OWN the police!” Tira boasted.

For once, it felt nice to be fully in control.

He savored that control for a few seconds right up to the moment a firm hand gripped the back of his head and slammed his face into the plexiglass counter.

“AUUGHH! Fuck!” He heard himself shout as another hand jerked his arm behind his back. What the hell?! Who was behind him?!

“Can it, punk.” A woman’s rough voice commanded. He felt his arm twist further and further as she spoke, forcing an agonized groan out of his throat. The hand pressing the back of his head darted away for a second. A hard piece of metal was jammed against his temple in the next second. It was obviously a gun. “If you move a muscle, I’ll use your brain to paint the walls.” She threatened.

Dammit. How had he not noticed someone sneaking up behind him? More importantly, what was Tira doing if she wasn’t helping him?

Turning his head enough to look around yet slight enough to avoid receiving a bullet-flavored lobotomy, Terunosuke saw Tira in the exact same position.
“I could really go for some lunch soon. Are you in the mood for anything in particular?” She asked nonchalantly, a meter separating their faces.

What the hell was her problem?! There were guns pressed to their heads! What possessed her to think that a life-or-death situation was the ideal place to discuss lunch plans?!

“You too, lady. Put a sock in it.” As he looked back, Terunosuke recognized the man pointing a gun at Tira’s head as the newlywed husband that had been examining mirrors when this endeavor began. That probably meant that the “wife” was the one contorting his arm.

That answered the question of how they snuck up on them. How comforting.

“Are you ready to negotiate now?” The owner provoked with newfound confidence, relaxing his elbows on the counter. “I’m not sure. You might convince me if you go fuck yourself.” Tira spat out in return.

Did she have a deathwish?! What the hell was she doing?!

“Break her arm.” The owner ordered. The “husband” nodded, but seemed to be feel squeamish at the thought of such a brutal action.

Before he could work up the nerve to carry out the task, the bell above the front door chirped alive, drawing the gazes of all five people in the room. A young woman stood in the doorway with her mouth gaping open. The sight of two people being held at gunpoint was the last thing one might expect when taking a leisurely stroll to the local antiques store.

“We’re closed.” The owner lied calmly. “Oh! I’m sorry! I’ll be going now!” The unlucky woman announced to everyone around.

Promptly turning around and skipping back out the door, the woman disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared.

“That was a close one.” The “husband” chuckled, a distressed drop of sweat sliding down his forehead as he smiled at his partner.

Genesis chomped down on his wrist. Hard.

A jarring crunch cracked through the ears of everyone in the store. Secondly, a mutilated wail sang out from the bitten man’s lips as well. Thirdly, a piercing gunshot blasted throughout the store.

Terunosuke’s ears were ringing. More importantly, Genesis had stolen the man’s gun in the deafening frenzy, the pistol resting snuggly in its reptilian mouth. Without warning, the snake stand unhinged its jaw and swallowed the firearm whole.

As the baffling process unfolded, the “wife’s” hold on his arm began to ease off just slightly. “Just slightly” was all the leeway that Terunosuke needed to wriggle free. Tearing his twisted arm away from the distracted woman’s clutches, Enigma shot out of him and flew wildly at the woman’s gun. With barely enough time to process that he had escaped from her grasp, the woman was blindsided by Enigma’s disarming theft that drew her weapon straight into Terunosuke’s pocket. Drawing his own hidden pistol, the young smuggler completely turned the tables on the overwhelmed woman.

Checking to see how his partner was doing, he saw Tira in another identical situation, holding the man at gunpoint with a personal submachine gun. Where had she been hiding that?
Noticing his duplicated success, she gifted him a smile that looked sharp enough to slice through stone.

In the span of about seven seconds, the pair had managed to both disarm and demoralize their respective assailants. Terunosuke actually felt proud of himself for once.

“Way to go, dumbass.” The woman scolded through gritted teeth. “You couldn’t manage to restrain a girl half your size?”
“How was I supposed to know it was a real snake?! And you let the Algerian guy overpower you! What do you have to say about that, huh?”
“I was worried about you and got distracted. I thought she shot you! My ears are still buzzing from that damn gunshot. Thanks for that.”
“Don’t blame me… wait… you were worried about me? Since when do you worry about me?”
“T-that’s not what I meant! You’re too importa-”
“SHUT UP!” Tira shouted, waving her gun like a lunatic in an effort to silence the quarreling lovers.

The orange woman had the floor; nobody made a sound.
“Thank you.” She praised, a degree of evenness reconnecting in her voice. “If there are no further objections, why don’t we continue with the original deal.” The gun in her hand aimed at the owner as her free hand twirled around one of her stray bangs.
“Y-yes. By all means.”

***

“7, 8, 9, and 10! That’s all the cash! Thank you for your continued patronage, and don’t hesitate to solicit any of Passione’s diverse services.” For someone who had been threatening their lives just a few minutes prior, Tira was providing exquisite customer service. Terunosuke could probably learn a thing from her.

Brushing her hair with her hands, she readjusted the flower on her bangs, retied the bow holding up her ponytail, and straightened out the pair of towering hairs that reminded Terunosuke of an insect’s antennae. Looking at the strands once more, however, gave the impression of a snake’s tongue instead. Fitting.

As they turned to make their exit, she whispered to Terunosuke.
“Hey, Carta. Don’t you think they’re just the cutest couple?”
“‘They’? Who? The guards?”
“Of course. Who else would I be talking about?”

He twisted his head around like an owl to spy on the pair. The man was holding the woman’s hands delicately, painstakingly studying them for any bruises she might have received.
“Forget about me, you thickheaded donkey. I didn’t even get hit.” The woman implored. “You should be worrying about your own wrist. I heard it fracture with my own ears!” The man just shook his head in response.
“I’ll be fine. A little break never stopped me before. Besides, I know how much you care about your nails.” A bright red blush washed over the woman’s face as she processed what the man had said.
“Y-you… noticed that?”
“Absolutely. When you’re around someone 24/7, the little things they do and care about start to grow on you as well.”

Tira’s ear-to-ear grin couldn’t grow any wider. Genesis beamed its own serpentine smile, a feat that Terunosuke didn’t know was possible. The love-obsessed lunatics nearly began to squeal out
in ecstatic cheering. Before they had a combined meltdown, he grabbed his partner by the collar and dragged the drooling girl out the door.
“Spoilsport.” She complained, pouting and dragging her heels.

He didn’t have any name to quip back at her, so he let her insult him for free just this once.

***

Pane never imagined that he could ever get tired of a personal chauffeur driving him around to wherever he needed to go, but reality had a bothersome habit of throwing surprises at him.

“We’ve arrived at the location, Mr. Pane.” The driver, Vito, informed as he parked the car.
“Thanks.” Pane replied lethargically.

For the eighth time that day, Vito walked around to the trunk of the parked car, retrieved the wheelchair, opened Pane’s door, helped the paraplegic into the aforementioned wheelchair, and inquired if his services would be needed to complete the delivery.
“That won’t be necessary.” Pane groaned in response to the eager insistence of his driver.

Bashing the door open and squeezing through the narrow doorway, Pane’s mood was less than ideal to put it lightly. He scanned the drug operation that masqueraded as a bike store, noting two burly guards trying and failing to act like normal customers. As long as things went according to plan, they wouldn’t need to act.

Rolling to the front counter, he dinged a call bell to alert the manager to his presence. After several minutes of thumb twiddling, the man in charge finally appeared, a fraudulent grin painted on his face.
“Hello, sir.” The hideous boss greeted, glancing down at Pane. “Ya interested in purchasing a bike?”
“Go fuck yourself.” The man with defective legs spat out indignantly. “Do I look like I want a fucking bike?!”
“Then why’re ya here, ya goddamn cripple?!” The man’s thin mask peeled off like a layer of dead skin, displaying his true colors for all to see.

Pane grasped the package that had been sitting in his lap and flipped it onto the counter.
“I’m here because you ordered some drugs.” The man’s revolting grin returned.
“Why didn’t ya say so sooner?” He poked with a tone of voice reserved for satanists and lawyers.
Without waiting for an answer, the walking shitstain tore the package open with his jagged teeth and spilled the drug packets onto the counter.
“This ain’t the stuff I ordered.” He hadn’t even looked at it. “Now one of two possibilities is gonna happen. Either ya go back and correct yer fuck up, or ya lose a high-paying customer fer life.
What’s it gonna be, cripple.”

Another one of these take-it-or-leave-it bastards? Great. Pane wished spontaneous, vicious murder was a viable option in his situation. As much as he wished for it, he knew that option would be too easy.

“Alright, listen here, you dungbeetle. I don’t give a single shit if you take your business elsewhere.
In fact, I’d prefer if you’d jump off the nearest cliff, but that isn’t relevant right now. What is relevant is what I think about this bullshit extortion plot. I think it’s a steaming pile of elephant shit on the side of a dirt road. Anyone depraved enough to employ it is either a sex offender or a politician, and you don’t look like the type of guy who participates in government, so that pretty
much narrows it down, don’t you think?” The man seemed to be taken aback by the rude insults.
“How dare ya talk to a paying customer like that!”
“You said you weren’t going to pay, so don’t try to hide behind any courtesies.” Pane pulled a
 cigarette from his pocket and lit up in the middle of his tirade.

“I’m going to level with you, cockhead. I’ve started to hate my job.” The man behind the counter
cocked an eyebrow. “You see, I just got back from an awful vacation; all I did was sit around and
stew in my loneliness for more than a month. I thought that I'd enjoy working when the break
finally ended, but chucklefucks like you seem bent on preventing that. This is the eighth delivery of
my day, and every single one of you goddamn bastards have tried to pull the same bullshit stunt on
me.” Pane took a prolonged and much-needed drag from his cigarette. “Here's what's really going
to happen, ‘sir’. You're going to pay full price for the goods that someone in the narcotics
department worked very hard to produce, or I could roll out of here and have my associates torch
this place to the ground in a week. The choice is yours.” He flicked the cigarette butt onto the
hardwood floor as he finished his searing rant.

For a time, the would-be thief scowled silently at Pane. After a minute, however, the scowl
morphed into an expression of pity and sympathy.

“I've been there, buddy. I know exactly how ya feel. 10,000 euros, right? I'll get that for ya right
this second.” Following through with his promise, the man trotted off to a room behind the counter
and began counting money.

That’s all it took to make people comply? A tiny scrap of understanding?

What bullshit.

***

“Did everything go as expected, Mr. Pane?” Vito asked for the eighth time.
“No. They actually made it easy on me this time.”
“That’s nice to hear, don’t you think?” The driver celebrated, starting the engine.

Rather than continue the trivial conversation, Pane simply stopped responding, choosing to brood
bitterly over the most recent clash.

Were Terunosuke and Tira Misu having this sort of problem? He considered calling up his best
friend to ask before he remembered that Terunosuke didn’t have a cellular phone. Damn
technology. Hell, he hadn’t even asked what city the pair had been assigned. Some friend he turned
out to be.

“Vito. How many stops do we have left for today?”
“No more, Mr. Pane. That was the final delivery. Were you focused on unrelated topics? You
should really perform this undertaking with the utmost seriousness.” Pane hadn’t asked for a
lecture.
“Thank you for caring, Vito. Where are you taking me now?”
“Back to Dr. Salvatore’s clinic, per his request. That man really is an incredible soul, don’t you
think?”

Pane let the conversation fade away a second time in favor of staring out the window.

Being crippled sucked.

***
After a brief drive back, Pane was back in the hospital-themed prison that was Salvatore’s clinic. It was practically his home at this point.

“Did everything go well today?” The doctor asked, parroting Vito’s similar question.

“Yeah. All according to plan.” Pane reported apathetically, conveniently leaving out the attempted shakedowns and his minor breakdown. “Do you know how Terunosuke is doing?”

“I’m sure Carta is doing just fine. He has a habit of blazing through dangerous situations without suffering any lasting damage. He’s probably on his way back as we speak.”

Salvatore was dead on in that assessment. Ever since Pane had known the guy, Terunosuke was the type of person who could take all the pain in the world and be hunky-dory the very next day. Shattered bones, extremely stressful situations, and life-threatening confrontations could only hope to slow down Pane’s former partner. It was probably safe to assume that nothing in his life had ever stopped him for more than a few minutes.

Terunosuke was just that type of guy.

***

“Slow down!” Terunosuke panted, teetering on exhaustion while jogging at a modest pace. “You’re tired from THIS? Get in shape, slowpoke!” Tira teased, keeping several paces ahead of him.

After spending a total of 6 hours on a bus and taking care of a handful of other shady deals, Terunosuke had overestimated his own endurance, leading to the laughable state he currently exhibited.

“My legs are sore from sitting awkwardly in that tiny bus seat. Give me a break!”

“If you complain again, Salvatore will escape before we get to him.”

Life was unfair. Every time he found himself ahead in the rat race, the world found a brand new way to kick him back to last place. Sore legs during a jog proved to be the most recent iteration of his unlucky nature.

He didn’t mind. Nothing ever got to him.

Ever.

Terunosuke was just that kind of guy.

“I think I’m getting a second wind!” He declared confidently passing Tira. “Don’t fall too far behind. You’ll let Salvatore get away.”

“Liar!” She growled, chasing after him

***

“Is everything alright?” Salvatore asked with an apprehensive expression.

“Huh?” Pane shook himself from his daze. “Yeah. I’m perfectly fine. You don’t need to worry about me. Just focus on the paperwork, Mr. Department Leader.” Pane didn’t even convince himself.

Thankfully, the doctor didn’t press the issue. The sound of a pen scrawling along mountains of documents was the only presence felt in the room for a substantial length of time. Pane spent most of that time wondering if Salvatore’s handwriting looked like the handwriting of a stereotypical doctor: chicken scratches and drunken hieroglyphics. Before he could come to an educated conclusion, a peace-breaking shout roared through the halls of the clinic.
“Where the fuck is Salvatore?!”

Terunosuke was back. Now he could actually start enjoying himself. “Shit!” Salvatore muttered under his breath. “I didn’t think they’d be back so soon.”

“Michael! Is Sa- Yeah, hello to you too. Is Salvatore here?”

…

“Can you tell me which room he’s in?”

…

“WILL you tell me which room he’s in?”

…

“Fuck it! Help me look for him, Tira.”

After the heated exchange, Pane glanced at the nervous doctor, the man now pacing around the room in search of a miraculous exit. “Help me out here, Pane.” There was the sound of a door down the hall being thrown open. “How do I get out of here without having to answer for making them take the bus?”

“You’re asking me?!”

“I’m desperate!”

Another door swung open.

“Climb out the window.” The purple-haired smuggler suggested. Nodding, Salvatore struggled in vain to pull the window up. “No good! It won’t budge!” Yet another door banged open, they were closing in.

“Hmm… what does your stand do again?”

“Under My Skin? It manipulates layers. Like the layers of a muscle that has a bullet lodged in it. It can make the bullet rise out the entry wound by lowering the surrounding flesh.” What the…?

“That’s what it does? I thought it could pull things. That’s really complicated. Let me try to think of a solution.” The swinging doors were getting closer and closer by the second.

If his stand manipulated layers, did it affect the layers of his own body? If it did, could how fast would it work?

The limitations kept piling on as he pondered a potential solution.

***

Terunosuke marched down to the end of the hall, Tira following close behind. Only one room still stood unsearched. He placed his hand on the doorknob and braced his shoulder against one side of the barrier. Tira quickly filed next to him, taking her position on the opposite side.

“On the count of three, we charge in and give him a piece of our minds.” Tira whispered. “Sounds good.” Michael deadpanned from a few doors away. Terunosuke nodded his confirmation.

Tira inhaled and exhaled.

Genesis prepared itself to strike.

Terunosuke clenched his teeth and wiped a trickling bead of sweat off his temple with his free
Michael picked his nose with his pinky finger.

“Three.” Terunosuke counted.

“Two.” Tira continued.

“Three.” Michael interrupted.

“One.” Terunosuke corrected.

“...” Tira stayed silent. Terunosuke glared daggers at her. “Are you going to open the door?!” She hissed with a hushed voice.

“Where's the zero?” Terunosuke demanded.

“What zero?! It goes ‘three, two, one’ and then we go! Zero isn't a factor.”

“Zero is absolutely a factor! The sense of finality is paramount!”

“ZERO GO!” Tira shouted, shattering the peaceful silence. Taking the cue, Terunosuke flung the door wide open.

Bolting into the final showdown, the pair rushed into their fates together. The final room contained a smirking Pane, a mound of papers and documents, and no Salvatore.

“Where did he go?!” Terunosuke growled.

“He just phased through the wall.” Pane laughed while pointing towards the single window in the room.

Terunosuke and Tira frantically pressed their eyes to the glass. The sight of Salvatore scurrying down an alley and out of their grasp graced the pair’s view, causing their blood to boil.

“Goddammit!” Terunosuke screamed. He struggled to lift the window, but the glass remained stuck in place.

“Salvatoreeeeeee! I'll kill youuuuu!” He declared in fury.

“Over my dead body.” Michael quipped sarcastically.

“Good luck with that, buddy.” Pane added.

***

Pettiness was unsatisfying.

In the hopes of throwing a wrench into the smuggling department’s brazen schemes, Cielo had approached local drug buyers that were notorious for doing business with Passione. The plan was to cast a blockade over the recently-reestablished department by way of the businesses acting unreasonable in order to squeeze maximum profit out of the vulnerable group. It was a tried-and-true method that had an established track record of success, leaving no reason to doubt its inevitable success.

The smugglers had different plans.

They had all stayed rigid and adamant in the face of unreasonable demands. Like starving mutts, they had rejected any attempts at negotiation and ripped through all opposition with extreme prejudice. Not a single owner reported an increase in revenue--some even complained about a harsh cut in their intakes.
A plan resulting in failure was nothing to be ashamed of.

A plan aiming to inconvenience a group of murderers resulting in failure was something that would gnaw at the back of his mind for weeks to come.

What would Noce do in this situation? Get mad? Try again? Drink heavily to drown out the dejection? All three?

Cielo didn’t know.

More than that. He couldn’t even think for himself. If there was one overwhelming quality that Noce had, it was his ability to put his mind to something in an instant, an attribute that Cielo could only dream about.

“Don’t pursue him.” Padre had warned.

He had a foolish, spiteful, destructive desire. A desire that pierced into his thoughts during his every waking moment. A desire that corroded his soul with its caustic potential. A desire that declared “Finish it, and you’ll feel better!”

A desire for bloody vengeance.

A desire to slice Carta in two. A desire to crush him like a dog in the street. A desire to rip his throat out!

Cielo knew--in his soul, he knew--his desire would soon become action.

Chapter End Notes

It’s become a bit of a cycle to have a serious chapter be followed by a lighthearted chapter and follow that by a serious chapter, and so on.

I plan on doing something about that down the road.
“So you know how Terunosuke was on leave for a while?” Michael asked, a goofy smile breaking out on his face despite his best efforts to contain it.
“Yeah?” Salvatore responded, a small smile of his own spreading out.
“And his alias is Carta.”
“I’m aware.”
“So that means during that time, he was on...hehe... Carta Blanche.” As soon as he finished, Michael began to laugh chaotically, apparently finding his own joke massively hilarious.
“Haha. Not bad.” As far as jokes went, it was fairly lackluster. But any joke that Michael told was comedy gold.
“Did you come up with that one yourself?”
“You bet! And get this! I told that joke to Terunosuke and do you know what his reaction was?”
“He didn’t really get it?”
“No. He understood. He just looked at me like I was an alien. It took a ton of strength to not insult his sense of humor.”
“Yeah? He is foreign after all. Jokes in Italian probably don’t translate.” Michael rolled his eyes.
“It’s alright to admit that the joke was pretty awful, it won’t hurt me.” Salvatore shook his head back and forth.
“No. It was a clever play on words. Don’t get down on yourself.” Michael gave a soft, genuine smile at his father's heartfelt compliment.
“Thanks, Dad.”

***

The late afternoon streets of Naples weren’t as chilly as noon in Florence. Tira and Genesis seemed to enjoy the lack of shivering.
“Hey, Carta. Where are we going?”
“I’m going to take care of some personal business. You don’t have to follow me.”
“I’m not following you.” Tira stated indignantly. “We just happen to be walking in the same direction.”

Terunosuke suddenly stopped in place. She turned back and looked at him like he was walking around naked.
“What do you think you’re doing?”
“Nothing important. But, hey, don’t let me slow you down. Go on ahead without me, I might be a while.”

The girl didn’t know what to do with herself. She took a few steps forward in a feeble attempt at independence, then swiveled around and walked back in his direction.
“I actually have to go this way.” She took a few more steps in the same direction before looking back at him. Terunosuke had remained firmly rooted in place.

Cutting her losses, she returned to her starting position, staring down at her feet as if they were the most interesting things in the universe. “I MIGHT be following you for my own entertainment… allegedly.” Terunosuke wasn’t aware that trailing behind someone could be fun. Throughout the entire debacle, Genesis had been silently attempting to eat itself.

With the pointless distraction resolved, the pair continued to march towards Terunosuke’s
destination: A travel agent’s office.

***

“Lemme get this straight.” The chain-smoking baldie started. “You want a single, one-way, international plane ticket for a date that’s a year away?”
“Correct.” Terunosuke confirmed without having to think. The agent paused for a few moments to squint at him, put out his cigarette in an ashtray, look over at an equally-perplexed Tira, and finally shake his head in resignation.
“If that’s what you want, that’s what you’ll get.”

***

“That guy seemed like a pretty bad employee, don’t you think, Carta?” Tira inquired. “Whatever happened to ‘service with a smile’?” She tugged up the corners of her mouth and stretched her lips into an unnatural smile. “Caa ah hal ya, sah?” She sloshed out incomprehensibly.
“What are you doing?”
“Pay aaong!” She insisted as Genesis stared daggers into his eyes.
“I can’t even understand what you’re saying.”
“Ugg... “ The girl released her lips in dejection. “You could’ve at least pretended to have fun.”

Terunosuke hooked his fingers around the corners of his lips and tugged them down into an exaggerated frown.
“Don’t look so upset.” He tried to pronounce, though it came out as, “Don ook oo uhsae.”

Annunciation didn’t bother Tira enough to keep her from laughing.
“Thank yaa… ah-ACHOO!” She sounded like a freight train when she sneezed. “Ghh… I feel awful.” Was she surprised by the sudden onset of a cold? The disease had never appeared spontaneously in his experience.
“Are you alright? You were fine just a second ago.” Tira looked defensive at the reasonable question.
“I’m completely fine.” She lied. He stopped walking and squinted at her.
“You just told me you felt awful?” Why was she acting like this?
“Just drop it.” She insisted a bit too forcefully. “This is probably because you didn’t let my borrow your coat when I begged you for it when we were in Rome. Are you happy now, you inconsiderate asshole?” She looked away and walked ahead of him in a coughing fit.

That entire conversation was a rollercoaster of emotion. He wasn’t sure whether he should apologize or play along.

***

As soon as they returned to his apartment, she took a straight path to her room and locked herself inside.

Terunosuke came to the logical conclusion that the best course of action would be to allow Tira time and space to cool off. For the rest of the night, he made no attempt to alleviate the ‘damage’ he had caused, imagining the scolding she would inflict upon him if he tried.

He briefly entertained the possibility that she was employing a roundabout method of teasing or was indirectly requesting attention from him.
Maybe. Maybe not.

It wasn’t like he’d be able to understand the differences even if she told him directly.

***

The next morning brought the ghastly realization of his mistake. How could he be so foolishly ignorant?! If a woman said she wanted to be left alone, the polar opposite was true. That’s how women operated!

The air held a straining weight, like a sword dangling just centimeters above his head, eager to fall and split his skull apart. His recent nightmares felt like a springtime stroll in comparison.

Determined to save his skin and correct his mistake, he scampered out of his fortress and made a beeline to Tira’s door. His knuckles hovered in front of the wooden barrier while a brand new typhoon of deliberation whipped up inside of his head.

What should he say when he knocked? How would he explain his negligence? How would she react to his excuses? What if she wanted to rip his head off? Where would he hide when she tried to kill him? How fast could he run? How fast could SHE run? Could he survive the landing if he jumped out of a window?

The anarchy of potential horrors swirled around without direction for what felt like hours. Finally, a single thought shined bright above all the rest.

What if she didn’t want to be bothered?!

He might set off a powder keg if he made a feeble attempt at an apology. For all he knew, it would be best if he repented for his sins if and when she brought it up.

Satisfied with his conclusion, he backed away from the door and tiptoed back to his room.

“Carta. Could you come in here for a minute?”

His neck cracked and snapped as he looked back to the gate of hell. He could already picture the horrible eyes she would wear, the vicious lashings she would inflict upon his bare skin, the dreadful shame she would force him to bear.

It was too much! But if he didn't comply with her awful demand, the punishment would be exponentially worse!

In the hopes that a display of humility would dull her wrath, Terunosuke bowed into a perfect right angle as he opened the door.

“Heh. What the heck are you doing?” Tira asked, sounding as though she had beaten her cold. It was probably unreasonable to think that an Italian would easily recognize a distinctly Japanese gesture. Terunosuke frowned in embarrassment.

“It’s a sign of apology where I’m from. This is me apologizing.” He replied to the hardwood floor, still bent over.

“Where you’re ‘from’? Oh yeah, you’re actually from China.” Not quite… “Anyway, I’m not mad. I actually want you to look at me.”

Complying with her request, Terunosuke slowly let his head rise up.

Tira was naked.
“What the hell is wrong with you?!” He shot up straight.

More accurately, she was covered up to the hip by her bedsheets while Genesis hid the inappropriate sections of her chest. She was lounging in her bed as if she were an extravagant queen who could call upon a legion of maids and butlers with a single thought. Terunosuke had never noticed how soft her skin looked.

“Something wrong? You were just about to come in before I asked you to come in. Don’t tell me you got cold feet so quickly.” That wasn’t the issue here.

“Why are you naked?” A look of amusement played on Tira’s face as he asked.

“I think the real question here is: Why are you still staring?”

“That’s…”

“Or is staring at a naked woman ‘a sign of apology’ where you come from?”

Shit. She had him in the palm of her hand. What should he do? What COULD he do?!

“Either way, I wouldn’t tease you so cruelly without making it worth your while.” That wasn’t a good sign.

In an gracefully refined style, Tira elegantly took ahold of Genesis’s lengthy body and methodically began to separate the serpent from her supple flesh. Terunosuke was petrified in place, he couldn’t even avert his eyes from her direction, he had to settle for staring at her covered legs. After an agonizing ten seconds, Genesis finally slithered off of Tira’s lithe frame, leaving the young woman’s upper body completely revealed. The seductress arched her back in a way that emphasized her breasts. Admitting defeat, Terunosuke allowed his eyes to trace past her slender waist, up her silky hair, and finally arrived at her… breasts?

Tira didn’t have nipples.

“Wh-what the hell…?” The pathetic response was met with derisive laughter.

“Were you hoping for a peep show? Hmm? Sorry, but you’ll have to wait a bit longer if you want a genuine peek.” The deceitful woman threw off her bedsheets and revealed the magic trick. Rather than a brilliant display of flesh and unguarded wonder, Tira wore the appearance of an anatomy model from a biology textbook. “Do you like the bodysuit?”

So that was her game. Through clever obscurants and evocative posing, she had managed to fool him into thinking she was naked when she was actually wearing a flesh-colored bodysuit. Where in the hell did she get a bodysuit?! What possible reason could she have for owning such a thing?!

Did she buy it for the sole purpose of fucking with him?!

With Tira, all things were possible.

“I… I’m leaving.” Terunosuke barely managed to squeeze out.

“Leaving so soon? Take your jacket off and stay awhile.” Tira made obscenely suggestive, wiggling movements in a successful attempt at making Terunosuke even more uncomfortable than he already was.

Before she executed another insane scheme, Terunosuke escaped from the horror show and made a tactical retreat back to his fortress.

What was her probl…

What was HIS problem?

He could’ve left during any part of that display, yet he stayed until the punchline landed on his head. Deep down in the depths of his subconscious, was he a masochist? He slapped himself with
his hands for even having the thought.

He simmered in embarrassment and second-guesses for the better part of an hour until a knock rapped against his door.

“Carta.” Tira’s voice rang. “There’s someone asking for you on the phone.” Did she honestly think he would fall for that?
“Screw off.” He curtly responded.
“I’m not joking this time. There really is someone asking for you.”

She wasn’t even trying! He wasn’t a goldfish that would forget everything in five seconds. He wouldn’t make it easy for her anymore!
“I said to screw off.” He repeated, louder and more assertive.
“Hmph. Fine. Don’t believe me. If you don’t want to talk, I’ll just have a nice chit-chat with your friend.”

The sound of deliberately-loud footsteps informed him that she had given up, hopefully for good. He held his breath for a minute, two minutes, five minutes until he was sure she was done bothering him. If he listened closely, he could make out the faint murmuring of Tira’s voice excitedly chatting away. Maybe she was actually telling the truth. But then again, who in the world would actually call him?

Figuring that the entire thought process was a waste of brain cells, Terunosuke dragged himself to his bathroom; a cold shower would do him well.

***

As the freezing water bit at his tender skin, a renewed clarity washed over Terunosuke’s mind. He just needed to relax. That’s all. Tira was a naturally teasing person. Nothing wrong with that. It might be fun if he went along with the joke for once. Yeah, that’d be fun.
“Hey, Carta.” Tira proclaimed, breaking his peace as if on cue. “Why didn’t you tell me you were friends with a little girl?” The voice beyond the shower curtain rang with a typical grating tone, but possessed a paralyzing quality in the words it spoke.
“Who was on the phone?” He demanded.
“She said her name was Maddalena. She seemed pretty surprised when I picked up instead of you, said she was proud of you for getting a girlfriend.”
“What in the hell did you tell her?!” His composure had completely vanished at this point.
“Relax! I just told her that you were eating three meals a day and getting plenty of sleep. I’ll have you know that I didn’t lie about a single thing.”

This was the worst possible outcome! Not only could Tira make fun of him for not trusting her, he also missed a call from Maddalena. On top of both nightmares, Tira had a conversation with Maddalena! What on God’s green earth did she say to the young girl?! Did she corrupt her with a brief conversation! What did she say?!

...Wait…

This was just another trick! Exactly! She couldn’t fool him again!

So she spoke with Maddalena. Big deal! She was a responsible young girl who wouldn’t be easily corrupted. If he got flustered again, he’d only add fuel to her fire. Instead, he should fight that fire with fire of his own!
“Did she say anything interesting.” His voice was as even as tempered steel as the words flowed from his tongue.
“Uh… no, not really.” There was a faint clue to her tone that gave him all the information he needed. Like an agile assassin, Terunosuke only needed the slightest lapse in concentration to strike! “If she didn’t say anything important, then you can leave, I’m trying to take a shower in peace here.” If he could see her face, he would take a picture of it to capture the moment forever. She had to be devastated by that! He couldn’t stop grinning like an idiot. “I understand.” She reported, likely through clenched teeth. “Mind if I join you in there?”

What? So she wasn’t done for after all. He had to give her credit, she didn’t give up easily. If she was bound and determined to offer empty tricks, he would simply call her on her bluff. “You want to shower with me? Sounds like fun. Strip down and hop in.” “H-huh…?!?” She sounded like a scared little girl. “Something wrong? Don’t tell me you’re afraid.” “Ah! T-that’s not it! I… just think… that… we won’t… have enough time if we shower together! We’ll be late if we get distracted!” “ Wouldn’t it save time if w-”

SLAM!

The sound of the door slamming and footsteps retreating paralyzed Terunosuke with disbelief. Tira… left? She left? More like she ran away. She could dish out all the jokes and jabs in the world, but the second he started, she ran away in a fit. How hypocritical could she be?

Terunosuke took back the respect he gave her. Tira’s skin was thinner than paper.

***

The rest of February passed in a blur. Endless deliveries throughout Italy, busy check-ins to an apologetic Salvatore, pleasant visits to a sunshiny Sergio, and a generally lighthearted cohabitation with an enjoyable Tira. It was possible to say that Terunosuke had established a predictable--and at times, comfortable--pattern in his life.

Michael didn't insult him, Maddalena and the Rossos called him almost daily, February sixth passed without a problem, and best of all, Scheggia didn't send goons to kill him.

It wasn't the greatest, but it wasn't awful by any standard.

Italy wasn't so bad.

***

“I’m glad you could meet with me again, Padre.” Cielo began earnestly. “We agreed to meet again in one month. It's been one month since we set the date, so we're meeting again. It's honestly nothing special.” The leader stated flatly. “No reason to be flippant.” Fan remarked.

“I'll get right into things.” Cielo started. “I still believe that it would be in the best interest of Scheggia if we were to follow Carta’s actions.” “Why do you believe this?” Padre was much more serious than usual today. Cielo gulped. “Because we owe it to Noce, Sanguinoso, the victims of the wedding massacre, and everyone who might have died by his hand previously.”

Once Cielo stated his belief, the board room fell silent for a few moments. “That it?” Fan questioned. Cielo nodded affirmatively.
Padre stood up and frowned calmly at his subordinate. “You didn't learn a single thing from the waiting period, did you?” Cielo was taken aback by the coarse words. “I said that trying to get revenge would lead to all three of our deaths. I wasn't lying, Cielo. This proposal isn’t subtle in the slightest; no one is fooled by your lies. You want revenge on that man for killing Noce, pure and simple. Try and tell me I'm wrong.” Cielo’s tongue dried up in his mouth. His hands froze to his seat. A blazing spotlight scorched his skin. He couldn't say a thing. “That's what I thought. If you were doing this out of unbiased concern, you would have suggested a monitoring plan after Sanguinoso’s death.”

The scolding leader returned to his seat and sighed softly. “If you do anything reckless, we will all pay the price.” How could he STILL not understand? This path was the right path! Why didn’t he see that?!

“You don’t understand!”

Padre shot out of his seat again, his characteristically calm expression replaced with frustration and anger. He stretched across the table and clenched bunches of Cielo’s shirt in his hands. “Shut your goddamn mouth, you stupid shit! If you want to kill yourself, do it on your own damn time. Don’t drag anyone else into your suicidal farce.” Did he think Carta would kill him? Absolutely not!

“Padre! Don’t yo-”

“I told you to shut your fucking mouth!” Padre snapped. “You are forbidden to go after Carta in any way. You will NOT search for information pertaining to him. You will NOT track him down. You will NOT try to kill him. Do I make myself clear?”

Cielo bit down the flurry of insults that he wished to hurl at his blind leader. “Understood.”

The foreigner tore out of his oppressive grip and escaped from the room, leaving Padre and Fan behind. “Dammit.” He heard Padre whisper.

***

“You're going to al-Jazā’ir for the next delivery.” Salvatore announced with a clap. “We're going to al-Jazā’ir?” Tira asked. “What's that?”

“Algeria. You were there for years! How did you not know that by now?”

“Oh.” Genesis drooped weakly around her neck. “I quit.” “Not deal.” Salvatore rebuked. “It’ll be good for you.” “Saaaallllll! I don't want to go back there ever again! I hated, hated, hated that place! I refuse to go back!”

“Quit throwing a tantrum. It'll take you 2 days at most. That's it.” “Mmm… can't we jus-”

“No.” Terunosuke chided suddenly. “Get over yourself.”

Salvatore eyed him cautiously, silently signaling him that he may have unintentionally overstepped his bounds. Tira loosely pinched her eyes shut, sighing in and out. Crap. Was he about to receive an earful for that comment?

“I'm sorry.” Tira announced, easing her eyes open and pulling an embarrassed smile on her face. “I guess I was acting pretty childish there, huh? I'll suck it up, I promise.” What a delightful response. When she acted like a rational human, Tira could be an wonderful partner.

“Same setup as always, right? Mikie has the information and all that?” Salvatore nodded. “Great. I won't keep him waiting.” With a bubbly hop, the cheerful girl left the room and began to skip down
the hallway, humming lightly all the while. She could make sugar jealous with how sweet she acted.

Just as the young smuggler was about to join her, a firm hand gripped his shoulder. “Terunosuke, we need to fix this, now.” Salvatore stated with a fearful tone. Why was the doctor calling him by his real name? “What’s wrong?” “Tira. That sugar-sweet glee just now.” Happiness was a bad sign? “I don’t get what you’re trying to say. How is that negative in any way?” Salvatore’s eyes widened. “She didn’t tell you yet?” “Goddammit! Just spit it out. What’s the problem with her being happy?” Instead of answering, Salvatore shook his head side-to-side and stared down at his feet. “I won’t say anything if she hasn’t said anything. I’m sorry, but forget about what I just said. You’ll know what I’m talking about if it happens.” “You can’t do that! If you freak out about something, I have the right to know what you’re afraid of. My imagination will set itself on fire if you don’t tell me.” “Terunosuke… the situation is complicated. If she doesn’t trust you enough yet, then I’m not going to go over her head on this. I’m sorry, that’s just the way things have to be.” Running a hand through his long hair, Terunosuke felt somewhat betrayed. “Fine.” He conceded.

Moving towards the exit again, he stopped right before the door. “If I see whatever it is, I’ll be sure to tell you.” Without waiting for a response, he left the room and made his way to a grinning Tira.

***

“Carta, can I ask you something?” “Sure, Tira. Nothing too personal, though.” “No, nothing like that. I just wanted to know how much money Passione makes.”

Interesting question. Considering the backlog of deals that the pair had delivered and completed throughout February, it was safe to assume that the number was far from miniscule. If the average cost of the goods involved in a delivery totaled to 10,000 euros, and the pair, on average, completed 5 deliveries per day, their contribution added an average of 50,000 euros per business day. Considering that they had been working nearly every day to clear the backlog, their contribution had to be quite substantial by this point. Add in Sergio’s higher rate of Naples-based deliveries to the mix, and the party of 3 probably managed to be one of the most profitable departments in the gang.

Of course, they weren’t the only lucrative department. In some form or another, each and every department was designed to bring in money: be it via extortion, gambling, and everything in between. It was clear that Passione was at the top of the financial food chain.

“I’d say that the organization is worth millions, maybe billions of euros.” He answered after minutes of silent consideration. “I see, I see. So can you explain to me why a multi-billion euro organization can’t charter a single measly flight? How could a gang with near-limitless pools of money make its employees take a commercial plane?!”

As she made her point, a snot-nosed kid kicked the back of her seat. The fat, sleeping man she was sitting beside slumped over on her shoulder, snoring grotesquely. A baby started crying a few aisles down.
It was an average day in public transportation for Terunosuke.

It seemed like a punishment for the world’s worst criminal based on Tira’s reaction.

“Well… Salvatore is a busy guy. He can’t arrange everything for us like the previous department leader did. Do you know how the process of chartering a private flight works?” Tira glared daggers into his eyes.

“That doesn’t excuse anything. Sal is the department leader and a medical practitioner. That’s all he does. Even if he was swamped with dying patients, he could still have Michael do something other than being a secretary.” She was actually making some decent points. He needed to change the subject before she ranted on for the entire flight.

“Just relax. There’s no need to be act like a little girl.” That statement was meant as a guide for enduring everyday annoyances, but it came out sounding like he was mocking her. He needed to apologize before she got the wrong idea “Uhh… what I mean by that is tha-”

“I got it.” Tira shot back, smiling brighter than a firework. “You’re totally right.”

Her annoyance was hijacked by glowing happiness. Salvatore had warned that that exact reaction would lead to catastrophe down the road, but didn’t say how. Was he overreacting like a clingy parent? Was he 100% on the mark with his warning?

Terunosuke grinned back, smiling as bright as a nightlight.

What did a doctor know about people anyways?

***

A baby cried a few seats behind Cielo. It was a strange thing to take comfort in, yet the wails calmed his nerves. They reminded him that he wasn’t the only one on the plane this morning; confirmed that he was still sane. Somewhere between the aisles of men, women, and children, Carta was relaxing like an innocent civilian.

One of the greatest strengths that Scheggia possessed was its unrivaled capability to gather information. For an organization that employed only 102… 91… 89…

Dammit, Carta.

With only a fraction of Passione’s numbers, Scheggia managed to know the inner workings of Naples better than the strongest criminal network in Europe. In fact, they were so adept at information gathering that even a single low-end worker could find a golden ticket. A golden ticket that read, “Carta will be on a plane headed to Algiers on the third morning in March.”

Funny. His birthplace would be Carta’s resting place.

Cielo still didn’t know what Carta looked like, but he knew they were currently on the same plane. With a pinch of luck, the bastard would be dead by sunset.

Until then, Cielo leaned back and appreciated the soothing sobs.

***

The first thing Terunosuke noticed when he stepped out of the airport was the toasty Algerian weather, or rather the lack of any toasty quality. In fact, the air was more frigid than Naples. What the hell was going on? Wasn’t Algeria part of Africa? If there was a single fact Terunosuke was sure of, it was that Africa was hot. He felt cheated by all the late-night nature documentaries he had
fallen asleep to over the years. “Feeling chilly?” Tira poked, wearing a bright orange down jacket that made her look like she was covered entirely with scales. “You really didn’t know that Algiers gets cold this time of year?” “I did too.” He lied through clattering teeth. “So you took your jacket off because you like the feeling of the freezing wind rushing by on your frail, exposed skin, right?” “That’s wrong.” He replied adamantly. “Oh? Tell me, how is it wrong?” She sounded a bit too amused about this. “It’s a long coat, not a jacket.” “Carta, you big baby!” She cried out before bursting into laughter.

He couldn’t help but crack an involuntary smile at her genuine laughter.

***

“Carta, you big baby!” A teenage girl’s voice called out. Cielo rubbed a finger in his ear to make sure he wasn’t hearing things.

There was no denying it. Carta was within earshot!

He turned towards the girl’s voice. Past the sea of common salarymen, tourists, and official workers, he spotted a young woman dressed in orange and yellow walking with a teenage boy who quickly slid his arms through the sleeves of a jacket.

Maybe he misheard. Maybe “Carta” was a name kids called one another, like “Golden Boy” or “Angel”. Maybe that was the boy’s nickname--his hair did look like sheets of folded paper. It was silly to think that he could be THAT lucky… but maybe he had hit the nail on the head.

The native Algerian weaved his way through the crowd, towards the pair. He drew close to them, close enough to eavesdrop on their conversation, yet far enough away to remain unnoticed. What did the young man have to say for himself?

“I see that Salvatore didn’t arrange a taxi for us, either.” The orange girl complained. “Like I said earlier, he’s the leader of the department for the time being; there’s no way he’ll be able to do everything for us lackeys.”

Only Passione members would say something like that! It… it was him! A kid no older than Cielo! He was the bastard that killed Noce!

Cielo took heavy steps toward the demon, his steady hands balling up into trembling fists. His eyes focused solely on the teenager standing in front of him. His back was turned. Cielo could kill him in a second! In just one second, the bastard could be sliced in half!

Just a Shining Star was about to be summoned, Cielo remembered where he was. Innocent men, women, and children were all within his stand’s range. If he went buckwild in such a crowded place, he would open a can of worms that could never be closed.

An airport wasn’t the proper backdrop for a justice-fueled execution.

***

The afternoon sun shined right in Terunosuke’s eyes as the taxi shuttled them away from the airport. “At least Sal was merciful enough to book a hotel for us lackeys.” “Whoa…”
“Huh? Carta, are you listening?”
“No. Look.” His finger pointed out the window in complete awe, directing to the unending metropolis of buildings, pedestrians, cars, road signs, sidewalks, and everything else a typical city would hold. “It’s incredible.”
“Huh? What are you pointing at?” Tira asked, not getting it at all.
“Outside! All of it! It’s a city!”
“…And?”
“And it’s in Africa!”
“So…?” The gears started to turn. “Are you… surprised that Africa has cities?”
“Exactly! I thought it was a continent comprised of mud huts and stick houses.” Tira launched into another laughing fit.
“You’re joking, right?! AHAHAHAHA! We were JUST at an airport! How narrow-minded are you?! Oh my God! I-I can’t breathe!”
“Alright alrea-”
“Do you think all French people have mustaches and smoke cigars? Or that all Russians drink liters of vodka every day? Tell me more, tell me more!”

He made a mental note to never say another word in front of Tira ever again.

***

Terunosuke had expected their hotel room to be comfortable. He was wrong. The door groaned whenever it moved, the bathroom smelled like someone had been murdered in it, and the only bed in the room didn’t have any sheets.

…

There was only one bed. Tira was probably going to say something like, “I guess we’ll ju-”
“I guess we’ll just have to sleep together.”

Terunosuke glanced at the orange girl and her pet snake, both grinning. It was like she could read his mind.
“That’s really not necessary. I can sleep on the floor.”
“You can not! Oh please, Carta, don’t be like that.” She walked over to him and put her hands on her hips. “I promise I won’t try anything funny, cross my heart.” She made an “X” motion over her heart, Genesis brushed the end of her tail over her upper-midsection. Was that where a snake’s heart was located? “Pleeeeeease.”

Was he really going to let a cute girl sleep all alone without anyone to keep her company?

Yes.

…

Well… that’s what he would normally do, but something in the way she gave him puppy-dog eyes and extended the “please” like it was the end of the world made him relent. This would probably come back to bite him in the ass.

“Jeez, fine. You win. I’ll sleep with you.” Shit! She was going to make a stupid joke on that.
“Thank you, Terunosuke.” Instead of making a cheap joke at his expense, Tira hugged him tightly.

She used his real name. She knew how much that pissed him off. Real names weren’t casual matters, they were signs of serious trust between two people. They both knew the significance of
what she said, and for some reason Terunosuke wasn’t bothered by it.

He should feel revolted by someone he barely knew saying his real name, but the outrage was completely absent.

Today was just one strange event after another.

Tira’s embrace tightened around him, almost creating a vicegrip. In response, he wrapped his arms around her back and squeezed softly.

“OH! I didn’t expect you to hug back.”

“Well… you’re welcome.”

For a while, they just stood there, hugging. It was about as uncomfortable as he expected, but the feeling of her breasts against his chest more than made up for it.

***

The rest of the night rushed by in seconds. Calls were made to the client that they would meet in the morning for the delivery. Additional formalities could be completed in the morning.

Terunosuke peered at his watch; the memento informed him that he would regret staying up so late. The natural course of action would be to curl up on the sheetless bed and pass out for 6 hours. However, the promise he made to Tira complicated matters.

“What’s up? You look worried about something?” She asked, staring quizzically at his scrunched face. Was he being that obvious?

“I kind of have an embarrassing habit when I sleep…”

“A habit? Like restless leg syndrome?”

“Not quite…”

“You snore?”

“No, nothing like that…”

“Then what is it?”

Terunosuke darted his gaze away, he couldn’t make eye contact during this.

“I… uh… sleep without a shirt on…”

He could feel Tira’s merciless stare digging into his body, judging him for such an immature quirk. She was going to laugh at him again, wasn’t she?

“That’s it? You really are innocent if you think sleeping shirtless is anything close to a bad habit.”

“So it isn’t a problem?”

“Not at all. It’s actually kind of cute.”

He gave her prime teasing material and she passed it up? It was like she was a completely different person tonight.

***

Sleeping in the same bed with Tira was painless. Her breathing had shallowed out hours ago, leaving only a rhythmic pattern of soft breaths. Genesis sat motionless on a nightstand, her breathing matching tempo with Tira’s. His watch scolded him to go to sleep before the sun came up, yet he couldn’t manage to fall down despite his frustrated attempts.

His insomnia was kept fueled by one key factor: Tira, or more specifically because of the fact that she had unconsciously wrapped her arm around him while she slept. The hairs on his neck stood on end as if an electric current was zapping through his body. His hands wouldn’t sit still, constantly
tugging and tapping on the mattress. There was no pleasure to be gained from the feeling of her breasts pressing against his back.

Even if Tira was breaking their agreement, a late-night spooning session wasn’t enough to keep him awake and anxious. The real reason was her recent attitude. Typically, Tira was a bubbly girl who wouldn’t shut up, and if she was pushed too far, would snap rather harshly. Recently, however, instead of snapping, she would simply remain effervescent. If Salvatore was right, this was a dangerous sign—a rattlesnake shaking its tail. Additionally, he couldn’t forget the vow he made to himself about not getting close to others. He had noticed himself going along with Tira’s jokes more and more, enjoying himself and enjoying her presence. Someway, somehow, life would find a way to rip the enjoyment out of his hands like it had before. It would be better if he remained distant from now on.

Moving slowly, Terunosuke eased himself out of Tira’s hold and silently lowered himself onto the floor. He would be sore in the morning, but it would be worth it in the long run.

***

Cielo should have tried to prepare more.

With no way to remotely keep tabs on Carta, he was forced to stay on his target’s heels without the luxury of being able to plan ahead.

When the pair hailed a taxi, he did the same. When the pair walked down a sidewalk, he did the same. When the pair went into a hotel, Cielo camped out in the adjacent alley, unable to afford a room. The plane fare really screwed him over.

For the entire day, neither Carta nor his partner showed their face outside the hotel walls. Evening dawned without a single appearance from the duo. Cielo was getting bored.

His stomach growled.

Cielo was getting hungry.

He sighed and looked up at the night sky.

…Whoa.

This brought back memories. The stars might be outshined by the midnight lights, but the sight of the vast, Algerian sky was a sight that Cielo knew by heart. If he focused closely, he could just barely make out Polaris: the North Star. An orchestra of memories trumpeted in his head. The long walk to school every morning, the way the others children marveled at his creamy-blond hair, the day he finally noticed that half of his class had died, the way his mother told him that they would have to abandon their home, the endless travel, the night sky that gave him hope every time he stared up at the ocean of stars, the panic in his father’s voice when…

There were dozens—maybe hundreds of emotions—coursing through his thoughts. It came as no surprise when he felt a pair of tears stream down his cheeks, both flavored sweet and bitter. The world had no better message to send him. When the time came to face Carta, he would act with divine conviction, for everyone who cared about him.

He stared up at Polaris again, this time with tear-filled eyes. Whoever was looking down at him was probably smiling. His hand shot up and waved around as if it had a mind of its own, his smile stretched out as far as his face would allow. Hopefully, everyone could see him from beyond the blue.
The morning brought two discomforts. The first was the expected stiffness in his back from sleeping on the hard floor. Simply sitting up proved to be impossible without sending a flare of searing aches pulsing through his muscle fibers.

The second discomfort came in Tira’s absence. The bathroom was completely empty, the underside of the bed only hid dust, and the hall outside the room was devoid of any signs of life. She hadn’t even bothered to leave a note, let alone tell him where she was going.

This was his fault, wasn’t it? Anyone would be upset if their trust was betrayed; Tira was living proof. By breaking away from her last night, Terunosuke had broken a very intimate bond without even realizing it.

He would probably need to apologize for this.

Completely forgetting about his sore back, he made his way out of the hotel and onto the street.

The familiar sense of astonishment hit him as he gawked at the AFRICAN metropolis: it was an oxymoron that stared back.

Rubbing his temples, he forced himself to stop feeling so awestruck. He needed to find Tira and apologize.

Of course, the problem was that he didn’t know where she was. For all he knew, she could be completing the job while he wandered through a labyrinth of foreign streets.

He peeked down the alley right by the hotel, but there was only a homeless man snoozing away. He attempted to ask people on the street if they had seen a girl wearing a snake around her neck, but they just laughed at him. He even tried to bribe a child to help him look, but the kid’s mother yelled for a police officer when she saw Terunosuke offer her son a wad of cash.

Things were not going well.

If he didn’t find her soon, the entire job would fall through. How in the hell would he fi-

“That's wonderful, Uguay!”

There she was. Barely one block from the hotel, no less.

A small group of children crowded around Tira as she smiled at a picture one of them had drawn. “Do you know these kids, Tira?” He asked half-astonished at her ability to make friends. “Oh, Carta! Look at this picture. Isn't it great?” The picture in question was a crayon drawing of a crude stick figure in Tira’s likeness surrounded by 4 stick figure children, presumably the same children surrounding her now. Each figure was labeled with a name above their respective head. Rachid, Omar, Farid, and Samir were playing with an extremely well-endowed version of Tira whose nickname was equal parts hilariously crude and anatomically inaccurate. Had the kids even looked at Tira’s chest? Terunosuke took the opportunity to compare the drawing’s proportions to that of the real woman standing before him. If anything, she seemed smaller than what he remembered her being.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” She questioned with uncomfortable concern. “Can you read any of these words?” He pointed to her nickname in particular. “Nope. I don't read or speak a single word of Arabic. Even after living here for a few years.” Terunosuke decided to not consider the countless issues that that must have caused.
“How do you know these kids?”
“I lived here a few years, like I said. One day, I was roaming around when they all came up to me and asked if I wanted to play with them. I had nothing better to do, so I did. The rest is history.”
How did she know what they were saying if she doesn't speak their language?
“How did you communicate with them?”
“What is this? 20 questions? Anyway, I figure it out by their gestures and tones of voice. It's not that different from talking with any little kid.” Absolutely riveting.
“So you have no idea what this name means?” He asked, pointing at the words above her drawing.
“It probably says my real name, right?”

“HAHAHAHAHA! You've been going along with this for years and you had no idea what they were calling you! This is incredible!” He turned to one child, pointed at Tira’s name, pointed at Tira, and coughed out a flurry of laughs. The group joined in on his shortling madness in no time.
“Well what does it say?! And stop laughing at me!”
“I can't believe you had no clue they were calling you BOOB LADY!”

Her reaction: immediate.
Her attitude: flustered.
Her expression: shocked.

“W-w-w-what?! Since when do you speak Arabic?! You're lying! How dare you!” Even Genesis was blushing; this was getting good.
“T-terunosuke calmly stated, as a greasy smile smeared across his face. It wasn’t typical for his language skills to come in handy, but when they did, he made the most of the moment.
“But don't take it from me, Boob Lady, ta-”
“Don't call me that!”
“-ke it from the artist himself.”

Terunosuke turned to one of the children, his grin only growing wider as time passed.
“Young man.” He cordially asked in the child’s native tongue. “Could you tell me what these words say?” His finger pointed to the name above Tira’s head.
“Certainly, sir. And please feel free to call me ‘Rachid’. Those words together are pronounced aimra’at althidii. In our language, thidi means breast and aimra’a means woman. We gave it to the girl because she doesn’t speak our language, therefore we could make jokes at her expense without hurting her feelings. It was a win-win for everyone.” The child articulated.

“T-ingenious. I happen to be this young woman’s coworker. As you said, she doesn't speak your language, so, for her sake, could you demonstrate what the words mean?”
“With pleasure, sir.”

The child first pointed at the first part of the word.
“aimra’a.” He said, making an hourglass-shaped movement with both hands.
“Lady.” Terunosuke translated. Tira grimaced slightly at the half-conformation. Rachid then pointed to the second part.
“thadi.” He thought for a moment on how to convey the meaning of the word in a way that would leave no room for misinterpretation. Suddenly, a visible Eureka struck him.

He placed his hands a few centimeters above his ribage near his pectoral muscles. Each hand then began to make an obscene, pseudo-juggling movement.

“Bo-”
“You don't need to translate that!” Tira exclaimed.
Cielo was at a loss. This wasn't the Carta he knew. The Carta he knew was a monstrous psychopath who committed atrocities for his own deranged amusement. The Carta he saw through binoculars was fun-loving, friendly to children, and flirtatious with his partner. Was it possible that the young man wasn't THE Carta he was searching for? Was he just a normal teenager who went by that name? Nothing added up.

“Calm down, Cielo.” The man spoke to himself in an attempt to psyche himself up. “He's a two-faced demon. Right now, he's wearing a civilian facade. Don't fall for his tricks.”

With an uncertain resolve, he looked back at the perplexing pair, currently smiling and waving as they departed from the small group of children. When they were a sufficient distance away, Cielo walked up to the children.

“Did you know those two?” He asked the one who seemed to be the leader.

“Yes, sir. We have been friends with the woman for a long time, but she moved away a little while ago. I'm not sure who her coworker was, and I didn't recognize his accent, but he seemed like a good person.”

“Thanks.” Cielo replied, already moving to continue stalking the pair.

This was the right Carta… but this Carta wasn't right.

***

Terunosuke might have taken that joke a little too far. Tira was pouting and attempting to drill a hole into him just by staring at him. Genesis had slithered off her arms and perched herself on Tira’s chest, likely as a method of hiding her female anatomy.

“A little bit further… down… the next street…”

“Correct.” Her narrowed eyes almost paralyzed him with anxiety. She wasn't mad. No, she was embarrassed! So much for trying to apologize to her.

“I-let's not keep the client waiting.”

The rest of the walk was spent reviewing/regretting all of his life choices. What if he had chosen to fly to someplace like Los Angeles or Seoul to start his life over instead of landing in Naples? Would he face the same uncertainties? Have to overcome the same challenges? Climb out of the same pitfalls? Have to deal with the same type of scary gi-

“Snap out of your perverted fantasy.” Tira reprimanded, pulling on his ear.

“No. That… I wasn't…”

“I don’t want to hear it from you.”

They had ended up at some sort of backstreet garage while he had been distracted.

“Is this really the place?”

“It's the address the client gave last night. Honestly, did you even pay attention at all?” She saw right through him. Was this the power of a slighted woman?

“Of course. I was jus-”

“They are coming out.”

As she spoke, a jovial-looking Arabian man poked his head out of the garage door and beamed a smile without a drop of falsehood.

“Hello, hello, hello!” He greeted. The rest of his body emerged from the garage, along with a fluffy cat that purred in his arms. “You must be the delivery service. I'm ecstatic that Passione has finally arrived to undertake my burden after so much waiting.”

“Don't mention it.” The pair replied in unison. After more than a month of constant reminders about the gap in activity, their patience for the subject had been completely whittled away.

“Come, come. I'll show you the truck.” The man instructed as he set the cat down and disappeared.
into the garage.

“Truck?” Terunosuke whispered, following.

“You really don’t pay attention. It’s for the job.”

Unfortunately, Terunosuke had been focusing on a very different topic last night. He knocked his knuckles on his forehead and forced himself to concentrate.

The garage held a large military truck. One with a pickup that was surrounded with a tall canvas canopy. Terunosuke hadn’t seen one since the raid on the Scheggia wedding, though that wasn’t something he wanted to think about now, nor ever.

“She’s American-made. Blah Blah Horsepower, Blah Blah Engine, Blah Blah fuel than you could ever Blah!”

His’s focus strayed like a feral cat. Speaking of cats, the sandy-brown feline that the man had been holding rubbed against Terunosuke’s leg. He bent over and began scratching behind its ear, drawing Tira’s annoyed glare.

“I’m listening.” He lied.

“Hhhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmm…” He went back to petting the cat before she even finished her audible doubt.

Could he turn the cat into paper? The thought struck him with no real cause beyond instinctual curiosity. It had been a long time since he pondered a subject like that.

With no need for further consideration, Enigma shot out and clutched the cat’s neck.

The cat responded by licking its crotch, unaware that Enigma was trying to strangle it.

He had forgotten that Enigma was weaker than a newborn baby, he wouldn’t be able to pluck a single hair from the animal’s fur even if he gave every drop of his strength. Despite his inability to harm the cat, Enigma was still able to turn the cat into a piece of paper. His stand simply was the best stand ever.

He flipped the paper around his finger like a magician performing a trick.

“-with the cans you won't have to worry… about refueling in… where did Mr. Leo run off to?” The client asked in the middle of his dull speech. He named his cat “Mr. Leo”? What kind of a loser did that?

But then he noticed what he was doing, where he was, and, above all, what he was holding.

“I'm sure he's fine. Cats take care of themselves just fine.” Terunosuke hurriedly stuffed the page into his pocket. “We should get going, Tira. Daylight’s burning!”

“Huh? What's gotten into you?”

“Let's go! Don't keep the man waiting!”

In a slightly-panicked hurry, Terunosuke slowly sprinted to the passenger's seat of the truck. Climbing in, he realized that his mistakes were piling up on him.

“What the hell is wrong with you today, idiot.” Tira chastised. “He said it was American-made. Meaning the left side is for the driver.”

“I heard him.” Terunosuke lied again.

“Oh. So do that mean you’ll be driving?”

“No. You do that.”

Admitting his fault with open arms, he slid across to the actual passenger's seat. Damn cultural differences.
“Do they drive on the left side of the road in China?” Tira asked without irony as she climbed into the driver's seat.

“Huh? I don't know. I'm not from China.” As Tira started the engine, she looked at him like she was a confused monkey.

“You aren't? So then you're Korean?”

“I don’t spend much time on rooftops.”

“Vietnamese?”

“I'm not a communist.”

“…”

“…”

“Mongolian?”

“Drive already!”

“I'll figure it out eventually, mystery man.” Terunosuke rolled his eyes.

With everything set, Tira stepped on the gas pedal.

Nothing happened.

“How? What the hell is wrong with this piece of junk?” Tira growled, kicking the pedal a few more times for good measure.

“Did you take it out of park?” Tira glared at him, then at the gear shift that was still set to park.

“Give me a break; I don't have a license.”

Setting her hand on the shift handle, Tira brought up her foot in a theatrical manner.

“If that's it, then let's get this show on the ro-”

“Wait a second.” Terunosuke interrupted.

“I'm trying to have fun here!”

“This'll just take a second.”

He clambered for the window button, only to realize the truck’s windows were manual. Tira and Genesis hissed at him for wasting time. Taking half a minute to roll down the window, he pulled out the cat’s paper and flipped it open towards the ground. The cat landed safely and soundly.

“Now I'm ready.”

“I… don’t want to know.”

***

Where could Mr. Leo have run off to? One second, the stupid guy was petting her. The next second, he had disappeared! Did that damn kid have something to do with his disappearance? Why in the hell had he trusted two teenagers with such an important matter?

Stomping over to the truck, Hashem noticed Mr. Leo stretching out right behind the vehicle.

“There you are.” Hashem greeted happily. He pat his legs and called his pet over to him. “Over here, Mr. Leo.”

***

Tira took a deep, relaxing breath.

“Alright. Is everything set to go?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did you steal anything else from our client?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Do you have anything left to do before we leave?”

“No, ma’am.”
“You don’t have to call m-” She stopped before finishing, perhaps realizing that “Ma’am” was a better title than “Boob Lady”.

“Let’s get this over with already.” She jiggled the shift handle left to right in a vain attempt to shift the truck into drive, but her motions made no difference. “I can help with that.” He offered. “No, no. I’m perfectly capable of this.” Finally, she wrenched the stick back one notch a sighed happily. “Let’s take this nice and easy.”

Her foot eased onto the gas pedal. The truck immediately lurched backward unexpectedly. They were backing up. “Aw crap. It’s in reverse. Lemme ju-”

CRUNCH!

“What was that?” She asked innocently, applying the brake.

“AAAAAUUGGGHH!!! MR. LEO!!!” The man’s voice anguished.

Tira’s eyes glazed over. Her mouth dropped to her lap. “Cat. The cat I-we cat that cat uhhh…….”

Terunosuke sprung into action. He wrapped his hand around the hand Tira used to grip the gear shift. With their combined efforts, they tore the stick back as far as it would go. “STEP ON IT!” He commanded. She obeyed. The tires squealed as the truck raced out of the garage.

***

As soon as they had driven far, far, far away from the man and his cat-shaped stain, Tira pulled over on the side of the road. “Ugh…” She thumped her head against the steering wheel. “I can’t believe I killed a cat.” “It was an accident. You didn’t do it on purpose.” “Yeah… but… still.” She banged her head against the steering wheel, blasting the horn awkwardly. Genesis unwound from Terunosuke’s neck and wrapped around her face, shielding her from the harsh realities of her horrible driving. Eventually, she resigned to simply pressing her face against the wheel, the horn blaring nonstop. Numerous people on the street gawked at them. Terunosuke looked away in embarrassment when someone looked him in the eye. “I know you’re having a moment and everything, but could you stop that? People are starting to stare at us.” “I’m fine; it’s fine.”

Tira shakily pushed herself back up. Her eyes—what little he could see past Genesis’s coiled body—were completely free of tears. It was comforting to know that she wasn’t taking the matter too heavily. “Are you alright? I didn't think you could wear a snake as a mask.” The corners of her mouth pushed upwards. Not exactly her beaming grin, but he’d take it. “We’re the worst gangsters ever, aren’t we?”

***

Cielo couldn’t believe his luck.

He thought all hope had been lost when the pair shot out of the garage in a hurry. Thankfully, their
truck left obvious skid marks that he was able to follow without worry. However, his hope started
to evaporate when he caught up. There was no way he could reasonably keep up with the blazing
machine on foot, nor could he rely on Shining Star if he hoped to remain undetected. He could try
to hail a taxi, but how long could he rely on that?

He circled around the front in order to figure out an entrance plan. The truck’s horn began to blare
without stopping. People on the sidewalk began to stare, himself included. Carta wore an
embarrassed expression.

For a tenth of a second, Carta and Cielo made eye contact before he darted his eyes away.

The horn continued to sound as Cielo ran to the back of the truck again. The bastard was right
there! If there weren’t so many people around, he could kill him in the blink of an eye!

When he reached the back, an idea struck him. The back of the vehicle was protected by a canvas
canopy. Along the bed of the truck was a some sort of cargo covered by a large blanket.

A plan took shape in his mind.

Under the audible cover of the still ringing horn, he eased into the bed and covered himself with
the blanket in a silent and swift movement. The moment he fully hid himself, the squealing honk
finally cut out. Was he safe? Did the sound stop because they noticed his presence?

The pair exchanged words that Cielo couldn’t decipher through his cover. Dammit! What were
they doing?! He mentally readied Shining Star to strike if violence occurred.

Then the truck started moving again.

He had to bite his tongue to avoid laughing. The idiots didn't notice him! He slipped right under
their noses! Very carefully, he pulled the blanket back far enough to spy on the pair of demons.
The back of their heads might as well have had gigantic red target painted on them.

Things were going perfectly.

***

“You know how the guy explained the mission to us when he gave us this truck?”
“Yeah, I was there.”
“Good, because I wasn’t paying attention throughout the entire speech.”
“I figured.” Tira sighed and shot him a sidewise smirk. “Before I… damaged relations with him,
that man asked us to secure a family heirloom.”
“An heirloom? Why is that worth our time? Wait… is ‘heirloom’ code for something?”
“Nope. ‘Heirloom’ means heirloom. We wouldn’t bother with something so inconsequential under
normal circumstances, but the financial compensation of our client prompted Passione to bend their
usual conduct.”
“So we’re taking a casual drive across town to retrieve a souvenir? Talk about easy money.”
“Wrong.” She stated, poking him on the cheek. “If that were the case, we would be driving a
luxury sports car.”
“Then where are we…? Oh! No way! Are we going to the Sahara?!”
“Bingo!” She gave him a thumbs-up then pointed backwards with the same finger. “We go to the
coordinates, drop the heirloom into that safe, drive back to that garage, apologize furiously, then
we’re done. Easy peasy.” Several jerrycans filled with fuel lined the sides of the truck’s bed. A
blanket had been draped over the aforementioned safe, giving it a very peculiar outline. He'd
probably check it out if the truck wasn't in motion.
“How long until we're there?” He asked, turning his attention forward.
“Mmm… about 5 hours.”
“5 hours?! That's how long it took to get to this damn country! My legs are gonna be paralyzed by the time we finish this job.”
“Then go to sleep. I don't mind driving.”
“You mean it?”
“Definitely, I may not look like anything special to the untrained eye, but I'm actua-”

Before she finished her thought, he laid his head against the window and closed his eyes.

Hopefully, she wouldn’t hit any cats on the open road.
“I didn’t mean that you should clock out right her-”

And then he fell asleep.

***

“Wakey, wakey, sleepyhead.” A hand ruffled his hair.
“Mmm? Wha?” He was no longer pressed against the window, but was curled up in a tiny ball imprinting his face against the warm, leather seat. Contorting himself in unnatural positions while he slept was taking a vicious toll on his sensitive back.
“We’re taking a break. Come on, I’ll buy you a drink.”
“I don’t drink alcohol.” He laid his head back down.
“I didn’t mean booze. Hey! Don’t go back to sleep.”
“Gghnnmm” He groaned in response.
“You're coming out of there whether you want to or not.” She poked at his sleeping face.
“Sure I am.” He waved away her annoying prodding.
“3… 2… sure you want to do this?”
“Hmm.” He confirmed.
“Suit yourself. 1… 0. Genesis.”

A burst of wind rushed by as he felt something wrap around his arm. When he realized it was there, his mind became aware of a surprising fact: he was in the air. Actually he was falling. More accurate still, he had been thrown out the door with inhuman strength.

This wasn't going to be very fun.

He landed on the ground with a heavy slam. It would have been a satisfying sound to hear if he wasn't the cause of it. The air in his lungs ejected immediately. He was left gasping and sputtering for oxygen for nearly two minutes. Not only that, the stiffness that had been quietly throbbing in his back erupted with blinding ferocity.
“Wow! You really caught some air! I'd say you set some sort of record.” Tira marveled.
“Did… you do that?” He choked out between labored breaths.
“Tech-nic-lee.”
“Stop smi-ghn! Stop smiling.”

She must have had Genesis wrap around his arm then whip him out the window like a human cannonball. If that were the case, the snake stand was much, much, much stronger than he imagined.

“Sorry about that. You weren’t supposed to go THAT far. You’re lighter than I thought you were… and shorter.”
“Enough!” He exclaimed, dusting himself off. Thank God he didn’t land on asphalt. Classic Africa: where every road is a dirt road… ignoring the fact that they had been driving on a highway
for the past few hours. “I didn’t get thrown out of a car just so you could make fun of me.”
“I’m almost as tall as you.” She continued, comparing their statures. “You’ve got 5 centimeters max.”
“I’m going back to sleep.”
“Wait, wait, wait! That was the last one. I promise.” She gripped his long coat and dug her heels into the ground. “I’ll be nice.”
“Do you promise not to launch me again?” He sighed.
“On my honor as a gangster!”
“But not much of a promise, but I guess I can take you up on that offer to buy me a drink.”

***

After waiting a few minutes to make sure he was undetected, Cielo threw the blanket off and wiped the sweat out of his eyes.

The truck had been parked behind some sort of restaurant that the pair had likely stopped at for a rest. Walking around the front of the building, he saw the pair: the masquerading demon chatting away with his partner, acting like he owned the world. He wanted to strike so badly right then and there, but he knew that he needed a plan.

A plan that would show the world exactly what Carta’s soul truly looked like.

***

“I always seem to have an exciting time at cafés.”
“How so?”
“I met Pane at a café and joined Passione almost immediately afterwards, I nearly tossed him into the bay of Naples with Salvatore’s help when we all had lunch together at a café, I saw a man walk on his hands while I relaxed at a café. Hell! Right before I met you, I was in a deadly fight with a Scheggia member while having lunch with a friend… at a café.” He took a sip of his coffee as his throat went dry.

“Wow. I’m really surprised. I didn’t know you had friends.”
“I thought you said you weren’t going to make fun of me anymore.”
“Shoot. I’ll buy you another coffee to make up for it.”
“Don’t bother, I’ll never fall asleep again if I have another. Plus, I don’t like coffee.”
“You don’t like it… yet you ordered it?”
“Yes. To make myself seem normal.”
“Normal to who, exactly?”
“To any Italian I talk to. If I order coffee, nobody will think anything of it. If I order water or tea, people might think ‘what’s the problem with this guy?’”
“I think you’re reading too much into the thoughts of other people.”
“That’s what you think.” He punctuated his hypothesis with a long gulp, but instead of tasting the warm, bitter liquid he disliked so much, Terunosuke gulped down air.

He tipped his cup back and was hit in the face by a scalding splash of nothing. The cup was completely empty. How in the hell?
“For someone who doesn’t like coffee, you sure downed it in a flash.”
“Are you screwing with me again? Did Genesis swallow it while I wasn’t looking?” Tira gave a confused look.
“I didn’t do that, neither did Genesis.” She wasn’t lying.

Could it have evaporated? The temperature was only a few degrees warmer than it had been before he fell asleep. Did the waiter forget to serve him? No, he could remember taking a sip. Was it
possible that…

He scratched his head.

***

They were shaking in their boots. Cielo smiled to himself. Shining Star’s ability had worked perfectly. One time was enough to consider something as strange. If it happened again, something was going on. Cielo was sure that exact thought process was going through Carta’s head.

In mere moments, the demon would seal his own fate.

***

Terunosuke wasn’t worried in the slightest. Inexplicable things happen from time to time. Nothing to fret over.

Instead of thinking about it anymore, he simply ordered a glass of water.

“You’re ordering water? What’s your problem?” Tira teased.

“Laugh it up. You’re paying for it.” He brought the glass to his lips and took a sip to illustrate his point.

There was only air.

His mind wasn’t playing tricks on him; it was real. Someone was causing his drinks to evaporate into thin air.

“I-it happened again.” He cried. Tira glanced over at him with a half-annoyed smirk.

“Alright, Carta. You aren’t doing that great of a job if you’re trying to scare me. I mean, disappearing drinks aren’t that scary. You can do so much better.” Maybe she was right.

She took a sip of her own coffee.

“Huh?”

“What?”

“My coffee's gone.”

Shit! There was no denying it! Someone was out there, and if he could make their drinks evaporate, what could he do to them?

“Who in the hell is doing this?!?” Terunosuke sprang up from his seat. His eyes darted around the busy street. A child grinned at them as he passed by the café. Could it be him?! Two women covered in burqas walked by. That sort of disguise was impossible to beat! A middle-aged man scowled at them as he walked.

He couldn’t find any answers! He was fucked! His blood was about to boil and there was nothing he could do about it!

“Carta! Calm down! It’s nothing to get worried about!” Tira stood too, trying to pacify him, but her words fell on deaf ears.

Then he saw him.

A young man--no older than he was--staring at him from across the street. His eyes pierced him like he was in the sights of a rifle. That was the attacker, wasn’t it… was it? The man began to walk across the street, slowly, easily, as if there was nothing in the world between himself and Terunosuke. His eyes continued to radiate a feeling that Terunosuke had no chance of pinning down. He had to be a member of Scheggia come to try and kill him just like Noce… but was that a
guarantee?!

Terunosuke wished the man didn’t exist. He wished he had never been born so that Tira could go back to teasing him. Why did this have to happen to him?! Why did ANY of this have to happen to him?! Why couldn’t he have just stayed in Japan?!

The man still approached; the piercing gaze still slashed through every fiber of his being. Terunosuke brushed his long coat aside and reached to his lower back with his left hand, his fingers brushing the metal of his handgun and the waist of his pants. He could shoot the man right there. Right in the middle of the street. He could end the threat before it really began!

“DO IT! NOW! SHOOT HIM! HE’S RIGHT THERE DO IT! DO IT!” A part of his mind screamed at him.

“WAIT HOLD ON STOP! IT MIGHT NOT BE HIM WAIT! YOU DON’T KNOW!” Another part screeched.

What was he supposed to do?! Nobody told him how to figure this out.

The man was meters away. Terunosuke could see every curly blond hair on his head, every wrinkle his scowl created, every drop of hatred his gaze held.

The frightened boy’s eyes clamped shut, almost as if the danger would flutter away if he couldn’t see it.

“THAT’S HIM! SHOOT!”

“DON’T NO!”

“GO!”

“STOP!”

“YES!”

“NO!”

“YES! NO!”

“NO! YES!”

“YES NO YES! NO NO YES! YES NO! YNO YNOYES!”

YNOESYONSEONSYEEONYEONSEO!!!

Terunosuke shot his eyes open!

The man passed him without stopping.

“Fucking immigrants.” He muttered under his breath.

Terunosuke didn’t relax until he was completely out of sight. After lifetimes of staring death in the eye, he was informed that he was simply paranoid. He gasped for air, realizing that he hadn’t taken a breath during the entire outbreak of chaos. His desperate pleas for oxygen made his groveling on the dirt minutes ago feel like a romp on the beach. The nightmarish havoc of his heartbeat made him clutch his chest just to prevent himself from collapsing. His pulse was a war drum pounding away to the beat of a human sacrifice.

There was no way he could look anyone in the eye. The ground served as an acceptable target to stare at as he recovered from his ordeal.

That random man wasn’t the attacker. The attacker was still out there. Where in the hell was the bastard hiding? Terunosuke was in no shape to answer that question. It almost felt like a heart attack was imminent, that he’d black out where he kneeled just from the stress. Maybe he’d make it
out alive if he kept his head down and his gaze low.

“Terunosuke! Dammit, answer me!” Tira’s concerned voice pulled him back down to reality. He’d almost forgotten all about her. No matter how drowned in fear he became, she would be there to pull him out.

He silently thanked her with all his heart.

A shadow silently darted into his vision. Not a walking pedestrian’s shadow and not Tira’s shadow. It was the shadow of a nightmare diving straight at his head.

It wasn’t real. He blinked his eyes; it would be gone by the time he opened them.

When his sight returned, the shadow’s presence was still descending upon him. Its infinite reach swallowed his entire world in unending darkness. Something was about to hit them! It was real!

“LOOK OUT!” He blasted. His right hand shot out and grabbed Tira, dragging her along as he desperately bolted forward as fast as he could manage. In the next second, the wooden table they had been sitting at detonated with an eruption of splinters.

Standing on the fractured wreckage was a mountain built out of nightmares. An angel stretched his wings and grunted acidically. The heavenly light reflecting off of his divine wings blinded and seared Terunosuke’s eyes. Every single one of his senses was overwhelmed all at once.

“Your judgement has come.” The angel announced with thundering calmness.

What?! Judgement?! That couldn’t be right. That wasn’t right! Terunosuke refused to believe it.

Terunosuke blocked the light with his left hand. The light faded and his eyes could make out a human shape. A normal man. He wasn’t an angel! He was a fraud, a fake!

“Fuck you! I was trying to enjoy my coffee before you showed up!”

“Carta? What’s happening? I can’t see.” Tira pleaded.

“I’ll tell you this, you demon.” The angel blasted. “I’ve tracked you down to deliver your judgement. Murder, as it turns out, isn't something you can get away with scot-free.”

“Go fuck yourself! You’re not an angel at all. I bet you’re from Sch-”

“Scheggia.” He took the words right out of his mouth. “You don’t have the right to speak that word, you disgusting rat!” At least the holy veneer was stripping off. “I’m here to kill you as revenge for Noce, Sanguinoso, and everyone else you snuffed out.”

Hooray. Another Scheggia pest to squash. He was just like Noce.

Tira bit her teeth together and sliced her brow down with an iron resolve

“I don’t know what happened to make you hate him, but Terunosuke isn't like that. Murder is something he absolutely would NOT do. I’ll rip your throat out before I let you say those things about him.” She turned to him with a sharp gaze. He glanced to her and returned the favor. They both nodded in unison and shifted their focus back to the false angel.

“So you're going to try to fight me? Can't say I blame you.” The winged man admitted. “Fine. I'll end you both without a second thought.”

“You can try.” Terunosuke taunted.

“Don’t even think about trying it.” Tira mocked. The man flared his fangs as well.

“Then if we’re all in agreement, LET'S GROOVE!”

Two guns flew out.

Two wings flashed.
2 things.

1. I'd like everyone to take a minute to appreciate how clever this chapter’s title is. It's definitely my crowning achievement in “obscure references that barely anyone will understand, let alone appreciate!” so far.

2. I feel as though I've unintentionally alienated almost everyone on Earth through the content of this work. A large number of people will ignore this story due to the main character being a total no-name in the series. Fans of Terunosuke might not like the creative liberties I've taken with his character. And many of the readers who can tolerate both of these hurdles might abandon ship solely because of the massive length of the story. Plus, the time it takes to write and fine-tune each chapter doesn’t win any favors. If you're still reading this despite all of those reasons, give yourself a pat on the back!
A storm of bullets flew out in a screaming frenzy. Before he could see what damage they caused, Terunosuke felt himself be pulled away by a powerful force. His feet began to run long before he realized that Tira and Genesis had dragged him away from the angel.

“We need to get out of here, Carta.” She shouted, rushing him down a narrow alley.

The alley between the café and the building adjacent to it was spacious enough for two people to safely dash through single-file, yet too cramped for someone with a pair of massive wings to get through without difficulty. It was a perfect escape avenue, save for the wall that stood between them and the truck.

Terunosuke turned back to the alley’s entrance. The winged man was bolting towards them, fangs bared. This was going to get ugly quick.

“Carta, help me out! Give me a lift!” Tira ordered with a flame in her eyes. He briefly glanced up at the wall and estimated how high he would need to lift her. Cursing to himself, he cupped his hands together and pressed his back to the wall.

“Go!” Without wasting a second, Tira stepped up to his hands and stretched up as far as she could reach. Her hand caught a hold and she pulled herself up. The angel was closing in.

“Reach up here.” Tira barked. Genesis coiled around her arm and stretched her head down to Terunosuke like a rope. Putting the pieces together, he grabbed onto the stand’s body with both hands. The snake pulled him up in a flash, leaving the winged man in the dust. The assailant roared in frustration, unable to follow the pair. He reversed direction and sprinted back down the alley.

They had a head start.

“Let’s move it.” Tira tugged on his collar harder than necessary. They both crossed over the thin division separating the alley and the truck. Jumping down and darting to the vehicle, Tira took the wheel and Terunosuke hopped in next to her. As soon as the ignition fired, she slammed on the gas, sending the wheels into a maddened screech as the truck flew forward. “Is he following us?” She asked, eyes focused on the road ahead. Terunosuke glanced at the passenger mirror and spotted a massive pair of flapping wings coming straight for him.

“Yep. He’s following us.”
“How close?” He estimated that they had plenty of distance on him.
“I’d say…” His eyes caught the small inscription that was engraved on the mirror.

Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.

“I’d say he’s closing in fast.”
“Fantastic. You have your gun on you, right?”
“Yeah. Want me to shoot him?”
“You just read my mind.”

With the instructions in mind, he slipped behind the seats, almost lost his footing as the truck shook violently along the road, pulled his way past the sloshing jerrycans, and finally managed to reach the back of the bed. The angel man was a lot closer now. Terunosuke pulled his gun back out and took aim with his left hand. Right before he pulled the trigger, the truck ran over a bump, flinging him into the air for a moment.

“Keep it steady, dammit! I can't hit him if you drive like that!” He scolded, aiming again.
“Just shoot at him!” She ordered back. “You don’t need to act like Lee Harvey Oswald, just scare him off!”

He fired a trio of bullets in the general direction of his target. As expected, two of the bullets missed the mark completely, but one lucky shot was on the money. Unfortunately, the target anticipated the attack. His massive wings flew forward to guard his body from danger. The one accurate shot deflected off as harmlessly as a fly. However, the protective movement shifted his wings from a gliding to a folded position in front of their owner, stopping his momentum instantly. It was almost hilarious to watch a him fall like a rock.

“It worked.” He reported back to Tira.
“Worked how? Did you actually kill him?!”
“No… it just… worked.”

***

Damn Carta. Damn bullet. Damn aerodynamics. Cielo brushed the sand from his hair and sighed. The truck began to disappear behind the horizon as he chewed on his nails. For some reason, he had somehow convinced himself that he would be able to kill Carta by sheer force of will alone. He had forgotten that an actual plan was needed. Couldn’t succeed without one of those.

“Say your prayers, bastard… you son of a… you monst- ow…” The soreness in his shoulder interrupted his practiced threats. He reached his hand to check its condition. Surprisingly, it was soaked with fresh blood. Yet another gift that Carta bestowed upon him.

The truck was starting to disappear completely, it would be gone in less than a minute. Summoning Shining Star again, he prepared himself to take flight.

Just as he began to ascend, he realized that his shoulder could get infected if left untreated. Shining Star was deactivated, he slipped the straps of his bag off his shoulders, and unfastened the belts that held it shut. He dug around until he finally found a bandage, then quickly slapped it on the cut. With the emergency dealt with, he ran a quick check to confirm that things were still in place.


Everything was good to go. He tightened both belts, slipped his arms back through the straps, felt annoyed at the tedious process, and reactivated Shining Star.

If Carta shot at him again, he would simply roll to the side in midair and continue his pursuit. That would probably work.

Probably.

***

Terunosuke hadn’t really paid close attention to the climate of his surroundings. Granted, he had been asleep for the past several hours and he had been watching the sky since Cielo’s attack, but he eventually managed to notice the abundance of sand in the area.

“Are we in the Sahara already?” He turned his attention away from his guard duty in favor of looking back at the snake charmer he called his partner.
“Yep. Did the desert tell you that, dumbass?” Was she joking or being serious?
“Yeahhhh…” Tread lightly. Try to ease the mood. She was just tense from the danger. “So… what’s your favorite color?” Good topic, Terunosuke. Good topic.
“What?!! What kind of a question is that?! Don’t ask stupid bullshit like that for no reason!”
Several minutes ticked by in silence with the only sound coming from the rumbling engine.
“Red.” Tira finally mumbled, barely loud enough to be heard.
“Really? I would have guessed orange. Mine is turquoise.”
“Turquoise? That’s kind of specific, don’t you think? Why not just blue in general?”
“Well you see, my mother’s name was Fi-”

Wait a second. Stop.

“Fi? What kind of a name is that?”
“Ah. I should get back to watching our backs, don’t you think?”
“Oh. Sure. Suit yourself.”

Crap. That was too close. He fixed his gaze out the back and shoved all distractions out of his head.

***

Eventually, the coast was clear. It felt safe to relax for just a minute. Tira stopped the truck per his suggestion that they take 5 and regroup.
“So how far are we from the destination?” He asked crawling back up to the comfortable seats.
“Well…” Tira stretched out on the seats, selfishly taking all the space Terunosuke wanted. “That guy kinda drove us in the opposite direction, so we MIGHT need to abandon the mission.”
“So soon?”
“Desperate times.” She looked up at him with a slight grin, but immediately frowned. “Is something wrong? You look like you want to strangle me.”
“Huh?” Astonishing how he couldn’t tell his own face was scrunched up in annoyance until it was pointed out. “Sorry. I just wanted to sit there.” He used both hands to give his face a deep muscle massage. “We oud ryy toe geh a avaage ah hish goy.”
“Uh… at-whay e-thay uck-fay is-way ong-wray ith-way ou-yay, etard-ray?”
“Sorry again. And I understand pig Latin. I said we should try to get an advantage on this guy.”
“Duh. That’s a given. What do you think we should do, genius?” Terunosuke set his head on his hand.
“No idea. Got any suggestions, unt-cay?”
“Not a one.” With a wry smile, she reached up to his face, stroked it tenderly, then flicked him sharply in the eye.
“GAH! That hurts!” He pressed his hand against his eye to quell the stinging. Tira pat him on the back and laughed at his misfortune.
“That’s the idea.”

As he grovelled in pain, Tira giggled and hopped out the door. Terunosuke followed closely behind out of obligation. She set Genesis down on the warm sand and let her stand slither around to her heart’s content.
“I’m haven’t eaten anything yet today, I’m kind of hungry.” Terunosuke noted, leaning against the hood of the truck right beside Tira. She looked him straight in the eye with an expression that was so neutral, it could be mistaken for a clean sheet of canvas.
“Eat me.”

She didn’t say anything more than that; the conversation hit the brakes so hard the earth cracked a little.

Was she implying something? A joke, maybe? A love confession hidden behind vitriolic shyness?

YEAH RIGHT!
“Was that supp-”
“Ha! Gotcha! You thought I was serious, didn’t you?” Her eyes darted away so fast that they probably set some sort of record in the process.
“Oh wow. How on earth did you manage to fool me? Are you some sort of magician?”
“It’s too hot for sarcasm. I’m burning up!” She tore out of her orange down jacket and chucked it onto the interior seats. Terunosuke always enjoyed seeing Tira’s flustered panic. The temperature hardly exceeded 25 degrees: barely enough to make him sweat while he was wearing his long coat.
“I don’t know about you, but I feel perfectly fine right now.” Hook. “Are you feeling alright?”
“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. Nothing wrong at all, just a bit warm.”
“Yeah, I could already tell you were in heat.” And sinker.

Her reaction would be priceless.

“You’re telling me.”

…

Hold on a minute.

Dammit. He really should have seen this coming by now. Tira had an otherworldly knack for subverting his expectations.

She just rolled her eyes and looked annoyed before hopping back into the truck.

“Yeah… it is hot.” He murmured out without an audience. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. Strange, even at the current temperature, he wasn’t sweating a single drop. His face was completely clear of sweat. If anything, he should be drenched just from the brief, yet stress-inducing conversation with Tira… or should it be the other way around? Nevertheless, it was really weird that he wasn’t sweating.

He scratched the back of his neck in contemplation.

There was a swamp festering where his hand touched.

So his neck was sweating, but his forehead was dry. Such an odd circumstance to be torn up over. It was almost as if the sun had targeted his face and evaporated every drop…

Wait.

This was just like the coffee back at the café. A liquid that had mysteriously evaporated for no discernable reason. No reason except for the angel man.

Terunosuke began to turn back ever so slowly, almost as if he was in a slo-mo scene from an action movie. His heartbeat hammered uncontrollably in his chest. For every degree he turned, his fear doubled.

When he finally completed his turn, he saw Tira fanning herself in the driver’s seat. He looked at the truck’s right side. Nothing. He looked at the truck’s left side. Nothing.

He allowed his stomach to release some of the knots that had built up. Everything was fine. He rubbed his forehead again, just to check.

Still no sweat.
Oh well. Nothing to get paranoid over.

His eyes gradually rose towards the sky, but stopped suddenly when he noticed a man perched atop the truck.

The angel man.

How was he there? There was no sound. They should have heard him.

Terunosuke shut his eyes for a second. When he looked again, the man was gone. But he wasn't an illusion; he was simply gliding through the air, one of his giant wings directed straight at Terunosuke's head. The smuggler barely avoided the attack thanks to his reflexes throwing him face-first onto the sand. The angel man landed on his feet just meters in front of him, his massive wingspan blocking out the sun. If Terunosuke wanted to shoot him, he would have to sit up, reach for his gun that rested on his lower back, aim the gun, then pull the trigger… all in the time it would take for one of the enormous wings to break him like a matchstick.

He needed to buy time.

"Who the hell are you?" He demanded, slowly pushing himself up to his knees. The man’s expression seemed to shift from a scowl to a grin for just a second.

"My name is Cielo. I've followed you two for quite some time, longer than I wanted to. But that's all over now! Say your prayers you monster! With my strength and my stand, Shining Star, I will bring you to your knees. And my name is Cielo."

"Carta?" Tira called out. "What the hell is wrong with this guy?"

"I… uh… no idea." He was obviously trying to avenge the Scheggia members Terunosuke had crossed paths with, but he wasn't aware that the shadow organization allowed mentally deranged persons into their ranks. That couldn't be good for business.

"Enough!" Cielo barked, regaining some semblance of sense. "You've murdered too many of my friends to be left alive. No matter what Padre says, I'll stop you with my own two hands."

No matter what Padre says? What the hell was that supposed to mean. Was he violating his leader’s orders by being here?

"I don't understand what you're saying, Cielo. Why can't you bastards just leave me alone? It would keep you from getting killed?"

"Shut the fuck up, you little shit!"

Cielo brought one of his wings up to attack, but before he could strike, a certain orange snake wrapped her body around his neck.

"Genesis!" Terunosuke cried out. The snake strangled Cielo with unrelenting tightness. His face got so red, it almost seemed like he might pop like a cherry. He clawed at her feathers, but he could do next to nothing to loosen her grasp. After only a few seconds of vicious strangulation, Genesis uncoiled off Cielo’s neck and practically jumped out to Terunosuke. In the surprise of having his windpipe suddenly jammed shut, Cielo had been momentarily stunned, having slipped to his knees. Seizing the golden opportunity, Terunosuke shot up to his feet, and slammed his boot into the psycho’s temple. It hit so hard, his wings of his stand petered out. He was down for the count!

Before he could wind up another stomp, Tira called out to him again.

"Get in the truck! We need to move it!"

He looked down at the bruised, bleeding, and likely-concussed man, for a just second, then followed Tira’s instructions.
Cielo’s profile

Former Codename: Pisello
Former Department in Passione: Extortion

Age as of 2001: 18

Stand Name: Shining Star
Favorite Author: Fyodor Dostoevsky
Favorite Subject of Conversation: Religious Studies
Country of Birth: Algeria
Favorite Band: *NSYNC

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Cielo’s head throbbed. Cielo’s throat burned. Cielo’s pride hurt. The terror he struck in Carta amounted to him squandering a perfect setup. The speech he had practiced ended with him getting strangled by a random snake and kicked in the head. And worst of all, the person he despised most in the world had made the same point as the person he respected most in the world. It was as if God himself had slapped him in the face.

He was lying face-down on the ground, having genuinely believed that juvenile boasting would bring Carta to repent for his sins. He was a complete shithead.

In the middle of his crippling self-hatred, the truck's engine had turned over and its wheels had begun to roll towards him. It wasn’t enough to metaphorically run him over, they had to do things literally as well. It was fitting if anything.

Clawing forward through the coarse sand, Cielo forced himself to align his body parallel to the truck. Since he had no time to crawl out of the way on either side of the vehicle, he would have to settle with letting the truck pass over him.

Just as he twisted his body into alignment, the truck began to gradually move above him. The front wheels missed his arms by mere centimeters.

A thought struck him as he avoided being run over. What if he reached up into the truck’s inner mechanisms and held on for the ride? They'd never expect it.

Before he had time to second guess himself, he grabbed onto some sort of internal strut or pipe.

His hand was immediately burned.

He had forgotten that cars generate a huge amount of internal heat while in use. Nevertheless, he tried his luck a second time. When he reached in again with his other hand, he was lucky enough to be spared from the blazing pain, and he moved with the truck.

Unfortunately, while the vehicle had wheels separating its body from the rough sand, Cielo’s face had no such barrier. His bare skin was dragged across the sandpaper texture of the desert floor without a single line of protection. The pain was equal to the time Noce had given him a pat on the back while his hand was still on fire.

Shining Star activated in a panic, trying to zap anything it could. But with no idea if it was working and much more pressing matters at hand, it was a wasted effort.
In mere seconds, Cielo decided to cut his losses and let go of the vehicle. With his connection severed, the truck drove past him. Unfortunately, a back wheel rolled over his ankle as it passed him, causing it to crack like an old toothpick.

To say that it hurt was a gross understatement. He tried to curse in pain, but he only managed to form an incomprehensible mess of chaotic noises. “FUAGHH! KSHNN! HGAAH HGNAANAG!”

He pathetically tried to expel all the sand and grit that had been forced into his mouth, but no matter how many times he raked his teeth across his tongue, a truckload of dirt stubbornly refused to leave. More importantly than his dirtied mouth, the bones in his ankle were currently screaming in agony at max volume. He felt his stomach turn itself into knots until he was certain he would vomit on himself. He refused to humiliate himself any further.

Whether God was smiling down on him or if his self-control was just that resolute, he somehow managed to avoid puking on his arms.

“D-Damn…”

The truck’s dust trail continued to get smaller and smaller as he tried to think of a way to follow in his sorry state. The thought of abandoning his crusade flickered into consideration. Only a moment passed before the image of Noce’s disapproving sneer snuffed the cowardice out. He would live to see Carta die; no other options existed.

One goal was present: kill Carta.

To that end, he needed to patch up his shattered ankle. He had packed bandages in his backpack for this exact reason, though he hadn’t intended on actually needing them. He went through the repetitive process of pulling it off his back before he realized it had been dragged through the sand too. As if he needed yet another reason to curse himself for being such an idiot.

Too bad he hadn’t listened to Padre.

He tore his backpack open and dumped the contents out. Naturally, it was a mess.

That fucking truck was worse than Carta.

The bandages had all been torn to shreds, effectively making them a pile of adhesive napkins. It would have to do. He wrapped what he could wrap, forced what he couldn’t, and stuck the truly unmanageable taters together. The end result was a pathetic jumble of gause and misery, fitting for the cascading failures that had unfolded. The bandages did nothing to quell the pain, but it at least situated his ankle in place to prevent further damage.

He took inventory of his situation. Carta’s truck had disappeared beyond the horizon long ago, his ankle was still so painful it made his hands shake, and he still had his trump card up his sleeve.

Not exactly how envisioned his revenge going.

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Cielo wasn’t following anymore. Terunosuke bit his thumb. They had definitely ran over him, but did they kill him? That would make two deaths with a single vehicle—a kitten and an angel. Impressive stats if killing was the intention, disheartening facts if it wasn’t. “Do you think he’s dead?” He asked, turning his head towards Tira but keeping his eyes locked on the horizon in case Cielo decided to show up again.
“Dunno. But I do know that we need to stop for a minute.”
“What?! We can’t stop again. He might catch up to us.”
“The fuel tank just nosedived; he’ll eventually catch up to us even if we keep going.”
“Oh… you should have said that in the first place! Don’t make me worry like that!”
“Don’t talk down to me!”

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“Hand me one of the jerrycans.” Tira requested. Terunosuke threw the blanket off the array of metal canisters and grabbed one of them. They were heavier than they looked. Much heavier.
“Wh-what the hell are these things made of? Lead? Reinforced steel?” With all his might, he barely managed to nudge the heavy canister in Tira’s direction.
“They’re made of aluminium. You know, one of the lightest metals.” Genesis coiled around her arm again and chomped down on the handle, pulling the canister out with no effort.
“That’s cheating.” Terunosuke whined. As Tira refueled the gas tank, Terunosuke silently used Enigma to turn one of the remaining canisters into paper and stuffed it in his pocket in case they needed to refuel again.

Thankfully the refueling process didn’t take very long.
“Let’s get moving again.” He called out.
“Hold your horses. We need to figure some things out. Come out of there and let’s talk.” Why did he have to get out? The back of the truck was safe, fortified. There was no reason to get out.

Begrudgingly slinking out of safety, he moved to her side.
“Where are we going?” She asked, looking him in the eye.
“What? Do you not know? Where have you been driving us this whole time?”
“Not literally! Honestly, it’s no wonder you can’t get a girlfriend, you never listen properly.”
“I’m not in the market right now!”
“Nobody cares. I was talking metaphorically. Where are we going with ourselves?”
“Where are we going? Hmm.” He looked up at the sky in contemplation. A flock of five vultures were circling high above his head, as if they were expecting him to be their next meal.
“Well… I’d say we should become good friends if we survive this. I might start a retirement fund to try to save money for my future, you should do the same if you haven’t already. I think I’ll try to learn how to play the piano. I took lessons as a kid, but I fell out of prac.”

Genesis bit his hand.

“AH! Let go!”
“Were you dropped on your head when you were in the womb?! I didn’t think anyone was THAT stupid!” Tira berated.
“I’m sorry! Now let go already!” Tira sighed at him.
“You really aren’t cut out for this type of work, are you? Genesis doesn’t even have fangs, yet you’re crying like a baby.”
“You’re full of shit.” He fired back as he easily slid his hand out of the snake’s wet bite. “That doesn’t prove anything.” He asserted flatly as he wiped the saliva from his hand.
“It proves that you’re a plucked goose!” What in the hell was that even supposed to mean?!

“ANYWAY! How was I supposed to correctly answer the question?” Terunosuke focused.
“Oh yeah, you were supposed to understand that I was asking about how we should proceed with the mission.”

In that moment, Terunosuke desperately wanted to shout “WHY DIDN’T YOU JUST SAY THAT IN THE FIRST PLACE THEN?! I CAN’T READ YOUR GODDAMN MIND!”, but decided
against it at the last moment.

“We obviously need to take care of Cielo sooner rather than later. Who knows what he’ll manage to do if he follows us back home. I think we’ll have to give up on the delivery.”
“I was thinking the same thing. He’s too dangerous to just run away from.” She stroked Genesis’ scales/feathers as she thought things over. “Well I guess it’s decided. We’ll have to give up on the assignment.”
“Should we return the truck when we get back? She sauntered to the truck and spread the blanket onto the desert floor.
“Give it back to who?”
“Oh… I can’t remember. Some old guy, I think.”
“You sure about that? Didn’t we pick this baby up from a coworker? There’s no need to give it back. Besides, there’s no need to worry.” She plopped down on the blanket and soaked up the sun.
“Sit down and relax, we’re totally safe.”
“I get it, I get it.”

They were definitely going to hell for this.

Even with the dazzling sunshine, he still felt uneasy. Cielo had appeared without any warning before. What was stopping him from doing it again? Unless he was dead, he was still a looming danger. He leaned against the side of the truck, but his attempt at relaxation failed; the tension was irritatingly heavy.

“Any suggestions as to where I should look for Cielo?” He asked without really caring about her answer.
“Cielo? That’s what he called himself? I thought he said Claudio… well, if his name is any suggestion, I’d look at the sky.” Per her suggestion, he gave a cursory glance at the sky, counted the six vultures circling above his head again, then pointed his attention to where it had been since the previous attack: the rear horizon.

The horizon was as clear as it had been since Cielo’s attack, which quickly threw Terunosuke into boredom. To alleviate some of the mundanity of the task, Terunosuke took to smoking.

“Are you smoking again?” Tira asked, as she slid her face to look up at him.
“No.” He stated between drags, their eyes looking into one another’s.
“Is that so? Oh. I guess you’re right. You aren’t smoking.”
“Exactly.” He took another drag. “Glad you underst-”

The cigarette was gone.

Clinging on the side of the truck right above his head, a feathered snake was draped down with a lit cigarette held in her mouth.
“When did you get up there, little girl?” He sweetly inquired as his left hand shot forward to snatch his property back. Unfortunately, the stand proved far faster than him, zipping away before he could even register her movement. “Jeez. Why do I even bother.” Genesis may have won, but he still had half a pack to get through. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out air.

The rest of the cigarettes were gone too.

“What?!” Darting his eyes back to the snake, he noticed that she was now holding the cigarette pack that had been in his pocket just moments ago. This time, she came to him instead of the other way around, slithering to him with the pack held in her mouth. He offered his hand to the nuisance as if she was a well-trained puppy. Surprisingly, she moved down and placed the pack into his open palm without any further fuss.
“Really? Thank you. This is a nice change of pace.” A soft smile flickered onto his face. He
brought his right hand forward to pet her feathery head. After giving a few thankful caresses, he brought his left hand and the pack of cigarettes up to his mouth.

At least he would have if his hand wasn’t empty.

With his smile still in place, he looked back at the snake; her mouth held the pack.

She was just too damn fast!

“I’ll kill you!”
“You idiot. Genesis is way too fast for you.”
Leave it to Tira’s stand to act just like her. He really should have gotten used to her antics by now, but it just couldn’t be helped.

Swallowing any further insults, he ignored the aggravating nuisance and went back to gazing out at the rear horizon. He estimated that it was somewhere around 3 in the afternoon by the position of the sun. Taking a quick glance at his watch, it read 3:10 PM. It might be good to get back on the road.

His stomach growled. The last food he had eaten had been cheap hotel snacks that had barely filled his stomach back then. Chock that up to unforeseen circumstances. If Cielo hadn’t attacked when he did, he might have been able to enjoy a genuine Algerian meal back at the café.

Damn angel.

THUNK!

A dull crash slammed onto the truck’s hood; Cielo was back! Speak of the devil. Terunosuke shot up and darted to stop the winged man, tearing his gun free. In a split second, his left hand was aimed dead at the landing zone. Tira dashed right next to him, her submachine gun in hand, Genesis coiled around her neck. He would have been impressed by her blinding speed if they didn’t have bigger problems to deal with. Instead of the enemy stand user, the truck’s hood was adorned with the bloody corpse of a vulture. Its neck was a mess of ragged feathers and bloody bones, almost as if it had been ferociously strangled to death.

The natural course of action was to look up.

A gigantic pair of silhouetted wings, and a man attached to both dove at them from above.

“SHOOT!” Tira roared as she pointed her weapon to the sky and fired for all she had. Terunosuke quickly matched her action and began firing as fast as his finger could pull the trigger. However, the gunfire did little to slow Cielo. His enormous wings effortlessly swatted the bullets away as he whizzed through the air at them.

They couldn’t even hit his body! They were screwed!

“Look out!” Tira roared again, pushing him out of harm’s way as she leapt away in the opposite direction. He rolled across the ground for a meter or two before coming to a stop next to the truck’s back wheel.

Cielo landed on the ground just as Tira’s gun ran dry. At least they were sure that he was still alive. He almost looked like a flamingo in the way he kept his bandaged foot slightly off the ground. Now that he was so close, Terunosuke could focus enough to get a good look at him. The most striking feature of his outfit was that he was almost wearing his stand. It seemed to almost encase his body, similar to how Ghiaccio’s White Album had done. But unlike the icy
stand, Shining Star only covered Cielo’s body in a golden, glowing cross shape. The cross started at the top of his hips, rose up past his chest, and ended at the base of his neck. Both the bottom and the top of the cross encircled Cielo’s body with a belt and collar—or maybe they were a pair of halos. The rest of his clothing was practically standard to the other members of Scheggia. A white, formal-looking suit coat that looked completely out of place in a desert that was adorned with miniature golden crosses that streaked out every which way. It had to have been well ventilated if he was willing to wear it into a desert and stuffy business meetings. Perhaps the strangest item of Cielo’s outfit was the “scarf” that wrapped around his neck and draped down between his wings that seemed more like a blanket than anything else—it might have been something called a poncho, but it looked unlike any poncho that Terunosuke had ever seen. To go along with the color theme, it was also white and gold, though the one broad cross it had was dark brown and stretched out to every end of the scarf. The question of how he used his wings without tearing his clothes raised itself. Maybe the poncho was there to hide the holes on the back of his suit. He also seemed to be wearing a small backpack underneath the mystery garment that was only barely noticeable, but its just being there only raised more questions. How did he put it on? What was inside?

If Terunosuke had to give an analogy, he'd say Cielo looked like a burning candle, though he didn't shine quite as bright.

Tira pointed her weapon directly at Cielo’s head and was about to pull the trigger, but Cielo acted first. He stabbed his wings into the sand then threw them both up, creating a Z-shaped pattern with his body. The action whipped a cloud of sand and dust in both directions, blinding Terunosuke for a moment and likely doing same to Tira. The sudden gust also threw the gun from his left hand.

Talk about a bad position.

Without the use of his eyes, Terunosuke groped the coarse ground in search of his lifeline. Sergio would probably lose his shit if he knew Terunosuke had dropped his weapon in the middle of a fight.

The thoughts that raced through his mind in the middle of stressful situations never failed to baffle him.

He was pulled from his thoughts by a rough grip on his ankle. He wiped his sand-filled eyes on the sleeve of his long coat and forced them to open. Cielo was holding onto his ankle with both hands. Before he could wonder why he wasn’t using his giant wings to crush his skull, said wings began to flap aggressively. As Cielo quickly began to rise, he brought Terunosuke along for the ride. In all likelihood, he would fly up high then drop Terunosuke to let him fall to his death.

Certain species of eagles have been known to drop turtles in order to crack their shells open so they can eat them from the inside out. That’s what Cielo would do to him. He’d crack him open like they were prime footage on some sort of late-night nature documentary.

Refusing to go down (or up in this case) without a fight, Terunosuke’s right hand hit a solid object. Holding onto it with as much force as one hand could muster, he rose into the sky. He stopped trying to struggle once they passed the top of the truck. At the height they were at, his skull would look like a cracked egg the moment he hit the ground. The only way out of this was a slow descent. If he was going to survive, he would have to bring Cielo down with him… literally.

In the blink of an eye, they were easily over a hundred meters above the ground. Terunosuke had never been this high up in his life. Just one look down at the ground was enough to give him vertigo, acrophobia, and paranoia all at once.

He had to get back to safety!
His abs curled up a few centimeters then promptly quit. Without a regular workout schedule and a smoking habit, Terunosuke’s body was in no shape to act like a gymnast.

“Shit.” He stated matter-of-factly.

“Just a little higher, Carta.” Cielo taunted. “Maybe I'll use that blanket you're holding to cover your remains after I'm done with you.”

“Blanket?” Terunosuke looked at his dangling right hand. He hadn't even noticed that he was holding onto a blanket instead of his pistol.

“Isn't it ironic?” Cielo questioned, his hold on Terunosuke’s ankle tightening hard enough to cut off circulation. “You'll be sent to hell by an angel.”

“Some angel you are! I'd gladly burn in hell for all eternity if it meant avoiding your evil ass!”

“Evil? Evil?! Go fuck yourself! You're the evil one here!”

“As if! Who’s the one here that hunted the other down to get bloody vengeance? Who tried to kill a girl who was completely unrelated to his revenge? Who defied orders just so he could try to kill me? It was you, Cielo! You did all that!”

“What…? That’s not…! Don't try to lecture ME on good and evil, you degenerate piece of filth! I'm not the one who killed someone for interrupting a phone call. I'm not the one who went out of his way to kill the people who have got in his way. I'm not the one who helped slaughter more than a hundred innocent people just because a few of them were connected to Scheggia!”

Bastard. What the hell did he know!

“I didn't help in that!” Terunosuke shoot back as they continued to climb higher and higher. “I just did what I was told! Don't act like you know who I am just from that!”

“Bullshit!” Cielo countered. “We know it was you who came up with that truck idea! We know all about you, Carta! You're just as bad as the rest!”

That dumbass didn't know a single thing about him! Not a single fucking thing!

“That can’t be right… you have to be wrong!” He pulled his free leg back. “FUCK YOU!”

Terunosuke threw a blistering kick that connected straight with Cielo’s nose. A beautiful jet of bright red blood soared from both of his nostrils. The two-handed grip on his leg loosened and he broke out of Cielo’s deadly grasp.

That action had been a mistake. While it was true that he was free, he was also free from the only thing keeping him from tumbling to his death.

He really should have thought this through a bit more.

The blanket in his hand billowed like mad in the ripping wind. If he wasn't holding onto it so tightly, it would've flown away in an instant.

It felt oddly familiar to flail around through the air in free fall. Had he done this before?

Hmm…

Oh yeah! He had done this before in Sicily. That one time when he wanted to see if he was still alive and the Rosso family thought he was trying to kill himself. Sicily was nice; much better than Algeria and a paradise compared to Naples. He should retire after this mission and live in Sicily for the rest of his life.

That'd be nice.

Remembering that he was still in a deadly free fall, he remembered why he felt so comfortable in
such a situation: he had already lived through it once. It was easy to survive such a predicament
with Enigma’s help.

He simply slipped into his paper form. The fall stopped in a second and he casually floated on the
air, the blanket doing the same right above him.

He was like a pure white feather twirling to and fro on the wind. From his bird-eye view, he could
see kilometer upon kilometer of open desert, and even what looked like a small town in the
distance. Of course, he could spot the truck as well as Tira and Genesis. Amusingly, it looked like
Tira was visibly horrified by everything that had happened in the single minute since Cielo had
snatched him off the ground. His eyes were probably just playing tricks on him.

He heard a whizzing sound coming towards him from above the blanket. Maybe Cielo was trying
to hit him with another dead vulture. Good luck with that.

As he brushed off the “danger” with little concern, the whizzing grew louder and louder until it
sounded as if a jumbo jet engine was revving next to his ear. It was probably safe to assume tha-
The blanket was torn in half; Cielo’s wing slashed straight down at a blinding speed.

Cielo was diving at him.

The massive wing had missed him by mere centimeters. A little more to the right and he would
have been cut in two like a magician’s assistant.

Counting his blessings while he still had the fingers to count them on, he ejected his hand from his
paper form to act as a weight (haha, a paperweight.) In seconds, he coasted down to the soft sand
and landed safely. He went back to his regular human form and began running towards the truck.

“Let's get out of here.” He barked at a red-eyed Tira. She must have been staring up at him for the
whole two minutes without blinking once, it was no wonder her eyes were bloodshot.

“Shithead.” She roared at him while they scuttled into the truck. “You almost got killed up there.
Be more careful or I’ll kill you myself, got it?!”

In seconds, they were speeding through the desert once again. They had exchanged a blanket for
the pursuit of an angel.

He couldn't help but think that had been screwed over in the deal.

He scrambled into his previous position as the rear guard. His hand darted down to draw his gun
until he realized that it wasn’t on him anymore.

“Shit! I dropped my gun back there!” Without a weapon, Cielo would be able to attack them
without resistance.

“I figured you’d forget something so important.” Tira replied wryly. Genesis slithered off her neck
towards him, his pistol held securely in her mouth. Instead of playing keep away like she had with
his cigarettes, she set the weapon firmly in his hand without any tricks or jokes.

It would be nice to thank her, but he was a bit preoccupied. Cielo was fast approaching them once
again, it wouldn’t take long for him to get into striking distance. Before he could make any
headway, Terunosuke took aim and fire two quick shots towards the angel. Naturally, they missed
terribly, but instead of falling to the ground like last time, Cielo didn’t even bother with defense.

Was he that confident in his abilities? Maybe he was so angry that he didn’t even care. Whatever
the reason, he was even more dangerous.
As the pursuer flew closer, Terunosuke shot again, three shots. This time, Cielo tucked his wings forward in defense just as Terunosuke had hoped. But instead of falling to the ground, he rolled in mid-air, deflected the shots, then threw his wings back with a burst of wind. With that fancy maneuver he was practically within spitting distance.

Damn. Firing at him wasn’t working. His eyes darted around his surroundings for some sort of alternative. There were the jerrycans, he had one sealed in his pocket. Maybe he could use that. There was also the safe that was supposed to be used to transport the client's heirloom. If he used that, it'd be like admitting that he was a complete amateur at his job and only cared about his own skin, not the client’s.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Enigma shot out and converted the heavy safe into paper. Turning his focus back to the original matter, he noted how close Cielo was. He could see the whites of his eyes at this distance.

It was time to end this.

“When you get to hell, tell Noce that you’re a bastard, just like he was!”

With all restraints stripped away, Terunosuke tossed the page towards Cielo. In mid-air, the page opened and the safe popped out with a thundering rattle. It’s path was on a straight collision course with Cielo’s face.

This fight was over!

Instead of slamming into the safe like he was supposed to, Cielo instead brought one wing upwards and sliced clean through the safe as if it were still made of paper.

The two split pieces thumped softly against the ground, barely making a noise. While Terunosuke’s focus had been directed towards the safe splitting, Cielo had capitalized on the opportunity, completely disappear from sight.

Was he under the truck? Or was he on to-

A massive, milky-gold wing pierced through the canopy. The deadly attack missed Terunosuke’s nose by no more than 10 centimeters. As fast as it had appeared, the wing flew back out in a blur of incomprehensible motion.

He took aim at the spot that Cielo was perched on. Before he could fire, a flash in the corner of his eye snapped his attention.

Usually, he would have registered the movement as Cielo trying to circle around to get a better angle, in which case he would turn and shoot. But instinct grabbed him by the head and slammed him prone against the ground.

When his eyes darted up, a massive wing was occupying the space where his head had been just a moment ago.

He wasn't playing fair. If Terunosuke had the opportunity in the future, he swore that he would rub Cielo’s face in the mud… or sand.

Terunosuke skittered forward on the ground like a bug and pulled himself into the passenger's seat.

“Roll down the window.” He requested in Tira’s direction.

“It's not automated, you have to roll it down yourself.”
“I have to do everything, don't I?”

While he wanted to blast the window to pieces to save the trouble, he went with the sensible option of rolling the glass down if only to conserve ammo.

Once the window had withdrawn all the way into the door and the high-speed winds whipped through the interior, Terunosuke slid through the opening.

“Wish me luck.”

His left hand’s grip tightened around his gun; his right hand kept the rest of his body steadied.

Cielo was right where he had left him, hunched over like a gargoyle on a dark cathedral. His back was turned to Terunosuke, like he wasn't worried in the slightest at the threat he posed. Strangely, it seemed like Cielo was hesitating. He was oddly static, only moving to keep his footing secure. It was a completely valid option to shoot him in the back, but he decided to go against his better judgement.

“Hey!” He called out over the roaring air. “Have you thrown in the towel already, Cielo?”

Cielo turned around and stood up, practically ignoring everything around him except for Terunosuke. His expression of raging anger was long gone, now replaced with a combination of doubt and melancholy.

“Don’t run off too far, we aren't done yet.”
“Don't run off too far, we aren't done. Just stand right there an-”

Before Terunosuke could finish his thought, Cielo’s massive wings threw him into the air, but rather than attack, he simply flew away. Terunosuke watched him as he disappeared beyond the horizon while the truck sped on full throttle.

He almost didn't believe his eyes until he was already completely gone.

“Hey! Get back here!”

***

Carta didn't make any goddamn sense.

Cielo had managed to understand Noce well enough to become his best friend; he was no stranger to offbeat personalities. Carta, however, was not offbeat. Carta was an enigma.

A single sentence had thrown Cielo into a fit of doubt.

“When you get to hell, tell Noce that you’re a bastard, just like he was!”

On the surface level, it seemed like a basic, schoolyard taunt. It wasn't until he thought it over did the implication hit him.

“When YOU get to HELL.”

That line prompted a review of everything he had seen Carta do these past few days.

Carta and his partner acting like a pair of lovers, his screaming “I'd gladly burn in hell for all eternity if it meant avoiding your evil ass!”, and most importantly “Don't act like you know who I am just from that!”
It all pointed towards the heart of the matter: Carta was convinced that he was “good” and Cielo was “bad”. It was obvious in hindsight, but Cielo had been blind up until now.

He didn't kill Noce because he wanted to, he killed him because Noce was trying to kill him first.

He was just a puppet being controlled by the higher-ups of Passione when he thought he was making choices for himself.

Noce, Sanguinoso, the innocents at the wedding, they were all killed because of Passione. Carta was just the poor bastard who had to pull the trigger.

He was just a desperate fool who got exploited.

…

… just like Cielo had been.

***

“Right there.” Terunosuke exclaimed as he pointed to a large rock formation. “That's perfect. Drive in there.”

The rock structure he pointed at was the perfect defense against Cielo’s surprise attacks. Its opening was wide enough for the truck to pass through, but not high enough for Cielo to slip along unnoticed. It only had a pair of open faces: the cramped front opening and a broad, open face on the right-hand side. Its left-hand side was totally solid stone without a single entry point, which would prevent attacks from that side. A thin pillar-shaped divider separated the openings from one another, making sure that they could focus their attentions efficiently in the case of an attack. The roof was closed off with more rock, casting the entire underside of the formation in soft shadows. All in all, it looked sort of like a crashing wave, and the safest spot in the entire desert.

“Do you have any idea what you're doing?” Tira jabbed. “Don’t worry, I’m certain we’ll be safe here.” He said, uncertain if he was lying or not.

The truck pulled into the middle of the stone fortification. Terunosuke hopped out and scanned the horizon yet again, making certain that Cielo wasn’t waiting for the perfect time to strike. The stress of constantly having to look over his shoulder made it impossible to care that the sun was beginning to set in the western corner of the sky.

“So…? What now?” Tira inquired. “What do we do?”

“We wait.” Terunosuke answered without a thought. “I’ll stand guard first.”

***

Cielo had nearly forgotten the circumstances that had led him to this situation, to this crossroads. In truth, his destiny had been set in motion long before God put him in the world.

***

In the early 1960s, Algeria “won” its independence from France through an atrocious civil war that killed hundreds of thousands of people on both sides. Despite this horrendous loss of life, the Algerian people were optimistic for their reclaimed future, and they undertook the task of repopulating their country into the next decade. Unfortunately, due to the destruction caused by the war and its lasting effects, the population had difficulty in sustaining itself. These difficulties inevitably led to public dissatisfaction and outrage.
In the midst of the growing tensions, a baby boy was born on April 16th, 1982, in a small village that few people cared about. His parents were a pair of Christian converts, living proof of the country’s colonial past. The boy grew up with few worries, save for the concern of being born with blond hair when all the kids at school had hair that was dark.

However, the tensions of the country didn’t dissipate just because a single child stayed ignorant. In the early 1990s, a fundamental Islamic political party came into power, bringing with it a push to purge France’s influence from Algeria’s soil, both culturally and religiously. Needless to say, the boy didn’t talk about God’s unending love very much after that.

Inevitably, the tensions boiled over and the opposing groups vying for power began a civil war. At first, it was nothing that the average person had to worry about. Though, over time, the issues became worse and worse: “intellectuals” being assassinated en masse, airports and public squares were bombed, foreigners were murdered in cold blood. In spite of these problems, the boy’s father refused to uproot his family.

“Things will get better soon.” He would always insist when asked why they stayed.

For many others, the decision to leave was an easy one to make. Many of the boy’s classmates departed during that period.

As the years continued to pass by, the civil war morphed into a bloody nightmare. The dam broke one day when the boy arrived at school to an empty classroom. The night before, a massacre had taken the lives of countless people in a neighboring village. They were all civilians.

The boy’s father finally accepted the gravity of the situation after so much stubbornness and finally made the decision to flee to a safer life. The small family began the trek north just as many families had done. Even though the boy was now a young teenager, he was just as fearful as an infant. To calm him down, his mother suggested pretending that they were the three wise men, following the north star to deliver gifts to Christ. The method worked fairly well. Each night, the boy would find the north star and was eased by its bright twinkle. With the ritual in mind, the journey didn’t seem so bad.

One night, they stayed with a family in a village just a few days from their destination of Algiers. Their hosts proved to be warm and welcoming, even wishing the family well on their journey. Their cramped home was a welcome reminder of the life the family strived for.

Unfortunately, nothing could prepare the boy for his destiny.

They were all unaware of the fact at the time, but the very village that his family was passing through was supporting one of the war’s many factions. To send a message written in blood, an opposing group drove into the town in the still of the night.

Blissfully unaware of this danger, the boy peacefully slept through the first few minutes of the massacre.

“WAKE UP! WAKE UP! WE HAVE TO GO!” His father shouted, shaking him awake. Rather than waking up to a silent, pitch-black night, the boy was thrown into a chaotic roar illuminated by vicious fires.

The world outside was a living nightmare. It was horror given shape. It was a parade of blood and death.

It was hell on Earth.
Homes were on fire, blood was splattered everywhere, corpses littered the ground as if they were trash.

For a fleeting moment, the boy thought that he was just having a nightmare, it was a common occurrence these days after all. He rubbed his eyes, but the carnage remained. He rubbed and rubbed until his eyes were red and sore. He would have kept up the act until he bled if it weren’t for his father taking him by the arm.

“Don’t stand around! You could be killed!” He was scolded in frantic whispers. His mother joined them and they began to flee away from the chaotic uproar behind them.

There was nothing in their way of escaping to safety except for the thin air in front of them. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a man toting a massive gun walked into their path. Before he noticed them, the boy’s father pulled him and his mother into another home and hid.

They were so close to escape from the war that the boy could practically feel the European soil beneath his feet. He would make it there no matter what!

The sound of rapid footsteps outside hit his ears, causing his heart to race in fear. Fortunately for him, the footsteps belonged to another civilian trying to get away. Unfortunately for that civilian, he didn’t see the man with the gun, but the man with the gun saw him. Three bursts screamed out. The civilian was ripped open, splattering blood all over the glass window.

“We need to keep moving.” His father commanded again. “I have an idea.”

The father again pulled him close and directed him to safety. They all snuck out of the home without drawing the attention from the man with the gun. Without making a sound, even to breathe, the three of them crept through the carnage, darting through shadows, behind homes. The boy wanted to ask where they were going, what was happening, if they would survive, but he couldn’t afford to make a single sound.

His father put a hand over his eyes and pinched his nose shut.

“Whatever happens, you HAVE to stay absolutely quiet.”

The boy nodded and was laid down on the ground, his eyes sealed shut. He felt someone slide next to him and then another. Were they playing dead? Was that the idea? Trick the killers? He felt yet another person slide next to him.

Curiosity got the best of him. How could he make it out alive if he was kept in the dark? He slowly eased his eyes open and looked to the person next to him.

Her waist had a little blood on it and she looked like she was hardly breathing, but she was alive. It was too dark to see her face, so he tapped her on the shoulder, but aimed too high and brushed against her neck.

Her bloody stump of a neck.

She had been decapitated.

“HAAA-!!!”

A blood-curdling screech escaped from his mouth before his father could suppress it.

“You have to be silent! This is the only way we can live!” His father desperately explained. “They’re already dead. Do not worry, just be silent.”
The boy nodded again and held his hands against his mouth to keep any more screams from erupting out.

“YOU! THERE! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!” An unknown voice shouted in their direction. “I HEARD A SCREAM OVER HERE?! WHO ARE YOU?!”

He had heard the boy’s scream! It was his fault that man was there! All his fault!

“No! I’m with you! I’m moving bodies into a pile so th-”

BA-BA-BAM!

A spree of bullets sprang loose and tore into the father’s body. The father stayed standing for a moment before collapsing on top of the boy, using the last moment of his life to hide him underneath his body.

“NOOOOO!” A voice shrieked. The voice of the boy’s mother. Just as her husband, she was sliced apart by the bullets and protected her child with her dying breath.

Everything.

The killer who shot the bullets walked over and tapped the boy’s father and then his mother with the end of his gun.

It took everything.

Without a word, he walked away from the people he had slaughtered. He didn’t chuckle, he didn’t apologize, he didn’t insult them. He simply walked away, likely to repeat the process elsewhere. He hadn’t seen the boy.

Tears burst forth like a flood. He didn’t dare uncover his mouth nor open his eyes. With their last actions, his parents had hidden him with their own bodies. They had given their own lives so that he could live.

These truths gave him the will to endure. The will to endure the horror of brutalized corpses on top of him. The will to endure the horror of countless innocents being butchered all around him. The will to endure the feeling of fresh blood dripping on the back of his neck, on his face, on his hands.

He refused to die in vain!

After an eternity, the butchers had destroyed everything they could get their hands on. Hours after waking up to a nightmare, silence finally returned. They left just as suddenly as they had arrived.

The boy had long since fallen out of consciousness. When he finally came back to his senses, he made absolutely sure that he was alone before he clawed his way out of the pile, ripping his bloodstained clothes off and falling over himself to get away from the corpses. In a combination of unimaginable stress, exhaustion, and horror, the boy fell to the ground, unable to move a single muscle.

The stars in the night sky shined brighter than the fires that had destroyed the village, brighter than the shots that had tore so many people to shreds. The north star shined the brightest.

He woke up in the morning without being aware that he had passed out again. The desperate hope that the night had just been a vivid nightmare didn’t even occur to him. He was still sprawled out in the dirt, the village was still in ruins, and his parents were still dead.
There was nothing left except for him.

With a silent understanding, he gathered all the corpses into the pile. There was no way he would be able to bury them all. Alone, he gathered all the hacked limbs, decapitated heads, and spilled intestines together before a wild animal could make a meal out of them.

With some gasoline that had been left behind and a prayer, the boy constructed a funeral pyre for the village and for his parents.

They burned brighter than the north star.

He hoped their souls could rest without worry.

A few days later, he hid himself away on a cargo ship headed for Europe. The goal his family had been striving towards was finally realized.

Within a week, he was alone in a city with a language barrier so dense, it might as well have been made of stone.

He was all alone with nothing to do but wander aimlessly around a country he didn't belong to.

One day, a green-haired man at a café tried to strike up a conversation with him. He tried to explain to the man that he couldn't speak a single word of Italian, but the man wasn't phased. “Just watch.” He seemed to say.

He pulled out a deck of cards, flared them out, and instructed him to pick one. The boy compiled, drawing a 3 of spades. The man then took the card back and shuffled it back into the deck.

Without warning, the entire deck burst into flames, frightening the boy for a second. The man laughed at his surprise and presented the one card that hadn't been consumed by the fire: the 3 of spades.

Words weren't needed to express his enjoyment of the trick, nor were they needed for the man to feel proud of himself.

Within weeks, the boy had made a friend for life.

But the horrors of the world didn’t stay away for long. By the end of his first month, the boy and his friend had joined up with Passione, one of the most powerful organizations in all of Europe. The boy took the lowly alias of Pisello and his friend took the fitting name of Noce. Yet, they were not happy with their newfound stations. The damage they were instructed to cause and the lives they were forced to ruin gave them no joy whatsoever.

They had to change, but what could they do? They were just two boys.

Thankfully, their dissatisfaction was more common than they had thought.

Padre gave them guidance and helped them and many others like them to establish Scheggia, a group that bravely cut itself off from Passione’s tyranny. The boy cast aside his pathetic alias and took on the new name of Cielo, a fitting title. Noce stayed Noce, though the name definitely fit him.

Cielo was reborn on that day, along with Noce, Padre, Sanguinoso, Fan, and many others.

They were a brand new family and Padre was everyone’s father.
Terunosuke was hungry. Terunosuke was really hungry. Terunosuke was very hungry. Terunosuke was super hungry.

He couldn't stop thinking about food.

Nothing in the entire universe could compare to the wonderful aroma of piping hot takoyaki. He felt like he could kill just to get a single bite of succulent yakitori. The juices that would run down his chin would be able to fill an ocean. Warm embraces of tonkatsu filled his mind until he thought he would die if deprived of the fried pork any longer. Majestic bowls of ramen danc-

Oh God!

Ramen!

The undisputed emperor of food! Such a straightforward, inexpensive, and altogether magnificent achievement was a magnum opus for culinary efforts the world over!

The deceptively simple combination of broth and noodles gave way to th-

“Are you feeling alright?”

Terunosuke snapped out of his fantasizing at Tira’s voice.

“Y-yeah. I’m fine.”

“It sounded like your stomach was playing Beethoven’s 5th. Off-key I might add”

“It's fine, Tira.”

“Don't be so pigheaded. You've been standing watch for hours now. Look, I might not have any food, but I have some water.” She put her hand in front of Genesis’ mouth and grasped the plastic water bottle that slid out. “Drink up.” With a surprising amount of insistence, she forced the bottle into his right hand and didn't look away until he took a sip.

“Thanks. Even if it is a bit gross” He offered between gulps.

“Least I could do. Now go rest up, you're no help if you pass out like wimp. You can finish off the bottle too.”

A while ago, he might have snapped at her choice of words. Now, however, he couldn't help but agree with her.

It would be concerning if not for the sudden onset of sleep. Who could blame him? It was pretty dark anyway. He at least felt at ease since there was no threat of the water disappearing.

***

“Hello again.” A voice, Terunosuke’s own voice greeted, as chipper as the morning sun. In the blank, empty space that served as the starting line for his dreams, Terunosuke laid down on the ground and attempted to go to sleep.

“No thanks.”

“That isn't an option! Not how it works, idiot.”

“We're the same person, remember? You're just calling yourself an idiot.”

“Whatever.”

Sensing that he couldn’t flip through the pages without reading them, he sat up, only to find himself sitting at a school desk. Looking around, he noticed that he was surrounded by empty desks as far as the eye could see. It was an infinite classroom.

“Welcome to the infinite classroom.” His copy had donned a pair of glasses that made him look
Terunosuke passed up the low-hanging fruit in favor of the pressing issue.  
“What’s the curriculum?”  
“Epiphanies of our mortal existence or some bullshit. In all honesty, we’re not qualified to teach anybody anything.”  
“That’s reassuring.”  
“Isn’t it? Anyways, let’s do a simple exercise.”

A blackboard snapped into existence, a piece of chalk popped into its hand. The copy wrote the word “antonym” on it.

“This’ll be easy. Just say the antonym of each word I say. You can even offer more than 1 answer. Got it?”  
“Sounds easy enough. Let’s start.”  
“Good.”  
“Alright... I said you can start…”  
“I just did.”  
“Oh... bad... evil.”  
“Interesting.” The copy wrote both responses down next to the original word.  
“Was that another word?”  
“No. The next word is ‘kill’.”  
“Hmm... spare... save... uh... that’s it.”  
“Happy.”  
“Sad, mad... no wait. Isn’t the opposite emptiness? I heard that once in a movie. Forget the first 2. Emptiness is the correct answer.”

“Hero.”

Terunosuke rested his hand on his hands and thought for a second.  
“Villain, enemy, monster, evil, killer, torturer, sadist...”

An uncomfortable memory ran through his head.  
“Josuke Higashikata.”  
“Oh? I’d have to agree. Literally. He was definitely the scum of the earth. Anyone else?”  
“...Cielo, I suppose.”  
“Yes, Cielo and Josuke Higashikata are pretty similar.”

“Congratulations! You pass!” A flurry of rainbow-colored confetti rained down on his head. “You sure are smart.”

“Do I get a diploma?”  
“No. You didn’t graduate high school, you pathetic dropout.”

“I’d like to leave now.”  
“So be it. Your wish is my wish.”

***

Terunosuke’s eyes eased open to the sight of the pitch-black night. Apparently, the dream hadn’t lasted very long in the real world.

As a slight consolation to waking up before the sunrise, he noticed Tira sleeping beside him. It was almost as if “the truck's bed” was being taken a bit too literally. He didn't really care. Too tired.
He walked through a door this time. Strange how things were already prepared instead of the blank landscape that usually started his dreams.

“Honey? Is that you?” He hadn't registered that he had walked through the front door of a home until he heard a woman's voice. He also hadn't noticed that he was dressed like a salaryman.

“Y-yeah… it's me.” He replied uncertainty.

The owner of the voice emerged out from behind a corner and gave him a smile that melted his heart. Everything about her was beautiful. From her long, bright hair, to her soft, fair skin, she was everything Terunosuke could ever hope for.

Was she supposed to be his wife? Were they newlyweds or something?

“Welcome home.” She pressed her lips to his cheek. In the same moment, his soul reached eternal peace. “Come on. Dinner is ready.”

Not only did she love him, she also cooked for him too? She really was a dream girl.

The rest of the night, the woman, his “wife”, was a ray of sunshine. She took interest in what he had to say, encouraged him to talk about the things that he enjoyed, and, above all else, made him feel worth something.

It wasn't until he felt joy did he realize that his life had been lacking it for so long.

“I love you.” She announced suddenly, almost catching Terunosuke off guard.

She really was perfect.

“I love you too.”

They both leaned forward; her lips looked so soft.

His forehead knocked on the floor.

“What!” He flailed in panic from the sudden contact and whipped the sleep from his mind before he registered that he was awake.

Once he realized his mistake, he desperately tried to force himself back to sleep, but he failed completely.

He cursed at himself, he slammed his fist against the floor, he bit his lip. Nothing made him feel any better, it just made it worse. Hell, he felt like he was about to cry.

“Hmm? What's going on?” Tira mumbled. Terunosuke glanced back at his partner. Upon inspection, he took notice of her bright orange hair tied up in a long ponytail and her fair skin that looked softer than a cloud.

“Shit.”

His copy was probably laughing at him.

“What's wrong?”

“Everything… and nothing.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Don't worry.”
The desert sunlight burned his foggy eyes. He rubbed them quickly, half to be able to see, half to wipe the welling tears away. Tira glanced up at him. He glanced back silently.

A light bulb went off in their heads.

"Why aren’t you on lookout?!" They both exclaimed.
"It’s your turn, isn’t it?!" Terunosuke questioned.
"No way! I woke you up in the middle of the night before I went to sleep. Did you never leave this spot?!
"Of course I moved!" He lied, having accidentally skipped out on his responsibility.

"Look, I get it. You screwed up and went to sleep before waking me up. I understand.” Tira narrowed her eyes at him, waiting for him to finish. “I’ll tell you what. If I take watch, I’ll consider this entire matter forgiven.” Tira continued to stare at him, pointing towards the open desert.
"Get to work, dumbass.”

***

Terunosuke felt luckier than usual. With careful wording and tone he managed to escape without having to do any actual work… save for a little guard duty… in the blazing sun… on an empty stomach… while he felt like an empty husk who could only find love in his dreams. Who was he kidding? He felt like he was going to die right then and there.

Suddenly, he heard the growl of a wild animal. He aimed his gun left and right before he realized that the growl came from his stomach.

"Psst.” A voice called out. Terunosuke looked left to right again. With his back to the broad left side of the rock formation, the truck was completely out of sight, just as intended.

"Psst!” It was louder this time. He hated how he couldn’t pinpoint it.
“Genesis? Is that you?” He guessed.
“Up here.”

Shit!

He threw his aim to the top of the formation. There was nothing. Nothing at all. Nobody.

Was he going insane?

“Right here.” The voice noted. A meter to his right, Cielo casually leaned against the rock, noticeably keeping weight off of his bandaged leg. In the time it took his heart to skip a beat, he was disarmed, his gun thrown into the distance. “Want something to eat? It’d be easier to talk to you if you aren’t hungry.” Terunosuke reached into his pocket for anything that might be of use.

A lighter flashed in the sunlight as it flew at Cielo’s face. However, his wings flashed into being and simply slapped it away. It twirled through the air like a ballerina and hit the ground gracefully.

“Easy now, Carta. I just want to talk.” How could he be so calm?! Terunosuke’s heart was beating out of his chest. He threw a punch that was easily blocked and a kick that fared just as well.

Nothing was working! He’d have to try something different!

“I hope your partner isn’t preparing a trap for me. I really just want to have a quick chat with you.”
“Don’t mock me!” As he threw his next punch, he waited for the very last moment, right before his fist came into contact with the wing. If it wasn’t right on time, the plan wouldn’t work. His fist came closer and closer. Cielo’s expression was that of boredom and annoyance.
When his fist came within a single micrometer, Terunosuke unveiled his plan. Just as the anticipated impact was supposed to arrive, Enigma activated his ability on Terunosuke, turning him into paper.

Cielo was dumbfounded. One second, his opponent was there, the next second, he vanished. Fortunately, it didn’t take long for Terunosuke to show up again. He tapped his opponent on the shoulder.

“Right here.” Cielo shot around to face the voice. As he turned, he met Terunosuke’s fist with his nose.

“What?!” He staggered back and clutched his face, his nose begging to bleed for the second time after being kicked the day before.

“Peekaboo.” Terunosuke taunted, the wind back in his sails.

He vanished again.

This time, Cielo knew what was coming. He threw his wings behind him in an effort to slam his opponent to the ground. But when his wings shot out, they only met thin air.

“Guess again.” Terunosuke hadn't moved.

Cielo was a sitting duck! With no defense, Terunosuke grabbed him by the hair and pulled his face down to slam into his knee.

“You're making this too easy. Try to keep your eyes open.” Cielo tumbled back a meter or two and jumped back to his feet, his morale nosediving.

Terunosuke felt like the greatest martial artist to ever walk the earth! He mopping the floor with Cielo’s ass. If he could hit him one more time, he'd be incapacitated long enough to make a run for his pistol and end things.

He hopped up and down on the balls of his feet.

“Come on, angel man. Have you had enough already?” Cielo regained his composure as the blood trickling from his nose faded away in an instant. He didn't wipe it on his sleeve or anything, it just disappeared.

“I'll keep my eyes open this time.”

Terunosuke dashed at his opponent, a wild smile swirling onto his face. He telegraphed a blow to the face that Cielo moved to block. When his wings completely blocked the line of sight, Terunosuke shuffled his feet around to give off the impression that he was moving. However, instead of darting to the side, he simply stood still and prepped his fist for a haymaker. In a second, Cielo threw his wings to his right and to his left in an attempt to predict Terunosuke’s next move.

“Close!” Terunosuke put his whole weight into the punch directed at Cielo’s swollen nose. The blow landed squarely, but its mark was missed thanks to Cielo putting up his arms just in time. His scuffed cheek was still a fine target.

“Please, Carta. I'd really like to talk this out. Violence really isn't a necessity.”

“You're only saying that because you're lo-”

Before he finished talking, Terunosuke kicked some sand into Cielo’s eyes. A dirty trick, but a necessary one.

“You punk!” Cielo growled as he rubbed his eyes and shielded himself with his wings. Taking the opportunity, Terunosuke converted to paper and buried himself underneath the sand. When Cielo recovered his sight, he eyed around cautiously.

“I'm serious. I don't want to kill you.” He took a step forward. “I'm willing to put our differences aside.” Another step. “There's no way you actually enjo-”
Terunosuke ejected out of the paper and blasted an uppercut into Cielo’s jaw. This time, the angel man was knocked on his ass. A fist-sized bruise now decorated his jawline.

“Shit. You're insane, huh? I almost bit my tongue.” He rubbed his sore jaw and tried to make sure it hadn't been dislocated.

“Ha! You're 100 years too early to fight me! Oh man, I always wanted to say that! Better watch out, Cielo. This may look like a normal long coat but in reality, it weighs 250 kilograms! If I take it off, you won’t be able to see me zipping around at the speed of light!” He continued spitting out cheesy one-liners at Cielo for longer than he cared to admit. It wasn't until his opponent raised a hand did he wrap up his parade of clichés.

“So are you ready to talk yet?”
“As ready as you are to die.”
“Well then.”

Terunosuke darted at his downed foe. Cielo curled up his wings in defense as if he was a turtle. However, Terunosuke switched directions and made a break for his gun. But before he could cover much distance, Cielo rushed forward and knocked his feet out from under him with one of his hands. His face made contact with a small object in the sand and he instinctively snatched it up. With Cielo’s grip on his ankle, he didn't have enough time to register whether it was his gun or not. He simply aimed it past his feet, right at Cielo’s forehead. Cielo turtled up again on instinct, retracting his grip.

Now free, he had time to realize that he'd grabbed his lighter that had been batted away earlier.

It didn't matter if it wasn't his gun. A two-step plan appeared in his head. Slam & Smash!

From his pocket, he retrieved a piece of paper and unfolded it; he knew it would come in handy sooner or later. A jerrycan filled with fuel weighed his arms down, but he could handle it, and more importantly, he could swing it.

The moment Cielo lowered his wings to see, Terunosuke capitalized. He used the can’s weight in his favor, swinging it into Cielo’s cheek. It was almost like his face had a bullseye painted on it.

While his enemy was down for the moment, Terunosuke enacted step two. The jerrycan rose into the sky and shot down towards Cielo’s face. To the angel man’s credit, he dodged out of the way right before his teeth were knocked out. The jerrycan slammed into the ground and kicked some sand up, but Terunosuke was far from finished. His grip on the can tightened up and he threw his arms high into the air yet again. When he brought the can down a second time, however, Cielo was prepared. One of his massive wings shot up and neatly sliced the can in half, spilling a torrent of fuel. As if in slow motion, every single drop of fuel disappeared into thin air. Cielo stayed bone dry.

Terunosuke blinked. How in the hell…? What just happened?

“How’d you do that?”
“It’s a magic trick I learned.” Cielo answered with a renewed smirk. “Actually, that’s Shining Star’s stand ability. Neat, huh? I think it's poetic in a way.” He rose to his feet, unsteady and bruised, yet completely confident. “It raises liquids and even some solids to a higher state: that of a gas. Just how we as people can raise each other up to limits we couldn't reach alone. Wonderful, isn't it?”

It didn’t matter. So what if he could do that? So what if he could vaporize and sublimate? He’d still
lose in the end with such a useless ability. Terunosuke had anticipated everything.

Enigma worked his magic once again and Terunosuke silently lurked through the sand. However, before he could even begin set up his next move, Cielo snatched up his paper body with one hand.

This was not something he had anticipated.

“You see, I get a bit stressed out when I don’t have a plan.” Cielo started, keeping Terunosuke securely folded. “But once I figure one out, it’s a breeze. Take right now for example. You had me on the ropes right up until you tipped your hand once I cut that container. I never would have guessed you could become paper yourself.”

This was bad and was getting worse by the second. Cielo had him wrapped around his finger. Literally. He could feel his heart start to beat faster and faster as the thought of his body shredding in half flooded his mind.

“I hope you’re ready to consider listening now.” Rather than holding Terunosuke’s body in a way that could be easily torn at a moment’s notice, Cielo did the unthinkable. He threw Terunosuke forward, willingly relinquishing his leverage.

Terunosuke popped out of his vulnerable form.

“Are you an idiot? Why did you let me go?” He had to have had a reason. Right? Damn. Maybe he only wanted to make him paranoid.

“I didn’t want to hold you hostage and try to bargain with you at the same time. It wouldn’t be genuine.’”

Maybe he really was serious about this. He had held his life in the palm of his hand. If he wanted him dead, he would’ve done it. Terunosuke could hear him out for a minute.

“Fine. Spill it. What do you want to talk about?”

“Actually, I don’t think talking would accomplish much anymore.”

“…Huh? Come again?”

“Yeah. You didn’t want anything to do with me and it showed. Plus, you’re not exactly in an understanding mindset.”

“So… you went through that entire fight to give up?”

“Of course not. I would have just flown away if things got too hot. I’m not a masochist. We aren’t going to talk this out, you’re going to settle this on your own.”

“On my own? Alone? And how am I supposed to do that?” As if to answer, Cielo produced a paper from his pocket and handed it to Terunosuke.

“It’s up to you now. I’ll be waiting, Cart-… actually… what is your real name? I’m putting quite a bit of trust into you after all.”

What should he tell him? Give a fake name like Ghiaccio had? Take a leap of faith like Sergio had?

“My name is Miyamoto… Ter-… Musashi Miyamoto. My real name is Musashi Miyamoto.”

A mix of both.

“Well, Musashi, it’s your choice.”

With those words, Cielo flapped his wings and began to ascend.

“Hey! Cielo!” Terunosuke called out before he flew too high up. The angel man looked down in midair. “Can I still have some? It's been a while since I ate.” Cielo chuckled and shook his head
before tossing an orange down to him as he flew off.

A paper and an orange for a half-fake name. It was about as far from expected as humanly possible. He never thought he would be glad that foreign knowledge of samurai history was a bit lacking. What a surreal meeting.

Snapping back to reality, he took a look at the paper as he took a bite into the orange.

“To Car-” FUCK!

He had forgotten to peel the orange before biting into it. Godammit. He coughed and spat as hard as he could and rubbed his tongue across his sleeve. Thinking with his head and not his stomach, he peeled the bitten fruit as best he could. With one “gift” dealt with, he turned his intention to the other.

“To Carta” was all it said. It was just a worn out, wrinkled piece of normal paper, completely unlike the clean pages Enigma could produce. He turned the page over and discovered a full letter on the back.

“I don’t think you’re evil anymore. A little while ago, I thought you were a sadistic bastard who killed Noce and the others because they got in your way. I really did believe that. Then you had the gall to call me ‘evil’. Me! Of all people! That’s when I realized that you thought of yourself as the ‘good guy’ and me as the ‘bad guy’, just like I had done.

I understand now.

You didn’t kill them out of enjoyment. You did it out of self-preservation, didn’t you? A string of bad luck, or maybe the very fabric of society, is to blame for those deaths, not you.

Carta, as you probably already know, my name isn’t Cielo. My real name is Rahim. I was born and raised and died and was reborn here in Algeria. I’m 18 years old. I believe that God is the savior of man, Padre is the hope of the people, and that you and I are more alike than you might think. I don’t want to be your enemy any longer. I’d like to be your ally. I’d like it if you broke off from Passione and joined up with Scheggia like I did. You can even bring your partner along if she wants to. But the decision ultimately belongs to you. I don’t believe that you’ve been given a proper choice in your destiny until now, so here it is.

If you choose to convert, you’ll both be welcomed with open arms. But if you choose to continue down the road you’re on right now, I won’t hesitate to stop you. Ask yourself this: Which path is diabolical and which is divine?

It’s up to you, Carta.

Sincerely, Rahim/Cielo”

That was that. He took a bite of his orange and digested what he just read. “Not so different”? Huh. How did he feel about that? He didn’t really know. What was Cielo “like”? Ferocious, determined, relentless, bloodthirsty. That didn’t describe Terunosuke at all. But it probably wasn’t right to describe him like that. Cielo… or rather, Rahim, only acted that way for revenge, he wasn’t like that anymore… supposedly.

This wasn’t something he could sort out in a moment, it was a complete paradigm shift after all. Would consulting Tira help things? She might be able to help out a little. She was a woman, and women had a keen understanding of emotions… right?
Just as he was about to head to the inside of the rock fortress, he remembered that he almost forgot about his gun. Without a proper recollection of where it went when Cielo threw it, he was forced to search for it manually. Like a needle in a haystack.

With his eyes to the ground, he had time to consider the contents of the letter. “My real name is Rahim”, “I don’t want to be your enemy any longer”, “You’ll be welcomed with open arms.” Rahim made a convincing argument. Passione wasn’t exactly a comfortable place of employment. Scheggia might be a welcome change of pace, but how welcome would HE be? Would the members just forgive him for causing multiple deaths? It just wasn’t possible.

Where was that gun hiding?

“I’d like to be your ally”, “You and I are more alike than you might think”, “Then you ha…”

Wait a second.

WAIT JUST ONE GODDAMN SECOND!

Cielo and Terunosuke Miyamoto were NOT alike! They were antonyms! One was a demon that tried to paint himself as the good guy, while the other had to suffer because of the so-called “good guys”!

Terunosuke knew exactly what kind of person Cielo was. He wouldn’t be fooled into believing anything that bastard had to say. He crushed the soft orange in his left hand and threw the crushed chunks as far as he could; the letter was quickly torn to shreds.

What an idiot he was for believing in that shit for a second.

He finally found his gun and swiped it up with his filthy left hand. It would be vital in a matter of hours.

***

“Carta, are you absolutely sure about this?” Tira questioned, almost wanting him to be unsure. “This plan could end up blowing up in our faces. I could always think up another plan.” “It’ll be fine. I know it will.” His eyes were sharp and determined, enough to convince Tira that he wasn’t joking around. “There’s no way you’ll get hurt.” “I’m not really worried about that… I’m worried about what we’re going to do after we finish.” “Drive back. Walk if we need to. If we’re on the tip of the Sahara, we’ll just need to go north a little ways. I saw a town not too far from here. It’ll be alright.” “As simple as that?” “As simple as that.”

She sighed a sigh that carried a heap of emotions and worries. “Fine. We'll do it. But I still think it's a shitty idea.” “It doesn't need to be a good plan to succeed.”

And so they got to work.

***

The sun was starting to set and the clock was just about to hit 6 when Terunosuke walked out of the rock fortress. Interesting how the sun could dip so low on the horizon, yet it still felt as hot as noon. It definitely wasn’t 25 degrees today. More like 52. How could people willingly live in these conditions? Eternal noon was a feature hell would include.
The heat was a war crime, the sun was an atrocity, and his hunger was a pressing world issue. What a wretched country Algeria was. It felt like he had been running from danger and attacking Cielo for weeks, but in reality, it was just over a day. In fact, they'd only been in Algeria for a little less than two days. Time flies.

As his boots stepped through the blazing sand, he wondered how long it would take for Cielo to come to him. Hopefully not too much longer. He didn't know if he could take much more.

After what felt like an hour of continuous walking, he glanced back to find that he hadn't even covered half of a kilometer yet.

Heat stroke couldn't come fast enough. Dammit Cielo! What was taking so long?

He drew his baking long coat off his arms and wrapped the sleeves around his forehead like a sweatband. A change in wardrobe wouldn’t affect the plan very drastically. This kind of clothing arrangement was something an actual Arabian would do. When in Africa, huh? Wait… Algeria wasn’t an Arabian country, was it? In fact, weren’t the Arabian countries actually in the western portion of Asia, not Africa? But wait, that area was usually called the Middle East. It definitely wasn’t in eastern Asia, and it was too far east to be the middle east of Europe, and now that he thought about it, it was probably too far east to be “middle” in Asia as well. So… then the Middle East was called that because it was in the middle of the Eastern hemisphere… so why didn’t people ever refer to the Japan and its neighbors as the “Eastern East”? Why not call it 2East? The possibilities were endless! Come on Eastern East, get it in gear!

He shook his head at the mental tangent. Damn heat. Damn Cielo. Damn air that should be getting cooler by now. But most importantly, damn Cielo… wait, that was already covered. Dammit Cielo!

As if coming in on a the very last in a long series of cues, the angel finally descended from the sky. About time. Almost there.

Cielo landed on his feet and hobbled to Terunosuke with optimistic caution, his ankle still looking like hell. And not only his ankle. His nose looked bent out of shape, the underside of his jaw had a dark bruise, and his cheek was so scraped up and raw, it seemed like it could fall off at any moment.

“Good to see you again, Musashi.”

“Musashi, who’s that?”

“Oh… er… I mean… Carta. Glad you came, Carta.” It wasn’t until after Cielo corrected himself that Terunosuke remembered the fake name he gave earlier in the day. Too late to go back now. Not like it would matter.

“So… what is your answer?”

“Whether I’ll convert to your side or not?”

“Yes, that one. What’s the answer?” Terunosuke gave a half smirk.

“Funny story, that. Since you wrote out your request, I figured I would do the same.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the same wrinkled piece of paper that Cielo had wrote on. The key difference being that he had folded it up to look like an genuine letter. That, and he had written “To Rahim” on the front. He stepped forward and held out the letter in his left hand.

Cielo looked like he was mentally preparing his stand to come out if needed. Thankfully, the precaution was unnecessary and he retrieved the letter without incident. He retreated back a few steps and began to open the letter. Suddenly, he stopped before he opened it.
“Carta.” Cielo began with a tight voice. “I need to know that I can trust you.” He lowered the letter to his side, careful not to open it yet. Carta raised an eyebrow.

“How should I do that?”

“You have a gun, right? A pistol. Wherever you have it hidden away, I want you to take it out and throw it away.” Carta’s expression turned a bit uneasy at that.

“Why should I? It’s my only line of defense right now. If I throw it away, you could attack without resistance.”

“But I don’t know that for sure.” Cielo explained from his point of view. “You could have a whole arsenal of weapons stashed away and I wouldn’t be able to know. Hell, you could’ve concealed an entire war in your pocket.” Carta’s expression became more and more tense as time went on.

“If I do this, will you give me your word that you won’t attack me while I’m defenseless?”

“Absolutely! I swear on my life. I swear on the souls of my parents! I absolutely won’t attack if you do this.”

Carta still seemed to have some misgivings about the arrangement. Reluctantly though, he reached to his back and pulled his pistol from the waistband of his pants. With all the strength he could muster, he threw it forward as hard as he could. It sailed through the air and landed in the sand quite a distance away.

“Thank you.” Cielo felt safe. “If your partner is lurking around nearby, please don’t let her shoot me while I read this.” Carta gave a forced laugh.

“Don’t worry, she’s all the way back there.” He pointed towards the rock they had used as a base; easily half a kilometer away. So there was no reason to worry. No reason at all. He untied his sleeves from his forehead and put his jacket back on the way it was meant to be worn.

“Thanks, Musashi.”

“No problem, Rahim.”

Cielo smiled. Genuinely smiled. He had a good feeling about this. Things were looking up. He finally unfolded the letter.

The first thing he noticed was that every word he had written before had been marked through with dark black ink. The second thing he noticed was the big, bold letters that served as the answer.

His pupils dilated. His hairs stood on end. He started to sweat all over his body.

Carta’s letter had only two words. Two words that made everything stop.

FUCK
YOU

What? Why?!

Cielo looked up to try to meet Carta’s eyes, but the man he trusted was darting backwards away from him.

“Hey! What’s the meaning of thi-!” Suddenly, the scribbled letter became heavier. It was so heavy! Why was it so fucking heavy?!

The truth revealed itself behind the letter and in front of his palm. Between both, a black mass grew increasingly larger. The unbearable weight crashed to the ground, smashing Cielo’s hand down with it. But it wasn’t a strange black mass.

It was a tire. A tire connected to their truck.
Seven seconds.

Terunosuke took just seven seconds to consider his situation. Cielo was pinned under the truck tire like a fox caught in a snare. He almost seemed like he would gnaw his arm off and charge at Terunosuke.

But he didn't. He just stayed there crying out in pain. If Terunosuke had his gun, it'd be easy to splatter his brains across the sand. It could end right there.

His chest felt tight, like something inside was trying to push itself out. Damn. It hurt. Hurt to see someone pour their soul out and be attacked for it.

He hoped Cielo would just go home and let them do the same. Hoped that Rahim could find a little peace in his life after everything finished.

“Carta! Let's fucking go!” Tira’s voice shouted from the back of the truck. He jumped back into action.

He didn’t chuckle, he didn’t apologize, he didn’t insult him. He simply walked to the driver’s seat.

As part of his plan, he was behind the wheel with Tira keeping guard, lack of driving experience be damned. He knew how to turn a wheel and stomp a pedal. Doing just that, the truck lurched forward, rolling off of Cielo’s hand. Without wasting another second, he pressed down on the gas as hard as he could. Thankfully, Cielo scrambled away as soon as he was free, leaving nothing more to worry about.

They sped off for a few meters until he slammed the breaks without warning.

“Genesis, grab my gun.” He commanded.

The snake compiled.

Paian paiiin papain paaiinn panin paiii pa paaiin paiinn.

Cielo couldn’t think the word correctly, let alone speak it aloud.

“AggHH!!!” He moaned. He couldn’t even understand himself, not that it would make him less of an idiot.

Cielo was a shithead for believing Carta’s lies. A shithead who deserved having his hand crushed.

He couldn’t get to his feet. Couldn’t stop thrashing against the sand. Couldn’t get a grip.

“AAAHHHHHHH!”

THE PAIN!

He focus solely on his shattered hand! Every snapped ligament! Every bone jutting out of his skin! Every bleeding wound!

They were all Carta’s fault!

THEY WERE ALL CARTA’S FAULT!!!
The abomination that killed Noce! He had earned death! FUCK HIM! He deserved to rot in hell for all eternity!

And Cielo would make it happen!

“CARTTAAAAAAA!!”

He clawed into the sky.

Carta was a dead man!

***

Driving wasn’t an issue once he got the hang of it. Terunosuke was more than capable of steering the truck where he wanted it to go.

Their destination was north towards civilization. Back to civilized life, without so much violence and pain. Pain that he had caused…

Dammit. He hoped Cielo would be alright. Hopefully, the last time he ever saw of him was his reflection in the rearview mirror. It wasn’t an unreasonable hope to want that, was it. Back in Japan, maybe not, but in this corner of the world, things were different. They weren’t simple, and they definitely weren’t easy.

Blue.

He saw it far in the distance: a butterfly with brilliant blue wings. The truck barreled straight towards in at a blinding speed. Terunosuke swerved to get an angle on it. As he got closer, he stretched his left hand out as far as he could reach. With one hand on the steering wheel and the other extended out the window, the butterfly was getting closer. Maybe if he caught it, it would make up for things in some strange way.

Soon, the butterfly was within reach. His left hand made contact and he snatched the treasure right out of the air.

He sat back in his seat and looked at his hand.

Empty.

There wasn’t anything. No butterfly, no brilliant blue wings. It was almost like it was never real at all.

…

…

…

“Hey! Stop driving like a fucking maniac!” Tira shouted at him from the back. He glanced back at her glaring eyes and nodded.

“Sorry, I got distracted.”

He rubbed the sweat off of his forehead and corrected their path. It was fortunate that he didn’t hit any rocks while he was staring off into space.

“Hey, Tira. Do me a favor. Hand me one of the jerrycans, please.”

“Get one yourself, I’m busy.”
“I’m busy too. Have Genesis do it. This is important.”

The snake pushed one of the many cans of fuel towards the driver’s seat, allowing Terunosuke to convert it into paper and stuff it into his pocket.

“Any sign of him?”
“I would’ve said something if I saw him. The coast is… hold on… speak of the devil… I mean… the angel.”
“You see him?”
“Sure do! Let’s get things rolling!”

Tira started to hum a song as she opened fire.

***

Some bullets flew at Cielo. It didn’t matter; he avoided them.

Through his rage, he stayed rational enough to remember his back-up plan. The trap set up in case Musashi was lying.

He flew near the driver’s seat. His wings sliced through the air and readied themselves to strike the murderous bastard.

“Time to die, Car-” A stream of bullets slammed into his wings from behind, throwing his balance off. He shook violently from side to side, desperate to try to stay in the air.

The truck drifted to the right, away from him. Carta wasn’t paying attention to it, but he was driving headlong into his death.

A faint path in the sand had been prepared. It was so subtle, that even Cielo, the person who drew it, had trouble finding it for a second.

But he didn’t miss it. Fortunately, Carta did.

Yes, it didn’t matter if Cielo sliced him to shreds. Carta was about to drive straight into his trump card and do it himself!

***

“Come on you dickless shitstain! Get back here!” Tira howled while trying to get an angle on Cielo. Terunosuke had never seen her this excited. What had gotten into her? Cielo seemed to be just as dismayed by the display. He distanced himself from the truck, still close enough to strike, but far enough to give Tira a line of sight. She sprayed another series of shots at the angel, emptying the magazine. Terunosuke swore he saw at least one bullet lodge itself into his good leg, but he either didn't notice or didn't care.

Terunosuke drifted to the right, creating valuable breathing room in the process.

His eyes darted forward, trusting Tira enough to watch Cielo while he checked the road ahead. Thankfully, he could see the indistinct silhouettes of some buildings in the far distance. While they were at least a few kilometers away, hope swelled inside his heart. The ride was almost over.

“I’m reloading, watch yourself!” Tira warned. His attention snapped to his window where Cielo was flying nearby. But when he glanced aside, the angel was nowhere to be found.

“Where’d he go?!” He let go of the steering wheel and sprawled down against the front seat, gripping his gun tight. When he looked up at the sky from his position, the only thing he could see
was a sea of cloudless blue.

If he wasn’t on their left side, and he wasn’t above them, the only option would be…

CRASH!

The window on the passenger-side door shattered violently when a golden wing slammed into it. Cielo was there!

“It’s over you bastard!” Cielo bared his fangs and reached his uninjured hand through the window. Terunosuke was waiting for an opportunity just like this! While Cielo was overflowing with rage and power, he had no direction. As soon as he got a grip on Terunosuke’s arm, he dragged him closer, probably hoping to slice him apart with his deadly wings. But he made a mistake. While he was perched on the outside of the truck’s door, his two wings were preparing to strike. Instead of flying into the air and dragging Terunosuke into the sky again, he opted to try for a quick straightforward slice.

That was his first and final mistake. There was a window of opportunity!

“Get back!”
Terunosuke pressed his pistol to Cielo’s forehead, just as he had done to Sanguinoso. He pulled the trigger without a second’s worth of hesitation. But Cielo was fast. With his bloody and battered hand, he redirected pistol’s aim. Instead of destroying his brain, the bullet drove into his shoulder.

Naturally, he cried out in pain, from his hand and from his newest bullet wound. His hold deteriorated and his balance disappeared. There was nothing he could do except fall.

But, he wasn’t done. Along with blinding speed, Cielo possessed inhuman tenacity. His wings hit the sand first. With energy that came from nowhere, he slammed the golden appendages into the ground, violently reversing his momentum. It kept him airbourne, but at the cost of falling far behind. Additionally, it looked pretty painful from where Terunosuke was sitting.

How in the hell was he still doing this?

Terunosuke pushed himself back into his seat and corrected the truck’s path. Maybe it would be better to use the seatbelt…

“That was fucking great!” Tira cheered, an expression of feral sadism etched onto her face. “Y-yeah. Stay focused, he’s not done yet.”
“No shit.”

As if on cue, Cielo started to creep back into range, low to the ground like a lion ready to pounce. “Get closer! I can’t shoot you if you’re that far away!”

Almost like he was intentionally defying her, he stayed away. Too far for Tira’s submachine gun to properly hit, and too far away for him to be a threat. He was just gliding easily without a care in the world.

Terunosuke couldn’t make heads or tails of his plan if he even had one. Was he coming up with one on the spot… or was THIS a part of his plan. There was no way to know and no way to not know, so he kept his foot on the gas. He wished he could go faster.

“Watch out! He’s moving!” Tira shouted. Terunosuke shot his gaze at Cielo’s position, but didn’t find him. He frantically searched up and down until he spotted his enemy through the shattered window.
A large rock stood in front of the truck’s path. They could either move right and get closer to Cielo or move left and get even further away.

Terunosuke choose left.

The boulder passed by, leaving the standoff further apart. But that was not the only change that came. On both sides of the truck, rocky hills rose from the ground. It was too late to turn out of the way; the boulder having been the point of no return. Far to the right, Cielo came closer. He stayed high, too high to shoot. But he didn’t stay up for long. Gradually, he drew closer to the truck. Inversely, both sides of the rocky hills grew higher and higher until the truck was traveling through a sandy strait.

Was this Cielo’s plan?

Cielo dove hard towards the racing truck, faster than Tira could fire.

“DUCK!” Tira screamed while she tried in vain to shoot the diving attacker. Terunosuke flew to the opposite seat and took cover. Good thing he didn’t buckle his seat belt. He waited for the bomb to drop, but it never came.

“What… the hell? What’s he doing?”

“He’s right above you. Dammit! I can’t get a shot on him!”

True to fact, Cielo was mere meters above Terunosuke’s head. His eyes were ahead, fixed on the distance, not down, focusing on his prey. What the hell was his game?!

The angel briefly peeked at Terunosuke’s cowering figure, then sped towards a jagged hill before Tira could fire at him again.

“Goddamn weasel! Slow down!”

What was the point of that? Why didn’t he attack?! Once again, Terunosuke pulled himself back into the driver’s seat and hit the gas. While there was still a little room for the truck to move left and right, it was rapidly becoming cramped. It was probably safe to assume that Cielo had planned for this to happen, right? It didn’t matter at the moment, he was holding off his assault for now. A bit further ahead, the hills converged in an narrow arch. While it would be a tight fit for the truck to pass through, Terunosuke knew he could thread the needle. The real concern was Cielo. Since the arch was the only way forward, there was no turning around. It was full speed ahead no matter what… and Cielo definitely knew that. He could simply wait for the moment he knew would come, then strike from above when there was nothing they could do to react.

That was the only course of action that made sense, but that felt reassuring in a way. If there was only one thing he COULD do, then there was no need to worry about cooking up a backup plan.

There was only the pressed gas pedal, the steady steering wheel, and the sandy road ahead.

The arch was getting closer and closer by the second. Similarly, Cielo drew closer. Tira fired at him, but the uneven hills coupled with the chaotic speed of the truck and Cielo’s agility made actually hitting him a pipe dream.

The angel was flying closer, but he was holding back. Why wasn’t he darting ahead to cover the only exit? Was he afraid of being shot again? Was he too weak to go that fast? Was he actually planning on cutting them off? Damn! What was he thinking?!

He darted away.
He didn’t fly high up, nor did he rush forward towards the arch. He just flew off in the direction of
the hill.

What the hell?!

The arch was seconds away!

What was Cielo’s plan?! Why did he run away like that?! Was he actually planning to attack
them… or… was there something else?

Terunosuke could make out details in the arch: weathered stone with all manner of scuffs and deep
scratches from the harsh desert winds.

But the was something that pulled his attention in like a magnet. A small mound in the sand, sat
half-buried in the middle of the arch. Too perfectly flat to be a rock, and too round to be an animal.

There was only one thing it could be!

“Shit! Get down!” Terunosuke bolted over the back of his seat and scrambled to get as far away
from the steering wheel as he could get.

“What’s wro-

As the truck sped through the arch, one of its front wheels rolled over the object that Terunosuke
had spotted. The half-buried object wasn’t a rock, nor was it an animal.

It was a landmine, primed to blow.

That was Cielo’s plan. The boulder that he knew was the point of no return. The inconsistent
nature of his attacks that distracted their attentions.

It was all leading up to that spot, that moment.

The explosion was deafening. A savage roar that overloaded Terunosuke’s ears and mind. The
entire truck rattled and crashed on itself. A blinding geyser of sand whipped up, slashing through
the thin air. Terunosuke and Tira were thrown around like pinballs in a blender. He strained to grab
ahold of anything stable, but the action was completely futile in the shuddering chaos.

The blast was actually strong enough to momentarily throw the front of the truck up into the air
and out of the arch. For a moment, everything was weightless. The moment didn’t last, throwing
the world back to the ground. What remained of the front wheels slammed harder than the
explosion itself. They were thrown back to the ground as gravity returned. He landed right on his
wrist, twisting it awkwardly in a direction it wasn’t supposed to go.

Everything hurt. Scratch that, everything that he could feel hurt.

Terunosuke pressed his hand to his forehead to check if he was still alive. Thankfully, he was still
breathing. Blood, sweat, and sand now covered his hand and face, but he was still alive. After the
brief reflection, he grabbed Tira’s arm with his right hand and pulled her forward.

“Come on. We need to get out right now.”

“Son of a… yeah.” One of the fuel cans had struck her square in the chest during the mayhem,
knocking the wind out of her lungs. With the fuel on his mind, he sped up their escape.

They both fell out of the vehicle and hurried away. Away from the burning ruins of the truck and
away from the arch.
When the mine exploded, it threw a torrent of flames and shrapnel up with it. Those flames scorched the front of the truck with even more heat. That heat had the awful function of lighting the gas tank ablaze.

A second blast knocked both of them on their asses and broke his grip on her arm. This time, he could feel every wisp and flicker of the blaze. It burned hotter than the sun. Thank God they moved away from the tank; they'd be charcoal otherwise.

With his ears ringing and his skin burning, he frantically tried to reestablish his lifeline with Tira. She was taking cover on the ground just a meter away, her arms desperately guarding her head. He moved to help her to her feet, but the second he did, another explosion—smaller, but still destructive—shook the world around him.

It must have been the extra fuel tanks. Shit! There would be more!

He didn't even bother trying to get to his feet. Instead, he struggled to his hands and knees while he helped Tira do the same. Several more eruptions blasted in quick succession without pause. It was almost as if they were all eager to cause as much chaos as possible in as little time as they could.

After an agonizing few seconds, the explosions finally whimpered out, leaving nothing but flames, heavy black smoke, and ringing ears.

“Tira?” He choked out. As soon as he spoke he realized just how strung out he was. His entire body was sweating, a cut on his forehead was bleeding down to his eyebrows, his stomach was an empty void, his legs demanded rest. He felt like shit to say the least.

Tira likely felt the same way. The only sound she made was the off-key humming of the same song she had been chanting throughout the chase. She made weak attempts at sitting up, but the explosions had left her rattled. Even Genesis looked out of sorts.

Terunosuke looked out to the distance, to civilization just a breath away. He tried to grab ahold of it, but it was far, far outside his reach. The distance separating them stretched further than the universe. There was no way he would get there. No way. Impossible. The truck was a smoldering wreck, his body was in abysmal shape, and Cielo would stop at nothing until he was ripped apart.

Speaking of Cielo, the winged man landed in front of the burning truck. He slammed the remnants of the metal frame with one of his wings, probably checking if Terunosuke was somehow hiding inside the flames. He said something, his mouth sharpening and his fangs barring, but it was impossible to know what he said over the roar of the fire. He could only guess that Cielo was calling for him. If that were the case, then that meant he had missed him.

Terunosuke pulled his pistol out, but his aim was a nightmare. From the distance he was at, he’d have a difficult time hitting his target at his best. With the state he was in, shooting true was nothing but a fantasy.

He’d have to get closer. A lot closer.

Summoning up the last dregs of strength in his body, Terunosuke rose up to his feet with an unstable balance. He shuffled towards Cielo’s direction as he kept a shaky grip on his pistol.

Cielo stepped back from the flames. It almost looked like he didn’t know what to do next. Terunosuke couldn’t blame him, revenge was a unstable mission. Once it was finished, it could end up leaving its host with an empty feeling… not that Terunosuke knew anything about that.

Suddenly, Cielo’s voice erupted out. It wasn’t a scream or a howl, but a sob. He fell to his knees
and began to cry.

Of all the reactions possible, he choose to cry?

He made no motion to stop himself. The floodgates had been broken and they were only getting worse. He almost looked like a child. Long streaks welled up in his eyes, flowed down his cheeks, and dripped off his chin onto the sand. His bloody hand reached up towards the sky, so far it almost looked like he could grab it.

“Noce! Everyone! I did it! It’s over! You can rest easy now, you hear me?! He’s gone! I did it! Did you see me?!” His voice strained as he tried to get every word out. He thought he had finally avenged his friends, achieved the justice he’d fought so hard for. He’d put himself through hell and back for those he cared about, for his loved ones that had met their end by Terunosuke’s hand.

A feeling swelled up inside Terunosuke. His stomach burned—not because of hunger, but because of remorse. Cielo’s entire drive was to kill him, but it was only because his peace offering had been rejected. Since his wholehearted attempts at a truce had failed so dramatically, there was no other option than to choose violence. The pain, the hardship, the anger, and everything else could be traced back to Terunosuke.

Was Terunosuke the real villain here? Was he dilluting himself into thinking he was in the right?

Who could say for sure?

The only thing he knew for sure was that when Cielo found out he was alive, he’d wouldn’t stop until he was finally dealt with once and for all. He’d probably throw away his own life if need be.

That was an outcome that Terunosuke absolutely couldn’t afford. He had come too far to die. Even if he was evil, he still wanted to live.

Cielo needed to be stopped for as long as possible. It was a matter of life and death. A bullet to the his gut should do the trick. Not vital enough to kill him, but painful enough to stop him for a good long while.

Terunosuke neared and neared. The heat from the blazing truck was unbearable in the already oppressive desert sun. Terunosuke just wanted to curl up into a ball and go to sleep. Terunosuke didn’t want to feel heat ever again. Terunosuke didn’t want any of this.

But he pressed forward anyway.

Just a few meters away from the roaring flames, he took a heavy breath in and shouted.

“Hey! Cielo! I’m not dead yet!”

He raised his gun, but only his hand made it up. Such a rapid movement with an exhausted body left him with no energy to bring his gun up too. His pistol thumped onto the sand pathetically.

Cielo’s death stare shot through his soul.

“Carta?! What the hell are you still doing?! Just fucking die already?!”

SHIT SHIT SHIT! THINK!

“I’ll kill you again and again until you die!”

Terunosuke rifled through his pockets for something. Anything!

An extra magazine for his pistol? Useless now!
Ghiaccio’s plane ticket? Not the time!
A folded piece of paper? The last jerrycan! Yes!

Cielo ran at him with a feral limp. There was no time to think. There was only time to act.
Terunosuke shot the page out of his pocket and pulled back to throw it, only to stop and hatch a
last-second idea. He dashed to the truck’s flames and dipped the paper in, not far enough for the
blaze to consume it, but more than enough to spread the fire.

With Cielo seconds away, he bent his arm back and flung the paper at his enemy.
“Eat this!”

The burning page sailed through the air at Cielo, carrying with it Terunosuke’s last hope at
survival. But it was just a blank, folded piece of paper. A measly attempt at stretching his life a
few seconds longer. The page would do nothing to save him.

Cielo drove his wing through the paper without a thought.

He lost right then and there.

It was true that the piece of paper wouldn't stop anything, that it couldn't even be considered a
defensive measure. Thankfully, it didn't have to.

The moment Cielo’s stand tore through the fibers of the paper, the sealed gas can was released.
Since the paper holding it was split in half, the can reflected the damage. Two halves traveled past
the wing and neared Cielo’s face.

The fire on the corner of the page finally took its opportunity.

The fuel exploded violently in front of Cielo, just as the other cans had exploded within the truck.
The blast rocketed through Terunosuke’s bones and was strong enough to knock him flat on his
back, though it didn't take much to achieve such a feat.

Before he could let himself rest, he forced himself back onto his feet. His ears were ringing and his
eyes wouldn't focus. Such a tense moment had to be seen, to be heard!

Forcing his entire body to take in his surroundings, he looked ahead to where Cielo laid.

Black.

Not dark-skinned, not shadowed.

Black.

His face was black.

Not completely, of course. A grotesque smattering of burnt flesh and raw skin dominated Cielo’s
face. The edges of the afflicted area were charred and blackened. The sight was like a burnt piece
of toast with jelly splattered on top. The connection alone made Terunosuke need to vomit the
limited contents of his stomach.

Cielo was defeated. Not stalled, stopped, or delayed, but defeated. He wouldn't be getting up…
ever. Terunosuke had landed the finishing blow with that page. The shambles that were once a man
would die in that spot.

That wasn't right.
He wasn’t supposed to be killed by it. He was supposed to have taken an indirect pop to rattle his head. Why didn’t he use his wings to guard himself?! This wasn’t how it had been planned! It was all wrong!

Terunosuke stumbled over to the angel man, his stand having disappeared after the explosion. He took his right hand into his own and clenched as hard as he could.

“C-Cielo! Say something!”

His pleas went on deaf ears and Cielo failed to make any sound beyond a low, agonized moan. His eardrums had been perforated and his eyes had been blinded. He could only feel now.

A crater of blackened despair carved itself into the depths of his guts.

“Cielo… I… I’m sorry! I didn’t mean for it to happen like this! It… it was supposed to slow you down! Not this!” Tears began to well up in his eyes despite his best efforts. “I fucked up… I didn’t want it to happen like this! You understand, right?!"

No response.

Instead Cielo moved his jaw and his seared lips as if to say something. Terunosuke leaned forward to hear.

“in… in… in th-th-the… in the na… na… the naaaameee… of G… G… God… am-m… men… amen.”

He was praying for his soul. Even if Terunosuke had his doubts that God was really there, he hoped he was for Cielo’s sake as well as his own. It gave him a tiny piece of comfort to know that his suffering wouldn’t be in vain.

“...out… I'm coming.” Tira’s voice. Terunosuke glanced back at her with tear-filled eyes. “I'm… coming… out… I'm coming.” She was singing. Not only that, her face was twisted into the longest smile he'd ever seen. It was inhuman, monstrous, hideous. It belonged on a demon, not Tira.

“What are yo-” His question was cut off when Tira threw him aside with an unexpectedly high amount of strength. What the hell was she doing?

“There’s a new me coming out, and I just have to live.” She continued on, towering over Cielo. It was the same song she had been humming for awhile, but more importantly, what was she doing?

“Tira! What are you doing?”

“... just wanna give. I'm completely positive.”

She wasn't liste-

CRA-CRUNCH!

Terunosuke’s eyes burned with sorrowful tears and of the hellish desert heat. Even in the extreme conditions he was in, he could see clearly. There was no chance to look away from the sight right in front of him.

Tira… with… to… Cielo…

He couldn't process it. Tira wouldn't do something like that… but there she was. The two competing realities ripped one another apart as they vied for control. But there was only a single concrete reality staring him in the face.

In the unnerving state Tira was in, she had sunk her teeth into Cielo’s burnt throat. Genesis had nothing to do with it. Tira was the only one involved.

The wet squelching sounds that splattered out confirmed the horror his eyes saw. Fat streams of
blood tore from his punctured skin. His prayer had been replaced with nightmarish choking, fighting with all his might to get air. The disgusting gasps and heaves stabbed through Terunosuke’s ears and cleaved his mind apart.

“S-stop it.” He cried out weakly. “Tira… stop.” His cries were nothing but hot air to Tira.

Her teeth stabbed into Cielo’s neck without resistance. His skin was burnt tissue paper. The expression she wore was that of limitless pleasure and euphoria, as if she loved the horrific carnage she was causing. She still sang that damn song, the bright lyrics replaced with muffled humming.

Cielo’s reaction shifted from numb pain to torturous agony. His panicked choking gave way to a scream that couldn’t make it out of his bleeding throat. His eyes were destroyed, his eardrums were blown out. Yet he could still feel everything. Every tooth that pierced into his skin. Every drop of blood that ran down his neck. And eventually, everything ligament and tendon that snapped when Tira began to rip his throat out of his neck.

Terunosuke’s voice broke free and spat out of his mouth.

“Tira! Stop it! Goddammit! STOP IT!”

But Tira refused to leave things half finished. The further she pulled, the more Cielo’s neck was exposed. She kept pulling and pulling and pulling and pulling and pulling and!

It all ripped out.

A huge chunk of Cielo’s neck was completely torn from his body. It left behind a bleeding swamp of cut veins, ripped skin that was burnt to a crisp, jagged bone, and convulsing tissues.

Cielo didn’t make another sound; his head hit the ground softly when Tira finished her attack.

He was destroyed. The devastation Terunosuke had inflicted didn’t even begin compare.

Tira spat out the bloody shambles of Cielo’s throat. Blood lined her mouth as if she’d just been sloppy while eating.

But it wasn’t a mistake. She had done that on purpose. She had ripped his throat from his neck because she wanted to.

“W-what the hell…” Terunosuke tried to ask before his voice gave up.

Tira turned to him, the hellish smile still stained on her face.

“Did you want to kill him yourself? Sorry for stealing your thunder.”

Chapter End Notes

I've found when I think up a stand, it ends up being a utility-based automaton with no face or personality, save for Genesis. That’ll be something I'll improve in upcoming chapters.

I also think that some of the powers are a bit weak. Cielo had the stand ability inducing of state changes, but he had the wings as a backup. If he didn't have that, he wouldn't be a very interesting adversary. Thankfully, horrifying stand abilities are coming sooner than you think.
The fluorescent lights hummed softly in the late hours of the quiet Tuesday night. Salvatore checked the clock on the wall and noted that he was taking far too long to complete paperwork that should have been dealt with days ago. No use in worrying about it now.

And he called himself a good leader.

He gave a thought about dinner while flipping through the patient records and financial statements. Would it be better to just go out to eat at some cheap fast food joint, or would homecooking be better? If he asked nicely, would Michael whip something up, or maybe go out and get something? No… that would be inconsiderate. He had been working just as hard as Salvatore had been. It wouldn’t be right to force him to work more than he needed to.

McDonald’s was still open at this hour…

There was a knock on the door.

“Michael?”
“No. Terunosuke.” The young man slunk into Salvatore’s office without looking up from the ground. He just sat with a heavy slam, as if he had been walking for days on end without any rest.
“You just get back?” Salvatore asked, setting his pen down.
“Yeah.”
“Delivery go well?”
“Failed.”
“It did? You and Tira were doing pretty well for a while there with no dropped assignments for about a month. What happened?”
“We got attacked. Things went south. Tira…” He trailed off just as he seemed to want to say something important.
“Tira… what?”

Then Salvatore remembered.

“Oh shit. Is she alright? Are you alright?”
“We're fine. Rahim isn't.”
“Rahim? Was that the client?!”
“No. He was the attacker.”
“Wait. If he was the person who attacked you, how'd you find out his name?”
“He told me.”
“He told you…? Hey, could you look at me when you talk? It's hard to know what you're thinking if you stare at the ground.”
“Sorry.” Terunosuke looked up to meet Salvatore’s eyes, but refused to maintain eye-contact for extended periods of time before glancing away.
“So what happened with Tira? Did she… ‘come out’?”
“‘Come out’? That's a pretty accurate way of putting it I suppose. Yeah. I think that's exactly what happened.”
“So you saw that side of her?”
“Yeah… she… Cielo she-”

Cielo?
“Cielo?”
“Oh yeah. Same guy. Crazy strong Scheggia member.”
“Was he a stand user?”
“Yeah. Figures, right?”
“Who else could give you enough trouble to make Tira do what she did?”
“Yeah.”
“So… what DID she do?”

Terunosuke met Salvatore’s eyes before looking back down at the floor.
“She ‘came out’ and ripped Cielo’s throat out.”

What? WHAT?!

“What the fuck! She did that?! You aren't exaggerating, are you?”
“No, it happened like that.” Terunosuke was a little shocked at Salvatore’s violent knee-jerk reaction. “She’s done things like that in the past, hasn't she? You tried to warn me about it before we left.”
“That's… that's true… but… not like that.”
“Not that violently?”
“No. Absolutely not. The worst she’d ever done was get a bit violent. To think she could do something as vicious as tear some poor bastard’s throat out.”
“What changed?”
“How should I know? Huh? You were there! Why didn’t you stop her?!” Salvatore snapped, his words cutting like a sharpened knife.
“Fuck you! I barely got out alive! Stopping Tira wasn’t something I could do.”

Salvatore sighed and rubbed his face.
“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that.” Terunosuke glanced back down at the floor, anxiety, embarrassment, and frustration swirled around in his eyes. “Pull this back to the very beginning. How did this all start?”

Terunosuke ran his fingers through his hair.
“Well… when we first stepped out of the airport, I found out how cold Africa could be.”

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“Christ.”

That was the only thing Salvatore could say for a while once Terunosuke finished his recount.
“Just so you know…” Terunosuke started. “I didn’t want Cielo to die at the end. He deserved to live. He SHOULD have lived… but… Tira.”
“Yeah. Tira.”

A heavy silence clouded the room. What was there to be said? They couldn't change anything. Not now.

“This time was definitely different.” Salvatore concluded.
“You said that already.”
“Not like that. I'm talking about why Tira did this.”
“Why she did this? Wasn't it the life-threatening danger?”
“That may have played a part in it, but I was referring to something else entirely.”
“Something else? Was she menstruating at the time?”
“No, you dumbass! She probably did it because of you.”
“Me? How fucking dare you! I would never make her do something so violent!”
“Terunosuke, calm down!” He laid a hand on the shoulder of the volatile young man. “You're misunderstanding me. I'm not saying you made her kill. I'm saying she killed to protect you.” Terunosuke scrunched up his face like a raisin in the sun.

“What are you trying to say? That she loves me? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Not necessarily. I'm saying that she doesn't want to see you get killed. Everything else be damned. She'll stomp faces and rip throats if it means ensuring your survival.” His face wrinkled even more.

“That's bullshit. Why would she care about me that much? We're just coworkers. We both know that, and if she's hiding her feelings from me, there's no way they're that intense.”

“You don't understand, Terunosuke. Even though you two are partners, you really don’t know her very well. She's been powerless to stop losses in the past. I'd bet good money that her coming outs are related to that past. The result was… what you saw.”

“So she did all that because of her past.”

“Partially. It could also be because she sees you as something more important than just a coworker.”

“Like a friend?”

“Better: like family.”

“Are you serious? Family?”

“Yeah. Think about it, the coming out occurred when she saw you in mortal danger. She did whatever she needed to do in a highly brutal fashion. The signs point to her trying to protect you.”

“I'm not convinced.” Terunosuke kept denying and denying that such a possibility could occur.

“What happened with previous coming outs?”

It had been a while ago, but Salvatore remember the incident vividly.

“The time I saw one was when she was in the middle of a highly stressful work cycle. She was exactly like she had been recently: overly happy and forgiving, then sour and irritable as time went on.”

“So what made her snap?”

“I think it was something that the previous department head, Pollo, did.” Terunosuke looked to the side as if he had just heard that name for the first time. “Tira had just finished an assignment and reported back to him. I heard Pollo asked her out for dinner that night, but Tira kept saying she didn't want to. Pollo kept pestering her a bit and Tira just turns around to leave right then and there. Apparently, she had started humming about that time. Pollo, according, to stories I'd heard, was never a man to quit very easily. So he grabs Tira’s shoulder. A breach in professional standards, sure, but nothing to really get furious about in the moment. Unfortunately for Pollo, a coming out occurred right that second.”

“And then she attacked him?”

Salvatore rubbed his face and wore a thousand-yard stare.

‘Attack’ does not begin to cover it. Tira turned around and…”

“And?!”

“It’s… really not… that much of a story.” Salvatore could feel himself turn blue as he recalled the visceral details. “But after she did what she did, Pollo ordered Tira to stay in Algeria as the first and only member of a new overseas Passione extension. Obviously just an excuse. She'd still be there if Scheggia hadn't eliminated most of the smuggling department.”

“I see.” Terunosuke looked up at the ceiling. “That must’ve been brutal, but not as brutal as her recent act.”

“Exactly. She was acting for herself back then, but acted for you this time.”

“You… might have a point.” Terunosuke finally half-conceded. “But that just makes things worse. What do I do now?”

That was the big question here: What now?

“I'm not going to tell you that you have to do a particular thing. It's all up to your judgement. But
whatever you choose to do, make sure you don't make things worse. She's in a sensitive position. If you charge in and try to force things to change, nothing good will happen.”

“Yeah. I know that much at least.”

“That's reassuring. Anything else you wanted to ask about?”

“No, not really. Everything else kinda went to the wayside, even the delivery was literally thrown out.”

“Don't beat yourself up over it. Missions get dropped all the time."

They both nodded, confirming that there was nothing to feel regretful about as far as work was concerned. Things happen.

“There's one more thing.” Salvatore said, pulling a paper from one of the mountains on his desk. “A meeting between the big players in Passione is scheduled for tomorrow night. Normally, only the department head and his confidants would go, but due to extenuating circumstances, everyone in the smuggling department is needed.”

“All four of us?”

“It feels really strange to hear that. An entire department that should be teaming with members is only comprised of three workers and a head. Almost feels unreal.”

“Jeez, when you say something like that, I feel like I'm completely useless.”

“That wasn't wha-”

“It's fine. I understand what you're trying to say.”

“Well that’s good. As I was saying, the meeting will be about the previous quarter. Even if it's only early March, the higher-ups want to find out where everything stands.”

“Financially or in a operational sense?”

“Both. I'll be able to cover most of that, but you guys will have to do some talking of your own.”

“Talking in front of an audience, huh? Doesn't sound too bad now that my life has been in mortal danger multiple times.”

“That's a good mindset to have. Just keep your head on your shoulders and everything will work out. And for the love of God, don't panic.”

“Anything else I should know? Should I buy a tuxedo for this?”

“That won't be necessary. Most people wear the clothes they'd already be wearing, so you won't need to go out of your way.”

“Alright… yeah, I can do that. This'll be a piece of cake.”

“Glad to see you're excited. Now get back home and get some sleep. And don't forget to tell Tira. I’ll call at noon to make sure you’ve got everything.”

“Don't worry, I'll pass on the word. I'll see you tomorrow night, boss.”

“See ya, Terunosuke.”

That was that; life moves on. Terunosuke closed the door behind him as he left.

Salvatore’s stomach growled in agony.

***

Don't forget to tell Tira.

It was obvious that he would need to inform his partner of tomorrow’s meeting, but whenever he thought about talking to her, Terunosuke could barely imagine the thought. How was he supposed to talk to her, let alone look her in the eye after everything that happened. How could they act like nothing had happened.

A dark cloud of anxiety and uneasiness swirled through his mind as he walked through the front door.
“Got a second before you go?” A man’s voice asked. Terunosuke turned back to see Michael sitting silently in the secretary's desk, his hat and black bangs still covering his eyes like always.

“Oh… h-hey.” This was just what he needed. Michael would be all too excited to jump on Terunosuke for taking another life, conveniently ignoring the surrounding circumstances.

“Ease up, I won't bite.”

“So you say…”

“I'm serious. I have no qualm with you right now. For once, you did the right thing. You tried your best to stay safe while also trying to avoid killing. While it might not have worked out in the end, you made an admirable step forward. I'm proud of you, Terunosuke.”

“W...what? Me?”

Was he dreaming? This wasn't real, was it? Michael was giving him praise. The same Michael who sucker punched him in the jaw and promised to kill him if he stepped out of line. The same Michael who practically drove him halfway to insanity. That same Michael was telling him he was proud of him for failing miserably.

There's a first time to everything.

“T-thanks…” He wished he could say more, but he hadn't exactly prepared for this situation.

“You're more than welcome. Keep up the good work. Tira on the other hand. Jesus Christ. What a psychopath. I never would have guessed she could do something so disgusting.”

“Hey. That's… not right to say.” Everything he had just said had been a thought that had already crossed Terunosuke’s mind, but when it came from the mouth of someone who wasn't even there, it felt like an affront upon dignity itself.

“It's true, you know? I'm not wrong. Her actions were vile and grotesque. There's no denying that.”

“Still… hey! How did you even hear about what happened? Were you secretly listening through the walls?” Michael shook his head.

“Nothing as straightforward as that. I just listened through the hidden audio transmitter in the room. By the way, your storytelling talents could use some work.”

“Hidden…?! You're… forget it. I don't even know where to even begin on that. I'm leaving. Tell Salvatore that we'll see him tomorrow night.”

“You don't need to rely on me, he's already listening in.”

“Wha?! Him too?!"

Michael nodded his head and pointed below the desk, motioning for Terunosuke to come see for himself. He obliged, but with a healthy amount of caution, it was Michael after all. He looked where Michael pointed under the desk. A thin sheet of paper was taped to its underside. Terunosuke pulled it off and read the writing that was written on it.

“Turn me over!” It read. Following the instructions, he flipped it over to its other side. The writing on the flipside was bold and heavy.

“Read if stupid.”

Wait what?

“Ghuhohosha!” Michael snorted in a grotesque attempt at laughter. Was that really the best he could do? He'd known ants with better senses of humor.

“I'm leaving.”

He didn't bother looking back at the cackling hyena as he walked out the door.

***

The apartment was quiet when Terunosuke finally got back. It was a little bit after midnight and all the lights were turned off, so it naturally felt empty. To him, however, it wasn’t the emptiness he
was worried about. Tira was in her room exactly as she had been when he left. She didn’t make a single sound.

Terunosuke felt his way to his room in the darkness, careful to keep his footsteps silent. It was immature and he knew he wouldn’t be able to keep the act up forever, but just for tonight, he didn’t want to see Tira. He didn’t want to talk to her, see her face, or interact with her in any way.

When tomorrow rolled around, things would be better.

He snuck into his room as quiet as a mouse.

***

Morning arrived too quickly. Even though he barely managed to get any sleep, the sun still taunted him with its presence.

His wristwatch read 6 AM, but it might as well have said “get out of bed and go talk to Tira!”

He was upset that it wouldn’t bail him out by showing the wrong time again, be he was also glad it couldn't talk.

His stomach, on the other hand, could growl at him. Having skipped dinner last night, it currently had quite the long list of grievances. Buckling to the incessant demands, he threw the sheets off his groggy body and fell out of bed.

Getting up took more effort than usual, almost as if he had a reason to feel unmotivated to move. Whatever could it be? Before he could chain himself down again, he shuffled to the door. He reached to turn the handle, but stopped before flesh touched metal.

What if Tira was just outside his door? What then? What was the plan?

He cracked it open just enough to peer through. The coast looked clear, but he wasn't completely sure. He couldn't be sure she wasn't out there. However, his stomach could be sure it didn't care. It growled at him again, greedily demanding food.

Didn't it know any better? The current situation required stealth, tact, and a keen sense of awareness. Growling stomachs did not help.

He squeezed through the slim gap, keeping an eye out for any movement. The handle stayed turned until the door was pressed against the hinge, a trick that prevented the mechanism from clicking shut. With slow, methodical movements, he turned the handle back to its resting position and assessed his situation.

No signs of movement; all clear.

One foot slid forward in front of the other. There wasn't a huge risk in making loud footsteps, especially when he was just wearing socks, but chances couldn't be taken. There was also the danger of creaky floorboards.

So many potential hazards, so little time. Screw it.

Enigma took shape and activated on his body, converting him to paper. Slinking across the floor made life exponentially easier for remaining undetected, though he had a few issues with maneuverability.
Floating around without constraints allowed him to let his guard down for a second. Tira probably wouldn't look directly at the ground if she was out of her room, so there was no danger of being seen. Enigma sure was a useful stand.

He finally reached the kitchen and ejected out of the paper, stretching his arms out wide when he exited completely. A yawn escaped his throat and he eased his eyes open to take in the sights and sounds of the morning kitchen.

A young woman with long, disheveled hair wearing a shirt that was 2 sizes too big for her stood at the door of the refrigerator as she drank directly from a carton of milk and stared at him with a wildly surprised gaze.

Under normal circumstances, Terunosuke would yell at her to at least use a cup, but the thought didn't even cross his mind now. While he had been right to watch for movement from Tira’s direction, he had never considered the possibility that she had already left her room. His lack of foresight stared him in the eyes.

Stop it. Those eyes weren't supposed to be frightened like that.

Tira tossed the carton of milk back into the fridge as her face burned bright red. She mumbled some apology and started to move past him, aiming her gaze strictly at the floor.

This was terrible, she was just as nervous about addressing the elephant in the room as he was. With the way things were, they'd stay deadlocked in the same spot forever. Salvatore had warned him about this exact scenario and his still walked right into it. That'd be terrible! He couldn't let that happen!

As she started to scurry past him, he placed his right hand on her shoulder, stopping her in her tracks.

“W-what?” She asked in a dejected tone.

“I had to say… uh… I… I had to say…” Dammit! He had no idea what he had to say!

What should he say? What COULD he say?! It didn't matter what he said! He just needed to say something! ANYTHING!

“I had to say… what's with your hair? I mean… it's all messy, but those two strands stick up regardless. Is that… uh… natural?”

What a sorry excuse for small talk! She probably thought he was patronizing her! Of all things, he chose fucking hair?! Terunosuke was a fucking idiot!

“Y-yeah… it's natural. They just kind of do that on their own. What about you? Your hair criss-crosses at the top and flips up at the bottom. Is that natural too?” Did hair actually work?! “It is natural! It used to do this even when I was a little kid. No hair gel needed.” That was the truth and it was a good response! Things weren't screwed yet.

“There's no way.” She turned around to face him, but avoided making eye contact, instead focusing on an end of his hair. “It has to be artificial. It isn't real.” She tugged on the lock of hair, testing its validity. To her surprise, it was the genuine article. “Oh… so you weren't lying…” “Of course not. I wouldn't lie about something like that. You can trust me.”

Despite his call for confidence, she still avoided eyesight. Something told him he wasn't really getting through to her. She might be speaking about hair, but she wasn’t talking about it at all. This was something completely different.
He had to try something risky. Go big or go fuck yourself, right?

He pulled both arms around her and pulled her into a warm embrace. It wasn't exactly the reaction he had expected; she actually grew a darker shade of red.

“W-what are you doing?! Is this something you do to everyone?!”

“I'm serious, Tira. I'm not going to lie to you. You can put your trust in me, I won't let you down.”

It took a massive amount of effort, but he managed to speak calmly.

“You're just saying that. You saw what I did with your own eyes. I know you think I'm a monster, right? I won't feel bad if you say it, I'm used to it by now. Just let me go already. This is embarrassing.”

She tried to push him away, but wasn't about to let her run away again. Not yet.

“I won't lie. What you did scared me, sure. I never thought you'd do something like that and when you did… I panicked. But now that I've thought about it, I realize that I've done things like that before too. Terrible actions that I regretted when the moment ended, things that I wish I could go back and undo.”

She stopped trying to wriggle out and looked up at him. “So… I don't hold it against you.”

The blood welled up in her cheeks and she quickly darted her gaze away from Terunosuke’s eyes. She then returned his embrace with one of her own. Yet another reaction that surprised him.

“Thank you… you don't know how much this means.”

“You're welcome. I'm glad I could help.”

“Oh… one other thing.”

“Hm? What else, Tira?”

“Next time you do something serious could you maybe… wear a shirt?”

Now it was his turn to turn red.

“I-I just woke up! There was no time to put one on!”

***

The bus ride over to the specified meeting location was cramped and hot, completely unexpected for public transport on a night in March. Terunosuke couldn't barely stand up straight by the time they made it. Tira, on the other hand, took her opportunity to make fun of him.

“You sure you can walk? Do I need to carry you? Hmm?”

“Screw off. It's hot.”

“Well if you wear a jacket in a furnace, expect to get a little bit warm.”

“This is a long coat and you know it!”

She really knew how to push his buttons. Now if only he could figure out the way to push hers…

At least it was better than uncomfortable silence.

They entered into the location as their game died down. As expected, it was a disguised location. The smells of warm bread and sizzling meat drifted happily in the air. Restaurants were common locations for operations to work out of. Money laundering and fraud could be swept under the rug without breaking a sweat. The police would never know unless they performed an audit or a search, but Passione practically owned the Naples police, so the risk was practically nonexistent… or so he had heard.

A waiter that looked no older than 16 greeted them as they came in.

“Sir, madam. Thank you for joining us tonight. Do you have a reservation?”

“Reservation? Yeah… that's right. It should be under ‘Carta’. ” The waiter trailed his finger down the reservation list.

“Carta… Carta… no, I'm not seeing a Carta.”
“Try Tira Misu.” Tira offered. The waiter looked down at the list again, but he shook his head just the same.

“Nope, it's not there.” Terunosuke heaved a sigh.

“Fine. Forget the reservation, we'd just like to be seated.”

“I'm sorry, sir. We're packed to capacity for the entire night. You'll need a reservation to be seated.”

Terunosuke glanced towards the tables in the restaurant. Every seat at every table in the establishment was completely empty, not a single patron in sight.

“Packed to capacity’?! What are you talking about? There's no one here!”

“I assure you that those with reservations will arrive at any moment.”

“How do you have people who make reservations if there's no one here?”

“That's simple. No one comes here because it's always full.”

“You bastard! Just let us into the meeting!”

At that moment, the door opened behind them. Of all the people in the world that could have walked through the door, it was none other than the man that couldn't walk.

“Pane!”

The purple-haired man leaned on a pair of crutches, but he was standing on his own feet. When had he graduated from the wheelchair?

“Ter- Carta! It's been too long! And Tira Misu too? Glad I could run into you guys.”

The waiter took notice of the new patron, reinstating the smile on his face.

“Ah! Perhaps you have a reservation.”

“Yeah, I've got one.” Pane nonchalantly noted. “It should be under Mr. Mary.”

Mr. Mary? What kind of alias was that?

“Mary… Mary… no. No Mary.” The waiter announced, repeating the process of frustration.

“That's a nuisance. Say, restaurateur, answer this. Is Mr. Sturgeon on the list?” Wasn’t that a type of fish?

“Hmm… no sturgeons here, this isn’t a hospital.”

“No luck, huh? What else? How about Mr. Haddock?” Where was this going?

“Haddock? Nope. None of those here, we take an aspirin as soon as we get one.”

“Hmm… I'm allergic to aspirin, so that's no good.” Wait a second! Pane definitely wasn't allergic to aspirin or any other type of painkiller for that matter. Why was he lying like this? “Sorry.” The waiter continued. “But unless you're last name is Swordfish, you probably won’t have a reservation.”

“Oh! Alright! Then I'm Mr. Swordfish.”

What?! How did that connect? The leap in logic was way too wide! He was obviously lying!

“Swordfish… there we go!”

What…? Terunosuke couldn't help but think that he was missing the reference.

“If you'll follow me, I'll take you to your seat.”

“Is it alright if my friends come along with me?” Pane motioned towards Terunosuke and Tira.

“Certainly. They were about to be seated anyway.”

The waiter began to walk and directed them to follow. Terunosuke leaned close to Pane, hiding his voice from eavesdropping.
“What in the hell was that?”
“Passcodes and stuff. Typically Passione shit. Did Salvatore not tell you about it?”
“He… might have.”

As he thought about it, Terunosuke recalled Salvatore saying something about a fish during his call at noon.

He should really pay attention more…

The waiter led them through the bustling kitchen, dodging cooking staff with unmatched grace. In comparison, Terunosuke bumped into a new person every 5 steps. After the third collision, he stopped apologizing.

In the back of the kitchen, a door stood quietly. The waiter opened it for them and ushered them through. Past its threshold, a uncharacteristically decorated hallway stretched out before them. The sudden shift between stuffy kitchen and fancy corridor was jarring to say the least.

“Right this way.” The waiter guided, walking in front of them.

At the end of the hall, another door stood tall, and again, the waiter moved to open it.

“Hold on a second.” Pane declared calmly, grabbing the waiter’s wrist before he could twist the doorknob. “How do we know this isn't a trap?”

“Sir, I assure y-”

“Just can it for a second.”

Pane glanced to Terunosuke, his grip on the waiter’s wrist still ironclad.

“Carta, search him.” Terunosuke immediately compiled, rifling through the waiter’s pockets and patting down his body for any hidden items. Fortunately, there was nothing to be found, save for a business card. He handed it to Pane without reading it. “Angel’s Nest, huh? Nice taste, I'm a regular there as well.”

“You can't be…” Tira began before biting her tongue. “Never mind.”

“That's only for the sake of the other members. Recommendations work surprisingly well.”

“Yeah, sure.” Pane poked with a smug grin. “Whatever helps you sleep at night… uh… name please?”

“Ragno.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Ragno.”

Pane released Ragno's wrist and gave him a pat on the back. To his credit, Ragno kept a professional face through the entire exchange.

“I think we can trust him.”

“If you say so…”

Terunosuke wasn't about to question the validity of trust gained from “mutual tastes”.

“Now then.” Ragno twisted the doorknob. “The time to arrive has come”

The group entered the room as one of the first few to arrive. A couple members had already arrived and were seated at the massive boardroom table, but they were few and far between.

Terunosuke took note of the meeting room he found himself in. Him, Tira, and Pane had entered through one entrance of four available openings. Each cardinal direction in the room held a door that likely lead somewhere else. They wouldn't have to worry about crowded exits if a fire broke out. The room stretch out to a wide-open space, easily reaching the size of a large classroom, or at least it felt like it. Additionally, a great deal of impressive art lined the walls, including a masterpiece from his favorite artist.
“Hey, guys, look. It's an Escher piece!” Terunosuke exclaimed with a childlike tone in his voice. He practically skipped over to the black and white masterpiece and marveled at the impossibly graceful creation. “It’s called ‘Sky and Water I!’” The way the birds in the sky melded with the fish in the sea to create an unrecognizable, yet immersive piece of art was nothing short of genius.

“An Escher piece? It doesn’t looked like its been etched at all…” Pane ignorantly voiced. “You’ve got it wrong. This is a work by famed Dutch artist M. C. Escher! Isn’t it an incredible sight?”

“M. C. Escher…” Tira wondered aloud. “Isn’t he the guy who sang ‘Hammer Time’?”

“That’s not even close!”

Dammit! Why couldn’t they appreciate Escher’s genius?! Plebeians! Philistines! Americans!

“How about we move on to another one.” Tira suggested in an attempt to get Terunosuke to calm down a little. “There’s plenty more to see.” Terunosuke sniffed back tears and nodded. The night was still young.

They moved on to the next piece that lined the walls. Next was an assortment of timepieces in semiliquid states.

“Ah. ‘Melting Clocks’. This one’s good too.”

“Oh yeah. I’ve seen this before.” Pane added. “Something about the absurdness of time?”

“That sounds right.”

“No, that’s wrong!” Tira practically shouted, vigorously pointing at the description the bottom of the frame. Pane and Terunosuke leaned in and had to squint in order to read the minuscule writing. “‘The Persistence of Memory.’” Pane looked at Terunosuke, Terunosuke looked at Pane, they both looked at Tira.

“‘Melting Clocks’ is better.” They both chanted in sync.

“W-What?! How co-”

“Moving on!”

The next few pieces were easily recognisable and needed no introduction. ‘The Creation of Adam’, ‘A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte’, ‘Guernica’; words weren’t needed to understand their significance.

This rule, however, didn’t apply to every piece.

A colossal tower scrapped the clouds out of the very sky. Hundreds, if not thousands, of workers were busy building it even higher. A king’s procession marched through the foreground, prompting the labourers to bow before his feet.

No one recognised the painting.

“‘The (Great) Tower of Babel’ by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.” Tira reported.

“Who…?” No one was able to come up with a meaningful answer.

“Look at the size of that thing!” A familiar voice marveled from behind them. Salvatore and Michael starred in awe at the painting. How exactly was Michael marveling at a painting when he had his hair over his eyes, Terunosuke couldn't say, but he was definitely doing just that.

“Hey, Sal.” Tira chirped.

“Good to see you, Doc.” Pane huffed.

“About time you showed up.” Terunosuke joked.

“Yeah, sure, I'm here now. And so is this painting. Jesus Christ. Have ever seen something so detailed?”

“Never in my life…” Michael sighed. Was he even able to see? It seemed like he could.

“You guys seem really into this kind of thing.” Tira noted.
“You could say that.” Salvatore replied halfheartedly, still absorbed in the admiration of the incredible work. Michael didn't say a word.

“Ground control to Dr. Tom!” Pane waved his hand in front of the entranced pairs’ faces. “Snap out of it.” Salvatore looked at his semi-paraplegic subordinate and frowned. “Pane… you're walking already?”

“I definitely am. What’s got you so absorbed in this painting in particular?” What was that just then?
“It's… the size.” Salvatore answered, staring at Pane’s crutches before looking back at the painting. “This baby is about 1.1 by 1.5 meters by my estimates. I don't need to explain how impressive that is. The real kicker is that this is a remake.”

“A remake? I thought they only remade Hollywood movies. I never would have guessed artists were doing it 300 years ago.” Had any of Escher's pieces ever been remade.

“You'd be surprised. Bruegel painted the first iteration, then created this in the same year. Can you imagine the dedication?!’

“Uhh… sure…” Pane agreed without a single drop of enthusiasm. “This isn't exactly the most interesting of topics, you know?”

“I understand. Fine art isn't everyone’s cup of tea.”

“I'll have to agree with him; this piece doesn't grab onto my soul.” Michael confessed.

“Your… soul?” Terunosuke wondered aloud.
“Yeah. I feels distant, I can't connect with it.”

“I see… what can you connect with then?”

“Works of brutality, institutional feelings, and visceral emotions. Towers are a complete bore, I want to see blood! I want to feel the despair!”

Where the hell was this coming from?! Didn't Michael despise death?

“So… what pieces here DO you enjoy?”

“Easy: those” He pointed towards 2 paintings. The first was ‘The Scream’. It certainly met his criteria. The second depicted a man holding another man in his arms, blood seeping from a gaping wound in the held man's temple. The man left alive had a horrendously terrified gaze.

Terunosuke could definitely feel the man's emotions.

“It's ‘Ivan the Terrible and His Son’. If you look up ‘Filicide’ you'll see that picture. Incredible, isn't it?”

“Powerful stuff.” Tira agreed. Despite his overflowing enthusiasm, Michael didn't acknowledge her.

“Oh no. Nothing that tame. I love the crazy shit. Stuff that really elicits a reaction, either from the heart or the stomach.”

“Like... psychological horror?”

“Still wrong. I love exploitation films.”

“E-Exploitation films?! Like the type of movies that show actual people dying?! I thought you hated that type of thing!”

“Hey, don't misunderstand.” He raised a hand to pump the brakes on the conversation. “I bear an absolute hatred for those who take human lives. The victims of these movies are the ones I watch for.”

“The victims?” Tira asked, receiving nothing but silence from Michael.

Terunosuke put the pieces together.
“Why do you watch torture porn for the victims?” He reiterated.
“I watch exploitation movies, not snuff films. Important distinction. And it's because it makes me appreciate what I have even more. When I see those poor bastards being flayed alive or getting impaled through the ass on a wooden spike, I think about the comfortable life I have. When I see a painting of a man who killed his own son, I feel all the regret and dread he must have felt. Really puts things in perspective, you know?”
“Wow. You're pretty philosophical.” Tira praised, smiling a little too desperately. Again, Michael ignored her.
“The way you describe it makes it sound so alluring. Now I want to check out an exploitation film someday.” Pane admitted. “Well… if I can stomach it.”
“Definitely! Even if it's low-budget, it can still pack in a boatload of feelings. Never underestimate exploitation!”

Unbelievable. Despite his negative history with Michael, Terunosuke was astonished. Who knew such a sophisticated manner of thinking was hiding behind MICHAEL’S facade?

It made him wonder what else the guy was hiding.

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Michael’s Profile
Age as of 2001:
Favorite Movies: Mondo Cane, Cannibal Holocaust
Favorite Color: Yellow
Favorite Food: Raw Black Olives
Favorite Band: ABBA
Favorite Book: 120 Days of Sodom

Michael is the adoptive son of Salvatore. He always has his eyes hidden by his bangs and a hat, creating and uneasy atmosphere whenever he's around. Though he doesn't have any official schooling in medical practices, he is adept in medical tasks thanks to Salvatore’s tutelage.

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After the conversation reached its conclusion, Salvatore and Michael wandered off to mingle with other members. Terunosuke, Tira, and Pane all decided to do roughly the same thing, albeit with a concise lack of any interaction.
“Look at that guy.” Tira said, pointing at a man with a grizzly beard and a suit that had seen better days. He had a notepad in his hand that he was furiously writing on with a pen. The only time he stopped writing was when he decided to look up, at which point he would flip to another page on the notepad and continue to scrawl out notes. “What the hell is he writing?”
“Is he an undercover police officer?” Pane questioned. “That'd be pretty cool. I always wanted to meet one.”
“That's… interesting.” Terunosuke decided. “But I don't think he's anything close to an officer. Maybe he's a stenographer. He might be hearing everything in the room and is writing it down as we speak it.”
“No way.”
“That'd be ev-”

“I'm a profile writer.” The ragged man proclaimed from across the room.
There were a few moments of interruption as everyone looked up to see what the noise was about, but the various conversations swelled back up as quickly as they had stopped.

The members of the smuggling department were at a loss. What the hell was this man's problem, what possessed him to yell out to them, and how in the hell did he hear them halfway across a noisy room?!

“What... the hell... is a profile writer.” Pane demanded while his crutches clacked against the floor as he walked towards the writer. Terunosuke and Tira followed.

“What does a profile writer sound like? Isn't it obvious what I do?” He explained without condescension or sarcasm. Thankfully, he had replied in a normal volume.

“Not really, no. I don't really know what a profile writer does.”

“Are you stupid or just dumb?” The writer looked at Pane as if he expected an answer.

“Do you write profiles...?” The writer nodded him forward. “...about the members...” Nod, nod. “...of Passione?”

“There we go. I figured there was a brain rattling between those ears. That is correct.” He straightened his white tie, flattened his white shirt, and adjusted the cufflinks on his white suit jacket.

If his hair had been white, he'd be mistaken for a ghost.

“So... you're the dumbass who can’t do his job properly. Is that what you’re telling me? Because that’s what I’m getting. I've got some grievances with my profile. Somehow you made me sound like a total gun nut. You might want to change it before someone starts to think that’s all I care about. Care to explain how you made that mistake in the first place?” Pane looked like he was ready to rip the writer’s face off and shove it down his throat.

“Easy, Pane.” Terunosuke pulled him back with Tira’s assistance. “I'll take this one. This is not the place to do something you’ll regret.” Pane complied with an unforgiving grumble.

“So you’re one of the peo-”

“Only one.” The writer corrected immediately.

“You’re... the person who writes the profiles on the members of Passione. Nice to meet you.”

“The feeling is mutually exclusive.”

What an asshole.

“Can I please see your work?”

“Sure. But make it quick, I’m an important man.”

What an asshole!

“Hey, Carta.” Pane murmured in his ear. “Why bother with this shithead?” Terunosuke grabbed the notepad from the abrasive writer’s hands and tossed it between his hands.

“When I’m done I’ll have the playing field just a bit.”

“Ohhh. Not a bad idea at all.” Pane concluded.


Terunosuke flipped through the notepad as Pane and Tira looked over his shoulder. He skimmed his way to the “C” section, but soon figured out that the notepad was not alphabetized in any language known to man, nor was it organized by date, nor was it organized in any sense whatsoever. Each page had a member’s name scrawled atop the header with a few random facts written below and a marginally useful summary of the member’s personality.

Michael seemed even stranger based on his profile, but that wasn't important.
“C… C… where in the hell is… aha! Carta!”
“Hmm?” Tira and Pane both leaned in for a better look.

----------------------------------------
Carta’s Profile

Age as of 2001: 18

Stand Name: Enigma
Favorite Time of Day: Midnight
Favorite TV Show: Beating Hearts
Country of Origin: Albania

A newly arrived Albanian immigrant, Carta has been making big waves in the short time he’s been in Italy. With three confirmed kills of Scheggia members, as well as being the secret key to the Scheggia raid’s overwhelming success, he stands as one of the most successful members the smuggling department has right now. Only time will tell how Carta will live. Will he reach God’s heaven, or fall into the Devil’s hell?

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…

…

What the fuck?!

WHAT THE FUCK?!

Everything was wrong! EVERYTHING!

Terunosuke was 17! He liked noontime most! What the fuck was Beating Hearts?! He was from Japan! Even Algeria was better than Albania! Was Albania even a real fucking country?! How in the hell was he the most successful smuggler based on a few cases of self-defense?! The only thing he got right was Enigma’s name! Was THAT wrong before?! Did someone have to tell him it was Enigma and not something batshit insane like Puzzler or Mysterioso?!

WHAT THE FUCK?!

“What is this trash?!” He practically shouted, digging his fingers into the disgusting pages.
“You watch Beating Hearts?” Pane remarked.
“I thought you were from Asia.” Tira lamented.
“That isn’t important!” He turned to the dumbass writer. “What is this?! Don’t make shitty jokes at my expense! Explain yourself right now!” His teeth were clenched and he was seeing red. The idiot could give any excuse under the sun and Terunosuke would still be pissed off.
“Is it inaccurate? How unfortunate. Second-hand information really can’t be taken as fact anymore.”
“‘S-second-hand information’? You mean you asked people about me in order to write this shit?”
“Yep. I guess it can’t beat the real deal. Oh well. It’s not like anyone reads this stuff either way.”

Incredible. The writer proved to be so unprofessional and so uninterested in his own work that he made Terunosuke’s anger evaporate into thin air. How could he be angry at someone so inept?

“This is unrelated, but what is your name?” Tira interjected.
“Marco Montagna.”

He wandered off without them, not even sparing the effort to check if they had noticed him leave or not. Whether he had intentionally left the notepad with them or not was left up to interpretation.

“Marco Montagna… I'm surprised it's such a normal name.” Pane chuckled.
“Tell me about it.” Terunosuke agreed with a snap. “I expected him to be named something totally out there, like Valentinez Alkalinella Xifax Sicidabo-”
“What the fuck are you saying?!” Tira wailed, covering her ears to escape from the alien string of syllables that escaped from Terunosuke’s mouth.
“It's… just a… uh…”
“Just find Marco Montagna in the notepad already.” Pane barked.
“R-right! Yes sir!”
“I'm not your boss.” Pane reminded as the pages flew.
“Yes.”

Finally, he reached the promised land: Marco Montagna’s profile.

---------------------------------------------

Marco Montagna’s Profile

Age as of 2001: Immortal

Stand Name: “What’s a stand?”
Favorite Color: Clear
Favorite Vegetable: Tomatoes
Favorite Music Genre: The Soundtrack of the 1989 animated feature “Baoh”
Favorwjhc Ckophhfr: Ofdstbcddtt

Marco Montagna is God.

---------------------------------------------

“Destroy it.” They all said after reading.

Terunosuke tore out the page, converted it to paper with Enigma’s power, and tore it in half in its new paper form. Tira and Genesis both stomped on the shreds even though the snake had no legs. Pane spat on what was left and summoned an Anthrax burr on his foot and rubbed his shoe against the pile, poisoning the corpse in case anyone tried to resurrect the crime against mankind.

“What the hell is happening to this organization?”
“This bullshit is exhausting.”
“Can we just start the meeting already?”

***

After a hideous amount of waiting, the remaining members finally arrived. Terunosuke considered himself lucky to have lived this far, yet unlucky to have even been in the situation to start with. At least the worst was over.

There was a small issue that they only discovered when they were seated. As Ragno ushered them to their seats, there were only three seats composing the designated smuggling section. Terunosuke, Tira, and Pane all had seats, but their leader, Salvatore, had nowhere to sit. Rather than their boss sitting next to them, Marco Montagna sat writing away on another notepad, completely ignoring
their concerns. 
“What’s the meaning of this?” Pane demanded, shaking Ragno down for all he knew.
“Salvatore was assigned to be seated near the front end of the table, not the far end. I’m not the one who put this arrangements together.”

All three members leaned around the concierge and spotted their leader halfway across the room, lounging under ‘Ivan the Terrible and His Son’. Conversely, the smuggling section was lorded over by Escher’s ‘Sky and Water’. Terunosuke hadn’t expected to dread seeing Escher’s masterpiece when he woke up that morning, but life was full of all sorts of surprises.

They all wanted to ask Salvatore to clear up the misunderstanding, but there was simply no time; the meeting had begun.
“Let’s get to business.” The man at the head of the table probably said. Terunosuke was too preoccupied with other matters to pay attention.

“How is this meeting supposed to work?” He murmured to Tira. She shrugged. He turned to Pane and repeated his question. A bead of sweat trailed down Pane’s forehead.
“Uhh…” Tira and Terunosuke leaned close. “Uhhh……” Closer. “Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh…………..” CLOSEST. “Fine, I don’t remember.” The failure of a human being whispered, pushing the two back in a sad attempt to reclaim his personal space. “I’d ask Salvatore, but…”

Three sighs.

They were on their own for better or for worse. Without leadership and experience, they’d have to figure out a plan on the spot.

Terunosuke took in his surroundings.

Salvatore was seated separately from them with no hope of giving them advice. Michael was nowhere to be found, but considering that he wasn’t actually a member of Passione, his absence wasn’t exactly unexpected. Ragno and the few other members of the waiting staff stood at attention. The other members of Passione looked stupid. Their senses of style ranged from dark suits and neat ties to tiger stripes and cow spots. What the hell was Italian fashion? The worst offender was probably Marco Montagna, though the man at the head of the table was a close second.

He was currently speaking with one of the department leaders about something or another, but Terunosuke could tell that the man was the one in charge of the entire meeting. The fact that everyone else was watching the conversation also helped clue him in.

The boss gave off an aura of a serious leader that could be depended on for guidance and leadership in times of hardship despite wearing a bright pink suit and tie with a baby blue undershirt. His hair even seemed to take note of the contrasting image. The slicked-back, black mane was nibbled at by a few stubborn gray locks near his scalp. In spite of the serious hairstyle, he was still dressed like someone from a 80s music video. From the wrinkles and the occasional liver spot on his face, he seemed to be in his 50s, yet he dressed like he ran a Miami nightclub.

How odd.

“Who is that man? Is he the boss?” He murmured to Pane.
“You don’t know Riziero Morricone?” Terunosuke shook his head. “Well I don’t blame you, he might be important, but you wouldn’t know it. They say he takes instructions directly from THE Boss. I don’t buy that for a second, but then again, how would I know?”
Wait a second… “THE Boss”? What did that mean? There was someone higher?

Terunosuke was just about to ask for clarification on everything when Pane shoved the notebook into his face.
“Read up. Who cares if it’s inaccurate”

Marco Montagna’s profile notebook was a complete sham, and it was the only source of information. Dammit.

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Riziero Morricone’s Profile

Age as of 2001: 54

Favorite Band: The Bee Gees
Favorite Color: Periwinkle
Favorite Movie: Pretty Woman
Favorite Book: The New Testament

Morricone is one of the premier underbosses in Passione. According to one of the more popular rumors, he takes orders directly from The Boss, but the validity of these stories are uncertain. Whether or not he has the ear of The Boss, he still commands the respect of his subordinates. Additionally, his sense of style is “unique”. Just don’t raise an eyebrow at him.

-------------------------------------------------

Underboss? Periwinkle? What was he supposed to think about any of that? At the end of the page, he had even less confidence in his plan… whatever plan that was.

There was always the actual conversation to listen to. Morricone was still conversing with one of the department heads, so Terunosuke took what he could get.

“...and say what you want about John Paul II, he’s done pretty well in his papacy.” The department head stated with eased confidence, as if the topic was as common as anything.
“You actually believe that, don’t you? Hopefully God has mercy on you.” Morricone replied.

The air thickened through the room. Terunosuke looked around at the shocked faces of his coworkers. What just happened? The department head’s face looked as if he’d just been stabbed through his guts, his chest, his dick, and both eyes all at once. Even Pane and Tira looked a bit astonished, hell Salvatore was practically shaking in his seat. All this from a single sentence? What just happened?

“Moving on. Salvatore.” Morricone had left his victim in the dust and shifted his focus to new prey. “How’s your son?”

What was he asking about Michael for? Was this a trap for Salvatore to fall into?

“Riziero. You know how my son is.” Salvatore spat out.

Whoa! What a bold move! Calling him by his first name AND refusing to make small talk! Salvatore was amazing!

“Oh? I see. I see. You’re a protective parent. I understand. You’re child is important to you. You’re a parent at heart. Right?”
That was all right! Salvatore was a great person! He was phenomenal!

“That’s… right.” Salvatore agreed with a moment’s hesitation.

Game. Set. Match.

“I see. I see. So that’s why you took over as interim department head for the smuggling department. The three kids that remained after Scheggia’s attack were young! They were inexperienced where it counted! It would be a disaster if they were left to someone who didn’t know them, someone who would demean them for being themselves! Right?”

Who was he calling kids?! Terunosuke and Tira might be on the young side, but Pane was no kid… was he?

“How old are you, Pane?”

“Twenty.”

Shit.

Salvatore shifted in his seat.

“That’s no-”

“The smuggling kids are just like your own kids! You’d do anything for them!”

“Hold on a sec-”

“No price is too high! If they screw up, you’ll take the heat. That’s what a good parent does, right?!?”

“What are you trying to say, Riziero?!”

“I’m saying that you’re treating this business like a nursery. You’d rather treat your subordinates like family instead of treating them like Passione members. Right?”

“…”

“Right?!”

“…”

“Salvatore! Answer the Goddamn question!”

Pane’s nails dug into his chair.

“That son of a bitch!”

Tira’s teeth sharpened into fangs.

“Motherfucking bastard!”

Terunosuke had to hold himself back from doing something he would regret.

“Who the hell do you think you are?!”

Tensions were boiling over. Everything was happening so fast, it was impossible to keep up with it all. Something was going to happen very soon.

“Am I, or am I not, ri-”

“Mr. Morricone!” Ragno shouted over the chaos. Every eye in the room snapped to him. “I think you’re being a bit too harsh on the man.”

What the hell? Ragno said that. Ragno the waiter…

The room was silent for a few seconds. Everyone’s eyes shifted from Ragno, to Morricone, to Salvatore. What was going to happen? What words were going to be said? Was Ragno about to be killed for his insolence?

“Bwahahahahaha!” Morricone roared. He stared down Ragno with a light, playful smile, and a
gaze of absolute disgust. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, kiddo.”

Ragno said nothing, but didn’t back down either.

“But hey, you might have a point. Maybe I have been a bit too harsh on ole Sal here. I’ll give him a little break while I pick on someone else. You can breathe easy again, Sal.”

No response.

Morricone pulled his fangs out of Salvatore and went back on the prowl. Terunosuke gave his best expression of disgust next to Pane and Tira. Morricone could go fuck himself.

Disaster had narrowly been avoided. Everyone took a deep breath and settled down a bit. It took the edge off, but the air was still razor sharp.

The bastard looked to the man sitting next to Salvatore and began to speak… but seemed to remember something important before the words left his mouth. His head shifted at an eerily slow pace, allowing his eyes to scan each member at the table. Slowly slowly slowly. He was like a roulette wheel. Round and round he goes, where he stops, only he knows. He stopped at Ragno for a fraction of a second and continued his prowl. His eyes didn’t even bother to stop when he reached Marco Montagna. That left only one victim in his line of sight. One defenseless lamb just waiting to be slaughtered.

The smuggling department.

“Pane. Nice to see you’re back on your feet. You’ve made quite the miraculous recovery, haven’t you?”

That was the same way he approached Salvatore. Casual, but aiming at a huge vulnerability.

“That’s exactly right. I might still be on crutches, but I’m walking sooner than predicted.”

“Wonderful! You’re an inspiration to us all! Why don’t you show everyone your progress firsthand. Rise up, young man. Unless you can’t.”

Could Pane actually stand up without any help? Terunosuke hadn’t tracked his friend’s progress enough to know.

Whether he could or not, Pane’s face twisted into an expression of rebellious defiance. He pushed himself away from the table. There was no going back and everyone knew it. Maybe Pane had backed himself into a corner that he couldn’t escape from.

No going back.

He pushed himself partway up using only his arms before planting his feet on the ground. His face strained and went a bit red. He straightened up, forcing his legs to take the brunt of his weight. Both of his legs swiveled inwards like some pathetic bird. The light coloration on his face broke into blood red. It was like he was about to burst into flames. He got higher and higher, more and more stable.

Then he broke.

His legs fell out from under him in the blink of an eye. It happened so suddenly, Terunosuke barely had time to catch him before he slammed into the table.

“Goddamnit. Goddamnit. Goddamnit.” He cursed as Terunosuke helped him back into his seat.
“How disappointing.” Morricone cried. “And you were so close too! Honestly though, I shouldn’t be surprised. You’re a constant disappointment, Pane. You had a failure rate of 40% even when you still had your legs. You got banned from Vatican City for some asinine feud with a cardinal. And you blow your earnings on prostitutes and strip clubs. You’re like a child, Pane. A child who can’t even stand.”

Pane grit his teeth and took all the insults. He didn’t lash back, he just took it.

“Moving on. Tira Misu.” Morricone glanced over at Tira before rolling his eyes. “What do I even need to say? Your reputation precedes you. No one in this room could care less about you.”

He shifted his gaze to Terunosuke without allowing any time for comforting words.

“I don’t believe we’ve met yet. You’re Carta if I’m not mistaken.”

All eyes were on him. Everyone in the room was waiting on his response. It was all on him. Salvatore had been ripped apart, Pane had been embarrassed, Tira had been slapped in the face. What hope did he have?!

He was a sitting target! He was completely screwed! Morricone was going to make him look like a fool in front of everyone!

He could feel his eye sealing itself shut; he was petrified!

“Carta? Don’t make us wait.”

Would it be better just to stay silent? Say nothing and just wait until Morricone got bored? No! That would just make him look like an idiot!

“Say something.” Pane whispered.

Terunosuke opened his mouth to reply, but not a single word came out.

Shit. He was scared stiff. He couldn’t do anything! This was the end! Everything that happened before didn’t matter! He couldn't do a singl-

A piece of paper fell into his lap.

He read the words written on it.

Don’t Panic
-Your Friend, Salvatore

He looked up at his leader. His stand, Under My Skin, had stretched it’s wires through the table and had managed to deliver the note without anyone noticing. Even during everything, he was still looking out for his subordinates.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

He COULD do this. Even if he got picked apart, it would be better than staying silent.

He stepped into the spotlight.

“Sorry. You’re right. I’m Carta.”
“Oh good. Thought you had lost your voice. Cat got your tongue?”
“Something like that. Sorry again.”
“It’s quite alright. Anybody would crack a little under so much pressure. I’m sure you’ve cracked before. Yes?”
“Of course. Everyone has.”
“Naturally.”

So far so good.

“Now if you don’t mind me asking, you don’t seem like you’re a native Italian. Unless you’re a first-generation immigrant, you’re probably from outside the country originally. Am I right?”
“...Yes. I’m not originally from Italy.”
“Right. And you’re not one of those ‘Padania isn’t Italy’ types, are you?” Padania? What the hell was that?
“No…?”
“Didn’t figure.”

Was that something important? Based on Pane’s and Tira’s reactions, he hadn’t screwed up yet.

“You do know what Padania is? Don’t you?”

Shit. What was the correct answer? What WAS Padania?! Was it contested land with another country or something? Terunosuke had no idea. If he lied about knowing what it was, he’d be ripped in half in an instant.

“Sorry, I’m afraid I’m not familiar with the concept.”
“I see. So you’re either from far, far away, or you haven’t been here long enough to know the local politics… or both.

What the…? All that from a single question?

“So where are you from?”

Don’t lie. Don’t lie. Don’t lie.

“I’m from Japan. Originally.”
“Oh wow! The Land of the Rising Sun! Mitsubishi and Panasonic! Samurai and Salarymen! And of all the countries to migrate to, you choose our little slice of heaven in the Mediterranean.”
“It was fate, I guess.”
“Fate as in finding your one true love, or the fate of being pulled towards other stand users?”

Fate of being pulled towards other stand users? Was… that something that happened?

The pace of the conversation was flying by at a blinding rate. He could keep up, but only barely.

“Uh… probab-”
“I’ll cut to the important stuff now.” Morricone said. “Salvatore will no longer be the smuggling department’s leader. One of you three will become the new head. Understand?”

What?! When was this established?! Both Pane and Tira looked just as surprised by the statement.

Terunosuke nodded slowly.

“Fantastic. We’ll be seeing if you have what it takes to lead a department.”

Terunosuke didn’t have it! Salvatore had it!
“Question and answer time.” Morricone snapped before Terunosuke could get his bearings. “When you finish a job, what is the first thing do with your newly earned money?”

Terunosuke could win! He had to give it his all, but he could do it! Don't panic and tell the truth!

“Easy. Food. I’m hungry after a job.”
“Well… let me rephrase that. What do you do with your salary?”
“I… buy things I need.”
“You don’t invest in stocks? You don’t try to sweet talk politicians? You’ve got to have quite a bit of cash if all you do is buy your essentials, right?”
“I wouldn’t really know. Anytime I need to pay, I just swipe a card. I don’t know how much I actually have in my account.”

Silence.

Pane covered his face with his hands. Tira looked at Terunosuke like he was speaking gibberish. Salvatore was floored. Morricone could barely believe his ears. Marco Montagna laughed at him.

Terunosuke had fucked up.

Badly.

“You… don’t know how much money is in your bank account?” Morricone prodded, as if he was unsure if he had heard correct. “How long have you been working for Passione?”

Lying would only make things worse.

“Almost… s-six months.”

Laughter erupted. Hard chuckles, roaring jeers, piercing cackles. All aimed at him.

“What an idiot!”
“Are you braindead?”
“Who let this kid join?”

They were all laughing at him. He was an ant. Pond scrum. Mud on the underside of a boot.

“Carta. Look up at this painting here.” Morricone pointed directly over his head at the painting that hung proudly on the wall. The tower of Babel, the one that Salvatore and Michael had been raving about.
“What about it?”
“Look at the king in the bottom-left corner of the picture and imagine that I’m that king. Who would that make you?”

Three workers bowed before the king in the foreground of the painting. They were nothing before him and his precession. Three. Tira, Pane, and Terunosuke. Morricone was the king.

Dammit.

“I’d be one of the workers bowing before the king.”

Morricone shook his head.

“Wrong.” He chastised. “Look to the other side.” He pointed to the bottom-right corner of the painting.
It was so small and faint that he had to squint, but Terunosuke managed to make out three miniscule figures standing on a cobbled-together barge that floated on the sea next to the tower. They were barely worth the strain it took to notice them.

“You are not even within the same domain as us. As far as I am concerned, you three are no more than tiny flecks of paint that do nothing but take up space. You cost us resources, time, and energy for what? A few grudges? A few dead bodies that have to be swept under the rug? Understand this. The longer you act like children, the more problems you’ll create for the adults!”

This… was wrong. He was chastising them as if they were preschoolers. They weren’t children, dammit! Why couldn’t he understand?! Terunosuke could feel the frustration and anger welling up inside of his stomach. He wanted to burst into tears and yell at the top of his lungs! He wanted to punch Morricone right in his Goddamn face… but if he did… all the accusations would be confirmed.

Morricone was right, wasn’t he? Just the simple fact that Terunosuke wanted to throw a tantrum was proof that he was still just a child. Nothing had changed since he got here. He was just a pat-

“Riziero Morricone! Stop it this second!”

Ragno’s voice.

Terunosuke turned back to see the lowly waiter march up to the tyrannical ruler alone.

“It doesn’t matter if their underperforming! They still deserve to be treated like human beings!”

What the hell was he doing?! He had no dog in this fight whatsoever. What was he doing sticking his neck right under a guillotine?! What did he have to gain?!

“I stood idly by as you tear down people one after another all to inflate your own ego. What you’re doing isn’t exercising demons or shedding light on concealed issues. No. What you’re doing is nothing but childish bullying. You call the smuggling department a bunch of children, but you act like you’re five years old yourself!”

Was he doing this to embarrass him? To make him look bad? Or… was he just doing it because he was a good person? Jesus Christ. It was a classic match of David and Goliath.

Everyone stared intently at the unfolding scene with widening eyes. This was a joke, right? Why would Ragno, a waiter who barely worked for Passione to begin with, stand up to Morricone? There were a few chuckles and the dumb bastard, a few scoffs at his ignorance, and even a couple genuine smiles. All of those smiles came from the smuggling department.

“What the fuck is your problem?! Huh?!” Ragno demanded, his rage rising to a grand finale.

He pushed his luck to the breaking point.

Until it broke.

A glint of light flashed past everyone’s eyes.

Morricone pressed a revolver into Ragno’s eye.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself!”

BAM!!! BAM!!!
Ragno’s skull popped like a balloon filled with jelly. Grey matter, blood, bones chunks, hair, flaps of skin. They all covered the walls better than any piece of art ever could. Ragno crumbled to the ground in a convulsing wreck. He shook and seized as the last bits of his life kicked out of his body.

He... was dead! Morricone had just killed him! It was impossible but it had just happened! Terunosuke was just as silent as everyone else in the room. The only sound came from his ringing ears.

“You crazy bastard!” Salvatore exclaimed. He jumped out of his seat and rushed over to Ragno’s lifeless shambles. His arms cradled his body, just like a parent would care for their child. The rushing blood soaked Salvatore’s arms like a disgustingly-dark coat of red blood.

“What was that for…? WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT FOR?!”

Tears welled up and spilled over his cheeks. He looked as if he was ready to kill.

Morricone was the only calm person in the room. He wiped the blood splatter from his face with his bright pink tie before answering.

“A proof of concept. To show the children that even though you might not know it, your actions could lead to someone’s death.”

WHAT THE HELL?! HOW DARE HE!

“Are you…? You don’t deserve a single bit of respect.” Salvatore lowered Ragno’s head to the floor. Once he was safely resting, Salvatore bolted through the nearest door out of the room.

“All the better.” Morricone stated without emotion. “Children.” He looked over at the smuggling department. “Make yourselves scarce. The adults will be talking about your future.”

***

It was raining pretty hard that night. Thankfully though, they were able to stand dry. The exit that Salvatore had taken had taken them to some sort of loading bay behind the building.

Away from the peering eyes of the other members, Carta could be Terunosuke and Pane could be Sergio. It was safe to relax.

Terunosuke and Sergio leaned against a handrail and smoked. Tira didn’t raise a fuss about it. Their smoke trails floated out into the night air, only to be crushed down by the heavy rain as soon as they flew out too far.

Sergio slammed one of his crutches into the metal handrail.

“GODDAMNIT!”

He wrapped his hand around the metal to keep himself balanced, but he kept trying to assault it just for being there.

“What did we do to deserve this?” He asked to no one. “We’re no worse than any other underperforming group. Why did we have to be singled out? It’s not like we asked for most of our members to be slaughtered in cold blood. It isn’t our fault.”

“Calm down, Sergio.” Terunosuke tried to say, but the words caught in his throat.

The three of them were just making excuses at this point. Morricone had gotten a lot of things
right. Things that Terunosuke never wanted to think about, let alone hear out loud from someone else.

Flecks of paint… just an insignificant pawn in a massive game. Wasn’t that how it was back then in Morioh? He had been enticed by exciting new powers and unbelievable opportunities… but in the end… he didn’t make a single difference in the grand scheme of things. Not that he could even see the big picture at all. He was sent to hell without a second thought then released by accident. His involvement wasn’t even part of any plan. He was just some goon. His executioner hadn’t even know his name.

The arrow was the reason he was here. The arrow that gave birth to Enigma, that threw him into the world of stand users. That was the real villain. Whoever it was that found or made that arrow deserved nothing but the worst death imaginable. Terunosuke wanted the arrow’s maker to burn in hell for all eternity for what he had done.

“Did you hear that?” Tira asked, glancing to the side towards an alleyway.
“Hear what? All I can hear is the rain.” Sergio dismissed.
“Listen. It sounds like someone knocking on a door.”

They all went more silent than they were before and listened closely. After a few seconds, a blunt, rough pounding came from inside the alleyway. With it came a scream of thrashing profanities and bitter curses. There was no question who was causing it, but no one wanted to be the one who pointed it out. They all just stood there in uncomfortable silence as the wrathful strikes continued on until they suddenly stopped.

Salvatore walked out of the alley cradling his hands in his chest. His knuckles looked like bloody meat that had been shredded into a million pieces. Had he been punching a brick wall with his bare hands? With every step he took, he got more and more drenched by the pounding rain. Mud and dirt stained the bottoms of his pants. No matter how much rain poured over him, the stains refused to let go.

When he looked up to see the three of them, his face sharpened in surprise, but only for a moment before forcing into a smile.
“Oh! Hey guys. Didn’t know you were out here.” His tears had been washed away with the rain, but his bloodshot eyes still made it crystal clear that he had been weeping.
“Salvatore…” Terunosuke started. “It’s my fault for causing that. If I had been mor-”
“Hey! Hey! It’s not your fault. Besides I wasn’t angry because of the stuff that happened in there. I just had an outburst because I had a song stuck in my head. Do you know “No Tengo Dinero” by Righeira? It’s a real earworm.”

A heavy silence followed Salvatore’s obvious lie. Terunosuke could tell that everyone wanted to talk about what had just happened… wanted… but they just couldn’t bring themselves to touch such a raw subject so soon after the fact.

Grimaces, clenched teeth, and pounding rain.

Dammit.

***

When they walked back inside after about fifteen minutes worth of waiting, the room had returned to the way it was before the meeting started. No blood, no gore, and especially no corpse. But it wasn’t all gone, not completely. If he looked closely, he could make out the faint stains of where Ragno’s blood had been spilled.
Morricone still sat at the head of the table, the tie he had used to wipe away the blood that had splattered on his face was completely clear of any markings or smudges. Just how in the hell had they cleaned everything up so fast?

Marco Montagna quietly waved to them as they took their seats, a motion that might as well have equated to a middle finger given the circumstances. They took their seats next to the idiot without acknowledging his presence anymore than they had to. Salvatore also took his seat on the other side of the table. Even though he was still soaking wet, no one in the room made a comment.

“Well? Did you have fun during the break?” Morricone taunted. Every word jabbed into Terunosuke’s ribs like a sharp spear. No one answered. “Understood. How about we get focused again? Pane.”

Pane glanced up, not even trying to hide the scowl on his face.

“Yeah?”
“You’re the new department leader for the smuggling department. Congratulations.”

What?

“Huh?” Pane balked. “A-are you serious? What happened to me being a failure?”
“You’re simply the most qualified. When it came down to a choice between you, Mr. I-don’t-know-how-much-money-is-in-my-bank-account, and everyone’s favorite psychopath, you were seen as the lesser of the three evils. And since no one wanted to take the position, you’re the final choice. Consider yourself lucky.”

What the hell…? Pane was Terunosuke’s new boss. Due to his ignorance and Tira’s blackened reputation, Pane had somehow managed to become the new department leader despite his glaring flaws.

That was wrong.

It was all wrong.

He was Terunosuke’s partner, his friend… well… he used to be his partner, but he was still his friend! Would that change too?

“Thank you… everyone for your decision! I promise to do my best as department leader!”

What was even happening anymore?

“So Mr. Department Leader? What is your first order of business?” Marco Montagna questioned, providing his first words since the meeting started.

Pane glanced at him and nodded, a faint grin forming on his mouth.
“I’m glad you asked. I noticed that since La Squadra di Esecuzione broke off from Passione, we’ve had no group dedicated to handling assassinations.”

La Squadra did that? Terunosuke hadn’t been informed. Damn. He really was ignorant of his surroundings.

“This is why I’m proposing a solution.” Pane passionately continued. “If it’s alright with everyone, I’d like the smuggling department to take on the duties of assassination for a short time. At least until a dedicated team is reestablished.”
Take on the duties? THE SMUGGLING DEPARTMENT?! The three of them?! What the hell was he thinking?!

“Pane! We can’t do this!” He desperately pleaded.
“Sure we can. You’ve handled fights like an absolute monster. You can’t be stopped. I believe in you, Carta.”

What the hell was he doing?!

“It is true that we’ve had a gap lately. If you can really deliver like you say you can, then I’ll let you show your talents.” Morricone approved.

Terunosuke shot his eyes over at Salvatore. What did he think about all of this?

The man that he looked up to looked defeated. His shoulders were slumped, his gaze was unfocused. He was completely out of it.

The remaining department leaders voiced their opinions on the matter one after another. At the end of the swift deliberation, the motion easily passed.

For a short while, Terunosuke would be both a smuggler and an assassin.

What the hell…

It didn’t matter that both him and Tira called the entire idea into question, things went ahead without their agreement. They were dragged forward by their ankles.

“Thank you! We’ll be sure to surpass your expectations in every way possible!” Pane raised his arm over his head and pointed a finger towards the sky. “I’ll tell you this right now. Our first targets will be…” He paused for dramatic effect, a decision that no one enjoyed.

“The top members of Scheggia!”

Chapter End Notes

This was a very fun chapter to write. I wanted to create a strong group dynamic between the smugglers, but I also wanted each character to have their own struggles. I think I’ve done pretty well in that regard.

I also feel that I went all out with the references in this chapter. I already do that for every other chapter anyway, but this time probably requires an encyclopedia in order to decipher some of these things (Art is interesting, give me a break.) That sort of leads me to another point. Since the story takes place in Italy, I felt I should throw in some Italian-based references, which will definitely fly over some heads.

But I digress.

This also marks something of a turning point in the story. What kind of turning point you ask?

You’ll just have to read and find out.
Sergio didn't know what to expect when he walked into the apartment complex that he used to live in. Terunosuke and Tira were now his subordinates and he was a department leader. They were the smuggling department. He was their leader. No matter how many times he rolled over the thought, it still felt foreign, like some joke he was the butt of.

He stepped into the elevator and tapped the button for the floor he used to live on. Elevators sucked. Something so cramped and mechanical should've never been invented. He would take the stairs if he could, but the crutches supporting his weight argued against the idea.

What the hell did they know?

A ding rang and he exited the sardine can as quickly as he could. The short trip down the once-familiar hallway felt excruciatingly drawn out with his new walking style. He reached the door and hesitated before he did anything he might regret. In front of him was responsibility, leadership, subordinates, and duties. A world he had only seen from the sidelines was something he had gleefully jumped into without thinking about the consequences.

He could reject it; there was still time. If he took a step back, turned around, and just left, he could avoid that world entirely. There would be no guarantee of a future, but at least he wouldn't have to be a leader. If only he still had his personal chauffeur, he could escape in no time flat.

What in the fuck was he waiting for?!

He was completely overthinking this! Leadership was an opportunity, not an obstacle! He didn't have cold feet, he had sore feet! Hell, he could hardly even feel his feet at all!

Sergio reached out his hand and knocked on the door, crossing the point of no return.

There was no immediate response. He stood in a state of anxious limbo, unsure if he should knock again, or if he should make a break for it while he still had the chance.

The door opened before he could choose either.

“Pane.” Terunosuke greeted flatly. “How's it going?”

“Just call me Sergio.” He insisted as he walked in and flopped onto the couch… or at least he would have if it was still in the same place he had left it. Instead, it was all the way across the room.

“Hello, Pane.” Tira chirped without looking up from her magazine, her reclining body taking up the entirety of the soft couch.

“Just Sergio is fine.” He reiterated. He stood over her in silence, waiting for her to move her legs, but she failed to take notice. “Move, please.”

“Do you live here?” She asked, still not looking up from her magazine.

“Well... I used to.”

“Do you live here?” She repeated.

“No...”

“Then you can sit somewhere else.”

He begrudgingly walked over and sat at a chair next to the couch.
“Time for business?” Terunosuke guessed, slumping onto another chair.
“Exactly.” Sergio confirmed as he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it on the coffee table.

A list of targets lined the even rows of the page. 3 men were listed, all of them held various connections to Scheggia.

Terunosuke immediately raised an eyebrow at the list.
“Only 3? I mean, I’ve heard that Scheggia is a lot smaller than they seem, but there can't be only 3 leaders, can there?”
“No, you're correct. I'm sure they have plenty more, but since there are only 3 of us, our options are kinda limited. I tried asking Salvatore for help, but he just said he wasn't a member of the smuggling department anymore.”
“Can't say I blame him. He's a doctor after all. Hippocratic oath, and whatnot?”
“Anyway.” Tira chimed in. “What's the idea with the targets.”
“Oh yeah.” Sergio tapped his finger on the page. “None of these guys are Padre, the leader of Scheggia. However, they're still very important.”
“We know that already.” She complained. “Are we going to just shoot them on the street, light them on fire, throw them off a building or what? How are we going to go about this, Pane?”

A tiny bead of sweat trickled down Sergio’s neck.
“It'll be different for everyone. We'll all act independently and strike at the same time. The targets won't be anywhere near each other, so we'll be alone. That means no backup.” He pointed to some of the scribbled information about one of the targets. “Apparently, this guy has been showing up at a certain metro station recently. If we know where he'll be and what he'll be doing, and at what time, we'll be able to craft a method of attack specifically for him. The same goes for the other two.”
“Wait a second.” Terunosuke interjected. “You're telling me we'll have to figure out how to do this on our own? You haven't figured this all out already?”
“Well… no… bu-”
“Oh God! You're killing me harder than the targets!”

Sergio gripped his chair’s armrest so hard he almost broke it.

***

“Welcome to HQ!” Sergio announced with grand jubilation that completely clashed with the underwhelming setting. His arms presented a single-roomed apartment like it was some sort of luxurious penthouse. The floorboards creaked, the AC didn't work properly, and there was an unplaceable odor that tingled the nostrils.

Even if it was free, Terunosuke couldn’t help but think that they were being overcharged.

“So what are we supposed to do here?” Tira asked as she looked over the completely barren living room.
“Observe, children. The prey that we shall soon hunt stands before you.”

Sergio pointed out a window towards a building across the street from the apartment. An office building and a boring one at that. What was there to be seen?
“Is this a lesson about property value? Because I don't really think I'll underst-”
“There lies one of our targets. He's a sitting duck and one of us shall be the butcher who plucks him clean.”
“What in the hell are these metaphors?” Tira wondered, taking the words out of Terunosuke’s mouth.
“Directly parallel from our location is the target’s office.” Sergio continued. “From where we are now we can easily formulate a plan of attack. This is plan #1.”

“An office attack huh…” Terunosuke had to admit that the prospect of turning the 5th floor of an office building into a battlefield sounded at least a little exciting.

“Due to all the paperwork that an office naturally generates, I know that you'll be a perfect fit for this location. It's all yours, Terunosuke.”

His? He turned around to look Sergio in the eye. His friend was confident and unwavering in his decision, and Tira just nodded without needing to say anything.

The location was his.

“Alright. Leave this guy to me.”

***

“Got any… 3s? Tira asked.
“Go fish. Got any 7s?” Terunosuke shot back.
“I hate you.” With another pair under his control, he was about to claim complete victory.

Sergio glanced back at them from the driver’s seat.

“Hold on.” He stated flatly

He swerved suddenly without warning anyone in the car.

“The next location awaits!” He roared with an excited exclamation.

“What the hell! Warn me next time!” Terunosuke yelled from the backseat, his game of Go Fish with Tira having been ruined right as he was about to win.

“Opportunity calls, Terunosuke! We have to catch Kairos by the hair or he'll be gone forever!”

“Who the hell is Kairos?”

“Our prey, or rather, Tira’s quarry. My informant gave me a hot tip on this guy.”

“Oh yeah?” Tira questioned as she pulled herself up from the car’s messy floor. “What's the info? And when the hell did you get an informant?”

“In due time, in due time.”

Terunosuke attempted to rebuild his victory, but the chaos Sergio had wrought proved too great to overcome. Dammit! He was totally about to win!

Sergio swerved without warning again throwing Tira’s skull into the rightful victor of Go Fish.

“Put your seatbelt on already!”

“I hate seatbelts, they dig into my shoulders and give me a rash!” Genesis nodded in agreement.

“Don't even bother, children, we have arrived!”

Sergio slammed on the brakes. While Terunosuke’s momentum was stopped by his seatbelt, Tira practically flew up to the passenger’s seat. Of course that wouldn't have happened if she had listened to him.

“Did you catch him?” Tira picked herself up again and hopped out of the convertible. Terunosuke and Sergio quickly followed suit.

“I wasn’t chasing him, I simply wanted to make a point.” Sergio pointed towards the building and the target’s car they had suddenly stopped in front of. “Observe!”

The garish letters on the building offered a familiar location that was near and dear to Terunosuke’s (and probably Sergio’s) heart.
The Angel’s Nest gentleman's club.

Tira grit her teeth together as her eyes erupted in unholy flames
“What the fuck is this! I refuse to humiliate myself again! If you think I'll wear some micro bikini just to blend in with my surroundi-”
“Easy easy easy!” Sergio raised his hands in hopes of calming the raging serpent. “You just need to take down your target without endangering yourself. This is simply valuable information on your target.”

Tira exhaled.

“Fine. But I don't see why we came all the way out here when you could've just said something.”

She made a good point.

“That's easy.” Sergio explained with a widening smile. “I haven't been here in months and I've been dying to return!” He raced forward while a river of drool practically oozed from his mouth.
“Wait! Won’t the target will see you! Terunosuke, do someth-”

She blinked twice when she realized he was joining in on the lunatic’s plan.

“Sorry.” He said with a forced frown. “An order is an order.”
“But he didn't even order anything you son of a-”

***

“I can't believe you forgot your damn wallet.” Sergio bemoaned.
“You forgot yours too.” Terunosuke shot back.
“I thought you of all people would have your credit card at the ready. You have so much money you don't even bother counting it all, riiiiight?”
“That's a low blow and you know it!”
“Yeah? Well that's the only low blow either one of us is getting right now, so you could at least be grateful.”

“Shut the hell up!” Tira roared at the pair of squabbling jackasses. “We're on an important mission, aren't we? Let's act like it!”
“That's cruel, Tira.” Terunosuke choked out through stifled tears.
“Yes, you don't understand what we're going through right now.” Sergio agreed.

In a moment, the dumbasses embraced with tear-filled eyes and heavy hearts.
“I'm sorry, bro! I was wrong to insult you!”
“No! I was the wrong one! You can't blame yourself!”

Tira rubbed her temples, but let a soft chuckle escape her lips.
“You could at least make the joke a bit more discrete. I can hardly take you seriously right now.”
A few more chuckles flew out until she was laughing uproariously. “Jeez, you really had me going there for a second.”
“You figured it out, huh?” Terunosuke’s serious expression slipped away and he joined in on the laughing party.

Sergio looked around and blinked a few times.
“That was a joke?”

***
Crowds of people from all over Naples walked through the metro station. Fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents and grandchildren all walked hand in hand through the open hub of public transportation.

In the middle of the day, people were coming and going, rushing to meet deadlines, taking in the sights of the city, and generally just trying to find the shortest distance from A to B.

Sergio, Terunosuke, and Tira did not belong to any of the above groups. Instead, they observed the thousands of people that walked past with sharp gazes, their eyes acting as fine-tooth combs that analyzed every face that stepped into their field of vision. They sorted through the sea of information for just one man: Sergio’s target.

The odds, as Sergio himself had explained, were such that the man was bound to make an appearance sooner or later. If there were around a million people in the lesser Naples area and the metro station that they were in served thousands, if not tens of thousands of people each day, then it was just a matter of time before the target showed up.

With that information in mind, the trio watched the passing crowds pass by like a wave of souls flowing by in an endless cavalcade of commuting.

At least that was the idea.

In reality, Sergio was the only one who kept his eyes on the crowds. Meanwhile, Terunosuke and Tira read a fashion magazine and shared a bag of pastries together.

“That dress really brings out the highlights in her hair, don't you think?” Terunosuke postulated between bites of doughy Bombolone.

“You don't really know much about fashion, do you…?” Tira guessed.

Sergio cleared his throat at them.

“I could really use some assistance here.”

“He's your target. You're the one who should find him.” Tira took a bite out of a croissant without bothering to look up while she spoke.

“I agree with Tira, dude. Plus, you never showed us a photograph or anything of him, so we don't even know what he looks like, and even if we did see him, we wouldn't recognize him.”

Sergio sighed and retrained his focus back on the crowd. How in the hell did Salvatore ever manage subordinates who gave zero respect whatsoever?! They just thought of him as a friend that they could make jokes at!

“Can I at least have a bite o-”

“Get your own.”

Dammit!

Sergio fixed his eyes firmly on the crowd and refused to think about the delectable treats his subordinates were eating. They were so close; right next to him! But his position as department leader forced him to uphold a strict standard of professionalism. Even if others slacked off, he would rise above the urge to join in!

He fixated on the people to keep his mind occupied. A beautiful woman with a very fine body walked past, her heels clicking as she strutted. Sergio made sure to keep extra focused on her in case she had connections to the target. When she walked out of sight, another woman with even better proportions flashed onto the scene. Again, he was required to watch her until she faded from
view in case she revealed some sort of secret. And after that, an even more beautiful, younger, and all-around better woman came through the station as if she had just arrived from heaven itself. Hell, Sergio felt like he was in heaven! Everywhere he turned, gorgeous beauties surrounded him. If he wasn't careful, he might end up breaking a few hearts. He closed his eyes to avoid boiling over from excitement. Jesus Christ! How in the hell was he supposed to keep it together? He could practically look in any random direction and be blessed with the sight of a goddess.

Doing exactly that, his eyes shot open with feral anticipation and blood-rushing excitement. Unfortunately, they ended up on some guy, but it wasn't just any guy. The guy had a beard so untamed and crazy it belonged in some frozen tundra. Every single article of clothing on him was white as snow. His tie was white, his shirt was white, his pants were white, even his damn handkerchief was white.

He looked like a cockroach attending a trashy wedding.

Sergio knew exactly who the man was. The profile writer who barely knew how to work a pencil: Marco Montagna.

Without warning, the cockroach stared back at Sergio with a look in his eyes that meant business, but was still attached to a complete failure of a human being, making the action look not so much intimidating as it was nauseating. Marco Montagna kept the glare going for a second, then looked away and dropped the face altogether. He then walked away like any other person would.

Maybe it was the sudden mature of the encounter, but Sergio couldn't shake the feeling that he had just been insulted.

***

Were they good assassins? Were they even good smugglers?

No, of course not. But by default, they were the best of both as far as Passione was concerned. However, Terunosuke could easily tell that they were all making it up as they went along. There was no use even trying to deny the fact.

He bent the blinds down to spy on his target’s office. The fifth floor office had a desk just like any other office. Terunosuke could spot a tennis racket hanging on the wall and a couple trophies next to it. Someone was quite the athlete. Mr… uh…

Terunosuke glanced down at the note Sergio had left for him. He was currently spying on Mr… Clemenza.

Whoop de freakin’ do.

It was just him in the damp, empty apartment. Tira and Sergio were busy scoping out their own targets, leaving him alllllll alone.

Dammit! He was gonna go insane if he had to wait for Mr. Clemenza to do something important! Forget him! Terunosuke had to figure something out for himself!

He stood up and started to pace around. Immediately he had to stop due to all the blood in his legs rushing to his brain. Sitting down for too long really took its toll. Once he had recovered, he thought about what was wrong with things.
Other than the obvious… well… everything… there was the glaring problem of boredom. He couldn’t keep eyes on Mr. Clemenza on all hours of the day. It just wasn't possible!

A walk would clear his head.

His stomach was feeling empty so he decided to check out a nearby restaurant for options. Unfortunately, his wallet was equally empty. Ironic, given his financial situation.

Speaking of his financial situation, how much money did he actually have? Probably a lot since he had barely touched it.

He traveled to an ATM to find the answer.

€50,000

...

How much actually was that? 50,000 euros was equal to how much again.

“Ma’am?” He called out to an older woman who was walking by at that moment. “What’s the exchange rate for euros?”

“Hmmm… I think it’s about $1.15 per euro.”

“I actually meant euros to yen.”

“To yen? Isn’t that about… ¥140 per euro? Hope that helps.”

50,000 multiplied by 140 came out to how much?

...

...

!!!

Seven million yen?! What the fuck?! That was more money than he had ever seen in his entire life! He could buy anything he wanted with that money! Holy shit!

He nearly popped a vein right then and there.

All that was gained from just a few measly months of work?! Imagine a couple years! He could put in his time, become a billionaire, then retire before he turned 25! It was possible, wasn't it?

Actually… probably not. If he did that, the gang might not accept his retirement and just have him killed by someone who was an actual assassin instead of some cheap amateur who got excited over some money.

There went the buzz.

Deciding that he'd aimlessly screwed off for too long, he resolved to walk back to the apartment and actually do something useful with his time. His attention couldn’t latch onto anything for more than a few seconds without getting bored, though he’d figure a way to force himself to work.

Unfortunately, he passed by a phone station on his way back. When was the last time he had given the Rosso family a call?

Without waiting to figure out the exact date, he charged in and dialed the familiar number. A voice greeted him within a few rings.
“Hello? Rosso residence, Maddalena speaking.”
“Congrats. Your voice is actually starting to sound like an actual girl’s voice. I almost believed were one for a second there.”
“Hey screw y- wait a second! Terunosuke!”
“The one and only.”
“How are you? How have you been? How’s work? Are you eating well? You getting enough sleep? When you wake up in the morning, is your blood circulating properly? Does it hurt to use the bathroom? Does it usually take longer than 4 hours for your ere-”
“Whoa! Slow down! Are you supposed to be my doctor?”
“Ahh sorry. It's just been awhile since you called.”
“Well let's make up for lost time.”

***

“Why do I even trust him?” Tira demanded from the empty room that had a concise lack of Terunosuke in it.
“Relax. He's probably just getting something to eat.” Sergio offered.
“If that were true, he'd be back by now.”
“Oh yeah… maybe he got attacked again?”
“That feels just a bit doubtful. I don't think Scheggia would attack us right before we attack them.”
“I'm not sure it works like that.”
“Whatever. Even if he was attacked, there'd probably be a commotion and stuff. Things are silent, so he's probably goofing off.”
“You're definitely wrong. I'm positive he's staking out his quarry as we speak.”
“But then why di-”
“Quit worrying. That's an order. End of discussion.”
“Tch. Fine.”

Sergio wished he’d get back soon. For everyone’s sake.

***

“And then she started walking on her hands! Can you believe it?! My little Maddalena walking on her hands just like her old man!”
“Uh… Oscar?”
“Yes?”
“You already told me that story… about 3 times now.”
“Oh have I? My bad. Well then let me tell you a joke.”
“Will it be the one that ends with ‘Must've been one hell of a bird!’ or a new one?”
“I've told you that joke multiple times too?”
“Yes, but, hey, I don't mind. Go ahead and tell it again.”
“Of course. I was going to do just that anyway.”

As Oscar retold the same joke for the 5th time, Terunosuke let his mind wander off. Pane se-… er… Sergio seemed to be a bit more forceful than he had been when he first meet him. When was it he had first met him? November? Jesus. That was only… 4… 5 months? It felt a hell of a lot longer than that. Granted he was his first real, true friend that he would risk his life to help, but the point still stood. Hell, he hardly remembered what he was like when they first met. He definitely talked about guns and women a whole heck of a lot more, but somewhere along the way, those things stopped mattering as much. Maybe it was when he got hurt or sometime earlier? Maybe after the Scheggia raid? Maybe after the bloody battle with Sanguinoso? No, that wasn't right. He was telling jokes right up until the moment that Sanguinoso attacked. Of course, he…
Wait a second…

Terunosuke thought back to that early morning. He was talking to Sergio (then Pane) at a phone station like the one he currently found himself in. He told Terunosuke a story for… some reason. Then right as it got good, Sanguinoso interrupted and totally ruined the mood. Once that happened, tensions boiled over until he started a fight with his blood ability, and the rest was history.

So… if Sergio had never told that story… Sanguinoso never would have died… and Noce wouldn't have come for revenge.. and Cielo wouldn't have either…

Shit… Sergio you idiot… everything was because of that little joke…

“Terunosuke? You still there?” Oscar’s voice asked through the receiver.
“Yeah! Y-yes. I'm here.”
“You didn't laugh at the punchline.”
“I've heard the joke before.”
“Oh yeah.”
“Yeah.”
“Yeah.”
“Hey, I have to get back to work now, but I'll talk to you again soon.”
“So soon, but we just started talking.”
“Oscar, it's been 2 hours.”
“Your point?”
“Goodbye.”
“Alright then, goodbye.”

Terunosuke hung up.

He was going to keep his revelation to himself.

***

The door opened and Terunosuke walked through. Tira and Sergio both looked at the young man who had just walked in.

He was eating a doughnut.

“Where have you be-”
“Haven't you had enough sweets recently?” Sergio jabbed.
“There's no such thing.” Terunosuke answered as he jammed the rest into his mouth all at once.

“Terunosuke. Where have you been for the past hour?” Tira asked with concern and disdain in her voice.
“WOOUUHHHHNNN.”
“Don't try to talk with your mouth full.”
“You asked.” Sergio pointed out, a point Terunosuke agreed with, or at least seemed to given his inability to speak. He chewed up the rest in a few bites then swallowed roughly before answering again.
“Woawa stuu…!”

He suddenly turned away from his leader and partner while making awkward grunts and weak coughs.

“Uhh… are you choking right now?” He shook his head initially, but his resistance broke down in a few seconds and he nodded a bit desperately as his face started to get red. Sergio gave him a few
solid slaps on the back until he coughed up the wad of wet, gooey dough… right onto his sleeve. After catching his breath he made a face that said “Ugh…” when he noticed it. “That's just wonderful, isn't it?” He had Enigma convert the doughnut hairball into paper, but the wet stain still remained on his long coat. Also, with nowhere to throw away the new paper, he just awkwardly held onto it.

Wonderful indeed.

“Phew. So what were you saying again, Tira? I got distracted there.”

“You alright?”

“I am now. It was like I swallowed a rag or something. No idea how magicians pull it off. I'm fine now though.”

“Well that's good…?” After such a ludicrous tangent, she didn't seem to have the energy to be angry anymore. “So what we're you up to before you picked up that choking hazard?”

“Oh you know… staking out the target… reconnaissance… espionage… scouting… thinking up plans… uhh… and getting lunch.”

“Anything else?”

“Welllll… I might have made a phone call somewhere in the middle.”

“I see. So what your saying is that you didn't accomplish a single thing of value all day. Do I have that right?”

The back of Terunosuke’s neck and forehead started to imitate a pair of waterfalls. The thin veins in his eyes pumped into overdrive, reddening the whites of his eyes. His mouth went dry as a desert as the moisture was diverted to everywhere else on his body up to and including: his armpits, his palms, the entire surface area of his back, his feet, his scalp, the undersides of his fingernails, his aforementioned forehead and the back of his aforementioned neck, and his cheeks among other locations. His hands began to shake as if it were a new dance trend that all the cools kids were doing. The acid in his stomach throttled into overdrive, chewing through the few bits of doughnut that he hadn’t managed to choke on. He parted his lips to defend his honor, his very existence, from the gross afront upon his character.

“No.”

“No? What do you mean no? Did you do any work or not?”

Terunosuke shook even more. His brain shut down as if a switch inside his skull had been flipped off. His train of thought ground to a halt, leaving only a single word available for response.

“No.”

“So you admit it!”

“No.”

“So you DID do some work?!”

“No.”

“Stop saying that, dammit?!”

“No.”

“Well you've convinced me.” Sergio yawned as he spoke. “So did you make much progress today, Tira?”

“No.” She replied instantly.

“What?!”

“I just… couldn’t go in…” She fidgeted her fingers together nervously. “Too embarrassing. Too many uncomfortable memories. Too man-”

“Too many excuses is what I’m hearing!” Sergio blasted. “You seriously couldn’t make it through the door? That’s terrible!”
“Yeah.” Terunosuke said. “How much progress did you make, Sergio?”
“None. My target didn’t show up today.”

Everyone went silent as the conversation stalled. A sense of self-loathing and regular loathing permeated the air.

“Keep up the good work tomorrow and we'll be ready to go the day after.”
“Understood.”
“Yeah. Understood.” Terunosuke assured.

He then walked over to the window overlooking the street, opened it up, then tossed out the paper that he'd been holding onto for the entire conversation. A few seconds after release, the glop of doughnut slapped onto the ground that almost made Terunosuke want to choke a second time.

“Tomorrow will be a goo-”
“SHIT!” Shouted a voice from the street. The trio peered out the window to observe the scene. 2 men of about middle age stood on the sidewalk with looks of bewilderment slapped onto their faces. The man on the right wore a strange ponytail and stared at the man next to him. The man on the left wore a half-shaved, half-doughnut hair style and stared up at the sky as if the clouds had called him mean names.

“What kinda fucking bird shit is that?!
“OH GOD! IT'S IN MY EYE! OH JESUS HELP ME!”

Terunosuke slammed the window shut.

“Must've been one hell of a bird.”

***

The next day started the same as the previous: start at the apartment, then grow wildly bored after a few hours of staring out a window. Terunosuke’s reaction to the issue, however, differed greatly. Rather than goof off and merely act like he had done work, he choose to skip the first step and actually do the second.

It was easier said than done.

The natural first step would be to scope the place out, but who knew what would be there for him when he walked in? Well… it was technically his job to find out exactly that…

Damn. He was going to have to work.

What did he do to deserve such a fate?

***

“Are you here for something?” An intimidating man asked him as he walked through the front doors of the office building. The threats were already popping up. The dark hair jutting out from his chin was like a sea of tiny black needles, all ready to stab an eye out if need be.

“I uh…” Terunosuke hadn’t even thought of a plan, let alone a cover story to cover his ass. “I wanted apply to work here.”

The man chomped on his gum.

“And you came dressed like that?”
Shit! Abort! Abort!
“T'm just picking up an application. I’m not trying to get an interview today.”

The man hammered his jaws together, really giving that piece of gum the what for.
“Do you even know what we do here?”

This guy was really good. With just general knowledge questions, he was tearing through Terunosuke disguise like it was tissue paper. Lies were not his strong suit.

“That's easy… what you do here is… hire people like me.”

The man coughed out a laugh.
“Maybe we will, kid. Don't worry about me, I’m just doing what the hired me to do.” He pointed to a badge on his shirt that had the title ‘Head of Security’ etched onto it, something Terunosuke really should've noticed immediately. “You can pick up an application on the 5th floor. Good luck, kid.” He gave Terunosuke a quick pat on the shoulder before he walked off.

What a nice guy.
“Hey! What's your name?”
“If I see you again, call me Valentino. Or better yet, call me ‘Boss’.” The man a replied without stopping or even turning around.

Terunosuke sighed in relief, glad that he wouldn't have to kill the man.

He found a stairwell nearby and scurried in. With heavy, dark walls and no windows to provide natural light, it felt like an oppressive jail cell. But Terunosuke could escape from any jail without breaking a sweat. As long as he had Enigma, he was impossible to defeat… well, unless another stand was involved.

Before he started digging up repressed memories, he marched up to the lauded fifth floor to meet his target face to face, or at least as close as he could get. Before he crossed the boundary, he took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled out. This was just for scouting out a plan. He wasn’t going to kill anyone today.

***

Boots and heels clicked against the cold stone floor. Men and women murmured up a dull roar. The noontime sunlight filtered through the windows and hit Sergio right in the eyes no matter how much he tried to dodge it. The metro station was bustling just as it had the day before.

Lives passed all around, none of them giving a thought to what layed beyond their own minds… or something like that. He was not a very philosophical person. The boredom was really getting to him.

Then, Sergio finally spotted him. Mr. Roth, his target, entered the metro just like any other person. But unlike any other person, he wore a face that was burned into Sergio’s psyche. He looked exactly the same as his photograph did.

He’d finally come, and thank God he did. Had he stayed away for any longer, Sergio would have been up a waterfall without a paddle. Passione would have easily replaced him with someone fit for the job and he would have lost his only chance at respect.

But that was all erased now.

Like a golden needle in a rotting stack of hay, he could easily track him through the crowds. Sergio
clicked forward on his crutches right behind his target, stalking behind him like a silently vicious tiger. He leaned against a nearby pillar and watched the impromptu meeting unfold.

Mr. Roth exchanged a few words with another man who he recognized as Mr. Greene, Tira’s target. Patience really was a virtue. For the price of the time Sergio had been impatiently sitting and waiting for Mr. Roth to show his face, he was rewarded with a secret meeting between a couple of Scheggia elites. What a fantastic day this was turning out to be.

“... is just a detriment nowadays.”
“I don’t understand what happened to him.”
“... was… duties…”
“...’s divided between… worse for us than for them.”
“You can say that again.”
“...care of yourself.”
“I’ll take care of anything that… just worry about… alright?
“I’ll be sure to. I’ll be back here, same time tomorrow… give… then...”

After less than a minute of speaking to one another, the two separated like nothing had happened. He couldn’t hear half of their conversation, but Sergio had seen everything and was going to see much more.

Mr. Roth started walking again, as did Mr. Greene, though in the opposite direction. Sergio waited a good ten seconds before leaving his hiding spot before restarting his pursuit, just to be safe.

Without spending two minutes inside the station, Mr. Roth made his way back outside. Of course, he didn’t do it alone with Sergio on his heels. As the sitting duck waddled thoughtlessly down the sidewalk, Sergio couldn’t help but think he was messing up the order of things. It was absolutely an option to pull out his Beretta right then and there and just done Mr. Roth in the back of the head, but he vetoed the thought just as quickly as it had arisen. There were, after all, quite a few people also walking on the sidewalk. Plus, there was the issue of escaping, as well as what he would do if someone called the police, or if someone tried to be a hero and attacked him. Additionally, Tira and Terunosuke would be screwed over as well.

Only a complete amatuer would do something so stupid.

As he reached a stopped crosswalk, Mr. Roth looked over at a street performer that was strumming away on a cheap guitar. He snapped his fingers along with the completely disjointed rhythm and sang along to the lyrics that the performer didn’t even bother to sing himself. When the light switched green, Mr. Roth fished out a wrinkled-up bill from his pocket and dropped it on the performer’s open guitar case.

Sergio didn’t push his luck and let Mr. Roth walk off. He’d be around tomorrow if he’d been telling the truth to his associate. Things would be resolved tomorrow.

As his target walked out of sight, Sergio focused on the shitty street performer who kept strumming away as if he was Frank Zappa. Mr. Roth’s donation had not been the only monetary gain of the day for the talentless hack, in fact, he had probably earned close to €50 on the day already. What kind of person would willfully donate to such an untalented idiot? Hell, Sergio could probably play better.

…

Actually…
Mary raised an eyebrow when a woman dressed in orange walked through the doors of the Angel’s Nest. It wasn’t completely unheard of for a woman to partake in the sultry activities that the establishment provided, but since they offered no talents of the male persuasion, the female demographic wasn’t exactly evenly distributed.

She adjusted her glasses and greeted her with a tight smile.

“Good afternoon, ma’am. Have you been here previously, or is this your first time with us?” The woman ran her hand down the feather boa that was wrapped around her neck before answering. “I’ve been here before. Not that I really wanted to, mind you.” She said that last part as a harsh scowl twisted onto her face. Mary didn’t really want to delve into a random woman’s issues, so she was content with letting sleeping dogs lie. However, she couldn’t help but think that the woman seemed familiar in some way.

“Alright then… what exactly wou-”

“I’m here for information, not a lap dance.”

“Oh? What would you like to know?” The woman moved her hand down to where her feather boa ended. As if out of thin air, a small photograph materialized between her fingers. Mary blink once or twice and rubbed her glasses clean, yet still couldn’t understand what had just seen.

“I’ve heard that this man is a regular customer. Is that true?” Mary glanced at the photo. Much to her surprise, it was a headshot of Mr. Greene.

“Oh! I know him pretty well! He’s one of our best clients actually. He comes by every few days and stays for hours on end. On top of that, he leaves tremendous tips every time he comes in. All the girls love him, and I’m sure upper management does too.” With every word she spoke about him, the semi-familiar woman’s face scrunched and contorted in all sorts of painful-looking angles. What was her problem with him?

“So this bastard uses his statues and wealth to take advantage these helpless girls until they form a financial dependency on him, and all the while the higher-ups just encourage him to spend more and more every day because it’s good for business-”

“That’s not true!” Mary almost shouted before the woman’s head exploded. Her eyes were practically ablaze with pure rage. The slightest misstep could send her into a murderous frenzy.

“When he comes by, he never engages any of the girls in a sexual manner. In fact, he just has conversations with them.”

“Con-ver-sa-tionsss?” The woman hissed out ominously.

“T-that’s right! He actually encouraged one of the girls to start attending a local university, and helped another to learn a new language. He even helped me overcome my fear of trusting other people! Mr. Greene isn’t a bastard by any stretch of the imagination! I’d actually go so far as to call him one of best people that I know!”

Mary fought to catch her breath as the woman visibly processed the information she had just provided. Gradually, her face relaxed until each and every sharp line of unfiltered anger faded away.

“I see.” As her face returned to its normal state, the same sense of familiarity overwhelmed Mary’s mind.

“I’m sorry… but have we met before?”

“You must have me confused with someone else.”

“I’m sure we… wait a second.”

“Don’t wait a second. I still have questions.”

“Aren’t you that one girl…?”

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

“Tia? Tiffany?”
“You’ve got it all wrong!”
“Oh yeah! I remember you now. You’re Tira Misu, aren’t you?”

The woman looked like her brain had just overheated. Her expression was frozen solid in a state of combined embarrassment, fear, and dread.

“T-that’s correct…” She choked out with a throat as dry as sandpaper.
“I thought so. I’m glad you’ve come back again, but unfortunately Mr. Greene isn’t here today, but if it’s any consolation I’m sure he’ll be here tomorrow.”
“No worries, I was just wanted to know if you knew anything useful about him.” Her eyes, which had been close to igniting just a minute before, now resembled an barren abyss devoid of hope and happiness. “I’m just glad I could talk to someone like you instead of some greasy old man.”
“Well… you’re welcome. If you’d like, I could give you a call when he comes in tomorrow.” Tira Misu nodded robotically at the suggestion.
“That sounds like a… good…”

She looked Mary straight in the eyes, a spark filling the empty void.

“Actually, I just thought of an even better idea.”

***

The plan was set. Terunosuke knew exactly what to do when the time came: Delivery, breakthrough, juice, passageway, ghost, construction, regroup.

The specifics didn't matter as much as the simple general outline. He could hammer out the fine details on the fly anyway.

Since he had dealt with his duties, he had quite a bit of time on his hands. He'd finished before noon and the scheduled time for reconvening was set for 5PM.

What to do?

He took note of the completely barren apartment/headquarters and noticed that it didn't have a single spot to sit down except for the floor. Such a fact was unacceptable.

He resolved to go buy some furniture; it was the obvious course of action.

***

The plan to acquire furniture hit a snag almost instantaneously.

Other than his complete lack of direction, he had no idea where he could find anything in the city of Naples. That was probably a sad statement considering the time he’d lived there, but he couldn’t be bothered to care about such a thing. He concluded that simply wandering around aimlessly would yield results sooner or later. Hell, he had the time to do it.

Putting one foot in front of the other was easy and was a welcome change from the stress of his work, though said stress probably wasn’t very high. Granted, Terunosuke had never been one to get overly stressed out about things, but even he had to admit that he was slacking off a bit too much as of late. While he’d been able to avoid a lecture from Tira, the point still stood. He’d done just the base requirements of his assigned task, possibly even less than that. For today, that was a nonissue, if he could do as little work as possible and still get paid, it was an accomplishment. But what about a month after that? Two months? A year? Five years? The rest of his life?! Did he want to just coast by for the rest of his life, going nowhere and just subsisting at his position? Would he
even want to stay in Passione? Hell, did he even want to stay in Naples? Italy? Europe?! Did he want to stay a smuggler who occasionally took a foray into brutal killer?

What did he actually WANT to do with his life?

He knew enough about himself to know that he didn't quite mind his position, but not minding something wasn't a feeling he wanted to hold onto for his entire working life. Jesus, how did regular people deal with life?

So was that what he would do? Spend the next forty-odd years of his life working a job he didn't particularly enjoy? Definitely not… probably.

But leaving Passione would entail leaving everyone he cared about behind. That meant leaving Tira behind. That meant leaving behind Sergio, Salvatore, and even Michael. Could he really do such a thing?

One thing was for sure.

He wished he could answer even one of those Goddamn questions. Because if he coul-

“Oh?”

He had happened across a furniture store.

“I knew I would easily find one in no time.”

A quick glance at his watch revealed that he'd almost two hours running circles in his own mind.

***

Terunosuke arrived back at the base of operations with far too much time on his hands and his pockets crammed full of crap. He'd bought a mattress at the furniture store with the funds on his credit card (actually what was called a “debit” card as he'd learned.) It wasn't until he thought about needing to actually transport the thing back to the apartment did issues arise.

How would he usually transport a big item conveniently? With Enigma’s ability, of course!

How would he explain why a mattress just disappeared? With (lllllllllllll), of course!

Wait, that wasn't right. If he just made a mattress disappear, questions would inevitably be raised, and he didn't need that at the moment. Naturally, a distraction was in order.

In the blink of a eye, half of the store's inventory had vanished, a portion finding its way into Terunosuke’s pockets. While everyone in the store was distracted by the abduction of every nightstand the business had to offer, the genius made his escape.

It wasn't until he was a good 5 blocks away that he realized that the store most likely had security cameras. He didn't even know if there were any anti-theft devices in the items he had procured. Frankly though, he didn't care about either issue. He fled out of the panic without a single soul noticing him, save for maybe the security cameras.

When he resettled back at the apartment, he spread out his earnings: 4 mattresses, a sofa, 3 chairs, 2 coffee tables, more area rugs than he wanted to count, and a lonely ottoman.

With so many options, he could transform the barran apartment into a welcoming home. What was he doing wasting his time acting like a smuggler? He could be the best interior designer in all of
Italy! And things didn't stop there either. With Enigma’s power, he didn't actually need to pay for ANYTHING. He could just take whatever he wanted. What an idiot he was! He was invincible...

He used to think like that back in Japan too.

Shit.

A wave of guilt crashed over his excitement, dowsing any and all enjoyment he had. If he continued acting like a dumbass, something would come around and teach him a lesson. Enigma had met his match before, he could meet another one at anytime.

The thought of returning everything bobbed around before being nixed. It'd cause even more panic if he tried to make everything better.

The least he could do was make the most out of what had already been done.

***

Sergio had his plan finalized and ready to go, save for a few materials that he would procure the day of the job. Tira was in the same boat, solid plan and everything, except she had already acquired everything she would need. What a great worker she was.

“How much you want to bet Terunosuke is screwing around somewhere?” Tira asked. Sergio shook his head in disagreement.

“I'll take you on for €5. Terunosuke’s perfectly fine. I'm sure he's been working hard.”

“So you say.”

Sergio moved to unlock the apartment door, but it was already unlocked. Not a great sign. He crossed his fingers as they entered their temporary base. The second they walked through the door, they were met with a completely different room. At first Sergio thought he'd made a mistake, but Terunosuke was indeed there, snoozing away atop a sofa.

The young man really was incredible. It was obvious that he had figured out his plan in a short time, then went out to a furniture outlet to make his fellow members feel relaxed and at home in the apartment. Efficiency and consideration! What a great guy!

Tira saw the situation much, much differently.

“Sleeping on the job, huh? Where the hell did he even get all this crap? I knew he was goofing off again.”

Terunosuke shot awake at that exact moment.

“GHWAA… hey guys. Back so soon?”

“We were gone for hours.” Tira noted, the tone of her voice sounding more and more irritated by the second.

“Oh has it?” Terunosuke checked his watch. “I guess it has. Time flies, huh?”

“Don't give me that shit.” The atmosphere snapped like a whip. Tira dug her claws into the moment and dragged it to a halt. “Did you even do a single thing of value today?! When the job starts tomorrow, do you know exactly what you'll be doing? Do you have ANY idea of what you'll be doing?! I can't fucking believe you. To thi-”

“Hey Tira, you should look at this.”

The raging viper turned her attention towards Sergio. For his part, the leader was hunched over by the window analysing an unorganized field of scattered papers and chicken-scratch illustrations. It outlined notes about the office building in both passing mentions and meticulous detail. The plan
itself was a pretty ballsy if a bit too risky in some places, but was overall pretty likely to succeed nonetheless.

Sergio cracked a tiny smile. He was right, Terunosuke was a fantastic member. And thankfully, Tira seemed to agree.

“Oh… guess I spoke too soon. My mistake.”
“Yeah… no problem.” Terunosuke said having not moved from the couch since they had entered.

Sergio suddenly felt a closed hand jab into his back.
“I’m glad I was wrong.” Tira whispered as she let herself smile. She forced something into Sergio’s hand before starting up a conversation with Terunosuke about his plan: A nice, crisp €5 note.

Guess that meant he won the bet.

***

“Is your plan ready to go?” Tira asked Sergio.
“You know it.”
“Are you going to succeed tomorrow?” Sergio asked Terunosuke.
“Without a doubt.”
“Did you remember to turn off the stove?” Terunosuke asked Tira.
“Absolut- hey don’t change the subject all of a sudden, it throws everything off!”
“Well did you.”
“How should I remember?”

“I’m proud of you guys.” Sergio belted out with no warning. “You both have really come through on this. All that’s left is to actually succeed.”
“Right.”
“It’ll be easy.”

To keep things simple, they had all agreed to sleep at the apartment rather than go back home and have to come back in the morning. The decision to steal multiple mattresses turned out to be quite useful in the end.

Terunosuke just wished he could get to sleep.

His watch said that it was almost 3 AM, yet his nerves simply decided to not cooperate. Tira and Sergio were long asleep, leaving him alone with his own worries.

Would his plan work? Would he live through the danger? Would Tira? Would Sergio? Would Salvatore… wait no… he wasn’t there. There was no reason to worry about him.

What about… Ghiaccio? He still had the plane ticket he’d asked him to buy. The delivery had yet to be completed. While on the subject, his mind poured back over the fight with the annoying iceman and Noce, though he hadn’t asked for it to. White Album was a strong sta… wait… White… Album? Album… as in… the Latin word for White. Ghiaccio had named his stand… White White?! What a loser.

He was thinking about this instead of sleeping. Great use of time.

Sergio looked like he was having a pleasant dream based on his grinning expression. Tira on the other hand, seemed to be just as nervous as he was if Genesis’ restless squirming was any indication.
At least he wasn’t the only one. He could actually fall asleep with such a reassuring thought.

If only Sergio would stop snoring…

***

The day started at 6 AM sharp. Not because that was the plan or anything, it was just because Sergio tripped on his way to the bathroom and cursed loud enough to wake up everyone in the building. Things really started rolling at around 9 AM. “Rolling” in this case meaning Terunosuke finally forcing himself out of bed and into the real world. “Forcing himself into the real world” in this case meaning sitting up for a few seconds, lying back down for another half hour, then finally getting up for real. “Finally getting up for real” in this case meaning exactly what it sounded like.

“Morning.” He greeted to nobody since Tira and Sergio were both still fast asleep.

It was going to be one of those days.

***

After another half hour spent forcing the pair from their rooted slumbers, the first steps of the plan were set in motion.

Tira locked herself away in the bathroom giving the excuse that she was changing into her disguise. Sergio gave the same excuse, though he had to leave to go get his, prompting the question of where Tira had been keeping her’s.

Terunosuke himself had procured a uniform that would get him through the doors of the office building without drawing a single glance. If he had learned 1 thing from movies, it was that Hollywood could milk a film series dry until nothing but dust remained. If he’d learned 2 things from movies, it was that it was that Hollywood could milk a film series dry until nothing but dust remained AND the best way of infiltrating a building was by looking and acting like a delivery boy. Unlike Sergio, he had his disguise right in his pocket, courtesy of Enigma.

The material was a bit inflexible and his range of motion was hindered slightly, but both concerns fell to the wayside when put in comparison to the plain-sight stealth advantage it provided. As soon as he placed the matching hat on top of his head, he knew his plan would work.

Soon after he finished his metamorphosis, Tira emerged back into the world.

For a breathless moment, the world suddenlyrevolved completely around Tira. Her silky hair that was usually tied into a ponytail had been let down to play with no restraints attached. A cute little hat that was reminiscent of a flight attendant’s rested atop her head. Even though he knew she had perfectly fine eyesight, she wore glasses that accentuated the smoothness of her skin. The uniform she was wearing incorporated a normal shirt and jacket as well as a tie, giving her an air of sophistication and maturity that was usually completely foreign to her. Her skirt stretched down to just above the knees, practically taunting him with a view of her ever-so-slender legs. The pièce de résistance, however, came in the space between her shirt and skirt. Namely that there was nothing but a razor-thin gap composed of supple, yet faintly toned flesh that made up her waist.

Terunosuke–in that fleeting moment of time–wanted nothing more in the world than to walk over to her and lay a flurry of light kisses directly onto said flesh.

But he didn’t because that would make Tira think he was attracted to her.

Which he wasn’t.
“Terunosuke? You realize you’re staring, right? Are you going to start drooling?”
“I’m just making sure your disguise doesn’t have any obvious holes in it.”
“I’m sure you’d like it if there was an obvious hole in this outfit.”
“Oh yeah! What about Genesis? Is she a part of this disguise?”
“Of course she is!”

Tira’s hands reached to her neck to pet her snake stand, but only met skin. Unfortunately, she had forgotten to don her feather boa during the dressing process. The look on her face when she realized her mistake was south of pleased.

“Just one second.”

She retreated back to the bathroom with her tail between her legs. And thank goodness she did. Terunosuke had almost done something he would have ended up regretting.

Just as quick as she had gone in, she reemerged with her stand properly draped across her arms and neck. Genesis actually kind of clashed against Tira’s new outfit. Maybe that was the obvious hole he’d been thinking of.

“Genesis doesn't re-”
“Hey dudes!”

At that moment Sergio burst into the room dressed like a homeless person. The jeans he wore were distressed, the sunglasses on his face were bent out of shape, even his shirt looked like it had been set on fire at one point. He actually looked like a complete loser.

It was really quite convincing; he was a natural fit for the role.

Only when he was about to complement the raggedy camouflage did Terunosuke see the guitar strapped to his back, signifying that he was supposed to be some sort of street performer.

He held his tongue.

“Whoa! Who's the lady?” Sergio asked, apparently not recognizing Tira in her disguise.
“Oh? Were you fooled? Were you? Were you?” Tira’s voice elevated with every question; she was really enthusiastic about that disguise…
“Oh. It's just you.” Sergio’s enthusiasm inversely crashed through the floor and dropped into the negatives. “Nice delivery uniform by the way, Terunosuke. The hat is a nice touch.”
“Than-”
“Now let's get the show on the road!”

He clapped his hands together and darted out the door he’d just walked in through, hoping his subordinates would follow.

“Guess it’s time.” Terunosuke sighed, anxious to finally take the stage.
“Guess so.”
“Well. Let's do our best, Tira.”

Terunosuke moved to follow Sergio, but a firm grip on the collar of his uniform stopped him in his tracks.

He looked back at Tira, who in turn looked at him with an expression that somehow mixed a smile and a frown.
“This mission could be dangerous. So be careful. Don't do anything reckless.” Strange how this was the first time she’d ever told him to be careful. “Another thing too… my name is Belinda.”
What the hell?

Where was this coming from all of a sudden? And what kind of a stupid name was Belinda?

“Belinda Ossorio Argento to be exact.” Her smile/frown shifted to an intense look of regret almost immediately. “Ah… I just wanted you to know that. In case one of us gets seriously hurt during the mission.”

“Uh… alright?”

He had no idea how to take any of that. Did it feel nice that she cared enough to consider the future like that? Or was it bothersome to assume he cared? Both? Neither? A third option?

Dammit! It was all too sudden!

“Well… thank you Tir--- Belinda. I'm glad you trust me.”

“Y-yeah. Same here.”

Considering the circumstances, that was probably the best response he could've given. Tir--- she seemed to think so too, judging by the slight smile she wore.

“Are you guys fucking coming or what?!” Sergio belted from down the hall.

“Guess we should probably get going.”

“Guess so.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was originally a lot longer. It got to the point where I just decided to split it into two parts.

Tira's real name is like four different references and jokes all in one, so that was pretty neat.

I really wanted to show off a more practical usage of Enigma, rather than just combat usages. There are more fun things to do on that topic as well.
“Do you know why that song has been stuck in your head for the past few days, Dad?” Michael asked, leaning against the doorway to Salvatore’s office. The doctor had been singing the chorus to No Tengo Dinero by Righeira without even noticing. Ever since the shitshow that had been the Passione meeting, he’d been humming the tune on and off every day, a habit his son had apparently picked up on.

“No. Why is that?”

“Because of what the song means, of course. “No Tengo Dinero”? I Don’t Have Money? How could you not see it immediately.”

“Son, what are you getting at.”

“Your leadership skills, Dad. The way you’ve handled things up to now has been pathetic.” His tone of voice didn’t change whatsoever. “People have died, respect has been lost, and, as the song implies, the money has dried up. I’m surprised they even let you live.”

“These things happen. I can’t do everything perfectly. People die, respect can be earned again, and money can be regained.”

“Don’t… don’t you dare act like it’s nothing.”

“What do you want from me?!” Salvatore snapped. “I tried to keep everyone safe! I tried everything within my power! How could I know things would turn out like this?!!”

“It’s not what you did.” Michael turned around and started to walk out of the office. “It’s what you refused to do.”

***

Sergio’s hands were sweating something fierce. The pressure was on. He was in the spotlight. It was time to act.

Now if only he could remember the major chords of guitar.

When it got down to it, he really was an amatuer. That probably helped the busker image, right? Mr. Roth was enamored with shitty hacks with no talent and he fit that bill perfectly. Damn, he was brilliant without even realizing it!

He belted out a few strums here and there with little musical success. His guitar case was almost devoid of denotations, save for a couple 20-cent coins that had been dropped in due to pity.

The whole damn world was looking down on him.

Just like always.

So what if he couldn’t play guitar very well? And so what if his leadership skills weren’t quite up to snuff? And so what if he was a complete failure at everything forever?! Even if all that bullshit was true, it still wouldn’t stop him from succeeding!

“HELL YEAH! JUST LISTEN TO THIS YOU BASTARDS!” With every fiber of musical prowess, he slashed his pick against the strings like his life depended on it… because it did!

***

“He should be free right now. Just take it up to his office.”
Security sure was light if Terunosuke could just walk up to Mr. Clemenza’s office directly, not that he was really complaining. The security guy he’d met yesterday… Valentino, really deserved to be fired. Without worrying about security liabilities for too long, he made his way up to the fifth floor.

If his timing was accurate, Mr. Clemenza would be sitting in his office, his secretary would have just brought him a glass of fruit juice, and he wouldn’t want to be disturbed for about an hour. Anyone who tried entering would be turned away. With the excuse of a personal package that was supposed to be delivered directly to his office, however, Terunosuke alone could break through the defenses. So long as his secretary didn’t take the package herself, of course.

Once the deed was done, he’d simply jump out the window, flutter down to the street in his paper form, and escape through a nearby construction site.

The plan was foolproof, but things could still go wrong. Without proper stealth measures, he’d end up tipping off the entire building to his presence before he could say “Package for you, sir!”

That was where Sergio came in. Right before they all split ways, his friend had given him the key to his weapons stash with the instructions to “Run wild.” The pockets of his delivery uniform were overflowing with weapons and tools for any situation… as long as the situation called for violence, though he did have a portable CD player thrown in there too, just in case.

As he neared the door for the fifth floor, he noticed his heartbeat was pounding through his chest. The palpitations drilled a hole through his confidence. Was he about to do this? Really? So many things could go wrong. What if everyone swarmed him? What if his gun jammed? What if he couldn’t bring himself to pull the trigger?

Dammit! He could do it! Self-doubt was for pussies and he was no pussy! He’d already come this far! Turning back now would be a certified pussy move!

…

Just to be safe, he spent nearly half an hour reviewing the plan again and again.

Not because he was afraid or anything. It was dedication. He was a hard worker after all.

***

Belinda felt free. Not in the sense that she was free from a prison, nor did she feel like she could fly. She just felt a bit more free. As if she was more herself than usual.

Maybe it was because Terunosuke trusted her a bit more now, maybe it was because of her mission. She couldn’t really place it. She felt great, a feeling that had been evading her for quite some time.

Yeah, it was definitely because Terunosuke trusted her.

It was wonderful how there was someone just like her that finally came into her life who could make her feel like she wasn’t so low on the ladder of life.

But she couldn’t spend too much time basking in her joy. She still had a job to do.

Mary had been so kind as to “take the day off” so as to allow Belinda to impersonate her without anyone knowing, especially Mr. Greene.

And just as she thought about him, he appeared.
Mr. Greene walked through the front door and into his doom.

***

Walking down the street with a spring in his step and a snap on his fingers, Mr. Roth hummed along with Sergio’s strumming. The action more or less confirmed Sergio as a total amateur with just as much talent as a lowly street performer. He was actually glad his musical career began and ended with a single shitty jam session, lest he get too invested.

Mr. Roth, being the art patron that he was, dropped a €5 bill in the donation jar/guitar case, all while still humming along to the discordant melody.

As soon as he passed by, Sergio jumped into action.

But it wasn’t Sergio’s time to perform. It was Pane’s. If he wanted to be a true professional, he couldn’t go using his real name.

***

Terunosuke peered through the door out to the bustling fifth floor office. Workers were slaving away in their cubicles doing whatever it was the company actually did. Maybe it would have been beneficial to have found that out before.

Adding the point to his list of things he should have done better, he stepped out into the open battlefield. A janitor gave him a weird look before he went back to mopping the floor, a guy in a rush darted past him on his way to the bathroom. It was like he was just a part of the background.

That was fine by him.

Mr. Clemenza’s office was completely unguarded, not even his secretary was around. It came as no surprise since assassination attempts weren’t exactly everyday office occurrences. Through the blinds he could spot the target speaking to someone on the phone, completely oblivious of what was about to happen.

Terunosuke clenched his teeth, pulled his hat down to cover his eyes, then knocked with his clenched left hand.

***

Pane walked up beside Mr. Roth, his guitar case on his back, his crutches on his arms.

“Nice day don’t you think?” He asked.

“You know it.” The dumbass replied back, still humming the same song that Pane had been attempting to play despite the one who started the song standing right next to him. He didn't even turn to look him in the eye, instead choosing to continue his off-key tune. Just as well anyway, it made Pane’s job a whole lot easier.

The retired guitarist brought the heel of his dirty shoe to his hand. He swiveled it around to reveal a secret compartment hidden in the depths of the sole. Unknown to anyone except the wearer, a folded piece of paper sat waiting to be opened. Thanks to his best friend’s stand, the paper faded away and left him with his favorite pistol as a parting gift. He flicked the compartment back closed again and poked his target’s back with the weapon’s barrel.

“It’s such a nice day, I think we should take a walk, just you and me. What do you say?”
This time, Mr. Roth’s fretful eyes met his as the walk sign turned in their favor.

“L-lead the way.”

***

“Mr. Greene! It's good to see you again!”
“Good to see you again too… Mary? I hardly recognize you!” His voice was chipper. A fuzzy blanket of words.
“You like what I've done?”
“Definitely. You make it work incredibly well.”

The information about him was accurate. It was clear that he could become anyone's friend in minutes.

“So who's the lucky lady that I get to spend my afternoon with?” He asked.
“Well… today is… me.”
“Wonderful. Now tell me, did you get all dolled up just for today?”
“That's right!” Belinda replied, a bit too desperate to justify the sudden shift in image.
“Mary.” The man grumbled with an off-catching disappointment. “You know I've always, always, always preached to you women that you are all beautiful just as you are without any effort needed. Dying your hair just for me is no exception.”

He actually cared, didn't he? Damn, these girls were lucky to have such a great man care about them. Even Salvatore could learn something from him. Such a shame that he had to work for Scheggia.

“I won't forget that. Thanks.”
“Of course, Mary.”
“Now, why don't we continue this meeting elsewhere. If you'd follow me.”
“It'd be my pleasure.”

With a smile on her face, Belinda lead her target to the same curtained-off room where she’d first met Terunosuke. This time, however, the end result would be much, much different.

***

“Come in.” Mr. Clemenza called out through the door. Terunosuke walked in without a word and set the package on the man’s desk in front of a tall stack of papers.
“Do I need to sign or anything?” Terunosuke simply shook his head.

Mr. Clemenza rustled the package back and forth, trying to figure out what was inside through sound alone. While he was preoccupied, Terunosuke discretely closed the blinds to the office, creating a private space that only two people were allowed to use.

“I don't even remember ordering anything. If you don't mind me asking, do you know who sent this?”

Terunosuke bit his tongue to keep from giggling with glee. The setup was perfect. He silently slid his gun out of its paper holding cell and into his left hand, tucked behind his back just out of sight.

“Who sent it? Well, that's simple.”

His hand zipped to his target’s face, pressing the steel into the soft flesh of his cheek.
“It’s from Passione!”

***

Belinda was actually enjoying her time for once. Despite the fact that she would have to kill him in a matter of minutes, she couldn't help but be enchanted by Mr. Greene’s stories. One after another they flowed out like a river of fairy tales, only instead of big bad wolves and fairy godmothers, his stories involved strippers and prostitutes. Granted they were strippers and prostitutes who were trying to turn over a new leaf, but… still.

“... and when she thanked me with those little eyes of hers looking up at me, I knew in my heart that all the effort was worth it in the end.”

She pinched her eyes shut before she started crying. He really cared. He actually honestly cared about other people.

“That's… that's really wonderful.” She forced out to keep from cracking. “Here. Let's have a drink to dedicate the moment.”

Before Mr. Greene could respond, she rose up from her seat and darted towards the booze table. In a flash she poured vodka in a pair of glasses. The drink was perfectly clear and colorless, perfect for a little tampering. Genesis set her mouth on Belinda’s hand and released a tiny flask from her stomach’s bottomless storage. She poured out the contents of the flask into only one of the drinks, keeping the other one free of contaminants. An important action seeing as how the flask contained hydrofluoric acid, one of the most corrosive substances known to man. Pane might be a pain in the ass most of the time, but when he provided a weapon, it hit hard.

“To health, happiness, and everything in between.” She gleefully announced. Genesis discreetly swallowed the flask back down. She also swallowed the remaining vodka as a backup plan.

Mr. Greene smiled at her, but it was clearly forced.

“Mary… you're lying to me, aren't you?”

“Wh-what?” She set the glasses down on the table. “I'm not lying.”

“You can stop now. I know you aren't Mary. You're just acting like you're her.”

How in the hell did he find out?! Genesis coiled nervously around her neck.

“What gave you that idea?”

“Mary knows how I feel about alcohol. She'd never serve me a glass.”

What kind of Italian refused to drink alcohol?!

“Oh. Guess I wasn't very convincing.”

“Well, your outfit doesn't quite fit right. Your waist isn’t supposed to be showing. But it's alright. Perfectly fine. I'm sure you did what you did for a reason. I'm not mad in the slightest.”

Belinda perked up to her feet at that. She picked up both glasses from the table, an authentic grin spreading across her face.

“That great to hear, but I am sorry.”

“It's fine.” He held up his hands to show his lack of any ulterior motives. “I'm really not mad about yo-”

“No. Not that.” She cut in. “I'm just sorry you made things harder for me.”

She had lost track of which glass had the acid and which was safe, so she just tossed both of their
contents at Mr. Greene’s face.

***

Pane shoved Mr. Roth down a narrow alley that no one was likely to see from the street. It was a bit of a challenge to pull off on crutches, but he somehow managed anyway. The guitar case on his back didn’t make matters any easier either.

“So what are we doing here?” Mr. Roth demanded in a position that didn’t allow him to make demands.

“Here? In this alley? I think we’ll sing a little.”

“S-sing?”

“Yeah. Sing.”

“Why? What do you get out of that?”

“Get out of it? I’ve got everything I need already. I just want to have a little fun before I’m done.”

“So… that means th-”

“Enough!” Pane jabbed the barrel into the back of his target’s head. “I could just use my stand to poison you if you’d prefer to suffer.”

Mr. Roth didn’t have a retrot for that.

“Good. Now then. Do you know the song “More”? Lots of people have sung a rendition of it before. It’s a classic.”

“More… yeah, I’ve heard it.”

“Know the lyrics?”

“Yes.”

“All of them?”

“Yes.”

“Well that’s great!” He backed off the pressure and let his target have some breathing room. “I really wish I could play some music with it, but you’ll just have to use your imagination. And without further ado, let’s begin.”

“A one, a two, a one, two, three, four.”

“More than the greatest love the world has known. This is the love I’ll give to you alone.

The bullet ripped through Mr. Clemenza’s head, throwing blood across the office like a mad artist’s paintbrush… but it did not kill him. Terunosuke blinked before he realized a few drops had hit his eye. Worse yet were the drops that hit his tongue. He retched and rubbed his eyes instinctively. All of this while Mr. Clemenza screamed out in shocked agony.

This was not according to plan.

Nevertheless, Terunosuke still had a job to do. He spat out the stomach-turning blood that had landed in his mouth, wiped his eye, then took aim at Mr. Clemenza once again. The bloody, screaming man covered his disfigured face with his hands in vain as the second bullet ripped through his forehead. His screaming stopped as if the power had just been cut off.

That was that. Job well done. Time to go.

Terunosuke wiped his tongue on his uniform sleeve, but only managed to stain his tongue with more blood. Goddammit.

He felt like a fucking idiot for more than one reason.
Deciding that the line of thought was neither here nor there, he proceeded to the window. When he returned to the apartment—which he could spot from across the street from where he was standing—he would have take a heavy shower.

He ran his hand down the side of the window in search of the release latch, but his luck was running thin. No matter how much he palmed around for it, he couldn’t find anything. In fact, he didn’t see a single way to open the window whatsoever.

No problem. He took a step back and shot the glass.

Unfortunately, it didn’t break. Hell, it didn’t even crack.

All the way across the street, plexiglass looked just like regular glass.

He was locked inside a bloody office with a man he'd just taken out, a gun in his hand, and the only way out being through a bustling office.

No problem, right? Just turn to paper and sneak out.

“Excuse me?” A woman’s voice asked as she intruded into his launching point, a glass of orange juice in her hand.

Terunosuke’s timing had been completely off. The secretary hadn’t brought Mr. Clemenza his daily juice. Mr. Clemenza hadn’t told her to leave him be for a while. The secretary hadn’t stopped from investigating the loud noises she’d heard from the office. Nothing stopped the world from coming to him.

“W-what’s going on?”

“More than the simple words I try to say. I only live to love you more each day.

“You’re definitely not Mary.” Mr. Greene stated. Belinda’s attack had missed the mark slightly. Instead of splashing onto his face, the acid and vodka only drenched his shirt.

There was a moment of tense peace as the gears turned for both parties. One of the glasses Belinda was holding was starting to become warped from the acid, prompting her to set them on the table before she got burned. While she did that, Mr. Greene unbuttoned his shirt, though he didn’t seem to be aware that he’d almost had his face dissolved. He stood up with his upper body exposed and an uncharacteristic scowl on his face. Belinda hadn’t noticed before, but he had a surprising amount of muscle on his body, easily enough to overpower her if he got close enough

“You know, usually the girl takes off her clothes for the guy’s sake, not the other way around.” He said with a fake chuckle.

“Funny.” She replied without laughing.

Genesis released Belinda’s gun from her mouth. She snatched it from her stand’s grasp and took aim at her target. Mr. Greene, on top of being stronger than first thought, was also quite agile to boot. He rushed her down faster than she could blink. His fist connected with her hand, immediately breaking her grip on the gun. His foot kicked the weapon away towards the booze table. Belinda lunged for it as it slid, but Mr. Greene grabbed her in midair and slammed her to the ground. He then forced her arms behind her back until her wrists touched her shoulder blades.

“Why the hell are you trying to kill me for?” He demanded, not even short of breath after his superhuman movements.

“An order is an order.”
“So you work for Passione?”
“In the same way you work for Scheggia.”
“I’m surprised you people know about that. Looks like we have some holes in our security.”
“That’s not all you have.”
“What do you mean?”
“You also have bite marks on your face.”
“What? I do no-”

Genesis lunged up from Belinda’s neck and sunk her fangs into Mr. Greene’s face.

“More than you’ll ever know, my arms long to hold you so. My life will be in you keeping, waking, sleeping, laughing, weeping.

“Oh my God!” The secretary cried. She dropped the glass in her panic. Glass and juice shattered across the floor as a crowd started to rubberneck at the commotion.

“Get out of the way.” Terunosuke threatened to the gathering crowd. Only a handful from the crowd actually compiled. Whether it was from shock, determined curiosity, or genuine bravery, the horde refused to budge. “I’m not fucking around! Move it!” He raised his gun at the idiots to incentivise their retreat, yet they still foolishly held their ground.

What the hell?! Why weren’t they moving?! He had a gun! He could shoot them at any moment!

“He killed Mr. Clemenza?” A voice in the crowd asked skeptically.
“There’s no way.” Another replied.
“This is one messed up prank…”

They didn’t believe their own eyes. Mr. Clemenza was right there in full view! His corpse was slumped back in his chair, dark red blood gushing from his forehead. There was no denying it! Were people in Italy so used to violence that they would shrug off an undeniable death that stared them in the eyes?!

Before the crowd realized the gravity of the situation, he hid his gun and shoved his way through the men and women, making a dash for the stairs. In the end, the office was filled with nothing but spectators, the type of people who watch a car accident with glee despite the driver getting smashed to bits. Who was the real monster here.

He had to bite his tongue to stop himself from answering that.

“Longer than always is a long, long time. But far beyond forever, you’ll be mine.

Genesis clamped her fangs through Mr. Greene’s skin. He recoiled back in shock just as any average person would in response to being bitten on the face by a living feather boa. But Mr. Greene wasn’t an average person. After only moments had passed, he grabbed her by the head, ripped her off his face without carefully extracting her fangs, and tossed her aside like she was garbage.

In the few seconds this all happened, Belinda was free from his imprisonment. She crawled forward and reached her gun that had been casually thrown aside. Just as she spun around to shoot at him, Mr. Greene rushed her down a second time. His palms fully encased her hands and prevented her fingers from even reaching the trigger. He slowly began to press the two pairs of hands and gun together, creating a field of pressure that became unbearable in seconds. Before he pressed hard enough to break something, he stopped adding pressure and opened his mouth to speak.

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“I wouldn’t have guessed you were a stand user. And on top of that, it’s one that can bite me. Not something I deal with on a daily basis.” The bite wounds began to seep out small streams of blood down his face as he spoke.

“Are you going to kill me?” Belinda asked.

“Kill you? Of course not. I’m not a monster.”

“I’m not a monster either. Though I will try to kill you.”

She shot her leg up toward his groin; a cheap blow was still a blow nonetheless.

He caught her leg between his knees.

“I know I never lived before. And my heart is very sure. No one else could love you more.

Terunosuke darted to and fro through the dense crowd trying not to bump into anyone so as not to slow down. Everyone around him was in a state of panic and confusion. Nothing made sense to them. He couldn’t ask for a better opportunity to make a break for it.

He made his way to the door of the stairwell just as even more people came filtering in. The fifth floor was crowding up at a rapid pace. If he stayed for much longer, he’d be crushed under the weight of everyone around him.

His shoulder collided with someone else’s as they charged past. On reflex, he looked back and apologized for his rudeness.

Then he saw him. The man he’d met the day before. The head of security. Valentino.

The man’s eyes met his, practically blasting through him. A chill shot up his spine that he couldn’t explain. He needed to run. He HAD to run! This man would kill him. If he stayed for a single microsecond longer, he would wipe him from the face of existence.

The man, befitting of his position as head of security, recognized the clear and present danger almost immediately.

“YOU! STOP RIGHT THERE!”

Terunosuke sprinted up the stairwell like his life depended on it.

Because it did.

“More than the greatest love the world has known. This is the love I’ll give to you alone.

Belinda was in a bind. Her hands were practically being smashed together and her foot was held in a vice grip. She was out of options.

“I think it’s time you give up before something bad happens to you. I’m sure neither of us wants that to happen, but I’ll do what I have to if you push me too far.” Mr. Greene advised. To underscore his point, he clamped his hands together even tighter. Somewhere along the line, something in Belinda’s hand gave way under the stress. A small, yet highly audible, pop stabbed in her hand. Pain ripped through her nerves like a tidal wave. She bit her tongue to keep from screaming out, lest someone hear her and make the situation worse. She was being pushed to her limits.

But hope was not lost.

“Genesis!” She called out between stifled screams. Her stand lunged at her targets face, fangs
sharp and ready to kill. But she wasn’t the only one with sharp fangs.

With his hands full and legs preoccupied, Mr. Greene used the only weapon he had left: his teeth. His fangs snatched Genesis right out of the air the moment she came close enough. His teeth pressed down on her neck, causing Belinda to feel her stand’s pain. Everything was collapsing down on top of her.

There was only one option left.

With the little room for maneuvering she had, Genesis pointed her mouth towards Mr. Greene. Her jaw unhinged and released the last resort that had been acquired just a minute ago.

A jet of vodka blasted in Mr. Greene’s face.

“More than the simple words I try to say. I only live to love you more each day.

Terunosuke ran. Valentino was chasing him. If he caught him, he would die! That wasn’t going to happen! It couldn’t happen!

Terunosuke ran faster.

He bolted down the steps, but he was immediately impeded by a mob of workers, probably curious about all the noise. He moved to shove his way through, but he couldn't. There was no time! Valentino would grab him and rip him apart if he tried it!

Up the stairs he went. Not a second after switching gears, Valentino emerged. He pleaded the workers for help and enlisted them into his nightmare army as his pursuit continued.

Terunosuke stood no chance! He HAD to keep running!

There were no windows around so the only path to escape was up. He fled towards the sky, taking the steps two at a time. Valentino and his soldiers didn't give up either. No matter how fast he ran, no matter how many steps he took, they were still on his heels.

He knew the building was around twenty stories tall and he'd already climbed to at least the tenth floor. If that was the case, then he just needed to hold out for about ten more floors! He could do it!

The door to the eleventh floor flew open and a second crowd of workers stepped through. They were armed with razor-sharp pencils, staplers wielded like clubs, bloodthirsty scissors, and any other potential weapon that they could get their hands on.

Terunosuke stopped dead in his tracks; the two crowds did the same.

“Don’t move!” Someone barked at him.
“You're surrounded! Don't try anything!” Another called out.
“You gain nothing if you kill anyone else! Give yourself up.” A voice, maybe Valentino’s, ordered.

They encroached on him, creeping forward ever so slightly with bloodlust in their eyes. Terunosuke knew that they’d murder him if he surrendered. He'd taken out one of their own, they wouldn't have a problem with retaliating against him. It was just like always: give up and get killed or fight for life!

That was what it all came down to! Live or die! There was no other way!
He shot his hands through every single one of his pockets. Sergio had recommended gathering an arsenal of weapons before walking into the building, advice Terunosuke had taken to heart.

Assault rifles, shotguns, submachine guns, pistols, and more burst forth from his clutches and pointed towards the hordes of demons.

His blood boiled, his teeth clenched, his grip tightened.

“I. Will. Not. DIE!”

He opened the gates of hell on them.

“More than you'll ever know, my arms long to hold you so. My life will be in your keeping, waking, sleeping, laughing, weeping.

Mr. Greene reeled back as the alcohol burned his eyes. Belinda’s hands were freed from his crushing grip, allowing her to take aim at his head. As she tried to fire, however, she found out that her trigger finger had been snapped like a twig. She hadn’t even noticed with all of the adrenaline pumping through her veins. She switched hands and took aim.

Mr. Greene wiped his eyes clean with laser precision and made another grab for her gun. His hands reached the weapon, but Belinda was ready. She pulled the trigger, once, twice, three times. Each bullet shredding a neat little hole through Mr. Greene’s flesh. His shoulder, chest, and neck all tore open one after another as if he was being poked by a demonic hole punch.

He collapsed to the floor, his new wounds bleeding just as violently as the wounds Genesis had inflicted on his face. The man writhed on the floor, covering his fresh blood with his hands as if it was an embarrassing weakness he was trying to hide. Unfortunately for him, Belinda already knew his weakness: bullets.

“Sorry I have to do this. I honestly mean that. You seem like a nice man. Shame you're a member of Scheggia.”

She pointed her gun at him for the last time.

But her moment of opportunity had passed..

Despite the bleeding wounds, despite the acid burn, despite the fatigue the situation had to have caused, Mr. Greene vaulted to Belinda, grabbing her weapon before she even realized he had even moved.

“Longer than always is a long, long time, but far beyond forever, you’ll be mine.

Blood blood blood blood blood blood.

There was so much blood.

Rivers of it poured down the stairwell. Drip drip dripping down the stairwell.

Down ten floors.

Blood that Terunosuke had drawn.

The guns clicked in his hands signaling that they were all out of ammunition. He dropped the arsenal and picked up his original pistol.
Everyone who tried to murder him had been taken out, though that didn’t remove the bodies. A graveyard worth of corpses filled the stairway.

He refused to think about it anymore. None.

He forced himself up the stairs.

Anything.

Anything else.

He looked at the gun in his left hand as he climbed. Think of ANYTHING else. He had called it “Yuki” once before. It was a gift from Sergio back when he knew him as Pane. It was innocent. It was only used in self-defense. That was a fact. But if it was only for self-defense, why didn’t he use it to defend himself just then? It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. He just needed to climb.

Twelfth floor. Thirteenth floor.

Crying.

Someone in the stairwell was crying.


Sorrowful.

It was taunting him. Calling him names for having the gaul to stay alive.

“Riccardo? Stefano? Guys? Please wake up… oh God… Jesus no.”

Stop.

“Sofia! I know you’re still alive! Stop acting dead! It isn’t funny! It’s cruel! This isn’t a joke! Please stop!”

Stop it.

“Why God… w-why… why is this happening?! This can’t be real. This has to be a nightmare… why is this happening?!”

“STOP IT STOP IT STOP STOP STOP STOP!”

Terunosuke was screaming so hard his throat felt like it would rip in half.

But the voice stopped crying.

Up the stairs.

He reached a door at the twentieth floor. The door outside.

The roof was bright. Outside wasn’t like inside.

So much blood on his clothes. He was still drenched. Soaked to the bone.

He threw off his hat. He threw off his uniform and shirt. His boots left bloody footprints when he stepped. He kicked those off.
He still wore his pants. That was enough.

There was only a little blood left on his hair and his gun.

Thundering footsteps charged from behind him.

Valentino emerged from the stairwell. Blood on his hands, his legs, his face. Tears in his eyes. A bleeding wound on his side. Hatred in his eyes.

Stop looking like that.

“I know I never lived before, and my heart is very sure.

Genesis wrapped around Mr. Greene’s arm, cutting off the circulation and cracking his bones.

He didn’t care, his hand still held tight to Belinda’s gun.

Belinda pulled the trigger and fired a flurry of bullets into his gut.

He still didn’t care. The only thing he did was fall back a few steps. While he was bleeding even worse than before, he looked as though he could still run a marathon.

Genesis uncoiled from his now crushed forearm. Nothing they did to him seemed to do anything remotely damaging to the walking tank. Anything short of complete annihilation was child’s play to him.

So she decided to do exactly that.

“Do you know how strong the vodka that I tossed on you was?” Belinda asked.

“Not very, I’m sure.” Even in such a state he was still able to talk.

“Au contraire! It was 176 proof! Know what that means?”

“Make your point already.”

“Well… in a nutshell, if a drink is 100 proof, it means it can ignite if it meets a flame. I wonder what the extra 76 will do?”

“I see. And do you have a lighter or something like it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t. Sorry.”

“Then why even say anything?!”

He reached towards her with the knowledge that she lacked the stopping power to bring him down permanently.

“No, I don’t have one.” Belinda giggled to herself. “But a friend of mine does.”

From the depths of Genesis’ stomach, a lighter appeared between her fangs. She leapt the small distance a snake could leap, yet it was still plenty. The flame brushed against the highly-flammable alcohol. The thin layer of liquid atop Mr. Greene’s skin flashed up a bright ignition for a few moments.

“Not enough!” He cried at the sorry attempt at immolation. He was correct, but not or long. From where she was standing, Belinda was within reaching distance of the booze table. If two glasses-worth could only produce a few moments of flames, what would another bottle do?

She threw the vessel straight at the burning demon. He didn’t even blink at the action.

He had no idea that he’d just signed his death warrant.
The glass shattered against his skin, scattering the rest of the vodka against Mr. Greene’s already-burning skin.

A blazing inferno exploded in the confined space. Genesis was almost caught by the flames, only barely avoiding them by the skin of her teeth. Mr. Greene on the other hand, took the full brunt of the blast. Fire ripped across his entire body, coating his chest, face, and even behind his ears.

“GGAAHHHHH!”

He stepped forward, one foot after another. As if ignoring that he had been set ablaze, he still attempted to attack. Belinda raised her gun and fired shot after shot, unloading into the unflinching behemoth of destruction that stood before her. Every bullet hit her target; it was impossible to miss at this distance. Each and every shot carved a hole through his burning flesh. His blood did nothing to quell the flames.

Fire ate through his body and bullets devoured the leftovers. Yet Mr. Greene still made his way to her.

He refused to die.

But refusal could only last for so long.

Just as he was about to reach her, his legs gave out from under him. He collapsed before her. There was nothing left for the fire to consume, fuel or body. The flames sputtered out just as his soul had.

That was that.

But, he was not finished with life, however.

His arm shot out and grabbed ahold of her ankle, wrenching her down to the floor with him. It was then that Belinda felt genuine, soul-crushing fear for the first time that day. The charred remains of a former human who had no business being alive clamped down on her as if she was anchoring him to the world of the living.

Or maybe he wanted to drag her to hell with him.

She aimed and pulled the trigger, but her gun was completely empty, every bullet having been shot through his body already. Genesis was awestruck just as she was. She could do nothing.

Nothing except die.

“Stop.” She whispered.

As if on command, he did.

His head slumped to the floor. The grip on her ankle loosed, allowing her to escape.

He had finally passed on.

Belinda just gazed at the thing that was once Mr. Greene. What was once a kind and gentle, yet powerful and intense man had been reduced to a slab of blackened, inhuman flesh. She wasn’t quite sure he had been anything at all despite being the one responsible for reducing him to such a state. It came as a surprise when she realized that she felt nothing about the situation. No sadness, no happiness, no pride for a job well done, nor horror for the brutal methods she had to resort to.

That was the worst part: the nothingness.
Maybe it was better than losing control and having another episode, but she wasn’t sure, not in the moment at least.

She stood up, let Genesis swallow her gun, and slung her stand around her neck. Her finger was still broken, but it could be fixed by Salvatore. The world outside the curtained-off room would be hostile and unforgiving. It wouldn’t be easy to escape, not with all the noise they had made. But she could do it.

There was no other option anyway.

“No one else could LOVE YOU MOOORR-”

Pane shot Mr. Roth in the back of the head as he hit the highest note of the song. The volume of his voice conveniently covered up the sound of his pistol firing. A neat little hole formed through his skull where the bullet entered.

He fell to the ground away from sight. With both a silencer and subsonic ammo suppressing the shot’s noise, anyone who might have overheard would’ve mistaken it for more signing, maybe a cracking voice. No one guessed a thing.

That was that. He hadn’t even needed to use his stand. Pane had been clean, efficient, and safe.

Just as a professional should be.

Sergio had done well.

***

Terunosuke snapped back into the present.

It was just him and Valentino left, everyone else had been dealt with. This would be easy; Valentino didn’t even have a stand for crying out loud! But there had been enough blood. Terunosuke would simply make his escape.

“Why? What was the reason for all of this?” Valentino growled out, short of breath.
“Just… A JOB?!”
“Y-yea-”
“MURDERING INNOCENT PEOPLE IS JUST A JOB FOR YOU?!”
“T-they… weren’t innocence-”
“YOU MURDERED THEM ALL! LIKE DOGS IN THE STREET!”

The lies were getting out of control. Valentino was just desperate to shift the blame onto someone else. Only cowards and monsters denied the truth.

“Enough.” Terunosuke took aim at Valentino’s knee. Not enough to kill, but enough to stop him. “You’ve been talking for long enough.”

He pulled the trigger.

…

And again…

Again…
Nothing. The gun was empty. There was no more ammo anywhere. He was SOL.

They both understood immediately.

Terunosuke darted for the roof’s ledge. If he couldn’t win a fight, he’d just jump off the side of the building and drift to the ground in his paper form.

That was the plan anyway.

Valentino refused to let him escape so easily, however. He hadn’t become the head of security by being slow, lazy, and unfocused. No. He trampled Terunosuke to the ground in seconds. One hand clawed his throat, the other snapped at his ribs.

He was right in Valentino's grip. If he converted to his paper form now, he’d be torn to pieces. There was nothing he could do.

Valentino’s fist rocketed into Terunosuke’s lungs, squeezing all of the air out of them in a single blow. The next hit connected with his face. Blood and saliva flew out of his mouth like a spewing geyser. With only two punches, Terunosuke was reduced to a sputtering mess caught between spitting out string of bloody spit and trying desperately to suck even the tiniest amount of air back into his lungs.

This was only the beginning, Terunosuke knew. Valentino towered over him, a look of unchecked rage on his face. When their eyes met, his expression snapped from rage to horror.

“You’re just a kid? I don’t understand. What kind of job does a kid like you have that requires you to kill someone?!”
“Ghhhaa… Paassssione. I waaahh work for Passione.”
“And you’ve done this for them… was it worth it?”
“What?”
“Was killing those people worth it?! The people that I gave my word I would keep safe! Was murdering them worth whatever they’re paying you?!”

Valentino pulled Terunosuke by the hair to force him to look in the eyes when he answered.

“Paying me?” Terunosuke’s left hand searched for any remaining paper left in his weapons pocket.

His fingers found something.

Valentino delivered a blow to his eye for even trying.

He pulled the paper from Terunosuke’s hand and opened it without thinking.

That was all that was needed.

Without the knowledge of how Enigma worked, he opened a paper that contained a grenade.

A live grenade, primed to explode.

What a lucky turn of events.

Terunosuke wriggled away, pushing his adversary on his back while he was stunned. He clambered to get as much distance as he could before the shit hit the fan. Valentino, meanwhile, froze in place. His eyes shot wide open, all of his muscles locked up, he dropped the grenade in
front of him.

He was dead. The shrapnel would tear him to ribbons in the blink of an eye. There was nothing he could do but pray.

…

…

The moment passed… as did another… and another, yet the grenade didn’t explode.

It was a dud.

Another failure. Three now. First the gun, then the grenade. And of course, Terunosuke himself.

Valentino closed in again. There was nothing Terunosuke could do. He tried to run to the edge, but he was thrown down by hands that radiated renewed hatred.

He was finally out of weapons, out of tricks. Enigma could do nothing for him now. Turning to paper would be a death sentence.

The only thing he could do was die.

Valentino’s hands enclosed around his throat. He fought for breath, but only for a little while. It was pointless to resist any longer. There was no breaking out, not anymore. He was exhausted. Nothing could help him anymore.

Tears dropped on his face. Not his own, they were Valentino’s. As he strangled him with all his might, he was the one who wept. For his friends? For his coworkers? For Mr. Clemenza? It didn’t matter. Terunosuke felt like crying, but couldn’t bring himself to.

It wouldn’t be right to do such a thing.

“Why? Why did you do it? I should’ve killed you when I first saw you.” Valentino rambled off nonsense as the strangulation tightened.

This was the end.

NO!

As his lungs began to burn, his calmness collapsed into panic. If he was about to die, Valentino would have to try harder!

Terunosuke’s hands swiped at the claws around his neck to no avail. He slapped and punched to as much effect. He jabbed at Valentino’s chest, attacked his neck, tried kicking and pulling, squirming, wriggling, and convulsing, chopping and headbutting. But nothing worked. Valentino was too strong.

His muscles started to spasm out of control.

He was dying!

Anything!

SWIPING CLAWING PUSHING SHOUTING PRAYING PLEDGING GRASPING WEEPING
A HOLE!

BLOODY AND SOFT!

ATTACK!

With the tiny drop of strength and focus Terunosuke had in his fading consciousness, his thumb on his left hand tore at the bloody hole. Instantly, Valentino shrieked out, releasing his hands.

Air drowned Terunosuke’s lungs. Each bit of oxygen tasted sweeter than sugar on his tongue. He threw himself away from his would be killer, who was currently rolling on the ground in agony, gripping his side.

In the end, Terunosuke was saved by a bullet wound in Valentino’s side. Just below the ribs.

The blood that poured out was uncontrollable. He’d opened Pandora’s box on Valentino’s flesh. If he didn’t get help soon, he’d be dead.

Not that that was Terunosuke’s problem.

He forced himself to his feet and crawled on to the ledge.

Valentino tried to grab for him, but it was no use.

Terunosuke dropped off.

The cool, spring air flew through his hair, past his skin. He was weightless.

Someone would find Valentino. Of course they would.

A construction site next to the building obscured his descent; no one even saw him walk past.

He made it to the sidewalk before he realized he was walking around barefoot without a shirt on. He must have looked pretty strange in that state. Hopefully, no one would mind su-

An explosion. From above.

His eye darted up to see the dust and smoke that had kicked up on the roof of the office building he’d just leapt from.

The grenade. It wasn’t a dud after all.

Valentino was dead.

***

Belinda and Sergio bolted downstairs as soon as they heard the explosion. If Terunosuke had to resort to explosives, things were desperate. Each flight of stairs flew by as Belinda ran as fast as she could manage. Sergio followed close behind on his crutches, keeping pace despite his impairment.

“You think he's alright?” Sergio asked, desperate for reassurance.

“He better be!” Belinda replied.

As they rounded the last corner, Belinda collided with a young man who stood around in a stooper. Only after a few moments did she realize that it was Terunosuke.
But something was wrong--very wrong. She almost didn't recognize him at first. Blood stained his pants so hard there was hardly a single spot that wasn't splotched. He had lost his shirt and hat along the way, but he'd gained bruises around his body and especially on his throat and eye. His nose looked like it had practically been turned inside out. Just standing seemed like a burden that he could hardly bear. So much so that he practically collapsed into Belinda’s arms.

He wheezed and panted like he was at the brink of exhaustion. What had happened to him? What went so wrong?

Terunosuke was in no shape to give any answers.

***

After a few hours of laying low in the apartment, the commotion outside started to finally die down. The police left the scene, the workers were allowed to go home, and Terunosuke finally got ahold of himself again.

The sun had set and the stars had come out. Terunosuke and Belinda parted ways with Sergio with a few words of congratulations. They returned home in silence, though. Belinda had tried to get Terunosuke to talk about what had happened, why he was covered in blood that was not his own, and why he had to resort to using explosives, but he gave no answer, just silence. Even when they got home, he still said nothing.

He hid in his room like he had so many times before, only instead of solace, the isolation forced him to think back on his actions, on what he had done to those people. The excuses he kept telling himself failed to comfort him. They had lost their potency, as if his mind had become immune to his own delusions.

So he decided to avoid thinking about anything, at least for a while.

He rummaged around, searching for the third memento he’d brought from Japan. While his father’s watch sat diligently around his wrist, and the photograph of him and his parents stood proud, his favorite CD in the world had simply been left to collect dust since he’d arrived in Italy.

Out of the Blue by Electric Light Orchestra.

In good times and in bad times, he would listen to it all the same. By this point, he’d practically memorized every lyric of all seventeen songs on the album, but he still wanted to listen to it again nonetheless. He popped the CD into the portable CD player he’d picked up earlier, finally finding a use for it. Immediately, the headphones on his ears rang the fade in to one of his favorite songs, Turn To Stone. It was just like old times, back when things weren’t so complicated and terrible. When his biggest worry was getting a bad grade in English class. Oh the irony. Nowadays, he could understand and speak English like a native, and more importantly, understand what the lyrics in the song were saying.

“I turned to stone, when you were gone, I turned to stone. Badum Dum Dum Dum. Turned to stone, when you coming home? I can’t go on.”

What the hell? That’s what was being said all along? How depressing. He could barely imagine a man turning to stone out of loneliness… except… he didn’t need to imagine it. He’d already met a man made of stone back in Japan: Angelo. The same Angelo who had murdered children and had been turned to stone by Josuke Higashikata, the same bastard who had sent Terunosuke to hell. No, Terunosuke didn’t have to imagine such a man at all. He had, after all, helped to end Angelo’s suffering by destroying his stone prison. Even if he was undeniably evil, he didn’t deserve to suffer
for years upon years for some petty grudge. Terunosuke would know.

Though that didn’t really fill the lyric. Angelo had turned to stone, but not because of loneliness. No one turned to stone or died because of loneliness. That would… just be… oh God.

Dad.

Without even noticing it, tears had welled up in his eyes and had started to roll down his face.

Dad had died like that, hadn’t he? While Terunosuke was in hell, Dad and everyone else had assumed him dead. With nothing left to live for, he started drinking and didn’t stop until he died.

All because Terunosuke had tried to have fun with Enigma.

It was his fault, wasn’t it? If he’d just pulled harmless pranks, the worst that would have happened was a punch to the gut. But instead, he let the power go to his head. He’d looked down upon all the shitheads in the world who thought that they were better than him in any way. For just a few minutes--not even an hour--he’d let himself become drunk with the new strength he had received.

Had he done things differently that day, if he had killed his opponents, or if they had killed him, or better yet, had he just ran away, he could have avoided all of this. And Dad would still be alive.

And he wouldn’t be sobbing into his hands.

Terunosuke tried to calm himself down, tried to tell himself that it was in the past, that it couldn’t be helped, but nothing worked. If anything, it just made things worse. Feeding himself lies just made him realize how much he’d been keeping everything inside. For months, he had been running away from having to deal with this exact moment. And now that the dam had broken, everything that he’d been holding back came rushing out all at once.

His cries got louder and louder each second. The world faded around him, leaving him all alone. There was no one except him anymore, not even his dreams would come to mock him.

He was completely alone. A result of his own selfishness and shortsightedness.

A hand touched his shoulder. A pair of soft arms held him from behind and pulled him close. A warm body hugged him tenderly. The headphones around his ears were pulled off and the CD player was shut down. His room was silent, save for the breath that gently caressed his skin.

“Tira?” He asked, wiping his tears away in shame.

“I’m Belinda.” She grasped his hand in hers, weaving their fingers together. “Don’t be embarrassed. You can cry if you need to. I’m here for you, and you’re here for me.”

Once again, he didn’t know what to say to her. The care she gave was clear. No matter what, she was there for him.

Knowing that, he allowed himself to fall into her embrace. Tears flowed unabated for what felt like hours.

She never left him.
There's a strange emphasis on hands in this chapter that I only noticed while in editing. This isn't completely without meaning, but it is for the most part.

I have No Tengo Dinero stuck in my head and thanks to listening to it so many times while writing this chapter, More has joined it.

I really liked how the concurrent stories wove together sort of like a movie. It might be a bit difficult to follow now that I think about it, but I hope it's understandable.

After this is the chapter I've been wanting to do for a long time now. Get ready for that!

As of the posting of this chapter, I have been writing Enigma Boy for a little over 2 years. It's slightly depressing to think that I work at such a slow pace, but then I realize that this process is a creative outlet, so it's fine if I don't rush myself.
Sunshine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunlight filtered through the closed blinds, shining directly in Terunosuke’s eyes. Morning brought a slew of feelings. The feeling of a great sadness throughout his entire body that had been washed away, a renewed, uncertain spirit, and a light body resting at the foot of his bed.

Tira, as h… Belinda, as he recalled from the previous night, had comforted him in his time of need. She had come into his room and wrapped herself around him like a loving snake. At some point in the night, he’d fallen asleep. At some point after that, she had tucked him into bed and had fallen asleep as well.

He had to admit, when her breathing was soft and her mouth wasn't moving, she was quite peaceful. If only she could keep that when she was awake.

A strand of hair lying in front of her face rose and fell whenever she would breathe. On thoughtless instinct, he reached out his right hand to move the strand away, a move he'd always wanted to try on a girl.

His right hand brushed against her velvety skin on accident.

In a flash, Belinda violently jerked awake. Her momentum was so sudden and so exaggerated that she ended up throwing herself off the bed. She hit the floor with a dull clatter of limbs.

“Owww… haha.” She tried to laugh it off, but the way she held her hand betrayed any sense of a joke.
“Are you alright?”
“Yeah, just f-ahh!”

He noticed that her index finger was red, swollen, and bent at an odd angle. It was definitely broken. Why she held a crumbling facade of cheerful toughness was beyond him. It wasn't like she was fooling him with that.

“You got injured during your job yesterday, huh?”
“Y-yeah.” She admitted. “My target broke my finger like it was a twig.”
“Sounds awful.”

As he thought on it, he realized his own injuries were still raw. His eyes were nearly black, his nose was swelled up, and bruises dotted his body like he was a dalmatian. They could both use medical attention.

“Let’s go see Salvatore.”

***

Salvatore hummed as his stand set Belinda’s bones back in place.
“That song still stuck in your head?” Terunosuke questioned as he waited patiently for his turn of medical attention.
“What song?” The doctor asked, oblivious of his own musicality.
“Nevermind.”
“So Sergio really followed through with his promise, huh? You three really killed those Scheggia members.” Salvatore broached suddenly.

“Yeah, that's right.” Terunosuke confirmed, leaving out that part where he had a breakdown, and that part where Belinda had to comfort him.

“We sure did!” Belinda replied enthusiastically. “You should have seen me at work, Sal! The guy I took on was a monster, but he was no match for Genesis and I! We ripped him…” She suddenly stopped her story when she realized that her audience wasn’t as engrossed as she was. Terunosuke looked away with guilt, while Salvatore clenched his fist--maybe he did it from anger over the deaths of human beings, maybe out of sadness that the girl he cared about was bragging about killing a man. Either way, nobody took her story well. “I… uh…”

She gulped down whatever she was trying to say.

“Sorry. It was wrong to say that. We were doing our job, but people still died. Even if they were the enemy, we shouldn't be glad that they are dead.”

Terunosuke and Salvatore both looked at her. Salvatore held a sad smile, as if he’d keenly known for years what she'd just figured out. Terunosuke, however, could barely bring himself to accept what she’d said. Those that he had killed were evil, he’d convinced himself as much. If killing them was still a bad thing to do, then some serious problems had just arisen.

He refused to think too hard about that.

***

“Carta!” Sergio greeted over the phone when they got back to the apartment. Terunosuke took the cue.

“Hey, Pane. How are you.”

“Pane? Just call me Serg… oh yeah. Good catch, Terunos… oops.”

Why even bother?

“Why did you call me?” Terunosuke asked.

“Ah! I've got news.”

“Good or bad?”

“Depends on your point of view. We're being outsourced.”

“O-outsourced? They're giving our smuggling jobs to China?”

“Outsourced was the wrong word. We're 'relinquishing our interim assignments.'”

“Interim? Oh! You mean our assassination work?”

“Bingo! Apparently, we're too inefficient to be entrusted with 2 departments at once. Turns out, you're supposed to take out targets that the higher ups choose, not pick your own. And you're supposed to keep up with smuggling deliveries at the same time. And you're supposed to take out targets in a single day, not a whole week.”

You're also supposed to kill only the target, not a dozen innocent people, Terunosuke wanted to say, but bit his tongue to stop himself.

“That's for the best. I wasn't cut out for that kind of work.” He joked instead.

“Well lucky for you we’re back to having a smuggling-only policy. There's a backlog of deliveries with your name on it.”

“Of course there's a backlog. Just out of curiosity, who took the assassination assignment off our hands?”

“Uh… the letter says La Nuova Squadra di Esecuzione will be headed by someone named M.M. before they find a permanent leader.”

“M.M.?” Terunosuke wondered aloud. “Do you know anyone with that name?”
“It’s not ringing any bells. The only guy I can think of is…”

The realization both struck them at the same time.

“Marco Montagne?!”

***

After spending the rest of the morning talking over plans for the coming days, Terunosuke finally hung up. Due to Sergio’s asinine volunteering suggestion, the smuggling department had been set back to the point that they’d have to work about a week nonstop just to get back to par, but at least he was allowed to relax for the rest of the day. A promise to pull more members into the department had been made, but who knew how long that would take? Terunosuke didn’t mind losing his special status as one of the only members in the smuggling department. Becoming just another face among the members would be fine by him if it meant less work. Maybe then the bastards from Scheggia would finally leave him alone for good. And better yet, he and Belinda wouldn’t have to bear the entire weight of the department.

Speaking of Belinda, he hadn't seen her for a while. Did she leave without him noticing?

Before he could look around for her, he felt a sensation of feathery scales wrap around his eyes as his vision went dark.

“Guess who?” Belinda's voice asked. Terunosuke didn't really get the idea of asking such an obvious question, but choose to play along despite it.

“Hmm… I’m not sure who this could be.”

“Terunosuke, it's me, Belinda.” Genesis uncoiled from his eyes, giving him a view of a girl who looked strangely worried.

Terunosuke was at a loss.

“You seriously didn't know who I was?” She said.

“W-what?”

“Honestly, you've been staying inside too much recently.”

“What?”

“Think about it. You spent most of the week in that soggy apartment. Now you can't even recognize my voice. It’s just not healthy. You obviously need to get outside more.”

“...huh?” It was like trying to follow a madman’s ramblings.

“That's why I got these.” Her hand moved in front of her stand’s mouth. Upon command, Genesis produced a pair of tickets.

“How in the…?”

“You act like you've never seen Genesis use her stand ability.” Belinda deduced nonchalantly. “I can fit all kinds of things into my baby here. I even stuffed an entire cinderblock down her throat for safekeeping.”

“I think we're getting off topic.” Terunosuke said. “What exactly are these tickets?”

“Oh! They're for our trip to Blue Grotto.”

“Blue Grotto? That some band or something?”

“Wow! You're really naïve, aren't you!” She said as if it were a good thing. “It's a natural cave formation that's world-renowned for its beauty. Furthermore, It's a place that we're going to together to lift your spirits.”

“I'm not really sure I'm in…”

“It's really beautiful!”
“...the mood for something…”
“You'll love it!”
“...like that today.”
“You're going and that's final.”

Like a madman.

“This is for your own good, Terunosuke.” She belted with a startling amount of insistence.
“Fine! I'll go! Happy?!”
“Overjoyed. It's a date.”

With the matter resolved, she bolted to her room in a flash.

A date?! Was that part of the agreement?

What the hell was he getting himself into?

***

Terunosuke really didn't understand what was going through Belinda's head. Was the scatterbrained, mile-a-minute thought process she'd used to rope him into a day of “fun” an underhanded tactic or the real deal? Things were easier back when he knew her only as Tira. Back then, she would just tease him and he might have teased her back. She didn't leave any openings anymore, none that he could spot at least.

He looked across the speedboat at her to gather some sort of information to clarify his questions. The girl smiling in the sun didn't offer any answers, but at least she was easy to look at.

“Hey, Terunosuke, you're staring again. You've been doing that a lot lately. Finally accepted your feelings for me?”
“Keep dreaming. Hell will freeze over before you get that wish to come true.”
“Hell might freeze over, but you've got to be burning up in that long coat of yours. Why are you wearing it on such a sunny day?”
“My long coat?” He repeated, secretly glad that she'd finally called it by its proper name. “Habit. I guess.” He ran his hand across his sleeves. “It’s something I’ve worn ever since I came to Naples. Wearing it all the time connects me with my hometown in some way, if that makes sense.”

Belinda nodded, seemingly understanding what he was trying to say. Unfortunately, she wasn't done talking.
“So let's say you'd never joined Passione. If you stayed home and never joined an evil gang, what would you do?”
“What would I do?” He questioned. “As in...?”
“What kind of job would you have? Well... I think I would have liked to be in an intellectual field, like a scientist or something. The more I think about it, the more I think I would’ve wanted to be... a psychologist.”
“A psychologist, huh? You actually like talking to people? You sure don't seem like it sometimes.”
A few drops of annoyance coated the last sentence.

“It’s not that I like talking to people. More like I enjoy understanding how they tick, how the gears in their heads turn. Helping people with their problems would just be an added benefit.”

Belinda smiled at him.
“Thanks for sharing that with me. I really appreciate it.”
Her reaction didn't seem fake at all, not one bit. Did that mean that her stupidity earlier had been a strategy to get him to open up?

“What about you? What did you wanna do before you joined the gang?”

Belinda chuckled ominously. Genesis slithered around her neck. “I wanted to be a pirate!” She exclaimed with blasting pride.

She leapt to her feet while the speedboat was still in motion, boldly posing as if she were the captain of a fierce crew. Her sudden movement, however, proved to be her downfall.

Literally.

Her center of gravity shifted too suddenly for her to withstand. In an instant, she was thrown into the water.

Terunosuke didn't even try to contain his laughter. “Ahahaha! Some pirate you would've been!”

“Yeah yeah. Laugh it up, moron. Just remember this when something embarrassing happens to you.”

She really was genuine, wasn't she?

Genuinely stupid!

***

“That was great.” Belinda said for the 50th time.

“Yeah.” Terunosuke said for the 3rd time. “Incredible how someone can fall off a boat that many times in a day.”

“Yeah yeah, but that made it even more fun.”

“I'll take your word for it.”

They both walked back into the apartment, locking the door behind them. After an exciting day full of “fun" and fun, Terunosuke was totally worn out. There was only so much carefree enjoyment he could have in a single day.

“Night. I'm going to sleep.” He mumbled as he shuffled towards his room, ready to pass out as soon as his head hit the pillow.

“Hold on.” Belinda ordered, springing to his side faster than humanly possible. “Did you have a good time today?”

“Yeah. Great time. I liked it best when your stupidity overflowed. Nice change of pace.”

“Ha! You fell for it, huh?”

“You're the one who fell. Lots of times.”

“That was an act. A joking sort of thing.”

“A joke? Seriously? What for?”

“For you.”

“Uh huh. Dinner and a show, right? You're not really fooling me here.”

“Jeez, you don't know how to take a gesture of kindness. Can't you tell I want to be closer to you?”

Belinda stepped close--uncomfortably close--to him. Their eyes stared into the other's at almost parallel, save a little height advantage on Terunosuke's part.

“How am I supposed to get closer if you don’t understand my feelings?” She asked.

“You could tell me…”
“Or I could show you.”

He didn't have anything to say to that so he stood in claustrophobic silence. Eventually, she would cave into embarrassment like she always did and everyone would laugh about it the next day.

A strange something happened, however. That same claustrophobic distance became a comfortable closeness. Maybe it was because of what she had done last night, maybe it was from her mischief of the day. Whatever the reason, her simple presence felt calming, enjoyable, even if she was right next to him.

Of course, who wouldn't enjoy a cute girl standing right next to them?

Belinda felt the same way, he could tell without words. Her beautiful smile was natural, as if she genuinely enjoyed standing right there next to him. No. She definitely enjoyed being close to him, considering she leaned forward and kissed him.

He only realized halfway through, but the act that had only happened in his deepest fantasies was happening. Reflexively, he returned the gesture.

And then it ended just as quickly as it had started.

Belinda beamed a smile as she pulled away without warning. Instead of explaining or continuing, she walked back to her room.

“See you in the morning.” She stated matter-of-factly.

Terunosuke would continue to see her for the rest of the night as he replayed the memory of her lips over and over, again and again until he died a little.

***

The next morning was a mixed bag. Terunosuke and Belinda didn’t look each other in the eye for most of the day. Stolen glances and accidental eye contact were all they risked.

“Are you guys feeling alright?” Sergio asked as he gave them the first of their overloaded assignments.

“Of course!” They both answered in instant unison.

Sergio let sleeping dogs lie.

Eventually, their frayed nerves settled down and they settled into their work. Smuggling was something that both of them and both of their stands were naturally suited for. Perhaps that was why they were able to rebound from their nervousness. Or maybe it was because they had to deliver so much shit per day that being awkward around each other just wasn’t an option. He just wished Sergio wasn’t such a slave driver.

And so things calmed down.

The backlog dissipated along with the discomfort Belinda’s presence carried. Proximity once again brought comfort to his worries. He even enjoyed the sound of her voice every now and again, something he never thought he would ever admit to himself. Just went to show he supposed.

“How old are you, Terunosuke?” She asked one day once they had finished work.

“I’m 17. Why do you ask?”

“17, huh? Dunno if that’s acceptable… are you willing to notch it down a couple years?”
He may have been too quick to judge on the voice subject.

“I’ll go ask Sergio for a new partner.”
“I knew I was older than you, but if it’s only by a little then there’s no point in bragging about it.”
“Seriously, I’m going to ask for a reassignment, maybe even a transfer to a different department.”
“What’s your birthday? There might be hope yet?”

Such intimate details about his life were normally under lock and key, but the dueling feelings of comfort and annoyance she radiated incentivized an answer.

“The 20th? That’s next Tuesday! Why didn’t you tell me sooner?!?”
“So about that partner reassignment.”
“Fine fine. So... March, April, May…”

While she calculated her age in comparison to his, a shadow of a thought crept into the back of his mind. The date on his father’s tombstone was important, wasn’t it? The day he died, March 21st, was the day after Terunosuke’s birthday. What should have been a day they celebrated together was the day he’d decided that life wasn’t worth living anymore.

Another case of Terunosuke’s selfishness hurting those around him. If only he’d chosen to differently back then…

“Hey, Terunosuke! You still awake?!” Belinda snapped.
“Ah! What?”
“Don’t ‘what’ me! Do you know what year it is?!?”
“Uh… 2001? Why?”
“Because you clearly don’t know how old you are. You’re 18, not 17. Don't lie to me!”

Huh?

“I don’t follow…”
“If you were born in ‘82 and it’s 2001 now that means you’re 18, seeing how you’re birthday hasn’t passed yet. You seriously forgot your own age?!”

That... couldn’t be right. He was 17! There was no way he’d fuck up something so basic… unless… he had lost some time along the way...

The time he’d spent in the book, the locked-in nightmare that had caused everything, was the root of the discrepancy. How had he not realized it earlier?

“Well, Terunosuke?!”
“Uh… I guess things got mixed up somewhere along the line.” He lied. Judging from her expression, Belinda didn’t buy it for a second, but either didn’t care enough to point out his lie, or had different avenues to pursue. Her frustration soon dissolved to melodramatic misery as she started to pout.

“I thought I was gonna have some power over you. I’m 18 too, but March 20th comes before July 16th, so you win in the end. Ho-hum.”
“Are you upse-”
“Hooo-Hummm.”
“Why are yo—”
“Hoooooo-Hummmmm.”
“Do you want to celebrate my birthday?”
“…yes.”
“Alright then…”
“Fantastic. It’s a date then.”

The words hung in the air for a few seconds before they really sunk in. Did that mean what he thought it meant? Belinda, to her credit, stuck around this time with a curious look in her eyes, waiting to see how her experiment panned out.

Terunosuke felt butterflies in his stomach and a rapid drumbeat in his chest… well… normally he would have, but not at this point. Something about her earnest, if irritating, M.O. was endearing beyond words. Her cute face didn’t hurt either.

“Yeah. It’s a date.”

She instantly beamed a smile as intense as the sun.
“That’s great! I’ll see you then!”
“You’ll see me before that too, though.”
“That’s true… well goodnight!”

In classic fashion, she turned on a dime and retreated back to her room, slamming the door shut. Terunosuke did the same.

As he splayed out on his bed to process the light-speed whirlwind he’d witnessed, he had to wonder if all of that was some evil plan to get his birthday and make him agree to a date.

Probably not.

Probably.

***

Terunosuke didn’t know the first thing about dating. Belinda didn’t know the first thing about dating. But when they were together…

…

They still had no idea what they were doing.

So they decided to locate their first date in the safest location they could think of: a café.

“You know, cafés always have the most interesting things happen around them.” He threw out.
“How so?”
“Well for starters, I have a habit of finding the most interesting people for better or for worse at these places.”
“Does that include me?” She asked while smirking.
“Not quite. That honor belongs to a strip club, remember? As I was saying, I’ve had all sorts of experiences at cafés. I met Sergio at a café, I fought a gu—”
“Didn’t you already tell me this story back in Algeria?” She interrupted.
“Oh…”

Crap. His only plan had been ruined!

What now?! Think fast!

“Tell me about yourself, Belinda, I feel like I hardly know anything personal about you.” He said.
Good job, good job. High-fives all around. Superb question, Terunosuke!

“Ah… I’m not so sure… that kind of thing is a little… personal.

Bad job, bad job. Demerits all around. Shit question, Terunosuke.

“But… I suppose I can tell you a few things.”

Greatest question known to mankind. He was a damn genius.

“When I was younger, I would get sick quite easily. It seemed like I was always in and out of hospitals or running some sort of fever. Because of this, my parents had a tough time making ends meet when they constantly needed to take care of me.”

“What changed?” He asked. “The most you've done since I've known you is sneeze a little.”

“Genesis came into my life. When she arrived, she solved my problem overnight. Her ability to ‘swallow’ things applies to anything you could imagine, my sicknesses included. If I ever get so much as a flu, Genesis can take the entire disease out of my system, then dump it out later without a sweat. She's a treasure, isn’t she?”

Belinda capped off her story by stroking her stand’s feathers in appreciation. Terunosuke wanted to know a couple things: how Genesis actually extracted viruses from her system, and where her parents were now. Figuring he probably wouldn't get a straightforward answer to either one, he settled for petting Genesis as well. It was the least he could do for keeping Belinda healthy.

As he was about to pull his right hand back, she grabbed it with lightning precision. Her fingers threaded between his and they were suddenly holding hands. What a sly girl.

He couldn't say he disliked the feeling. In fact he quite enjoyed the sensation of her soft skin against his, though he wouldn't let her have the satisfaction of knowing that.

“Consider this your birthday present.” She said.

“Cheapskate.” He replied with a smile.

As far as presents went, he could definitely admit it was one of the best he'd ever received.

The moment, however, was not destined to last forever. A pair of men, one younger, one older, walked into the café, arguing all the while. Sergio and Salvatore.

It would’ve been a great sight to see Sergio walking without crutches for the first time in months if he hadn’t come in during the date while arguing with Salvatore.

“You knew exactly what you were getting them into." Salvatore insisted in a low, intimidating tone.

“I didn't expect him to mess up THAT badly. Didn't know he had it in him.” Sergio replied, trying and failing to act nonchalant.

They shot back and forth at one another, trading barbs without restraint. Terunosuke and Belinda couldn't help but stare. After a few more potshots, the two noticed their subordinates. At the same moment, the couple realized they were still holding hands. They separated as their friends came by, but the damage had been done.

“Terunosuke, Tira. You seem to be enjoying each other's company.” Salvatore said with a grin.

“Dude! Did you seriously get a girlfriend before I did?!” Sergio whined.

The difference in leadership was evident.
Terunosuke felt the urge to reflexively deny the claims to save face. Hiding his purpose and keeping secrets was second nature. But he didn't want to, not anymore. What was the point in obscuring the truth? He was nineteen after all.

“That's right. Belinda and I are dating.” He said.

She looked surprised at him for a second before smiling. Salvatore and Sergio were taken aback far more than expected, as if it was some major revelation.

“I wouldn't have guessed…” Sergio remarked.
“I don't think it's a good fit for her.” Salvatore agreed.

The nerve!

“Hey! If you're going to talk bad about our relationship, at least have the decency to not say it to my face!”
“Oh! No, Terunosuke. We weren't surprised about that.” Salvatore explained. “That was just the first time we'd heard Tira’s real name.”

Processing…
Processing…..
Processiiiiing…….
Shit!

Belinda was not pleased to say the least.

***

With the moment irrevocably ruined, Salvatore and Sergio decided to stay. The topic of conversation transitioned from emotional confessions to everyday discussion.

“Really wish my tea would get here already.” Sergio complained.
“Get over it.” Salvatore said with a rather foul voice.
“Yeah, whatever.”

Terunosuke and Belinda glanced at each other and let the spat pass.

“So... anything new?” Belinda asked.
“Just work. Nothing much.”
“Same here.” Salvatore said. “You’d think that we’d be able to forgo paperwork after winning the gang war, but no such luck.”
“Gang war? Did we finally defeat Scheggia?” Terunosuke asked. Sergio faked a chuckle at that, a gesture that earned Salvatore’s scornful glare.
“I fucking wish. It'd solve a hell of a lot of problems in the long run, but good luck getting the quack to understand that.”
“Sergio, you have no idea what you’re talking about. And we’re not having this argument anymore. End of discussion.” Sergio held his hands up and let the tension bubble away, though he rolled his eyes as he did it. “No, Terunosuke, I’m talking about Passione’s victory over the Mafia in the 1980’s.”
“The mafia? I thought WE were the mafia, right?” Belinda seemed to share his sentiment. “Not quite. ‘Mafia’ is a bit of a catch-all, but it originally described a specific syndicate. The eponymous Mafia is the one that Passione defeated and absorbed.”
“Hold on a second, Doc.” Sergio interjected. “I thought I heard Passione started in ‘86 or ‘87. How’d they take down the Mafia when they were just starting out?”

“The Maxi Trial.” The doctor answered simply. “It was a gigantic group arrest the size of which had never been seen. Practically the entirety of the Mafia’s leadership was hauled into prison and had to stand trial all at once. In such a weakened state, the remaining forces were no match for Passione.”

“Well still. They should’ve had some reserves to fend them off. They’re THE Mafia after all!” Terunosuke reasoned.

“Remember, the Mafia didn’t have stands, Passione did. After the victory, the Camorra, Naples’ own homegrown crime syndicate, brokered a deal that saw them merge with Passione. Of course, their leaders were slaughtered a week later along with most of their underlings, making Passione the only dog in town. It’s been this way ever since the early ‘90s.”

Everyone sat back to take all that in. Passione was on another level of brutality than previously imagined. They didn't just defeat their rivals, they destroyed them. Sergio sipped the tea that had finally arrived.

Belinda was the next one to speak.

“How do you fit in all of this, Sal?”

“Fit in? How do you mean?”

“Why are you in Passione?”

“Oh that? I saved my son, Michael, by killing a few Passione members.” Terunosuke knew about that, but he’d never heard anything past it.

“What's the story with that? There had to be SOMETHING, right?” He asked.

Salvatore adjusted himself in his seat, as if the question made him physically uncomfortable.

“There is. And I trust you all enough to tell it to you.”

***

Salvatore Medici. Born in Agira, Sicily. Raised in Palermo until leaving to study medicine in Naples. To all who knew him, he was a respectable young man. One night, his fate would hit a snag. A man not much older than him crossed his path while he was walking home. The man, bleeding profusely, was in dire need of medical attention. Being the upstanding man that he was, Salvatore treated the man’s wounds and allowed him to stay in his apartment as he recuperated from his brush with death. During his stay, the man introduced himself as Riziero Morricone and revealed that he was a member of Passione, the organization that had suddenly dismantled the Mafia faster than the government could’ve ever dreamed. This came as quite a shock, but in the face of potential opposition, Salvatore allied himself with the winning side. While he was asked to lend his skills here and there on occasion, he was not given authority nor was he forced to do anything immoral.

For years, he was able to save lives, operating on leaders and average members alike. His ethics may have been compromised, but that didn't matter in the face of helping his fellow man.

Everything would be turned upside down eventually. In the summer of 1990, Salvatore overheard a conversation between some Passione members. Apparently, a child had been seized as ransom for a couple who failed to pay protection fees. Being the moral man that he was, Salvatore made his way to where the boy was being kept in hopes that he could broker a deal between the two parties.

Nothing could have prepared him for what he was getting himself into.
When he arrived at the back-alley warehouse that the members had mentioned, he was threatened at gunpoint. One of the ransomers hadn’t recognized him until he looked Salvatore in the eye. As soon as he realized who the doctor was, he gave him a heartfelt hug. The young man was one of the many members that Salvatore had saved over the years.

Before Salvatore had arrived, the member explained, the mother and father had attempted to break their son free. That decision had led to them being shot and bleeding out on the warehouse floor. The member murmured something about what a shame it was. Salvatore nearly vomited. Yet, there was another matter to take care of. The member and his associates still had possession of the newly-orphaned boy. At some point in it all, one of the men there saw his opportunity to submit to his base desires.

When Salvatore made it to the boy, everything in his world shattered.

The boy, strapped to a table, had been… treated in a way that a child should never be treated. Ever.

Salvatore vomited as soon as he saw the result. The member and his associates had a laugh at his expense, and offered him a chance to partake.

Salvatore didn’t answer. While they were distracted, he made a choice of his own that he knew he would not regret. One of the associates had set his gun down before partaking in the vile act, not wanting it to get in the way. A full magazine begged to be used, to fly at supersonic speeds, to destroy, to kill.

Salvatore jammed the gun into the man who was standing over the boy. He pulled the trigger twice. Blood and brains splattered on his face. He turned the weapon to the other bastards, firing a bullet through each of them before they could understand what was happening.

After a few seconds, only the member who had greeted Salvatore at the door remained. Multiple wounds had carved through his body, leaving him feeble and suffering. He begged for forgiveness. Unfortunately, Salvatore would never forgive him, nor did he have any bullets left. He raised his foot high, then slammed it onto the animal’s face.

He did not stop until his head was ground into paste.

Salvatore was then alone in the world, his partnership with Passione effectively severed. But he was not truly alone, the boy that had been caught in all of this softly wept, barely loud enough to be heard in silence. Salvatore draped his coat over the child's naked body, holding him close and promising that he would never suffer again.

He did everything that he could for the boy. While it was tragic, the best he could do was pay for his hospital stay and arrange for an orphanage to take him in. It would be better if he could adopt him, but he knew that he was living on borrowed time.

After a few days, he arrived home to find a man sitting in his living room. Riziero Morricone nodded at him, simply noting that he was there. Salvatore said a final prayer before he was interrupted. He was instructed to follow the man he had once saved as if he had some sort of choice in the matter. Even if he attempted to run, he knew that he’d be gunned down. They walked all the way across town to Stadio San Paolo where Italy and Argentina were facing off in the World Cup semi-finals. A few minutes into the match, nothing had happened, Morricone just watched the match with disinterest. Salvatore demanded to know what they were doing there. Morricone explained that he would be given a special deal, unique to him alone. Since he had saved lives before his murder spree, he would be granted the chance to either join Passione full time or be killed. Of course, there was no real choice in that either.
Morricone laughed. Apparently, the leader for the Italian squad was named Salvatore Schillaci. What a funny coincidence. With all his might, Salvatore fought against the impending doom around him. Two Salvatores in two different lines of work. The doctor prayed that the player would somehow win the match single-handedly, as if his victory would give him hope.

Italy lost in the shootout 4-3.

So Salvatore Medici became an official member of Passione. He worked long hours for modest pay, though he was never abused or extorted, he was simply made to stay loyal. Considering the people he was dealing with, he was lucky.

A few months after joining, he received a letter. The orphanage the boy had been sent to live at reported that he was having difficulties getting along with the other children. He would isolate himself for long periods of time. Whenever he would be forced to play, he was prone to fits of violence that had left more than one of the other children with injuries. The people in charge knew that keeping the child around any longer would be a disservice to him, so they asked Salvatore for help. With the child’s parents dead and no next of kin, he knew the boy had no one else to turn to.

No one except him.

He had made a promise to that boy that he would never have to suffer again. And with his life now back in his hands, he could make right by that promise. The boy became his ward and he became the boy’s guardian. After everything was arranged, he met the boy again, under better circumstances, thankfully.

It occurred to him that they had never been formally introduced to one another. He greeted the boy as if it was the first time, giving his name and offering his hand. The boy looked up at him with cautious, untrusting eyes. Familiarity won out in the end, however, as he recognized him as the man that had saved his life. He met Salvatore’s hand with his own and introduced himself as Michael.

That was the first day Salvatore spent with his son.

***

Silence settled over the air. Everyone absorbed the story in their own individual way. For Terunosuke, the most important part of that story was the surprise that Salvatore’s last name was Medici. If revealing one’s first name was a sign of trust, what did a last name represent? Double trust? Triple?

Whatever the case, he choose to keep the thought to himself as he mulled over the other aspects of the story. The med student who simply did good for anyone, the doctor who took lives to save a child, and the father who gave a boy a new life. Salvatore had been all of these without Terunosuke ever knowing.

Sergio, however, took a far different message away from the parable.

“Wait, wait, wait.”
“What’s wrong?”
“You’re saying your assistant, Michael, is…”
“Is what?”
“He’s seriously your son?!”

***
“Congratulations, birthday boy, you managed to do pretty well on your first date.” Belinda said when they got back home.

“Great. It's all downhill from here now. Nowhere to go but down.”

“Just take the compliment, smartass.”

Not wanting to push his luck, he did exactly that.

After an exhausting day of relaxing with friends, he flopped onto the living room’s couch. The television practically begged him to watch it. With the screen starting right at him, he flipped the machine on. Belinda slid down beside him, resting her head on his shoulder.

***

After his birthday, watching television together became something of a habit for them. It wasn’t like they did it every single night. They would just watch what was on. Shows, straight-to-TV movies, documentaries, even the news from time to time.

On one such occasion in April, a special news alert hit the airways late at night. Apparently, some sort of biochemical weapon had been released on the streets of Rome by some uncredited terrorist group. The civilian casualties were unknown, but were estimated to be in the hundreds.

With nothing to do about the situation, Terunosuke and Belinda could only stay glued in place for hours until they fell asleep. They awoke in the morning with the news that not only had there been civilian casualties, but also mass hallucinations as an aftershock effect.

What a strange attack.

Belinda thought it was the Soviets even though the USSR had disintegrated a decade ago. Terunosuke guessed it was Israel or Egypt, whichever one hated Italy. When they brought up the question with Sergio, he was firm in his belief that some Middle East country was the culprit, probably Iran. He called up Salvatore, who was of the opinion that the attack was domestic, like the Oklahoma City bombing had been.

There was no consensus among any of them, and it certainly felt like they were all incorrect.

Not that there was anything to do about it anyway.

***

It seemed like the attack on Rome was just the beginning of the excitement. As if unprecedented terrorism wasn't enough, a bombshell announcement was dropped in everyone's laps a few days later. The content of the message wasn't even the biggest surprise, though it raised eyebrows nonetheless. The true surprise was that the message, which brought words that no one ever thought they'd ever read, came in the most nonchalant manner known to man.

“The boss of Passione will be holding a personal meeting. If you have received this letter, you will attend.”

It seemed so… offhanded, as if this was some placeholder message that was supposed to be replaced by the real deal. But no. Just a simple letter personally addressed to him.

So the boss was going to show his face for the first time in years like it was no big deal, an everyday occurrence typical for a distinguished official.

No matter how long Terunosuke thought about it, he couldn't make it add up. It didn't; IT
COULDN'T! Why? For what reason? He was invited, Belinda was invited, Sergio and Salvatore were invited! What was the boss thinking?! Even lowly smugglers were called upon.

Was this some Scheggia trick designed to get back at him?

Whatever the cause, he couldn't make heads tails of anything.

***

The meeting was held at a mansion on some villa outside the city limits. It had an air of sophistication that would have fit a gathering for disgustingly wealthy socialites instead of gangsters. Golden sunlight blanketed the path leading up to the building. A breeze of warm wind rustled the late spring leaves.

Terunosuke felt like he was about to puke. His stomach wasn't used to the level of class on display. Suits personally made by the biggest names in the industry, unamused faces that couldn't give a rat's ass about his input, a heavy atmosphere that could crush the weak and the innocent.

This wasn't where he belonged. He belonged in a classroom, an office, a video rental store. Anywhere but the place he was.

“Everyone here looks so serious…” He murmured to Belinda. She sheepishly nodded in agreement. At least there was someone who shared his anxieties. It made the ordeal easier to bear.

“Look. Even Salvatore is getting in on it too.” Sergio said.

The doctor, for his part, was dressed to the level he normally wore, yet carried himself in conversations as if he was the most important man in the world, a far cry from the approachable modesty that was expected. Was he actually the same man, or just a bodysnatcher masquerading as their friend? The latter. Definitely.

As their group finally filed into the building, they were directed to a crowded waiting room. Familiar faces lined the walls. Department leaders from all across the gang were waiting for their time to meet the boss face to face. Trusted underlings from other departments had also been extended the invitation. Terunosuke didn't feel so out of place.

“Shit. Look who it is.” Sergio groaned, pointing across the room. Terunosuke followed his finger to an intimidating man who was in the middle of an important-looking conversation. Riziero Morricone was just as fear-inducing from a distance as he was up close. Even a simple glance at him was enough for blood to run cold. If only Salvatore had let him die...

“Thanks for the heads up. Morricone scares the sh-”

“That’s wrong.”

“Nothing like that happened.”

“Watch your tone, children.” He scoffed with the arrogance of a libertine aristocrat. “You're
“Insulting the leader of the new and improved assassination squad.”
“Interim leader, that is.” Sergio said, annoyed that he wasn’t getting due respect as an actual department leader.
“You’re point?”
“How in the hell did you even get this position?!”

Before they could banish him to a small island nation 2000 kilometers off the coast of Africa, a man walked into the room and directed the 5 members of the smuggling department to follow him. Somehow, Marco Montagne was mistaken for a part of them and was brought along for the ride. Salvatore was brought along due to association, that made sense. The same wasn’t true for for the cockroach.

“Psst. Carta.” Sergio whispered as they walked, using his alias for the work-related event. “What do you think the boss is like?”
“3 meters tall, biceps bigger than his head, and his stand allows him to turn water into fire.”
“Interesting theory.” Belinda said, joining in on the conversation. “I bet he’s really a woman, except she’s really ugly so she acts like she’s a man so people don’t make fun of her. She recently got a lot of plastic surgery done and now she actually looks female.”
“That’s one of the dumbest things I’ve heard all day.” Salvatore interjected. “The boss is clearly an average man, just with social anxiety. His New Year’s resolution was to be more social and this is just one of the results.”
“You’re all idiots.” Sergio said. “It’s obvious that he’s on his deathbed. With a ticking clock, he’s trying to do all the things he wanted to do in life, but was just too busy to do. Just watch, he’ll make Salvatore teach him how to juggle.”

Terunosuke was proud to be a part of such a synchronized group of friends. Not only did they all pick up on the joke inst-

“Wrong. All of it. Everyone.” Marco Montagne stated. “The boss is by all accounts paranoid and highly cautious in every aspect of life. He doesn’t meet people because he doesn’t trust anyone. This entire event is a sham. We’re not even going to meet the real boss here, it’ll just be some actor who calls himself the boss.”

“Can we see the boss yet?”
“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”
“No one asked for your damn opinion.”
“Climb up a mountain and jump off, shithead!”

***

They finally made it to the door separating them from the boss's room after far too long. Everyone settled into silent anticipation as the guide explained that in order to show loyalty, they would all have to kiss the boss's hand. It was allegedly a display of obedience, a public display that would let both parties know that orders were orders. Terunosuke thought that it was just an excuse for the boss to have men kiss his body.

Finally, the awaited moment arrived. Despite the calm attitudes they all displayed, they were anxious as to what was in store for them. What was was the boss like? Why was he coming out of the shadows now? Was he a she?

There was only one way to find out.

The doors creaked open as light beamed through the opening. Inside the room, a blond teenager sitting at a throne-like chair caught their eyes. A young man wearing a cap leaned against the far
wall and stared out a window. Next to the sitting teen was a turtle with a jewel-encrusted shell.

So... where was the boss?

“Boss Giorno, the smuggling department is here to see you.” The guide announced.

“Thank you. Send them in.” The teenager said. Why was he the one to respond?

The group shuffled in awkwardly, unsure of who they should walk to before collectively settling on the teenager. They crowded around him as their actions stalled and everyone looked to someone else for guidance.

“Boss?” Sergio finally asked.
“Refer to me as Boss Giorno.” The teen, Giorno presumably, stated.
“You're... the boss?”
“That is correct. You are the leader of the smuggling department, correct?”
“Y-yeah...”
“I hope you perform to the best of your abilities.”
“Thank... you?”

Again, everyone was confused. Why was the “Boss” so young?

“I knew it.” Marco Montagne declared. “Come clean Boss Giorno, you're an actor, aren't you. You can tell me in good faith, I promise not to put it on your record.”
“That is not true. I am the true boss of Passione, nothing less.”
“Hold on.” Salvatore said. “Passione was founded more than a decade ago. You're telling us you founded a criminal syndicate while you were breastfeeding?”
“Do not concern yourself with trivial matters.”

A serious look in his eyes pierced through everyone in sight. If he wanted to, he could kill them all in a moment, at least that's what it felt like. Some nebulous, dark feeling swam around in Terunosuke's guts. Something unknown was wrong with Boss Giorno, like he’d met him someplace, somewhere and had some sort of hellish experience with him.

He didn't trust him for a second.

With introductions out of the way, there was little to do except prove their loyalty. Everyone in the group pressed their lips onto Boss Giorno’s hand, proving that he was the most important person in the room or something, Terunosuke wasn't sure. The only person who was exempt was Marco Montagne for obvious reasons.

And that was it.

The guide took them back to where the other members were, they all met with some other members, and then they left together, minus one profile writer.

“Think he was the eldest son of the old boss?”
“I say he was some pupil groomed from childhood.”
“Could be a trusted friend.”
“Former lovers. No doubt.”

***

Giorno was the new boss. Nothing they could do would change that, not that they would want to anyway. Life went on, just with the knowledge that Passione was ruled by a kid. Other than that,
though, things were smooth as usual.

For some reason, they made less deliveries than before. Sergio explained that it was because the drugs that they would deliver to dealers had been discontinued in “certain markets”. Whatever that meant.

That was the issue of it all: Terunosuke didn't know anything. In the fantastic, immortal performance of life, he was a no-name bit player, a speck of paint on a colossal canvas. There had been a story beyond Giorno’s ascension to power. A story kept hidden in shadows, unknown to no-names like Terunosuke. He'd never know that story, not all of it. Giorno's history, Passione’s founding, the “real” boss, hell, the reason why he was even there if he was so useless.

“You worry too much.” Belinda said, brushing off his worries. “You're here because you need me. That's good enough, right?”

Probably. He didn't know anything anymore. Belinda was the only thing in his life that still made sense. He liked her, she liked him. No complications.

At least he hoped so.

***

There were obviously complications.

It would be childish to believe that their relationship would be completely free of conflict, but neither of them were prepared for the difficulties inherent to maintaining a relationship. Since both of them had been the other's first relationship, they were a bit behind the curve. When they finally did have a fight, it was over something minor and was over just as soon as it began, thankfully.

Belinda had taken it upon herself to do the majority of the cooking for the both of them. Terunosuke would have objected to her burdening herself for his sake, but since he didn't know how to cook without using a microwave he let her make her own decisions. It really was convenient to date the girl he already lived with.

One night, she had made a dish, some traditional pasta concoction that looked great, but had an issue.

It had mushrooms.

Under no circumstances would he eat those fucking things. Ever.

Not wanting to offend, he ate around the issue.

“Do you not like what I made?” Belinda asked.

“I hate those fucking things.” He responded.

“Well... sorry for doing so horrible.”

She seemed genuinely hurt by his words, as if she was taking the mushroom’s side. He could feel his inexperience shining through.

“W-what are you upset about?”

“When you insult someone’s work, Terunosuke, they have the right to be mad.”

“Oh…” Her look of anger was replaced with one of confusion. “Why do you have a vendetta against mushrooms?”
The question made his sweat freeze. He should be fine with the question, with the situation. But he wasn't. It was stupid of him, but that was just the way things were.

“That's... personal.”

Her confusion shifted to anger again, though it was more subdued this time.

“Fine. If you can't trust me, I can't expect you to trust anyone. Forget I said anything.”

She made short work of the rest of her plate and shut herself in her room for the rest of the night.

Even Terunosuke knew that that was a bad sign.

***

A sword was hanging over his head, held only by a thin thread. Belinda was giving him the silent treatment due to him refusing to open up. They handled their tasks in curt mutters, hardly saying a word to one another.

Sergio, thankfully, didn't mention anything, or just didn't notice. Salvatore, however, gave Terunosuke an empathetic, yet prompting look when he noticed. Michael was avoiding the two of them so he didn't give any input.

Belinda might've been giving him a taste of his own medicine, but he couldn't help but feel she was being hypocritical about the situation. Why didn't she tell him about her life? That'd probably make things easier on him.

He didn't tell her any of these feelings and expected her to eventually understand her mistake. Just like she was doing to him. Maybe they were actually perfect for each other.

A few days into the skirmish, Terunosuke had had enough. He approached Belinda like an adult, looked her in the eye, and told her how he felt.

“So are you ready to talk?” He asked.

“Depends if you are?”

Silence returned as he went quiet. He avoided her eyes. After a hesitation that went on for too long, he nodded.

“Yeah. Let's ta-

“Why are you keeping secrets from me?”

She was so quick, he almost tripped.

“Because... I'm not ready talk about these things yet, not with you at least.”

“Not with me? Would Salvatore be able to actually help you?! Your own girlfriend can't do anything?!” Dammit! That wasn't right!

“I didn't mean it like that! I meant I'm not ready to talk about it with anyone.”

Tears started to well up in her eyes. She was on the verge of crying while wanting to punch his lights out at the same time. Not a good combination.

“You don't really want my help at all, do you?” She asked. “You're just trying to placate me so I stop acting like a crazy bitch, right?”

“I'd like to be able to talk to you at least. Don't you think that's a good start?”

“You're avoiding the question.” She sighed in exasperation. “Is everything blocked behind some
traumatic wall? Will you need a few years before you can tell me why you decided to move halfway across the globe? Or why you have a hatred for fucking mushrooms of all things?"
“I told you! That's... all personal.”

She grit her teeth together.

“So what if it's personal?! I'm personal with you! Haven't I earned your respect enough already?!”
“You're getting the wro-"
“What has it meant to you, Terunosuke?! I didn't comfort you during your break down just so you could hold me at arm’s length, I did it because I wanted you to depend on me! Face it, you're pathetic without me! If I'm not around, you're a mess! You need me!”

Her shameless thoughts flooded through the open air. That was the kind of person she truly was. How was she able to trick him into thinking she was someone he cared about for so long? What she had revealed right then was despicable, disgusting, horrible, unacceptable.

What the hell was her fucking problem?!

“I need you? Who do think you are to me, Belinda?” He asked, his voice low to the ground. A cold rage threatened to burn ablaze depending on her answer.

“I'm the person that you need most in the world.”
Total conviction, utterly serious in her stance. This was no exaggeration.

“I don't need your damn help, Belinda. Before you came along, I was managing just fine. Just because I choose to lean on you, doesn't mean you can treat like some rescue puppy.”
“W-who are you trying to fool? You've been pathetic since the moment we first met! If you weren't such a chickenshit little bitch, you would've tried to fuck my brains out! But that's why I liked you from the start! Because you're even worse than I am!” She was desperate and feral. Every word she said broke down the pure image he had of her in his mind, leaving an ugly beast who wore the skin of the girl he lived with.

“How the fuck am I worse than you?!” He demanded. “I'm pathetic, sure. I'm a fuckup too. But there's no way in hell I'm worse than a crazy bitch like you! I've killed a few people who might not have had to die, but you take it further than anything I've done. You call me pathetic, yet you can be a serial killer at a moment’s notice! Don't even try to make me seem worse than you!”
“What the fuck?” Her desperation broke through the cracks she'd hidden for so long. “Stop trying to cover your ass. Just wallow in your own pitiful existence and I'll throw you a bone every once in a while! It's a win-win! J-just do what I tell you and we'll be perfect for each other!”

He'd had enough. The last straw had already been drawn when the conversation started, it was time to leave.

Terunosuke walked to the door without looking at the demon in his living room.

“I'm a man, not a toy. Don't forget that.”

She cried out for him not to leave, but he was already gone.

***

Terunosuke put distance between himself and Belinda. He walked down streets every which way with no goal in mind except to keep on walking. Eventually he reached the Gulf of Naples. The salt from the water stung his nose and all the walking made his feet hurt. He lit up a cigarette and admired the view of the water off the dock.
For all the time he'd spent in the city, he felt like he'd hardly lived there at all. He almost never went to any local attractions, he'd only made 3 or 4 friends, and he might have spent every night in his room. The facts proved he was plain bad at being Italian. It was fortunate that Passione provided falsified citizenship documents, else he would never have had any hope at all.

Funny how he could appreciate the group while hating working for them at the same time. Sounded like someone he knew.

There was no running from it; no use delaying the inevitable. He enjoyed being around Belinda, but was that all a manipulated reaction? Had she been guiding him to her grasp since the first second they met? Was he always a plaything to her? How could she view him like that? Did she really mean all of that?

It was certainly a possibility. She’d done deranged things in the past, what was keeping her from doing them now? Salvatore had warned him that she had snapped in Algeria because she was protecting him. Was that because she was protecting her prized asset?

Yeah! That was it exactly! She was an insane psychopath who viewed him as nothing more than a tool. All the evidence pointed to that being the truth. The caretaking, the comforting in his time of need, the joking…

Wait… that all pointed to her caring. So which one was it?! Did she genuinely care for him or was she using him?!

Were all relationships that complex?!

Maybe… it was a bit both. Perhaps she did see him as her personal plaything while caring about him at the same time. Maybe this was just one of the ways she snapped. If that was the case, she needed his help in the same way he had needed her’s.

Whatever the truth was, he would get nowhere by standing around just thinking about it. He flicked his cigarette into the water with his right hand and began to walk home. The answer was waiting for him there.

“Don't throw shit in the water, asshole!” A dock hand yelled at him.

“Fuck you, I'm in love!”

He ran to the girl who mattered most to him.

***

When he made it back to the apartment, the sound of running water filled the apartment. Belinda was taking a shower… in his shower.

At least her sense of irony wasn't gone.

With cold feet, he silently charged into the steam-filled room. Genesis was resting on the floor next to Belinda’s scattered clothing. To his surprise, he didn't hear angered ranting or maniacal cackling. He heard faint sniffling, almost too quiet to be heard over the running water. Belinda, the girl who had been screaming at him for not being pathetic enough, was weeping in solitude.

“Hey, why are YOU crying?” He asked. Behind the curtain, there was a panicked shuffle, as if she'd just been caught with her pants down, which was technically true.

“Ahh! H-hey. Didn't hear you come in.” The tightness in her voice was impossible not to notice. “You didn't answer my question.”
“I… Terunosuke… I…”

She poked her head out from behind the curtain. Her normally energetic hair clung wet to her skin. With bloodshot eyes, she looked at him and spoke.

“I’m sorry about everything I said.”

Seriously? She was sorry too?

“You are? I thought I was supposed to apologize.”
“What? No. You didn't do anything wrong at all! I was completely crazy.”
“Wait a second, Belinda, I was the idiot. I should be apologizing for yelling insults at you like that.”
“Huh? But you were right!”
“Well I still feel bad about it!”

They both felt bad about treating the other poorly even though they both thought they deserved such treatment. How the hell was he supposed to keep track of that? Would an apology even work anymore?

“So… what do we do now?” He asked.
“Well…” She trailed off, equally confused and inexperienced. “I think I might have an idea. Just don't freak out when I tell you, alright.”
“Sure, what is it.”

An audible fidget came from behind the curtain, no doubt from Belinda trying to muster up the will to extend an olive branch.

“Get in here with me.”
“Alright.”

His mouth worked faster than his brain.

What the hell?! Why did she just ask that?! They didn't have that level of intimacy. Wasn't this moving too fast?!

But why not? He'd just admitted that he genuinely liked her. What was the issue in skipping a few steps along the way to his ideal? Couldn't this be a sign that she felt the exact same way?

Of course! She had done all of this because she liked him! He'd done all of this because he liked her! It was obvious!

He threw his worries to the wayside and joined her.

***

Belinda was a soft woman.

She had a soft voice, soft skin, soft hair, soft laughter, soft personality, soft lips, soft… everything.

Terunosuke greatly enjoyed those parts of her, among other things. Hopefully there was something about himself that she enjoyed just as much.

The two of them were together, heart to heart. He'd promised himself before that he would never get too involved with anyone ever again. Even while knowing the potential for despair that
everything could cause, he had no regrets. Belinda was worth the risk.

He didn't want that to change for as long as he lived.

***

“Are you ready now?” She asked.
“To open up to you? I think I finally am.” He replied.
“Alright then.”

She faced him and rested her head on his chest.

“Why did you leave Japan?”

The question that had ruled his life for the past six months. Everything that had happened in his life seemed to be a factor in the decision. There had been only one path forward back then, but he wasn't so sure anymore. Had there been a solution he hadn't seen back then? Maybe Belinda would know.

He told her everything. From his receiving of Enigma, to his naïve joining of a serial killer's taskforce, his hollow victory and ultimate defeat, the inhuman hell he was thrown into, his accidental release, his guilt over his father's suicide, the blind revenge he tried to take, his escape, his chance encounter with Sergio, the massacre he devised at the Scheggia wedding, his battle with Sanguinoso, his hiding in Sicily, and the day he met her.

Everything was laid bare for her to hear and know. Nothing was kept secret.

Some parts brought tears from them both, some laughter, and a lot of silence.

“Thank you.” Belinda said after he finished. “I'm glad you finally trust me enough to tell me all that.”
“Of course. In turn I'd like to know something about you as well.”
“And what's that?”
“Why do you lose control like you did in Algeria?”

She looked away from his eyes and sighed sadly.

“Do you remember when I said I would get sick a lot as a kid?”
“Yeah. And Genesis cures you nowadays.” The stand coiled up next to him in response.
“That's right, but it wasn't the whole story. When I was a child, my parents did everything they could to help me. I was in the hospital all the time and that made things difficult. Eventually, the problems piled up too high. With nowhere else to turn, they joined a criminal group to make ends meet. Whenever Passione caught wind of the group, they… didn't leave anyone alive.”

“I'm sorry.” Terunosuke offered, knowing it didn't help anything.

“Don't be, it's all in the past now. When I found out, I swore to kill the man who murdered my parents: a piece of trash who had no worth. When I was fourteen, I dressed like a prostitute to get close to him. I wore a feather boa and hid a knife in it. When I got him in private, he grabbed me and tried to defile me. Before he could even strip me naked, however, I stabbed him until I couldn't see his face through all the blood. After that, I had nowhere else to go, so I joined the one place that would take anyone, even murderous bastards. The one and only Passione. Ever since then, I've had an unhealthy tendency to lose all control when my back hits the wall.”

Silence once again settled for a moment before Belinda asked the next question.
“Terunosuke, why do you have an issue with mushrooms.”
“Because they killed my mother.”
“What?!” She giggled out before apologizing. “Sorry. Your serious tone just caught me off guard. Please keep going.”

“When I was still in Japan, my mom was making dinner one night. The dish she had chosen had called for mushrooms, but we’d run out. That was just unacceptable to me, so I threw a fit until she caved in to go get some more. It was cold and foggy that night. It was so bad that a car accidentally drove onto the road and hit my mother as she was on her way to the store.”

He had to take a pause to collect himself.

“When my dad and I heard about it, he… called me a worthless son. Of course he apologized tons of times after that, but things were never the same. We drifted apart for years, simply sharing the same house. He devoted himself to his work and eventually we hardly saw one another at all. I became a worthless troublemaker and always got into fights I never won. After I got trapped, my dad must have realized that I was the last thing he cared about in the world. On my birthday, he drank himself to death.”

“Is that why you don't drink either?”

“Yes, it is. So if I had never thrown that fit, my mom never would've died, we would've been one big happy family, I never would have been imprisoned, and… I guess I never would've met you either.”

Belinda pressed close to him and embraced him with her whole body.

“It isn't your fault.” She spoke softly.

He pressed back as tears began to flow freely from his eyes. She followed suit as she began to weep herself.

Joy and sorrow intermixed together. A clashing harmony that brought two lovers even closer together.

***

An upsetting thought crossed his mind after Belinda had fallen asleep in his arms. As he tried to drift off himself, he couldn’t wipe the dark notion from his mind.

What if this was all a dream?

What if he was still in Morioh, existing as some disgusting book in a dim library? It was all possible. After being unable to move or speak or exercise his own will, his fragile psyche snapped into a million pieces. He’d dreamed up a false reality where he smuggled packages, shot the bad guys, and got the girl, anything to distract him from his horrible reality.

There had to be something he could point to that proved him sane, but anything could be fake. Nothing was evidence. Anything and everything could just be part of a dream.

How in the hell was he supposed to live with this possibility? Everything could be meaningless! The woman he loved, the friend he cared about, the man he respected! They could all be figments of his desperate imagination!

The worst part was the ambiguity of it all. Reality might be real, but it might not be. How could he
even begin to understand the difference between a dream and reality?

HOW?!

“Are you still awake?” Belinda groaned.
“Uh… yeah.”
“Go to sleep already. It's late.”

She pressed against him tighter and drifted back to sleep.

That was proof, wasn’t it? He’d never known what it felt to be embraced by a naked woman. He hadn’t known what it was like to make love before tonight. It had actually caught him by surprise in a few ways if he was being honest.

But that was completely fine! If everything was how he thought it was or how he remembered it being, it would proof that his mind had taken over the whole show. Being caught by surprise was the best proof to the contrary he could ask for. Reality was still king, his mind wasn’t shattered, and Belinda was real.

Thank goodness too, he really did like her.

***

“Why did you call me here?” Padre asked.
“You know why.” Fan spat out.
“Don't play games with me. Why?”
“Giorno. He's ruined everything.”
“What? Just because he's revealed his ident-”
“You know he's a fake, I know he's a fake. He's just a puppet or a scion. Whichever it is, he’s already done our jobs for us. The whole reason we split off from Passione in the first place? Complete! Done! Taken care of! We're no longer needed. Everything is going to be fine.”

Padre put the pieces together.

“Then that means… we can leave all of this behind. It's over.”
“No.”

Fan faced his boss.

“We still have one more thing left.”
“What are you talking about?”
“Carta, of course. How could you forget? He has to be killed. No matter who takes over, he has to d-”

Padre’s clamped down on Fan’s shoulder with all of his might.

“STAY AWAY FROM HIM! If you attack him, he'll kill you! Understand?! You'll die just like everyone else did! Why the hell would you do that?! We're free! We can finally live our lives without regret or fear! Why would you risk that?!”

Fan didn't even blink.

“If I don't do this, I'll live my entire life with regret. Try to understand that, boss.”

He walked out unceremoniously.
Padre knew for a fact that he'd never see him alive. He fell to his knees, pitiful and feeble, crying pathetically. There was no one left for him to lose.

He was a failure who couldn't do a single thing.

***

Work meetings: annoying.
Sergio: enjoyable.
Work meetings run by Sergio: total shitshow.

Belinda and Salvatore being there helped. It wasn’t that bad. They moved smoothly from topic to topic without much sidetracking. Things were lax.

“So are things finally peaceful between you lovebirds?” Sergio joked.

Things were too lax.

“I'm interested in knowing too. It's always good to have someone by your side.” Salvatore added.

“Well… we've been getting to know each other recently.” Terunosuke said.

“Yeah, ‘knowing’ in the Biblical sense.” Belinda blurted out with a cheerful smile.

What. The. Hell.

Did she know what she had just said? Did she know what that phrase meant?! She had just announced that the two of them had started a serious physical relationship! Was that on purpose?!

Sergio jumped on the explosion first.

“YOU GUYS FUCKED?!” He exclaimed with way too much enthusiasm.
“What?! No! That's not what I meant!” Belinda tried to say.
“That's what that phrase means!”
“I didn’t mean to say it like that!”

“Make sure you use protection, Terunosuke. It'd cause a lot of issues if you got her pregnant.” Salvatore said.

Work meetings were Terunosuke's new favorite part of work.

***

Life went on. Terunosuke finally had something to look forward to, something to live for. With Belinda by his side, he felt he could work until his fingers bled. He didn’t actually want that to happen, but he could handle it if she was there.

Around midnight one night later in the week, they finished a job that had taken an eternity to complete. Eventually, they finished and could finally go home.

They could never have known about the man who had pledged to kill them both, nor could they have known just how close he was. Fan, Padre’s right hand man, was ready. He skulked in the shadows away from sight. Even with Terunosuke’s deadly reputation, he choose to kill. Hell would be unleashed through his hands.

Fan stepped out into the midnight arena.
Things would never be the same.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was the culmination of a lot of elements that had been in the works since the very beginning of the story and lots of things that were just generally fun. I think it drags a little, and it's kind of boring in some spots, but I'm proud of how it turned out.

The part about Salvatore Schillaci was too perfect. I honestly didn't know about the guy before writing this, but he was an actual person and all of that actually happened.

After this chapter is the beginning of the end. It almost feels like I've been working on this for my entire life. There's still plenty of story left so don't cry just yet.
A chill. Terunosuke's spine shivered in the midnight air. Even though it was a warm, April night, he shivered. He looked behind his shoulder. Nothing but a stone street and shadows cast by light posts. Was there something hiding in the shadows? Someone watching him?

“Everything alright?” Belinda asked. She clearly didn't feel the same anxiety he did. Not even Genesis, a physical embodiment of her psyche and subconscious, felt anything wrong. If the snake wasn't worrying, why was he?

“I'm just being paranoid. Don't mind me.”
“As long as we're together, we can solve any problem.”
“Oh yeah? We should try solving world hunger if that's the case.”
“Oh shut up.”

She leaned in to kiss him. Before she could, however, the sound of footsteps running towards them causing Terunosuke to whip around. His panic proved unnecessary since the footsteps belonged to a dog. The mutt ran between them, dashing forward at top speed.

“I guess that's who was watching us.” He sighed.

***

In a small plaza used for a market, they happened upon the dog. It hadn't run very far in the few minutes since they last saw it, yet it was collapsed on the ground breathing shallow breaths. There weren't any lacerations or contusions to speak of. The dog was just completely exhausted on the cold street.

Terunosuke kneeled down over the mutt, checking to see if there was anything to see. The fur around its mouth was matted with bloody saliva, as if something had ripped out its tongue.

“Anything?” Belinda asked.
“I don’t know, but it's too convenient for things to be like this. Makes my skin crawl.” He eyed around the plaza, scanning for hostile movement. “Get ready to attack.”

Genesis ejected Belinda’s gun from her storage, Terunosuke opened the page that held his pistol. They slowly moved through the plaza. One foot in front of the other. A shuffle came from behind a stall, drawing their attention.

“Who’s there?” Terunosuke called out.

No one answered.

The partners shared a glance. Was someone dangerous actually there? Were they just overanxious?

More shuffling suddenly sprung up from the stall. Rather than simple silence this time, an orange fell off a stall and rolled towards them. Terunosuke picked it up and examined it, making sure it wasn’t a disguised bomb or something. Thankfully, it was an average orange.

“I think we’re in the clear.” He said.
“You sure? No worries?”
“Yeah. Running around with guns whipped out is bound to scare some people. I guess we
should’ve realized.”
“I… guess you’re ri-”

“GYYAAAA!”

A screaming man bolted straight for them from the stall.

The two of them shot at him with lightning reflexes. Without saying anything, they both aimed for
the man’s legs to avoid inflicting a fatal wound. He predictably fell like a tree. What was he even
trying to do?

He collapsed over a fountain in the middle of the plaza without making a noise, completely
betraying the normal, just-been-shot response.

“Anyone else?” Terunosuke asked, keeping an eye on the target.
“Uh… no, doesn’t look like it.” Belinda responded.
“Why’d you shoot him in the leg too?”
“Huh? You did that too? I didn’t want to kill a valuable source of info.”
“Oh? That’s why?”
“Why’d you do it?” Belinda asked.
“I didn’t want to needlessly kill someone again…”

Before he could dwell on the issue, he walked up to interrogate the man.

They kept him at gunpoint as they approached. Despite the heavy blood loss and bullet wounds,
the man still didn’t make a peep. Had he instantly died from shock? How pathetic. At least his
bloody legs weren’t bleeding into the fountain.

Terunosuke flipped him over.

“Hey! Who are you and wha-”

The man was unconscious, just like the dog had been. And just like the dog, his mouth was a
mixed mess of droll and blood. Was this an enemy stand’s handiwork? A parasite that infects a
victim’s mouth, causing them to go berserk?

“We’re definitely not alone.” He announced.
“That’s for sure.” An alien voice replied from behind.

Before he could turn around and fire, a pair of arms vaulted from atop the fountain and grabbed his
wrist and mouth, disarming him and silencing him in one fell swoop. Belinda was in the same
predicament. Both of their guns clattered to ground.

As he regained his bearings, Terunosuke could see that they had not been attacked individually by
a pair of assailants, but by a single man. One pair of normal arms, the ones he used to grab their
wrists, was naturally attached to his body. The other pair, much longer than human arms, was
erupting out from his back Their skin was unnaturally green and slimy and burned Terunosuke’s
lips.

He regained his senses long enough to register that he should attack the man instead of standing
around in a dazed stupor. As if he read his mind, the man slammed his inhuman arms into his chest
and launched him across the plaza. Terunosuke skidded across the ground with little more than a
scraped knee, but had flown surprisingly far. He wanted to shoot the man right then and there, but
he’d been disarmed.

“AAHHH-” Belinda’s voice screamed. Terunosuke bolted his eyes to her just in time to see… her face.

He couldn’t comprehend what he was seeing. Belinda’s face, the one he’d seen tons of times, was being stretched out ungodly far by the two false hands on the man’s back… and there were, a pair of legs were coming out of here stretched mouth with no sight of the man. She tried to pull the intruder out, but it slid down further and further despite her strained resistance.

What the fuck? It looked like some deranged cartoon.

He quickly rubbed his eyes. He looked at her again and saw that she was perfectly fine, but the man was nowhere in sight, nor were the arms.

“What happened?” He called out.

“Huh?! Where'd he go?!” She cried.

He ran over and quickly embraced her. Whatever he had seen was just a paranoid hallucination. She was safe.

Genesis on the other hand, was practically going insane. She tried to coil around Belinda's neck despite the fact that such an action would suffocate her as well. The stand's actions infuriated Belinda.

“You damn pest! Cut it out!”

Without warning, she dug her teeth into her own stand. A bleeding wound splashed onto her side, corresponding to the spot she’d bitten her own stand. Terunosuke pulled her away to stop her self-harm. He unraveled the snake from her body and pushed her away.

The man had done something to her! That was the only explanation. Genesis continued to go wild in his grasp as Belinda stared daggers into his skull.

Just as suddenly as before, she began to chew at her arm. Blood streamed down her skin in thick cords. In a combined effort, Terunosuke and Genesis restrained Belinda from herself. They pressed her to the ground, clamping her jaw closed.

“What the hell is going on with you?! What did that guy do?!” He asked.

“Mhpphh.” Terunosuke released her mouth. “The way you’re holding me down… are you going to have your way with me? You're so ballsy.”

“W-what?”

“Oh come on. You can’t tell me you DON’T want to hold me down and treat me like an animal. We both know what sort of perverted fetishes you have.”

The way she talked was… off. Her voice sounded the same, but she spoke with a totally different cadence. And what she said was downright alien. What was wrong with her?!

“What did he do to you?” He repeated.

“Oh, he just came and went. You can do the first.”

“Shut up!”

“What's wrong, Carta? Are you thinking about someone else for once?!”

Carta! Only the bastards from Scheggia called him that! They were possessing her or masquerading as her! That was it!
“What did you do to Belinda, you bastard?!”
“Belinda, huh? What a name! I thought she was named Tira.” That confirmed Scheggia’s involvement! “But it's no use asking now. She's gone for good!”

What?

“What's that supposed to mean?!”
“Use your brain, fuckface. The Belinda you know is gone forever. Her consciousness is erased. She's just a body now!”

That… wasn’t…
“Stop lying!” He forced the false Belinda to face him, to look him in the eyes. “You're lying! I know you are!”
“What do you know, Carta?! What proof do you have?! Belinda is dead, but her body is still warm. Want to use her for your darkest fantasies? I bet she's been fucked plenty of times!”

The body laughed maniacally. Its jaw practically unhinged with the way it laughed. Everything was wrong. Belinda couldn't be dead! Not after everything!

There had to be something!

“It's the same deal for the dog and the guy you shot. Their memories are completely gone, though nothing’s wrong with them physically. They can't even remember their names anymore. That's Basket Case’s handiwork! HAHAHAHA!”
“You…! Give her back!” Terunosuke wanted to lay into the bastard with everything he had, but it was Belinda he was looking at. He couldn't attack the woman he loved!
“Do you understand now?! How it feels to lose loved ones? For friends you've known for years to drop like flies? To feel just how weak you truly are?! DO YOU?! HAHAHA!”

What the fuck. His grip went slack. He fell to the ground as the world spun around him.

Belinda was dead.

She was dead.

Dead. He couldn't keep her safe.

He stared slack-jawed at the laughing bodysnatcher who relished in his suffering. Its gigantic mouth laughed ceaselessly at him. Mouths were not supposed to stretch like that.

But there was a glint. In the back of its throat, a dark mass was visible in the dim midnight glow. A mass big enough to suffocate it, yet didn't.

The truth clicked into place. The dog’s mouth, the legs he that had slithered into her mouth, Belinda's voice. It all made sense!

The bastard with four arms had crawled into Belinda's body and had worked her like a puppet! That was his ability! Terunosuke understood everything!

“I... know you're in there.” Terunosuke murmured.
“Sorry, but the bitch is de-”
“I’m not talking about Belinda! I’m talking about you!”

With both hands, Terunosuke grabbed ahold of Belinda's jaws. With every bit of his strength, he pulled her mouth open as if it were a latex mask. It stretched and stretched, on and on. Moans
choked out violently, but they didn't stop him.

Her face was horribly disfigured, stretched out beyond recognition, but it didn't matter anymore. Terunosuke shot his hand to the back of the throat, bundling a fistful of hair between his fingers. He put everything he had into ripping the parasite out by the roots.

Lurid snapping and a festering rip assaulted his ears, but nothing would stop him. He had nothing to lose. Belinda’s body tried to flail against him in protest, but the pulling seemed to wreak havoc on the input. The more he pulled, the worse the noises became, yet the malignant mass was coming loose.

His muscles strained and pulled, heaved and forced. His bones bent, his nerves ignited, his tendons trembled, his teeth ground themselves into oblivion, his spine collapsed in on itself, his fingers ripped apart at the seams.

He pulled and pulled and forced with everything until something finally wrenched loose. The force of his pulling threw him back along with the parasite. It rapidly slid out of Belinda's horribly disfigured face, freeing her after so much struggle. As it tore out, her face snapped back to its normal shape.

The four-armed man was thrown across the plaza just as he had thrown Terunosuke before. The look on his face was that of abject shock and surprise. He probably didn't know that such a thing could even happen.

But Terunosuke didn't care about the bastard, he cared about Belinda. Keeping his guard up and his attention on the extradited parasite, he cradled Belinda's head in his arms. He glanced down at her and noticed the bloody drool coating her now-healthy mouth. She was unconscious and barely breathing, but she was alive, at least in body.

Were her memories actually erased? No. It was impossible, right?

Right?

Genesis coiled around Belinda's neck. It was a familiar sight, one that Terunosuke recognized.

That proved it!

Genesis, a manifestation of her own mind, wouldn't recognize her if all her memories were erased. She certainly wouldn't do something so familiar at the very least.

That settled it. Belinda was just unconscious, not gone forever. The bastard had lied in order to psychologically torture him. Everything was alright.

Terunosuke gently eased Belinda's head down, leaving the woman he loved in the care of her stand. He had a job to do. Before he went, he wiped her mouth clean and planted a kiss on her forehead.

He wanted to pluck up his gun and shoot the bastard, but at some point in time, the parasite had snapped both his pistol and Belinda’s submachine gun in half, presumably with his stand’s elongated arms. Not a comforting sign.

Terunosuke stood alone before the bastard who had almost killed Belinda. The man was his antithesis. His hair was a pitch black mess contrasted with Terunosuke's organized white locks. His skin was so pale, it looked like he'd never been in the sun, completely different from Terunosuke's darker complexion. Terunosuke was clothed from the neck down, hardly showing his own skin,
while the man stood stark naked. Terunosuke's blue eyes contrasted fiercely with the man's orange.

The only thing they had in common was their intent to kill.

Terunosuke bolted forward first. If he let his opponent take control of the situation, there was no guarantee Belinda would be safe. The man responded likewise.

They closed their gap in seconds, meeting one another with messy jabs and feral tackles. A disadvantage was clear from the outset. Any punches that Terunosuke could block or shrug off only distracted him from defending against a flurry of body shots and side jabs. He tried to get in a few blows of his own, but a lack of experience and reflexes, coupled with the appendage disadvantage left little hope for victory.

He should have had a plan. With very little effort, the man outmaneuvered Terunosuke on all fronts, smearing him to the ground. The man restrained Terunosuke's right hand with three arms while his knees were pressed against Terunosuke's spine. Nothing the smuggler did to struggle helped him escape the vice grip, he was under the mercy of his assailant.

“Carta.” The assailant rasped. “I finally get to see you.”
“Fuck you.” Terunosuke said. The man twisted his arm further than it should've for that remark.
“You shouldn't talk. You don't matter after all. If you don't matter, don't speak.”
“Ghh... why should I listen to a crazy bastard like you?”
“Crazy bastard? You're the crazy bastard here. And it's Fan to you.”
“Fan? What kind of a name is that.”
“Short for Fanculo.”
“Fuck you too. Why are you restraining me like this, Fanculo? Do you plan on humiliating me to death?”
“No. Too quick. I want you to understand. Understand your own miserable nature. Understand the meaninglessness of your inhuman existence. Understand what a useless, broken object you are.”
“Good luck, fucker.”
“It’s Fanculo.” Another twist for that.

“Did you know that your existence is nothing but a passing dream?” Fanculo began.
“Is that some Shakespeare shit?” Terunosuke responded.
“No. You do not exist as a normal person exists; you do not exist on your own. You are only alive when someone else thinks about you or talks to you or sees you. Only through another can your existence be guaranteed.”
“What the fuck are you talking about?!” Fanculo scrapped his face against the stone ground for that outburst.
“Even now it holds true. You are here only because I'm torturing you. Your existence completely vanishes when you are alone. At that point you're nothing. Less than a man. You are not real. You are not there. You are fictional. You are mere lines of ink, words on a page, pixels on a screen, a thought in the mind of others that they can erase just by thinking about something else. You are nothing but an extra in the play of life, only existing to be cut down and disposed of. No one will remember you.”

That thought sat in Terunosuke's mind. Without anyone else, he was less than nothing. He was an unwanted book in a library...

“So what?” He demanded. “I'm a human being, not a thing!”
“Wrong. You may think that, but how can you prove your own existence? You have no way. You exist nowhere except the mind.”
“I'm right here! You're holding ME down! I exist! Don't say that I don't!”
“You're nothing more than a thought in my mind. Time to stop thinking.”

Enough! Terunosuke whipped his right arm free of Fanculo's grasp. With the element of surprise in his court he shoved the assailant off and sprung to his feet.

Fanculo didn't change his expression. He just stared at Terunosuke with dead eyes. His extra pair of arms primed themselves for assault.

What was Terunosuke supposed to do? He was back on his feet, sure, but what came next? He couldn't beat Fanculo in a fistfight, and Enigma was useless in a melee. His only hope had to be an attack of overwhelming force. One strong enough to dispatch Fanculo in a single blow. He'd seen boxing matches end in a single punch, and had received his share of swift beatings. It was time he dished one out to someone for a change.

All the strength in his legs shot him forward to close the gap. He clocked his right hand back, ready to bash Fanculo right in the center of the jaw. If he couldn't finish him, he could at least leave a vicious scar.

As the fist flew, Fanculo adjusted to circumstances far quicker than expected. The bastard didn't dodge the attack. Instead, he maneuvered his head so that the fist slotted itself right between his teeth.

Terunosuke stopped dead in his tracks. Fanculo clamped down like a bear trap. If he wanted his hand free, Terunosuke would have tear it out.

The nightmare didn't end there. Both pairs of arms converged around Terunosuke's trapped right arm. Nails tore, fists brutalized, teeth crushed.

“You are a thing.” Fanculo said through his clenched teeth.

Terunosuke's hand was being torn apart.

It was a multi-faceted agony. With so many different things happening all at once, Terunosuke couldn't focus on just one source. He was disoriented and agonized. The brutal sensory overload was far, far more than he could handle. He would've fallen unconscious if he wasn't being tortured.

His nails were chewed out of their sockets, his skin was torn off, his nerves and veins and bones were exposed and torn at. He could hardly hear himself think over his own screaming.

“That's it. Scream as much as you can. This is what you deserve.” Fanculo said through clenched teeth. “But this isn't all.”

He released his jaws while continuing the ripping assault with his arms. The spot behind his back where the second pair of arms erupted from began to shake. Like a mass swelling up, a head materialized from Fanculo’s skin. A putridly green, blindfolded face heaved as if it could hardly breathe. It kept stretching out and out until an entire torso was jutting out of Fanculo's back.

The stand's entire body was sharp, like it had been chiseled from razor sharp marble. Each of its yellow teeth and rancid fingers looked ready to tear Terunosuke's guts out. The filthy bandages on its eyes kept them hidden from sight, but he could still feel their petrifying glare.

“Say hello to Basket Case, Carta.”
Basket Case’s arms grabbed the back of Terunosuke's head pulling him towards its disgusting face. “Do you know, Carta, what the human eye and a perfectly sauteed mushroom have in common?”
Terunosuke could feel Basket Case's humid breath on his skin. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't pull away.

“The answer, Carta, is that they both have the exact same texture when you bite into them.”

Basket Case sunk its jagged teeth into Terunosuke's right eye.

“AAAGGHHHHHHH!”

He couldn't withstand it all! Each tooth was a knife piercing into his eye! It was going to rip out! He was going to die!

His voice screeched out helplessly. Hellfire stabbed the sensitive tissue. Blood and tears mixed together and poured out like boiling oil around the wound. The world went red as everything shook and howled! There was only hell, right then and there! No past, no future, just the agony of now.

His left hand reached out in desperation. It clenched something, he couldn't tell what it was through the pain, but it caused Fanculo to immediately react.

Some reason, some cause, made Basket Case cower away and made Fanculo shove Terunosuke back. Whatever it was, Terunosuke was glad it happened before his eye was torn out of the socket.

When he looked back at the psycho with his one good eye, he seemed to be rubbing his throat and hyperventilating slightly. Breath in, breath out. Over and over.

Terunosuke put two and two together. His desperate action of reaching out had resulted in him unintentionally strangling Fanculo. But that wasn't all. Fanculo, along with struggling to breathe, had tears streaming down his face. Terunosuke thought it had been induced by the strangulation, but no, it was a full blown cry.

What the hell was this turning into? He would've felt sorry had the man in question been something other than the guy who tried to tear his hand off.

Speaking of, his entire right arm had been pulsing in agony even though he'd been released. His fingers were barely recognizable as such. They bent at odd angles and had all been stripped of their nails. The back of his hand had been eviscerated so badly, he could see the bones and tendons and veins that made his hand what it was. His forearm had been clawed to hell, but didn't have any major issues aside from heavy bleeding. That was the big issue: every part of his right arm below the elbow was bleeding like a hose cranked up to full blast.

All and all, the arm was fucked. Who knew if he would ever be able to use it ever again, though that wouldn't matter if he died. The most he could do was hide it behind his back to avoid further damage, though even that was enough to drive his exposed nerves into a frenzy. There was no way he could hope to win a fistfight, so something else would have to do. He needed an advantage.

Even worse, his right eye was shedding blood and weeping tears like crazy. Just thinking about it made the pain twenty times worse. He jammed his eyelid down tight in the hope that it would help. A long streak of blood crawled down his face and dripped off his chin onto the cold ground.

He couldn't use his gun or his right arm. His pockets didn’t have anything viable for defense. He could barely even see!

If he used Genesis, would that work?

No, Belinda would be defenseless if he did. But what if Genesis could help him in another way?
Fanculo composed himself enough to finally approach Terunosuke once again. In turn, Terunosuke bolted to Belinda. There wasn’t much time. He knelt down and looked the snake in the eye. She was still guarding Belinda’s unconscious body, but recognized his bloodied face even in the midnight dark.

“Safekeeping! I need it!” He spat out. Genesis seemed to innately know exactly what he was after and ejected it from her mouth as quickly as she could. Enigma converted it to paper and Terunosuke stored it exactly where he needed it.

Blazing orange eyes pierced into Terunosuke. Icy blue eyes stabbed into Fanculo. There was no hope, but who needed hope? Terunosuke held his left hand out like a martial artist preparing to attack. His slashed right arm felt even worse than before.

Did he have a plan? Sorta. Was it a good plan? Eh. Was he fucked? Probably. Was Fanculo fucked? HELL YEAH!

Terunosuke charged at the naked bastard to get what little distance away from Belinda that he could salvage. He led with his left, aiming straight for Fanculo’s throat. If he could collapse his windpipe, the entire affair would be finished! Of course, four is greater than one. Terunosuke’s left hand was stopped by all of Fanculo’s appendages long before he could get close to the target.

Just what he wanted.

With his tattered right hand, he swung wildly at Fanculo’s defenseless face. A simple strike would only hurt him for a second, and would honestly hurt Terunosuke a hell of a lot more. But that wasn’t the plan.

Both men witnessed the split second. Stashed between Terunouke’s torn skin and trembling hand tendons was a piece of paper. The only thing that was needed. The wind split the paper open.

A cinderblock, the same one Belinda had stored in Genesis’ mouth for safekeeping, smashed into Fanculo’s face. It hurt like absolute hell, but it was worth it.

But Fanculo didn’t go down. Terunosuke drove his shoulder into the stone, yet it wasn’t enough to flatten the son of a bitch. Four arms reached for Terunosuke.

Suddenly, a blur of orange appeared on Fanculo’s foot. Hope came in the form of a serpent. Genesis rapidly coiled around his exposed ankle and squeezed with enough force to crush his bones like a twig. She even bit his heel even though she didn’t have any fangs. God, he loved that snake.

The one-two punch of cinderblock and snake was finally enough to drive Fanculo to the cold stone ground. Terunosuke’s weight ramming into his enemy was even enough to split the concrete block over Fanculo’s head. Too bad his bones didn’t break first, though the broken stone gave Terunosuke a valuable club to beat Fanculo senseless with. Faster than a skipped heartbeat, the stone slab smashed into the bastard’s face so hard it shattered.

Terunosuke did exactly the same with the other half until Fanculo was soon covered in rubble. He tried desperately to resist, to stop his teeth from being smashed in. All four of his arms tried to lash out, but Genesis zip-tied Basket Case’s appendages while Terunosuke pinned Fanculo’s arms. As Terunosuke bashed his fist into his face, Fanculo tried in vain to flail his legs. Nothing could help him now, he was at Terunosuke’s mercy. He didn’t need strategy or tactics to win, he just needed
unchained brutality!

As Basket Case let out a feral howl, Fanculo screamed out a plea. “Stop it stopitstopitstop! Stop holding me stop hitting me! STOP READING THIS!”

Of course, Terunosuke wouldn’t stop just because he was asked.

In fact, he even noticed something that made him want to lash out with renewed aggression: Fanculo was crying again. It wasn’t because he had been hit in the eye or because he was being beaten senseless. It was because he was scared shitless!

In that moment, Terunosuke became keenly aware of just how hard he had been holding himself back. Ever since the battle with Sanguinoso, he hadn’t been using Enigma to his full potential. His stand was capable of making people into objects the moment he saw them as mere objects, as fear stricken cowards! Why the hell was he holding out?! There was no time to waste!

With all the excitement in the world, Enigma grabbed the crying degenerate by the throat and dragged him kicking and screaming into the deepest circle of hell. All that remained was a simple piece of paper, completely blank aside from a crude stain in the shape of Fanculo. Basket Case’s arms tried to grasp at some sort of hold to keep from being pulled into the page, but it was pointless, all of it! Its hands couldn’t do anything as it fell into its paper prison.

The paper would make a nice trophy if Terunosuke was interested in such a perverse hobby. Hell, it would even make a nice bookmark! If he stapled the page together, he could give Fanculo the exact same fate that he had had to endure for a year and a half back in Japan! Torture like that would be exactly what he deserved for almost killing the woman he loved. Yes, spend all of eternity as nothing more than trash!

The temptation to do just that was so palpable. But he wasn’t a psychopath like Josuke Higashikata was. Terunosuke was merciful. He would grant Fanculo an undignified, messy death fit for a rabid dog, but a death nonetheless.

With his right hand fucked up beyond recognition, he choose to tear the paper in half with his teeth.

He placed the paper between his fangs and pulled with all the strength his left hand could produce. The page easily tore in two.

Fanculo’s body hit the ground with a dull thud. Terunosuke didn’t even bother to look at the carnage he had created, it didn’t matter anymore. It was done, over, finished. He turned his attention to Belinda, hoping that she was still safe.

But Fanculo was tenacious. It was not over yet.

A wet gagging sound came from the bastard who should’ve been dead. Terunosuke slowly crept his gaze to the source of the retching. Fanculo was supposed to have been ripped in half, right down the middle. How was he even making noise?!

The answer was more disgusting than Terunosuke had hoped for. Fanculo had indeed been ripped in half, just not symmetrically. Rather than being split at the waist or down the middle, Fanculo had been ripped apart from front to back. A line traced along his entire body starting at the front of his feet, rising up to his outstretched arms, and eventually slicing off most of the front of his head. His face was a work of art itself. His chin, nose, and eyes had been absolutely destroyed. Luckily, if that was the word, his forehead up had only been skinned, leaving his brain and skull completely
intact. Thank God for angles.

The result of all this was a faceless, armless freak who couldn’t stand and couldn’t fight back. The remains of his split eyes oozed blood and tears. Fanculo’s tongue remained, still trying to lap up something in the thin air before it dried out. His severed arms, cut at the lower wrist, laid close by him. He probably would have tried to palm around for them if he still had hands. His face looked like an orange that someone had stomped into the dirt. Basket Case’s blindfolded body groped around the ground, just as blind and disoriented as his owner, powerless to help whatsoever.

All that, yet he was still alive.

He would probably die quickly with those injuries. Probably, but Terunosuke wasn’t about to take that risk. That was the issue that got him here now: he wasn’t thorough enough. Had he ripped Josuke Higashikata in half the moment Enigma captured him, he wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with. If he walked away now, who knew what Fanculo might pull off. He wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. Terunosuke marched right back to finish what he started.

Genesis could easily strangle Fanculo. With a severed nose and almost no mouth left, it was a small miracle he could even still breathe at all. It would be simple, but Terunosuke didn't want simple. Fanculo didn't deserve simple.

What to do then? He gave the bastard a testing kick to the ribs. Fanculo and Basket Case spasmed in pain. A nice reaction, but nothing satisfying.

Terunosuke had to make a statement, a declaration to all of Scheggia. It had to tell them that if they wanted to attack him, they would end up dead and disfigured just like Fanculo. To make it work, Terunosuke would have to kill him in such a horrific way that it would strike fear with just the description of the act.

Should he split his body over and over until he was nothing but a cheese platter? No way, mafiosos dismembered victims all the time. What about feeding his body to animals, leaving him as nothing more than literal shit? Still not enough. That’d just piss them off without showing them the bloody results directly.

Terunosuke gave another kick to see if Fanculo was still alive, which he was. He looked over everything that littered the ground: body parts, torn clothes, and a ton of blood. Fanculo’s severed face sat neatly on the stone ground.

“Yuh… ah… ah… -ang.” Fanculo slurred out. You are a thing. Somehow, it made Terunosuke hate him even more.

A wretched idea metastasized.

He picked up the slice of skin and crumpled it up. It was like trying to fold up tough, messy meat and doing it with one hand was a hassle. When he got it bunched up and compact, he knelt down to Fanculo, who was still writhing around blindly on the ground. He flipped him over on his back, getting a direct look at the wet, bleeding mass of sopping wet tissue and nerves and bone.

Fanculo still had ears, but Terunosuke wasn't about to ask his victim for assistance. He would force him to comply even if he was willing. What remained of his lower jaw was wrenched down to force his throat wide open.

He wanted to say something that would drive Fanculo over the edge of insanity. Something so vile that it broke the man in two. But he couldn't think of anything. The only sound was Fanculo's
gagging.

“Fuck you.” Terunosuke said.

Fanculo’s severed face was forced down his own throat. The gagging was suppressed, replaced by feral screams from Basket Case. The stand’s inhuman arms tried to push Terunosuke away, but they were too uncoordinated to even amount to anything. Fanculo tried to kick away, but it wasn't enough.

None of it was enough.

Buried screams ran through Fanculo’s throat. Terunosuke thought about how it must feel to be deprived of all of one’s senses except hearing, to only be able to hear one’s own suffering.

What a thought.

Fanculo and Basket Case continued to thrash around, fighting tooth and nail for the pathetic ruins of his life. It was a fucking disgrace. Die with dignity, bastard!

Terunosuke held Fanculo's jaws open with his left hand and jammed his slashed right hand deeper down Fanculo's throat. Even through the pain, he pushed the balled-up skin as deep as he could. Basket Case, unfortunately, struggled against the strangulation. The stand’s arms squeezed down on his slashed arm with crazed desperation.

Terunosuke didn't care anymore. It was time to let Fanculo die.

Terunosuke bashed the bloody remains of Fanculo's face, aiming directly for the eyes. He could barely see what he was hitting through all the blood splattering him in the face, but the solid, visceral feeling of meat mashing beneath his fist answered his question. Basket Case let out more and more feral screams, pathetic and desperate to survive.

He didn't know how long it took, or how many times he hit, but he realized at some point that Fanculo had stopped struggling.

Basket Case had faded away. The soul had seeped out of the body.

That was it.

Terunosuke slid out his right hand from the dead man's throat, leaving the face behind. He tried to stand up, but his knees were shaking so badly he couldn't even keep a single foot on the ground. When he looked at the aftermath of of his actions, he was astounded at just how much effort it had all taken. What remained was an ungodly mass, rather than a face. Haphazard layers of tissue skewed left and right, up and down, completely unrecognizable as human. Through all the blood and destruction, the mess still looked like it was crying out in agony.

Flecks of bone smattered Terunosuke’s bloodied left hand. A river bled out from his right arm, bleeding more blood than he thought he had left in his body.

As the adrenaline began to taper off, he began to feel like the world was pressing down on his shoulders, on his right arm, on his eye. Goddammit. He was about to lose consciousness.

Fuck! Was Belinda safe? He tried to crawl back to her, but he couldn't even remember where he had laid her down.

Shit shit shit! Stay awake! Get to her! Keep her safe!
He felt something soft on his fingers. Genesis curled around his left hand, almost as if to protect him. If she was there, Belinda was safe.

He passed out feeling a drop of relief.

Chapter End Notes

I specifically tried for something very different from my regular style of writing. Instead, I wanted to make something nasty, brutish, and short to convey the gravity and feeling of the situation. I also wanted to make you, the reader, uncomfortable with a few acknowledgements. I hope it did something!

Saying all that, however, I can't help but feel that I tried too hard, or made things seem unintentionally funny. Hopefully not.
A blank, white void stretched out endlessly. Terunosuke was surprised to see it, and annoyed that his subconscious choose to bother him yet again.

He felt a presence behind him and turned around to greet it. Instead of his doppelganger or some hideous monster, he was greeted by the sight of a figure. It looked like an average man, only instead of flesh and bone, he was made of hundreds and hundreds of sheets of paper. It… he… gave Terunosuke a silent look. He said nothing and seemed to expect no words in return.

“Nothing to say this time?” Terunosuke asked. The paper man answered with more silence.

Without any words, the man sat down. Terunosuke did the same without being asked. He half expected the void to transform into lush scenery or something of the like, but no, the void persisted.

Terunosuke focused on the paper man in front of him. What the hell was his issue? This sort of thing usually involved something horrible or nothing at all, not a confusing middle ground. If something traumatic was going to come up he’d prefer it to happen sooner rather than later.

He tried to swing his hand into the paper man, but his right hand wouldn’t move, so he settled for using his left. As it made contact with the pages, they flew away only to return to where they had been after a few seconds. Terunosuke repeated this process until he was bored, which was fairly quick.

What was the point here? Was there some take-home message? Just get on with it already.

His innate desire materialized. One by one, each of the pages on the man’s body ignited and began to burn. The result hurt his eyes, but Terunosuke didn’t look away.

The flames burned and burned, yet they did not consume the paper. The pages lost no color, nor did they distort, bend, or fold. It was like they weren’t even on fire.

It was pointless. The fire, trying to damage him, the entire dream. Why bother?

Still on fire, the man pointed past Terunosuke to something behind him. A large door stood proud. Rays of heavenly light flickered from the small gap underneath it. Soft laughs could be heard. Warmth radiated inside his body just thinking about what might be on the other side.

All it needed was to be opened and he could be a part of whatever was inside. The handle practically begged to be turned. He reached his right hand… but it still wouldn’t move. His hand stayed by his side, unable to act. He reached for the handle with his left hand, but for some reason, some cause unknown to him, the door would not open that way.

He tried and tried and tried and tried. But it would not open.

The handle then slipped from his grasp as the door and anything behind it faded away into the pure, white void.

He would never know what was beyond that door, what there was to be seen, to be heard. It had
rejected him and everything he represented.

The only sound was paper burning.

***

Beep… Beep… Beep… Beep…

A series of unbroken beeps pierced Terunosuke’s eardrums.

Beep… Beep… Beep… Beep…

A pure, white light blinded Terunosuke’s eyes.

Beep… Beep… Beep… Beep…

He shifted around on the bed he was lying on, but there were too many tubes and instruments jammed in his body for him to move properly.

“Whoa! Hold on, don’t move around.” A voice he recognized as Sergio’s said. He quit moving at the command. “Jesus, glad to see you’re finally awake. How do you feel?”

Terunosuke looked around the room. His right eye was covered with a bandage, but he could see Sergio at the foot of the bed, looking back at him. He opened his mouth to speak, but his voice didn’t respond, coming out only as gritty and unintelligible. He cleared his throat and tried again. “How long was I asleep?” He scratched out.

“A little under a day. I think the doctor’s said it was due to shock from blood loss. The docs hooked you up with enough blood transfusions to fill a pool with.”

“Doctors… ah wait! I assumed this was Salvatore’s clinic. Where are we?”

“We’re in a hospital. Your condition was too severe. Sorry if you were hoping for the clinic. Had to be this way.”

“No, it’s fine. Uh… where’s Belinda?” She wasn’t in the room and Sergio hadn’t called her in when he woke up. Was she still unconscious?

“Belinda… oh Tira. She’s back at your place. She woke up about an hour after you guys got here and she was discharged this morning. I guess she wanted to be here when you woke up, but I managed to convince her to go home and get some rest. I’ve been waiting here ever since.”

For the entire day, Sergio had been waiting at the foot of Terunosuke’s bed, patiently waiting for him to awake… it almost made him laugh. He was a great friend wasn’t he?

He tried to laugh, but something in his body didn’t find the humor in the situation.

The memory of what he’d done trickled back into his memory. The reason why he was hooked up to a hundred machines, why his eye and his arm were both bandaged, why he was in the hospital, why Sergio was visiting him.

“Sergio…” He began. “Did… did you see the… scene.” His friend’s expression grew solomon. What had been smiling a second ago was now dead serious.

“I went there before I came. I was informed that you were there, but when I got there you’d already been transported here. I got to see… what was left of the guy.”

Tension filled the air. Terunosuke spoke again before it became too oppressive.

“Did I go too far?”

“Too far? You did what you had to do.”
“No, I didn’t. What I did was far worse than what ‘needed to be done’.”
“That’s wrong. You might feel that way right now, you’re just feeling some regret, that’s normal. Once some time has passed, you’ll understand that what you did was acceptable, clever, even.”

Terunosuke didn’t want to hear about how smart he was. He turned his focus elsewhere, anywhere else.

“My arm… will it heal fully?” It had been swathed in bandages. His fingers especially. The whole limb was barely even exposed to the air.
“The doctors seemed to think so. There’ll be some scarring and shit like that, and you’ll have to wear splints on your fingers so the bones recover properly, but other than that it should be fine. Even your nails will grow back eventually… oh! Though… your pinky was… lost.”
“It’s not there anymore?” Sergio shook his head. He tried to twitch his smallest finger, but everything below his elbow was numb from anesthetic.

“What did that bastard actually do?” Sergio asked. “Actually… don’t answer that. You don’t have to.”
“In the middle of things…” Terunosuke said, still staring at his arm. “He ranted about how I was less than human. He said that I was a… thing, that I was fictional.”
“You don’t believe that shit, do you?” Terunosuke didn’t answer. “Do you, Terunosuke?”

Sergio sighed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Listen man, what he said was… uh… what was it…? It was… a tale, said by an idiot, full of… sound and fury, not signifying a thing.”
“Did you think that up just now?”
“No, that was from Macbeth. I just thought it was relevant.”

It wasn’t all that relevant, but Sergio quoting Shakespeare was a surprise to say the least. Silence once again came rolling in, though it wasn’t so heavy this time around. Sergio stood up and walked over to Terunosuke’s good side. He grasped their hands together.

“Listen, I know you’re doubting yourself right now. Things seem like they’ll never be the same. Maybe they will be, maybe they won’t be. I don’t know right now. But I know that Belinda would be dead if not for you. Remember THAT. You’re my best friend. You’re her lover. You have people that care about you, and would do exactly what you did in your situation.” He let go and began to move to the door. “Speaking of, I promised I’d call Belinda when you woke up. I’ll be back in a few.”
“Before you go…” Terunosuke said. “Has Salvatore come by yet?”
“Hmm… now that you mention it, no. Doc hasn’t shown his face yet. Guess he’s kinda pissed about the whole situation. The pledge to life overrides his personal relationships or something? Dunno, he’ll probably swing by with Michael sooner or later.”

Sergio left at that.

Terunosuke closed his eyes… eye… and thought about what his friend had told him.

One thing was certain: Sergio had become more mature, more fit to be called a leader.

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Terunosuke spent a few more days in the hospital before he was cleared to leave. During that time, Sergio and Belinda came to visit him every day. He warned Belinda that if she hung around too much, they would have to deal with a backlog of packages yet again. The threat didn’t deter her
visits in the slightest; if anything she came more often.

She asked about the fight only once. Terunosuke naturally didn’t answer her in any meaningful way, deferring the question for a different topic. While this move would’ve annoyed her in the past, she was understanding due to the personal nature of things.

He was soon released and life returned to normal, minus the state of his arm. The heavy bandages still covered his skin. Splints lined all five of his fingers, even his shortened pinky, in order to set and heal the shattered bones. It wouldn’t be used for a while, but he could manage.

He would manage. It would be inconvenient, of course. Life was one big inconvenience.

Though that never stopped him for long, now did it?

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In spite of his optimism, time ticked on in a harsh manner. The heavy bandages were replaced by heavy scars. The splits left, but a chill in his hand took their place. Apparently the veins had been damaged, causing blood circulation to be hindered throughout the hand. Whenever Belinda held it, she would ask how he dealt with having a block of ice for a body.

The chill didn't end there.

Even though it was late April, Naples became exceptionally cold. What should've a serene springtime turned out to be a miserable slog. His hand would practically freeze whenever the wind sheared against it, bringing no end of icy pain.

Belinda would curse the weather through chattering teeth. Not even extra layers of clothing seemed to help keep the cold off of her. Seeing her miserable just made him feel worse.

His hand hurt, the weather was awful, Belinda was in sour spirits, and they had to make up for delayed deliveries with no downtime.

But none of these things really bothered him that much, not really. Despite Sergio’s advice, he couldn’t move past his actions. Every day, he would remember the horror he had caused with his own two hands. He had completely destroyed a person. He had killed people time and time again, and even when offered a way out in Algeria, he had rejected it and killed more, even innocent people. Even if he didn’t want it to be that way, he couldn’t take it back, make things better. He could only exist in a limbo, caught between a rock and a hard place. No matter what he did, everything seemed to come back to bite him. If he killed an enemy, another enemy would pop up to take their place, on and on without end. Would they keep that up forever or until he finally died. If so, why even bother resisting? At this rate, he would die meaninglessly in the street or some back alley.

He never told Belinda about this, nor did he tell Sergio or Salvatore, not that Salvatore was even around. If he did, it would only cause more problems. There was no easy way to get rid of his feelings. It was guilt after all, people were supposed to feel that when they did horrible things. When he allied himself with a serial killer and was shown the pain his actions had caused, he’d felt a guilt that he had never fully dealt with. It was in the back of his mind, sure, but it was still there. Why should this be any different?

But was that acceptable? Feeling guilt was fine, he deserved to suffer through it. Belinda, however didn’t deserve to be caught up in his consequences. If he stayed, she would invariably be caught in the crossfire. It had already happened with Fanculo. The bastard had specifically targeted her just
to torment him. But what if someone wanted to kill her just to get to him? What would he do then?

There was one thing he could do to keep her from falling victim to an attack in the future. Just one simple thing.

He could leave without saying a word.

It would crush her. It would crush him too, but that wasn’t important. If he could guarantee that she would be safe, he would do it.

Passione wouldn’t like his decision, hell, they would probably send people after him for abandonment, but it was all worth the risk.

He loved her.

On a night in May, moonlight trickled in through his window. Belinda had fallen asleep beside him. She rested her head against his chest and breathed with a soft, quiet rhythm. Genesis had loosely coiled around his right arm, a point that Belinda had demanded he allow, lest he develop hypothermia.

They slept peacefully around him, but he had stayed awake. He gently laid Belinda onto the sheets and slowly unwrapped Genesis from his arm. He rose from his bed, put on a shirt, his shoes, his watch, and his long coat, then walked out of the apartment.

It was all he could do. Putting one foot in front of the other was the best thing for the situation.

He thought about how Belinda would react. She would probably assume that he’d gone out without leaving a note. She’d wait patiently, but only for so long. That patience would give way to worry and fear. She’d call Sergio and Salvatore, asking if he were around. Eventually, she’d look high and low for him, the fear of losing him becoming more and more real. After a while, she would realize that he was gone for good. All without saying goodbye.

Tears were rolling down his cheeks before he even realized he was even weeping.

Was this it? Was this how he planned on living his life? Moving from place to place, ripping up lives until he couldn't stay any longer? Departing from someone he loved with no warning just like his mother had?

No. It didn't matter that he hated it. Belinda would cry, but it was better than her dying. He had to do it. Who knew if the next one would be his last?

Shit! Son of a bitch! Fuck! What was he supposed to do?! What was the right choice?!

He slammed his right hand against the cold ground, sending waves of pain through his sensitive flesh.

He loved Belinda! He wanted her to be safe. It didn't matter if he left as long as she was safe! If he left she’d be defenseless! He wanted the best for her who cared if he wasn't there he loved her more than he'd ever loved someone he never wanted to be apart from her! HER HER HER HER!

Terunosuke would never leave!

He hadn’t gotten more than a kilometer before he raced back home. There was no way in hell that he was about to abandon the woman he loved!
He dashed forward, demanding his feet go faster than they could. Hell had ripped through his life too many times to count. The one piece of joy he’d found wasn’t going to be tossed aside.

Terunosuke would stay by Belinda’s side no matter what! Through thick and thin! In the worst of times and in the best of times! He would be there for her!

He made it back home in record time.

Belinda and Genesis were still asleep in his bed, blissfully unaware of how close Terunosuke had been to making the biggest mistake of his life. His heavy breathing seemed to stir them awake.

“Terunosuke? Why are you up? What time is-”

She was cut off by him embracing her closer than he had ever held her.

“Wha! What’s wrong? And why are you so sweaty?”

There were so many things he wanted to say, so many dreams and fears he wanted to confide, so many feelings and emotions to confess. Every thought in his mind begged to be released, but he couldn’t form the words. His eyes burned with tears and the lump in his throat was heavier than stone.

“I love you.” It was all he could manage to say. Somehow, Belinda seemed to understand exactly what he wanted to say with just that. She returned his embrace with her own.

“I love you too.”

Terunosuke would never leave her.

***

Life continued in the warm, spring days. Terunosuke and Belinda performed their duties without complaint. Sergio would roll his eyes at the lovebirds, but the truth was obvious. He was glad his best friend was back in high spirits, happier than he had ever seen him before.

Additionally, Sergio finally followed through on his long-awaited promise. More members were added to the smuggling department after months of just Terunosuke and Belinda doing all the legwork. The additional members took the load off their backs and let them breathe easy. Gone were the days of working for days on end to catch up on a backlog.

It was the first time in Terunosuke’s life that he felt like he truly belonged. The work was still work, but it wasn’t as bad as it had been before. He felt important when subordinate members asked him for help. And his relationship with Belinda was only getting better and better. Any worries he may have had were now blown away like dust in the wind. He trusted her implicitly, and he knew that she felt exactly the same way.

He didn’t need anything more to keep him happy. He had achieved the dream that every working class citizen dreamed of. An exciting, well-paying job, great friends, a beautiful girlfriend. It was everything he ever could have wanted.

Losing all of that was what scared him so much when things threatened to change.

It was May 31st, 2001, when he received the call. Nothing about that day was special. It was an average Thursday. He and Belinda had finished their allotted work for the day and were watching the nightly news when Sergio called.
“Carta. This is big.” His superior began. Using his alias was unusual—unless something serious—as serious as he made it out to be—was happening.

“Ser… Pane. What is it?” Belinda raised an eyebrow at the usage of the codename and listened in curiously.

“You might not believe this, God knows I didn’t, but… you’re moving up in the world!”

“Moving up…? What’s this all about?”

“Carta! You’ve made it in the world! I don’t know why or how, but you fucking did it!”

“What are you talking about?! What happened?!”

“Boss Giorno wants to meet with you! Face! To! Face!”

He… didn’t know how to take that. Belinda had heard and looked at him with an expression that was as surprised as his. They stared at each other at disbelief for a while.

“Hello? Carta? Are you still there?”

“Sorry, I’m here. Why does Boss Giorno want to see ME of all people?”

“No clue. I didn’t even get to talk with him directly, just some go-between.”

“So… where do I meet him?”

Pane only gave him the address and meeting time; the only information he was provided from the third party. After that, they said their goodbyes and hung up, leaving Terunosuke with far more questions than answers.

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The address led to the chateau where he had first met Boss Giorno. He was met at the door by a man wearing a cap on his head. The cap coupled with the Italian fashion he was wearing burned Terunosuke's eyes as he was led to a boardroom.

When he walked in, he was met with the sight of two other men, neither of them Boss Giorno, but imposing nonetheless. A rugged, stone-faced man glared out the bright windows, as if he could scare the light away. Patches of painful-looking scars carved up, down, and around his face at all angles, some faded, some recent. The other man couldn't be more different. His bright green hair popped in the light along with his designer suit. He wore sunglasses despite being indoors, though his clothing seemed to demand it with the amount of luminance it radiated.

As soon as Terunosuke was noticed, the walking disco ball strolled over to him and slung his arm over his shoulder.

“Great to meet another one! I'm Caffè and the grumpy soldier over there is Albi Cocca. Great to meet you.” Terunosuke disliked Caffè's over-familiarity, but he could at least greet him.

“I'm Carta. Nice to meet you.”

Caffè unhooked his grapple and returned to his spot at the table. He leaned back, discontent with sitting normally. Albi had no such issues, sitting silently with his hands on the table.

“Take a seat, take a seat!” Caffè said. “I'd hate to keep you standing, Carta.” He pulled out the seat beside him, inviting Terunosuke to bask in his close proximity. There wasn't much choice in the matter, so he took the invitation.

The man in the cap disappeared somewhere, leaving the three of them alone. Caffè immediately took advantage of the opportunity.

“So what does your stand do, Carta?”

“Ah… I'm not telling you just because you ask.”
“Of course, of course. Where are my manners? You need a gesture of goodwill to make sure we're up to snuff, right? Allow me to provide.”

Caffè pressed his palm to the table. As soon as he did, vines and petals began to emerge from beneath his skin. Roses grew majestically in all sorts of sizes. Caffè took a whiff of one and joyfully sighed.

“Violator never disappoints me.”


“It's just roses, but it sure would be convenient to have some more options, not that I'm complaining. I mean, seriously! Take a smell.” Terunosuke didn't trust the man one bit, but, again, not much of an option. He'd put his nose to the rose, but he'd simply feign smelling it, just in case.

Just as his nose was about to graze the petals, Albi grasped Caffè's wrist, yanking the flower away. “Bastard, don't take advantage of the newbie just to satisfy your perversive sadism.” Albi's stand manifested behind him. A smooth, overly-geometrical stand glared at Caffè. The stand's large, silver finger tapped the rose, turning it to stone instantly. Albi then grasped the stone flower and shattered it with a clench of his hand.

“Aww. You ruined the fun. I was just going to give Carta a nice scar on the cheek to match one of yours.” Caffè whined.

Terunosuke was at a complete loss through all of this. Albi seemed to notice his ignorance.

“Caffè's stand, Violator, takes its form through roses. Its actual ability is to be highly acidic to the point of being able to melt human flesh in mere seconds.” He pointed at where other roses had touched the table. The wood was singed and warped. Terunosuke could only imagine what they would have done to his face...

“I was able to counteract Violator because of my own stand, Hard Times. It petrifies organic matter on touch. It’s just strong enough to neutralize a flower with a single touch. And since acids don't burn matter when they're in a solid state, it's a safe process to shatter them to pieces with my bare hand.”

“Wow.” Terunosuke said. “That's a lo-”

“Don't be so reckless, Carta. You shouldn't have even trusted Caffè in the first place.”

Caffè just grinned without a shred of guilt on his face. Without speaking, Terunosuke moved chairs to sit by Albi instead of the psychopath. Albi just went back to staring out the window without reacting.

A few minutes later, the time finally arrived. The man with the cap returned, calling their attention as he did.

“Men. Pay your respects to Boss Giorno.”

As the blond leader of the gang entered the room, the three men at the table stood up from their chairs. Once the boss was seated at the head of the table, they returned to their seats.

“I'm glad to see that you all accepted my invitation today. I won't waste your time with small talk. Let's get to business.” Boss Giorno gazed across the table at each of them before continuing.

“There was a squad of men who were tasked with serving as my guard squad. They undertook the duty of investigating anyone seeking to expose my identity to the world and dealing with the threat.
Due to recent circumstances, the squad laid down their lives to keep me safe. One of the reasons I revealed my identity was to make sure no one died for my personal paranoia any longer. Now, I am left with little protection and a target on my head. I've exposed myself to the world, and any coward with a gun could threaten my life. This is why I've called you men here today. If you choose to accept my offer, you will become a member of my personal guard squad. You will no longer need to oversee simple gambling, Albi Cocca. You will no longer have to engage in constant assassinations, Caffè. You will no longer have to rush about delivering packages, Carta. You will be paid handsomely for your service and any information you request will be personally provided by me.”

Boss Giorno stood up and continued speaking with a smooth, confident voice.

“What do you say to my offer, gentlemen?”

Terunosuke… couldn't believe what he was hearing. Why did Boss Giorno want him in this?! Albi made perfect sense and Caffè seemed crafty enough to make the cut, but he didn't belong at all!

“I accept your request, Boss Giorno.” Albi answered without hesitation.

“With an offer like that, I don't know how anybody could say no. I absolutely accept!” Caffè said.

Everyone in the room shifted their focus to Terunosuke. With no clue as to how he should answer, he asked a question for more information.

“You said you'd provide information, right Boss Giorno? If that's true, then please answer me. Why am I here?”

Boss Giorno answered in a heartbeat.

“You are here because of your ability to deal with threats. On five separate occasions, you have dealt with members of Sceggia in deadly circumstances. In each of these engagements, you have defied all expectations by not only ending the lives of your enemies, but by also receiving only minimal injury. Based on this information, you are the driving reason for Sceggia being crippled. Out of all potential candidates, you have fared the best in the shortest amount of time. That is why you are here.”

So it was the Sceggia bastards that landed him here. The wedding, Sanguinoso, Noce, Cielo, and Fanculo. It all felt so long ago, almost like it had never actually happened. Was he just lucky to have survived every time? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe Boss Giorno had a legitimate point.

But still… what about Tira? What about Sergio? Could he leave them in the dust? He loved where he was at, but what would that get him after the novelty wore off, once the reality of his situation settled in? This was an opportunity to rise above simple smuggling and stand beside one of the most powerful men in the country, maybe even the entire continent! To make meaning in his life!

It was all too much to consider right then and there.

“I can't make a decision yet. I need some time to consider my options. Can I hold off on providing an answer until I've figured things out?”

“Certainly.” Boss Giorno said. “Take all the time you need. When you've made a decision, simply call this number and you'll receive instructions from there.” The leader motioned at the man with the cap. The man pulled a notepad from his pocket, wrote down a number, tore off a page, then handed it to Terunosuke.

The remainder of the meeting rushed to completion. They were all released and Terunosuke was soon alone with a myriad of questions.
“Hello, Rosso residence, Maddalena speaking.”
“It’s Terunosuke. How are you?”
“TERUNOSUKE! How are you?! How are things? How’s Belinda, how’s Sergio, and how’s Salvatore? Are you eating well?”
“One question at a time, little girl.”
“I’m not that little.”
“Either way, I have something I want to ask you?”
“Oh yeah? Well Belinda would probably like chocolate and flowers when you apologize to h-”
“Get serious, midget!”
“Midget?! Who do you think you're talking too?!”
“A midget. Thought that was pretty obvious when I said ‘midget’.”
“Daaaad, Terunosuke's calling me a midget!”
“Don't use your dad to fight your battles for you! Fight me like a man!”
“I'm not a man and you know it!”
“Oh right, you're not a man, you're a midget.”
“You make it really easy to hate you some days.”
“Like I care about what some midget thinks.”

Maddalena hung up on him.

He wondered if he'd taken the joke to its natural conclusion, or if Maddalena was just overly sensitive.

Definitely the latter.

He still needed help, so he redialed the number.

“Hello, Rosso residence, Oscar speaking.”
“How are you, Oscar? It's Terunosuke.”
“Oh hey! Good to hear from you! Have you been eating well, are you using protection with Belinda, what do you have against midgets, what is the weather like in Naples?”
“Yes, none of your business, they annoy me, and beautiful. Let me ask a question.”
“I'm all ears for you.”
“Thanks. So this is the situation: I'm working at my job, my du-”
“At the gang.”
“Yeah, at the gang. My duties are bearable, I get respect, and I enjoy the environment. My coworkers treat me with respect and I feel important.”
“So what's the issue?”
“The issue is that I have an opportunity for something else, something with more importance than I'd ever hope to wield where I'm at.”
“But that wouldn't necessarily make you happy, would it?”
“No. I don't think it necessarily would.”

Oscar sighed across the line. He took his time collecting his thoughts before speaking again.

“This other opportunity… it won't completely uproot your life, will it?” He asked.
“Not my personal life, no.”
“Well then… I think either option would be fine then. It's your call and no one can make it except you.”
“Yeah. I sort of expected you to say that.”

They both chuckled a bit at that.
“I won't keep you. Think about who and what is important to you. Oh, and if you ever need someone to turn to, Maddalena, Olivia, and I are more than happy to lend a hand.”
“Thanks, Oscar. You're a good man.”
“Not as good a man as you'll be.”

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“So Boss Giorno wants you for his guard squad, huh?” Belinda said.
“Jeez, what an opportunity. Dude, you've gotta get his autograph when you have the chance.”
Sergio said.
“So what do you think I should do?” Terunosuke asked.
“Just as long as you stay safe and come back to me in one piece every night, you can do anything.”
Belinda answered.
“I say you should take the offer!” Sergio said. “Boss Giorno is a big deal! Think of all the perks that position could reap.”

Their answers were laissez-faire and overly-excited respectively. Not exactly enough to push Terunosuke in either direction.

How was he supposed to make a choice when everyone he asked either told him to decide himself or was distracted by celebrity?

He needed a neutral third party for this, someone who had no stake in his affairs…

He might know just who to turn to...

“I'm going off alone to think about this for awhile. I'll be back home before it gets dark.”

Belinda and Sergio would have no clue where he was going, nor would anyone else. He'd never told anyone about what had happened that day, after all.

Maybe she could help him find an answer.

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He took a taxi to the same park he had gone to months ago. He was glad he didn't have to walk through the cold this time around.

It didn't take long for him to find the unmarked spot behind a row of trees. The last time he had been there, he had buried a woman. He didn't know that woman's name, nor did he know her story beyond what little she had told him. She was just another nameless victim of an uncaring world.

Or at least she would have been, had it not been for Terunosuke.

When he buried her, he had left a carnation on her grave both to mark where she was laying, and to give the hidden spot a sense of life.

This time around, the spot was almost completely different. Grass had grown atop the grave, making it almost impossible to know that someone was buried there. Even more, the single carnation was joined by an assortment of flowers of all shapes and colors. It was like a secret garden that only he knew about.

He took a seat before the vibrant flower bed. It was bright, beautiful, and respectful. It was good. Exactly what every person deserved. If he could've given that to every person who had died because of him, he would do so without hesitation.
But regrets weren't his focus. His focus was on the future.

“Hi, ma'am. I don't know what your name was, but I wanted to talk with you.” It was a bit of a silly idea, all things considered. Though, it seemed that it would be alright if he talked despite that.

“I don't think I ever told you my name either. I'm Terunosuke Miyamoto. I'm from Morioh, Japan. I'm nineteen years old, though I feel like I'm eighteen. I live with a girl I love, I'm best friends with a respectable guy, and I look up to an incredible man. Many people have died because of me… including you.”

He took a breath before continuing. This was a bit harder than he had expected.

“Right now I'm at a crossroads in my life. I like where I'm at, I really mean that, but I've been offered the chance to go further than that. I would be an important person… but that would involve leaving the people I care about in the dust. I'm not sure what it is I actually want, so I thought it might be a good idea to ask you for advice.”

Being there seemed like it would help, but he might as well have been asking advice from a deaf-mute with all the help it actually provided. He was glad to see the makeshift shrine, but it left him no closer to finding an answer.

“It was you.” A voice said. It was not the woman's voice, but the voice of an old man standing behind him. Terunosuke had been so focused on his own self-reflection that he hadn't noticed someone walk up behind him.

“Who are you?” Terunosuke asked instinctively.

“The groundskeeper of this park.” The man answered.

Terunosuke's stomach sank. If he was the groundskeeper, he would definitely know about the dead body of the woman that had been buried without permission. It wasn't a good position, sitting there in front of the secret flowerbed grave. Only two people would know about the grave: the one who put the woman there and the one who had to deal with it. Terunosuke's had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“You're the one who put that body there, aren't you?” The groundskeeper demanded. Terunosuke didn't try to weasel his way out of this.

“Yes, that was my doing.”

“Straight to the point. I'm glad you told the truth.”

Terunosuke wasn't sure what he should say in response, so he just kept quiet.

“When I first found that body, I was disappointed more than anything else. Disappointed that such a pretty girl was brutalized, killed, and thrown into a shallow grave barely deep enough to cover her corpse. But I noticed something beautiful. A carnation had been laid atop the grave. No heartless killer would do that. It was a sad attempt at respecting the dead, but an attempt nonetheless. If someone cared enough to give that woman a burial, then they could not be a monster. And you aren't a monster, are you?”

He looked at Terunosuke with a fixed gaze, as if expecting a speech.

“I don't think I'm a monster. Some might, but I don't.”

“Well, kid, why did you come back to this grave?”

“I'm actually at a bit of a crossroads right...”

“I heard all that. What were you hoping for when you came here?”
“I… wanted help figuring out what's important to me.”
“Isn't that something only you can decide?”
“Sure, but I can't decide something I'm not sure about.”

The groundskeeper seemed to understand.

“It's between the options of comfort or importance, right?”
“That's about right, yeah.”
“Then I suppose you have your answer.”

Terunosuke gave him a confused stare.

“How do you figure?” He asked.
“You came to this woman's grave for remembrance, didn't you?”
“Partially. That and guidance.”
“You see? If you were more concerned with comfort, you would have remembered her at home. But instead, you've come to remember her directly. From where I'm standing, you wanted to keep the memory of this woman alive and well. That's just what it looks like to me anyway.”

That observation clicked everything into place. Of course Terunosuke had framed his choices that way, he'd wanted to make that decision from the beginning, hadn't he. He'd be able to spend his off-time with his loved ones while attaining an important position. He could have both options that way. And of course he cared about remembrance after his time in the book, there was no way he wanted to be forgotten. If he could be with those he cared about while also being revered and remembered, how could he pass up the offer?

The answer was clear now.

Terunosuke stood up, taking one more look at the woman's grave. After what felt like an appropriate length of time, he turned to the groundskeeper.

“Thank you. You've really helped me out.” The groundskeeper gave him a surprised look, but smiled nonetheless.
“You're welcome? Glad I could help you out. Just don't bury anyone else here, even if you are a good man. It's not the type of issue that I'm equipped to deal with.” Terunosuke chuckled at that.
“Sorry. I promise I won't do it again.”

With that, Terunosuke turned around and began to walk back home, or at least to the nearest taxi. He glanced over his shoulder to see the groundskeeper watching him depart. Terunosuke waved as he walked.

A person that nice didn't belong in such a violent world.

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That night, Terunosuke joined Boss Giorno's guard squad.

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With a single decision, Terunosuke’s life changed yet again. It was not a bad change, though. In fact, he was able to sleep in the next day. Belinda gave him a joking scowl when she left for work while he lounged around. Sergio had promised that she would be as safe as possible. He also said that he should focus on working hard and getting ahead.

At a little past noon he reported to where he was directed. He was still humming along with his
ELO CD he’d been listening to all morning. It probably wasn’t professional to walk in to his first meeting wearing a portable CD player and headphones, so he converted the machine to paper and jammed it in his pocket before walking inside the building.

When he arrived, he was greeted warmly by Caffè and coldly by Albi Cocca. The guy with the cap who had ushered him into the meeting with Boss Giorno, Mista, wasn’t anywhere to be found. Caffè said something about avoiding making 4, but Terunosuke didn’t quite follow. Albi just told them to can it.

Their assignment was one that the two had been working on while Terunosuke had been deciding his path forward. Apparently, a pair of two-bit thugs were planning on assassinating Boss Giorno. Their plan boiled down to storming Boss Giorno’s living quarters, of which the location was a mystery to them, and popping him in the skull a few times until he died. At that point, they would take over Passione… somehow? Maybe it was just a framework in which improvisation would be added… but the men in question didn’t even seem smart enough to spell “improvisation”.

Nonetheless, the guard squad had a job to do. They would neutralize the threat to Boss Giorno’s life through whatever means they saw fit.

The thugs were easily located at a street café. They sipped coffee, ate cake, and talked about pie-in-the-sky ambitions. As the three members of the guard squad approached, Caffè started to smile a slick, dirty smile. If Terunosuke could see past his coworker's sunglasses, he bet that his eyes were bloodthirsty, feral. He was eager for this.

Albi and Caffè pulled up seats at the table, leaving Terunosuke standing as they all stared at the thugs who were startled at their sudden company.

“Can we help you?” One of them asked with audible distaste.
“‘You can!’” Caffè said, perking up. “We hear you have your sights set on the very top of the gang.”
“‘We sure do!’” The other idiot said. “You interested in joining our cause?”
“Something like that.” Albi said. “Though we had a few adjustments to your master plan.”
“‘Oh yeah? Think you can do better?”
“Just a bit.” Terunosuke said. “But we can't talk with all of these people here.”
“Take care of that, Carta.” Albi ordered.

Terunosuke nodded, raising his gun high up into the air. He fired off a few shots, breaking the peace of the easy, April afternoon. The other patrons wisely left the area, leaving the two thugs, who began to understand what sort of situation they were in. They couldn't move to run, however, due to their legs being petrified by Albi Cocca's Hard Times.

Caffè hunched over the table, resting his elbows on a piece of cake one of the thugs had been eating.
“Ah fuck! Look what you idiots did. This suit is Armani! How could you smear cake all over it like I'm some baby trying to eat! I'm not letting this one go!”

He hurled the plate that he'd smeared his suit on across the café, shattering it on the storefront. He handed Terunosuke the other thug's cake. It had only a single bite taken out of it. If the offer was there...

He took the piece as Caffè got to work on the idiots.

The cake was a subtle chocolate flavor, almost like coffee actually. It was creamy without being overwhelmingly sweet, which was a pretty phenomenal combination. Rather than sweet, it had an earthy, borderline-bitter flavor, that didn't overextend into its coffee overtones.
Albi picked up a fork from another table’s abandoned meal and asked for a bite of his own which Terunosuke was happy to provide.
“Mmm. Haven't had tiramisu this good since I was a kid.” The serious man said.

Terunosuke suppressed the urge to laugh at the joke he'd walked into. He wondered if Belinda would enjoy it as well.

Eating tiramisu. How dirty.

The idiots had been encased in Caffè’s Violator at this point and could only shriek out in pain. Terunosuke pitied them for the hand fate had dealt them, though they had brought it on themselves through pure stupidity, not some sort of myopic enthusiasm or power drunkenness. They didn’t bother him much with that in mind. Even though he lost most of his appetite, he continued taking bites until the treat had been consumed it in its entirety.

To avoid hearing their screams, he pulled out his portable CD player, slid the headphones over his ears, and listened to a few ELO songs. After a few musical masterpieces, Caffè had finished the job. His bloodlust had been temporarily sated. He wiped the cake off of his suit with a napkin.

Terunosuke was instructed to dispose of the remains at a provided location where friends of the thugs were supposedly located. The only thing remaining was melted, bloody bones, but Enigma could manage. He did as instructed, still listening to his favorite band all the while, keeping his mission as far back in his mind as he could push it.

He finished with time to kill.

That was the only task on the agenda for that day. With nothing more, he was allowed to go back home and spend his time however he wanted.

It was distasteful work, no doubt. But if someone tried to kill Boss Giorno without taking the due diligence to keep things under wraps, how sorry could he really be? Idiots didn't deserve tears.

The stupid weren't pitiable anymore.

***

His duties with the guard squad progressed smoothly. Albi Cocca served as the de-facto leader, while Terunosuke and Caffè stepped up when required. Albi was a man of few words, but managed to be a decent listener because of it. At one point Terunosuke had told him that he joined the guard squad partially because he wanted to be remembered. Albi didn't say anything, but seemed to understand the reasoning.

Life continued on as it always did. When a lead was found on suspicious characters, the guard squad would track down the suspects, interrogate them, then choose how to deal with them. Most of the time they'd decide to scare the living shit out of their targets, but sometimes, especially if they were influential, they would inflict numerous injuries to send a message to any potential sympathizers. That was, unless Caffè flew off the handle and melted their target down to a sizzling bloodstain, regardless of relevance or social standing. Terunosuke hated the cold nature in which the group took lives, though he was always able to defer any sort of legitimate violence to the other members. All part of the job.

Speaking of his job, it came with additional perks. While Boss Giorno had said that he would answer any question, save for the most closely guarded of secrets, Terunosuke had not considered what that actually entailed.
In short, it entailed a lot.

He learned about the circumstances surrounding why La Squadra deserted and what had happened to them. It hurt to find out that not only had Ghiaccio met his end, he’d met his end at the hands of Boss Giorno himself. The same Ghiaccio that had helped him take down Noce had been cut down by Terunosuke's boss. Why did the man even need a guard squad? Though Ghiaccio had kept his professional distance, he had saved Terunosuke’s life. The plane ticket he'd been asked to buy wound up being pointless. What a shame.

But that was how things were. Ghiaccio and the rest of the assassins had been cunning, ruthless, and dedicated, but when it came down to it… their luck just didn't cut it.

Terunosuke passed the ticket off to Sergio in the hopes that he could find someone who would use it.

Rest in peace, crazy bastard.

And so life went on as it always did.

Threats were scarce, allowing Terunosuke to be free for most days. During that time, he appreciated the best perk of the job: recognition.

People knew Carta, people respected Carta, and people were glad to have Carta be their friend. Restaurant owners were quick to bump him to the top of the waitlist as soon as he walked through the door. Bakers always had their best bread piping hot whenever he was around. Kids on the street would ask him to play with them no matter what kind of game they were playing.

They knew him. They recognized him.

But they didn't respect him.

It was entire town of fair-weather friends. No one had noticed him or baked bread for him when he was a lackey in the smuggling department. They only cared about being on his good side. No one ACTUALLY cared about who he was.

No one except Sergio and Belinda, of course.

While Salvatore and Michael were away doing God-knows-what, those two were who he spent his time with.

Belinda, of course, was especially important. They loved one another and that love only grew as the months passed. If they weren't together, they'd be eagerly waiting until they could be together again. When they were together, they could barely keep their hands off each other. Caffè laughed at him for being an idiot in love, but Albi Cocca approved of his healthy relationship.

It was a fine way for life to be.

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Around the end of August, Terunosuke had a dream. It was just like the one he had gone through after his fight with Fanculo. A blank, empty landscape stretched out as far as the eye could see. There was no one there now. There was only a closed door with heavenly light shining behind it.

It seemed like he had returned to the end of his previous dream, but was still faced with the same delima. The door would not open.
He tried to twist the doorknob with his right hand, but it wouldn't budge.

Nothing to be done.

He walked back a few steps and laid down on the blank floor. His doppelganger had told him once that the secret to waking up from a dream was to fall asleep in one. If there was one source of information he could trust, it was himself.

Just as he was attempting to get comfortable, he noticed that there was much more light than before, to the point where sleep-within-sleep was impractical.

He opened his eyes to see the doorway flooded the blank world with rich, heavenly light.

The door was open.

Terunosuke stood up. He took a step towards the light, the near-blinding light.

Before he took another step, his eyes opened in the real world. Belinda was curled around his arm as she always was. Her head laid softly atop his chest.

The darkness and the stillness of night were a far cry from his bright dream. Though, he could sleep easy knowing that no matter what might happen, that door could always be open, no matter what mistakes he might make.

It might not open immediately, but it would always be there.

***

It would be so simple if that was it. It would’ve been a wonderful place for life to stay.

A gratifying job, a loving girlfriend, a welcoming community. The pieces were all there.

But Terunosuke was vigilant, always looking out for when life would eventually come to bite him.

A few weeks into September, the members of the guard squad met with Boss Giorno to discuss a threat that they had recently neutralized. The man with the cap, Mista, was in the boardroom as well.

“After that, we figured out that the warehouse was just a decoy.” Albi explained. “Thanks to Carta figuring out the trick, we were able to stay on their trail.” The serious man nodded at Terunosuke. That was as close to approval as anyone got with Albi.

“Once we tracked them down, I had all sorts of ideas to make them spill their plans.” Caffè gleefully reported. “I started by using Violater to mel-”

“That's enough detail.” Boss Giorno said, raising his hand to cut the story short. “Thank you. If you have nothing else to report you are free to go for today.”

“Say Boss Giorno, what do you think about what happened in New York City yesterday.” Albi asked. He was obviously referring to the terrorist attacks that had devastated the United States, and the rest of the world by extension.

“The United States and Italy are longtime allies. Whoever is deemed responsible for the attacks will be subject to the wrath of the armed forces both countries possess, alongside other allies. Furthermore, we are in a special position, seeing as how Rome was hit by a bioterrorism attack this year. Because of these factors, Italy plans to show a sign of solidarity with our ally.”

It was a delicate subject. Lots of people had died in that attack, far more than the Rome attack. To
know that Boss Giorno and other leaders planned to stand next to a friend in need was a comforting thought.

With that matter out of the way, everyone stood up to leave before Caffè piped up with his own question.
“Boss Giorno, you've got to answer this for me. It's been gnawing away at me for months.”

The blond leader looked at his subordinate evenly, awaiting the question.

“We all know that you didn't found Passione. You're way too young to have managed such a thing. People say you were either hand picked for the role by the old boss, or you're his secret son. Won't you tell us the answer?”

Boss Giorno was silent. The whole room was now silent. Even Albi seemed curious about the truth.

Boss Giorno motioned for Mista to make sure no one was listening in on the conversation. After all the entrances, exits, and potential hiding spots in the room had been checked, Mista gave the all-clear. Boss Giorno narrowed his eyes at all three of the guard squad members before speaking.

“This information does not leave this room. If it does, you will be hunted down and killed. Do I make myself clear?”

The members nodded.

Boss Giorno continued speaking.

“Your assertion is correct. I, Giorno Giovanna, am not the founder of Passione. That title belongs to a man by the name of Diavolo. He tasked the group Mista and I were in with securing his daughter and delivering her to him. However, he had only been using us to do his dirty work. The truth was that he wanted to kill his daughter, we were simply delivering her to the slaughter. When we found this out, we betrayed the gang and saved the girl. In the end, my superior, Bruno Buccellati, laid down his life so that I could use a stand arrow to transcend my stand. My Gold Experience became Gold Experience Requiem. With my new power, I was able to eternally destroy Diavolo. Due to my stand’s ability, he is cursed to die eternally.”

Albi nodded, understanding Boss Giorno's methodology.
Caffè laughed, taking second-hand delight from the violent story.
Terunosuke didn't move.

He hadn't heard right.

“Could you explain that again, Boss Giorno. Die eternally?” Terunosuke asked, the unease clear in his voice.
“I'm not completely sure myself, but it would work out that way. My Gold Experience Requiem harnessed the power of ‘zero’ when Diavolo was killed, negating a proper death. As it stands, Diavolo is most likely in a constant cycle of death, and will continue to be for all time.”

“Good God.” Albi said.
“Holy shit!” Caffè exclaimed.

Terunosuke was silent.

Monster.
Boss Giorno was a monster. A demon. The Devil in disguise.

A bastard just like Josuke Higashikata.

“What the hell? WHAT THE HELL?! How could you do that?!“ The blood was rushing through Terunosuke's veins. His throat scorched as the words flew out.

“I understand why you might be outraged by this. But you lack the context of the situation and of the entire picture.”

“Big fucking deal I don't know the context! I can still understand that what you did was unforgivable!”

“Carta.” Albi said to him. “Calm down. Take a second to think about this situation.”

“You might do something you regret, Carta.” Caffè said with a goading tone, almost daring him to make a move.

“Please, Carta.” Boss Giorno continued. “What I did was the best way to deal with the situation.”

The ‘best way’? Eternally torturing someone like some toy was the best way to deal with a human being?!

Who in the hell was Boss Giorno to make that decision?! Who was he to play God like that?! Why did he get to decide Diavolo’s eternal fate all on his own?!

Terunosuke would not allow it!

He flipped open the paper that held his gun. His left hand pointed the weapon straight at Boss Giorno's forehead.

Outcries erupted around him. Mista pointed a revolver at him, Albi shouted at him to put the gun down, and Caffè laughed.

“Carta!” Albi shouted. “I thought you wanted to be someone important. How the hell are you going to be important if you're dead, huh? How do you plan on that one?”

“That doesn't matter.” Terunosuke answered.

“And shooting Boss Giorno does matter?!”

Being revered and leaving a legacy were important to Terunosuke, but if he just let this matter go, if he didn't put his foot down right here and right now… what did his time in the book mean? What did the injustice of it all amount to? How was he supposed to sleep at night knowing that he ignored someone who was in the exact same circumstance as him?!

He couldn't.

He wouldn't.

So what if it was idiotic? So what if he had no plan? So what if he might die?!

This was the most important moment of his entire life.

Boss Giorno had been staring at him through the entire standoff, not once looking away.

“You don't owe me anything, Carta. I had no idea that you had such steadfast ideals. I respect you for that. If you cannot tolerate working under me anymore, I understand. If you so desire, you may leave. You are allowed to walk away and never work another second for me. You are permitted to leave Passione without fear of retribution. I will not send anyone after you. You would be free to
live any sort of life you want with your loved ones.”

Boss Giorno focused his gaze on Mista, who had been pointing his revolver at Terunosuke since the beginning of the confrontation.

“Lower your gun, Mista. Don't force Carta into a corner.” Mista complied reluctantly. Albi took a step back as well. Caffè stayed where he was.

Boss Giorno turned back to Terunosuke, seemingly unfazed by the gun being pointed at him.

“Do you have anything you wish to say to me, Carta?”

Terunosuke thought for a few moments. His mind ran on overdrive, thoughts scattering then disappearing in a second. One thing he realized out was that he couldn't die here, not after everything that had happened.

Belinda was waiting for him.

“I won't work for you any longer, Giorno.” Terunosuke lowered his gun, converting it to paper and storing it back in his pocket. “You're a sick bastard. What you've done is reprehensible, and I hope you burn in hell for all eternity. Until that day comes, lead the gang and Italy the best that you can. I resign from Passione.”

He glanced to Mista, who scowled at him. He glanced to Caffè, who waved goodbye. He glanced at Albi, who gave a single nod.

His desires for remembrance and significance were just desires. They were pointless in the grand scheme of things.

As he open the chateau’s front door with his right hand, he felt the late noon sunlight wash over his body. He walked out to a world of his choosing, not one life had chosen for him.

Whether he made the “right” or “wrong” decision didn't cross his mind.

He kept true to what he believed in.

That was what mattered.

Chapter End Notes

The end is close. It really is setting in, isn't it? I've labored away at this project for such a long time, it almost feels like it's a part of me now. That's probably a tad dramatic, but its kind of true.

After this chapter, the end is right around the corner.

Side note: the second ED for the part 5 anime is "Modern Crusaders" by Enigma. It was quite the pleasant surprise to see Enigma's namesake get recognition!
Terunosuke had made his decision. He had chosen to leave Passione, accepting any and all consequences that entailed. After everything, it all came to an end with a gut reaction. Months of work derailed in a moment. He believed in his decision, but he couldn't help thinking that he'd acted too impulsively. Maybe he could've just stepped down from the guard squad. But as he thought about it, he knew that he'd never be able to work for Boss Giorno no matter how many layers of separation there were between them.

So he walked. He could hold his head high, but what was next? Where did he go from here? Could he get a normal job now? He didn't know. Life had changed for him with a single rash choice. Whether things would change for better or for worse was still up in the air.

When he got home he fell onto his bed and let the thoughts have their say. The worry was worried, the frustration was frustrated, the anger was angry. He ground his teeth, he balled up his fists, tears welled up in his eyes.

After a few minutes of feeling his feelings, he took hold of himself. If he kept everything down forever, it would only come back to bite him. If he eased the tension, he could control his emotions, instead of the other way around. He sat up and stared out the window. Naples was really nice in September. How much longer would he live there? Would his choice change that as well?

Terunosuke considered all the paths laid out before him, likely and unlikely. He could find another job. He could coast off the money he'd earned from working. He could move somewhere else. He could just die, though why do that? He could turn to crime again. Life was his for the taking. If he wanted it, he could have it. Possibilities ran amok in his head. He got so wrapped up in scenarios that he didn't hear Belinda come in.

“Meeting go well?” She asked.
“No. Things went south today.” He said.
“What, did the air conditioning break?”
“No, I'm serious. Things have changed.” His tone wasn't joking, not even for a second. Belinda took note.
“What happened?”

Terunosuke filled her in, explaining his fateful question, the appalling response, and the instant, violent reaction that followed. Of course, he let her know about his resignation too.

“And so here we are.” He concluded.

Belinda paced back and forth. Throughout the story, she'd been looking anxious, as if it was prepared to hear about some grisly bloodbath. When he finished, she faced him.

“I'll resign as well.” She said.
“Of course I do! I have you, Terunosuke.”
“But… what about Sergio and the other members? And how do you even plan to resign from Passione? It's a gang! They don't just let people leave so easily.”
“That didn't stop you, did it?”
How insane was this woman?!

“Huh? The hell are you talking about? I'm a special exception! I was given clearance by Boss Giorno himself!”
“Don't act all high and mighty, Terunosuke. I could get him to let me off with a single call, no sweat.”
“You're delusional!”
“And you're an idiot if you think I'm letting you go.”

What a pain she was, following him around like some cute, lost puppy. He didn't need her to confidently stay by his side in his darkest hour. There was no need for her to care so much, to be such a wonderful woman.

“You're the idiot here.” Terunosuke wrapped Belinda in a tight embrace. She instantly returned the gesture.
“So what should we do next?” Belinda asked in his arms.

Terunosuke poured over what he'd thought about since his confrontation. They could live all kinds of lives in Naples, from average workers to not even working for a decade. Or they could move. He remembered something he'd been told, something very personal and encouraging.

“If you ever need someone to turn to...”

Oscar Rosso had said that. If Terunosuke phoned him up, asking for help in a time of need, they would help him. Whether that meant giving him a place to stay or not was up to debate, but it was worth a shot considering his options.

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“Hello, Rosso residence, Oscar speaking.”
“Hi, Oscar. It’s Terunosuke.”
“TERUNOSUKE! How can I help you?”
“I'm not sure how to ask this, but can Belinda and I stay with you for a few months while we try to reestablish our lives?”
“Certainly! You two can have the guest room.”
“Uh… thanks. You agreed so quickly I don't quite know what to say.”
“Terunosuke, I'm your friend. Of course I would do what I could to help you.”
“I don't know what to say.”
“You don't need to say anything. Just take care of what you need.”
“I'll… see you soon--in a couple days!”
“I look forward to it! Maddalena will be over the moon when I tell her the news.”
“See you soon.”
“Same to you, Terunosuke.”

***

The news that they were on their way out of the gang and moving to Sicily was given to Sergio personally that night. Unlike Belinda and Oscar, he didn’t take the news with a smile.

“You're kidding.” He said with a look of utter disbelief.
“Wish I was, but it's the truth.” Terunosuke said.
“But… why? I thought you were happy? You got to be Boss Giorno’s guard! You aren’t happy with that?!”
“Sergio.” Belinda said. “It’s about ethics.”
“ETHICS?! This is a fucking gang! A crime organization! Who gives a flying fuck about ethics?!”

He turned to his friend, looking him straight in the eye before continuing on. “Terunosuke… how am I supposed to run things? I can’t do it if I know I’ll never see you again, man. Who's going to be impressed by what I accomplish? Who am I going to turn to when I don’t know what to do?! I can’t do it on my own! I’ll go back to how I used to be. I’ll be a worthless pile of shit who buys whores to avoid having to be alone. Someone who drinks all the alcohol the world to squash down any negative feelings. Can’t… can’t you just stay here in Naples? Can’t you watch over me, tell me if I’m doing well, keep me on the right path?”

Heavy tears were streaming down Sergio’s face. What was supposed to be a straightforward sit-down about the future had turned into a confessional. Terunosuke had no idea how much importance he had had on Sergio’s life. While it was true Sergio had been free spirited when they’d first met, it wasn’t something he’d known to be a major source of insecurity. But that was all behind him now. Sergio was a leader, and a capable one at that!

Terunosuke brought his arms around his friend, embracing him as if they were brothers.

"Sergio. I’d be a nobody if I hadn't bumped into you the first day I arrived in Naples. I would probably be working in some warehouse, alone and poor. But because you and I ran into each other, I became a member of Passione."

"So what?" Sergio said. "Any jackass from the gang could've bumped into you. And you're leaving anyway."

"Sure, but you recognized my skills, you became a genuine friend. I don’t think just anyone would have done that."

Sergio’s frown didn’t seem so bitter after hearing those words, but his spirit was still downtrodden.

"I was just desperate."
"It wasn't just that. You taught me how to survive here. You defended me during the fight with that Scheggia member, Sanguinoso. Remember that? Nobody would do that for someone they just met, but you did."
"You had to bail me out in the end. Then I got my spine fucked when we tried to kill the hitmen and Formaggio, God bless his soul."

"Sure." Terunosuke said. "And then you made your way back to your feet. Don't you see? Everytime you fall, you get back up. That's the mark of a real man, Sergio!"

“So that’s what you really think?"
"It is. I’m absolutely sure that you will be a phenomenal leader for years to come. The only thing holding you back is self-doubt.” Sergio wiped his reddened eyes.

“I guess you're kinda right. I’m only proving myself right if I cry like a baby about you moving on. You better live a happy life, got it?” He said, acting like he was making some sort of demand.

“Get what? I don’t take orders from you anymore… or anyone for that matter.”

“Well… you better make Belinda a happy woman.”

“Hmm. I guess I can agree to that.”

Even Belinda could accept that order.

***

The next morning began with the impact of his decision setting in. This was real life. No turning around, no looking back. Naples was a city he’d never thought he’d find a life in. It was random chance that carried him there, a lucky roll of the dice. But this was how things turned out. He had regrets, of course, but he also had a ton of treasured experiences.

This thought was almost immediately slammed with a negative experience. The phone rang,
forcing him to leave Belinda’s warm embrace and crawl out into the cold world.

“Hello?” He groggily answered.
“Carta. What’s up with you?” An annoying voice asked. Of all the people to call him, he hadn’t expected, nor desired, Marco Montagne.
“How’d you get this number, you damn cockroach.”
“Rude. I used the phonebook.”
“The phonebook?! This number is unlisted!”
“Uh… you gave it to me?”
“No way in hell.”
“I called every number in order until I got to this one?”
“Get to the point already!”
“Oh yeah.” The definition of annoyance cleared his throat and moved on to his main point. “I heard from one of my subordinates that one of Boss Giorno’s guards left the gang. Since you’re the only one stupid enough to do that, I figured I’d give you a call.”
“How considerate.” Whoever put Marco Montagne in charge of anything, much less the new crop of assassins, was downright insane. “I’m hanging up now.”
“Hold on, Carta.” Marco Montagne bellowed, to which Terunosuke tentatively complied. “I hear you’re pretty good at killing people, wanna join the new assassin squad and work for me? I hear you’re quite the interior decorator.”
"Hell no I don't! And besides, I've come to a realization about my future."
"Are you going to be a father?"
"Can it! I've decided that I'm never going to kill another human being for as long as I live."

Marco Montagne went silent for a minute, quietly considering Terunosuke's new life stance. He quickly broke the peace with a final topic.

"By the way, I just wanted you to know that your fly was down everytime I talked to you.”
"Excuse me?"
“You heard me.”
“No it wasn’t!”
“Was too. It’s probably down right now.” Terunosuke checked.
“It’s not!” He exclaimed, victoriously.
“Made you look.” Marco Montagne said.

What the hell was this conversation? Sensing that the joke had run its course, Marco Montagne voted to quickly wrap things up.

“That was all I had. Have a good life, Carta. I’m glad to have been your friend.” He said with a surprisingly genuine tone of voice.
“You... too.” Terunosuke offered back.

The click on the other side of the line ended the strangest acquaintanceship he’d ever experienced. The time wasted interacting with that cockroach could never be reclaimed.

Just as Terunosuke turned around to go back to bed, the phone rang again. A long sigh fell out of his lungs. Reluctantly, he shuffled to the phone again. If it was a telemarketer, he’d have to break his vow of nonviolence.

“Hello, you’ve reached the residence of an exasperated lunatic, please state your business or suffer the consequences.” He said.
“Is that your normal greeting, Terunosuke?” Sergio asked, disappointed in his friend.
“Oh. Morning, Sergio. Come to say your final goodbyes over the phone?”
“No way man, I’ve got some news that I think you’ll appreciate.”
“What exactly?”
“The big man wants to see you guys off. Salvatore is back from his sabbatical!” The announcement
was delivered with a level of enthusiasm on par with a preacher announcing the second coming.
“Sabbatical? That’s where he was? I figured he was just mad at me for some reason or another.”
“Awfully narcissistic, aren’t we? I haven’t seen Doc in months! But he called me and specifically
asked for you and Belinda to meet him. The address he gave me isn’t that far from you guys, so
it’ll be perfect to swing by and meet with him on your way to the airport. Then, once you guys
finish up and say your goodbyes, I’ll see you off at the airport gate!”
“Sounds like a plan to me.”
“That’s great! I’ll see you when you get to the airport. Don’t keep me waiting.”

After relaying Salvatore’s meeting spot, Sergio could barely hold his excitement, perhaps due to
getting the chance to hear how Salvatore was doing. Or maybe he was just that excited to usher in
the next stage of Terunosuke’s life. Maybe both got the blood pumping.

With all distractions squared away, Terunosuke knew one thing. Spending his morning with
Belinda would get HIS blood pumping. Departure could wait a little bit longer, there were
memories to be made.

***

They took public transportation to the meeting place like a couple of normal people. It seemed they
actually were normal now, at least if one were to ignore the feathery neck snake and the paper-
making spirit ghost. There was a short walk from the bus stop to the destination. The spot was a
quiet, open-air market with a fountain in the center. It was quite the welcoming attraction.

“Wish we’d discovered this place before we left.” Terunosuke remarked.
“I was just thinking the same thing.” Belinda said. “Would’ve been nice to come around on a day
off and browse at our leisure. What a pity. Bet they have a great selection.” Belinda glanced over
to the nearest fruit stand, but was dismayed to see that the seller had just run out of oranges. “We
should’ve gotten here earlier…”
“Time got away from us. We were busy enjoying ourselves.”
“That’s one way of putting it.” The sun was smiling high over them. It reminded him of the first
day he’d set foot in Naples all that time ago. It all went by so fast, didn’t it?
“Now where could Sal be hiding?” Belinda said.

With a quick glance, Terunosuke spotted the doctor sitting on the edge of the fountain. He had
grown out patches of uneven facial hair and his coat was unbuttoned, allowing it to flap in the wind
like a flag. Someone had clearly enjoyed their sabbatical a bit too much.

“Hey, Salvatore! Good to see you.” Terunosuke said. Salvatore turned in his direction, but didn’t
meet his eyes or even seem to recognize his voice.
“Earth to Sal.” Belinda said. “It’s us, Belinda and Terunosuke.” She said their names quieter, just
in case someone was eavesdropping.
“Terunosuke…” Salvatore mumbled. He moved his eyes to the couple. His gaze sharpened a bit
when he put the name and face together. However, just as soon as he did, his eyes seemed to glaze
back over.

Was he drunk out of his mind? Didn’t he arrange this? Why was he so out of it at a time like this?

“Finally here, huh?” Salvatore said, rising to his feet.
“You bet. We couldn’t leave without saying goodbye. You’ve done so much for us that doing any
less would be unacceptable.” Terunosuke said.
“That’s exactly right.” Belinda added.

Salvatore looked at both of them, back and forth, one to the other. He took a deep breath in and let out a heavy, tired sigh.

“It’s been a journey, hasn’t it?” He said.
“Could you call it tha-”
“Done a lot of things, haven’t you?” Salvatore interrupted before Terunosuke could fully answer.
“Y-yeah? I’ve lived my lif-”
“Are you proud of what you’ve done, Terunosuke Miyamoto?”
“Huh? Proud? Is this about… the people I’ve…”
“More than you could know.”
“Hold on, Sal.” Belinda interjected. “You aren’t being fair. So what if he killed people? There were all sorts of circumstances around each time. What’s this about?”

Salvatore let out another rough sigh and rubbed his face with his hand, almost as if he was composing himself. Terunosuke could put the pieces together. The doctor was conflicted.

Ever since Terunosuke had killed that crazed maniac in such a brutal fashion, Salvatore’s moral stance had been shaken. How could he be close with someone who would do such a vicious thing? Said murderer was a close friend and he was leaving town, maybe forever. If he didn’t say goodbye to that murderer, he might never have the chance again. Either confront the ideological divide, or let things dissolve into a great big unresolved nothing. Terunosuke couldn’t blame the man for the clashing state he found himself in.

“Belinda, Terunosuke.” Salvatore rose to his feet. “I need you to understand something important. It’s something that I’d hoped could have stayed buried forever, but hoping it’ll all work out isn’t going to cut it anymore.”
“It’s alright, Salvatore. I trust you.” Terunosuke said. Salvatore just stared at Terunosuke, unreactive.
“The truth is…” The doctor hesitated. It seemed like he couldn’t go through with it after all. Yet after a few deep breaths, he worked himself up to try again.
“The truth is that I am the leader of Scheggia. I am Padre.”

…

The words hung over the stagnant air.

Terunosuke repeated them in his head. Padre? Schiggia? Their leader? That was Salvatore?

…

“AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA” Terunosuke burst out laughing. Salvatore and Belinda looked at him like he’d lost his mind. But soon, Salvatore was swept up in the fun.

“Hahahaha.”
“AHAHAHAHA.”
“Hahahaha.”
“AHAHahah”
“Ha… ha…”
“Aha… aha… aha…”

The manic laughter died a painful death, leaving behind horrifying implications.
What the fuck was Salvatore saying?! He was the leader of Schiggia?! What fucking bullshit! Why the hell would he work for Passione?!

“DON’T FUCK AROUND, SALVATORE!” He screamed, louder than he had meant to. “Why the fuck would you be leading an evil organization, huh?!’’

“Evil? Is that what you think Schiggia was?”

“Of course! They sent their goons after me! They forced me into a corner! I killed because of them! What else can they be but evil?!”

“Do you know what Schiggia did on a day-to-day basis?”

“What’s it matter? They’re a group of vile bastards, nothing else.”

“They provided food for the hungry, help for the poor, treatment for those afflicted by drug addiction. That’s why they were presented to you as the enemy: they cut into Passione’s bottom line.”

“I don’t believe you, Salvatore. You’re just trying to make me feel like shit for making the wrong decisions. Trying to use Schiggia to shame me is a bullshit tactic. You’re almost as bad as Michael.”

“DON’T SAY HIS NAME YOU SON OF A BITCH!” Salvatore instantly lashed out.

“What the hell…?” Terunosuke was caught completely off guard.

“DON’T YOU RECOGNIZE WHERE YOU ARE?! OPEN YOUR EYES?! ISN’T IT OBVIOUS?!”

“What the hell are you talking about, you crazy bastard?”

Terunosuke glanced around the area, but only noticed that most people had taken notice of the exchange and had wisely vacated the premises. Belinda put her hand on his shoulder, practically falling over herself while doing so. When he looked back at her, the blood was drained from her face.

“Terunosuke… isn’t this the place where… you killed that psycho?”

Ah. That was it. This was the location where he fought Fanculo. He went off the rails and murdered the man when he possessed Belinda, nearly killing her. That was where they were. And if this was the case… then…

No. That wasn’t it.

“So what if this is where that bastard kicked the bucket. I killed him to save Belinda’s life.”

Terunosuke declared.

“There’s a difference between protecting someone and murder.” Salvatore said. “You could have subdued Fanculo, or battered him into submission, instead of torturing him to death.”

“But what’s it matter? It was the best way to end the threat he posed at the tim-”

“BEST WAY?!” Salvatore suddenly shouted. “Severing his arms, bashing him mercilessly, ripping off his face and jamming it down his throat to suffocate him was the ‘best way’?! Is that what you’re telling me?!”

“It sounds terrible when you put it like that, but yes. I admit I lost control of myself, but that’s what happened. I’ll stick by that no matter what you think.”

“And you still maintain that opinion, despite knowing who I am?!”

“So what if you were the leader of Schiggia--which you aren’t. Just because I killed some insane subordinate of ‘yours’ doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

Salvatore narrowed his eyes at Terunosuke.

“Would you care if I told you that Fanculo was like a son to me?” He asked.

“What?” Terunosuke said. “So what? You alrea-...”
Terunosuke stopped dead in his tracks.

Wait.

No… no, no, no, no, no.

Oh God. No!

The pieces of the puzzle snapped into place before he even realized he was putting them together. Fanculo was a violent psycho who Salvatore viewed as a son. The psycho revelled in degrading Terunosuke’s worth as a human being, up until he died brutally. Since Salvatore was viciously tearing at Terunosuke, it begged the question… why wasn’t his son, Michael, with him. He’d done the exact same to Terunosuke since the moment they met! There was no reason for him to choose the high road now of all times.

Unless he couldn’t choose.

If his arms had been severed, if he’d been brutally beaten, if his face had been ripped off and shoved down his throat until he suffocated to death.

If Fanculo was Michael.

Only then did it all make sense.

"Do you get it now, Terunosuke?"

The young man could only manage a stiff nod. Salvatore wasn’t playing a cruel joke. He was Padre, the leader of Scheggia. He lead the group that had tried to kill him time after time. The man Terunosuke almost thought of as a father was the mastermind behind practically all of his suffering.

("W-why didn’t you tell me?" Terunosuke asked.
"You could’ve blown everything we’d worked for if you weren’t on our side. I had two lives I had to balance."
"Why did you keep trying to assassinate me?"
Salvatore’s expression grew sour. “They didn’t listen to me. I told them to leave you alone, that you’d either kill them, or they would get a hollow revenge for killing you. I wanted them to stop just as much as you did.”

Terunosuke’s mouth went dry. “So what happens now? What do we do, what do you do? I… don’t think you’ll just let me walk away after all I’ve done.”
“You’re right about that.” Salvatore said. As he spoke, his stand, Under My Skin, materialized behind him. Its only eye gazed through Terunosuke’s soul. The large, striped spike that served as its legs pierced a hole into the stone ground where it stood. Its broad arms reminded Terunosuke of Fanculo’s stand… Michael’s stand. “I can’t allow you to leave after everything that’s happened. One of two things will happen: you kill me, or I kill you. There is no other way.”
“But… can’t we resolve this someway else?!" Terunosuke cried. “You’re a great man! I have no reason to want to kill you. I don’t want to kill anyone ever again, and I can’t go back on that.”
“Carta…” Salvatore said, using Terunosuke’s alias. “This fight has already begun.”

A moment before things fell into motion, Terunosuke noticed the slender wires emerging from the stone ground around him. They all ran straight into his left hand like a swarm of flies descending upon a slab of rotting meat. In the blink of an eye, the wires shifted his hand around like a bloody jigsaw puzzle. Bones, tendons, veins, skin, nerves. Everything shifted. Everything rearranged in an
instant. Everything was in the wrong place. The result was pain in every direction. It wasn’t even a hand anymore, just an insane mass of throbbing, bloody parts attached to a wrist.

His scream tore out of his throat. He tried to clutch the mass, but the pain only multiplied whenever he touched it.

“Terunosuke!” Belinda cried, snapping from her stunned silence to rush to his side. “Stop this, Salvatore! Doing this won’t bring anyone back.”

“Of course it won’t. Who said it would?”

The wires reeled back in to the stand and Salvatore walked toward Terunosuke. Belinda put herself between them, raising her arms to shield Terunosuke. Genesis slithered around her arms, primed to strike at any moment. Salvatore stopped before her, looking down on the woman.

"I'm not here for you. Move."
"Like hell I'll move!"
"I'll rearrange your organs if you don’t."
“You wouldn’t.”

His stand's wires dove into her body. Belinda and Genesis attempted to rip them out, but to no avail. Terunosuke couldn’t move through the pain. All he could do was helplessly watch. The wires dove in, but Salvatore suddenly stopped dead.

"Belinda?! You…?!” It was as if he was only just noticing the woman standing before him wasn’t his target. Seizing upon the moment of hesitation, Genesis struck at Salvatore's face. Her fangs pierced into his skin and she wrapped her body around his head. The wires withdrew from Belinda and dove into Salvatore’s own body. They centralized around his forehead, creating a spider-web shape.

Salvatore took ahold of Genesis, but rather than pulling the snake away from him, he did the opposite. He jammed Genesis a small distance into his skull between his wires.

"You won’t be biting anything.” He stated with cold confidence. He pulled the stand up through his scalp out into the open air, then threw her back at Belinda as he stepped some distance between them.

"I'm not here to fight with you.” He declared.
"Then stop! I'll kill you if you touch Terunosuke again."
"No. You aren't going to do anything anymore. Not here.”

Salvatore closed in. He took hold of Belinda with just the strength of his arms and flung her away. She slid for a distance, but was unscathed. Genesis didn’t even have a chance to strike again. Under My Skin's wires shot to the ground, spreading every which way, like the legs of a venomous spider.

"What are you doing now?” Terunosuke asked, fighting through agony just to speak.
"Did you forget already? Under My Skin can manipulate physical ‘layers’. This fight is between you and me, not Belinda. I’m simply going to make a barrier.”

Terunosuke was about to ask what the hell that meant when his question was answered for him. The ground began to rumble. An enormous ring formed from stone rose up from the ground, surrounding the plaza. Belinda jumped to her feet, but the stone blocked her before she could get to Terunosuke. His back was to the wall.

“Now it's just us.” Salvatore said.
“Don’t do this.” Terunosuke pleaded.

Salvatore didn’t respond, simply walking forward once again, eyes cold as ice. Pleading wouldn’t work, there were only actions. With his right hand, he dug through his pocket for his gun. Salvatore reached out his arm, his stand’s heavy wires tangling out like inhuman fingers. Terunosuke raised the pistol with his non-dominant hand, all the while shaking like a leaf from both pain and panic. Salvatore was stunned for a split second.

It was enough time to kill him! But Terunosuke refused--he couldn’t.

He aimed the pistol at Salvatore’s foot. When he squeezed the trigger, only dust kicked up. The shot hadn’t even come close. Between using his off hand, the torment of pain, the pressure, and his vow to not kill, his accuracy never stood a chance.

Salvatore regained his composure. His wires went to the ground, raising a wall a few feet in front of Terunosuke. Similar walls instantly rose up to his left and to his right. Along with the ring against his back, he was boxed in. He was in a prison beneath the blue sky.

“How do you know what it was like to have my men die one by one?” Salvatore asked through the wall. Terunosuke might’ve been able to shoot through the stone, but he still didn’t want to kill his friend.

“First you suggested that the wedding be wiped out in such a sadistic manner. Imagine knowing a massacre was about to befall you closest friends, and not being able to stop it, lest sign your death warrant. I hated you when you killed Sanguinoso, but I moved past it. Then everyone wanted to get revenge on you and the rest of the smugglers. I said no, but they didn’t listen. After your layover in Sicily, you killed Noce, and Cielo not long after. It was around that time I realized that anyone who fought against you would end up dead. Everyone listened to me then. But you had to go and kill so many innocents in our office, including Valentino. That was the breaking point for Michael. Everyone else in the organization could start over somewhere else without a fuss, but not him. I begged him not to go, but, again, my warnings fell on deaf ears.”

The stone wall in front of him began to close in on Terunosuke. He pressed against it to slow it down, but it slowly encroached despite his efforts.

“I searched for hours in the dark. I prayed that maybe, just maybe, he had managed to send you to hell. But that didn’t happen, did it? Can you picture it in your mind? Cradling your own son’s mutilated body? Blaming yourself for everything you didn’t do?! Wishing it had been you that had been suffocated to death like some nightmarish test subject?! Feeling nothing when I heard you had left the gang except for cold understanding that I could finally murder you and get away with it?! Do you get it now Terunosuke?!”

“Salvatore! Stop it! Please!” Terunosuke begged, the wall creeping in tighter and tighter.

“Did Michael beg like that?” Salvatore asked.

The walls slammed together. It was over… but there was no wet pop of bone and blood, however. Not even a single drop seeped out.

From the top of the stone, a single piece of paper fluttered out into the open. Terunosuke emerged from his paper form. Salvatore hardly noticed before the young man emerged from the page and struck him in the face.

“Did you know I could become paper-thin?” Terunosuke said. Salvatore didn’t respond. Instead, he sent out Under My Skin’s wires back out to the stone slabs that had nearly crushed Terunosuke. The monoliths blitzed into him at blinding speeds. They shattered from their own speed, but the rubble still threw him to the ground as it collided with him.
“Did you know I could do that?” Salvatore said.
“Salvatore!” Belinda’s voice called out. She had scaled the outer ring with assistance from Genesis and had Salvatore in her gun’s sights. “I swear I’ll kill you right here!”

Under My Skin’s wires sprung all across the plaza, like the blooming petals of a flower spreading open in the morning sunlight. He looked up at Belinda without an expression.

“What are you waiting for?” He said.

Countless stone slabs rose up, creating vast stretches of walls, hiding Salvatore away from sight. From Belinda’s point of view, it almost resembled a maze. From Terunosuke’s view, it was yet another obstacle. He rose to his feet with his one good hand and picked up his gun that had been tossed aside in all the confusion. The slabs hadn’t crushed it, thankfully.

The newly-made walls were higher than what he could climb or glide over in his paper form. Belinda wasn’t on the wall, but he suspected that she had hopped into the maze on her own. Salvatore had blocked himself off, forcing Terunosuke to find an exit.

“Where are you, Salvatore?” He called out. “Quit hiding and face me.”
“Terunosuke? Where are you?” Belinda’s said somewhere in the walls.
“Belinda? Follow my voice!” Terunosuke weaved through the stone maze, getting closer to Belinda as far as he could tell.
“You’re getting closer!”

The walls were all the same color and blended together seamlessly, giving no hints to where he was headed. The paths bled into one another. He couldn’t even tell if he was going towards the center or towards the outside edge. Left and right hardly factored into the equation. If he came to a fork in the path, it would just lead him to more winding paths.

Around and around. It was endless. Were the paths being changed around when he wasn’t looking? Was it intentionally designed to make him become lost? Where the hell was Salvatore? Where the hell was Belinda?

Terunosuke rounded another path and came upon a straight, long path. On the other end was Belinda, gun in hand, Genesis around her neck. She noticed him too and the pair raced towards each other. They’d be able to figure this mess out if they could just get together.

Right as they were about to reunite, a new wall rose from the ground. The path was cut off right where they would have reconnected.
“Damn!” Terunosuke yelled, pounding the wall as if he could knock it down with his bare fists.
“Salvatore! Come out here! Right now!” Belinda screamed from the other side.
“I’ve been here the whole time.” A voice said behind Terunosuke’s back. Standing only a few meters behind him was Salvatore. Terunosuke pointed his gun. His aim was in shambles and his left hand was still a wreck, but it was all he could manage.
“You think that will do you any good?” Salvatore said. His stand’s wire dug into the ground, sure to pull some new nightmare into the fray at any moment.

Terunosuke had the shot! He had it! It was right there! He could just pull the trigger! Why couldn’t he stop his right hand from shaking so much?!

The opportunity slipped, letting Salvatore unveil his next weapon: an underground water pipe. The metal pipe rose from the ground with Under My Skin’s help. It was pointed straight at Terunosuke. A torrent of water blasted out. The blast jammed Terunosuke against the corner of the wall. It was like a thousand fire hoses were pointed at him. Water not only assaulted him, but collected around
him as well. When he lost his footing he was thrown into a shallow, yet suffocating, pool. With so much water attacking him at once, there was no chance to breathe without getting a lungful. He coughed and heaved. It soaked him to the bone and even further. The water itself was tying a noose around his throat.

Thankfully, Salvatore had mercy or a sadistic sense of pacing. He put the pipe back where it belonged, letting the water permeate through the rest of the maze instead of hosing Terunosuke down any further. Air finally returned to his lungs. He opened his eyes without realizing he’d shut them tight. The oxygen deprivation and adrenaline had blocked out the searing pain in his left hand until it demanded his attention again. Goddammit. The gasps for air went on and on. The cries of pain went on even longer.

“Feel clean after that? Wash away all the dirt and grime? The blood on your hands didn’t seem to go anywhere.”
“Aah… shut the hell up.”

Terunosuke spotted his gun wedged in the corner across from the one that he had been blasted against. Using his right hand to propel himself, he lunged forward, reaching for his weapon before Salvatore could blink.

But Salvatore was too close. His boot slammed Terunosuke square in the jaw.

“Don’t even try.”

Terunosuke retreated back to the corner. Salvatore wouldn’t let him out, and he didn’t have a means to force his way. All he had was a crude puddle of water that submerged his hands and knees.

So he used what little he had. He reached for his gun a second time, prompting Salvatore to raise his boot once again. Rather than go for his gun, however, Terunosuke scooped up a handful of water and flung it into Salvatore’s eyes. The doctor quickly wiped his eyes on his sleeve. In the single second he was distracted, Terunosuke fished his gun from the water.

Salvatore regained his sight, seeing Terunosuke take aim at him. His stand’s wires encased him as he started to phase through the nearest wall he could hurl himself at. Terunosuke pulled the trigger, aiming for the leg, but no bullet flew out. Salvatore escaped unscathed.

Of course it didn’t fire. It was completely waterlogged. Sergio would’ve chewed him out if he was around.

“Stop running away, Salvatore!” Terunosuke demanded. The only response he received was the sound of water sloshing around somewhere in the maze. Bastard. He made his way to trek through the maze once more, but yet another wall rose up right in front of his face, blocking him off on every side. Salvatore was likely planning to try and crush him again, so he turned to paper. No attacks were made. Terunosuke returned to normal. He waited with bated breath for Salvatore’s next attack. He crouched low to the ground. His good hand was ready to pop up and strike at a moment’s notice. He looked every which way he could. Maybe he could catch Salvatore before Salvatore caught him.

But there was no attack. Nothing came. Terunosuke was left alone in a cramped, waterlogged box. As the adrenaline tapered off, exhaustion and pain returned with a vengeance yet again. He could still barely catch his breath, his drenched feet were sore beyond belief, and his mess of a left hand shot waves of pain through his entire body.
Worst of all, he was beginning to think on Salvatore’s words. He was in this situation because of the many deaths he had caused, the most recent and brutal having taken place in the very plaza he found himself. He’d forgiven himself for what he’d done—promised never to do it again, even—and had begun to move forward. But just because he forgave himself didn’t mean that everyone else would. It happened the same every time before. Why would it change now that he felt good about being a murderer?

He struggled to even keep the promises he had made to himself. Belinda was caught up in all this because he stuck around. If he had just left, she wouldn’t be in this situation! Shithead! If only he’d had the guts to go through with a tough decision! And Salvatore! He was the leader of Schiggia! From the very beginning! What kind of fucked up destiny led him to be mortal enemies with the man he looked up to more than anyone?! What kind of monster was Terunosuke to murder his son?!

An unforgivable monster. That’s all Terunosuke was. He found that out when Michael was drilling dread into his skull. Of course he was unforgivable. How many times did he have to prove it to himself until it finally got through? A mountain of excuses could be made in his defense, but it didn’t change the cold, hard fact of who he was and would always be.

A monster. Nothing else. He had already failed too many times to prove otherwise. Why bother worrying about it now that the end was so close?

Terunosuke rose to his feet, ready to demand Salvatore’s final attack. He listened for any footsteps that might clue him in to the doctor’s location. What he heard was crying, familiar crying. Crying he never wanted to hear. From just behind the wall Salvatore had propped up to cut him off from Belinda, there was crying. Belinda’s crying. Ugly, pained sobs. Uneven sloshes as she moved around in the water. She sounded like she was trying to find something to affect, to make a difference with, to not be powerless.

That was his fault too.

He wanted to comfort her, hold her in his hands, tell her it would be alright. But that wouldn’t change anything in the long run. It wouldn't be enough to keep her safe. But it would stop her tears. Bring her at least an ounce of joy. Brighten up this insane clusterfuck of his own making. Make her happy. Do all he could for her.

That was all that mattered.

“Salvatore! Knock down this damn wall! Belinda has nothing to do with this!” He gave the wall a solid kick. “Let me be with her! Don’t force her to suffer through all of this! At least let me do that!” The uneven sobbing was the only noise in the air as Terunosuke awaited an answer. There might have been a clinking of wires, but he couldn’t pin it down.

Suddenly, the wall collapsed under its own weight. Thousands of stone pieces scattered into the shallow water, kicking up a blinding spray for a few seconds. Once everything settled down, the surrounding water was a dirty mess of stone and grit. But the wall was gone, and Belinda stared into the pool with teary eyes.

“I'm… coming… out…” She sang. Those lyrics were ones that she had sung before, weren't they? Yeah. Right before she snapped and killed Cielo, she had sung just like that. Right before she lost control. Terunosuke wouldn't let it happen again. Not now. Not ever.

“Belinda! I’m right here. Nothing is going to happen to me--or you. You’ll be alright.”
She stopped singing and narrowed her eyes at him. Genesis slithered off her neck and wrapped around him with what seemed like a hug. Belinda followed suit, pulling their bodies tight together. She squeezed him so tight and close he thought he might burst.

“You aren’t going to leave me alone again, right?” She whispered in his ear.
“No, never.”
“And you won’t get killed?”
“Not a chance.”
“Thank you.”

Their voices were calm despite the circumstances. Maybe that was just the effect they had on each other. A wave of torment could hit them, but as long as they were together, they could endure it.

And they WOULD endure it.

“We have to stop Salvatore’s rampage. Here and now.” He said after a moment of tranquility had passed.
“Don’t kill him.” Belinda demanded.
“Of course not. I promised not to kill anyone ever again, remember?”

It was a nice, little thought, sure, but there were a ton of problems with that plan, weren’t there? His pistol was out of commission and he didn’t have any papers to use. He was empty-handed in the most important fight of his life. But he wasn’t alone. Not anymore.

“You still have your gun, don’t you?” He asked.
“Yeah.” Genesis pulled it from storage and gave it to him. “You aren’t planning to kill him, are you?”
“No way. It’ll be risky, sure, but we’ll make it through this.”

Terunosuke stared at Belinda’s weapon, trying to plan out the perfect story that cast the gun in the starring role. Shooting was deadly, Sergio had taught him that if nothing else. If he shot at Salvatore, especially with an automatic submachine gun, there was an overwhelming chance that the doctor would be killed. He needed something else. Something that would give him a chance for a clean shot. Something that would give him an edge. Something that he could find inside the maze.

His eyes drifted out of focus while the thoughts revved. What was there, if anything? The wind blew gently through the plaza. The water around his ankles mixed with stone rubble, creating a mixture that was quite possibly the worst thing imaginable that could worm its way into his socks. Just what he needed. He’d have Enigma scoop it all out if he was able… to… do that…

Could Enigma do that?

Terunosuke bent down to scoop up a handful of grainy water. With only one good hand to use, he bit down on Belinda’s gun as his right hand tried to test his theory.

“That was inside of Genesis, you know.” Belinda said, caring about hygiene a bit too much given the circumstances.
“Do you think Enigma can transform water into paper?” Belinda gave a look of confusion at the seemingly random question.
“Probably? I don’t see why not.”
“If he can… then… we’ll win.”

The rock-filled water actually turned to paper upon Enigma’s activation just as Terunosuke had
expected. A sheet took the spot of the water that had been in his hand. It made sense that that would happen, so it came as no surprise. The real test was what would happen when he repeated the process.

Once again, Terunosuke dipped his hand into the shallow, rocky pool, this time with a paper still in his hand. When Enigma emerged from him, the result repeated itself. He was left with a single paper where the messy water and other paper had been. He had found a way to store papers inside other papers. Perfect.

He slid the doubled-up paper between his teeth and the gun. With a tug from his hand, he ripped the page. A jet of cloudy water sprayed out, naturally, but at a pressure higher than expected. It almost stung when it splashed against his hand.

“We’re going to win this.” He stated. Zero doubt. Everything was coming together. With his newfound capability, Terunosuke could turn the tables on Salvatore. He just needed the right situation.

“What will you do?” Belinda said.
“Stun him, then shoot his legs out. Nothing complicated at all.”
“So what can I do to help?”
“You could… distract him, hold him in place. If you can pull that off, he’ll have no chance.”
“You can count on me.” Belinda rose to her feet as Genesis rapidly slithered around her neck in anticipation. “Stick close. Once we find Salvatore, I’ll set up a distraction. After that, it’s all up to you.”

Belinda led the way. Despite trying to be quiet as they looked for Salvatore, the water at their feet made it painfully obvious where they were to anyone with ears. They wouldn’t be able to sneak up on him even if they wanted to. He’d have to be engaged face-to-face.

The stone walls curved every which way leading to dead ends and tight passages. What made it even worse was the lack of noise coming from Salvatore’s end. They were making a ton of noise splashing around, but Salvatore wasn’t making a single peep. He was either sitting still, or was about to spring out at any second. Terunosuke had his money on the later.

After far too long, they came to the outside of what seemed to be the center of the maze. Terunosuke peaked around a wall and spotted Salvatore sitting on the edge of the fountain, just like when they had met him at the beginning of all of this. The doctor was simply glaring at thin air. Was he waiting for them to come?

“So what’s the plan?” Belinda asked in a whisper.
“Talk to him to start, then attack with Genesis the second he makes a move at you.” Terunosuke said.
“How long do you need?”
“Only a minute or two. If you can get me that, I guarantee we can make it.”
“Guarantee?”
“Guarantee.”
“Don’t let me down.”

Belinda took a nervous breath in, her whole body noticeably shaking. She glanced at Salvatore, then back to Terunosuke.

“I love you.” She said.
“I love you, too.” Terunosuke replied.

With more certainty in herself in that moment than Terunosuke had ever had in his entire life,
Belinda marched towards Salvatore. Terunosuke kept himself hidden behind the stone wall, waiting for her to give him an opportunity. The flesh of his left hand throbbed painfully in time with his racing heartbeat.

The ensuing conversation was just out of earshot. Words were being said, and emotions were running high, but he couldn’t make out the specifics. But he didn’t need to; Belinda would do exactly what she had said she would do. He had his own role to play.

A paper that contained another paper was practically useless. If opened, it would release another paper and some water. Pointless. However, if the process of containing water and paper within water and paper was repeated ad nauseam, the perfect opportunity could be capitalized upon, and the battle would be won. He went to work making his theory a reality.

“Things can’t go back to how they were, Belinda!” Salvatore shouted.
“Because you won’t let them!” She fired back.

Tensions were nearing the boiling point. Terunosuke picked up the pace. A handful of water surrounding the page, Enigma working his magic, repeating on and on. Terunosuke repeated this process over and over, again and again. Paper and water inside of paper and water, folding in on itself countless times. He repeated the process so many times, he thought he might dry the whole maze out.

“It can all go back, it can all be the same again!”
“You Goddamn idiot! Nothing can be the same after what Terunosike did!”

His hand sped up its pace to feverish speeds. Water, paper, water, paper. Faster! Faster!

Water splashed all around from where Salvatore and Belinda were. Sounds like that could only mean that they had descended to violence.

Terunosuke forced his focus away from the paper bundle. Belinda and Salvatore were indeed engaged in combat. Genesis leaped from Belinda’s neck, lunging at Salvatore. The doctor, unflinching, grabbed the serpent out of the air, wrangling it into submission. Belinda charged at him with her bare fist. Between the stand in his grasp and an unwillingness to strike Belinda, Salvatore took a few blows to the face, but the pacifism didn’t last for long. Under My Skin emerged and unleashed its wires towards her. With surgical precision, a slew of wires tangled around her hands and feet without needing to dive below the skin. Genesis was wrapped in a similar manner. They were both left constricted and contained, unable to attack.

“Terunosuke.” Salvatore said in a calmness that betrayed the gravity of the situation. “I know you’re hiding nearby. I won’t hurt Belinda if you come out right now.”

The young man looked down at the paper in his right hand. Water and paper. It could work. It would work. Just for extra measure, he scooped up another handful and converted it to paper before he stood up. He considered another round, but it was finally time to throw his plan into action.

The plan would work. No one had to die. It would work! It would work!

Terunosuke compiled with Salvatore’s demand. He kept a tight grip on the self-contained paper with his good hand. The water splashed around his feet as he drew closer and closer; the closer the better, the more likely it was that the plan would work.

“See how easy that was?” Salvatore said, looking at the young man up and down, as if he was
seeing him for the first time. “This could have been avoided. All of it.” Terunosuke’s grip tightened around the paper. Salvatore didn’t seem to notice it.

“You could just stop right now.” Terunosuke said. “Let Belinda go, crumble this insane maze down. Simple.”

“No. It’s not simple. Not after all we’ve done. Going back to the way we used to be is nothing but a dream.”

“But can’t we try?” Terunosuke pleaded. “Even if it’s difficult. Even if it doesn’t feel right. Even if things can’t be the same ever again… can’t we at least give it a try together?”

“He’s right, Sal.” Belinda looked up at Salvatore from the water where she was being held down. “We owe it to you for all you’ve done for us. There’s no other way it should go.”

Salvatore sighed. A quiet sigh hardly long or loud enough to even notice. A sigh that came long after a sigh of resignation, of chances squandered and cruel fates accepted. It was a sigh from a man that had already given up on alternatives.

“Terunosuke, one of us dies here, the other walks away. There’s no point in delaying the inevitable any further. Let’s make this quick.”

“Salvatore! Wait!”

The plea fell on deaf ears. Under My Skin emerged from the doctor. More wires shot directly towards Terunosuke. The last chance for peace evaporated in the noon sun. Terunosuke’s heart was about to be ripped out.

With his right hand, Terunosuke flung the water-filled paper into the air as high as he could muster. Salvatore knew immediately what the intention had to be. The split-second engagement--and both of their lives--would be decided by that paper.

The wires made a U-turn towards the paper. They moved fast through the air, but not fast enough. Terunosuke unfolded a second paper so quickly, it tore through his pocket as it erupted from his long coat. It wasn’t his usual pistol, but the increased firepower of Belinda's submachine gun was more than welcome. He had just enough time to shout three words before pulling the trigger.

"Close your eyes!"

Belinda listened. Salvatore did not.

The bullets screamed out of the barrel at speeds that put the wires to shame. Terunosuke's aim was hindered by firing with his nondominant hand, but the blazing stream of bullets made up for it. He missed the paper with nine shots, but hit with the tenth. It was instantly torn to shreds, releasing the built up contents layered inside.

Everything. All at once.

Terunosuke followed his own warning, clamping his eyelids shut tight, hiding his left hand behind his back, and raising his right arm over his face. While he didn't see what happened next, he certainly felt it.

When the liters of compressed water were released, every drop shot out in all directions. The pressure was so immense, it was as if every drop had been fired out of a cannon. The force of the water sheared against Terunosuke’s arms, torso, and neck like knives. He was lucky he was wearing his long coat and had covered his eyes. Salvatore wasn’t so fortunate. His eyes tracked the paper as his stand’s wires flew to capture it. He had made his choice to forgo defense in favor of complete offense. If he’d been a second quicker, he would have won.
But he wasn’t.

The high-speed water slashed against his bare face without remorse. The doctor relled in shocked pain. His hands covered his face. His hold on Genesis and Belinda was lost in shock. He howled out and stumbled around blindly as Terunosuke lined up the crosshairs at his legs.

Suddenly, Belinda and Genesis, still partially-submerged in the water, grappled both of Salvatore’s legs in a coordinated attack. He was rendered immobile. Terunosuke aimed higher, not wanting to put a bullet anywhere near Belinda. The grip on his right hand was so tight, he thought the gun might snap.

Salvatore pulled his hands from his face, as if he knew exactly what was about to happen. His eyes seemed to scream at Terunosuke. “Do it!”

Terunosuke let three shots out. They made a diagonal pattern as they flew. The first shot hit Salvatore in the right forearm near the wrist, passing clean through and taking a small geyser of blood along for the ride. The third shot grazed Salvatore’s left shoulder, barely making contact.

The second shot was not so kind. That shot hit his stomach, where all the internal organs were.

Salvatore fell back into the shallow water. Genesis and Belinda released their holds on him. Terunosuke then realized what had just happened--what he had just done. He dropped the gun and rushed over to Salvatore. The bleeding had already begun by the time he reached the doctor’s side.

“Shit! I-I didn’t mean to hit you there!” He exclaimed. “Belinda was too close to your leg! And I wasn’t used to that gun or shooting with this hand! And I didn’t want to hit you like that!” Excuse after excuse came pouring out of his mouth trying to justify what he’d just done. But the massive bleeding didn’t just go away because he was sorry. Terunosuke put pressure on the wound he had just made.

“Sal! Say something!” Belinda begged.

“That fucking hurt.” Salvatore said.

This wasn’t happening. Salvatore wasn’t dying. He couldn’t die because of something that Terunosuke did.

“Keep breathing, Salvatore. You’ll make it.”

“What’s the point?” He asked. “I don’t--ghh! I don’t have a future. Unlike you… I don’t have anyone else.”

“You have me. You have Belinda. You even have Sergio!”

“It isn’t the same. My son is dead. Yours isn’t”

“I don’t have a son, Salvatore, I just have Belinda.”

“You don’t know? Do either of you?” The doctor’s expression of pain left his face as one of calm understanding took its place.

“Sal?” Belinda said. “What do you mean by that?”

“Haaa… guess I ruined the surprise.” Salvatore sighed in satisfaction and in pain. “When you charged at me after I explained my intentions… Under My Skin felt a source of life from within your body. Belinda… you’re pregnant.”

Terunosuke glanced up at Belinda. She looked about as shocked as him. She was pregnant? Since when? She didn’t even know? He was going to be a father? How the hell was he supposed to do that?!

“You’re lucky, Terunosuke. You’re strong enough to protect your kid from anything that comes. I
“You’re a doctor, tell me what to do.” Terunosuke begged, a few tears rolling down his face. “How do I keep you alive?!”

“It’s too late. It’s all too late.” Salvatore spoke.

Those words probably made sense. They connected with one another to make a meaning… but Terunosuke couldn’t accept what they said. There had to be something. As his mind struggled to comprehend the circumstances, the high walls of the prison began to slide back down into the ground. The shallow pool of water flowed away, leaving Terunosuke, Salvatore, and Belinda with just each other.

“Sal… you can’t die yet.” Belinda said. “There are so many things left for you to do, to see.” Salvatore didn’t respond. He just weakly looked her way.

“I’ve done a lot of terrible things in my life…” Terunosuke began. “I’ve killed more people than I ever wanted. I thought I was doing the right thing every time, but I know now that it only caused more pain than anything else. You know that firsthand, Salvatore. So please… don’t let me make another mistake.”

Salvatore looked up at the young man. He tried to speak, but his voice faltered when he tried. It took a few painful seconds for him to compose himself enough to get the words out.

“I’m sorry, Terunosuke. I always intended this to be where I died… whether I actually killed you or not. You have your life ahead of you. Be… a good father to your son. Live a happy life… one that I couldn’t.”

Nothing worked. Salvatore was too far gone. He’d already made his choice. They couldn’t make him to do anything at this point. The only thing they could do was provide him with comforting words as he passed. Words about peace, happiness, and their future child…

And their child…yes. Yes.

Yes! That was it!

That was the way to save his life!

Terunosuke fought back the dam of tears that was threatening to burst, the knife in his throat trying to slice its way out, the shaking of his entire body that wouldn’t stop. He fought for one last plea.

“I… want the best for my child, Salvatore. I want to give him… her… the best that I possibly can. But I don’t know the first thing about being a father. And I’m pretty sure Belinda has no clue how to be a mother. How could I give the best when I don’t even know what the best looks like, huh? I have no clue what’s going to happen and I’m afraid if I don’t do it right, then the kid will end up scared, violent, and clueless, just like me. So please, for the sake of my child… won’t you stick around and help us out?”

A second passed.

Another.
Another after that.

“S-Salvatore?”

The look on the doctor’s face hadn’t changed the entire time Terunosuke had spoken. There hadn’t been a single flicker of emotion whatsoever. The only sound came from barely Belinda holding back tears of her own.

Then the wires began to move. Under My Skin dug around the bloody wound, making movements to stop the bleeding.

“I’ve… already lost my son… I won’t let you lose yours. No matter what.” Salvatore declared as strong as his frail body could muster.

The dam burst at that.

Chapter End Notes

Between the size of the chapter, perfectionism, and not wanting it to be over, it took me eight months to finally get done, but it’s here. When I started this three years ago, I never thought it would take me this long. Even though I had planned out everything from the very beginning, it still took me this long. Just goes to show.

I was very concerned as to whether or not I had made the Salvatore foreshadowing too obvious. Hopefully it worked as intended. On the subject, I had always intended for him to die there, but after watching Mirai no Mirai and becoming super sentimental for about a week, I decided that he should live on.

If you’re left wanting more, don’t fret. The epilogue is next, and with it comes the end of the story.

The book is finally coming to a close.
November 2005

Terunosuke and Sergio climbed the steep slope of a hill. A chilly wind blew past them, giving a hint of the weather that would arrive soon. Sicily was wonderful year-round, but the icy winds that blew in from the Mediterranean were far from idyllic, especially compared to the warm breezes that summer brought.

"We better hurry." Sergio called out, having gained ground without Terunosuke noticing. "Everyone is expecting us."
"Hmm… yeah." Terunosuke mumbled, rubbing his hands together for warmth.
"What’s up? You’ve been lost in thought ever since we got back."
"I was just thinking, you know. About it all. How it all happened, what I did."
"What prompted that?"
"All the time that's passed, I suppose."
"Since you guys moved here?"
"Since I left Japan. It'll be five years in a few days. The business I was running away from when I came to Naples never really resolved. At this point, though, any danger should have completely blown over."
"Then do you plan on going back someday? Set everything straight with the guy?"
"Yeah. Tonight, actually. Me, Belinda, and the little one are planning to catch a flight out tonight."
"Tonight?! Thanks for letting me know! Would you have told me if I didn’t ask?"
"Oh, quit whining. We would’ve told you on the way out."

Terunosuke beat his friend to the top of the hill. A bit further ahead stood a house that had probably stood for a century. Through one of its windows, a man and a woman could be seen preparing a large meal. Their methods and movements were eccentric, tossing knives and dishes all across the kitchen, though they made the process work without wrecking the place. Somehow. Outside the house, a young woman played hide and seek with someone who had hidden themselves away. She had grown her hair out in recent years, cutting off any jokes about her possibly being a boy. The girl seemed to have no luck in finding her target as she looked high and low. Whoever she was seeking must have hidden extremely well, likely trained by a champion at the game.

Sergio finally caught up. "Is Salvatore around?" He asked. Terunosuke hadn’t spotted him in or around the house. Given the fact that everyone knew that Terunosuke was scheduled to return from his trip today, there was only one place the doctor could be. He looked up towards the hill that overlooked the home. Sure enough, at the top of the hill was Salvatore, lost in his own thoughts.

“He’s hanging out up there?” Sergio said. “Think he wants to be left alone?”
“No way. I bet he just wanted a little peace and quiet for a minute is all. You know how Oscar and Olivia can be. I’ll go talk to him. Go see if they need any help inside.”
“Jeez. When did I start letting you order me around?”
“Oh please. It’s been this way since the start.”

Terunosuke took his time walking up yet another hill. When Salvatore was up here, it was always for a singular purpose: to visit his son.

“…hope the kids in town grow up in a good world. And I hope Agira grows up well. He’s a good
kid.” The doctor murmured, only barely loud enough for Terunosuke to overhear.
“He is good, isn't he?” Terunosuke said, reaching the top of the hill.

Salvatore glanced back at him and nodded. Over his shoulder, Terunosuke noticed that Michael’s headstone had been dusted off. He took a seat next to the man. It felt a bit intrusive being there, but only for a moment.

“We were just talking about you. Glad you’re back.”
“Glad to be back. So were you spreading rumors about me behind my back?” He leaned in close to the headstone. “Don’t listen to what the geezer says about me, it’s all made up.” Had this been a couple years earlier, simply being close would have filled Terunosuke with a guilt more potent than poison. Yet now, there was a comfortable familiarity that time had lent. He only wished that he could preserve some of this ease when he returned to Japan.

"How often do you think back to those days?" Salvatore said. "Back when we had no idea how things would ultimately play out."
"Every now and then. Used to hate being reminded of it. Nowadays, I can look back on the good and the bad. I was actually remembering some stuff a little bit ago. Gotta say, I got pretty damn lucky more times than I can count. I guess I would've changed a lot if I could, but the way it all turned out hasn't been so bad."
"You've got a point. Still glad you pulled me away from the edge, by the way."
"Figured." They shared a chuckle. After the laughter, Salvatore rose to his feet, with Terunosuke doing the same. "Let's get back. Olivia and Oliver are making lunch. If we stay up here any longer, the kids will pick everything apart like a couple of vultures." As they left, Terunosuke took a glance back at Michael's grave. He gave a small wave as he walked back toward the house.

Everyone had begun to gather around outside. The weather was so beautiful that it was an obvious choice to eat out in the open, even if it was a bit cold. Salvatore convened with Oscar, discussing something or another about his duties as a local doctor. Maddalena and Olivia rambled together aimlessly about world peace, though Sergio had his own eccentric opinions to share on the topic. Terunosuke stood a little ways away, not due to apathy or any isolationist tendencies, but as bait for a hunter. The expert of stealth that Maddalena had been unable to find emerged from the woodwork and began to sneak up on Terunosuke. Of course, Terunosuke was a pro at picking up on the expert's movements. When the expert was just centimeters away from jumping up and scaring Terunosuke, he had already sealed his fate. In a single moment, Terunosuke went from being caught unaware, to grasping the expert's leg. He threw the expert into the air with both hands, flinging him onto his shoulders like it was nothing.

"You're still not ready to sneak up on me, kiddo." He said to the defeated expert.
"Aww… next time, Daddy." The expert decried.
"But Agira, isn't that what you said last time?"
"Then I'll get you now!"

Quicker than Terunosuke had defeated him moments ago, Agira grabbed fistfuls of his father's hair. He folded the hair over Terunosuke's eyes, blocking all sight.

"Gaaaah! It's dark for you!"
"Ah! I'm blind!"

Mankind's greatest fear lived in the uncertainty that lay hidden within darkness, but Terunosuke was as far from afraid as humanly possible. Though he wouldn't let his son know that.

"How can I go on like this?! What a heavy price that has been paid! If my eyesight is gone, then
that means all my other senses will be enhanced. But when I die, I won't be able to see my life flash before my eyes! There were so many movies I wanted to watch again! But I’ll save so much on rental fees!” Terunosuke accompanied all of this with a mad flailing that did little to shake Agira off. What kind of father would he be if he didn’t play along? After about a minute of shaking around, he wrestled control of his son’s hands. He pulled the small hands from his eyes, bringing the light back to his world.

“I can see once again! Nobody can stop me now! Muhahaha!”
“Not if I can help it!”

Just as Agira was about to follow up with a guillotine choke hold, he suddenly stopped in place.

“Look, Mommy! Daddy is back!”

Terunosuke swiveled his head to look where Agira had spoken. Standing with the dumbest-looking grin on the planet was the most beautiful woman on the planet. Every time Terunosuke saw her, he was reminded of how lucky he was.

“How… uh… how much of that did you see?” He asked sheepishly.

“Since you went blind.” She said, the grin getting even dumber than it already was. Despite the grin, or maybe because of it, she walked over and gave him a “welcome home” kiss. Agira wasn’t a fan of seeing his parents kiss, but what did a little kid know about romance?

“The trip to Damascus went well I assume?”
“It sure did. Just some dignitary that needed help getting out of some hot water. Nothing to worry about.”
“You know I always worry about where they send you.”
“And I always say you worry too much. You know the arrangement. A few days of work in Rome or Paris every month, and a mission or two per year. That’s all it takes to pay for our lives here. Oh! Before I forget.” Terunosuke dug around in his pocket and handed a piece of paper up to Agira. “For you.”

The child unfolded the paper, unleashing a lustrous piece of turquoise into his small hands.

“Whoa.”
“Turquoise is the best color, you know.”
“Yeah. It is.” Agira agreed. He was as entranced with the souvenir as Terunosuke had been when he had bought it.
"Come on." Belinda said, smiling. "The food is ready." Terunosuke set Agria on his feet as he continued to admire the souvenir jewel. "Oscar suggested that everyone take a picture before we leave for Japan tonight."
"Sounds good to me." Terunosuke said.
"Me too." Agira agreed, oblivious of what he’d even agreed to. Decided just like a king. Astounding.
“We’ll eat after the picture is taken.”
“That’s no good.” Agira decided in a moment. How fickle royalty could be.

When they reconvened with the others, Sergio was fiddling around with a camera timer. Each time he tried to test it out, it would instantly flash in his face. The display was both concerning and entertaining. A few dozen attempts went by with just as many flashes to the face.

Everyone took their places. Oscar, Olivia, and Madalina stood together. Terunosuke, Belinda, and Agira did the same, only Belinda held Agira in her arms. Salvatore stood near the back, smiling just as brightly as the two families.
"Alright… everyone say… AH!" Once again, the flash seared Sergio's corneas, prompting everyone to relax their poses for a minute or two… or three.

"Ah."
"We're gonna miss our flight at this pace."
"Uncle Sergio, are you ‘braindead’?"
"Stop teaching Agria how to insult people."
"Need any help?"
"Enough from the peanut gallery!"

As they waited, Terunosuke noticed a shape moving in the corner of his eye. A graceful butterfly fluttered around without concern for the humans below it. Instead of fear, the butterfly was quite brazen, straying closer and closer to the small crowd below it. Eventually, it decided to land near them, or rather, on them. On Terunosuke, to be specific. He held his right hand out, allowing it to land on a finger. It seemed to like the spot, because it didn't try to fly off.

"Wow! Never seen one do that!"
"It's wings are so pretty."
"How long did it take you to train that thing, Terunosuke?"
He chuckled at the thought. "A few years, I suppose."

"Aha! Got it!" Sergio declared. He scurried to his spot before the camera went off. "Smile bright everybo--"

The flash cut his sentence short before he could finish.

***

“This really came out quite well.” Belinda sifted through the pictures that Sergio had accidently taken, cycling through the mass of mistakes on the digital camera. “What did you think about this one, Terunosuke?” Terunosuke, however, was staring down at a notepad, deep in thought. He had scribbled a few words in Japanese, but seemed stuck on the rest. Even though she hardly knew what the language actually looked like, Belinda could tell the years of disuse had done quite a number on her husband’s handwriting skills.

“Who are you writing to? Some Japanese delegate you saved?”
“No.” He said, not losing his focused stare. “Its for… someone from back home. Someone who I hurt in more ways than one.”
“Him?”
“…Yeah.”

Belinda set the camera on her lap and sighed. “Why would you write a letter to him? What do you have to gain?”
“Resolution. For a long time… I’ve wondered what I would have done if the situation was reversed. Everytime I do, I can’t help but think that I would have done the same or worse to him.”
“You wouldn’t do som--…” Belinda stopped herself before finishing that sentence. “Hmmm. So you think that will help put the past behind you once and for all.”
“It couldn’t hurt… I hope.”

Belinda smiled and looked down at Agira, who was entranced by the in-flight pamphlets on the crash-safety plan. If Terunosuke was after forgiveness, then so was she.

“Why don’t you write about us, about the family we’ve made together.” She said.
“You and Agira?”
“And you, too. You’re just as much a part of this family as I am.”
“I guess that’s right, isn’t it?” Terunosuke scribbled some words on the page.
“Talk about your life. You save people for a living now. That would make you a hero to most people.”
“I’m not sure if any of that would matter to him. He might fly into a blind rage the moment he recognises me.”
“Would he attack you in front of your wife and son? After, what… five years? There’s no chance. Besides, if you’re genuine about this and apologize from the bottom of your heart, there isn’t a chance that he’ll slam the door in your face.”

Terunosuke looked at the letter, then to Belinda. A little smile lifted on his face. “You’re right. I’ve got no reason to worry.”

Then it was Belinda’s turn to smile.

***

Terunosuke’s morale had lifted and fallen like a see-saw ever since landing. The taxi driver reminded him of the hostage he had once taken, and the one he had used to flee the country. The appearance of Morioh’s buildings were familiar in some places, yet foreign in others. When they passed by the library, there was absolutely no sign of burn damage, though there were fewer books inside. The spot where he had been imprisoned wasn’t there anymore. All the bookshelves had been shuffled around elsewhere. Maybe it was because of him, maybe it was because of something else. Whatever the case, things were different now.

Visiting his mother and father was surprisingly natural, melancholic as it was. He wondered if they were watching him. Everything he wanted to say to them that he’d held onto for five years came out calmly and cleanly. It was a miracle that only a few tears trailed down his cheeks, rather than an entire flood pouring out. Belinda put her hand on his shoulder when he finished. Agira said some words to the headstones after his father was done. His words were too quiet to hear, but they seemed to be respectful based on all the bowing.

And so, the time had arrived.

Belinda and Agira walked up to the front door of the house. The house that Terunosuke had broken into twice before, where his greatest mistakes had begun. He was hidden away for safety, yet he could still see everything. Despite being safe in a page, he could feel his hands shake and sweat, his stomach twist in knots, and a lump form in his throat.

Would everything be alright?

Belinda knocked on the door. Seconds passed in a nervous limbo. Someone was surely there, right? It was late enough in the day that the average person would have been off of work for a couple of hours, and the sun was beginning to set. What would happen if he wasn’t home? What if he wasn’t even in town?

Thankfully, a middle-aged woman came to the door before anything fell apart. She gave a visual pat-down to the strange, foreign woman and child standing on her doorstep. Terunosuke had to resist every urge to jump out and start the apologies right then and there. In due time.

“Hello? May I help you?” The woman said. How strange would it be for a beautiful woman to show up on one’s doorstep with a child in tow with no prior warning? This might cause a misunderstanding.

“Ah…” Since the woman spoke in Japanese, Belinda was unable to understand her. Terunosuke
had thought ahead, thankfully. She pulled a slip of paper from her pocket and sounded out the words that had been written out for her. “Is your… son here?”

The pronunciation and phrasing made it sound like her tongue had been cut out, but the meaning managed to come across. The woman was obviously confused, but nodded all the same. She called inside her home for her son. Terunosuke was shaking now. Fears of rejection, confusion, and angered reactions flooded in. Logically, the worst-case scenario would never happen, but he didn’t have a concrete guarantee to assure himself with. He could only hope that everything would be alright.

A man came to the door. He towered over the woman and Belinda, but he did not loom with intimidation. If anything, confusion colored his expression. Belinda sneered at him ever so slightly, coming face to face with the demon she had heard so much about. But she knew what this was all for, so she stamped down the trace amounts of anger that rose to the surface. She spoke a single word.

“Josuke?”
“Yes, that’s me.” The man responded.

This time, Agira held out a paper towards the man. Due to the difference in heights, the man had to bend down to take it. He looked over Belinda and Agira with confused eyes before turning his attention to the paper, which seemed to be a letter.

Josuke Higashikata,

You may not remember me, but you played the most important role anyone has ever played in my life. More important than my mother, father, or even my wife and son, who both stand before you. I cursed what you had done for years. I hated that you were powerful, while I was not. You devastated my entire life, yet you didn’t even know my name. You had your entire life in your own hands, but I was left to rot in that library, made to be less than human. A dark part of me wished that I had been quicker that day, less careless, left fewer openings so that I would have stood victorious over your desecrated corpse. I held tight to that fury for years, playing those events over and over and over and over again until I went mad. It didn’t accomplish a single thing.

I wondered how you could do what you did. How could someone who had loved ones do something so unrepentantly vile? I am a human being! How could you stoop to the level of a monster and lock me in such a horrific prison? What kind of bastard would inflict a living hell on me?! It took me a long time to find the answer. But in the end, it was so simple, I couldn’t believe I had overlooked it.

The answer was love. You love your mother. If anyone were to bring her harm, you would stop at nothing to bring hell upon them. I had never loved anyone as much as that. Perhaps if I had been closer to someone--my own mother, my father, or even an important friend--I would have understood from the very beginning. It wasn’t until I found a love of my own that I truly understood the capacity for destruction that comes inherent with love. When I found myself in your position, seeing what you saw, feeling what you felt, only then did I understand how evil I had been when our fates crossed paths.

I will not say that what you did to me was a good thing. I still regard those days as a hell that should never be inflicted upon anyone, not even the most evil of men. Yet… if you had not done what you did, I would not have touched the lives of the people around me. I would not have lost everything. I would not have fallen into an unfamiliar land. I would not have committed acts of
terrible violence. I would not have made lifetime friends. I would not have met my wife. I would not have had my wonderful son. I would not have lived my life as I live it today.

I will not thank you, but I will apologize to you as best as I can.

-Terunosuke Miyamoto a.k.a. Enigma Boy.

Josuke looked up from the letter after reading all it had to offer. That name, the things the letter talked about, they seemed so familiar to him. Who was it that wrote this? Who was Terunosuke Miyamoto?

He asked the foreign woman as much, prompting her to smile. The child next to her, her son, based off of the letter, set a folded piece of paper on the ground between them.

The moment Terunosuke was dreading finally arrived. There was no turning back now. He slowly rose up from the page and looked Josuke straight in the eye. His wavering determination held firm. Recognition hit Josuke’s face. He was initially shocked and the slightest bit hostile, but the circumstances seemed to calm his instincts.

Terunosuke could do this. With all eyes on him, he did what he had come to do. He bowed to Josuke and spoke.

“I’m sorry.”

Those words were the only things left to say. With that, Terunosuke was finally free. After so much anger, sorrow, laughter, pain, love, and uncertainty, Terunosuke finally left behind the last shreds of his prison.

He could finally close that book.

Chapter End Notes

So this is the end. Thanks for reading all the way here, it really means a lot.

I devoted a lot of thought to subtle references and foreshadowings throughout the chapters. For example, before something really bad would happen, there would always be a mention of oranges. The first Godfather movie had something like that, so I thought it’d be fun. There are a lot more of those just below the surface all throughout, like the significance of Terunosuke’s left and right hands and how they interacted with the world. I hope that reading everything a second time through will be even more rewarding than the first.

The Godfather was a great source of inspiration, and there were many others alongside it. Clannad, Katawa Shoujo, Haruhi Suzumiya, Trigun, and of course the whole of JoJo’s, just to name a few. I guess there’s something to be said about interpreting art through oneself and vice versa.

Every character was tons of fun to write. My favorites were perhaps Sergio and Cielo. Sergio for being a determined man who slowly improves himself through harsh struggle and a great conduit for jokes. Cielo for having an unstoppable devotion to
achieve his goals while having understandable reasons for wanting to achieve them. You could almost see them as being reflections of one another.

I suppose the reason I chose to write about Terunosuke was because he appealed to me on a fundamentally empathetic level. His design and powers were captivating and wholly underutilized, sure, but it was his fate that left a bitter taste in my mouth. To be unable to move around or take action is my deepest fear, and to see a character I enjoyed be subjected to that, especially when I felt he didn’t deserve something so extreme, laid the foundation for this story. Life is funny like that, huh?

Thanks again. And look forward to whatever I might write in the future.

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