

II

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

ILLUSTRATION BY SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-


Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-


Cooking
Washing
SUBARU
Cleaning
Petra


"What a refreshing breeze. But the sunlight is gentle today...you needn't be so considerate."
"El Fulla—!!"
"Hyaaa! M-Miss...?!"
"This will get a little rough!"

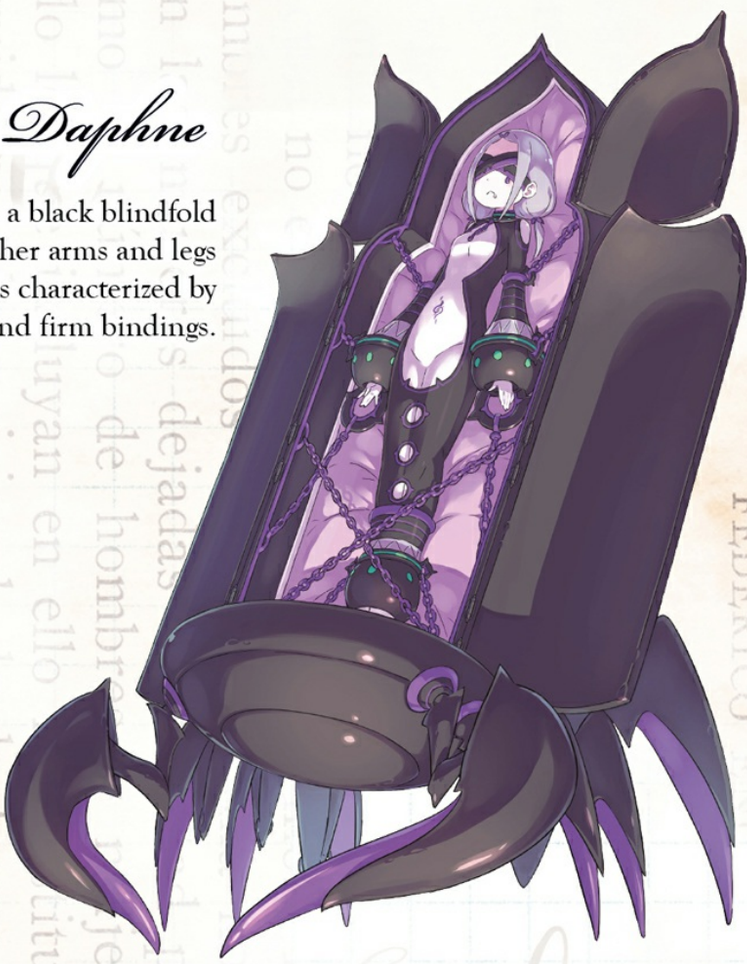
Characters

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

Daphne

The Witch of Gluttony. With a black blindfold in an X over her eyes, and her arms and legs bound in black restraints, she is characterized by her exceptional appearance and firm bindings.





Typhon

The Witch of Pride. With brown skin and green hair, she looks like an exceedingly normal girl, but...

Minerva

The Witch of Wrath. Blond hair and blue eyes. She is a healthy, lively, energetic, beautiful young girl.



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CONTENTS

Chapter 1
Maid, Maid, Maid

Chapter 2
Girl's Gospel

Chapter 3
Friend

Chapter 4
The Value of a Life

Chapter 5
The Witches' Tea Party

Chapter 6
Loveloveloveloveloveloveyou

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-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 11

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

YEN ON

NEW YORK

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Re:ZERO Vol. 11

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

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Re:ZERO KARA HAJIMERU ISEKAI SEIKATSU Vol. 11

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1: Maid, Maid, Maid

Chapter 2: Girl’s Gospel

Chapter 3: Friend

Chapter 4: The Value of a Life

Chapter 5: The Witches’ Tea Party

Chapter 6: Loveloveloveloveloveloveyou

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

CHAPTER 1

MAID, MAID, MAID

1

—The restoration of Subaru Natsuki's lost life came with the usual, nigh-unbearable agony.

The power of Return by Death caused no lag between death and resurrection.

Subaru's mind didn't perceive a pause or transition from his final moments, as only time itself and his body reverted to their previous states. This inconsistency between his mind and reality disturbed his soul deeply.

The instant return to a cold, hard floor made it was clear this time was no exception to the usual rules.

The first thing that broke into Subaru's consciousness was a revolting sensation.

"—Ueegh?! *Geho!! Oegh!!*"

Before his mind could catch up to reality, he violently retched from the foreign matter he found in his mouth. A bitter taste and the stench of soil lingered on Subaru's tongue; he coughed as he desperately forced open his eyes.

"Th-this is…"

A hoarse breath escaped Subaru as he sat up, squinting at the gloom. After blinking a few times, his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and he could make out the interior of an old stone room—one familiar to him. He realized he was in the ruin.

"Inside…the tomb…?"

The peculiar putrid air stood out in his memory. There was no mistaking that this was the tomb in the Sanctuary.

Placing his hands on the rough floor, Subaru pushed himself to his feet while connecting the tangled threads of his memory to piece together what had happened. Fresh back from Return by Death, his brain couldn't cope with the amount of information flooding into it.

He was sure he'd gathered the Earlham Village residents that had evacuated to the Sanctuary and brought them back to their homes on his way to Roswaal Manor. He'd planned to confront Frederica once he arrived, only to find the mansion abandoned, causing worry to stab at his chest.

He was concerned about the others who were supposed to be there: Beatrice, Petra, and above all, Rem—

"—I told you, didn't I? I promised you, yes?"

With a shudder, Subaru's throat went taut as the lush voice brushed directly against his nerves.

It was a bloody voice, the very essence of vulgarity and pleasure. The speaker had reached her climax when she witnessed the loss of life, heaving a satisfied sigh as she spoke of her one-sided promise.

Subaru touched his stomach where it had been slashed and his innards had spilled out. Naturally, after Return by Death, his body was unharmed; however, the deepest scars had been carved not in his flesh but his soul. No—

"Getting my gut sliced open was the biggest reason I was brought to the mansion, wasn't it?"

Pulling his finger away from his right flank, Subaru gently traced the center of his abdomen. The wound was nowhere to be found, but in Subaru's true history, it was a cold, hard fact that he had been sliced wide open.

And for Subaru, the culprit was the first obstacle he had faced after arriving in his new world—

"—So the Bowel Hunter returns to the stage… Gimme a break… geez."

He used the back of his hand to wipe the sweat beading on his brow.

In the back of Subaru's mind, he could see a beautiful woman of pure darkness with long hair every bit as black as his own. Brandishing a vicious blade, that butcher had taken Subaru's life twice over—and her name was Elsa Gramhilde.

"Why was that woman at the mansion…? Forget it. Not that isn't important, but…"

Having reviewed what had happened since his Return by Death, Subaru's mind focused back on the present.

Where had his ability brought him? As far as he could tell, since he was in the ruins, there could only be two possibilities—and given the cramped, stone room, he narrowed those down to one.

"This must be right after I took the tomb's 'Trial'…or right before? Which one it is…doesn't matter! More importantly, if this is after the Trial, then…"

When Subaru's mind and reality connected with the speed of a blitzkrieg, his head practically snapped back to look over his shoulder. Inside that claustrophobic chamber, the figure he sought was lying on the floor right behind him.

"—Emilia!"

There lay Emilia, her silver hair fanned out around her head and her pale cheeks twisted in anguish.

Subaru knelt at her side and was about to touch her sleeping face when…he hesitated.

"_____"

If he touched her, Emilia's Trial would end right then and there. Outside interference would cause whatever vision she was seeing in the Trial to instantly vanish, like popping a bubble…regardless of how hard Emilia was working to overcome her past.

"But I know that tonight it won't do any good…!"

Shaking his head, Subaru pushed away his uncertainty. He embraced the tormented Emilia, sitting her up and holding her against his chest. That instant,

Emilia's body heavily arched back. And after trembling for a while—

"Su…baru…?"

"Yeah, that's right. It's me, Emilia. You all right?"

Subaru shot Emilia a small smile when she recognized him and called out his name though she was still dazed. The warmth of his smile and embrace stalled Emilia's grasp on reality for a time.

Soon, the situation she'd been placed in and the result of the Trial would crash down upon her. After that, she would cry like a child. He waited for it in silence.

"—aa."

The least Subaru could do was to gently embrace her so that her heart would not break in the process. And so until Emilia calmed down, he held her firmly in his arms, not allowing her to leave his grasp.

2

"I-I'm really sorry… I-I've calmed down, so…let's talk."

Now in a guest room in Ryuzu's house, Emilia's voice was choked as she spoke.

A faint redness tinged her eyes, where heavy traces of the confusion and sorrow she felt a short while ago were still visible. Still, she was doing her best to be strong, so Subaru didn't want to interrupt.

"Well, sorry…for causing you trouble in the tomb. Really, I'm still…"

"Emilia-tan, it's okay. When you send trouble my way, it's not a bother. Helping you is what I want to do. More importantly, you didn't hit anything when you fell down, right? If you did, I can give it a really gentle rub."

"Mm. Seems like I hit my butt a bit when I went down. It feels a little numb…"

"Gulp. Th-then, I'll be very caref— Miss Ram? Is that you jabbing your cane into my back?!"

While Subaru was being particularly silly, Ram drove the tip of the cane she

was gripping directly at him. When he pointed this out, she twisted the cane, causing Subaru to yelp with pain and leap away.

“H-hey, you?! Th-that’s a little too much, isn’t it?! Look at this—blood’s oozing and everything!”

“Lady Emilia, how’s your condition? Don’t leave out a single detail.”

“Are you seriously gonna ignore me after all that, Ram?! You really are a piece of work!”

As Ram respectfully checked on Emilia’s health, she responded to Subaru’s complaint by glancing at him as if he were an insect, snorting “Hah!” in an amused sort of way. The exchange brought a weak smile to Emilia’s face.

“…Thanks, both of you. I’m feeling all right… So we should…talk about what happened inside.”

Her lips made a small smile, but she could not conceal the worry and fatigue dragging down the corners of her eyes, pulling on her cheeks, and filtering into her voice.

Surrounding Emilia was everyone who had gathered at the tomb for the Trial —in addition to Subaru and Ram, there was Garfiel and Ryuzu, and, for some reason, Otto, who made five.

With everyone’s eyes upon her, Emilia held her emotions in check to properly convey the details of the Trial and to announce that it had ended in failure. Most of the conversation was identical to the previous time around. The only difference was—

“Then why is Mr. Natsuki safe and sound after having gone inside?”

Raising his hand, Otto posed the question that Subaru had managed to wiggle his way out of answering the last time. He had hidden that he’d actually taken the Trial and kept quiet about the fact that he was qualified to take it. That had been out of consideration for Emilia, to avoid putting extra pressure on her when she was facing the same Trial, but…

—This time, after some thought, he changed his reply to the question.

“The reason’s simple. Just as you saw from the light in the ruin, I was qualified

to take the Trial, too. So I took it…and I passed.”

“—Huh?”

At first, Subaru’s declaration left everyone taken aback. Then, fierce unrest ran among them.

In particular, Emilia’s shock was tremendous; she’d taken the same Trial and failed. Her purple eyes opened wide, looking like trembling gemstones as they focused on Subaru.

Subaru nodded toward her as he continued to survey the other surprised reactions in the room.

“Sorry to surprise you like that. But to be honest, I was only lucky. The details of the Trial just happened to be something I’d made my peace with beforehand… I wouldn’t call it an easy win, though.”

“Hmm. Is that so, Young Su? However, that…complicates things.”

A throbbing pain returned to Subaru’s chest as he reminisced about meeting his parents in the world known as the Trial.

It was Ryuzu, representative of the Sanctuary, who mulled over Subaru’s words and furled her brows. The youthful-looking elder’s grave voice made Ram fold her arms, narrowing her pink eyes.

“This has gotten complicated… There’s no doubt about that. But if Barusu isn’t spouting nonsense, then it’s a great achievement. If his story is true, the barrier should be lifted now. Garf, what is the state of the barrier?”

“…All I can say is, the pact feels the same way to me ’n’ the old hag.”

“So that was all a lie. Please die.”

“Damn, you decided that way too early!!”

Reeling from the sting of Ram’s uncharacteristically hasty judgment, Subaru was clutching his head when he belatedly realized something.

“…What’s wrong, Garfiel? Why you making a scary face like that?”

“—It’s nothin’… Barrier ain’t down yet, right? What did you expect?”

“I was just about to explain that stuff. Man, you guys are so impatient.”

Garfiel, who'd been glaring at Subaru, crinkled his nose and averted his gaze. Put off by his demeanor, Subaru turned back toward Emilia.

Just as before, Emilia's eyes were filled with worry and bewilderment as she said, "…Tell us, Subaru. What…did you see when you…overcame the Trial?"

"Probably more accurate to say what I learned rather than what I saw. The Trial's a real bully… And there ain't just one. Apparently, even after you finish the first, there's still two left, for three in total."

"Two more…"

The worry in Emilia's eyes deepened, which made Subaru's chest tighten so much it hurt. The first challenge, the Trial of the past, provoked unspeakable anguish for her. The thought of two more was simply staggering.

"This might be going too deep into the weeds, but who exactly did you hear all this from while you were in the tomb?"

"Who…? Er, I didn't talk to anyone… When I started the Trial, I heard my own voice in my head. I think it probably affects different people in different ways."

It was close to the truth for him to say that he'd simply come to understand the information rather than hearing it from someone else. Subaru had no memory of meeting a person in the tomb, so it was a natural assumption to make.

"It is said that in rare cases, one can understand how to use a *metia* merely by touching it. This could be something similar."

"Ahh, I have not yet had the opportunity to touch something as precious as a *metia*…"

"I suppose you wouldn't. You have the look of a pauper."

"It hasn't even been half a day since Miss Ram and I first met, has it?!"

Ram had quickly decided how she was going to interact with Otto. Setting aside their exchange, Subaru sat right beside Emilia on the bed she was resting in. Then, he locked eyes with her as he addressed her directly.

"Emilia, there's something I want to suggest. You might not like it very much, though…"

“Suggest? What…do you mean by that…?”

“—Can I challenge the Trial in the tomb in your place and clear it?”

“_____”

The words Subaru had uttered fiercely unsettled Emilia. From her perspective, they were completely unexpected; from his, they required courage and resolve to say.

—Subaru would take the Trial, liberating the Sanctuary in her place.

It was a thought that had occurred to him during his conversation with Garfiel on the way back to Earlham Village the last time around.

Mid-trip, Garfiel had questioned Subaru, who was sending Emilia to the Trial in spite of the agony she had to endure because of her repeated failures. Garfiel had wondered whether overcoming one’s past was truly necessary.

Naturally, Subaru couldn’t simply accept that idea without any thought, but it had undoubtedly been a bolt from the blue.

He acknowledged it was worth suggesting as an option, at least.

“I want to be there for you. I don’t know what you’re facing from your past, but if it’s enough to make you cry like that and bring out so much suffering on your face… I want to reach out to you.”

“…Subaru.”

“It should be fine even if it’s me taking the Trial and liberating the Sanctuary. There’s nothing that says you have to go through a hard time and face up to your past.”

The way Subaru slowly shook his head and spoke gently to her made Emilia’s gaze wander.

He understood Emilia’s inner turmoil. Facing her past had been excruciating. If there was some way to avoid it, some part of her must have wanted to do exactly that and leave the rest to Subaru. It was her strong sense of responsibility and nobility that did not permit her to abandon a burden once she had decided to carry it on her shoulders. Moreover, her gentle nature left her afraid that Subaru might have to endure a pain comparable to hers in the

Trials that would follow.

If that kindness was the shackle binding her, Subaru had to tell her it wasn't necessary to—

"—Man, I shut up and listen for one minute, and you suddenly think you can decide every damn thing on your own, huh?"

Before Subaru could say anything that might have broken those shackles, someone in a particularly foul mood called him out from behind. The speaker growled through his fangs, crinkled his nose, and curled his back in a catlike posture as he unleashed another stream of words.

"Me, I'm opposed to anyone besides the Princess…besides Lady Emilia takin' the Trial. At the very least, I'll be damned before I let the likes of you lift that barrier."

"Wha—?!"

From Subaru's perspective, this was the second time Garfiel had struck him with a bolt from the blue. However, the impact of the first paled in comparison to that of this one.

Subaru, unable to reconcile the words with their speaker, was completely dumbfounded. Seeing his apparent confusion, Garfiel pounded the incomprehensible reality home.

"Let me say it again. If you ask me, no one but the Princess should take the Trial. I ain't lettin' the old hag get it twisted either. Think of this as my rule."

"Wait! Wait, wait, wait…!"

Subaru desperately rambled in response to Garfiel's sudden declaration. Inside his mind, he was unspeakably shocked and baffled.

Of course he was. The source of Subaru's suggestion was none other than Garfiel from the last time around.

"Why the hell are you the one who's against it…?"

"Huh? That surprised I'm not all for this plan? Ain't you an optimist."

"Hey, don't get all bent out of shape. If anyone should be frowning and

complaining here, it's me…"

Last time around, Garfiel was the one who had browbeaten Subaru to take the trial. Yet here he was, shooting down the very same plan. He couldn't figure out the true intent behind Garfiel's change of mind.

"I'm not doing a great job reining in my whirlpool of emotions right now…but can you tell me exactly why you're against it? As far as you're concerned, the faster the Sanctuary is liberated, the better, right?"

"It ain't a question of sooner or later. This is one of those, ya know, issues of status. Ain't that right, old hag?"

"Though the way he put it was unbearable…I cannot refute what Young Gar says. That said, there is an issue with how he phrased it."

"Hell, even Ryuzu is against it…"

Subaru was bewildered that not only Garfiel was stubbornly opposing him, but the elder was as well.

Considering how emotional and temperamental Garfiel appeared, it was at least understandable how his opinion could change at the most inopportune time and place. However, Subaru wouldn't have guessed Ryuzu would react this way.

In response to Subaru's earnest gaze, Ryuzu waved an oversized sleeve as she picked up where she had left off.

"I understand Young Su's point about lifting the barrier because the sooner that happens the better… However, I wish to follow Young Ros's plan as closely as possible."

"Roswaal's plan…"

"—Lady Emilia should obtain the Sanctuary's freedom by her own hand."

"!"

Emilia's breath caught as soon as she heard those words when Ryuzu narrowed her eyes and spoke. Emilia touched a hand to her own breast, her long lashes hovering over downcast eyes as her voice quivered.

“I—I have to do it… It’s no good if it isn’t me… I…need to do this…”

“No, Emilia, there’s no…”

“I-it’s all right! Subaru, you don’t need to force your way into going in my place. I’m just…I’m just a little surprised because this is all so sudden. But now that I know what needs to happen…”

Knowing the Trial was about facing the past, she could emotionally prepare for it.

That’s what Emilia insisted, but it was already a proven fact that no matter how strong her resolve, it wasn’t the same as a foolproof plan. If nothing else, letting Emilia continue like this would mean watching the past devastate her for the next three days.

This foreknowledge was what brought such sorrow to Subaru’s eyes.

That was why—

“Subaru… A-are you thinking that you can’t trust me with this?”

“—Wha?”

Right as his mind drifted off for a second, Emilia posed a question to him, her voice quivering with worry.

When he let out a surprised breath, Emilia weakly shook her head side to side and continued.

“It’s because you saw me fail… That’s why you think you can’t trust me to complete the Trial… That’s why you want to do it in my place.”

“No, Emilia, that’s not it. It’s just… It isn’t like you absolutely have to deal with the past and…”

“But I—! If I don’t face it, then I can’t pass the Trial! I-if I can’t do even that much, there’s no way I can become King… I have to help the villagers and the people of the Sanctuary get out of this place.”

Emilia firmly embraced her own shoulders as she swept Subaru’s words away. Her slender nails dug into the skin, as if she meant to hurt her timid self.

“I…can’t keep relying on you all the time, Subaru. It was just the other day

that you became so badly hurt for my sake…and now it's about to happen again. I won't put you through that…"

"…It's fine that way, Emilia. This might be the wrong way to say this, but this is one of those, you know, give-and-take situations. Wait, would it make more sense to say giving the right person the right job? What I'm trying to get at is that I just so happen to have a better matchup when it comes to this Trial. Since it seems I can handle this, might as well have me take care of it. That's all. You'll definitely have great opportunities to give it your all in the future."

"Isn't this one of those important opportunities? If I avert my eyes simply because I don't like what I see, then push everything onto you, Subaru, before running away…what does that make me?"

How good would it be if he could simply yell back, *And what's wrong with running away?*

If running from something awful was possible…if someone had a chance to not look at something bitter or to turn away from suffering, and in so doing, they could breathe easier, then that's exactly what they should do. That was how Subaru had lived his life up to that point.

Even if people looked down on that way of living as the weakling's path, he could almost certainly say with conviction that it was not something to be ashamed of.

"____"

And yet, Subaru was unable to affirm Emilia's weakness.

He didn't understand why he couldn't bring himself to say the words. But when she noticed that Subaru had fallen silent, Emilia shut her eyes with all her might, casting them downward as her lips tightened.

Seeing that stabbed at Subaru's chest, and when he tried to say something even though he hadn't been able to think of anything meaningful—

"—For now, let's leave it at that."

It was neither Subaru nor Emilia who punctuated their discussion with that brief statement. The speaker had quietly circled around Emilia's back, gently

touching a pale palm to the young girl's mouth. An instant later—

"…Ah"

Emilia, her strength suddenly draining out of her, lost consciousness, tipping forward as she crumpled.

Subaru hurried to catch her. Laying in his arms, tranquil breaths slipped from Emilia's sleeping face. Then he turned to another—Ram's—and asked, "What did you do?"

"I gave her a whiff of incense to help her relax. Perhaps you're upset that I used such a forceful method."

"That was definitely aggressive… But you did the right thing. Sorry for making you go through the trouble."

"Receiving an apology about Lady Emilia from you, Barusu, is strange indeed. When did you inherit Lady Emilia's guardianship from the Great Spirit?"

"That wasn't what I…"

Meant, he wanted to say, but his shoulders drooped instead. Subaru knew the retort wasn't very convincing.

It was a fact that, whatever the reason, Puck's refusal to show himself made Subaru even more protective of Emilia than usual. His knowledge of how the Trial would wear her down made him rash as well.

What's more, it seemed Emilia was well aware of this tendency of his.

"Ha. Either way, looks like we're done talking for now."

Subaru was at a loss for words, and Emilia was unconscious. Seeing the two of them like that, Garfiel snorted as if he was bored. Though Subaru took issue with his attitude, he couldn't bring himself to snap back with a retort.

The conversation for that evening was over. There was no denying that fact. However—

"It'd be nice…if we could talk to the Princess again tomorrow."

Subaru had no reply for the murmur that Garfiel added, either.

3

“Can I talk to you for a minute? There’s something I wanna ask.”

There, in the settlement, illuminated at night by a bonfire, Subaru called out to the figures walking ahead of him.

“What’s that? Ya got somethin’ more to say?”

Two individuals—Garfiel and Ryuzu—came to a halt so they could turn around. Garfiel was in a foul mood, while Ryuzu’s expression was unreadable. Subaru scratched his cheek as he spoke to the pair.

“Hey, don’t be so combative. I just have a little question.”

“A question, is it? If it’s something we can answer, then I don’t see why not. What is it you wish to ask?”

Garfiel loomed with his fangs bared, though Ryuzu held him back and gave Subaru permission to proceed. Grateful for her demeanor, Subaru abruptly puzzled over something.

“Come to think of it, this house used to be where Ryuzu stayed, right? Then where is Ryuzu staying while Emilia and the rest of us are staying here?”

“…Hey, why are you even askin’ a question like that? Lemme make this clear. If you even try and do somethin’ to the hag, you can bet I ain’t gonna forgive… ow, ow, ow! What gives, lady?!”

“It’s time to give the stupidity a rest, Young Gar. Do you think a youngling would want to do anything with a fossil like me? It’s obvious he’s simply curious.”

Ryuzu sighed with an exasperated air as she dug her nails into Garfiel’s hip. Certainly, Garfiel’s suspicion was way off the mark, but it still felt kind of strange to hear Ryuzu describe herself as an old lady.

Either way, Subaru had come to talk about his idle curiosity, so he cleared his throat and continued.

“You opposed my suggestion back there. I wanna know the real reason why. Mind telling me?”

“…Like we said before, liberating the Sanctuary should be something Lady Emilia accomplishes on her own. That’s what Young Ros desires, after all.”

“You said that it’s Roswaal’s plan. Meaning…”

When Subaru suddenly recalled the heated debate he had shared with Roswaal the last time around, his ignorance caused wrinkles to break out on his brow.

Dealing with the menace of the Witch Cult and liberating the Sanctuary—Roswaal claimed he’d set everything up so that Emilia would be credited with the success of both. Subaru could agree that Roswaal’s plan presented unique advantages for Emilia’s bid for the throne. However, he felt that line of thinking was too heartless.

“…Do the two of you agree with that guy’s methods?”

“Hey, don’t get the wrong idea. Me? I hate the bastard, too. But things ain’t that simple.”

“Young Su, I understand how you must feel. I hardly find it a pleasant topic either. But as the settlement’s representative, my position also requires me to think of what will come after the barrier is lifted.”

Prodded by Ryuzu’s statement, Subaru grimaced in bewilderment. Garfiel observed Subaru’s state and went, “Now look,” scratching his head in irritation as he went on.

“Even if the barrier’s lifted, that don’t mean the people livin’ here just go poof and vanish. If how and where they live changes, who do ya think is gonna take care of geezers and hags who can’t even tell left from right?”

“—I get it now. Even if the barrier’s lifted and everyone formally moves into the fiefdom…you’re still under Roswaal’s care. That’s why Ryuzu and the others are…”

“We do not wish to risk our relationship with Young Ros. I am sorry for you and yours, Young Su.”

“…You know, this is making me trust Roswaal less and less…”

Considering how low Subaru’s opinion of Roswaal had dropped the last time

around, the current conversation was a truly bitter pill to swallow. Subaru's reply elicited a pained smile from Ryuzu, while Garfiel gave a single, strong click of his fangs.

"Aaanyway, we've laid out our demands. The Princess takes the Trial. Me, I won't let you take it, whatever qualifications you've got."

"Stop calling her Princess. It sounds like you're making fun of Emilia."

"Can't call her half-demon or Princess? Man, you complain a lot. Besides, Sir Knight, if she ain't a Princess, then who the hell have you been protectin' this whole damn time?"

Twisting his hip, Garfiel peered up at Subaru as he spoke in a provocative tone. Subaru fell into his thoughts a short while, before coming to his senses and lifting a finger to thrust toward Garfiel.

"The part where you called me *Sir Knight* just now, could you say it one more time?"

"The hell you gettin' all worked up for…"

Garfiel seemed fed up with Subaru's unexpectedly bashful reaction when Ryuzu raised a hand between them. Then she brought that hand to her mouth as she let out a little yawn.

"Young Su, could we leave it at that? The late hours of night are hard on the elderly. Let's continue this tomorrow."

"Given your appearance, it feels super-weird hearing that from you…but roger that. Sorry for keeping you."

"Hah! 'The Abengam comes on thick.' Don't you dare go anywhere even near the tomb."

"Not sure what that phrase is supposed to mean, but I get the gist of it. I've had enough of the tomb for one night, anyway."

After seeing off the sleepy Ryuzu and the thorny Garfiel, Subaru, by his lonesome, lifted his head and gazed up at the starry sky. The night sky was full of clouds, but since there were barely any light sources on the ground, the starlight was incredible. He felt like nature was cleansing his heart.

“The situation’s too dire for a warm and fuzzy mood, though…”

After a dizzying day and Return by Death, Subaru’s body and spirit were both laden with fatigue. But he slapped his cheeks to energize himself and turned toward the group’s temporary accommodations. And then—

“So what’d you think of that discussion just now? I’d like to hear an outsider’s opinion.”

“…Normally, wouldn’t one call it a third-party opinion? When you call it an outsider’s opinion, you make both my position and opinion feel overly estranged…”

“This is my way of being considerate of your position. If you’re just an outsider in the end, it gives you a chance to save face, right? Damn it man, don’t make me say it out loud.”

“Such consideration is pointless when you already involved me in the earlier conversation!”

As they bantered, Otto slowly emerged from the temporary accommodations. He’d probably eavesdropped on the last conversation from beginning to end. “However,” he prefaced without the barest hint of shame, “if you were asking for my honest opinion, then I’d have to say that what Garfiel and Ryuzu said makes perfect sense, doesn’t it?”

“____”

“They understand the Marquis’s aim, and there is Lady Emilia’s standing as a royal selection candidate to consider as well. Mr. Natsuki, you no doubt believe that even if you overcome the Trial in her place, the prestige of the exploit would still belong to Lady Emilia…but would something like that be accepted by all the involved parties present here? In other words, would doing things that way win their support?”

“Even I get the logic behind that. However you think about it, Emilia liberating the Sanctuary would be the ideal move. But…”

As Subaru trailed off, a third party smashed right through his hesitation.

“—Lady Emilia cannot overcome the Trial?”

When Subaru turned toward the voice, there stood Ram, who had supposedly been tucking Emilia into bed. Subaru reacted with a bitter expression and shook his head.

“I’m not saying it’s impossible. But anyone can tell it’s hellish to make any progress in a short span of time, right? The barrier isn’t a problem we can leave alone for a long time.”

“I suppose not. At the very least, I would like to conclude it within three years, before the royal selection is decided.”

“That’s way longer than I was thinking!”

At first, Subaru thought this was another display of Ram’s peculiar brand of flippancy, but her frank expression made him seriously consider the possibility. Meanwhile, Otto silently crossed his arms and nodded before adding his thoughts.

“I actually understand why Mr. Natsuki is so concerned. Considering the burden on the evacuated villagers and the current living conditions in the Sanctuary, food stores included…the day it all breaks down does not seem far off to me.”

“Suddenly being forced to live as refugees puts a lot of stress on people. And then there’s the inhabitants of the Sanctuary who have to give out all their food. Their dissatisfaction is probably about to explode any moment.”

“Which is why you would like to do something before that happens. So what’s your plan?”

“Feels…kinda unsettling to have the conversation move so quickly… If possible, I’d like to propose freeing the villagers from the Sanctuary before there’s an irreparable breakdown in relations.”

With Ram and Otto, Subaru brought up the idea of releasing the hostages just like he’d done the previous time around.

His proposal had been accepted once before, but he didn’t know if that would happen again. After all, the condition for agreeing to the proposal last time had been for Subaru to take the Trial.

This time, the representatives of the Sanctuary had precisely forbidden him from doing that. He expected negotiations would not be easy.

“I’m sure they have no desire for mutual destruction either. Given the nature of the barrier, Lady Emilia cannot depart until someone brings the Trial to an end… It would seem most of the proposal’s premise has already been fulfilled.”

Otto nodded as he interpreted the parts of Subaru’s proposal that hadn’t been elaborated on enough. Seeing Otto logically break things down, Ram went “Hmm,” narrowing her eyes as she spoke with a hint of praise.

“I’m surprised. The pet you took in is worth more than I presumed, Barusu.”

“Isn’t he? I found him tied up on the side of the road. I’ll take care of him, so can I keep him?”

“Only if you take proper care of him.”

“Could you two stop referring to me like I’m a dog or a cat?! Both of you are seriously in tune, aren’t you?!”

When Otto bit back, Subaru and Ram both let out a hearty sigh. This was solid proof they were truly in sync, but Subaru sank into thought about something weightier.

Based on the earlier exchange, he didn’t think Garfiel would simply go along with his proposal to free the villagers. That said, Subaru had a reason why he couldn’t take things slow.

—He had to seriously start thinking ahead, to the situation that had caused his Return by Death.

“All things considered, it would seem that this proposal will become the focus of the conversation to follow.”

“Yeah, I suppose it…wait, what conversation?”

“…He really is hopeless, no?”

“What are you talking about?! It’s a bad habit of yours to decide things all by yourself!”

Ram seemed like she seriously felt sorry for him, which made Subaru stamp

the ground as he asserted the unfairness of it all. His childlike reaction caused Ram's shoulders to sink as her pity deepened.

"Since Lady Emilia was haggard after the tomb's Trial, and the ongoing situation has been hard on Barusu's small head, I am trying to be considerate, but I cannot have you forgetting a most important promise."

"You know, I have a bit of trauma about not keeping promises. Remind me what this one was again?"

"—That after the Trial, Master Roswaal would make time for you."

The words, which Ram said in a rather sour tone, made Subaru go "Ah" as his mouth fell open. Folding her arms at the stupid look on his face, Ram continued nonetheless.

"That's where you were supposed to speak about circumstances to date, and what's to follow. Isn't that right?"

4

The important points of the latest Return by Death were completely different from those of previous times.

During a *normal*—though it was difficult to use that word in these situations—or *usual* instance of Return by Death, Subaru often presumed that the situations instigated by various assailants and the labor required to counter the threat they posed were the most important.

Using the previous loop as an example, the hostile party that had caused the Return by Death situation was the Witch Cult, and Subaru had borrowed the power of other factions, such as Crusch's, to deal with them.

In a similar vein, the attacker this time around was Elsa, the Bowel Hunter, and his options for dealing with her would probably come down to fight or flight.

But this time, there was an issue he clearly needed to prioritize above that. Namely—

"—What had happened to Frederica and the others by the time Elsa killed

me?”

In the current loop, after he’d returned to the mansion, Subaru had felt extremely wary toward Frederica. The crystal she had given Emilia was the reason he had been teleported while they were on their way to the Sanctuary. He later went back to the mansion fully intending to figure out her true motives.

“Who would’ve ever thought it’d be Elsa’s blade greeting me. Thanks to that… well, crap, thanks to that I got a Return by Death without learning a damn thing.”

Subaru wouldn’t say he had truly come away with absolutely nothing at all, but what little information he’d gleaned was not enough. Now that he knew there was an enemy lurking, the largest pending issue was the uncertainty of who her victims would be.

Besides Frederica, there were three others at the mansion: Petra, Beatrice, and Rem—were the girls at the mansion all right? If Frederica was in fact hostile to Subaru and the others, did that mean she was connected to Elsa? Either way —

“I doubt that insane woman would have any reason to hold back against Rem and the others…!”

His memories bubbled up unbidden: the pain of Elsa’s wicked blade and his sense of helplessness at being unable to stop her vile deeds.

She’d killed Emilia. She’d killed Felt. She’d killed Old Man Rom. She’d killed Subaru himself.

There were few things Subaru had greater faith in than the tastes of the butcher known as the Bowel Hunter. Elsa would never let her prey at her chosen slaughterhouse slip away.

That was why—

“—I’ve gotta get back to the mansion without a moment to spare. I have to figure out what happened.”

Along with the liberation of the Sanctuary, this was a challenge Subaru had to

take on.

“—I seee. Now I graaasp the situation.”

After hearing Subaru’s long explanation, Roswaal, lying on his side in bed, nodded deeply.

The room set aside for Roswaal’s convalescence contained only him and Subaru. Setting Otto’s thoughts aside, Ram seemed unhappy she couldn’t also be in attendance, but this was how it had to be.

After all, when men met to plot wicked deeds, the fewer of them, the better.

“I must say, these are results beyond anything I could have hoped for. Not only was the Witch Cult driven off, to think you eeeven participated in the hunt of the White Whale at the Liphas Plains…”

“We can discuss that again when invitations for an award ceremony get thrown around. My exploits weren’t exactly small, so I figure some prestige is coming my way.”

“I get the seeense that *some prestige* is hardly enough to accurately describe the acclaim you’ve earned. Moreover, I wish to thank you on a personal level for your cooperation in subjugating the White Whale… And what of Sir Wilhelm?”

Closing one eye, Roswaal posed the question with only his yellow eye open. It made Subaru gulp down.

“I didn’t think I’d hear Wilhelm’s name out of your mouth… He was there. Wilhelm was the one who finished off the White Whale. It was incredible… He’s seriously something else.”

“I see. That is most splendid.”

“—?”

Subaru knitted his brows, suspicious of the intensity in Roswaal’s murmur.

The fact that Wilhelm had avenged his wife, achieving his long-cherished desire, had delighted Roswaal.

“Roswaal, do you know Wilhelm?”

“…No, I have neeeever met him. One of my ancestors did, briefly. Therefore, I choose to toast the Sword Devil’s tenacity from a distance, entiiiirely on my own whim. That is all.”

That is all, Roswaal had said, but the emotions surfacing in his expression seemed conflicted. Subaru couldn’t bring himself to blindly trust what he had just heard, but he also had no time to pursue the matter any further.

“This really, really bugs me…but let’s move on to the main issue. You’ve read my proposal, right?”

“I haaad intended to discuss rewarding you for your exploits as well, but…no matter, let’s continue. You wanted to discuss your plan to request the freeing of the Earlham villagers from the Sanctuary, yeees?”

When Subaru urged him onward, Roswaal smiled back and touched the bandages wound around his chest as he nodded.

“Certainly, the fact that Lady Emilia has entered the barrier means Garfiel and the others’ aims have already been realized. Lady Emilia cannot depart unless the barrier is lifted. Suuurely it is not necessary for other hostages to remain within the barrier as…insurance.”

“Seems like a rational plan to me. It’s not kicking the Sanctuary’s problems down the road or abandoning them. This is a reasonable proposal, so the other side ought to be willing to compromise.”

“A reaaasonable proposal, you say. It is not that you actually have a diiiifferent concern? For instance, when Lady Emilia’s heart is crushed by the Trial, the people of the Sanctuary might use the presence of the villagers as a shield, using them as leverage to force her to challenge the tomb against her will. Which would make this your way of nipping that in the bud…or something like that?”

Closing one eye, Roswaal stared at Subaru with only his yellow eye, something Subaru was used to seeing by then. Subaru folded his arms, then leadenly drew in his chin as he replied.

“Nah, sorry. Never thought of that. In fact, just imagining it is scary. Gimme a moment.”

“Oooh my? Perhaps I overthought it? How rude of me. I’m sooorry to surprise you.”

Roswaal smiled, glossing over what was either bottomless pessimism or a vicious thought process. While those disinterested eyes and that smile were still trained on him, Subaru mentally refuted the possibility Roswaal had raised.

Purely as an option, it was certainly one potential course of action. However, no one involved in the current events was the kind of person to carry it out. It had only been a few days, but Subaru was confident he knew where Garfiel, Ryuzu, and the other residents of the Sanctuary stood on this.

“…Either way, I understand your proposal, so…what is it you deeesire from me?”

“I want this proposal to go to Ryuzu and the others through you, not me. This time, it seems like…they’re not gonna compromise with me.”

“—This time, hmmm? And why is that?”

“Seems like that Garfiel bastard’s taken a disliking to me. I don’t have the time to get through to a moody guy like that. That means it’s better to have the idea come from someone other than me.”

Opposition to Subaru taking the Trial included, Garfiel’s demeanor had clearly changed from the last time around. His stubborn demeanor and the almost outright hostile glint in his eyes were things Subaru didn’t remember encountering before. He wondered if it was something he’d said, or if he’d done something to rub the guy the wrong way.

Either way, Subaru decided it was best for him to avoid coming into contact with Garfiel this time around.

“If he gets hard-headed about my point of view for emotional reasons, that’ll put everyone in a bind. It’s a little scary how Ryuzu just goes along with whatever Garfiel says, too.”

“And thus, my turn has come. Okay, very well. I shall speak to the elder. But Garfiel hates me as well, so I am concerned I may not be able to bring him around riiight away.”

As a fellow person whom Garfiel hated, Roswaal readily consented, leaving Subaru to make a pained face as he entrusted his hopes to the man.

The plan itself would likely be accepted by the other party after considerable grumbling. They would probably promise to free the villagers within the next several days. However, this was only the first step of Subaru's ultimate plan.

"Noooow then, is your business with me at an end?"

"—Not yet. If anything, this business is more important than that proposal and everything that's wrapped up with it."

That preface made Roswaal's cheeks harden for just a moment, but that stiffness soon morphed into a smile as he ran a finger through his long, indigo hair. Then—

"—Tell me. What is it that you desiiiire?"

"I want to go tell the people back at Earlham Village that the hostages will be released from the Sanctuary just like we discussed. I want to tell all the worried folks that their families are coming home."

"Hmmmmm. In other words, you wish to go before the hostages are freed and the barrier is lifted…"

"I'll return to the village alone. Of course, I'll be heading to the mansion, too, where Frederica's scheming something or other."

With his shrill voice and heated gaze, Subaru transmitted his exact thoughts to Roswaal.

Subaru had thoroughly reviewed the circumstances surrounding Return by Death, had shown consideration to Emilia, who was giving it her all to face the Trial, and had been wary of Garfiel, resident of the Sanctuary. At a glance, it seemed as though Subaru had handled everything quite calmly.

However, even at that very moment, an undeniable impatience threatened to tear the inside of his chest asunder.

How was Elsa connected to Frederica, one of the few remaining at the mansion, and what in the world had happened there? Subaru desperately wanted to find out as soon as possible, to the point that he couldn't bear to sit

around and wait for however many days it would take to persuade everyone.

“I understand your concern. However, to the extent of my knowledge, Frederica is not one prone to rash…”

“—The hell do you know?”

“____”

Somehow, Subaru’s interruption silenced Roswaal’s attempts to alleviate his worries. Dark, heavy emotions were infused within the young boy’s low voice.

Of course there were. Roswaal’s private opinion of Frederica was entirely irrelevant. What Subaru had seen was the truth. In the future, something would occur, and that reality held far greater weight to him than anything Roswaal thought.

“Don’t say stuff like that. It doesn’t suit a smart guy like you. Frederica’s the one who put that crystal in Emilia’s hands. That’s evidence she’s up to something. You said as much, didn’t you?”

“…Even so, she isn’t one to intentionally bring harm to others. She has not the couraaage to do so.”

“I don’t have much courage either. But that’s doesn’t guarantee she wouldn’t try something desperate.”

There was no firm, clear answer what exactly prompted humans to take dramatic actions in extreme circumstances. It certainly wasn’t courage that drove Subaru forward. It was nothing more than a sense that something bothered him.

“Roswaal, the trip will only take half a day. If it’s just me going with Patlash, I can be back in a day’s time. Please, give me the permission I need to do just that.”

“Even assuming I do permit it, if it becomes clear that Frederica bears enmity toward you—indeed, if she takes hostile action against you…what will you do?”

“____”

“The girl has demi-human blood flowing within her. The circumstances of her duties at the mansion mean that she has learned a certain degree of martial

arts. Uuunfortunately, I do not think you stand a chance against her.”

“Th-that’s none of your business…”

The straightforward problem Roswaal pointed out made Subaru’s throat tighten.

Depending on how events played out, it was possible Subaru would have to face both Frederica and Elsa at the same time. Opposing them would be Subaru alone; Petra and the sleeping Rem couldn’t be considered ready for a fight. He had no confidence he could even get in touch with Beatrice.

All things considered, the only combat strength he could bring from the Sanctuary back to the mansion was—

“Emilia can’t go because of the barrier, Roswaal’s heavily injured, Otto’s definitively a noncombatant…wait, is this checkmate?”

“I suppooose it is, though with a single exception.”

When Subaru blanched, Roswaal spread his fingers toward Subaru’s pale face. The fingertips stole Subaru’s attention, as Roswaal smoothly wiggled them around and continued.

“I shall add a condition of my own to your proposed plan of action. As I was just saying, I cannot send you alone to a ceeertain death. Therefore, to ensure that does not come to pass…”

“To ensure that…?”

Roswaal clapped his hands together, opened them, then spoke.

“—Take Ram with you and go. I am quite ceeertain she shall be of aid to you.”

5

“—To put it bluntly, I am not thrilled with this situation.”

“…You’re saying that after we’ve come this far, Big Sis?”

The next morning, Ram was the first to open her mouth when they arrived at the settlement’s entrance. With a sour look on his face, Subaru followed suit.

It was a rather Ram-like thing to say, eliciting a wry smile from Subaru as he

scratched his head.

—As a result of the discussion the night before, Subaru had swallowed Roswaal's terms. It was plain fact that Ram was the only one who could be relied upon for combat, making her the sole countermeasure against Frederica. Ram had indicated her disapproval but relented and came along obediently in the end.

That said, it didn't mean her chagrin had simply vanished—

"With Master Roswaal's poor condition, I can't help but feel concerned about leaving his side."

"I mean, it's not like you can do anything by staying here either, right? Also, I was speechless when I heard it was Garfiel who bandaged those wounds and not you."

"Don't be ridiculous. If I did it and Master Roswaal's injuries worsened, where would we be then?"

"You should feel a little worse about the fact that you'd make it worse!!"

Subaru's voice rose as he took in Ram, who was utterly shameless about her poor ability. He sighed deeply, hearing his voice echoing in the distance as morning embraced the Sanctuary.

It was the start of the day after the discussion. Their preparations had been as quick as humanly possible. But considering his unease over his Return by Death, Subaru truly wished they could have departed the preceding night.

"At night, the Forest of Cremaldi is quite dangerous. Even without the barrier, those woods form a natural stronghold that bars the entry of humans."

"…Don't be reading a man's mind, sheesh."

"It was written all over your face. Are you that worried about the girl you left at the mansion?"

Ram had a sharp intuition and had handily discerned the reason for Subaru's unease. Ram was referring to Petra, freshly employed at the mansion. If Frederica turned out to be hostile to them, the girl's presence was Subaru and Ram's Achilles heel. He wanted to avert a situation like that at all costs. But that

wasn’t all.

“It’s not just Petra I’m worried about.”

“—? If you mean Lady Beatrice, she should still be in the Archive.”

Ram regarded Subaru’s sullenness with a questioning look, not mentioning the other person left in the mansion—namely, Rem. That was natural; Ram didn’t remember Rem, and Subaru hadn’t spoken about her yet.

The nice way to put it was that he hadn’t had a chance to bring it up, but in truth, he was simply afraid. Of course, he believed that it was absolutely necessary for him to bring it up during their trip to the mansion.

“I’m not super eager to talk about it, but…emotionally, it’ll be better to bring it up when it’s just the two of us, huh…”

“____”

“Er, sorry, that’s my bad, Patlash. It’s not like I forgot that you’re here, too.”

Overhearing Subaru’s murmur, the land dragon rubbed her nose against Subaru’s shoulder in apparent objection. Patlash, Subaru’s beloved land dragon, would play the most important role in their journey from the Sanctuary back to the mansion. He was relying on Patlash’s grasp of the way home, and this time, no one would be riding a dragon carriage; it’d be him and Ram mounted on Patlash’s back as she ran for the entire return trip.

“She’s a good land dragon, making up for her all-too-lacking master. I pity her taste in men, though.”

“I can’t say anything back about that. I really can’t, but it still bugs me…”

“—Headin’ back snuggled between two fine ladies, huh? Just showin’ off at this point, ain’t ya?”

When Subaru’s shoulders sank in misery, he heard a voice coming from behind, causing him to turn back with a scowl. The speaker, who was the very person he had expected, walked over while trampling the grass before stopping right beside the two riders and one mount.

“Didn’t think you’d be seeing us off at this early hour. Real polite of you.”

“Geezers and hags get up stupid early. Me, I live here so I picked up the habit… Wait, none of that’s important right now.”

“You were the one who started talking about it, Garf.”

When Garfiel came into view, Ram looked genuinely surprised. However, that was true for Subaru as well. He’d seriously never expected Garfiel to give them a proper send-off.

“Are you that worried about me and Ram riding together? Just so you know, it’s not like my back’s touching anything. And even if it did, all there’d be is something hard as a board.”

“Oh shut it. Me, I know that more than anyone in the whole wor—ow?!”

“You certainly do not know that. I’ll slap you silly.”

“Don’t say that after ya slap someone!!” “Incidentally, stop smacking me, too!!”

Ram simultaneously slapped the vulgar pair’s cheeks as her shoulders sank in exasperation. Then, with handprints plastered on them, Subaru and Garfiel’s faces met.

“Anyway, thanks for coming to see us off… Also, does that mean…you’ve heard?”

“The talk about lettin’ that lot of outsiders leave? I heard it straight out of that bastard Roswaal’s mouth last night. I don’t like you holdin’ talks without me but…I ain’t got any problems with it.”

“Yeah? That’s a big help. I couldn’t help thinking that in the worst case, you were here to stop us by force. If that happened, I’d be forced to throw Ram as far as I could and use her as a decoy.”

“Hey, I’d never fall for that! …I wouldn’t, right?”

“Hell if I know!! Ram, say something to him already…”

After shouting angrily at Garfiel, who’d suddenly lost his confidence, Subaru called out to Ram, who was right beside him. And it was then that he noticed Ram was knitting her brows, apparently contemplating something.

“Ram? What is it?”

“…I am merely getting a headache from Barusu and Garf’s idiotic conversation.”

However, when Subaru asked to see if everything was okay, Ram shook her head and replied in her usual manner. In so doing, she cut off that line of conversation, leaving Subaru unable to pursue the matter.

With that concluded, Subaru reoriented toward Garfiel to speak with him.

“Well, we’re off for a little bit. I intend to be back tomorrow, so take care until then.”

“…You’re fine with not greetin’ the Princess first?”

“I’m even more surprised you’re worried about Emilia and me… But it’s fine. I left a letter, and I asked Otto to stay with her if she’s having nightmares or anything.”

“That guy’s got it rough, too. He’s going through the middle of Temtem Manor for sure.”

When Garfiel rattled off one of his mystery phrases, Subaru accepted his concern with genuine gratitude.

He hadn’t gotten a chance to debrief Emilia about the discussion he had with Roswaal the night before. He was setting out before she even woke up. Subaru didn’t have time to offer explanations, arguments, or excuses.

Since, of course, his leaving would make Emilia worry, he’d left a letter behind —

“But when I’m not by her side, I can’t stop worrying… So I’m leaving her in your hands, Garfiel.”

“Wha? The hell are ya thinkin’, entrustin’ the Princess to me…?”

“I suppose because you’re strong, you’re thinking of the Sanctuary, and you’re well aware it’s gonna be a problem for you if anything happens to Emilia.”

“____”

“Also, worst case, I can try asking Ram to seduce you into going along with…*guaaaa*!!”

“It seems you haven’t done any reflection yet, Barusu.”

“Don’t smack me right in the same spot you did earlier!! Are you a demon?! … Wait, you are!”

Teary-eyed, Subaru raised a complaint about his punishment, which Ram met with an amused “Hah!” Garfiel was completely lost, having gone from mid-conversation a moment before to speechless.

But after a brief silence, he audibly clenched his sharp fangs and said,

“…Fine. For now, I’ll go along with all this madness…”

“Really? That’s great… I’m so happy my face’s swelling up…”

“Ram, I’ll take care of that bastard’s wounds, too, so quit looking so damn worried. This ain’t like you.”

As Subaru rubbed his cheek, Ram seemed to show no outward emotion when Garfiel made his comment. Ram’s cheeks tensed ever so slightly as she responded.

“What an impertinent thing to say, especially coming from you, Garf.”

Having said her piece, she turned her back to him. She was no doubt signaling that the conversation was over. It was true that taking too long before departing would be a problem. Subaru also wanted to leave the Sanctuary right away, but…

“…Come to think of it, do you have anything to hand to me this time?”

“Huh? What are you talkin’ about?”

Right before mounting Patlash, Subaru asked a question that left Garfiel perplexed. He acted like a question mark was hanging over his head as Subaru idly reminisced about his old world.

Last time, when Garfiel had accompanied him for a portion of the journey back to Earlham Village, he had handed over a crystal to Subaru, who had been anxious about his reunion with Frederica. At the time, Garfiel had said he didn’t

know if it would be of any help.

In the end, Subaru had perished without ever meeting Frederica face to face —

During the previous series of events, three more days had passed before his return trek, but this time, no more than half a day had gone by. It was natural that Garfiel had no reason to be generous with Subaru. However—

“—Garf, will you show any consideration to your dear Ram as she heads off to meet Frederica?”

“What are you sayin’ I should do…?”

“You should do your duty for the woman you have fallen for. Do you not wish to be of aid to her?”

“Actin’ like a woman only when it suits ya… Damn it all.”

Ram maintained her brazen demeanor. Garfiel clicked his tongue and tossed something her way. For an instant, the morning sunlight reflected blue off the crystal, just like Subaru remembered.

Guessing what Subaru had been aiming for, Ram forced Garfiel to cough it up. All Subaru could say was that it was completely in character for her.

Internally sighing in admiration at Ram’s skill, Subaru mounted Patlash and reached out to her with his hand. Unexpectedly, Ram politely accepted, and with that, the pair finished mounting the land dragon.

After that, Subaru waved a hand to Garfiel, entrusting the Sanctuary to him once more.

“Take care of Emilia. And as much as you can, let her know I apologize with all my heart and mind, ’kay?”

“You can tell her crap like that using the mouth you were born with, damn it!!”

As though Garfiel’s angry shout was a starting signal, Subaru commanded Patlash to set off.

The pitch-black land dragon accelerated, tearing through the serene air as

they cut through the forest. As they continued to go faster and faster, Garfiel quickly receded from sight.

“So, Barusu? Do you think that thing of Garf’s will be of any use?”

The effect of the wind repel blessing meant the riders didn’t feel any shaking or wind, even on the back of a running land dragon. As they sped on, Ram, sitting behind Subaru with her hands around his hips, tinkered with the crystal she had just received.

It was a crystal pendant tied with a string, and it really did look a lot like Frederica’s.

“I have no idea what effect it’ll have. What do you think? You’ve known him a lot longer than I have.”

“I didn’t even know he had this, so of course I have no clue… But the fact that the two have similar objects does make one wonder, doesn’t it?”

Frederica and Garfiel, connected by blood, though their views on liberating the Sanctuary diverged—what role did the crystals play in their relationship?

“_____”

“…You know, you’ve had a pretty somber expression for a while now.”

Around the time Subaru had reached that conclusion, he noticed Ram had gone silent and her face was unusually gloomy. Subaru remembered seeing the same look when he’d tried to sweep things under the rug during the earlier conversation.

“I’m no Garfiel, but it’s true that this isn’t like you. If there’s something on your mind, you should talk about it.”

When he prodded a second time, Ram’s pink eyes narrowed, and after a moment’s hesitation, she spoke. “…Barusu, something felt amiss earlier.”

Her statement caused Subaru to tilt his head as he asked, “Amiss?”

“At the height of your ridiculousness, you mentioned throwing Ram somewhere as a decoy, yes?”

“I did…or at least I think I did? It was mixed up with a lot of other stuff, so I

don’t remember too clearly…”

“You did. And for some odd reason, those words tugged at my chest. It’s as if —”

Her words trailed off, but after a pause, Ram continued.

“—as if such a thing had actually happened before.”

“____”

For a brief moment, Ram’s murmur made his brows furl, but then Subaru realized something. It dawned on him so late he wanted to strangle himself.

Subaru hurling Ram was indeed something that had actually taken place. The only catch was that fact probably didn’t exist anywhere save inside of Subaru—after all, it was a memory that was related to Rem.

At the height of the commotion surrounding the Urugarum demon beasts, Subaru had used Ram as a decoy to stop Rem’s rampage. When all trace of Rem vanished from the world, established facts connected to her were sloppily rearranged to maintain consistency.

“Barusu?”

A world where Rem did not exist was slowly settling into place.

By all rights, there was probably no way to stop such a thing. But it was possible the existence of Subaru Natsuki might keep it at bay…perhaps by driving in some nails fastening Rem’s existence to the world.

“—Ram, I have to talk to you about something important… To you, it’s probably the most important thing in the world.”

“…Beyond Master Roswaal, I do not believe any such thing exists.”

“Nah, there is something—That’s what we’re gonna talk about.”

Subaru was embarrassed that he’d chickened out and avoided this conversation for so long, considering how important it was. There was still a fair bit of time until they reached the mansion.

There were countless things that he had to ponder. Even so, he could at least take the time to—

“There was…a girl named Rem.”

And so he spoke—to build a place for that girl in her beloved older sister’s heart.

6

—His second return to Roswaal Manor went off without a hitch.

“That said, the awful experience I had took place *inside* the mansion…”

Scratching his cheek, Subaru murmured to himself as he dismounted Patlash before the gate.

His other objective—reporting to the residents of Earlham Village—had been taken care of beforehand. He’d told them that their families remaining in the Sanctuary would soon be released, and their reunion would occur within a few short days.

They had been delighted at the news, but Subaru felt guilty for using it as the justification for his return. Still, this was to make sure everyone made it through the coming danger safe and sound…or at least that was what Subaru told himself.

“You seem stricken by pangs of guilt, almost like a proper adult. Take care to remember that feeling in the future.”

“Future, huh? You’re thinking about Frederica just as much as I am…”

“I’m not speaking of today’s future, but far beyond that. Considering Lady Emilia’s royal selection, the opportunities for Barusu to engage in wicked deeds shall only increase…though I am probably wasting my time bothering with you.”

Subaru couldn’t even muster a groan of complaint at her harsh appraisal. Ram dismounted the land dragon like he had. Gazing at the mansion from beside Subaru, she appeared calm and ready. Her face didn’t reveal a trace of the gloom and frailty Subaru harbored. He was genuinely envious about that.

“Well, excuse me for being unable to leave that boorish lower middle class mindset behind…”

“You have served but a few months, Barusu. Ram has served ten years. Our

degree of loyalty and length of service differ. It is impertinent for you to think you can stand upon the same stage… More importantly, have you managed to harden your resolve?”

“I’ll turn that question right back at you.”

Ram, putting their differing mindsets on the back burner, asked him whether he was ready for something far more immediate. Subaru closed one eye.

With their destination, Roswaal Manor, right before their eyes, Subaru couldn’t exactly back off. Compared to the previous loop, he’d arrived back two entire days early, but—

“Please don’t let anything have happened yet…”

Put bluntly, his latest return to the mansion was more or less the fastest option possible, given the current point of Return by Death. The only way to get back any faster would have been to drop everything and run back the moment he got out of the tomb.

Subaru wondered if Patlash would even cooperate if he had tried that. Unfortunately, that course of action was not something that Emilia, Roswaal, or the others involved would have understood. Of course, if it meant he’d make it back in time to do something, Subaru would have charged forward regardless, but…

“_____”

As Subaru sank into thought, a hand moved to his right arm as if by nature—touching the white handkerchief wrapped around its wrist. This charm symbolized a prayer for his safe journey…and the promise Subaru had made with Petra that he would come back safe.

“Even if Frederica is an enemy, whether she intended to start something right away matters a lot. The fact that she showed her face at the village yesterday doesn’t eliminate the possibility she did something right after we left, but…”

“Barusu.”

“Attack or run away. It’s a hard choice to make, huh? This time, Ram’s here, but if it comes down to a fight, it’ll be a drop in the bucket… When we’re up

against Elsa, running for the hills is way smarter. The problem with that is Beako still holed up here…”

“Barusu.”

“What? Can’t you tell I’m desperately tryin’ to put my thoughts in order right now? If I don’t work things out well enough, we’ll seriously pay for it later. Could you put up with me talking to myself for a litt—”

“—If you are going to do that, I think you should do it inside of the mansion, right?”

Subaru, turning when Ram tugged at his sleeve, pleaded with her about the importance of his fevered mumbling. But then a cute, amused giggle brushed against his eardrums, making Subaru look toward the gate in surprise.

When he did so, he saw a maid standing on the other side of the gate with a demure smile on her face. She had reddish-brown hair accented by a big ribbon on her head. Her adorable smiling face convinced Subaru that an angel had appeared.

He was taken aback when he finally laid eyes on the girl—

“Pe…tra…is that you?”

“Welcome back, Master Subaru. You are back far sooner than expected, no?”

“Y-yeah, I’m back… Er, ah. I’m uh, happy to see you.”

In front of the surprised Subaru, the girl—Petra—elegantly grasped the hem of her skirt and politely bowed. After staring intently at her, confirming that she was safe and sound, Subaru let out a deep sigh.

“—?”

Subaru’s strange demeanor made Petra cock her head to the side, completely mystified. Then, she let out a little “Ah!” as she nervously turned her back to Subaru, carefully arranging her clothing and hair. Then, saying to herself “Okay,” she turned back around and smiled adorably once more.

“Is there something wrong, Master Subaru?”

“—! Aw, geez! You. Are. Soooo damn cute!”

“W-wah?!”

Petra’s unbearably charming behavior drove Subaru to impulsively embrace her and stroke her head. The complex, unreservedly adoring motions of his hand made Petra’s eyes go wide as she raised a bewildered cry.

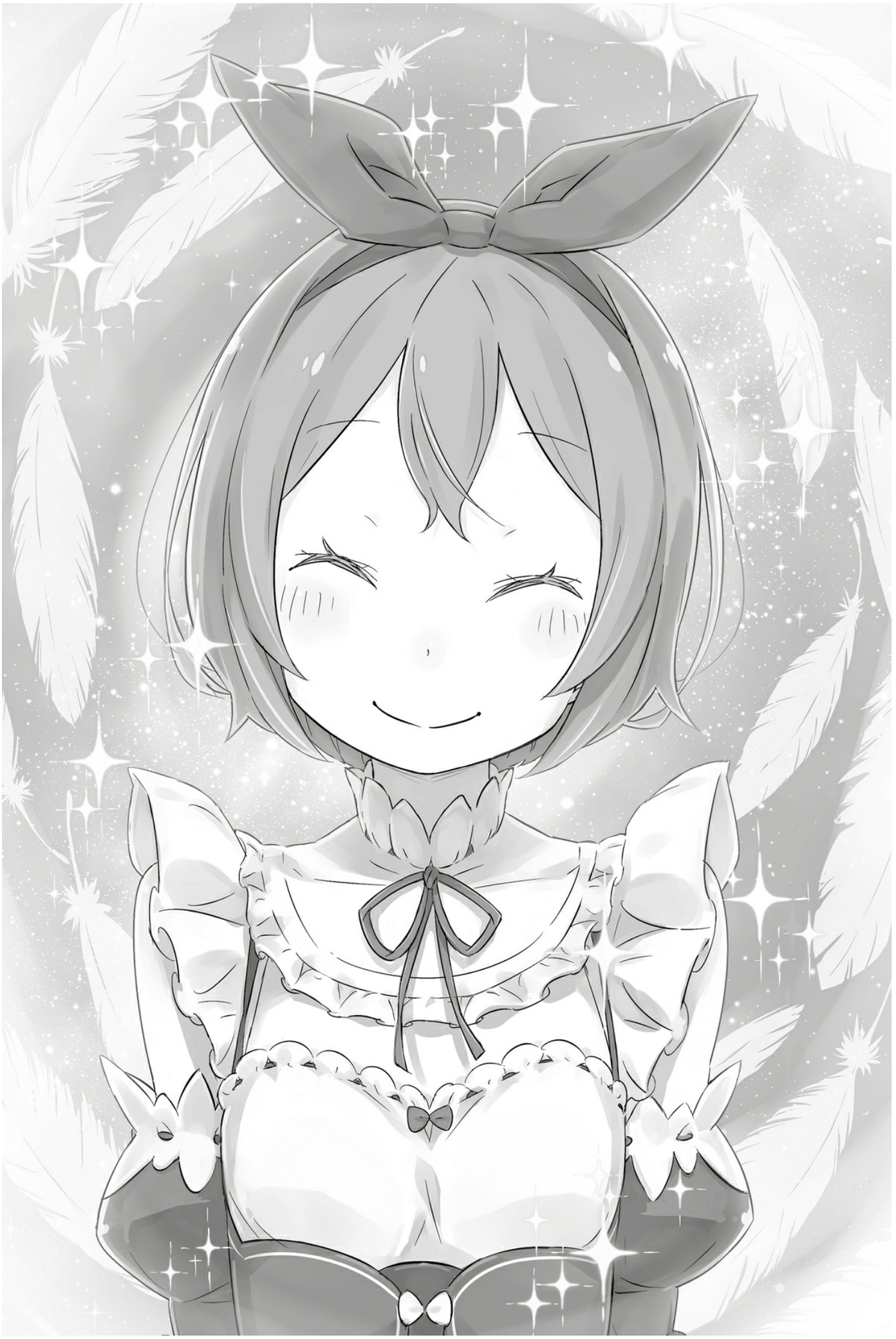
“Wh-what are you?! S-Subaru…th-this is embarrassing…!”

“Gahhh, you really have no regard for people’s feelings… You really don’t, damn it all…!”

“…Subaru?”

The girl’s cheeks reddened as the brows on her blushing face furled with a questioning look. Still buried in Subaru’s chest, Petra examined him with worried eyes as she asked in a low voice, “Does it hurt somewhere…?”

The worried girl’s fingertips brushed Subaru’s trembling cheek. “Nah,” he replied, gently taking into his hand the slender fingers touching him as he shook his head.



Breathing deep through his nose, he stopped for a moment. Then, he slowly met the girl's gaze as he answered fully.

"I'm just relieved from the bottom of my heart. Hi Petra, I'm home."

7

"—To put it bluntly, I am not thrilled with this situation."

"That's the second time I've heard that today."

"I suppose it is. It's sarcasm after all—adorable sarcasm from dear Ram, who's at a loss from being thoroughly forgotten."

Ever since Subaru's reunion with Petra, Ram kept shooting off sarcastic remarks.

Moved by the mere sight of the girl being safe and sound, Subaru had unwittingly gotten quite emotional, but Ram's silent anger at having been ignored in the meantime ran deep. Subaru was on his knees as he apologized.

"I'm sure you already understand, but I was worried about her. I'm just relieved that she's all right."

"How indecent."

"You're way more indecent for saying that about a tiny girl like this!"

Subaru deflated as Ram folded her arms and snorted with a "Hah!" But as she watched the exchange between the pair, Petra gingerly walked closer to Ram.

The big ribbon on her head swayed. With a fair bit of tension on her face, she asked—

"Errr, you're Miss Ram, right? This is the first time we have properly spoken, so… I am Petra, new servant here at the Master's mansion. I am pleased to meet you."

"My, you aren't calling me Ramchi today?"

Raising an eyebrow, Ram teased the girl about the nickname that had spread among the children of the village some two months prior. Her reply brought a blush to Petra's face. "B-back then I…" she panicked in her embarrassment.

“I was still just a child. But please watch me. I will be different from now on.”

“…Unlike Barusu, you are quite discerning. Very well, you pass.”

“Hey, who do you think you are?”

“Incidentally, Barusu fails. As he is, I cannot allow him stay at the mansion.”

“Then what was the point of me coming back?!”

Naturally, seeing Subaru and Ram mess with each other like they always did helped relieve the tension from Petra’s face. Seeing this effect on her made Subaru think that Ram’s way of being considerate was as hard to understand as ever.

He never raised it though because he soon focused on the mansion and changed the topic.

“Uhh, so Petra, has anything changed while I’ve been gone?”

“Mhmm, that’s what I wanted to ask you. Why have only Subaru and Miss Ram come back? What about Lady Emilia and the noisy guy?”

“Emilia-tan is in the middle of an important job. Otto… What is Otto doing, anyway?”

“I do not know, nor am I interested in knowing.”

Ram’s dismissiveness aside, even Subaru wasn’t aware what Otto was up to from day to day. Within the Sanctuary, he had been approaching people as a traveling merchant who’d simply accompanied the other evacuated villagers.

Other than that, there wasn’t any particular job Otto had been entrusted with, but—

“I expect he can help ease Emilia-tan’s heart for a short while, though I doubt that’ll work for long.”

“I suppose not. His face betrays a lack of endurance, so he’ll likely break down in no time.”

“It’s not like I left him behind to be a punching bag, you know?!”

In the first place, Emilia wasn’t the kind of person who could cheer up by directing her resentments at others. If things stayed reasonably simple,

consoling her when she was crestfallen was a simple matter as well.

Subaru's and Ram's replies made Petra go "Hmmm," accepting them for the time being. Accordingly, questioning rights shifted back to Subaru, whereupon he repeated his earlier question.

"All right, rematch time. Has anything changed during the time you've been holding the fort? Especially with Frederica…"

"Miss Frederica? She's very gentle, and she's so thoughtful about teaching me things. Besides that, nothing's really happened…except maybe, once in a while, she looks outside with a worried look."

"Outside?"

"Sheesh!! She's worried about you and Lady Emilia! At least figure out that much."

Subaru deflated when he was scolded for being a blockhead.

What he gleaned from his current conversation with Petra was that she and Frederica got along curiously well, and Frederica had not engaged in any obviously suspicious behavior. Also, since he failed to properly appreciate the feelings of others, he was in danger of Petra hating him.

"If anything, it's that last bit that's the most serious problem… If I don't quietly patch things up, I'll be in a real bind."

"Setting Barusu's nonsense aside, Petra, where is Frederica right now?"

"Miss Frederica went into the forest to check on all the barriers. She said that until all the villagers are back, it's her job to make sure the barriers are properly woven. It should still be…a little while before she's back."

"I see. I wonder if that is for better or ill… Barusu, what will you do?"

Ram posed that question to Subaru, secure in the knowledge that Frederica was absent. Reading between the lines, Ram was posing a choice. *Withdraw? Advance?*

At the very least, if they evacuated Petra to Earlham Village at the current juncture, she wouldn't become involved even if Frederica did resort to drastic measures.

However—

“—I want to check on something else. Let’s head to where Rem is.”

“…Rem.”

The circumstantial evidence seemed to point to Frederica harboring an intent to betray them, but it wouldn’t be possible to discern her true intent until they exchanged words. Subaru held high hopes for that talk, and in turn, made a choice to take things in a favorable direction for Ram.

—On the way back, he’d told Ram about the existence of Rem as well as their relationship, as time permitted. He couldn’t possibly speak about her as thoroughly as he would have liked. At the very least, he had managed to explain that they were sisters and what circumstances had caused her to forget the person who was her other half.

“____”

She would reunite with the sister she had been forced to forget. Understandably, even Ram could not fully maintain her composure; her cheeks were stiff, and her pink eyes were filled with worry. Subaru peered at her from the side.

“…What?”

“I thought you looked tense.”

“I am not tense at…”

“Nah, you’re definitely tense. I figured you would be, and I’d rather you be.”

This wasn’t anything like an emotional reunion between sisters who had been living far apart.

Rem would not awaken from her sleep, and to Ram, the reunion was one that genuinely didn’t bring back any memories. Even so, Subaru, as the one person left who knew them both, had a single wish.

If nothing else, when they reunited, he wanted Ram to feel a pang in her heart, however tiny it might be.

“Petra.”

“Yeah…whoops, I mean, yes. Rem is…in the same room as before.”

When Subaru called out to her, the quick-witted Petra said, “This way,” and began guiding them. Following her petite back, Subaru and Ram both stepped into Roswaal Manor for the first time in several days.

Their destination was the bedroom devoted to Rem on the second floor of the eastern wing. They proceeded through the mansion interior, meticulously maintained by Frederica and Petra’s work; after a short while, the three arrived at their destination.

“I’ll…go back to cleaning the west wing some more. Please call me if anything comes up.”

Not wanting to be insensitive in any way, Petra courteously bowed and excused herself. Subaru watched the newly minted maid depart, shrugging his shoulders at Ram, who was staring at the door.

“—A very well-mannered child. She is a suitable candidate for serving Master Roswaal.”

“I agree that she’s no mere village girl… So you’re mentally prepared?”

“I am, always. Unlike you, Barusu.”

When Ram replied with a demure look, Subaru forced himself to smile as he slowly put his hand on the doorknob. He hesitated only for a single moment. The door creaked slightly as it opened up.

And inside the room—

“_____”

There was a blue-haired girl, quietly sleeping atop a well-kept bed.

She looked just like he last remembered her. It was as if the room had been frozen in time. The slight rise and fall of her chest and her faint breathing were the only outward signs that she remained alive, meager proof that they were.

“—Rem.”

Subaru said her name. Anyone could tell there was a great deal infused within that single, brief murmur. It held an unceasing torrent of emotion, one that was

directed toward only a single person in the entire world.

He had steeled his heart, determined never to waver, no matter what struggles he might have to face.

—But her sleeping face easily shattered that resolve and determination.

“…So you were…safe and sound.”

He hesitated to say “safe and sound,” given her condition as a helpless sleeping beauty.

Even so, Subaru’s heart did find some measure of peace from seeing with his own eyes that she was the same as how he left her when he had departed. He felt like someone had told him, *There’s no such thing as something that you can never make right.*

—He also felt like someone had told him, *Don’t give up on making this right.*

“____”

His emotions were too intense for true relief, but they also weren’t enough for him to come to a final resolution. Completely unrelated to what was rumbling in Subaru’s chest, Ram was completely at a loss for words as she stared at Rem, asleep in bed.

She unconsciously took half a step forward. Subaru couldn’t see her face, but —

“—Barusu.”

“……What is it?”

“Could you…leave us alone for a little while?”

“—Sure.”

It was neither an order nor a demand from Ram. It was a simple request.

With no reason to go against it, her request made Subaru draw in his chin. After brushing the hair out of Rem’s sleeping face a tiny bit, he quietly left the room, leaving the sisters by themselves.

He proceeded to look back, leaning against the door as he sighed deeply.

He'd confirmed that Rem and Petra were safe.

"Only for the moment… For the moment."

In the worst case, he would find himself in checkmate, unable to arrive in time to make everything right no matter how quickly he left the Sanctuary. He still had to find out what cards his opponent was bringing to the table, and which hand she would play.

To discover that, he had to—

"—Master Subaru, what a surprise. I did not expect you to return so soon."

"…I don't see much surprise on your face, though."

"Please do not speak about my face. I am quite self-conscious about it."

The jesting tone Subaru heard made the corners of his lips twist as he tried to smile. Though his expression couldn't be considered friendly by any means, the only other person present decided to interpret it that way as she glanced at the door behind Subaru.

"You paid Rem a visit?"

"Yeah. It's only been two days, but each one felt like ten lifetimes… Right now, the sisters are meeting."

"—Sisters…I see. That girl's existence is…very complicated for Ram, isn't it?"

The woman's eyes looked quite concerned for the girl past the door. Her seemingly genuine distress made Subaru feel uneasy at the increasing discrepancy with the conclusion he had drawn from circumstantial evidence.

The fact that she hadn't instantly launched an attack, let alone taken Rem and Petra hostage, and was even freely engaging in a friendly chat, was wholly inconsistent with Subaru's assumptions.

"It is best to leave them by themselves for a while longer. Let me pour tea for you in the reception room, Master Subaru. We can speak at greater length there."

"I guess that's fine. Going ahead without Ram isn't the wisest thing I've ever done, but…"

He'd brought Ram along in case of emergency, yet he was about to go alone to a place where such an emergency might very well arise. It seemed suicidal, but Subaru dismissed that for two reasons:

There probably wouldn't be an emergency, and he didn't want to be the idiot who intruded on someone's special moment.

"Don't betray my expectations, okay? I'm trusting you, Frederica."

"Then I shall strive to do my very best to live up to them—I have taken to heart that this is a maid's duty."

With that reply, the woman—Frederica—hid her sharp fangs behind her hand as she smiled softly toward Subaru.

8

"The fact that Lady Emilia is not with you must mean affairs in the Sanctuary are not yet settled, I take it?"

After relocating from Rem's bedroom, the pair sat down on sofas in the reception room. Spread out between them was a table and cups of freshly poured black tea. Having finished setting the table, Frederica made the first comment. Subaru confirmed her inference with a "Yeah," nodding as he gazed at the steam wafting up into the air.

"I'm grateful for you coming out and saying that you understand what's going on…especially after I had to talk with a guy who apparently knows everything but won't be straight with you about any of it."

"When you say that, Master Subaru, I believe we have the same person in mind."

"I'm sure you're also thinking of a certain…hard-core eccentric who won't let his makeup slip even when he's badly hurt."

Subaru's sarcastic reply brought an "Oh my" out of Frederica as she met his words with amusement. After that exchange of minor jabs, Subaru leaned forward quite a bit as he got directly to the point.

"—When we were setting off for the Sanctuary, you deliberately withheld a

fair bit of information, but…that was the vow at work, right? And that's still in effect even now?"

Frederica had told Subaru and Emilia about the Sanctuary, but she had hidden a number of facts from them, saying "I cannot speak of it." Frederica had strenuously insisted that this vow of hers was the reason why.

When Subaru questioned whether that yoke was still on her neck, Frederica shook her head side to side.

"Unfortunately, I cannot respond as you wish me to. The vow is still in effect… in the first place, unlike a pact or a covenant, a vow has no compulsory power by itself. This is simply what my heart has settled upon."

"If there's no compulsion, then can't you bend it just a little? Even if it's against your beliefs, you understand the situation we're in here, right?"

"—Ten years, seven months, thirteen days."

As Subaru pleaded his case, Frederica suddenly rattled off those words. The span of time didn't mean anything to Subaru. While he was thoroughly perplexed by this tidbit of information, Frederica gently brought her cup of black tea to her lips and explained.

"That is how long it's been since I left the Sanctuary and began serving Master Roswaal. That is also when the vow went into effect… Master Subaru, are you asking me to throw all that time aside?"

"…Ram was just talking to me about time, actually."

Scratching his head over the quiet statement, Subaru took a single, deep breath before pressing on.

"—If it's necessary, then yeah, throwing it aside is exactly what I want you to do. I'd like to respect the time and emotion that went into keeping your vow. But if it's in the way of something truly important, I think it's something that should be broken and tossed."

"You say that rather lightly."

"I'm not saying that you should be super-excited to break your vow and throw it away. But if you're up for doing that…"

Subaru made a paper-ripping gesture, which made Frederica's jade-colored eyes tense up. With neither side willing to concede any ground, this was nothing but crashing their opinions against one another. No one would call this a negotiation. Subaru knew nothing good could come from continuing this. Accordingly, he came at her from a different direction.

"…I get that you're dead set against the idea. Let's try talking about something else, then. Frederica, please look at this."

"What is it, Master Subaru?"

Putting a hand into his pocket, Subaru presented Frederica what he had been given: the blue, glimmering crystal. Her first glimpse of it only made Frederica put on a questioning face, but soon enough, she realized its identity.

"That is…the crystal I handed to… No, it's not? That necklace… Ah."

"It looks just like that one but it's different. Take it and see for yourself, please?"

Frederica blinked, her hand trembling as she accepted the necklace. She stared at the crystal resting in her palm, feeling it in with her hand over and over, after which…

"This is…Garf's stone, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right. When I was heading out, he… Well, technically, he handed it to Ram, but…"

Garfiel no doubt had never intended for Subaru rather than Ram to hand it to Frederica. *No way am I telling him about this,* Subaru firmly decided in his heart.

"Either way, the only people who call him Garf are people close to him. That's true whether it's Ram, Ryuzu…or you, Frederica. Though I kinda figured you two were related, even without that revelation."

"…Then it isn't as if you heard about it from Garf."

"I can tell from your faces that you're related by blood. Besides, you give me the impression of an older sister. In the end, it was just my intuition based on your attributes."

"I am uncertain what attributes you might be talking about, but you are

correct. There's no mistake, for I am Garf's…Garfiel's older sister by blood."

With a wry, pleasant smile, Frederica lightly touched the corner of her eye with a fingertip. Subaru averted his eyes because the gesture seemed like she was wiping away a tear, which made him feel like he was watching something he ought not to.

"My, Master Subaru, you are unexpectedly timid."

"Sheesh, any man has it tough when he makes a girl cry. Here's a handkerchief to wipe that off."

"A different handkerchief than the one Petra gave you… How surprisingly gentleman-like."

Walking around with a handkerchief was a habit he'd learned from when he lived back with his own family. Thanking his mother for having instilled the practice in him, Subaru blushed when Frederica teased him about it as she accepted the handkerchief.

She was dragging the conversation in an odd direction, but the last thing he wanted to do was simply go along with it.

"Anyway! I didn't expect the necklace to change anything. In the end, I only wanted it to trigger a different conversation. I'll get to the crucial point."

"A crucial point, you say?"

"Yeah, the main thing I wanted to discuss— What did you set up a teleport trap in the Sanctuary for?"

—Plunging straight into that topic was a large gamble on Subaru's part.

The crystal Frederica had handed them had triggered the teleportation upon Emilia's and his arrival in the Sanctuary; in other words, it was proof that Frederica had intentions of some kind regarding Emilia. Frederica was familiar with the Sanctuary, so she surely knew that Emilia would lose consciousness once she came in contact with the barrier.

What was she scheming, teleporting Emilia when she was unconscious? Subaru cut straight to the meat of his interrogation.

"Answer me, Frederica. Or is it that you can't talk about this either 'cause of

the vow?”

“_____”

“Even if that’s the case, I can’t let you be quiet about this. I’ll make you talk, no matter what.”

The moment he said that, he felt the interior of his mouth instantly run dry.

The tension in the air sped up his heart rate. With his gaze, he pinned Frederica where she sat, assessing her every move and gesture.

He knew it was a risk to approach the crux of the matter without Ram present, but Subaru was seen as weak and underestimated by many. At the very least, if he could wring out a little information so he could piece everything together—

“—Master Subaru.”

While Subaru studied her, stiff all over because of his enormous gamble, Frederica curtly called out his name.

Subaru’s only response was to watch her even more intently.

His black eyes met her jade eyes head on, when—

“…What do you mean by ‘teleport’?”

“————Eh?”

The sincerity of Frederica’s question made it seem like a question mark floated above her head. Her reaction left Subaru flabbergasted.

“E-even if you look at me like that…I honestly cannot tell you something I do not know.”

“Wait, wait, wait, you can’t fool me! If you don’t know anything, then my whole premise goes out the window! Dunno if I should call them the conservative faction or the stay-at-home faction, but you’re cooperating with people from the Sanctuary, right?!”

“Conservative? Stay-at-home? What…are you talking about…? Could you please explain from the beginning?”

“Me, explain to *you* what’s happening with the Sanctuary?!”

For Subaru, seeing Frederica not understanding a single thing he had mentioned so far was truly a thunderbolt from a clear blue sky. To begin with, the whole point of this conversation had been to question Frederica about various things in the Sanctuary that she had to have known. And yet, Subaru realized their positions were reversed.

“Th-this isn’t…an act…right?”

“____”

Seemingly clinging to hope, Subaru stared at Frederica, but she shook her head with a look of pity.

Her gesture destroyed the last footholds Subaru had remaining. Of course, he couldn’t take everything Frederica said at face value. But even with that in mind, it really didn’t seem like she was lying at all.

“—Barusu, meeting Frederica one on one without Ram suggests you truly have no need for your life.”

The door to the reception room opened in grand fashion at the same time they heard that remark. Crossing the threshold was Ram, haughtily folding her arms. After sighing slightly, she addressed an astonished Subaru.

“In the end, your speculation was wildly off the mark. You are so pathetic, I can barely stand to look at you.”

“Yeah, sorry about… Hey, wait! Didn’t that wild speculation about Frederica maybe cooperating with the stay-at-home faction in the Sanctuary come from you to begin with?!”

“I said it was a possibility, nothing more. You really should find more constructive things to do than fixate on finding fault in others.”

“It just ain’t fair!!”

Subaru clutched at his head, forcibly trying to sweep away his embarrassment, but Ram paid no heed whatsoever. She boldly sat at Subaru’s side, bringing his untouched black tea to her lips.

“…It would seem that your skill at making tea has not improved in my absence.”

“My, even though pouring tea is my specialty. What an uncharming girl you are.”

“I do not need to be charming. Ram is plenty cute enough. Any more so and the world would be imperiled.”

“Truly, your tongue is as sharp as ever! Goodness…how very like you.”

Though she showed her fangs as she shouted angrily, Frederica’s final words oozed with softness. And while Ram’s face was unchanged from always, it was instilled with just a faint whiff of affection.

This conveyed to Subaru how they had been colleagues for a long time, or perhaps it reminded him more of people who had been friends from a rather young age.

“Though you may not have been away for very long, you are still in good health?”

“Yes, Ram is always… I suppose I cannot lightly say that this day.”

“…Did you spend enough time with Rem?”

Frederica lowered her voice to a whisper and posed a question that was no doubt difficult to ask. Subaru wanted to know the answer, too. To these paired gazes, Ram slightly lowered her head as she said, “It’s mysterious. Just as I heard from Barusu, that girl is the spitting image of Ram. When I touch her forehead, I know that blood of the same tribe flows through her, and yet…”

“_____”

“Inside of Ram, that girl’s existence is still nothing but a blank.”

Suppressing her emotions, she strove to speak in a normal tone of voice to maintain her normal, steady self.

—The loneliness and desolation Ram carried, the sadness that made her voice tremble; her attempts to hold them in check made their effects on her stand out all the more.

It was not Ram’s fault. Of course, it wasn’t Rem’s, either. Fault lay with the sinner that had consumed Rem’s very being, tearing her away from the world. If, beyond that blasphemer, there was anyone else to blame—

“—Sorry.”

“…Barusu, why are you apologizing?”

“I didn’t…want to make you meet Rem like this. But…”

Subaru was insufficient. He was fatally, idiotically insufficient.

That was why he was helpless to help the sisters meet except this way.

If Ram was hurt as a result, it was none other than Subaru who ought to bear that blame—

“So I’m sorry. It’s not something that you’ll forgive even if I apologiiiiii-iiiii-iiiiiiiiii?!”

“Stop making such a suspicious face. It degrades an already almost worthless man, though I suppose I am too late to do anything about that.”

Mid-apology, Ram’s hand stretched forth and mercilessly pinched Subaru’s cheek. When Subaru let out a lament at the amazing pain, Ram snorted “Hah!” and let a laugh slip out.

“Do not go making that face. It is as if you decided you were something important to Ram and Rem, lowly Barusu.”

“Y-you said it yourself. I really am a lowly…”

“Ram has no interest in Barusu’s feelings of guilt. At the very least, she doesn’t blame Barusu in the slightest. Do not insult Ram and her little sister by wallowing in tragedy all by your lonesome.”

Thrusting a finger at his forehead, Ram made a truly Ram-like statement as Subaru’s mouth flapped open and closed.

“…Y-you don’t even remember her, but you act like Rem’s older sister all of a sudden?”

“It is quite mysterious. Though I have no memory of her, I am very firm about holding such a position. It would seem Ram is an elder sister much respected and loved by her younger sister. This is natural, of course.”

“That way of thinking is seriously Big Sis of you!”

Even though Rem’s existence had fallen away, Ram’s authority remained

undaunted. Subaru, conflicted as he was about whether this was a happy or a desolate thing, admired Ram's nobility of spirit regardless.

"Yes, yes. It is *quite* clear, even to me, that you two get along very well."

Frederica, intervening in the pair's exchange, offered Ram fresh tea as she said,

"I, too, think an unchanged Ram is a happy thing… But the main issue at hand was something else, yes?"

"I suppose so. Let us return to the conversation that strayed due to Barusu—the issue of the teleport."

"The one Master Subaru was speaking about just earlier, I take it?"

The atmosphere had been relaxed, but with one word out of Ram's mouth, it tightened anew. Seeing the grave look on Frederica's face, Subaru pointed to the blue crystal she was holding.

"Let me get to details, then. The crystal you gave to Emilia reacted to the barrier, triggering a magic teleport in the dragon carriage…one that rather conveniently launched its victim directly to the tomb."

"Teleport to the tomb…?! A-and was Lady Emilia all right?"

"Fortunately, she was, thanks to Subaru's sacrifice. A noble deed by his standards."

"…In other words, I was teleported in Emilia's place. I'm all right, though."

Ram accepted more tea as Subaru did a little dance on the spot, demonstrating that he was in good health. The sight made Frederica forget to cover her mouth with her hand, openly displaying the shock on her face.

With this, it was finally established that Frederica really hadn't been involved with the crystal causing the teleport.

"But if that's so, what'd you give her the crystal for? According to Roswaal, what you need to get into the Sanctuary is the correct path. Having an object doesn't make you qualified."

"That's…"

“You can’t speak because of the vow, I figure? If so, that is a poor excuse, Frederica.”

Anticipating Frederica’s hesitation, Ram unleashed words so cold, they made Frederica bristle. But she immediately nodded.

“—It is true, as you say. That is not a topic of conversation that may pass from my lips.”

“So you chose to rely on that poor excuse anyway— Still that cannot be the end of the matter.”

“H-hey! Ram, wait!”

Frederica stubbornly refused to relent. Seeing Ram’s reaction to this made Subaru nervous.

After all, Ram had stood up, her hand gripping her cane. It was short and slender, apparently made of wood. The cane was her weapon, which she lovingly employed when she was casting magic.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself! We were just talking peacefully… What gives, all of a sudden?!”

“You are too lenient, Barusu. Frederica will not respond to the question. Her rebellious intent is clear.”

“Frederica wouldn’t do something that stupid! And you’re the one who said that!”

Her conclusion was too hasty to be called *decisive*. In fact, it was Ram herself who had most trusted and defended Frederica’s nature as a person.

“Then why are you…”

“We shall restrain Frederica and bring her with us to the Sanctuary. By doing this, we shall flush out the one giving Frederica instructions. Actions are more certain than words, and produce faster results, too.”

“Well, you’ve got a point, but you can’t think it’d go that smoothly…”

With an unyielding posture, Ram was essentially saying, *we’ll tie her up if that’s what we have to do to find answers.* But if Ram resorted to such

measures, Frederica would surely resist. If it came to that, it might not be the way he'd imagined it, but they would indeed be unable to avoid an undesirable battle nonetheless.

Faced with Frederica's silent posture, a part of Subaru wanted to do just that, but—

"Even so, I don't want any bloodshed! Frederica! Your being quiet is part of the p—"

"If you wish to take me with you to the Sanctuary, I shall not resist."

"You see! Even Frederica's saying stuff like…er, wha?"

Subaru, his face pale from the explosive situation, was flabbergasted at what had just entered his ears. However, to an astounded Subaru, Frederica calmly kept her posture straight, as she explained further.

"I am saying, I shall yield to Ram's judgment. If you wish to take me to the Sanctuary, that is fine. Though I do not understand how this would accomplish your objectives."

"Y-you won't resist…? Why? What's the meaning of…?"

"Quite a slow learner you are."

Standing beside Subaru and bewildered to a comical extent, Ram sighed, pointing her rod at Frederica before continuing.

"Frederica cannot break her vow of her own will. Therefore, if Barusu drags her off by force, it cannot be helped… Such an excuse is required."

"The part about me dragging her off by force sounds unlikely, but…you're fine with this?"

The suddenly cooperative attitude that had sprung up between Ram and Frederica had thrown Subaru for a loop. After all, until just moments before, Frederica had done a fine job of setting her heart on that "vow," speaking as if leaving it unbroken was a question of her beliefs. And yet—

"With the excuse that she was forced, she's not going against it… Is that it? To be honest, there's an opposition party inside me complaining that's too arbitrary of a plan to resolve things, but…"

“Then simply silence that voice. This is the best of all possible plans to put this matter in order.”

It didn’t sit well with him. But it would be meaningless for Subaru to whine and groan about it. Just as Ram had said, this was a three-person consensus. He need only shut his ears to the moderately discordant sounds in the background.

But he did want to say just one thing about it.

“Even though you didn’t arrange it in advance, you two sure were on the same page…”

“But of course.” “We have known each other for nearly a decade.”

Hearing those perfectly matching replies, Subaru completely took his hat off to them.

And with that, the situation had well and truly been sorted out.

First, barring the possibility of her being an actress of exceptional skill, it seemed that Frederica had absolutely no involvement with the teleportation incident. Her circumstances for remaining silent because of the vow would surely become clear if she went to the Sanctuary. In so doing, they would also be able to expose the mastermind trying to infiltrate through cracks in the camp’s framework.

“Hiding the teleportation and then instructing you to keep it secret… When I put it like that, the guy you made a promise to has the worst personality ever.”

“I…suppose so… Even I cannot willingly obey instructions that make a fool out of me to this extent. It is said, ‘The Empire makes you carry lead as heavy as your deceits.’”

“…What’d you say?”

“It is a Volakian Empire saying. It expresses that nation’s cold view toward decep— What is it?”

“Nah, it’s nothin’. Just thought that blood will tell, huh.”

Frederica seemed proud of her knowledge, but Subaru’s reply was only accompanied by a lukewarm expression. He felt like he’d gotten the answer he wanted, if not quite in the way he had intended.

“Either way, getting Frederica’s cooperation…even if in a roundabout way, is a big win for us. Thanks to that, I think I can toss away the extra misgivings I had inside of me.”

“Extra misgivings?”

“Ahh, basically, I thought that if Frederica did turn out to be hostile and the mansion was under attack, that’d be a huge disaster.”

Frederica inclined her head, looking like she had not the faintest idea pertaining to this “disaster” he spoke of.

That state held, with nothing of the disaster—not even “E” for Elsa—escaping her lips. Based on the reaction of the Frederica before his eyes, it seemed safe to assume there were no ties between her and that butcher.

If that was so, they had to get away from the mansion with all haste and draw up a plan to deal with that black-robed butcher.

Subaru knew her attack was coming. That would let him seize the initiative, giving them time to concentrate their forces, encircle her, and take her down.

“That’s another reason I want to pull out of the mansion. There’s no time to lose. We march Frederica along, grab Petra, and go. And if we pick up Rem and one Beako whose current location is unknown, then…”

At least for the moment, they could escape the peril that was about to befall the mansion.

Seeing that beacon of light, Subaru felt like he’d found a compass pointing a way out of the darkne—

“—Oh my, I would prefer if you weren’t so cold.”

Right as Subaru was counting on his fingers the various things he ought to do, a glossy voice violently brushed against his eardrums.

Instantly, Subaru’s heart beat louder, accompanied by pain that made it feel like his heart was being rent asunder. Looking like he’d been slapped, he turned toward the reception door entrance—and there stood a figure he knew well.

She had black hair in a triple braid, lavish black clothes that exposed a scandalous degree of skin, and deep, captivating jet-black eyes that seemed to

pull you in—black, black, black; she was the very epitome of pitch-black bloodlust.

Her familiar beauty, and a devilish face he'd never wanted to see again, suddenly blotted out the light of day with her dark presence.

"Now, let us fulfill our promise, shall we?"

These words spoken, the Bowel Hunter charmingly licked her red lips, a prelude to the slaughter to come.



CHAPTER 2

GIRL'S GOSPEL

1

—Instantaneously, Subaru got the sensation that time had simply stopped.

It was an odd feeling, but he remembered having that sensation before. When his life was in danger, his brain's survival instincts kicked in, urgently trying to keep its body alive—from there, things would be decided in seconds.

Why was Elsa there? He had no time to ponder such a question.

It was not *why* he needed to think about, but rather, *how*? Calmly, to the extent possible, he tried to grasp the situation he was in.

On the one hand, the black-robed butcher was in the doorway; on the other hand, inside the room, Subaru and Frederica were sitting on sofas, and Ram was standing rooted to the spot, cane in hand—but they were not the only ones present.

"____"

—Petra was there.

Elsa had made the young Petra stand right beside her as she opened the door. A blade rested against the girl's throat, and her round eyes had large tears welling up in them.

He understood. She'd led Elsa to the room. Elsa forced her to, forbidding her even from crying.

Right then, there was surely a vortex of fear wildly swirling within Petra's heart. Her life was in danger; she'd been made to lead Elsa to Subaru and the others; she wanted so desperately to cry out, "Help me"—

“…Frederica, Ram, Subaru…”

With a quivering voice, Petra called out their names.

What could he do for that voice? He wanted to nod to let her know to rest easy, to tell her it was all right for her to cry—

“—Run!!”

“____”

Instantly, Petra shouted not “Help me” but “Run,” stoking a searing-hot fire in the trio’s hearts—for Subaru, it was because he recognized the great threat; for Ram, it was the butcher’s ghastly aura; and for Frederica, it was seeing the girl’s tears.

“El Fulla—!!”

In a show of force, Ram raised her cane and unleashed a blade of wind at maximum velocity. Mana coalesced into an invisible slash, tearing its way toward the leisurely standing Elsa. The blade of wind could not be stopped with physical force. However—

“What a refreshing breeze. But the sunlight is gentle today… You needn’t be so considerate.”

Elsa maneuvered her nimble upper body, evading the wind blade of certain death. The figure in black dodged a continuous series of attacks with great ease. It was as if she could read the wind—no, it wasn’t merely a figure of speech.

Ram had launched her attacks in such a way as to avoid Petra, who had been taken as a hostage. Elsa took advantage of that, slipping into the blind spots between her and the wind to dodge the blades of air.

“If you were willing to hit this little maid along with me, it might be a different story…”

“—Unfortunately, it is an ironclad rule in this household that servants support and aid one another!”

“Oh my.”

From behind, Elsa raised an eyebrow, stroking Petra’s cheek, which made

something catch in the girl's slender throat. Both of Frederica's arms whipped out as she leaped into close combat, apparently aiming to tear Elsa's torso asunder.

The five-fingered strike was similar to the martial arts move known as a Tiger Claw. But there was one simple difference: The two arms Frederica was attacking with had transformed into genuine bestial claws.

Her slender, pale fingers changed shape and became the talons of a tenacious, ferocious beast, and both of her arms were now wicked implements for the rending of flesh. With a cacophony of furious creaking sounds, sparks flew between Frederica's bestial claws and Elsa's kukri.

"Partial transfiguration…! Demi-human blood, yes? Delightful!"

"Thank you for the unwanted praise… I can do this, too! Petra!"

With Elsa overjoyed by the unexpected clash, Frederica lowered her stance in front of the butcher. The instant she called out Petra's name, the girl's round eyes flew open.

As the girl stood still, a golden sash seemed to stretch before her. It was a slender animal tail covered with golden fur stretching from the back of Frederica's skirt.

"__!"

The instant she understood that, Petra leaped toward the tail. At the first touch, Frederica used the tail to yank Petra close, pulling out of the butcher's range with the girl in tow.

When Petra leaped away, Elsa tried to close the distance with her blade, but Ram wouldn't allow it.

"Fly into pieces!!"

Robbed of her hostage, and thus her safety zone, Elsa was enveloped by wind. Spherical wind blades expanded to cut off her escape route, converging on their prey in the center all at once, the surrounding gale blowing savagely.

"_____"

It was certain-death timing. Fresh blood spattered about, and there was no

doubt the wind had bitten into Elsa. But—

“Her arm…!”

“Ahh, ow, ow… I thought I was going to die.”

Lifting her cruelly gouged-out arm aloft, Elsa licked the blood trickling from the terrible wound.

It was a painful-looking injury, but that single arm was the only damage she had taken. Elsa must have used her arm as a shield while the blades of wind flew in, minimizing the damage. At a glance, it seemed like a reckless choice, but it had very much been the optimal course of action—

“You are a detestable woman.”

“I rather like you, Miss Medium-Size Maid.”

When Ram spat a scathing comment, Elsa shifted her kukri around with her intact arm. One by one, the dully gleaming knife blade displayed the faces of each of the four in the room besides Elsa when she said, “A man and three women, maids large, medium, and small. I shall line you up on the table and compare what is inside your bellies.”

“A pick-up line even worse than Garf’s. In that case— Barusu!”

“I’m on it—!!”

Petra, in Frederica’s embrace, landed behind the others. That instant, at Ram’s signal, Subaru heartily thrust his right arm toward Elsa.

His silent observation of the situation up to that point was not because he lacked the power to intervene. Of course, that was a plenty good reason, but more importantly, he had been calculating the right time.

—Time to play the trump card he’d decided to use in advance should he encounter Elsa.

“—Shamaaaaaaak!!”

He was weaponless, with no means of striking back, with inadequate preparations and resolve, and he was engaged with an enemy defying all expectations. However, the least he could do was take advantage of the best

card in his very meager hand. He fired up the imperfect magic reactor inside of him, causing the blood coursing through him to light up from its heat. “Don’t use it,” warned Ferris’s voice in the back of his head.

The instant he crushed his hesitation between his molars, black mist explosively flooded out of his right hand.

Less a shadow of the light and more a thick, all-consuming darkness, the black-attired woman that was his target was swallowed whole. Through the power of magic, the spells victim would plunge into incomprehension, robbed of its powers of thought and movement.

“How’s that…! If you can climb over that wall of oblivion, then…”

Managing to cast his magic exactly as intended, Subaru let fly with some caustic words—and the next moment, *it* arrived.

“—Giii?! Gaaaah!!”

With the sound of something being sliced apart, nearly unendurable pain exploded in the center of his skull and torso.

The excessive pain blew Subaru’s thoughts away. As he screamed, his vision was dyed in a mix of red and white. Wringing mana out of his incomplete Gate made him feel parched and numb at the same time. Agony came crashing down on his soul.

His vision went blurry, and strength drained out of his knees. At that rate, he’d lose his grip on reality, and with it, his mind—

“Subaru—!”

A moment before plunging into darkness, a distant voice and the touch of a palm connected to his mind.

His dimming vision beheld a teary-eyed Petra right in front of him. Her voice was making his heart burn hotter.

He had no time to yield. For a brief moment, he forgot the pain that was shredding his nerves and chipping away at his soul. During the time that the “bluff” was effective, Subaru grasped her hand back.

“—We’re pulling out!”

“This will get a little rough!” “Hyaaa! M-Miss…?!”

When Ram swiftly decided they must retreat, Frederica put a hand around Petra’s waist without hesitation. Then, her remaining arm pulled the wobbly Subaru against her chest as well. It was a soft sensation.

“A-at a safe time I’d like to appreciate this more thoroughly…!”

“As if I’d let you touch me normally! Anyway, out from the window—“

Subaru, still moaning from pain, made a joke that earned a blunt reply from Frederica as she headed to the back of the room. If she broke that window, they’d be able to jump down all the way to the mansion courtyard. The Shamak smoke screen wouldn’t postpone things for long. Instant assessments, instant decisions, and instant actions were required at that moment—

“—uu?”

When Frederica crouched down, Subaru realized something soft had hit his back.

Something felt wrong from around his left shoulder and shoulder blade. Breathing hard, he twisted his neck to check. Something like a skewer was sticking out of it. The lingering shudder of the long, slender object was proof that it had hit only moments ago.

—Countless similar objects came flying from the direction of the black haze all at once.

“—Fredericaaa!!”

He shouted. It didn’t come in time.

A flurry of sounds followed as the sharp, glimmering surge sank into soft flesh —

“—!!!!” *“—El Fulla!!”*

—The roars of a demon and beast layered atop one another as a blast of wind blew them out of the reception room.

2

Clearing the reception room, Subaru and the others fell straight toward the mansion courtyard.

The expected blow from the fall never arrived thanks to an exquisite performance by Frederica, landing on the grass from the second story with Subaru and Petra under her wing. But the cost of the retreat had been unexpectedly high.

“Miss Frederica!!”

Thrown by the landing, Petra raised her voice into a near-shriek as she rolled on the grass. Her gaze was on Frederica, down on one knee in the yard with skewers stuck in her bloody back.

“I…underestimated our opponent…!”

Frederica was making labored breaths as slender skewers rose from her back like a mountain of swords. The skewers were nearly eight inches in length, and more than a few had doubtless reached her internal organs.

Frederica wasn’t the only one who understood their might, for Subaru had gotten a taste as well.

“Ow……! Shit! She’s like Julius: an enemy that Shamak doesn’t work on…!”

“Surely not. She simply threw them past of the cloud of darkness. She has exceptional intuition.”

Subaru wailed at the skewer impaling his right shoulder as Ram stated her thoughts. Examining Subaru and Frederica’s wounds, her refined eyebrows gently formed a scowl.

“There is no one here capable of using healing magic. If I remove the skewer, you will die of blood loss.”

“I don’t have the courage to touch or even look at it twice, let alone pull it out… Did you get Elsa?”

“I blew the entire room away, but I didn’t get the sense that I hit her. We cannot be optimistic.”

“Damn it all…! I thought I’d bought us a little time at least…”

Gritting his teeth at Ram's reply, Subaru quietly lamented that no one present was suited to treating their injuries. Previously, Rem had healed his wounds, and Beatrice had healed graver ones still—that was when he belatedly realized it.

"Rem and Beatrice are both…!"

Both were still in the mansion, and Elsa was right there with them.

At that point in time, the idea of running vanished. He couldn't distance himself from the mansion with both of them inside.

"If we don't save the two of them…!"

Burning with the pain of his wound, he thought at full-speed, examining their options.

One thing for certain was that Rem was in the mansion's east wing. The problem was that Beatrice was constantly running her Passage spell. At that critical juncture, the peculiarities of the Passage became poison.

—If, then and there, he prioritized saving Rem, could he hope for Beatrice to deal with the matter herself? Considering the capabilities of the Passage, that was without a doubt another potential plan.

As a matter of fact, at the height of the battle with the Witch Cult some days before, Subaru had failed to bring Beatrice out of the mansion; she'd remained behind, trusting in the power of the Passage during the decisive battle.

If the conditions were identical to back then, the possibility harm would befall Beatrice was—

"Am I…stupid? No, I *am* stupid. The situation's totally different from last time…!"

—The Witch Cult's objective and Elsa's objective were fundamentally different.

In the end, the Witch Cult's target—Petelgeuse's target—had been Emilia. Since they had no information about the occupants, leaving Beatrice behind at the mansion was a viable option because she was wholly unrelated to their objective.

However, Elsa was different. That butcher's objective was clearly to slaughter everyone in the mansion. She'd targeted Subaru, Frederica, and Petra; naturally, she'd try to kill Rem and Beatrice, too.

"____"

He couldn't leave them behind. He couldn't. There was no way he could just let them die.

So even without a flash of inspiration for a way to save everyone, he had to act before his useless brain burned out completely—

"Barusu."

"What?! Right now, I'm thinking of a way to get Rem and Beatrice out of there somehow…"

Subaru was desperately trying to think when Ram abruptly called out to him. When he looked at Ram, it seemed like his burning brain was leaking out of his earlobes while he desperately searched for a way out of their predicament.

As he prepared himself to hear a proposal for a comeback from the brink of certain doom from her pink lips—

"—Given our current situation, the best thing to do is leave those two at the mansion while the four of us escape."

"—Wha?"

Their equal-height gazes met, and the declaration, delivered with great firmness, blanked out Subaru's thought process.

His eardrums trembled, conveying the words to his brain, his mind immersed in the words as he arrived at comprehension of what she had said to him. Then, the instant he achieved understanding, his emotions came to a boil.

"Wh-what are… What, are you—! What! The hell are you saying!!"

"Angry shouts get us nowhere. Please compose yourself. I believe it is an exceptionally natural thought."

"Like hell it is! Rem's in the mansion! Your little sister!! She loves you, and you love her! She's your little sister; it's natural for you to protect her!!"

The moment he shouted, the pain of his wound increased. But he didn't care. Filled with agony and rage, he spat blood as he slammed his ferocious emotions into Ram as hard as he could.

However, though showered by Subaru's voice, Ram continued with a serene look on her face.

"It is the correct decision under the circumstances, nothing more. Losing Ram and Frederica, and, more to the point, Barusu, will be a heavy blow to our faction. Such sacrifices must be avoided."

"But! That means sacrificing…!"

"I suppose so. She may well be Ram's little sister— But if she is Ram's little sister, she would surely say this."

To Subaru, at a loss for words due to fierce emotion, Ram paused. Then, she pressed on.

"—Please, sacrifice Rem for Master Roswaal's sake."

"_____"

The instant he heard those words, Subaru felt something inside him being smashed to dust. It was a blow rivaling the cracks in his incomplete magic user's Gate—no, it caused a greater impact than even that, shaking the soul of Subaru Natsuki to its very foundation.

"I-I didn't… This isn't why I…"

—He hadn't brought Ram and Rem together so that she could speak such words to him.

All memory of Rem had been erased from the world, and nothing of her was left inside of anyone. Even so, if the twin sisters, sharing mutual love and even their souls with one another, yet existed, something of her had to remain.

That was the faint expectation Subaru clung to, something he could not even call a hope. That was what he carried within him when he brought Ram back to the mansion.

—He didn't know the result would be Ram saying to him the words he never wanted to hear.

“In this world, Ram… Even you won’t be on Rem’s side…?”

This was perhaps the greatest sorrow he had known since Rem’s existence had been taken away.

After all, Subaru knew just how much affection the sisters, Ram and Rem, held for each other—

“—Both of you, this is no time for us to be arguing!”

Subaru was reeling while Ram’s pink eyes were utterly lucid. One shout from the gravely wounded Frederica interrupted their exchange.

In the current situation, allowing a verbal argument to chew up even a couple of seconds could prove a fatal loss of time.

“Cool your heads, both of you! How can you argue at a time like…!”

“…Ram is perfectly composed. Barusu has merely worked himself up all on his own. Frederica, surely you, too, understand whose view is justified and whose is not.”

“Certainly, Ram, you are correct. I shall not say you are mistaken.”

Speaking quickly, Frederica acceded that Ram’s assertion was properly justified. When she took that position, it seemed Frederica, too, was of a mind to leave Rem and Beatrice behind, putting Subaru on the brink of despair.

But before he could cross that precipice, Frederica continued, saying, “However, I think we should rescue both of them.”

“…Are you sane?”

“Yes, of course. You are the one who brought up losses our faction would incur, yes? Based on that, it is indeed best to rescue both—Lady Beatrice and Rem are both important.”

Frederica’s assertion brought a dubious look over Ram’s face. Subaru, too, was taken aback. But with the others at a deadlock, the final person present slowly raised her hand and spoke up. “I-I also… I also agree with going to save, to save them…!”

“…Please be quiet, child. This is not a majority vote.”

“E-even a child can be a proper adult! Miss Frederica says I’m more helpful than Miss Ram!”

Under Ram’s cold glare, Petra did not retreat even one step as she pushed her own view. Pressed into silence by the teary-eyed retort, Ram shifted her gaze toward Subaru and Frederica.

“Are you saying we have a chance?”

“—! We know where Rem is! Finding Beatrice is my job!”

“I suppose so. Barusu and Lady Beatrice do get along so very well.”

“Since I’m trying to persuade you, I’ll let that one go this time…”

Though hardly at her wits’ end, Ram made a show of carefully considering the trio’s views. Of course, at that late juncture, even Subaru could not help but acknowledge which plan held the greater odds of survival.

However, what meaning did survival have if Rem and Beatrice were sacrificed for it?

It was meaningless. If that was the form the updated world took, it was better if—

“—I…”

“…We are undermanned. We must search for Lady Beatrice and extricate Rem. The enemy interferes with both.”

“—It was I who spoke out, so that is my duty to bear.”

When Ram listed the pending concerns, Frederica, breathing in intense pain, patted her own chest. Her self-recommendation took Subaru and Petra by surprise, leaving Ram the only one who sighed in understanding.

“There you go again, too stubborn to back down when dealt a bad hand. Exactly like Garf.”

“You are both my adorable junior coworkers. Besides, it is not I who resembles Garf. Garf is the one who is imitating me.”

Frederica said it with a wink, hiding the fangs in her mouth as she smiled.

Subaru unwittingly sucked in his breath, sensing the resolve and

determination behind that sunny smile. And as Subaru drew his breath in, Frederica did something even more surprising right in front of him.

“Miss Frederica…?!”

Petra was struck with wonder, but that was a natural reaction. Frederica put a hand to her blood-ridden maid outfit, violently ripping it apart. Her pale flesh, bloodstained and covered in a light sweat, became exposed. The spectacular force of the move made Subaru see a part of her underwear, something that made his eyes bulge in spite of the emergency situation.

“—This may surprise you, but please do not raise your voice.”

With those words of warning, the half-bare Frederica knelt onto the lawn. Then, she put Garfiel’s necklace around her own neck—an instant later, the very air grew taut.

“—aa”

Had there been no warning beforehand, Subaru might not have been able to keep himself from crying out in surprise.

First, he saw Frederica’s long, beautiful, golden hair shrink. Next, golden fur began to sprout over her exposed flesh, and her skeleton ferociously creaked as it changed shape and grew larger.

She set four paws on the ground as the fangs that defined the inside of her mouth became something sharper, more powerful—a transformation taking but a few, brief seconds that made him doubt his eyes.

“—So this is transfiguration, huh?”

As Subaru murmured, there was a ferocious, golden beast standing before his eyes—the bestial Frederica.

It was a slender, supple feline predator with a stature nearly six feet in length. Of the animals Subaru knew, she resembled a cheetah or a leopard, but her body had no black spots upon it; he could only call the form beautiful.

Were it not for part of that lustrous, golden mane being marred by blood, he truly would have been enchanted by that beautiful beast.

“So it’s not Beauty and the Beast; the Beauty *is* the Beast… Ahh, I want to get

her in the bath and snuggle.”

“I categorically reject the idea of bathing with you.”

“—! Y-you can still talk like that?!”

Subaru, trying to conceal his unrest with his flippant tongue, gaped at the face of a ferocious beast seemingly ready to roar. Subaru was surprised on two levels that the tone of voice was that of the pre-transfiguration Frederica.

“I remain myself. Though my appearance has changed, I am completely rational… In addition, thanks to this, my wounds have closed to a fair extent.”

Taking in Subaru’s surprise, Frederica’s body twisted, and numerous skewers fell away. Simply changing forms had closed some of her wounds, expelling the skewers from her body. But the wounds themselves still remained. She needed complete healing to fix those.

“Frederica…”

“Please do not ask me ‘Can you do it?’ I can, and I will.”

“…Yeah, I get it. Please do. You’re the only one we can rely on right now.”

Frederica clawed the ground in high spirits as Subaru ceded the battlefield to her. Accepting Subaru’s request, the ferocious beast turned her eyes toward the two remaining, Ram and Petra.

“Petra, I’m sorry for scaring you. You did very well not to shriek.”

“Yes… Yes, Miss, take care…!”

“You’re a very good girl—Ram, I entrust the rest to you. Worst case, use the Master’s office.”

“That goes without saying. Frederica, if you are late, we shall have words.”

The few words exchanged between them told just how much trust lay between Ram and Frederica.

Finally, Frederica looked overhead at the freshly broken reception room window through which they had fallen. With the crystal necklace hanging from her large neck, the ferocious beast bared her lion-like fangs, ferociously crouching down—

“———!!”

She let out a very brief growl. The next instant, Subaru saw the ferocious beast crushing the smashed windowsill under her paw.

Subaru’s eyes gaped at the blink-of-an-eye speed. Her outside appearance brought to mind the cheetah, the fastest animal on land, but Frederica’s sprinting easily put its speed to shame.

Passing through the breached wall, the ferocious beast raised a roar as she charged into the mansion interior. The black mist’s effect was soon to expire. Not long in the future, the battle between the two would resume—

“We cannot just stand here! We must go and make the best of this opportunity while Frederica buys us time.”

“Y-yeah! That’s right! First, Rem in the east wing!”

Elsa’s combat ability was terrifying, but Frederica’s speed was superhuman, too. With her swiftness, she ought to be able to get away safely if Subaru and the others accomplished their objectives sooner rather than later.

With Frederica headed off to act as a decoy, just how quickly could they move—

“—No complaints about property damage, okay?!”

Charging through the front yard, the three raced to the east wing as one. And after climbing over the east wing wall, Subaru picked up a shovel for yard work, smashing a window before leaping into the building. Sullying the carpet with dirt, he rolled onto the mansion floor and lifted his head. The stairs to the east wing, and Rem, were right before him.

But the instant he lifted his head, Subaru was struck by the odd sense something was wrong. Namely—

“…The doors are open?”

In front, so far as the murmuring Subaru could tell, all of the doors of the first floor were open. Turning his head around, the doors behind him were the same; every door in the entire corridor was open.

“Simple forgetfulness cannot account for leaving this many doors unclosed.

Petra?”

“I-I haven’t done anything weird like this!! Miss Frederica hasn’t either!!”

Entering the corridor just as Subaru had, Ram gazed at the same sight and questioned Petra about it. Petra was equally bewildered as she denied involvement, but that was nothing compared to Subaru’s strong suspicion that something was horribly wrong.

Open doors weren’t the problem—the problem was that he remembered this scene.

“The doors were open like this last time around, too…”

—Subaru had seen something similar in the mansion just prior to Return by Death.

At the time, Subaru hadn’t been able to decipher the identity of that bad feeling prior to his “death.” Now that he was seeing the image again, he still didn’t know what it meant. But he was certain it was an ill omen.

“If it wasn’t Petra or Frederica, then…”

Naturally, it wasn’t Subaru or Ram either. Rem, still asleep, couldn’t have done it. Perhaps that left Beatrice as the only possible suspect, but she had no reason to do it. The only possible reason would be—

“—!! R-Rem’s! Rem’s in trouble! Second floor, quick!”

The only kind of person who had a reason to open rooms one after another was an outsider who didn’t know where anyone might be. At that moment, that description corresponded to only one person in the mansion. And if that individual had already opened every door in the mansion’s east wing—

“Calm down, Barusu! Frederica is pinning down the enemy! There is nothing…”

“What are you saying at a time like…”

Even when her little sister’s life in danger, Ram maintained her cool. Rather than being impressed at how reliably steady she was, Subaru felt angry.

However, Subaru’s raging emotions vanished and flew away in the next

instant.

“_____!!!!”

Howls resounded from outside the building, in the direction of the yard from which Subaru and the others had leaped in.

The next moment, the window—no, the window and the windowsill—were broken apart, seemingly gouged out along with the wall itself. With a high-pitched sound, the glass shattered in a violent dance, and heavy footsteps intruded upon the mansion interior.

There, filling up the corridor, stood a bizarrely shaped monster, its wicked visage resembling that of a lion.

—The second floor, where the Sleeping Princess awaited, felt far, far away.

3

—The situation kept moving.

It was bewildering, something far beyond Subaru’s imagination, and now leaping far, far beyond his comprehension.

“_____”

Its stout, bizarrely shaped frame, twelve feet long, trod upon the carpet as it pushed its way into the cramped corridor.

It had black fur and a head resembling that of a lion. It had a horse’s hindquarters, and its long, slender tail greatly resembled a snake. A ghastly aura befitting its brutal nature brimmed from the entirety of its body—and on its forehead was a misshapen white horn.

“Demon beast…?!”

Even if the creature was unknown to him, that characteristic, evident from a single glance, made Subaru reel. Hearing his voice from the side, Ram clicked her tongue and pointed her drawn cane toward the demon beast and said,

“Fulla!!”

Without hesitation, Ram pounded a single attack into the demon beast at

maximum velocity.

But in spite of its great size, the black demon beast agilely leaped within the corridor to evade the blade of wind. The slash of raging wind grazed past, minimizing the damage before it tensed, bellowed, and charged.

“Subaru! This way!”

Subaru was frozen stiff before the charging demon beast when Petra pulled him by the arm, practically throwing him into the room right next to them. A moment later, Ram leaped into the same room, violently closing the door—

“Stand back!”

Her sharp voice and her arm shoved him deeper into the room. The next instant, a monster claw broke the door with ease. The hinges blew apart, and the door split into two pieces as the demon beast leaped into the room; Subaru instantly held Petra close.

“_____!”

The room’s doorway was for human use, not something the size of the black demon beast could use to get in. However, the demon beast paid no heed, swinging a claw and demolishing the wall as it pushed into the room.

“Whoaaaa?! Waitwaitwaitwait! Wh-why is a demon beast…?!”

“This isn’t the time! It’s here and that’s that! Petra, the window!!”

As Subaru raised his voice at the menacing demon beast that had savagely widened the entrance, Ram ordered Petra to open the window. They would escape outside of the east wing they had only just entered.

“_____”

The situation, from which they could only flee, made him nervous. But amid the chaos, a question outweighed that.

It was a strange, unnatural situation. The last time around had had no such turn of events.

Over the course of his various experiences with Return by Death, Subaru had changed circumstances a number of times. Along the way, no matter what

actions he had taken, the events that were to unfold were the same each time. He thought that was a hard rule.

For example, no matter how many times he repeated events, the Witch Cult never stopped targeting Emilia.

—For the calamity at the mansion not to have been caused by Elsa Gramhilde was simply…bizarre.

“*El Fulla!!*” “———!!!!”

As the irrationality clawed at his thoughts, behind Subaru, Ram’s magic sliced into the demon beast’s face. It was so focused on enlarging the entrance, it forgot to defend itself as its black lion-like face was smeared with black blood.

Reeling, the demon beast abandoned its destruction midway. But shocking resiliency made it extremely difficult to slash to death.

“Humiliating, having to run from a dim-witted foe like this…!”

Ram insulted the demon beast and rued her own lack of ability as she rushed toward the window. Then, she grabbed Subaru by the collar, leaping out the window Petra had opened in one go.

He felt grass. Having entered the east wing from the front yard, they’d gone out the opposite side of the building, into the back yard.

“*Geh!* Th-that demon beast back there…”

“A blockhead…or rather, a Giltirau. Without its eyes, it shouldn’t be able to follow us.”

“B-but…that demon beast, it had a horn!!”

Ram named the demon beast, and Petra continued, pointing out something that shouldn’t have been there. “Yeah,” went Subaru, nodding at both statements, particularly Petra’s.

“No way a demon beast like that just wandered in here from the wild. Someone set it loose on the mansion…!”

Demon beasts were enemies of all living things, manifestations not of the instinct to fight but the instinct to slaughter. However, each one had a horn

growing from its head; it was said that they learned to obey the person who broke that horn, and only that person.

Using that characteristic, perhaps it was possible to make a simultaneous attack by Elsa and the demon beast a reality, but…

“But this time the horn ain’t broken… How the heck did someone bring that demon beast in here?!”

“It couldn’t be…”

“—?! Ram, you know something?!”

Ram reacted as if something had come to mind. Subaru bit down hard, training a sharp eye on her.

“Surely you did not think the previous Urugarum incident was merely a rampage by wild beasts?”

“At first I did think that… But now that the royal selection’s started, it’s hard to think that way.”

He thought back to the curse from the demon beasts, and the mansion loop that had begun as a result.

Just like the crest theft incident in the royal capital, that incident was clearly sabotage directed at Emilia, a participant in the royal selection. In point of fact, a girl involved in that incident had vanished without a trace—

“—You don’t mean that girl controlled the demon beasts, and she’s come to attack again? If that’s so, this is…”

—A simultaneous attack, by the perpetrator of the crest incident, and the perpetrator of the mansion incident both.

“—!!”

“…Ah! Subaru, are you all right?”

The instant he realized the true awfulness of the situation, Subaru wobbled, and Petra held him up.

The odd heaviness of his head felt annoying, but that was largely the effect of blood loss from his right shoulder. They’d left the skewer stuck in him, but the

bleeding hadn't been sufficiently stemmed while they'd been running all about.

"—Barusu."

"D-don't…! We just…can't leave both of them and run…!"

"I have not yet said a word… I understand. I shall bring the land dragon from the stable."

"Bring, Patlash…?"

Ram looked to the rear, and Subaru, his breath ragged from anemia, followed suit. At a distance, he caught sight of the stables indicated by the direction of her glance.

Going around the back of the mansion put them close to the stable at the back of the grounds. Patlash was tied there, and she would definitely be of service whether they resisted or fled.

"The bleeding hasn't stopped at all… Subaru, this needs treatment!"

"I-I gave my handkerchief to Frederica…"

"Then I'll use this one!!"

Ram raced toward the stables; in the meantime, Subaru obeyed Petra's earnest instructions. She untied the handkerchief wrapped around Subaru's right wrist, shifting it to his shoulder wound.

"This will hurt, but just bear it! Three, two—!!"

"Gigui—!!"

Midway through the countdown, she drew the skewer out, the intense pain causing Subaru to raise an odd voice as he writhed. But Petra promptly tied the handkerchief over the wound, using it and the sleeve of his tunic to deftly stop the bleeding.

"Y-you saved me… but what happened to saying 'one'…!"

"You were more relaxed that way… I'm really glad I gave you that handkerchief, Subaru."

Petra's deeply relieved voice drew a long exhale from Subaru.

The pure white handkerchief she'd given Subaru as a protective charm was now pure red from Subaru's blood. Petra showed no sign of caring about that, but instead, it was Subaru who was stricken by pangs of guilt.

"Sorry… I'm always getting you into trouble like this…"

"Don't say weird things like that!! I'm very grateful to you, Subaru. You're the one always saving me when I get into trouble!"

Shouting in anger at Subaru's attempt to apologize, Petra's face remained red as she indicated the forest. Then, she continued.

"When Ryuka, me, and the others went into the forest, Subaru, you came after us by yourself. I was really worried later when I heard you'd been bitten so badly all over…"

"_____"

"That's why it's all right!! This time, I'm the one saving you. We'll rescue Beatrice and Miss Rem, and with Miss Ram and Miss Frederica, we'll get out of this together."

He wondered if she talked so much because she was frail.

Petra earnestly raised her voice to encourage Subaru, who was becoming weak-willed from blood loss and distress over the situation. The sight made Subaru want to lament the extent of his own foolishness all over again.

"…Petra, you're incredible. I'm being pathetic."

"Not at…"

"Nah, I'm not feeling sorry for myself. I'm saying, since you're so incredible, Petra, I've gotta be, too."

He shook his heavy, stooped head, raising it as if to sweep away his weak-mindedness.

If he tried to devise some scheme to raise his spirits, he wouldn't have enough wisdom left for the hopes he should have been still striving for.

—This time, Subaru Natsuki would put it all on the line to offset everything he lacked.

Subaru calmly rose to his feet, extending his left hand toward Petra. For an instant, Petra hesitated to take hold of Subaru's bloodstained hand, but—

"—Petra, let's go. We're going to escape with everyone, just like you said."

"…Yeah!!"

Subaru's declaration made Petra's face brighten in an instant as she took his hand.

Then, a moment after he sensed her gripping his hand, the girl went "Ah," seeming vexed as the ends of her eyebrows fell.

"What's wrong?"

"It's not 'yeah'; you gotta say 'yes'… I mean, you should have said yes."

Saying this, Petra mischievously stuck out her tongue.

The girl who had spoken so bravely under such circumstances had forgotten to keep speaking politely. Subaru, feeling saved by her valor, let his tongue slacken just a tiny bit as he clapped back.

"After all this, I've gotta get Ram and Frederica to scold you for th—"

—That instant, a roar and a blow from right above him blotted out Subaru's mind with red.

4

————————His mind was distant.

"_____"

Scrape, scrape. Something was being dragged. *Scrape, scrape. Scrape, scrape. Scrape, scrape.*

He was being dragged over the ground, in a state of not knowing whether he was faceup or facedown…

"A Rock Pig…! Barusu! Can you hear me? Barusu!"

He couldn't hear very well. Someone was desperately calling out to him.

Be it to reply, be it to respond, he couldn't do either very well at the moment.

“It wasn’t just that blockhead… This is my failure. I should have seen it sooner…”

“_____”

“Do what you must. Ram shall as well— Yes, that’s a good girl.”

Scrape, scrape. The speed increased. The force with which he was being dragged increased, resulting in faster scraping.

He searched for someplace somewhere that was free. Head, neck, hip, foot, hand—left hand.

Only his left hand was gripping something. He felt something. He was gripping something, something important, from which he must not let go.

“_____”

At the same time as he poured his remaining strength into his left hand, not letting that something go, the speed accelerated faster.

His body was floating higher. Something was tightly sandwiching him around hip level. The sway, the breathing, these things conveyed the devotion of the being from which they came—

“Paa…rach…”

The delicate touch, as if handling a fragile object, told him exactly who the unseen party was.

Though he meant to call out her name, only a hollow moan trickled out of his throat. Froth was bubbling up from the corner of his mouth. The froth tasted like iron. Why was he spouting blood froth?

It had to be related to why his body couldn’t move, why his entire body’s senses were so delicate, why his mind was still hazy—

“—aa”

His mind connected one dot to the next, and he remembered who he was.

He was Subaru Natsuki. He’d returned to the mansion to save everyone from impending calamity. Elsa, demon beast, Frederica, Ram, Petra, Beatrice, Rem, Rem, Rem—

“Gnh, oo……!”

With a coughing sound, a large volume of blood flowed out of him, seemingly along with his life.

Having his stomach wrung out was too weak a metaphor; he hurt as if all of his insides were being whisked around. The outpour from his throat would not halt, and his liquefied inner organs seemed to be drooling out of him.

Cough, cough, cough, cough, cough hard cough hard cough, and finally—

“—I’m…”

He remembered how to open his eyes. After several blinks, he was freed from the world of darkness.

Tears flowed together with the sharp pain of reality jabbing into his eyeballs. He couldn’t determine whether the tear droplets were clear or the color of blood. One thing, however, was clear.

—Namely, that the world enveloping Subaru Natsuki was dyed the color of blood.

“_____”

Subaru’s body swayed. Up, down. Left, right.

The pitch-black land dragon had Subaru’s hips in its jaws while it raced away from the mansion grounds.

“_____!!!”

Next, when his eardrums came back to life, the sounds of explosions pressing upon them all at once made him want to doubt his ears.

There were high-pitched, earsplitting leaden noises, combining to make him feel physically ill. Resounding around him were high-octave voices, roars, neighs —all the cries of the demon beasts hot on their tail.

There was a giant mouse with black fly wings spread. There was a ferocious frog that featured black spots. There was a multi-headed serpent with innumerable necks sprouting from its torso. They were surrounded by misshapen creatures beyond all description.

—*Beast Master* was the term that popped up into the back of his mind.

“_____”

With Subaru in her jaws, Patlash was desperately searching for a way out. However, even a land dragon, the fastest of ground creatures, could not overcome such numbers; the roads were blocked, the skies were dangerous, and she was surrounded with no way to break free. Already, there were lacerations beyond counting on her pitch-black scales, from which she was bleeding profusely.

Not far in the future, she would reach her limit— No, her limit had already arrived. Patlash was simply exceeding that limit, burning the remaining fire of her life away for Subaru’s sake.

“_____!!!!”

Right after a conspicuously huge roar, the land dragon’s speed was dulled as a creature with over twice her bulk pulled alongside.

The black lion had a wound on its face, with blood flowing from the sockets of its smashed eyes—the demon beast from earlier. He’d forgotten its name.

But even if he tried, he would never be able to forget the blow from its claw.

“_____”

Its vision was compromised. It had unleashed a wild strike. And yet, that blow was aimed directly at the land dragon’s right abdomen. This creature was not relying on sight but something else—smell. The demon beast was drawn by scent.

Faster than he could register the impact, penetrating with the force of an explosion, the world was dyed red with fresh blood.

But it was not Subaru who was affected by that impact. That was because, a moment before the claw strike landed, the land dragon’s neck swung up, hurling Subaru’s body into the air.

“Patl—”

In her final moment, she did not let out a single cry. Such pride suited the sublime land dragon well.

As he spun, a flower of blood bloomed beneath his eyes. Subaru had no time to avert his gaze as his body's back collided with something, breaking through it with a spectacular sound, before finally smacking the floor, hard.

"K-kha…!"

He was racked by a coughing fit; his right eye had closed from the blood coursing from a cut on his forehead, but even so, he immediately realized it.

He'd been hurled to the second floor of the mansion—the second floor of the east wing, exactly where he'd been heading.

"____"

Subaru no longer knew what to think about his beloved land dragon's final act of devotion.

He'd shed too much blood. It was as if his determination and resolve had flowed out of him with it. He couldn't summon any energy. His head wouldn't turn, either. His mind was slowly dying, too.

Even so, even with Subaru like that, there was one, and only one, place that had not lost its strength.

He felt a sensation in the grip of his left hand. Even though his mind was dead, the part telling him not to let go was still alive.

He remembered that, right before everything collapsed, he was holding someone's hand.

"Pe…tra…"

His gaze arrived at the hand he felt, the wrist, the elbow—and there, it came to an end.

"____"

Though he was holding her hand, the girl who should have been there did not go past the elbow.

She had been smashed, crushed, torn away—

"—oooaaAAA!!!"

Subaru Natsuki had managed to protect…nothing.

5

—Just how much time passed as he stared at that arm, torn off at the elbow?

“_____”

His thoughts were still as he stood in a daze.

Ironically, during that time, his senses of sight and hearing gradually recovered. They helped Subaru understand just how desperate the situation he was in truly was.

Subaru’s state was so terrible, the wound on his right shoulder seemed cute in comparison.

His left leg bent in two more places than it should, and his left arm was flattened, crushed by something. Petra had probably been struck by the same blow. Accordingly, there was nothing of her past the elbow.

“_____”

That was all his eyesight could tell him of the terrible spectacle. But the information conveyed from his hearing was more terrible still.

Beneath the second floor corridor in which Subaru had collapsed, he could hear the roars of demon beasts around the building from every direction. He couldn’t be bothered to count their numbers and types. But a voice kept pressing into his mind, *There’s nowhere to run.*

He’d let Petra die. Patlash had been ripped apart before his eyes. He didn’t know what had happened with Ram afterward. Perhaps she was still fighting hard. Perhaps the cunning girl might even survive, but—

“—Ahh, I’ve finally found you.”

These words spoken, he tilted his head, seeing and hearing the presence of a raven-haired woman.

From Subaru’s position, in the middle of the corridor and kneeling on the carpet, the woman was standing straight ahead.

It was the butcher whom Frederica had stayed behind to slow down. If she was there, that meant…

“Fre…derica’s…”

“The big maid? Relax. She amused me quite a bit. If possible, I would have liked to see whether transfiguration changes the contents of a person’s belly, but I was unable to confirm that with my own eyes.”

“…I didn’t…ask you about that.”

He wasn’t asking. However, she made him acknowledge what he knew without needing to question her further.

That she had put up a good fight was no doubt true. Elsa had lost her mantle, and her black clothes were ripped all over the place; her pale skin was splattered with blood—Even so, she was in such a good state that it would be fair to say she was in fine health.

“I must praise you. You have done well coming this far with wounds like those.”

“Throwing me a bone, are you… If it’s your life, I’ll take it…”

“I wonder, should I interpret that as, ‘I want your life’?”

“If I…get to trample it right now, then yeah…”

Venting at Elsa’s off-the-mark answer, Subaru leaned his weight against the wall and lifted himself up. With his left leg wrecked and his left arm twisted, he had wounds running across his entire body.

“Even so, there is a whiff of anger accompanying the scent of your blood… Your intestines are probably sublime.”

“You’re messed up… I don’t, get what you’re sayin’.”

As Subaru rose to his feet, Elsa embraced her own body and let out a hot breath of ecstasy his way. Whatever he said and did, it only brought greater delight to the ravishing butcher’s mind.

“Who hired you to come after us…?”

“I shall not speak of my employer. I owe him that much courtesy, at least. Your return was earlier than expected, so things worked out a little differently than in the contract, though…”

“Worked out…different…?”

“It was supposed to be two maids and one ‘shut-in,’ and everything was supposed to be timed to coincide with your return…”

A wry, blood-colored smile came over Elsa as she pointed the tip of her kukri toward Subaru. Her verbal summation of the plan fit with the tragedy that had occurred in the mansion the last time around.

At that time, Petra and the others’ corpses were probably waiting for Subaru and the others’ return to the mansion—

“I’ve heard enough…”

Shaking his head, he rebuffed Elsa, pressing only cruelties upon him. Subaru’s reply made Elsa’s refined eyebrows grimace. “Is that so?” she murmured in visible disappointment as she started to wrap up.

“I suppose so. Let us finish this. If this carries on any further, Meiri might be captured, and we cannot have that, so I shall console myself with your hot stuff before that happens.”

“_____”

“All done, are you? Then I shall send you to meet your angels.”

This spoken, Elsa’s posture sank. Running with her posture so low she seemed to crawl across the corridor, the black figure charged, making a beeline toward Subaru. She was so fast. One wouldn’t even think counterattack was possible.

But—

“—Like hell I’m gonna just let you kill me.”

Dragging his smashed leg along, Subaru reached the door beside him quicker—the door to Rem’s bedroom.

His decision made Elsa knot her brows. Even if he fled into the room, it would only prolong the amount of time until the end. Even so, seeing his reaction made her tone down her gloating smirk just a little.

—There was no longer any way to break through the encirclement. It was impossible. Accordingly, he abandoned the thought.

His wounds were deep. His life was pouring out. He was on the verge of expiring without having saved any of the people he had to protect. Then, at the very least, he'd get back at Elsa just a little, so that everything would not have gone as she pleased.

"____"

Neither the Bowel Hunter nor the Beast Master had reached Rem's bedroom.

He absolutely would not allow them to defile the girl who slept within.

Even if the world was soon to end, he would not lose Rem a second time, not to anyone—

"____"

He opened the door wide and leaped into the bedroom.

Lifting his head in search of the bed where Rem slept, Subaru was taken aback.

—Subaru, resigned to his end, was greeted by the bookshelves of the archive of forbidden books.

6

The choking musk of old tomes seemed like a rebuke presented to its noisy visitor.

The room's interior was packed with bookshelves that were chock-full of books. When that aroma and visual information finally hit home, Subaru realized he had stepped into a different place than that he had desired.

—And the late realization of that fact courted a most fatal result.

"—?!?"

Subaru's head was dominated by one question: *Why?!* That instant, Subaru felt he was enveloped by wind.

That wind peeled Subaru away from the door, forcefully drawing him toward the middle of the room. With the feet he had planted down nonfunctional, Subaru, unable to resist, tumbled into the room's center.

The very next moment, he heard the great sound of the door slamming shut straight behind him—

“—W-wait, please!!”

Lunging for the firmly closed door, Subaru desperately tried to open it. But his will couldn’t reach his half-destroyed arms; the ferocious creaking sound only served to fuel his frustration.

And as Subaru, smeared with blood all over, turned toward the door, behind him was—

“—Struggle as you might, you are not leaving this room.”

When he heard a voice and footsteps, he turned to see a girl slipping past a gap in the bookshelves and walking toward him.

She had long, cream-colored braids and a gorgeous, extravagant dress. She had a young, adorable face, but at that moment, a terribly cold expression rested upon it as she glared straight at Subaru.

“Bea—trice…”

“Are you in a simply horrid state, I wonder? Do not walk around; you will only sully the archive’s floor…”

“Open the door!! Right now!! Let! Me! Out!!”

When the girl—Beatrice—gazed at his wounds with a chilly look, Subaru shouted unsparingly at her in anger.

The admonition not to *sully the room* never even entered his ears. Blood dripped from his bleeding arm as he screamed.

“Why did you come out *now*?! Why this of all times?! Send me back! Send me back right now!!”

“…And what would you do if I did? What can you do in your current state, I wonder?”

“I know better than anyone I can’t do anything!! But even so…!”

He had to return to that place, to the second floor of the east wing, to the bedroom where Rem slept.

The Passage had activated at the room he had presumably entered. The door leading to the bedroom became the entrance to the archive of forbidden books, whereupon the door immediately cast that duty aside. In other words, the door had resumed its normal duties: those of the door leading to Rem's bedroom.

"That's why—!"

"It is too late."

"What do you mean, too late?! There's no such thing as too late!! I have to get there, right now…"

"—Did I not say 'it is too late,' I wonder?"

Subaru's angry voice, straining upward to resist the horror racing through him, fell silent.

In contrast to Subaru, eyes wide and blinking while unable to speak a word, Beatrice continued.

"—Just now, the reason you wish to return to that room became no more."

The proclamation left Subaru at a loss for words— Any means of putting it into words…had vanished.

Beatrice had said it in a calm, composed fashion, but the sheer cruelty of her words asserted their claim to reality and truth.

"—aa"

Before he realized it, Subaru had crumpled to the floor right there.

His shoulders fell, his head bent down, and there was a ferocious ringing in his ears echoing throughout his skull.

He wanted it to be louder, noisier. He wanted it to tear at his brain until it split in two. He wanted it to be bad enough that he couldn't think, so he wouldn't have to understand.

He wanted it to tear his life away with it. And yet—

"…What are…you doing?"

Haltingly, his voice trickled out. He heard a whisper-like, delicate voice from right beside him.

“Perhaps I cannot stand to see you in pain. Therefore, I am healing your wounds, out of disgust and nothing else.”

The girl who murmured her reply was incredibly close. Her palm had a faint glow around it as she held it over his wounds.

The light asserted its own existence, gradually softening the unrelenting pain that had been eating away at him. He felt it carry heat into his body bit by bit, mostly his horribly injured left side. The bleeding stopped, the bones returned to their proper positions, the gouged-out muscles attached to them, the slashed nerves—

“—Are you kidding me?!”

“—?!”

With his remaining strength, Subaru howled, wholly rejecting Beatrice’s healing light.

While Beatrice was still reeling from his threatening attitude, he rolled away to put distance between him and the girl. The carpet of the archive of forbidden books was marred by blood. Blood frothed from the corner of his mouth, and in that ghastly state, Subaru glared at Beatrice.

“I don’t…need you to heal my wounds…! Why are you trying to save me…?!”

“That is because…y-you are simply too pathetic; I cannot stand to look at you…”

“Why me?! If you wanted to save someone…why didn’t you save Petra or Frederica?! Or Ram, or Rem!! You could have saved everyone…!!”

With Beatrice’s power, she could have escaped and helped others escape with ease.

“They should have been saved…! I’m stupid, I’m weak…even if I couldn’t do anything, you could have reached them…! Why didn’t you……!”

“Wh-why, should Betty do such a… Perhaps Betty does not have a single reason to save anyone? I do not know. I do not have any such reason…!”

“If that’s true…then you didn’t have any damn reason to save me either, right…?!”

Shaking her head in disgust, Beatrice denied Subaru's entreaty. Adding his denial to hers, Subaru slowly raised his crushed left arm aloft. He painfully squeezed Beatrice's throat.

—His emotions were exploding.

"Who the hell…asked you to save anyone…?!!"

"—aa"

"Do you even know what you've done?! Thanks to you, everything might be completely ruined now!! All of this might've overwritten the possibilities, and this piece-of-shit present might be set in stone……!"

Why had she showed herself *then*, when it was too late?

Knowing that Subaru had been teleported, Elsa would recognize the Passage for what it was. She was getting closer to Beatrice. Why, in spite of that, was she trying to make a half-dead Subaru live?

Why had she saved Subaru the instant he'd given up instead of allowing him the death he desired?

"I…should have died there…! You…should have killed me……!!!"

When it was his time to die, but he let the opportunity slip, Subaru Natsuki was worthless. The only way Subaru could gain the right to redo things was to use his life without a care.

When, spitting blood, he shouted from his very soul, the girl, bathed in his pleas head on, opened her eyes wide.

"I-I do not understand… Can I understand, I wonder…?"

Incomprehension, and perhaps even fear, crossed Beatrice's face as she shook her head side to side.

The reply made Subaru clench his teeth. If that was how it was, fine. He wouldn't cling to her.

"Fine, then. If even you… If you won't save me, then…!"

From the beginning, relying on someone hadn't been an option. He should have understood that.

His gaze shifted, and his eyes caught sight of a stool near the entrance. It was the stool Beatrice was always sitting on. He kicked it over and then slammed it against the wall with all his might.

“What are you…?!”

Beatrice let out a shriek, eyes bulging at Subaru’s act of violence.

A hard sound reverberated, and the wooden stool was cruelly smashed apart, scattering in a number of fragments. From those fragments, he picked up the biggest, sharpest one.

“_____”

It wouldn’t be his first suicide. Even a piece of wood like that was enough to easily end a person’s life. If, in a single breath, he stabbed his own throat, his life would come to an end, and Subaru Natsuki would surely be granted another chance.

—In another world, it would be the third time Subaru had chosen suicide.

The first time was in the middle of the mansion loop. He had been determined to fix something that couldn’t be undone.

The second time was at the very end of the loop that had started in the capital. It was from remorse, to save Rem after she’d been taken from him.

And now, the third time would be from indignation, after giving into rage and cursing his own powerlessness to take everything back.

It was a “death” with meaning. It was a “death” with value. Everything besides “death” was worthless—

“—Don’t!!”

And yet, the instant he had committed himself to stabbing his throat, a tiny body leaped at him to get in his way.

The hem of her dress fluttered as Beatrice raced through the middle of the archive, impeding Subaru’s suicide by force. She grappled his arms, bit into the right hand containing the fragment, and attempted to wrest the vile implement away.

“You…! Why…!!”

“I won’t let you! I will not…let you die here……!”

“—!! Quit it! Let me go, already!!”

His voice grew ragged as they jostled with one another. However, in his current state, Subaru could not easily get even a helpless little girl off him.

They desperately grappled, violently bumped their bodies against a bookshelf, and finally, furiously collapsed onto the floor. He didn’t know if it was the impact that made a moan trickle out. But it had been Beatrice who had accomplished her goal.

“Haaa-haaa……!”

After Subaru had fallen onto his bottom, Beatrice cast the fragment far aside and moved away from him. Glaring at the girl in resentment, Subaru collapsed faceup, unable to move any farther.

“Wh—y…”

For what possible reason had she stopped him from killing himself? Regardless, the end result wouldn’t change. His blood loss was severe. Subaru would soon perish.

Beatrice’s action was completely irrational. He didn’t have a single clue what purpose she had in mind.

Maybe she hated him dying before her eyes? Maybe she just didn’t want him to kill himself? She didn’t want anything to do with it?

He didn’t understand, not at all, not one little bit, but even though he didn’t understand *that*—

“—eh?”

Beaten senseless with incomprehension, Subaru tried to avert his eyes from everything: from Beatrice, from the archive of forbidden books, or perhaps from his own powerlessness, or even his impending “death.”

But when he averted his gaze to do so, Subaru noticed the presence of… *it*.

“____”

—“It” had fallen at the edge of the wreckage from the destroyed stool.

It was a thickly bound, simply covered book, as large and inconvenient to carry around as a dictionary…yet the malevolent aura emitted by the black book bore not the slightest resemblance.

Subaru had seen “it” many times over. He’d seen “it” in the hands of a madman.

“What’s that…doing here…?”

Was it actually a copy of the Witch Cult’s Gospel? The volume once possessed by Petelgeuse ought to have still been packed in the dragon carriage they took to the Sanctuary. It certainly wasn’t there in that room.

—No, he had to face facts. The stool had been hiding the evil black book.

“____”

As if affirming Subaru’s shock, the girl in the dress picked up the book.

The girl hugged the book to her chest, letting out a seemingly relieved sigh as she stroked a finger across the cover.

Her touch was tender and loving. With gentle eyes, Beatrice embraced the Gospel.

“…Why…are you treating that book…like it’s so important?”

“____”

“It’s not one of the books the Witch Cult has…is it? It just looks like one, right?”

“____”

“You hid it because I’d jump to conclusions… Jump to conclusions, get angry, and then…”

“____”

“Why…won’t you…deny any of it…?”

For that moment alone, Subaru forgot the anguish of blood loss and his impending “death” as he wove the words together.

If she said only one thing, that would have been enough. That would have been plenty to clear Subaru's worries away.

Subaru's words, pleading for nothing more than that, were answered, and just as he had hoped, Beatrice said but a single thing.

"—Betty has not been instructed to answer that question."



Beatrice spread the book she clutched to her chest, scanned its contents, and emotionlessly spoke those words.

He'd heard that for the Witch Cult, a Gospel was like their Bible. Petelgeuse had said the text functioned as a book of prophecies, showing the future to its owner.

Accordingly, the Witch Cult obeyed the Gospel, doing as the text instructed.

If he matched that fact with Beatrice's reply—

"What's written in that book… What is it telling you to do…?"

"Perhaps that question is not in the book, I wonder?"

"You can't do anything if it's not in the book…? Then, you sheltering me here before was…?"

"That question is not written in the book, either."

"And talking to me right now? Saving me, when I was on the verge of dying…!"

"—I wouldn't know."

Eyes still cast down at the book, Beatrice continued her empty replies without looking Subaru's way. She sent replies that weren't answers back at him, her obstinate mind closed within the tome.

Her doll-like appearance, her eyes with emotions locked away, sent a tremor through Subaru that seemed to make his lungs convulse. Assaulted by dizziness, seemingly forgetting even to breathe, he raised his voice.

"Are you saying…you can't do anything…anything, if it's not according to what's written in that book?!"

"…I wonder? Yes, it is so. Perhaps the Gospel's guidance must be obeyed in all things, for that is Betty's reason for living, and the sole reason for Betty to exist."

"Did you…try to save me because the book told you to?! That time you saved me when I was cursed, too! Lending me a hand when I couldn't stand on my own! All the time we spent fooling around, yelling at each other, having fun like

a couple of idiots, all that time…was all thanks to that book?!”

“—Is that not precisely what am I saying, I wonder?!”

When Subaru, who had been criticizing Beatrice, now tried to appeal to her emotions for his own convenience, she exploded. Beatrice’s face was red with anger, her round eyes glaring at Subaru as she raised a finger and screamed.

“It is as you have seen, and as I have told you! Everything Betty has done until now, all of it was written right here. Is there any way you, the likes of *you*, could move Betty’s heart, I wonder? Do not be so full of yourself, *human*.”

“_____”

“All of Betty is for Mother’s sake. For Betty, her connection to Mother is everything…! The likes of you, the likes of you…*human, human, human……!!*”

It was as if a dam had been breached. Emotions poured out of Beatrice.

The vast torrent of fierce emotions instantly rendered Subaru speechless; there was nothing he could do but be swept away.

Facing the wordless Subaru, Beatrice very, very tightly clutched the book.

“Do not touch Betty, *human*. Do not come close, *human*. Do I even know you, I wonder, *human*? I hate you. I hate you—I despise you!”

This time, the girl’s teary-voiced shout clearly rejected Subaru’s entire existence.

The inside of his chest was filled to the brim with confusion and dismay. That was how great the rejection was for Subaru.

—He’d stubbornly believed, without any basis, that there was a bond between them.

Even if neither he nor she would acknowledge it openly, he believed there was *something*.

After all, Beatrice had saved Subaru a number of times during the loop that started at the mansion.

It was her presence that had saved his mind, on the verge of breaking as he repeated those days over and over.

And whatever form it took—

“Back then…I…was happy…”

Once again, words Subaru had never spoken aloud slipped out at the very end.

“—uu”

His vision warped badly. He vomited something up. It was neither blood nor bile, but life itself. He instinctively knew it—his time had run out.

Blood loss, useless. Grave wounds, worthless. Betrayed, a dog’s death. Gospel, butcher, Beast Master, dying in a rage.

There, having achieved nothing, Subaru Natsuki would perish.

“____”

Then, on the verge of death, Subaru heard a miraculous sound.

His ears, on the verge of death, probably picked up the sound of a door opening. Footsteps; someone was entering the room.

The footsteps beheld the fallen Subaru, and exhaled.

“—How disappointing.”

The murmur was distant. The footsteps advanced farther ahead, seemingly losing interest in the dead man.

The owner of the voice, a black-clad Grim Reaper, leisurely walked toward the little girl clutching the book.

—Just what would result from this chance encounter between the girl and the butcher?

“Oh my.”

The surprised voice belonged to the woman. A bloodied hand was entwined around the butcher’s long leg.

Meaninglessly, Subaru, on the precipice of death, acted to slow her down with all of his body and soul.

“…eaa, triii…”

“How marvelous. Truly, you are treasured.”

Instantly, a wind blew. The next moment, the right hand with which he grasped her came off—and the wrist along with it.

No blood came out. The wicked blade reversed, and a black glint went… somewhere. Subaru’s head, his neck, his torso…somewhere.

Wherever it was, it would surely impale him in a critical location—

“_____”

In that final scene, he saw the face of the little girl as she sucked in her breath. There was sadness and pain upon it.

—But as death came for him, that had nothing to do with Subaru Natsuki anymore.

CHAPTER 3

FRIEND

1

He heard a deluge-like sound, like that of a muddy stream.

It was a ferocious watery sound. It coursed downward, obeying the power of gravity, obeying the flow, obeying its destiny: a waterfall.

Inside his ears, or perhaps his skull, it echoed with a ceaseless roar. The ferocious muddy stream seemed to churn his very brain, even as it led Subaru's consciousness from oblivion to awareness.

"—a, eh, *goho!*"

Subaru retched, feeling like his throat was clogged, which was totally throwing off the rhythm of his breathing.

Breathe in the air, blow it back out. Having completely forgotten how to repeat those alternating actions, he convulsed like a fish on land, and as drool trickled out, Subaru returned to life.

"*Gahu!* Aha!"

He was in a facedown position, collapsed on the ground. Putting his arms on the hard floor, Subaru was seemingly prostrate as he forced oxygen and comprehension into his lungs, remembering the procedure for breathing once more.

The pain softened, and he spat out the saliva that no longer had anyplace to go. Then, when his body calmed down and recovered its grip on reality, his oxygen-deprived brain came around—his mind was restored.

"D-did I…die…?"

Wheezing as he murmured, he confirmed a fact that needed no checking: he had Returned by Death.

No, he didn't need to check whether he had Returned by Death, for that was Subaru's worth. It wasn't important that he had gone back—rather, when and where he had gone back to were the most critical.

"Ah…"

Lifting his head, Subaru squinted at his surroundings when he immediately realized it.

It was a darkness he remembered, a darkness he knew. It was the stone room of a tomb, the cold air holding an otherworldly ambience. The darkness hovering over the roughly constructed stone floor extended to a stone door leading deeper within.

—And lying on her side, collapsed right beside Subaru, was a lovely, silver-haired girl.

"Emilia…"

Wiping the light sweat off his brow, he stared in the dark at Emilia's sleeping face, her suffering clear upon it. Having confirmed that much, Subaru finally managed to accept the situation.

The time passed, the life lost, the impending calamity, the unbelievable betrayal—one after another, everything that had happened crashed against him like waves, driving Subaru's heart into a corner.

"No change in the restart point…!"

It was the place right after he had overcome his past—and there, Subaru Natsuki had returned.

In exchange for being unable to take anything back, he had returned to a place where he had not yet lost everything.

"—H—aa."

The moment he abruptly came to understand that fact, relief spread through Subaru's chest.

The left hand he'd unwittingly touched to his chest wasn't crushed. It was fine. When he looked at his right wrist, Petra's pure white handkerchief was still wrapped around it, not a trace of blood to be seen.

Knowing this, he let out a long, deep breath, patting his chest with relief—and then, he was shocked.

"—You've gotta be kidding me."

"……nn, aa"

He was shocked at his own nerve, checking that *he* was all right, not at all concerned by the sight of Emilia suffering.

That very moment, Emilia was being tormented, crushed by the past from the Trial. No matter how long her pain continued, nothing good would come of it. Subaru knew that it was a time of hardship, and nothing more.

And yet, just then, setting his eyes on the girl's pain, he had patted his chest in relief.

—As if the fact Emilia was suffering at the time of his return was a good thing.

"That's, not…the thought process of a sane person…"

Swallowing back his lamenting voice and gritting his teeth, Subaru flared in anger at his own ugliness and fragility.

If he put the people precious to him, the things precious to him, the things he ought to prioritize, on the back burner, how could he save anyone?

Had not that foolish way of living invited the calamity at the mansion?

"Anyway, Emilia first…"

Right then, putting the situation in order, confirming that he'd Returned by Death, and devising countermeasures against issues and obstacles could wait. Right then, he had to wake Emilia from her nightmare, console her as she cried, and bring her outside.

That was the right thing to do— And by doing so, he would preserve the sequence of events.

"Deal with things the right way, one at a time…"

He had to rescue everyone from that terrifying, calamitous fate.

Setting his heart, hardening his resolve, he was filled with determination as he reached a hand out to wake Emilia up. As he did this, there was something that Subaru himself still did not realize…

His face was entirely devoid of any emotion.

2

After Emilia awakened in the tomb, developments differed little from what had come before.

Tormented by the past, Emilia was confused by grief and remorse as Subaru brought her outside. There, he met with Ram and Garfiel, both of whom were present when they had entered the tomb together, and returned to their temporary lodging.

“—? What is wrong, Barusu? You’re staring at Ram’s face.”

“…Nothing at all. I just think you have a pretty face.”

“How indecent.”

Taking Subaru’s apology for staring at her during the walk back from the tomb, Ram snorted with a reproachful gaze.

Having Returned by Death, it went without saying, but Ram looked fine upon their reunion. Without anyone knowing, that fact brought him relief, and the gaze and sharp-tongued reply she sent back at him brought further relief still.

“____”

Carrying Emilia to her bedroom at the Ryuzu residence, their temporary accommodation, was the most he could do as a man. With Emilia’s heart in pain from the nightmares she had seen, he gently laid her in bed.

“—aa”

Emilia was lying on her side when Subaru took his hand away. Her voice trickled out at the loss of his touch. With worry on her face, Subaru smiled at her to set her at ease, after which he left everything to Ram.

That night, it was fine to leave Emilia to Ram. She'd do a good job calming Emilia down.

During that time, there was something Subaru ought to be doing. And that was—

"—The discussion that Roswaal promised."

Roswaal had established a seat for Subaru to speak with him on the first night Emilia challenged the Trial. Last time, Subaru had used that opportunity to propose returning to the mansion in the morning. In accordance with his request, he'd returned to the mansion at maximum speed, and the result was a calamitous failure.

Subaru had saved no one. Subsequently, he'd returned with a number of pressing questions—

"—Mr. Natsuki? Mr. Natsuki, are you listening?"

"…Sorry, wasn't listening."

He was leaning his back against a building, concentrating on his own thoughts, when his mind was summoned back to reality. When he looked over, it was Otto, brows furrowed in a questioning look, who had called out to him.

The place was outside the Ryuzu residence. In the middle of the night, with no light save that of a bonfire and the stars, Subaru was putting his thoughts in order for the coming conversation with Roswaal.

"So what did you want to talk to me about, using up valuable time like that?"

"The way this man speaks really takes the wind out of one's sails…! …I just wanted to ask you something."

"Ask me what?"

"I simply mean, right now, are things…all right?"

When Otto repeated his question, that time it was Subaru's turn to put on a questioning look. He thought it was obvious that if someone was listening to you, it was, by definition, all right to ask."

Perhaps surmising what was in Subaru's mental space, Otto went, "Ah, not

like that,” waving a hand as he continued.

“By ‘all right,’ I am not asking about the time. I mean, Mr. Natsuki, you seem very…busy, so I imagine your time is very precious at the moment…”

“Yeah, you hit the nail on the head. Right now, I don’t even have time to worry about Emilia-tan. So I don’t really have time to shoot the breeze with…”

“—That is precisely what I wish to speak with you about.”

Tapering his lips at Otto’s roundabout speech, Subaru tried to swiftly cut off the conversation. But instead, Otto bit on Subaru’s words like a hook, continuing with his own.

“If I may, Mr. Natsuki? You brought Lady Emilia out after something happened inside the tomb. I imagine your head is something of a mess from things I know nothing of, but I shall ask nonetheless.”

“—? Yeah, ask away.”

“Then, without further ado— Mr. Natsuki, are *you* all right?”

All that lead-in and that’s your question, thought Subaru, seriously perplexed.

That said, it wasn’t that he couldn’t understand Otto’s concern. Emilia had gone into the same tomb and had fallen into a panic as a result. He could understand Otto suspecting some anomaly befalling Subaru as well.

Hence—

“Of course, I’m full of pep and in super-duper condition. With Emilia like that I understand why you’d be worried, but I’m fine. Besides, does anything look wrong with me?”

“…No, nothing looks wrong with you. You appear very calm.”

“You see? Then…”

“Particularly, with Lady Emilia in that condition. Does that not suggest a particularly grave state?”

When Subaru tried to assert there was no problem, Otto’s follow-up put his words on lockdown.

“_____”

Otto narrowed his eyes, peering intently into Subaru's black pupils.

He was concerned for Subaru's current mental state. Certainly, in his current state, knowing future circumstances gave Subaru a sense of the past being prolonged that Otto could never share. Where he was seeing things for the first time, Subaru was seeing them for the third, and the effect of that gap was that Subaru took things far more mentally calmly than he.

"So you think I'm too calm about this, then."

"Yes, exactly. I do not think it is a bad thing. Just…"

"—Nah, thanks to you I feel more confident about this. Thanks, Otto."

"Eh?"

Interrupting Otto, Subaru leisurely shook his head side to side. Considering the situation Subaru had been placed in, the composure Otto had drawn attention to was something deserving a warm welcome.

"It's proof I can still have composed thoughts about things after everything that's happened."

"Er, I believe there is an exceptionally large and deep chasm between seeing things calmly and taking composed actions…"

Otto seemed left in the dust as he said it; perhaps the conversation had gone awry from what he had sought. But for Subaru's part, the exchange with him had deepened his own confidence.

Even after that tragedy in the mansion, with anger burning in the deepest depths of his mind, his head was still working.

"I'm going up against Roswaal. This time, ain't no place for letting him give me the slip."

He'd had it with how Roswaal ducked and weaved, concealing the things he knew during their conversations. At the very least, he had innumerable things he wanted to ask Roswaal that time around.

He absolutely wouldn't let Roswaal behave like last time, holding back about Beatrice, among other things—

“—Heya, got a moment?”

Just when he was determined anew, someone interrupted his conversation with Otto.

Holed up in the entrance of the de facto boarding house, poking his head out their way, was Garfiel. When he clacked his canine teeth and walked over, Subaru rubbed his own nose and said,

“Garfiel, huh… You really just don’t stick to one pattern, do you?”

“Ahhh? The hell ya talkin’ about?”

“Talking to myself. About how it’s tough dealing with someone who has as many whims as a kitty cat.”

Subaru’s attempt to gloss things over made Garfiel sourly crinkle his nose.

Subaru had assessed Garfiel to be as whimsical as a cat, and that was not wholly untrue. That night was taking place a third time for Subaru, and Garfiel’s attitude had changed each time.

Of course, alterations in the actions committed by Subaru changed others as well, such as Emilia, in subtle ways. However, Garfiel’s changes deserved special mention.

His opinions reversed course, his like or dislike flipped on its head, and reasonable positions in conversation were replaced with obstinate ones. The changes were such that Subaru almost started doubting that he was dealing with the same person.

This time, Garfiel’s going out of his way to come over and speak to him was further evidence.

“And there last time you’d have headed right off if I hadn’t called out… Besides, what’d you wanna talk to me about? I have important business after this.”

“Business, ya mean wicked schemin’ with that bastard, don’t ya? Don’t think that’ll be fun.”

“I’m offended you’re treating it as wicked scheming. Well, I won’t argue about the not-fun part, though.”

“I must say, you two are saying quite some things about the Marquis…”

As far as distrust of Roswaal was concerned, Subaru and Garfiel held a mutual opinion.

Subaru could sympathize with Otto, who had yet to have his first contact with Roswaal, seeing them both take that attitude. Subaru’s shoulders slumped in exasperation at the naiveté of Otto’s view.

“You just don’t get it, Otto. This Roswaal guy, he’s a man who pokes you in all kinds of places. If you don’t understand that, his pokes’ll wear you down to death.”

“Right now, you are speaking seriously? Or is this something safe to ignore?”

“You wanna talk seriously about that bastard Roswaal…? Bro, are ya all right in the head…?”

“And this time you are concerned for me?! The problem is not with the Marquis?!”

“I’m telling you, that’s just the kind of guy he is.”

Having been told so much, Otto was finally beginning to worry seriously about just whom he was trying to gain an audience with. He folded his arms, mumbling this and that about preparing to encounter the genuine article.

“My worries grow and grow, and this is the only way for a turnaround with one blow… No, no, but my very life depends on facing this man, yet the people who are his allies say such things about him…”

“Well, take your time worrying, okay? You’re not talking to him tonight, at least.”

Considering the issue of Roswaal’s scheduled conversation with Subaru right after that, it was a virtual impossibility that he would allow Otto to greet him at that juncture. Besides, Subaru didn’t really have any time to spare for that.

He probably didn’t have the time to loosen the corners of his lips and forget his worries about the future just a little, as he was doing right then, either.

“So then. It’s not bad for three guys to talk stupid stuff, but what did you want? What’d you wanna talk about?”

“Ohh, forgot ’bout that. It’s like, ‘Kukuruu was so thoughtless.’”

Garfiel clapped his hands together when Subaru dragged the straying conversation back and prodded him toward the real topic. However, he went, “But y’know,” his jade eyes shooting a meaningful glance Otto’s way as he carried on.

“Ahhh, you want the Bro here to hear this too? I’ll leave that up to whatever judgment ya make.”

“…If you’re leading in like that, it’s something related to the Sanctuary, right?”

“What else did ya think I’d be talkin’ to ya about…?”

“I thought you might’ve wanted to do some research on Ram… How she likes guys that have the three heights: high back, high station, high education. Also, makeup like a clown.”

“Stop it… I don’t wanna hear it, and if I do it’ll depress me…”

As the man seemed genuinely distressed, Subaru relented in his verbal assault, granting him a warrior’s mercy.

Either way, he was grateful for Garfiel’s consideration. It wasn’t as if he could forget on the verge of a huge appointment, but the prospect of involving Otto in their faction’s issues left him feeling uneasy.

At the end of the day, Otto was someone who’d simply been caught up in these events, a bystander who was supposed to be eventually returned to his normal life safe and sound.

“So we’re gonna be talkin’ love stories from here on out. The night’s late, so go on ahead and stay at the Cathedral, ’kay? Your business rivals are there with the villagers they evacuated, y’know.”

“Uu…if someone who knows me saw me acting so impertinently, I would be mocked for sure…! Er, that is not the point! Now listen here, Mr. Natsuki, I…”

“—Wait.”

Otto’s face flipped from pathetic to clingy as he advanced a step. But Subaru cut him off, taking the wind out of his sails. Subaru could understand Otto’s desire to get involved in Subaru and company’s circumstances to make a better

impression upon Roswaal. But—

“Please, Otto. See you again tomorrow.”

“Gnnnn… U-understood. I shall behave, sleeping as my small-fry competitors laugh at me!”

Discerning that Subaru’s obstinate posture would not falter, Otto ruefully took off his hat, gently squishing it in his grip as he walked off in the Cathedral’s direction.

The sight of him from behind, shoulders slumped in dejection, somehow came off as well-done heart-tugging acting.

“That lonely-looking back suits that guy pretty well…”

“Me, I think that, too, but are ya all right with this?”

“It’s fine. I’d sleep worse if anything happened to him.”

When Subaru, watching Otto recede in the distance, made that reply, Garfiel twisted his neck. Then, he went, “Well, fine,” tossing the thought aside as he gave Subaru’s shoulder a light pat.

“Something I wanna talk to ya about. I’m switchin’ places, so come on.”

With that, and an attitude that wouldn’t take no for an answer, Garfiel walked off without waiting for a reply. Watching his back, Subaru scratched his head, reluctantly following as he murmured to himself.

“Gimme a break… Another different development, geez.”

3

As Garfiel walked ahead, Subaru followed in his wake and trudged deeper into the woods.

It was common knowledge that forests were dangerous at night. And among them, Subaru had heard that the Lost Woods of Cremaldi were particularly perilous. That alone made him somewhat apprehensive about the stroll.

“Just don’t leave me alone out here, ’kay? I’m begging you.”

“Hey don’t say depressin’ stuff like that. It’s just a damned forest at night.”

“There’s a lot of people who think ‘just a damned forest at night’ is a lot more dangerous than you do. This goes for holding up in a fight, too, but I don’t have a nose that can pick up outsiders from a long range like you do.”

“Ha, you mean during daylight? Who’da thought ya still had a grudge over that?”

“Nah, not particularly. Otto’s forehead was the only thing that took real damage anyway…”

Besides, from Subaru’s perspective, the events during the daytime were days and days ago. Even if Otto was a close friend of Subaru’s, it would be too long a period for Subaru to sustain his anger.

“Besides, he’s not a close friend of mine. I’m the guy who saved his life; that’s about it.”

“That bro’s had it rough, too, huh…”

Subaru let the comment, sympathetic to Otto for some reason, slide as he took a good look at Garfiel.

He was short in stature, and while he looked slender, his flesh was supple and well honed. In the end, his stature wasn’t radically off from what made sense for human beings, but Subaru couldn’t put much stock in that personal perspective. In the first place, in that world, shape and form didn’t correspond with physical ability whatsoever. After all, even Rem, with her small frame, could whip around an iron ball.

Accordingly, at that juncture, Subaru had a different thought aimed at Garfiel’s back.

“—How long has it been since you’ve met Frederica?”

When the sentence suddenly sliced in, Garfiel’s shoulders made a visible jump of surprise.

He’d already confirmed that Frederica and Garfiel were related as older sister and younger brother. He’d also heard from the people concerned that their relationship was not harmonious.

It was just, he understood next to nothing about Frederica’s stance toward

the Sanctuary. At the very least, she'd engaged in a duel to the death with Elsa. The possibility of Frederica having invited Elsa into the mansion was zero— More importantly, there was definitely some other mover-and-shaker who ought to be topping his suspect list.

So to chalk up Frederica as an ally to a very firm extent, among other reasons —

"…And why the hell do I gotta talk to someone like *you* 'bout somethin' like that?"

"I just thought I'd ask and see. Figured if I did, you might actually give me an answer."

"Ha! Thought I talked about that to ya this mornin', too. That one ain't got no relation to anyone here on the inside. She left this place. Ain't related in any way."

"Yeah, about that."

What Garfiel, without turning in his direction, seemed to chew up and spit out, Subaru picked right back up. Ever since he'd learned of the relationship between Frederica and Garfiel, it kept tugging at him.

"Garfiel, I know you and Frederica are brother and sister."

"…Shit, someone's loose-lipped. The bastard, or Ram maybe?"

"Not something worth hiding, is it? Besides, it's thanks to that I'm wondering about something now. If you and Frederica are siblings, Frederica has to be mixed, too. So why is she outside?"

"_____"

The barrier that enveloped the Sanctuary sealed demi-humans of mixed blood —the so-called "mixed"—inside.

Accordingly, Emilia, Garfiel, and the others were held captive by the barrier, and it was in search of liberation from this that the scheme to challenge the Trial was hatched. At the very least, that was how Ryuzu's explanation portrayed it.

Therefore, it was strange that Frederica, related to Garfiel by blood, was not

held captive by the barrier.

“The fact that she isn’t means that there’s some kind of loophole. If you know of one, can you tell me about it?”

“And what if I told ya? The barrier ain’t openin’ up unless the Trial’s beaten. That ain’t changin’.”

“I just want to know. If I know, our choices increase. I’m the type of guy who wants to cram every bit of info in his head to figure out a way to clear stuff.”

“_____”

During the time they spoke, Garfiel never looked back, so Subaru could not read his emotions. It was just the oppressive sense conveyed by his back that told Subaru the expression on his face was not a pleasant one. Even so, the fact that Garfiel, a man of short temper, had not cut the conversation off meant he was unsure— That thought was probably Subaru’s bias at work.

“…Here we are.”

Rather than replying directly to Subaru, Garfiel said that while shoving aside vines blocking his path. During their conversation, the pair had continued to walk, apparently reaching their destination before Subaru could get an answer to his question.

That said, leaving the current back-and-forth with an ambiguous finish put Subaru in a bind, but—

“—Could you please not tease Young Gar too much, Young Su?”

Subaru opened his mouth, but before he could press for an answer, a young voice was cast his way. When he looked, he could tell there was an open space in the forest beyond the vines Garfiel was moving aside.

This place, a natural spectacle of light from the waning moon and the stars pouring down, engendered a surreal, almost phantasmal air. The beautiful girl standing under the moonlight and starlight only added to that sense.

“…But I will comment that your outward appearance is too young to be my type.”

“For a lad, you have quite a venomous tongue. Are you trying to compete

with Young Ros for Most Uncharming Child?”

“Come on, that’s going too far. Not giving up on being charming is one of my charms.”

Subaru made a pained smile at the various harsh assessments, as he stepped into the moonlit clearing. If he was facing just Garfiel, lowering his guard seemed a poor move but—

“If there’s a guarantor with him, that’s a different story, huh.”

Clicking his tongue with the air of a pout, Garfiel cut past Subaru’s flank and went straight to the center of the clearing. He went beside the girl standing there—the ephemeral individual called Ryuzu. Subaru smiled a bit at how both stood at seemingly prearranged places, but that was when he sensed something was off.

Ryuzu’s clothes were not the black outfit she wore at the inn, but a white, hooded robe.

“Er, Ryuzu, did you change your outfit?”

“This is a difficult time for someone my age, you see. Unfortunately, I am not a night owl like you, Young Su…”

“I watch late-night anime, so I’m not suffering, but…you wanted to see me, Ryuzu?”

“I do not mind if you take it as such. Young Gar is serving as my escort.”

When Ryuzu nodded in apparent confirmation, Garfiel stood still, arms folded. Closing one eye, his demeanor seemingly broadcasting that he wouldn’t butt in, Subaru lightly tilted his face up.

Overhead, a gentle breeze blew. He heard the sound of the leaves shaking, and the stars glimmered in the clear sky above.

“…This is a nice place. It’s like a secret base here in the forest.”

“’Tis merely an open field. It is altogether too empty to be called a base, is it not? …Though perhaps that is why I feel so comfortable in this place.”

“Anyway, it’s a relaxing place for you, Ryuzu? Guess we’re getting along really

well in half a day for you to be inviting me to a place like this. Guess I'm close to a chance for you to divulge your secrets?"

"You are speaking in a rather good mood."

With a neutral look on her face, and only her choice of words showing her age, Ryuzu was gentle during the exchange. That said, Subaru and the two of them had experienced a far different period of time. Considering only half a day's time had passed for Ryuzu and Garfiel, it was far too optimistic to think they had opened their hearts to him. There had to be some reason behind their actions.

"Garfiel's whims…ended up relieving his suspicions of me…maybe?"

That was about all he could come up with as a cause for the change in Garfiel's response.

Garfiel had changed each time around, but each being a change for the worse had really put Subaru in a bind. This time things were turning in the right direction. If that was so, he wanted a suitable return on his investment.

"Either way, I'm happy we're having a meaningful conversation…a friendly match before the war of words with Roswaal that's coming."

"The baggage Young Ros bears is heavy by its nature. Well, I suppose I shall strive to live up to your expectations."

Ryuzu said it with the nuance of a pained smile as she slapped her own hips. Naturally, Subaru didn't think she needed to play the part of an old woman that far, but he set that aside and proposed a different matter for debate. Namely—

"Earlier, I asked Garfiel this question, but maybe you could answer, Ryuzu?"

"…The reason Frederica could depart the Sanctuary, was it? You heard this from Young Gar as well, but what do you intend to do with the knowledge, Young Su?"

"I don't think my answer's changing either, namely that I'll think about that once I hear it. But…maybe this, then?"

Frederica, who'd slipped out of the barrier using some kind of exception, showed no special signs of bearing any penalty from it. If it was possible to

create a loophole he could make applicable to all residents of the Sanctuary, then…

“I’d use that to bring all of the Sanctuary’s people outside the barrier. During the day it got rejected because it’d leave people soulless shells, but if this worked, it’d be okay without having to take the Trial, right?”

“According to logic, perhaps. However, the Trial is obstinate. Evading it is…”

“I don’t want to make Emilia take the Trial. That’s completely me being selfish, though.”

“____”

When Subaru lightly scratched his cheek and made that reply, the ends of Ryuzu’s eyebrows fell in apprehension.

Tormented by the past, Emilia would continue to face the Trial and suffer, unable to surpass it. At the very least, Subaru knew that would continue for several days, if not longer.

“From the looks of it, I really don’t think she can overcome her past. So I don’t want to let her do it.”

“In terms of the Trial, perhaps that is for the best. But one does not choose the time and occasion for one’s troubles. Days of tranquility are not necessarily fated to continue. One cannot continue to flee from facing one’s troubles forever…”

“I’m not talking about forever. I’m talking about a retreat to prepare for facing it properly…one of those so-called strategic retreats. Ryuzu, just as you said, there’s times when you have to face trouble on disadvantageous ground… but shouldn’t a person work hard so you don’t have to?”

As Ryuzu continued her explanation, Subaru replied to her words to justify running away. This was because, at the very least, Subaru didn’t think there was any shame in turning your back on something. More than that, if, for instance, Emilia turned her back on her current troubles, there was absolutely no way that was enough to finish her.

“Even if it’s not now, Emilia will definitely be able to face her past someday.

The Trial made her remember that stuff. So Emilia has to make a choice, whether to overcome it or to forget it. That being the case, it's my role to knock down as much stuff blocking her way as I can."

"…Even if one tries to run, one can never escape the most trying times of all."

"I'm saying this 'cause I totally believe she can beat this without running away."

He didn't know if it was a suitable conclusion to the conversation, but Subaru smiled as he said it nonetheless. His smiling face, teeth on display, made some kind of deep impression on Ryuzu as she narrowed her eyes.

Perhaps the elder who didn't look her age was laughing at the idealism that smacked of youth.

"—Old hag, ya got bad taste."

The one offering those blunt words was Garfiel, standing there with his arms folded, silent last Subaru had checked. He opened the eye he had previously kept closed, glancing at the youthful elder right beside him as he said,

"I'm tellin' ya. It's just like Gaddgii Guaddzeadd the Hermit."

"I'm grateful, but same as usual, I don't have one clue what you're sayin' to me."

"What Young Gar wishes to say is, there is no such convenient loophole. I was in the wrong to allow you to jump to such conclusions, a bad habit of the elderly."

Breaking down the mystery phrase, Ryuzu twirled her pink hair around her finger. Taking in her reply, Subaru gave her a look that pressed his request for a more detailed explanation.

"In the end, it is because Frederica is an exception that she was able to go outside the barrier. She does not fulfill the conditions for being held captive by the barrier. Accordingly, she was able to leave. That is all it is."

"Conditions for being held captive by the barrier? Is there something besides being mixed?"

"No, it is not so. That is the only condition to be held captive by the barrier.

There are no exceptions.”

Even though Subaru was reflecting on her first roundabout statement, Ryuzu made an even more roundabout one that made him knit his brows.

Unraveling her statements, there was no change in the condition for the barrier encircling the Sanctuary. In other words, it wasn’t an issue with the barrier; it was an issue with Frederica. For it to be true that Frederica wasn’t caught by the barrier… “That means Frederica can’t be mixed?”

“Strictly speaking, the barrier fundamentally discerns mixed blood based on the ‘thickness’ of the blood. If one thickly carries both human and demi-human blood, he or she is held captive by the barrier. However…”

“If you’re less than half…like, a quarter or something, the barrier doesn’t work on you? Meaning…”

Breaking off his words, Subaru looked Garfiel’s way. His lips were twisted, and making a sour face, he clicked his fangs and went, “That’s right,” continuing his words with,

“Me an’ Frederica have different fathers—Me, I’m Garfiel Tinzel. She oughta have called herself by a different family name.”

The family name that Garfiel had not invoked even once before bolstered Subaru’s deduction.

The family name Garfiel claimed was certainly different from that of Frederica, who had introduced herself to Subaru and others as Frederica Baumann.

“So Frederica’s blood is thin… That’s why she could get outside the barrier.”

“She was the child of a human mother and a mixed-blood father. Accordingly, she is free to enter and leave the forest.”

“Ha! Free to enter and leave? Don’t make me laugh!”

When Ryuzu nodded gravely and murmured, Garfiel snarled in annoyance. He touched his fist to the white scar on his forehead, the pupils of his jade eyes narrowing.

“Enters and exits, my ass. She ain’t come back once in ten years, right?

Frederica abandoned this place. That's why that woman has nothin' to do with it anymore."

"Young Gar…"

Spitting the words out, Garfiel averted his eyes with a bitter look on his face. The youth curled his back, reducing his short frame even further, whereupon Ryuzu stretched and gave his shoulder one good smack.

After that, Ryuzu turned toward Subaru anew and spoke again.

"That is how it is. I am sorry to have dragged out a fruitless conversation."

"…Nah, that's fine. Certainly it wipes out one choice, but it beats keeping one on the list that can't ever be used. But that leaves the Trial in the end, huh?"

He couldn't claim not to have been disappointed. But his current words were no mere bluff, either. There was no disadvantage to learning more about the complicated situation between Garfiel and Frederica.

But having made a loop around that issue, he'd ended up right back at the topic with which they had started.

Breaking through the Trial was indispensable to liberate the Sanctuary—when he saw that, he felt like amorphous Fate was laughing down at him.

However, this time wouldn't end with Fate laughing at his expense.

"Ryuzu, Garfiel. Actually, I have a proposal."

"…Proposal, meaning what?"

"I have to talk to Roswaal, too, and I need Emilia's consent for this also…but I'll talk to you two about it first. It's a really important issue, so I'd appreciate if you didn't talk about it to anyone else."

Touching a raised finger to his lips, Subaru implored Garfiel and Ryuzu. That preamble brought questioning looks from the pair, but he owed them at least that much advance warning.

"_____"

Last time around, the attack on the mansion had proven Frederica's innocence. However, she had yet to reveal the mastermind who had brought

about the teleportation. Frederica didn't know of the existence of the "militants," but it was difficult to think that the manipulator was unrelated to that faction.

Accordingly, if Subaru's proposal leaked, that would provide an opening the mastermind could take advantage of. For that sake, he wanted to divulge the information only to the Sanctuary's two representatives in absolute confidence.

"Can you promise me that?"

"A promise, you say? Did you not say that this was a difficult word for you, Young Su?"

"Various circumstances have made me hate stuff like pacts or vows more and more, yeah. But promises are different. Someone's convinced me those are things you have to uphold, so… Both of you, please."

He didn't mind if it was an oral promise. Subaru trusted that neither of the two would say no.

To Subaru, the seeker of that promise, the pair fell silent for a time. But in place of the wordless Garfiel, Ryuzu made an elderly-sounding sigh and nodded.

"Understood. As you wish, we shall not speak of it to others. Speak of what you will."

"Big help. Thanks."

Thanking Ryuzu for her acquiescence, Subaru shifted his eyes toward Garfiel as well. He remained wordless, but he did not object. Taking his demeanor as acceptance, Subaru continued.

"I want to talk about the Trial. When I said earlier that I don't want Emilia, I meant it. I want both of you to accept that."

"Ah? Like hell. If the Princess ain't takin' it then what happens with the barrier, huh? Cryin' scared of old stories as much as ya want, the barrier ain't gonna yie…"

"I get that. So I'll take the Trial in her place— How about that?"

"_____"

As Garfiel bared his fangs, Subaru interrupted him and showed the card in his hand.

The contents made Garfiel's eyes open wide, and though Ryuzu had a neutral expression, her cheeks seemed to harden. Faced with the pair's reactions, Subaru explained what had happened at the tomb.

"When I went into the tomb to help Emilia, I was safe and sound, right? That's because I had the qualifications to take the Trial…and more to the point, because I broke through the Trial."

"Ya overcame the Trial…?!!"

He was reproducing the conversation they'd had after carrying Emilia to the Ryuzu residence. That time, too, Garfiel had been similarly surprised at Subaru's qualifications.

Given that, Subaru also anticipated the reaction coming from Ryuzu, standing right beside him.

"You're thinking this makes things complicated, Ryuzu?"

"I cannot dispute a single word, let alone the entire sentence. However, I do understand what you are saying, Young Su."

Unlike Garfiel, who had yet to recover from his surprise, Ryuzu looked like she'd quickly absorbed the impact. Even so, she seemed to be mulling a variety of things as Garfiel glanced toward her, bewilderment in his eyes.

It was a glance seemingly in search of a judgment. Receiving this, Ryuzu exhaled slightly.

And then—

"Young Su, I too have something important to speak with you about."

"What is it?"

"That, here and now, I must ask you to behave yourself, Young Su."

"———Huh?"

Yes? Or no?

Having been given no responses other than those, Subaru was

catastrophically late in comprehending the words making his eardrums tremble. No, it was not that he was late—simply that he didn't understand in time.

After all—

"—G, uu?!"

"Don't thrash around, 'kay? Or I'll just have to hurt ya more."

As Subaru stood still, it was Garfiel who grasped his neck, hoisting him aloft.

Garfiel used his exceptional strength to leave Subaru's legs floating in the air, and his grip put enough pressure on Subaru's throat that he could barely breathe.

"K, a, ku…na, a…!"

"'Why,' you seem to be asking. However, I do not ask for your forgiveness."

Slowly shaking her head from side to side, Ryuzu somehow seemed lonely as she spoke the words.

He didn't understand the reason why. Why, all of a sudden, was this act of violence being committed against—

"I shall uphold my promise. I shall tell no one— This, I swear upon the name of Ryuzu Shima."

She grew distant. Both what Ryuzu was saying, and the voice with which she said it.

In its place, his mind focused on the heat from Garfiel's hand, evaporating along the border between reality and dream.

It was as if the strings holding him up were snapping one by one— Where had he gone wrong?

Within the darkness, still comprehending nothing, Subaru's mind flipped over and fell.

4

—The first thing that tugged at the edge of his mind was the repeating sound of water droplets.

“____”

The water drops fell at regular, rhythmic intervals, which, in that soundless space, seemed like a roaring cacophony. In accordance with that hallucination, his sleeping brain resumed activity, and he keenly felt blood coursing through the entirety of his body. As that blood coursed, he strongly felt numbness in his hands and feet, and when he tried to squirm around—he could not.

“—?!!”

That was the moment his mind instantly awakened, and Subaru reclaimed his own existence. At the same time, he reconfirmed that which was not natural: he could not see the presumably visible world, and his presumably mobile limbs could not move.

—Had his eyes been mangled, and his hands and feet lopped off?!

The worst of possibilities rose into the back of his brain, but before he could despair at the hasty conclusion, he noticed the oppressive sensation over his head.

The tightness he felt around both of his eyes was probably a blindfold. Similarly, his hands and feet were likely tied to render them unable to move. He felt the backs of his hands were tied; his ankles were firmly bound as well.

And there was a gag in his mouth. At that point, he could comprehend it, like it or not—He was imprisoned.

“____”

Though confused at the sudden circumstance, Subaru used his brain to somehow understand the present situation.

Unless the Return by Death point had changed, he would begin again at the same restart point: the stonework room in the tomb. In other words, his current predicament had nothing to do with Return by Death. Therefore, it was related to the events that had occurred just before he blacked out—

“____”

He’d headed for the woods with Garfiel, and in the middle of conversing with Ryuzu, he’d been mugged—

“—From the looks of it, ya just woke up. Lucky, ain’t ya.”

It happened right after Subaru’s memory came back, allowing him to grasp the present circumstance.

A voice descended from right above, almost as if it had been waiting for that exact moment. Subaru, belly down on the floor, lifted his head, and though unable to see, he was able to guess the other party’s position as he called out.

“A—i—u…”

“Not sure what ya even sayin’, but it’s probably my name. Hold on a sec. I’m takin’ the gag out right now. I’ll tell ya in advance, ain’t no point callin’ for help.”

He felt footsteps drawing near. Someone right beside him audibly squatted down, touching his hand to Subaru’s mouth. The hand undid the tightly tied gag, freeing Subaru’s jaw and tongue.

“There we…”

“—Anyone!! I’m over here!! Save me!!”

“Gah?! Why you, I told ya not to shout!!”

When Subaru broke the admonition the instant he was free to do so, his jaw was closed by force. His cheekbones creaked under the strength of Garfiel’s grip. Subaru managed not to moan from the pain as he said, “L-like there’s one prisoner told not to call for help who wouldn’t……!”

“Shout in anger or scream, it’ll do ya no good. This is a hideaway, no one in the Sanctuary is comin’. Of course, it ain’t nowhere close to the settlement. Look, keep yer mouth shut or I’ll gag ya again.”

Right up close, he butted foreheads with the presumably blindfolded Subaru while delivering the warning. Subaru gasped, taking his words as meaning that even if Subaru struggled, no one would come to his aid.

“Looks like yer gonna behave now. I don’t wanna hurt ya.”

He clicked his tongue, and the enmity coming from Garfiel stabbed into him. Showered in it, Subaru clenched his teeth, still needing to ask as to his true intent.

Why had he imprisoned Subaru? He had to ask, and that went for what Ryuzu was thinking, too.

“…First, can I ask where this is, in detail? I’d like to use it for reference when I escape.”

“Ha!! Man, ain’t you composed! I thought ya’d be shakin’ in yer boots. I think a tiny bit better o’ ya.”

“That’s ’cause I learned lately that chattering teeth get you nowhere. I’ll broaden my questions bit by bit until I make you answer one… How long did I sleep?”

“…That, I can answer. ’Bout half a day. It’s the middle of Fire Time.”

With Subaru negotiating from the palm of his hand, Garfiel lowered the tone of his voice as he replied.

With the state of his stomach, he could believe that half a day had passed. If that was the case, on the outside, Emilia ought to already have noticed Subaru’s absence and grown concerned, but—

“I have confidence I stand out enough no one would forget me in half a day. How did you fool everyone?”

“That ain’t a problem *you* need to worry about. Ya got somethin’ more important ya need to worry about— Or, maybe ya don’t?”

Abruptly, the tone of Garfiel’s voice grew graver. Behind his blindfold, Subaru knit his brows.

The power behind Garfiel’s words just then felt…off. They carried conviction, certainty. Garfiel was sure of something about Subaru, yet Subaru had no idea what that was.

Hence, Garfiel’s current statement felt very off to Subaru.

“Don’t play dumb at this point. Where are yer heroics now, huh?”

“…Sorry, but I seriously don’t know what you’re saying. If you’ve got something against me, could you just come out and say it? Just like Ram would.”

“Cheap trash talk there, damn it— And I just loooove cheap trash talk.”

Spitting out a sharp breath, Garfiel grabbed Subaru by the collar and lifted him up.

Subaru remained unable to move as his back was pressed against the cold, hard wall. He remained like that when he felt something sharp—probably one of Garfiel’s claws—touching against his throat.

“Not afraid o’ death, huh. You guys are all famous for bein’ messed up in the head, y’know.”

“W—ait… This seriously doesn’t add up… What are you accusing me o…”

“Don’t act dumb!! With that much miasma comin’ from inside yer body, you wanna say ya don’t know? Think that excuse’ll work, huh?—Like hell, Witch Cultist!!”

“—H—uh?”

The claw strongly pressed in, and Subaru’s throat slightly tore. There was a faint, sharp pain to it, and he felt blood bubble up from the laceration, but Subaru had no mind to spare for pain.

Surprise and impact greater than it pounded into Subaru’s brain, exceeding his comprehension.

“The scent’s been thick on ya since the moment ya came out of the tomb. Buuuut, sometimes even normal guys have thick miasma. ‘The suspicious Pitero was acquitted.’ So I meant to do nothin’ to ya…but then, take the Trial for the Princess, huhhh?”

“_____”

“That ain’t funny. Who’d follow heartless words like yours, ya bastard fool!!”

“Heartless…?”

“Hell yeah. Ya used all those big fancy words, made this excuse ’n’ that, but where was there any concern for Lady Emilia in that attitude, huh? Ya got the same eyes as the jerk I hate the most. —Ya got eyes that don’t see anythin’, except yerself.”

He wished he could have shouted in a large voice, *It's all a big misunderstanding.* But the deep emotion he'd felt just following Return by Death—at the fact he'd put his own relief upon ascertaining he'd Returned by Death before thinking about Emilia—prevented him from refuting Garfiel's suspicions.

Furthermore, the searing words he had hurled made the back of Subaru's mind recall a prior event: a past situation greatly resembling the present scene —

"A-a Witch's miasma from my body…?"

"Thaaat's right. Don't ya dare try and act like ya didn't know. It's real bad in yer case."

"…And when I…came out of the tomb, it was thicker…?"

It had changed because he had taken the Tri—no, because he had Returned by Death. Over the course of being revived by the power of the Witch, its color, its scent, thickened as it entwined around Subaru's existence.

—Rem had called it the aroma…

"The lingering scent of the Witch…!"

"Ha!! An interestin' name for it. It's the stench of one smelly Witch!!"

The moment after he wrung out his voice, Garfiel violently hurled Subaru onto the floor.

Unable to break his fall, Subaru slammed shoulder-first with the floor. The dull pain would have made him let out a moan, but he forced it back inside, cursing the awfulness of his situation anew.

Once upon a time, it had been the trigger for Rem to suspect Subaru, and this had caused his death more than once.

—Once again, the lingering scent of the Witch reared its ugly head before Subaru to impede him once more.

"_____"

"What do ya wanna go into the tomb for? What are you plannin'? It's a

Witch’s tomb. Ain’t nothin’ good, that’s for sure.”

Every time he’d returned, he’d decided Garfiel’s shifts in attitude were based on whim. He was wrong.

The changes in Garfiel’s demeanor were based on the changes in the density of the miasma enveloping Subaru.

That was why, the first time around, when the miasma was thinnest around him, he’d proposed that Subaru clear the tomb, and why, ever since, as the density of the miasma increased, he became visibly distrustful of Subaru. It was also why, that time around, he had landed in a cell.

—And for Subaru, that fact meant his situation was bad to the extreme.

“____”

His relationship with Garfiel had worsened because of Return by Death and would worsen further according to the number of times he did so. On top of that, with the restart point being the tomb, he was overwhelmingly short on time to improve that relationship.

When they’d first met, Rem had likewise viewed Subaru as dangerous due to the miasma, but even so, she deferred judgment while she kept him under her eye. But the short-tempered Garfiel would do no such thing.

If he saw the miasma enveloping Subaru as a danger, he wouldn’t flinch from instantly eliminating that danger.

“W-wait… if that’s so, why did you lock me in here…?”

“Huhhhh?”

“You said I’m abnormal… If you decided it’s dangerous to let me in the tomb, it’s…weird that you’d lock me in here like this. Why didn’t you get rid of me…?”

“Get rid of you! Hah! Man, stuff like that just rolls off yer tongue!!”

Subaru’s query drew a sharp exhale as Garfiel clicked his tongue in disgust.

“Me, if I could, I’d have done it already. But no can do.”

“Can’t do it…?”

“Because ya did a good job of wormin’ in with other people, that’s why. If I

get hasty ’n’ lay a hand on ya, it’ll be an explosion like the Fall of Fort Tesla. No thanks.”

He used one of his frequent mystery phrases, but this time, he was able to understand the content based on what preceded and followed the statement. The outburst Garfiel feared was from people learning Subaru was not safe and sound—likely meaning Emilia and the people of Earlham Village rebelling against the Sanctuary.

But his seeing the danger in that meant—

“Your home’s not as whipped as you want, huh… To you, I’m a dangerous ingredient *and* a way to keep them in line, then?”

“A crafty lil’ bastard, ain’t ya. I suppose if ya weren’t, ya wouldn’t be acting so cunning either.”

The voice was very close. With Subaru on the floor, Garfiel must have crouched and brought his face very close. He continued to feel very close when he grabbed Subaru’s head and continued.

“Ta be honest, the Trial stuff shook me up. But I got over all that. There ain’t no change in the barrier. Plain as day yer lyin’.”

“Ahh, that… Actually, the tomb’s Trial is three parts in all.”

“Got some guts, in the situation yer in. I’ll praise yer shitty courage at least.”

“Guess you don’t believe me, huh… I completely messed up the order of that conversation…”

He should have spoken of his having the qualifications for the Trial, stated he’d overcome it, and brought to light that there actually was more than one gateway through which to pass. It was no exaggeration to say he’d disclosed that to a distrustful party in the worst manner possible.

“…What’ll happen to me?”

“Suppose I’ll say, depends on Lady Emilia. For now, ya stay locked up. I’ll make sure ya don’t die on me…but how ’bout we have a little chat after the barrier’s down?”

In other words, *I won’t kill you.* Garfiel’s announcement of Subaru’s continued

confinement made him swallow his spit.

While he was stripped of the ability to move, various issues arose in the back of his brain.

—Emilia was dealing with the Trial, Roswaal was off duty with Ram attending to him, Puck was unresponsive, Elsa was assaulting the mansion with her probable coconspirator the Beast Master, the puller of Frederica's strings remained hidden, Petra would be swallowed by the tragedy, Rem continued to sleep that very moment, and Beatrice was clutching that magic tome.

And amid all that, Garfiel viewed him as dangerous because of miasma; Ryuzu concurred and was on Garfiel's side; plus the people of Earlham Village were primed to explode in Subaru's absence.

"Ha."

The hell was this. What the hell was this? What could—what should he do, and how…?

What the hell did he need to do to break through, to smash apart the situation with so many obstacles in his path?

From the very point he'd entered a confined state, he was caught in a state of "check"—

"—?!!"

"—Oh no ya don't."

A foreign object was stuffed into Subaru's mouth, making him fiercely retch in shock. But having done the deed, this did not make Garfiel hesitate; as Subaru writhed, he swiftly repositioned the gag.

Now he couldn't raise his voice. And simultaneously—

"I don't know what the hell yer thinkin', but I ain't gonna let ya kill yerself either."

"_____"

When he'd impulsively tried to bite his tongue, Garfiel had obstructed him from doing so. Having the gag stuffed in robbed his jaw of its freedom; nor

could he wipe away the drool spilling out of the corners of his mouth.

Suicide, and thus, Return by Death, were locked away from him.

Garfiel had a reason to keep him alive. Accordingly, he couldn't let Subaru die.

"Me, what I can't stand the most is *that* attitude."

"A—i—u……!"

"It ain't just the miasma— Those eyes, they're just like that bastard Roswaal's."

Lobbing those words, Garfiel kicked the moaning Subaru. Subaru rolled onto the hard floor, slamming into the wall, and remained faceup afterward, while desperately exhaling raggedly over and over.

"Just leave food 'n' stuff to me— And don't try anythin' funny."

With those threatening words as his last, Garfiel's footsteps grew distant.

"Aeee! A—i—u! Aeeee!!"

Squirming his body, he lobbed his voice at the receding presence. His incomprehensible voice did not make the other party halt.

Subaru's desperate voice continued to fall on deaf ears until he could sense the presence no more—

"—a—i—uu!!!"

—To Subaru, the worst of all prison lives had begun.

5

The hollow passage of time slowly whittled away at Subaru's mind.

"____"

It had been several hours since Garfiel had departed, and he had fallen into a full-blown state of captivity—he was vague as to whether it was really a few hours, but he could only wonder what was going on outside in the Sanctuary.

Thinking back to his exchange with the now-absent Garfiel, there was no way the situation was sweet and rosy.

—The heck am I doing at a time like this?

Gagged and thus unable to even speak to himself, he mostly sucked up the drool as it dripped, and berated himself.

Subaru had a veritable mountain of obstacles he had to overcome. And yet, that very Subaru was unable to do anything, writhing around like a potato worm as he was at present.

“____”

Could he resolve anything by trusting someone and explaining the problems? He wanted an answer to that.

He held love for Emilia, distrust for Roswaal, remorse for Beatrice, anger for Garfiel, hatred for Elsa, and these swirled and swirled, further muddying Subaru’s heart.

The blindfold was tied so tight it hurt. Unable to see anything, Subaru could only direct his questions at his own heart. His interior was packed full of suspicions and mysteries; in other words, he was at a stalemate.

All of his thoughts were deadlocked, actions held in check, and Subaru, not permitted even to kill himself, felt a sense of impatience eating away at him. As time passed, the countdown to the calamity that would inevitably arrive advanced, one second at a time.

“____”

With the fires of impatience burning away at his heart, the horror show at the mansion played anew in the back of Subaru’s mind.

Though he had saved no one from that tragedy, that didn’t mean his gains from it were zero, either. He learned that Frederica was unconnected to the attack, and the attackers were Elsa and the Beast Master.

More than anything else, his greatest gain was learning that the day of the attack on the mansion changed according to his own actions.

Between the last time around and the time before that, there had been a gap of around three days between the attacks on the mansion. Besides, Elsa had clearly stated that the timetable been moved up. That information was a big

deal.

Subaru had hard evidence he had at least until the evening of his return to the mansion the first time around—the fifth day from the starting point.

“____”

But at the same time, that fact raised a different issue.

Given the mansion would be attacked upon his return, evacuating Rem and the others wasn’t realistic. There was no option besides repelling the attackers, Elsa and the Beast Master, on site.

As fighting strength for the sake of that, Frederica and Ram just weren’t enough by themselves. In the present circumstances, the only people besides that pair that could be relied on for combat power were Emilia, Roswaal, and Garfiel.

Roswaal had his wounds, Emilia had the barrier, and there was a wall stopping Garfiel from trusting him.

Or, perhaps, if he could borrow the strength of the final person left in the mansion—

“ea, oiu…”

He seemed to weep as he murmured the girl’s name.

—In the end, Subaru still didn’t understand where Beatrice stood.

Beatrice had shouted that she’d obeyed everything written in the Gospel in her hands to date.

They’d slammed invective into one another, glaring with mutual disgust. When Subaru pondered if anything could be nurtured amid such a relationship, every part of him felt very alone.

—Was it really like that?

That’s right, affirmed a loud voice within him.

A tearful voice declared firmly that Beatrice had made it all up.

Even after everything that had happened, Subaru wanted to believe that Beatrice’s words were lies.

What he had seen on the verge of death, her tearful eyes and tearful voice, made Subaru doubt Beatrice's words.

"A, oe…"

Even if everything to date had been according to what was written in the book.

Even if the tragedy at the mansion had come to pass because of her obeying what was in the book.

—Right now, I want to hear your voice so much.

"____"

No one was coming. No one could hear him. He'd been left behind in that place, all alone.

Amid that unrelenting darkness, Subaru gradually traced that very faint hope and continued clinging to it.

—And so more time passed while Subaru remained in the dark.

He was having a nightmare from which he could not awaken. Over and over, he experienced his moments of remorse at things beyond his reach.

Petra, reduced to only an arm. Frederica, sliced to death in a place beyond where Subaru's eyes could reach. Ram, whereabouts unknown. Rem, of whom all he knew was the statement that he was too late. And in the final instant, Beatrice.

"____"

More, more, over and over, the red-dyed scenes repeated.

Emilia, collapsed on the floor in the loot cellar. Old Man Rom, his throat rent apart like glass. Felt, cruelly sliced apart in a single blow. Rem, dying from wasting away. The people of Earlham Village dead at the hands of the Witch Cult. The children stuffed into the storage shed. Petra, with her eyeballs gouged out. Ram, wearing the makeup of death. Rem, her entire body defiled. The villagers slaughtered a second time over. Ram, impaled as she shielded them. The subjugation force members, crushed by the White Whale's giant body and erased by the mist. The beast men torn to pieces by the hands of Sloth. The

villagers and subjugation force members swallowed up by the deadly blast—Corpses, corpses, corpses, surrounded by death, regrets piled atop each other as far as he could see.

“____”

His body squirmed, seeking the pain from the ropes tying his legs and hands. Pain was good. Right then, it was what he wanted.

In that pitch darkness, unable to see anything, he saw images of scenes of regret over and over and over.

Unable to hear a thing, he heard the death cries of the people he had failed to save, replayed countless times.

His despair at how his hands were unable to reach them came back again and again, wearing away at his soul.

“____”

It wasn’t the first time he’d been left behind in the dark.

He’d been abandoned in a cold, lightless cave, once.

But at the time, his heart had been ruled by anger and hatred, and Rem, in a near-death state, was present, so in a real sense Subaru had not been alone.

This time, he was alone.

In a real sense, this was the first time Subaru had tasted isolation rotting his heart away.

“____”

During his state of confinement, it was not literally true he had no contact with anyone.

Just as Garfiel had stated, he had a reason he couldn’t let Subaru die. Because of that, he brought food to Subaru and ensured Subaru’s other bodily functions were accounted for.

Though neither pleasant nor polite, he had a caretaker nonetheless. For the victim of confinement, it was nothing praiseworthy whatsoever.

After all, the existence of such care did absolutely nothing to help cure

Subaru’s isolation.

“_____”

He heard the putter of bare feet walking on the floor, thus sensing someone’s approach.

It was the second time, or perhaps the third, Subaru had sensed his caretaker coming to bring him food.

“_____”

His caretaker remained wordless, likely having placed the metal tray on the floor. Then, he slowly lifted up Subaru’s head, removing the gag. That instance constituted a chance to bite his tongue, but—

“—aghh”

With a robotic movement, a small fist thrust into his mouth.

The fist blocked the motions of his jaw as the other party used an open hand to retrieve a plate from the tray. The contents of the tray were poured through the gap in his mouth, conducting a forced feeding.

The food was closest to chilled-over soup. He had no time to taste it, desperately swallowing it down as it invaded his throat, gasping as it fell into his stomach. It was not so much eating as simple oral intake.

Once this was done, the gag was contemptuously shoved into the coughing Subaru once more. Making no move to wipe the soup from his dirty face, the caretaker checked Subaru’s underwear to see that they were not soiled, whereupon the caretaker swiftly departed.

During that time, the caretaker had not spoken to Subaru even once.

The first time, Subaru had tried to speak through the gag, but the other party had not responded in any fashion.

The caretaker gave off the impression of an unthinking doll.

“_____”

Coming into contact with such a caretaker drove Subaru’s heart deeper into a corner.

Knowing that someone was there had only deepened Subaru's isolation.

Time was passing. It wasn't simply in his head; it was time he could not take back.

What time was it, then? What day was it? What had happened, what hadn't happened, what was going on?

—When, and how, would he die?

Subaru thought in that fashion as he experienced the unpleasant sensation of the soup drying on his cheek.

A man's heart was weak to darkness and isolation. He'd heard something like that from…somewhere.

When he'd heard that talk, Subaru had probably given it a good laugh. In terms of mental strength, he couldn't really compare to a lot of people, but even so, he must have found being broken by isolation and the dark to be absurd.

He didn't know what experiment that talk resulted from, but he'd never end up that way.

Without any empirical basis, he simply figured he'd be all right. What a little fool that made him.

"____"

And left in actual darkness and isolation, a fair bit of time came to pass.

Right then, all Subaru could think of was death.

He was thinking of ways to die. He yearned for "death."

Perhaps, even, that desire might not have been related to Return by Death.

He was afraid of the dark. He was terrified of isolation. He hadn't known.

If he stopped breathing, wouldn't he die? If he kept chafing his arms against the ropes, might he die of blood loss? If he rammed his head against the floor, how about that? What if the next moment, an earthquake happened and he tumbled into a crevice?

There was food that had fallen all over the place. What if worms came and ate

Subaru whole? He'd heard that mice gnawed on the fingers and ears of the sick. Why didn't he make himself bait and find out for himself?

If he forgot that he was even himself rather than just a simple collection of meat, then—

"_____"

He was so thick with love of death; he was late in noticing.

Footsteps. He sensed a human presence approaching. Was it time for his care again? Another opportunity to deepen his isolation.

He heard the sound of something pounding on the hard floor. Slowly, it was heading for the prone Subaru. It drew nearer, even as Subaru had lost track of whether he was faceup or facedown at the moment.

Death from hunger. How about starvation? If he obstinately refused to eat, death would approach, slowly but surely. Thinking it worth a try, he tried to reject the hand his caretaker stretched toward him—

"—I imagined you would be in a terrible state, but this is even graver than I presumed."

For a moment, Subaru didn't understand what it was.

In that world, a sound beyond his own filthy breathing and his beating heart that could make his eardrums tremble? He felt like it was something beyond his knowledge. Very, very late in the process, he comprehended it was something called a "voice."

Someone's voice. The voice of another person, something he hadn't heard in how many centuries? And of someone known to him.

"—a"

"Oh, please do not raise your voice. We are crossing a rather dangerous bridge, so I would rather not be caught here by a guard. Neither of us is very good at giving up, you know?"

With an easygoing tone, the other party replied to the fallen Subaru's lamenting voice while doing something to his body. The light sound made Subaru comprehend the bindings on his hands and feet had been untied. His

arms, his legs—they could move freely.

Rolling his body over, he faced upward. Why was it so hard to breathe?

“I shall take out the gag. Incidentally, the blindfold, too.”

“____”

With the cause of his difficult breathing removed, saliva flowed out from the corner of his mouth. Along with that, the blindfold tied around his head all that time was undone. It was a liberating feeling. His tear-coated eyelids moved around.

With a sound like starch being ripped off, his eyelids opened. The darkness, and time itself, brightened—

“In any case, I am relieved to have found you alive, Mr. Natsuki.”

—These words spoken, after what seemed like centuries had passed, Otto Suwen smiled.

6

To the face before his eyes, Subaru was speechless, reduced to staring in astonishment.

“What is it? You have the look of a man in complete disarray, seeing the seemingly impossible, unable to believe the work of your own brain, and as a result, suspecting it may be a dream or illusion?”

“…That’s not…”

Otto had a hand on his hip with a fairly indignant look on his face. Subaru looked up at him, somehow managing a murmur.

His throat was a mess, his entire body fatigued from wasting away, enough that the air itself felt heavy. Just moving his body and his previously bound hands and feet a little sent pain running through them, multiple ills he hadn’t noticed during his confinement.

Even so, he was alive. And so too—

“—You coming is the last, last thing I expected.”

“Well, I can understand that. To be honest, I do come off as rather unreliable…”

“More like, on a level it just flows out of you from head to toe… I’m not exaggerating here. In all that time…you coming here didn’t enter my mind the tiniest little bit…”

“Even in this situation, this person really knows how to mercilessly shave one’s spirit down…!!”

“Hey, you’re the one who said…not to talk loudly…”

When Otto raised what seemed like a voice of lament, he made a face unaccepting of Subaru’s admonition. This exchange, too, brought back old times. It seemed the man there was the real Otto.

“All that isolation, seeing hallucinations… What state would I be in if you were the first guy popping up in ’em…”

“It is remarkable you can say all that with your throat and body in such a difficult state. Here, water.”

Otto tendered a metallic canteen to silence Subaru’s sharp tongue. Taking it, he practically bathed in it, drinking the remaining water, amounting to half or so of the container. As a matter of fact, he did shower a portion onto his face.

After dampening his throat with the cold water and crudely washing his dirty face, his mood improved a fair margin.

“So finally ready to speak?”

“*Geho!* …Just barely, yeah. Can I ask something first? Right now, how many days have passed?”

“If by that, Mr. Natsuki, you mean in reference to the night of your disappearance, three days have passed since then. Outside this structure, it is night…the time of the Trial.”

“Three days……!! And the Trial is still continuing?!”

The answer to his question, and the information appended to it, abruptly changed the look on Subaru’s face.

If it was nighttime three days later, the time was half a day after the time limit regarding to the mansion. And the continuation of challenging the Trial had a direct bearing on the situation in the Sanctuary after Subaru's confinement.

Subaru's reaction elicited a tired shake of Otto's head as he spoke.

"Mr. Natsuki, I understand how you feel, but Lady Emilia has her own ideas. Lifting the barrier remains just as much a necessity as before, for one thing…"

"…Mind if I ask what's happened in the time I've been gone?"

"Due to the circumstances, I cannot speak about it in much detail, but…"

Thus, inserting that odd preface, Otto began slowly speaking about what had happened since. The real issue was what had happened the night Subaru had disappeared—in other words, what had been triggered by Subaru's disappearance.

"Quite naturally, of course, news of Mr. Natsuki vanishing immediately spread. It was said that you had a promise with the Marquis for that night, and even without that, Mr. Natsuki, you are a rather famous individual, so…"

"You can ditch the flattery. Go on, please."

"I did not particularly intend it as flattery, but…at any rate, Mr. Natsuki going missing stirred up the settlement considerably. In particular, Lady Emilia seemed to be in a rather large panic, enough that she did not challenge the Trial the following day."

"Emilia did that…"

Hearing the word *panic* made him imagine Emilia's mental state had been in a pretty bad state. Without Subaru there at her side, she had to do without his emotional support on that first day.

Well after the fact, he regretted being unable to encourage and console her with gentle words.

"…Shall I continue, Mr. Natsuki?"

"…Yeah, please."

In a composed manner, Otto explained the happenings in the Sanctuary that

followed from an observer's perspective.

Subaru's disappearance had been blamed on having entered the Lost Woods at night. Ram had been unable to locate Subaru even with her Clairvoyance, and for a time, Emilia had gone into the forest to search. Volunteers from the people of Earlham Village gathered together as well, forming and dispatching search parties that searched around the forest.

And without any foot-dragging, Garfiel had cooperated unreservedly with their efforts—

"Lights the match, then comes running with a water bucket……somehow, he's managed pretty well on the outside."

Though his comment suggested Subaru's disappearance was covered up nicely, opening the lid of the barrel could not have revealed any sloppier method. Garfiel's actions seemed completely random.

"But in point of fact, Emilia did call off the search for me…"

"That was at once Lady Emilia's thinking, and the Marquis's voice at work."

When Subaru lowered his head in doubt, Otto raised a finger, wagging it left and right.

"It was the Marquis who made the suggestion to Lady Emilia. If searching the forest with small numbers was to no avail, a large-scale search party was the only viable means. For that sake, the liberation of the Sanctuary needed to take precedence."

"A search party for the forest… And Emilia swallowed that down?"

"The Marquis made a solemn, formal vow that he would in no way slight Mr. Natsuki, whose meritorious service had subjugated the White Whale and destroyed an Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins of the Witch Cult."

Otto awkwardly lowered his eyes, but inside his heart, Subaru was outright stupefied. Setting aside however Garfiel may have explained things away, there were far too many mysteries behind Roswaal's attitude.

In the first place, Subaru had meant to pin Roswaal down with questions that time around. He wanted to inquire about the tragedy at the mansion; how

Beatrice, with a Gospel in her hands, was connected to it, and what she, a spirit, was thinking; and the one most knowledgeable about all of those things had to be Roswaal, who'd promised to answer his questions.

This time, Subaru's objective was to get Roswaal to divulge the relationship between the pair, allowing nothing to remain hidden. Though Garfiel and Ryuzu's interference had gotten in the way of that—

"With that vow made, Lady Emilia was challenging the Trial yesterday and today with great intensity evident. Her heart seems quite pained at being unable to overcome the Trial even so…"

"…Something's been bothering me a little since earlier, actually."

"Yes? What is that?"

Breaking off from his tale, Otto raised an eyebrow. "It's just," said Subaru as a preamble before continuing to say, "that really sounds like a chat between other people. How do you explain that you heard it, too?"

Setting aside the crux of the story, Otto was himself one of the people concerned when it came to the various issues happening in the Sanctuary. Why did his story since earlier sound so much like something overheard from another group's discussions?

"Ahhh, that is what you are asking… This is somewhat difficult for me to say, but…"

Receiving Subaru's query, Otto behaved in a blatantly suspicious manner. Scratching his own cheek with a finger, he made a pained smile with an awkward look on his face.

What the heck did he mean by "difficult to say"? wondered Subaru, girding himself a little.

"What? You've made one shocking report after another. Throwing something else in might stand out less than you imagine. I think you should reveal whatever secrets you may have, like the amount left in your bank account."

"If you were to see my bank ledger, you might end up frightened out of your wits, Mr. Natsuki."

“Don’t try to gloss things over.”

Subaru was the one who started the flippant comments, but he wouldn’t let Otto escape through playing along.

Discerning Subaru’s will from his gaze, Otto sighed with an air of reluctance and finally answered.

“Er, actually, you see…just like you, Mr. Natsuki, Garfiel has set his eyes on me, and I am currently in the middle of fleeing this way and that throughout the Sanctuary.”

“—Huh?”

“I mean! If you are a victim of imprisonment, Mr. Natsuki, then I am a fugitive being pursued! All of this information, I gathered while on the run… That is why, as a matter of fact, they *are* things I have heard.”

With Subaru taken aback, Otto looked him over as his shoulders sank with an exceptionally tired expression.

Blinking several times at his explanation, Subaru stared at Otto more intently. Then, he belatedly realized that Otto, standing right before his eyes, was in a grimy, tattered state.

Given his standing as a merchant, Otto, mindful of visual impressions, was always very nicely groomed. He’d also heard directly from Otto that this was part and parcel of his preparedness as a merchant.

It was this Otto who, at present, had sweat and soil marring his face, his hair all a jumble. His hat was squished, his clothes were damaged from snagging all over the place, his boots were grimy with mud, and appended to all of that was —

“—Man, you reek! It’s getting into my eyes!”

“That was exceptionally blunt of you, but you realize this applies not only to me, but to you as well?!”

“Ahh, well, I suppose so… I suppose you’re right, ha-ha.”

Subaru made a listless laugh as he put his nose to his own sleeve. He indeed smelled terrible.

Thanks to being blindfolded and isolated, his vision and hearing had grown exceptionally sensitive, but his undamaged nose seemed to have been wildly thrown off as well. But the largest reason for that was that it was not his body odor at work.

It was a more distinct, sharper stench that filled the area around him, seemingly piercing his nose.

“This really bad smell, it couldn’t be… It’s not the scent of miasma, right…?”

“I do not know why you are speaking of miasma all of a sudden, but you need not be concerned. We are indeed near a Witch’s tomb, but nothing that dangerous is hovering about. That is not to say the cause of this scent is a completely safe thing, but…”

“You know about miasma?”

“Enough to know that my head would be acting strangely if it was miasma lingering in the air…”

For an instant, his statement that he could sense miasma put Subaru on guard. But Otto’s subsequent testimony cleared his wariness away. Either way, the scent had nothing to do with miasma—

“Meaning, this place must really smell. I don’t wanna stay here for long.”

“In a quite different sense, I concur. I would like us to distance ourselves before the guard returns.”

“The way you keep mentioning guard this, guard that sounds real scary. But before that…”

Otto kept his expressive voice down, trying to advance to the actual escaping part. However, before following his plan, Subaru had something he had to make certain of first.

He had to get Otto to continue talking about his standing in the Sanctuary.

“Let me ask this. How did Garfiel end up after you? Running around from him is why you look all messed up like that, right?”

“_____”

“I’m genuinely grateful you came to help me. To be honest, before I saw your face, I was backed into a corner so hard I thought death was better. But…”

There, Subaru’s words trailed off as he gazed at Otto, pressed into silence.

For once, Otto received Subaru’s gaze head on with an expression close to dead seriousness. Subaru continued.

“I can’t figure out why you’d lend me a hand. Logically, I can see the possibility, but…”

It wasn’t that he was doubting Otto, but Subaru couldn’t put a finger on his motives. If things were bad enough that he was in a serious mess, having made an enemy out of Garfiel, the strongest fighter in the Sanctuary, then why help Subaru? Of course, there were a few potential reasons.

By gaining Subaru’s favor and laying the foundation for dealing with the Sanctuary’s other various problems, he would gain a lot of goodwill with the Emilia faction. Even Roswaal, the greatest contributor to the faction, would surely remember his deeds. That would be sufficient for Otto’s original objective of gaining favor with the Marquis.

But it was merely sufficient. In terms of profits, big scores, and any other mercantile affair, the odds were stacked against him.

Total defeat seemed inevitable. With no clear means of victory, it was no gamble; it was suicidal conduct, simple as that.

If he had a reason for that act not to be suicidal conduct, that might have been a different story, but—

“You don’t seem the type who likes getting himself killed.”

“…Is there any person who *does* like getting himself killed?”

To Otto’s question, Subaru twisted his neck and went, “Who knows?”

At the very least, there was one man in the room who’d spent the last three days thinking of nothing but death.

Yes, during those three days, Subaru had begged for death a number of times. Even as he begged for death, he saw once more all the deaths he had experienced to date. He had told Otto the truth. It was not in jest whatsoever:

In those entire three days, he had not remembered Otto even once.

In one sense, this was the trust Subaru held toward Otto.

With so many terrible situations piled atop one another, he didn't want there to be any reason to be on his guard even against Otto.

It was a very evasive kind of trust.

"So answer me, Otto. Why did you come help me?"

The quiet question was the watershed dividing the pair standing in that place.

With bated breath, Subaru awaited Otto's reply. Receiving Subaru's inquiry, Otto swallowed for one brief moment, staring back with his own black pupils.

"—Mr. Natsuki, it is your fault Garfiel has a reason to come after me."

"…My fault?"

"Mr. Natsuki, that night, you know for a fact I was the last one to meet with both you and Garfiel, yes? When Mr. Natsuki disappeared afterward, naturally I suspected him. He surely found my eyewitness testimony to be inconvenient, so he wanted me to keep it to myself."

The explanation resonated deeply inside Subaru's chest.

In other words, Garfiel was after Otto to silence him. That being the case, it was entirely natural for Otto to decide that rescuing Subaru was ultimately the best way to break out of his dilemma.

"However, he stated that if I was to keep his meeting with Mr. Natsuki secret, he would do me no harm. He showed me some kind of crystal, offering it as compensation."

However, it was Otto himself who poured cold water on Subaru's premature conclusion. Garfiel had not attempted to silence him by force, but with words and compensation.

Now his earlier acceptance made no sense. Otto had a choice that would have ensured his safety.

"And in spite of that, you turned him down? And that's why Garfiel's after you?"

“Well, it might have been a compelling choice, but not a particularly palatable one…”

“Don’t joke at a time like this! Are you an idiot? Why did you do something like that?! What…”

—What reason did he have to cross such a dangerous bridge?

What could have possibly been the impetus to make him do so?

“What were you th…”

“My goodness, Mr. Natsuki.”

With Subaru at his wits’ end, Otto interrupted his words, passing a hand through his own ashen hair.

Then, he fixed his squished hat as he finally answered.

“—Is it really that strange to help out a friend?”

—For an instant, time came to a halt for Subaru, unsure just what had been said to him.

It was several seconds before time moved again—a slow, slow restart.

However, even when it moved, his confusion did not cease. The meaning of the words would not sink in. At that moment, just what magic spell had Otto cast upon Subaru?

—*Friend?* What was this word, *friend*? What, was this person saying to him?

“Wh-why is this person’s face frozen in such a look of surprise…”

“Nah, someone I don’t recognize just got mentioned… Mr. Fred, you said?”



“That conclusion is wrong from head to tail! Not Fred, *friend*! As in *friendship*!”

“Friends… Friendship?! Between whom?!”

“Between me! And Mr. Natsuki!!”

Stamping his foot, Otto pointed at both Subaru and himself. But his action left Subaru’s eyes even wider. Subaru’s reaction made Otto go, “Oh, good grief!” as he plucked at his head, seemingly to drive the numbness away.

“Certainly! Our mutual interests coincide where my coming here is concerned! It is so I can meet with the Marquis, and through such business, aid and support Lady Emilia. And in the first place, Mr. Natsuki, it is you who saved me when I was captured by the Witch Cult!”

“____”

“But setting all these troublesome matters aside, I simply believe I am Mr. Natsuki’s friend. There is the normal manner in which you treat me but also the sense of a friend’s distance between us.”

Scratching his head, Otto averted his gaze from Subaru, perhaps getting blushy midway. And having heard the entire story, Subaru made no reaction whatsoever. His silence drew a questioning look from Otto’s face. There was a fair bit of concern in his eyes, for Subaru displayed no reaction to his words at all. Perhaps Subaru was reflecting upon the high-pressure friendship sales pitch.

Otto’s pupils seemed to represent a hundred faces at once. And what this brought gushing up from Subaru’s heart was—

“*—Pfft.*”

“Pardon?”

“Wahahahahah! F-friends? Friends, huh!! Ahhh, so that’s it, that’s it! Otto, you actually wanted to be my friend!”

“Wha—?!”

Unable to take it anymore, Subaru broke down laughing as he rabidly slapped the red-faced Otto’s shoulder. Even so, the mirth had not vanished from him;

Subaru stamped the ground and squirmed, still clutching his belly.

“Bwa-ha-ha, friend! Awww, damn it! Otto, damn you, you bastard!”

“Ow, ow! What was that for?! Ahhh, I was such a fool to say it! I can understand why you are laughing, Mr. Natsuki! But surely it is not *that* funny!”

“No, no, no, I have to laugh at it. You’re not the weird one here… I’m laughing ’cause my foolishness is so huge and awful, I amaze even myself.”

Wiping away with his left hand the tears surging up from his outburst of laughter, Subaru was still struck by it all as he straightened his posture. To his front, Otto wore a face that revealed regret that he’d spoken the word *friend*. But toward the sight of him like that, Subaru bore gratitude…and near-bottomless derision for himself.

—He couldn’t understand Otto. He didn’t know what to believe; and yet, here was Otto, coming to Subaru’s aid for no more reason than being Subaru’s friend. Faced with such a man before him, it was less that he trusted his feelings than he rued his own idiocy in suspecting what might lie beyond.

He’d been too buffeted by the situation, rendered too unable to understand the feelings of the people around him. He’d believed in malice so strongly, he’d forgotten goodwill even existed. He’d truly been an enormous fool.

He’d come to feel like having crossed through death to redo things a few brief times had taught him *something*.

—The battle wasn’t over. He didn’t have to abandon anything, not yet.

“Mr. Natsuki?”

A question mark floated over Otto’s head. He did not understand the meaning of Subaru’s self-derision and self-admonishment.

Subaru shook his head at the man’s reaction and somehow feeling brighter, breathed in and spoke up.

“Sorry. You’re my friend, Otto—Thank you for coming to help me.”

To his friend, he conveyed the thanks that should have been the first words out of his mouth.

CHAPTER 4

THE VALUE OF A LIFE

1

The place Subaru had been confined was removed from the settlement, deep into the woods—a remote place where the Lost Woods of Cremaldi very much felt like they lived up to their name.

The instant they exited the structure, Subaru took deep breaths over and over as he felt his skin bathed in outside air for the first time in three days.

“Really have to say, though, what a stench… What’s actually making that smell, anyway?”

“Who knows? It differs from the stench of flesh or rot, but its ill effect upon the nose is no different. It feels like some sort of oil or aromatic, but…”

“Considering how active a smell it is, maybe ammonia or something like that. Nah, let’s think that one over later…”

As he looked back at the building in which he had been imprisoned, he set aside the issue of the scent that had made such a deep impression.

It was a white weathered stonework building. In terms of materials and apparent age, it felt akin to the tomb, but seemed far better preserved in Subaru’s mind. That was probably a by-product of the environment…smell included.

“I felt this while I was captured, but man, there’s not one bug or mouse here?”

“There is no mistaking it is a strange environment. I meant to use my blessing to search everywhere for you, Mr. Natsuki, but I would have been in dire straits if I had not noticed the ill feeling in this place.”

“Ill feeling?”

“When I am seriously employing my blessing, there are few places in this world untouched by the rhythmic voices of bird and insect. It is human nature to find such rare places suspicious, is it not?”

When Otto winked, Subaru crossed his arms in response. Then, quite earnestly, he said, “Hmm, you’re a pretty useful guy. I seriously don’t understand why you come off like such a flake.”

“Could you decide whether you want to praise me or insult me, and just pick one?!”

“Why are you such a flake? That’s, like, an incredible, unspeakable flaw for someone?”

“Why did you pick insults?!”

When Otto grumbled about the insufficient praise for his exploits, Subaru responded with a wry smile and a sigh of admiration.

According to Otto, his blessing—the blessing of the spoken word—enabled him to achieve mutual understanding with any living creature. Thus, he was able to converse with the land dragon in his service, and contact birds and insects to tell him which routes were safe.

“So that blessing is how you searched for me and gave Garfiel the slip, then. You really are a hell of a convenient guy to have around.”

“It is hardly all a good thing. All it does is bring them to the table. The result of the negotiations is on my shoulders. If I put them in a sour mood, they shall lead me not to a road but to a cliff.”

“Natural wildlife is scary!!”

He who had the blessing spoke, admonishing him who did not. Carving the words upon his breast, Subaru put his interest regarding the white building back on the shelf for the time being. The place tugged at him, but thinking about it wouldn’t get him any answers no matter how long he spent. Right then, there was a more pressing issue in need of an answer.

“What if, for instance, we went back to everyone, and exposed what Garfiel’s

done?”

“…Actually, I truly cannot recommend acting upon that thought.”

“And why’s that?”

“Ahh, I did not sufficiently explain during our earlier conversation, but your disappearance has caused even larger effects than are apparent on the surface, Mr. Natsuki…”

Averting his gaze as if he found it difficult to say, Otto brought all five fingertips from both hands together in front of his own chest. The feminine gesture gave Subaru a bad feeling that tore at him. Subaru began with the preamble, “Man, you’re scarin’ me…” and continued, “You’re scarin’ me, but talk. Really, what’s been going on while I’ve been gone?”

“Errr, it was a factual explanation, I assure you! Simply, the situation is a little more difficult, perhaps more extreme, than a dry explanation can convey…”

“Spill it already!”

“Lady Emilia has been backed into a corner, and the concerns from the evacuated villagers are coming to a head, so if they heard, at this point, Mr. Natsuki had been imprisoned, they might…explode!”

Raising both hands in an act of surrender, Otto seemed desperate as he revealed the current state of affairs.

The contents just exposed left Subaru opening and closing his mouth for several moments before he managed to get something out.

“It’s that bad?”

“…Mr. Natsuki, it would be best if you gain a little more self-awareness of how much you are the mental pillar of support for the people around you. Though I do not know the details, Lady Emilia still has not heard from her contracted spirit, and you have saved the people of the village twice over, have you not?”

“That’s, well, it’s true, but…”

“A rather unreliable, halfhearted reply, yes?”

Goodness, seemed to say the slumping of Otto’s shoulders, but Subaru

couldn’t just come out and nod his head.

He understood Emilia being worried. With Puck not there for her, Subaru was her only absolute ally. That said, if she could make it through the Trial, it probably wouldn’t have been reason enough to shake her up that far.

For the people of Earlham Village, he’d resolved the demon beast uproar and the Witch Cult issue. He didn’t mind the gratitude, but this was too much. Subaru had let them all die over and over. It was an extreme over-appraisal.

But if either part was true, it meant the situation was exceptionally perilous.

“If finding me means a huge explosion in the Sanctuary… Seriously, why’d you come looking for me? If it’s like this, finding me doesn’t solve a thing.”

“Well, if I hadn’t found you, you would have died! Is that not reason enough?”

“____”

“Ow, ow, ow! What?! Why are you slapping me without a word?! Could you stop?!”

With rock rather than paper, Subaru punched Otto’s shoulder, each blow packed with emotion.

At any rate, he kissed goodbye the plan to expose Garfiel’s scheme. Subaru didn’t want relations in the Sanctuary to worsen, either, naturally. Nor did he intend to cry himself to sleep…

“Exposing the truth here and now is a bad plan, huh? Can’t be helped, then. Let’s go with Plan B.”

“What is this Plan B?”

“Ah? There isn’t one. I was just trying to think one up while I said it.”

In the first place, he’d been thinking of nothing but death until just prior to his escape. Even if he’d dragged his thoughts away from giving in to his fate, his head hadn’t done much for thinking as of yet.

“But unlike me, you look like you have a proper plan. That’s the friend who came to save me for you. It’s not like you just charged in with an empty head, no thought about what comes next?”

“Uwa! Uwaaah! Goodness, you really know how to lay into someone out of the blue! Although it is *not* the case that I came without any thought, I assure you!”

Wanting to live up to expectations, Otto spoke along the same lines as Subaru had. An impish smile came over him as he lowered his voice to a whisper.

“Mr. Natsuki, your existence is a source of great worry to Garfiel. The fact he has kept you alive without any means of using you is proof enough… Therefore, I wish to use that worry as a bargaining chip.”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“Mr. Natsuki, you shall escape past the barrier. With the barrier still up, the residents of the Sanctuary, Garfiel included, cannot pursue you. When the barrier is lifted, the conditions shall stabilize, dousing the embers, yes?”

As things were, without the Sanctuary being liberated from the barrier, any explosion inside of it would be fatal.

Otto’s proposal was simple. To avoid that explosion, Subaru, the ember in question, would be sent outside it. This done, negotiating the release of the villagers held hostage would not be particularly difficult.

“The problem is whether we can do it. As they say, ‘easier said than done.’”

“You say that as a quote, much like Garfiel. Either way, I shall state you need not be concerned about that matter. I already have a highly reassuring sympathizer.”

“Sympathizer?”

“Yes. Thanks to this, I am able to learn many things even while on the run. Even if I hear things from other living creatures, complex human relations and changes in emotional states are a bit much, you see.”

It was less—even blessings have their limits—than the difference in priorities between different living things.

However, he was a little surprised by the existence of a sympathizer. The Sanctuary apparently wasn’t all on the same page. He could understand the sentiment, though—wanting to spectacularly hurl the ember away before it set

off the powder house that the Sanctuary had become.

“Just escape, huh?”

“Yes, that is best, I think. I understand your wanting to tell Lady Emilia you are safe and sound in person, but…”

“I do feel like that, of course…”

He had no objection to Otto’s plan. He could even endure Otto’s worry and consideration for Emilia. However, the reason he hesitated to simply run for it was something else entirely.

“At any rate, I’d like to meet this sympathizer. If I’m gonna make a run for it, it has to be while Emilia challenges the Trial… In other words, it’s now or never. That’s the idea, right?”

“That makes it a short discussion, Mr. Natsuki…truly rare for you. The sympathizer is waiting for us outside of the forest. First, let us proceed that way. Please do not stray.”

Acknowledging Subaru’s judgment, Otto listened attentively as he headed toward the forest. He had no doubt activated the power of the blessing of the spoken word, lending his ears to the words of the living creatures in the area.

“_____”

From time to time, Otto’s mouth let slip sounds of a sort that should never have come from a human being. The blessing seemed to function by matching his wavelength with those of the other parties when he spoke. It was like communicating with bats via ultrasonic waves, something that tugged at him a fair bit.

They moved to rendezvous with the sympathizer as he awaited Otto’s negotiations. The thought of traversing a forest in the deep night, relying on the words of insects and small animals with very different points of view, depleted his morale far more than he’d expected.

“Don’t tell me they’re guiding us to burrows people can’t pass through…”

“Certainly they are not people. But this toil has come to an end.”

As the tired Subaru took long breaths, Otto, his hair smeared with leaves,

replied thus. When Subaru responded to the optimistic words by lifting his head, he saw a faint bonfire straight ahead of them—and made out the presence of the settlement.

If the bonfire was there, Emilia was conducting the Trial at the tomb. By rights, he wanted to race over there to be at her side, but—

“…Can’t do that, huh. So where’s this sympathizer you spoke of?”

“This is the rendezvous point. She is exceedingly punctual, so she should already be here…”

“—You certainly took your time. I thought I would become an old woman while I waited.”

“—Eh?”

Subaru gasped when a voice suddenly interrupted their conversation.

He felt the grass part as a person approached. When he turned his face that way, a pink-haired girl emerged, pushing her way through a thicket that very moment. She brushed the hem of her short skirt. And then—

“Though even an elderly Ram would be adorable, I am sure.”

These words spoken, Ram turned toward Subaru and Otto, snorting in her usual manner.

2

When they arrived at the rendezvous point with the sympathizer, it was none other than Ram who appeared.

Stunned by that fact, Subaru was frozen in place as Ram’s pink eyes narrowed. The dangerous look in her eyes made him swallow his saliva, whereupon Subaru quickly glanced at Otto, standing beside him.

“…Otto, on three, we split up and run. Your job’s to cry out in a loud voice and draw her off. Mine’s to be quiet, wordless like a snake. Any objections?”

“I have nothing but objections! For that matter, why are you taking such a guarded posture…”

“Idiot, you were followed. Look at Ram’s eyes. She’s planning to kill us, no mistake. Trust me. They’re the same eyes as when I messed up back at the mansion.”

“Trust you, because you’re a man that people regard with bloodlust on a daily basis?!”

In a small voice, Subaru contrived to flee, but Otto’s reaction was far too dulled. Against Ram, his poor intuition was a fatal flaw. Unfortunately, Otto would perish.

“And when you die, I will carve your dying will upon my breast and see that the people of the Sanctuary are freed…”

“May we set the games aside and advance the conversation? Wasted time leads to a wasted life.”

“This useless treatment makes it sound like I am already dead either way!”

Otto persisted against Ram’s bluntness, but her response to his behavior was a frighteningly cold gaze. Torn apart by that gaze, Otto tragically sank in an instant.

Watching the one-sided interaction, Subaru went, “At any rate,” and continued his words with,

“Even with his life in extreme peril, I don’t see Otto nervous…so what, you’re the sympathizer?”

“I object to the ring of the word ‘sympathizer.’ I am the instigator.”

“Man, Otto really comes off like a familiar here…”

The familiar concerned seemed dissatisfied with being treated as such, but Subaru took his lack of objection as assent. Whatever you wanted to call it, Ram apparently really was lending Otto a hand.

In other words, she didn’t want an explosion in the Sanctuary either, and thus intended to let Subaru escape outside—

“I can’t say I ever expected Ram and Otto to team up…”

“I suppose you did not. However, facts are facts. Accept them.”

“I could do that, but it’s more natural for me to see this from a different point of view.”

“_____”

“You letting me escape, that’s an instruction from Roswaal, isn’t it?”

When Subaru’s question pressed further, Ram was silent as her expression froze over.

Ram independently cooperating with him would have made his chest heat up quite a bit, but Subaru knew intimately that she wasn’t prone to acting in such a convenient manner. Ram’s actions were fundamentally based on her loyalty toward Roswaal. Accordingly, it was proper to think that Roswaal’s intentions always rested behind her every action.

“_____”

“No denial, huh? Not sure if Otto knew that, though.”

“I have made a deal regarding you, Mr. Natsuki. She shall not send your head flying.”

“Meaning it’s Ram who approached you, huh? If that’s Roswaal’s instruction, too, did he tell you to do anything else? What’s his thinking behind sending you?”

“…For Barusu, blood flows through you rather quickly, doesn’t it?”

Accepting Otto’s defense of himself, Subaru’s certainty deepened, which caused Ram to sigh deeply. He thought the sigh contained a whiff of both exasperation and exhaustion.

“This behavior really ain’t like you.”

“That is Ram’s line. It is strange that you can be this calm after being confined somewhere beyond everyone’s knowledge…or rather, quite creepy.”

“Don’t say creepy; that hurts. Besides, I can only look at it calmly ’cause it came after a big, hard laugh.”

He had to grudgingly admit that the exchange with Otto just prior did much to restore his spirits. Between pep and bravado, Subaru was without doubt on the

pep side of the coin at present. So while the pep lasted—

“I want an answer to my earlier question. I’ll base what I decide on that.”

“What to do? Here, is not fleeing the only option? Mr. Natsuki, to put it bluntly, if someone spots or finds you, the situation becomes worst case, does it not?”

“I get what you’re saying. I’m incredibly grateful that you came to help me. But I’ll never win anything if I let things end with only the other guy landing a punch.”

Otto’s opinion hadn’t changed since the outset: He should wholeheartedly flee. However, Subaru knew the situation would only deteriorate. He had to gamble in order to break the deadlock.

And, as dealers for wagers went, the Ram standing before him worked just fine.

Faced with the resolve in Subaru’s gaze, Ram’s long-lashed eyelids gently fell. And then—

“…Yes, it is as you say. Assisting Barusu is Master Roswaal’s instruction. Setting eyes upon Otto for that purpose was Ram’s own personal judgment, however.”

“So he fit the bill in your eyes, huh.”

“I merely reasoned that without a competent handler, Otto would die for nothing.”

“Ugh… Can’t deny that!”

“Well, deny it anyway!!”

Otto shouted in anger, but in light of the background circumstances, Ram’s guess was correct. Having blown off Garf’s demand, he saw no path for Otto to survive without Ram’s cooperation.

In that case, prolonged confinement would have probably left Subaru crippled.

“It would seem Ram’s greatness has sunken into you.”

“Accepting it is off in another dimension, though… Besides, I want to ask you something more. If you’re obeying Roswaal’s instructions, were they to get me outside?”

“…His instructions were, *Aid him.* But, in the present Sanctuary circumstances, you understand that getting you outside is the optimal plan, Barusu?”

“You’re certainly right about that— How did you plan to get me out?”

If the powder house was on the verge of an explosion, just how did you plan to carry the ember out? At Subaru’s question, Ram folded her arms. “It is simple,” she prefaced before saying, “Garf cannot leave the tomb during the time Lady Emilia challenges the Trial. We need to simply mount Barusu on his land dragon and get him beyond the barrier while still outside of Garf’s sight.”

“That really is simple. Sure you want to pull that without a double for me or something?”

“Do not complain. At times like this, simple is best.”

Immediately turning her back on him, Ram meant to lead Subaru in the direction of his escape. Obeying her instructions and breaking away from the Sanctuary as soon as possible was the right call—if the Sanctuary was the only issue, at least.

But it was not so. Therefore, to arrive at other correct solutions—

“—Ram, change of plans. Running comes later.”

“Mr. Natsuki?! What are you saying?!”

“I’m not saying I won’t run. But with Garfiel at the tomb, it’s a chance to do something besides just running, ain’t it? A chance to do something else without anyone butting in.”

When Otto let out a shriek, Subaru strongly thrust a finger toward him. The gesture pressed Otto into silence; in his place, Ram looked back toward Subaru.

“And just what do you intend to do?”

With a calm, collected tone of voice and eyes betraying no emotion, she questioned the intent behind Subaru’s statement.

Subaru exhaled deeply at that gaze, and the corners of his mouth twisted as he replied.

“—I want to pick up where we got interrupted three days ago.”

3

“—Roswaal, this time, let’s talk without you hiding anything.”

Subaru was the first to open his mouth, letting those words fly. Roswaal narrowed his pair of heterochromatic eyes.

His injured body resting on the bed in his bedroom at the Ryuzu residence, Roswaal betrayed no sign of surprise at the sudden arrival of this rare guest. It was almost as if he knew Subaru would come.

Indeed, his deep nod seemed only to support that conclusion as he spoke in greeting.

“A reunion after three days—a miraculous return at that—there is a rather dangerous air about you, is there nooooot?”

“No jokes. Right now I don’t have any time for foolin’ around. I don’t care how badly you’re hurt. I’m ready to use force if I have to.”

“I see. I suppose three days of suffering will do that to someone. No, no, noooo, even if I speak words of praise for this, it shall only disgust you, I am sure. Let us get to the point, shall we?”

The sight of Subaru clenching his teeth with no margin for error made a smile come over Roswaal as he shook his head side to side. After that, his eyes shifted to the closed door behind Subaru as he said,

“Ram let you through, yes? I did give that girl instructions to aid you, but…”

“Yeah. That’s why she brought me here without any fuss. If you ask me if I wanna run, I’d probably tell you yes, but I pushed that choice down the road.”

“—Really.”

Roswaal closed one eye as he replied. Under the gaze of his open yellow eye, Subaru lightly moistened his lips.

—He'd come to speak with Roswaal, putting fleeing the Sanctuary on the back burner.

Naturally, Otto had objected vociferously, asserting that it would only put Subaru in greater danger, but Ram had set the stage at Subaru's request. Paying due attention to the fine details, she had brought him there, to the stage built for a conversation with Roswaal—beyond the Sanctuary residents' prying eyes.

"I'll ask you this, Roswaal. It's three days late, but are you gonna claim you changed your mind about your promise?"

"Strictly speaking, I had intended for the promise I made to be effective for that night alone…but it is fine. I am not a spirit mage, after all. I have no interest in nitpicking the fine detaaaails."

Originally, Roswaal had promised to speak no lies in the discussion they were to have had that night. He had sworn that, though he might remain silent about matters inconvenient to him, the words he spoke would be the truth.

He'd make use of that. Ironically, it was just like the Roswaal from the last time around had said.

"I understand the situation in the Sanctuary, and the danger of me being here. That's why I want to ask you about the mansion as a major precondition of my leaving here."

"Hmm, about the mansion, you ask? If it is something within my understaaaanding…"

"More like you're the only guy who can give me an answer— What I wanna ask about is Beatrice. Why is she in the mansi— No."

There, Subaru cut off his own word, interrupting his question. He couldn't ask it that way. Roswaal had already given a similar question the slip once before. He hated to follow Roswaal's words of advice once again, but he needed to pose his questions "well."

Things were decisively different than the last time around. He needed a question Roswaal couldn't gloss over—

"…I'll change how I phrase the question. Is she, is Beatrice…a Witch Cultist?"

Choosing his words, Subaru paused, endured the palpitation of his heart, and posed the question.

The decisive difference from the previous time around was that Subaru knew Beatrice possessed that magic tome. Namely, he harbored a suspicion that she might be connected to the Witch Cult.

“_____”

Roswaal, receiving Subaru’s question in silence, sank into thought for a time.

That silence felt detestably long, further accelerating Subaru’s heart.

Finally, before the nervous Subaru, he exhaled and said,

“Why do you think that Beatrice be a Witch Cultist?”

“…Because I’ve seen her room.”

“And by seen, you mean…?”

“Because! She… The book! Because she has a Gospel…!”

Subaru’s voice was tinged with anger. He was angry at having to say aloud even the part he did not wish to speak. The raw bitterness in his shout revealed the real reason Subaru wished to pose that question.

Beatrice, clutching the Gospel to her chest, shouting that she obeyed its notations as she rejected Subaru; if she was truly a mad devotee of the Gospel, instigator of the tragedy at the mansion—

“—If that time comes, she’ll be our…my enemy.”

He’d see Beatrice as an enemy, as an obstacle that had to be removed.

“Strong words. Truly words of resolve.”

Roswaal nodded deeply at Subaru’s declaration. Then, he closed his open eye.

“…Though the pain upon your face makes such words less convincing.”

“—!”

“You having to be pitted against the girl is such a terrible tale. Certainly to me, having seen you two smile and play together so. Therefore, I wish to extend a hand of salvation.”

“A hand of salvation? You, to me? …That’s like, top-level worldwide fishy.”

Feeling something raging inside of him, Subaru’s cheek twitched as he wrung out his voice. Roswaal no doubt saw right through the bluff, yet he said not one disparaging word, merely raising a finger as he said, “Certainly, the book you saw is very similar to the Gospels that Witch Cultists possess. It is no fault of your own that you suspect Beatrice as a result. But I guarantee this—”

“Guarantee…?”

“That girl is not a Witch Cultist. She has nothing to do with those hurling themselves over the Great Waterfalls in search of love that does not exist. Though it is true that the book is of a similar nature.”

“—!! Not the Witch Cult…! You mean it?!”

Gazing with eyes open wide, Subaru leaped at Roswaal’s response.

It was pretty much the first piece of good news for Subaru that time around. Though the fact that it was Roswaal’s guarantee bore its own whiff of concern, his vow to speak the truth made up for that.

“If Beatrice isn’t part of the Witch Cult…then…”

Then, there was no reason it was an irreconcilable conflict. He didn’t have to give up on her—

“W-wait! I don’t wanna get happy over just that. The problem isn’t what flag she’s under. If she’s not part of the Witch Cult, what is that book? Why does she have a Gospel?”

“I suppose saying it is from an archive of forbidden books where numerous magic tomes are gathered…would be too much of a stretch. So I shall reply plainly… That book is not a Gospel.”

“It’s not…? But she definitely called the book a Gospel.”

“Because it does not have a proper name. Hence, she called it via the name used for the inferior product.”

Even then, Beatrice’s rejection lingered in his ears. Subaru refuted Roswaal with that difficult-to-forget shout in mind. With a knowing look, he said to Subaru, “If I may?” and continued his words with,

“I do not know how much of which you are aware, but the Gospels possessed by Witch Cultists are incomplete. The number of notations is limited, their contents vague, varying depending upon the interpretation. To have such an unfriendly tome determine the path of the possessor’s fate…is rather arbitrary, is it not?”

“…You’re crazy detailed about this. All I’d heard was that it was holy writ that prophesized the future.”

“Witch Cultists can gush forth from anywhere, particularly Sanctuaries connected to a Witch such as that which I administer. It is not merely once or twice that I have skirmished with them. I have found traces of their tomes amid the cinders of their corpses. However, I know they are frauds because only the possessor may read their contents.”

“I’ve had that experience once…”

Subaru, too, possessed a single Gospel, but he wasn’t able to understand its contents. It was like staring at cursive handwriting from a foreign land; the character information wasn’t being conveyed to his brain. Even at present, when he tried to remember the single page he had seen, not even a portion floated into his head.

“It feels a lot like the ID-blocking robe’s effect… In other words, it might not be common, but books like that aren’t super-rare either. So, you’re saying it’s not strange that Beatrice has one, too?”

“—No, the tome Beatrice possesses is a complete edition. It is a magical tome that records the true future, of which only two volumes exist in the whole of the world. It is the closest thing to a Tome of Wisdom that currently exists.”

With his eyes closed, Roswaal spoke the name of the book, which Subaru didn’t recognize.

Then, a moment after it became clear exactly what book Beatrice possessed—suddenly, Subaru’s body stiffened, feeling like the air in the room had suddenly gotten colder.

The cause was Roswaal, head hung just before him. The ghastly aura emanating from him made Subaru draw in his breath.

“Ros…waal…?”

“Sorry. It seems I was recalling an amusing memory for a short while.”

“…I-if that just now was a funny memory, slipping up and asking about old stories seems like a really bad idea.”

“There will be other opportunities to speak of unamusing old tales. At present, time is limited, is it not?”

Abruptly, his mood seemed to soften, his smile dispersing the strained air about them.

The relaxation of the atmosphere made strength drain from Subaru’s body as well, but his horror at the abnormal demeanor did not vanish. However, Subaru bit down the persisting horror with his back teeth, forcing his mind to right itself.

Every moment that passed brought the Trial closer to an end, and so, too, Garfiel’s return.

A sense of duty to finish the discussion before that happened burned within Subaru as he turned to face Roswaal once more.

“I’d really like to ask for the details about this Tome of Wisdom, but right now the gist will do. What I need to know is how do I convince the Beatrice with that book to back down?”

“Perhaps if you broke into tears and begged, she might listen to you?”

“I said no joking around! I’m not asking you to be funny. This is a serious question.”

“I did not intend it as a particularly frivolous reply, mind you…”

Bringing the obstinate Beatrice around was an absolutely irreplaceable component of breaking through the calamity arising at the mansion. Even if the option of taking her and fleeing had vanished, he’d be at a marked advantage if he had her cooperation.

They could shelter the noncombatants, Rem and Petra, in the archive of forbidden books and jump them to Earlham Village.

“Beyond that, even if Frederica were to become hostile, that girl would surely fend her off without difficulty.”

“…I don’t particularly suspect Frederica as an enemy.”

“Oh my, you seemed to suspect her due to the crystal incident. Your opinion changed at some point?”

“…Yeah, that’s right, it did.”

“A rather uncertain reply, no? If you are concerned, take Ram. Surely she will not refuse.”

Subaru had only cleared up his suspicions of Frederica based on the memories of the Subaru who had returned to the mansion. From Roswaal’s perspective, Subaru’s two worries for his return to the mansion surely appeared to be Frederica’s rebellious intent and Beatrice’s possession of a certain book.

Accordingly, proposing that Ram accompany him was a natural decision. Aside from the point that Subaru had already tried that and failed—

“—Roswaal said, ‘Ask your questions.’”

“…Huh?”

As Subaru sank into thought, the abrupt statement made his jaw fall open. Roswaal sat up from lying on his side in bed, looked up at Subaru, and repeated himself.

“If you remain concerned about the matter, upon your return to the mansion, tell her, ‘Roswaal said, Ask your questions.’ When Beatrice hears this, she will surely respond.”

“That’s…”

He blinked. Subaru remembered hearing those weighty words before.

The first time around that loop, just before setting out from the Sanctuary to return to the mansion, Ram told him those words, hailing from Roswaal after their relationship had worsened.

The shock of death had caused him to forget them, and he had not remembered the words on the last, and second, time around, but—

“…I see. You do not believe these words are sufficient.”

“W-wait. Insufficient, that’s… Nah, before that, it’s just…”

“Then I shall continue. Or perhaps, this way of speaking it would be surer footing?”

Roswaal ignored Subaru’s confusion; indeed, a smile came over him. Then, in his usual manner, he closed one eye, seeing right through Subaru with his yellow eye and speaking thus:

“—Simply tell her you are That Person.”

“That Person…?”

“Make Beatrice ask this of you, and affirm that it is so. Do this, and she will most certainly be your ally, sure to lending you her power without reservation.”

He firmly declared this, his words infused with powerful conviction. When that conviction caused Subaru to look back into Roswaal’s eye, the tranquil yellow glint therein betrayed none of his thoughts.

Still, if that all turned out to be true, then the words he’d been told to speak were simply that powerful.

“What’s…up with that? How can you say that so confidently?”

“Because to that girl, to Beatrice, it is a pact she is unable to defy.”

“—A pact.”

When the word made his eardrums tremble, Subaru felt his smoldering anger rekindled once more.

Pact, vow, covenant, promise—just how much, how far did these bind one’s heart?

“Her staying in the mansion…in the archive of forbidden books, was all due to a pact, I heard? What kind of pact did you two form…?”

“You misunderstand, Subaru. No pact has been formed between Beatrice and me whatsoever.”

“…What?”

To Subaru's question, posed as he trembled with anger, Roswaal refuted with a sideways shake of his head. Then, as Subaru stood dumbfounded, Roswaal touched the bandage wrapped around his chest as he said,

"I shall repeat myself. No pact-based relationship exists between Beatrice and me. She is under the same roof because our mutual interests coincide… Her pact to protect the archive of forbidden books was formed between her and a different individual."

"Someone else…?! Then, who the heck was it!"

"It is best you ask her. That is a question for Beatrice herself. It is not for me to speak of."

Roswaal's reply, in contrast to Subaru's rage, gradually caused the latter to lose its heat. Roswaal's demeanor and reply made Subaru go "Shit!" as he strongly kicked the floor.

"This again! She tells me to ask you; you tell me to ask her! Stop making me run around in circles! I want to know the answer, damn it!"

"I have handed you the key so that you may arrive at your answer. All that remains is for you to place it into the keyhole and turn it. I shall not permit crudeness such as peeking into the box…rather, the archive, on the sly."

Unexpectedly, Roswaal asserted his own view in a most straightforward manner.

Clenching his teeth at the obstinate stance, Subaru forced his resentment down to the bottom of his belly.

"…Based on the state of affairs up to yesterday, Lady Emilia should finally be exiting the tomb…regardless of her success or failure. So what shaaaall you do?"

Perhaps he'd consciously put a lid on it up to that point, but now, Roswaal spoke in a blatantly jester-like tone.

It annoyed Subaru, but he had a point. Timewise, he was right on the edge, a half day left until the deadline when the mansion would be attacked. Any longer, and he wouldn't make it even with Patlash running full-speed.

The forces available for repelling the calamity of the twin raiders consisted of Frederica back at the mansion, Otto and Subaru set to return to it, and if they added Ram—

“…Is it true that Beatrice will go along with what you said just now?”

“I made a vow that I would speak no lie. At the very least, it is what I believe.”

“If it doesn’t work, I don’t care what anyone says, I’m punching you in the side of your face. Remember that.”

For once Subaru’s one-sided promise made Roswaal’s eyes go round. Of course, if Subaru failed, his life was forfeited. It was a promise that would be gone the next time around.

But Subaru would remember. That was what he was declaring, then and there.

“Understood. Do as you like. Should you and Beatrice pair together, it shall likely be of great aid for the issues enveloping the Sanctuary as well.”

“Don’t lay deep stuff like that on me when I’m leaving. Not like you plan on talking anymore either way.”

“Surely you can allooooow me this much— After all, it seems I am not up to the task.”

Averting his gaze, the tone of Roswaal’s voice fell slightly as he whispered. When Subaru, unable to clearly make out the latter half, prompted him with “What was that?” he shrugged his shoulders.

“I was speaking to myself. Ah, please set your reluctance aside. If you fail due to being late, you cannot fulfill your promise to punch me?”

“…Roswaal, let me ask you one last thing.”

“—Please do.”

Subaru refused to go along with the jesting demeanor, straightening his back as he stared right at Roswaal. Receiving that sharp gaze, Roswaal beheld Subaru in his differently colored eyes.

Beholding Roswaal in return, Subaru posed the final question of the evening.

“You’re not…our enemy or anything, are you, Roswaal?”

“_____”

After a pause, Roswaal answered…

“Of course not— You are all…my allies.”

4

With the secret talks concluded, Subaru headed for a rendezvous point outside the Sanctuary.

There, the arrangement was for Subaru to meet Otto and Ram, with Patlash in tow, other preparations for his escape already at an end. Sometimes sneakily, sometimes boldly, Subaru hurried along his path.

“*Haaa*… Shit, my side hurts…”

However, it was a stretch to say Subaru’s hurried gait was in good form.

His three-day imprisonment was the cause. Both the environment and the food were poor, leaving his debilitated body more weakened than he had thought. But he’d save his sob stories for later. If he returned to the mansion, a far harsher situation awaited him.

“Even if it’s as Roswaal said…”

Even if Beatrice responded to Subaru’s call, it was incalculable whether she could truly oppose Elsa and company. Either way, Subaru’s duty wouldn’t come to an end just by getting back to the mansion. If anything, there he could finally begin to fight.

“_____”

When he looked at his right wrist, there was a handkerchief tightly tied to it. Never having been removed during his confinement, the handkerchief had been blackened, and the fraying and bloodstains really stood out. Even so, his promise to return it remained unblemished. Strength surged within him. Once again, the effect of that promise lent him strength.

“…Just from that.”

Even as pacts and vows rubbed his mind the wrong way, Subaru's own promise was a pillar of strength to him.

According to the talk with Roswaal, Beatrice was bound by her own pact. To her, not a human but a spirit, a pact likely held far stronger, weightier meaning than it did to Subaru—

"What the hell are 'pacts' to me anyway…"

The various promises that had reached Subaru's ears to date rose in the back of his mind: the pact between Emilia and Puck, the pact binding Beatrice to the archive of forbidden books, the vow Roswaal had made that very evening, the Covenant between the Kingdom of Lugunica and the Dragon, the promise between Subaru and Petra—

And what Subaru had said to Rem, and what Rem had cast upon Subaru like a curse—

"—Mr. Natsuki!"

The voice hurled at him from the side brought Subaru, running like a madman, to a halt.

When he looked over, out of breath, Otto was waving him over, and Ram was standing beside him. Apparently, he'd gone past the rendezvous point while astray in his own thoughts.

Wiping off his sweat, he headed over to them, and between them was Patlash, too, with luggage on her back. When Subaru saw that preparations were already in order, he let out a long breath.

"What is wrong? When I thought, *he's finally here*, I was concerned when you ran right past us."

"…S-sorry. A lot on my mind. My bad."

"Barusu not playing mischief upon Otto? It is worse than I feared."

"I would like to object to the basis of that judgment!"

When Subaru linked up with them, the pair greeted him in their usual manner. But with no time to spare, Subaru did not play along, which made both knit their brows in suspicion.

“You were speaking with Master Roswaal, were you not? Why, then, is your face so clouded?”

“Can you quit it with the assumption everyone’s happy to talk to Roswaal…?”

“But you are making a rather dissatisfied face. You resolved to meet with the Marquis in spite of the danger. Can you please stop acting as if nothing was gained?”

“There was a lot gained. There was, but…”

Is what I dug up a good thing? he pondered belatedly. But when he thought about it, there had been gains, too.

Of course, one was the possibility of breaking open the stalemate. Now that he had gained a countermeasure plan, Subaru wouldn’t have to face giving up without being able to accomplish anything like the last time around.

He might be able to prevent the calamity at the mansion, rescue Rem and Petra, and even fulfill his goal of improving relations with Beatrice. And yet—

“…Why does my chest feel this queasy?”

If he made an ally out of Beatrice and saved Frederica, they could deal with the Sanctuary’s issues, too. If she exposed the mastermind behind her actions, all they had to do was beat the Trial to take care of the other problems.

“The logic’s sound. So why am I…”

“Sorry to interrupt when you are so troubled, but time is an issue. We cannot wait any longer.”

Mercilessly, Otto sliced Subaru’s indecision apart. His judgment was heartless, but his words were correct. Subaru hesitating at that juncture wouldn’t resolve anything.

Everything else hinged on first slipping out of the Sanctuary and returning to the mansion.

“Bringing the dragon carriage would attract too much attention. This means I shall be riding Patlash with you, Mr. Natsuki. You do not mind?”

“It’ll be real bad for you if you stay, so no obje…ah, wait.”

When Otto was ready to beckon Patlash by hand to adopt a mounting posture, Subaru made him wait. Then, when Subaru looked behind him, Ram, standing right there, asked “What?” as she narrowed her eyes.

“When we get out of the Sanctuary, we’re heading straight for the mansion. We can’t leave Frederica as things are. But Otto and I aren’t really…”

“You’re really lacking in combat capacity— In other words, you want Ram with you?”

“I talked to Roswaal about it. He said you’d come…which is very reassuring.”

If he managed to persuade Beatrice, and Frederica lent him her strength, and he added Ram on top of that, Subaru was fairly confident that would be the maximum possible fighting strength he could prepare.

When Subaru made his request, portraying it as the best option, Ram fell into thought briefly, immediately exhaling.

“It cannot be helped.”

“You’re sure?”

“Master Roswaal did command me to aid Barusu.”

Her acceptance, far easier gained than he had expected, bewildered Subaru all the more for it. But Ram folded her arms. “However,” she said, continuing, “I am fine with going with you, but how? With Ram, that makes three people for one land dragon.”

“…Ah…”

“Even if Barusu and Otto are only half a man in human terms, your physical weight is that of full men. Even for a land dragon, it is difficult to carry three people.”

“You called me half a man?!”

Ignoring Otto’s lament, Subaru clutched his head, seeing that Ram’s view was sound.

He hadn’t thought about the physical means. Given Ram’s light body weight, adding her probably meant Patlash could still run with ease, but in that case,

the way they'd be riding was—

"Considering safety, it'd be a Ram Sandwich between me and Otto…then?"

"Incidentally, there is also the option of one of us running rather than riding."

"In that case, considering fatigue and physical endurance, it'd definitely have to be Otto…"

The choice would make for a particularly tragic scene. Of course, Otto vociferously would protest—Subaru heard no such voice. Finding this quite unnatural, Subaru and Ram gave him a suspicious look.

Receiving the pair's gazes, Otto's cheeks were hard as he glared in the direction of the next day's sun.

At the end of his gaze, there was the bonfire that illuminated the settlement —

"—Ain't you all havin' a nice lil' stroll 'n' chat. Why don't ya include me after I've come all this way?"

An orange-hued figure walked between them and the flickering red flames.

—A figure audibly clenching his sharp fangs, a smile coming over him, as a ferocious, ghastly aura emanated from him.

"____"

Instantly, Patlash let out a low growl, her anger toward the figure clear. The sight of the proud land dragon preparing for battle deepened the figure's smile, his delight deepening still.

"Ha! Got whipped that much and not even a flinch. Fine woman, that land dragon. It's that whole 'The more she shines, the farther she is from Magrizza' thing."

"Garfiel…"

Subaru wrung out the word as the appearance of the figure—of Garfiel—made his body tremble.

Why was he there? Such a basic question clawed at his trembling heart.

The sight of *him*, the direct cause of his confinement, made him remember

the darkness of those three days. The fear came back again, too. He touched his shoulders; he clenched his teeth; and driving back his terror, he lifted his head.

“…Right now, you’re on duty as a representative. Should you really be wasting time in a place like this?”

“Me, I’m the protector o’ these people of the Sanctuary. So if there’s someone threatenin’ ’em, of course I’m doin’ my real job. Ya never shook off the eyes of the Sanctuary.”

“The Sanctuary’s eyes…?”

“I’m sayin’ stuff comes right to me. So where the hell d’ya think yer goin’, huh?”

Crinkling his nose, Garfiel asked Subaru what he was up to. Subaru hesitated to give the question a straight answer. But—

“—From here, we are getting Barusu out of the Sanctuary. Having him here is as much trouble for you as for us, so is this not more convenient for you, Garf?”

“…Ram.”

“I shall say it once: this is your mess, Garf. Enough that I would appreciate hearing thanks for cleaning it up in your place.”

Puffing up her chest, Ram provocatively conveyed the plan to Garfiel. For an instant, Subaru felt that was a very dangerous posture, but he held his tongue, judging that she’d probably chosen correctly.

Ram’s point of view was correct. Surely, Garfiel, too, understood that Subaru’s presence in the Sanctuary could only lead to an explosion. Getting him outside without an explosion was therefore a good plan.

Accordingly, Garfiel plucked at his own head in annoyance and responded.

“So ya see right through me, huh. Not a cute woman. Well, nothin’ wrong with that…”

“…Meaning, you’re considering letting us go?”

The words spat out along with a sigh made Subaru’s eyes widen as he saw a glimmer of hope. The way he took that made Garfiel go “Aa?” with a sullen

growl.

“Ya don’t just smell o’ the Witch, ya smell of trouble. Me, I do get why leavin’ ya here ain’t convenient. But put another way, I gotta consider ‘Hoshin was Banan’s setting sun’.”

“Is that so? Another mystery phrase that doesn’t make sense to me, but what you’re getting at is…”

Erasing the fact of his imprisonment aligned with their mutual interests on that single point alone. But when Subaru was relieved, taking Garfiel’s words as a statement that he’d let them go—the other two, stepped to the fore, interrupting his thoughts.

“Wh-what’s with you two…?”

“I suppose your poor education means you do not understand, Barusu.”

“‘Hoshin was Banan’s setting sun’ refers to an anecdote about the legendary trader Hoshin bringing the small nation of Banan to ruin— It refers to giving the opponent two choices: surrender or face all-out attack.”

“Surrender or face all-out attack… You don’t mean!”

Along with the pair’s statements, the vivid guardedness from Ram and Otto brought an abrupt change in Subaru’s expression. Seeing this, Garfiel folded his arms, loudly cracking the bones of his neck.

Then, he bared his sharp fangs, militancy gleaming from his jade eyes.

“Garf! What’s the meaning of this? Are you too stupid to understand the meaning of Ram’s words?”

“Ya better watch how ya say that stuff, Ram. I might be in love with ya, but that don’t mean I won’t twist yer arm. Look, just get ’im back to where he was before, ’kay?”

“M-man, you really want me in a cell. Maybe this sounds like begging for my life, but I really am a coward. Me being here is nothing but bad news, and letting me go is going for the low, low price of free, so shouldn’t we aim for that?”

“‘Confusing price for bargain brings ruin.’ That was one of Hoshin’s sayings,

too.”

Saying something similar to *there is nothing more expensive than something offered for free*, Garfiel refuted and rejected his proposal. He couldn’t understand the obstinate posture. For what reason was Garfiel so obsessed with Subaru?

“Me, I can’t let a shady guy like you outside. Better ya stay inside with me, the strongest guy around.”

“That decision might court Master Roswaal’s displeasure. After all, to Master Roswaal, Subaru is—”

Cutting off her words there, Ram suggestively glanced sidelong at Subaru. Subaru, ignorant of the gaze’s meaning, was perplexed, whereupon Ram looked back at Garfiel and carried on.

“A useless servant… It is best to discard him, yes.”

“I’m pretty amazed you can say that in this situation, Big Sis…”

The way Ram was covering for him before abandoning him midway made Subaru forget his situation as it depleted his morale. However, the target of the statement took it in a completely different way.

“Worsen Roswaal’s mood…?”

“____”

That instant, Subaru’s entire body went tense, feeling goosebumps all over his flesh. When he looked at them, Ram and Otto’s cheeks had hardened as well, eyes looking forward, warily watching as Garfiel stood before them.

“And just how much is that bastard thinkin’ of here and of the old women? He ain’t. That bastard only thinks of himself! Ram! Even you know that!”

“Garf, Master Roswaal…”

“Shaddap, shaddap, shaddap! The hell do *you* know about the bastard! Last warning! Hand him over! I’m gonna tie him up, and you two are gonna shut up and wait—”

Flying into a rage, Garfiel had no ears with which to hear as he unleashed an

angry shout. His ferocious fighting spirit proceeded to surge upward, and along with it, Subaru sensed Garfiel's very flesh growing all at once.

But that instant, as if on reflex, the situation broke into motion.

"—Miss Ram!"

"Go!!"

"Whaaa?!"

The same time as Subaru heard the hard-pressed voices, an arm wrapped around Subaru's body. It was Otto's. Without asking permission, he hoisted Subaru right up.

"Patlash—?!"

Patlash ferociously broke into a run, practically scooping Subaru and Otto up onto her back.

With Subaru's eyes wide open from the unexpected turn of events, Otto paid no heed to him, gripping the reins—and Patlash, squatting to raise her speed, darted out of the night-shrouded settlement.

"Damn it, ya lil' minion—!!"

"You have no time to be distracted, Garf!"

"—!! Won't let ya get in the way of my vow!!"

The voice, bellowing with anger, was snuffed out by the howling gale.

Subaru sensed the two forces powerfully exploding, bouncing off one another, but his mind couldn't catch up. Right next to him, cheeks hard, Otto kept hold of his torso, nothing more. He raised his voice.

"W-wait, Otto! Why leave Ram in a place like that?!"

"Any longer and you would be in peril! This is my and Miss Ram's decision!"

Shouting back in an angry voice, Subaru gritted his teeth as he squinted behind him. The bonfire had been bowled over, rendering his vision vague. But he could hear angry voices mixed with the sound of ferociously whipping wind.

Considering fighting strengths, it was the best choice for holding off a Garfiel

turned hostile. But the logical issue wasn't something his emotions were capable of endorsing.

"—!!!"

His brain was tied into knots from doubts and confusion when a sharp, high-pitched sound slammed into his eardrums.

The source of the sound was very close; in tangible terms, from Otto through his own fingers. The high-pitched sound reverberated throughout the night-shrouded Sanctuary, only to echo twice and then a third time.

"Is that finger-whistling some kind of signal?!"

"…It is a means I had rather hoped not to employ. I would rather have done without."

"Don't say deeply suggestive stuff like that! Ram's still there; any more chaos and…"

Colluding with Patlash, Otto had contrived to escape without Subaru's input. Though he wondered what Otto was still hiding, Subaru, his voice ragged, immediately realized just what it was.

"—Aa"

It was not to the back but the fore that one light after another was lit along the sprinting land dragon's path.

These were not the red lights of torches but the white lights of crystal lanterns. They were guiding lights, showing the way through the Lost Forest.

And the people carrying those guiding lights amid the darkness were—

"The people of Earlham Village…"

"—I told you. We have reassuring sympathizers!"

The blow from the words spoken by Otto made Subaru's chest tighten.

Sympathizers, this was what Otto was calling the people lending a hand to help Subaru. Subaru had thought that Ram was that sympathizer, and that it was Ram alone offering her aid.

"—Master Subaru! Please be safe!"

The instant he passed one of the lights, the man holding the crystal lantern raised his voice. Naturally, it was a familiar face. It was one of the villagers at the Cathedral, who was yearning to be reunited with his family and placing his hope in Emilia breaking through the Trial.

He wasn't the only one cooperating by any means. The settlement, the forest, held as many allies as it held lights.

"You said if they knew, they'd explode…"

"And as a matter of fact, they did! So they had me keep quiet to you about it! With Mr. Natsuki escaping, they did not wish to become shackles!"

"_____"

He couldn't tell what it meant. Otto's shout, the villagers' consideration…he couldn't tell what any of it meant.

Why were they doing such a thing? Shackles, who, on whom? There were countless lights floating amid the darkness.

"_____!"

Patlash made a short neigh, seemingly to display respect for the devoted villagers that had made the path of light.

Even Patlash, who knew the correct path through the Lost Woods, had no guarantee of not being swallowed by the darkness. The white light wiped away that uncertainty, and as she followed it, the land dragon's speed gradually outstripped that of the wind.

"This way! Farther in, Master Subaru!"

"Mr. Otto, take good care of Master Subaru!"

"Please stop trying to die before us elderly folks, Master Subaru…!"

Both bodies and hearts were crouched as many, so many, voices were tossed in Subaru's direction. The voices reverberated as the villagers desperately, earnestly, wholeheartedly called out Subaru's name.

"Why are you all doing something as stupid as…"

"That is not very convincing coming from you, Master Subaru!"

Unable to put the emotions filling him in order, the near-lament Subaru let out brought pained smiles. When he looked up, straight ahead was a large, distinctive tree—with multiple villagers standing at its roots.

“Go straight from here and you’ll cut straight through the barrier! Then you can get away!”

“And you all?!”

“We’ll slow down the pursuit! Why, giving Master Subaru time to get away is the least we can do…”

The figures numbered five, a group of male youths. The five men were poorly equipped, but even so, they had decided to hold Garfiel off for as many seconds they could with stubbornness and guts.

In staying behind, Ram had probably calculated along the same lines as they—

“_____!!!!!”

A roar bellowed across the forest, and the next instant, Subaru was swallowed up by a ferocious shockwave.

5

“—.———.———aa”

Ting, went the ringing in his ears. Subaru slowly opened his eyes.

The instant they opened, his head heavily swayed. He’d fallen to the ground. And yet, his semicircular canals had lost track of the world, and he kept rocking right and left, as if swaying on top of a wave.

The world was covered in a dense cloud of dirt. With a heave, something flowed backward from his stomach. It was liquefied food, water, and stomach fluid. It tasted bitter and acidic. He wiped it with his sleeve, laid his head down, and…



“—Aa”

In the world inclined at ninety degrees, he saw a hole gouged out of the ground, a great broken tree, and a crouching figure.

—Subaru saw a single giant tiger covered in golden fur.

“_____”

The ferocious tiger’s body was crouched low. Its jade eyes were looking down at the fallen Subaru.

Its body length was about twelve feet long, far larger than the tigers Subaru knew.

Its four legs were very thick, and its closed mouth could not contain all the fangs growing therein.

At a glance, the visual broadcast the menace that the tiger’s very presence presented.

“…uu”

The blow, the circumstances, made him think of something very similar he’d recently experienced amid the tragedy at the mansion the last time around—when he’d lost Petra to the attack of a demon beast.

“_____”

Desperately pivoting his head, Subaru turned his eyes to the area around him. At the base of the broken tree lay the young men, sent flying from the shockwave. From very close, he heard Otto’s groaning voice; he sensed Patlash, too.

Everyone was alive, if only barely. They hadn’t been allowed to die. After all, their opponent was—

“Gar, fi…el…”

A distinctive loincloth was still tied around the lower half of his enormous frame. He immediately realized that this was one and the same as that Garfiel wore around his hips. The sight of Frederica’s beast form was in the back of his mind. Simultaneously, the truth of the blood connection between her and

Garfiel was laid thoroughly bare.

—The ferocious tiger before him was the transfigured Garfiel.

In a matter of seconds, Garfiel had broken past Ram, ferociously chasing Subaru and Otto down. As for how much combat strength his bestialized form possessed, all Subaru knew for certain was that no one could help him.

It was over, he thought. He could escape no further. But he was strongly determined about one thing alone.

“I’ll do as you, say…but just don’t…”

Don’t hurt anyone else. Don’t kill anyone else—he declared, just not *that*.

Frederica had proven that however ferocious a bestial form appeared, it was still possible to think logically in that state. He knew Garfiel, having exposed that form to them, was serious. However, Subaru was serious, too.

Even if he had to return to that darkness, he didn’t want anyone else to get hurt.

—This, from Subaru Natsuki, who could fairly say he feared that darkness more than death.

“_____”

Without a word, he sat up and rose to his feet. The large tiger received his gaze, equally wordless.

The tiger simply stared and narrowed the distance. Subaru swallowed, close enough to feel the breath coming from the beast’s snout. He proceeded to await Garfiel’s decision, for him to release the transfiguration and return to his normal fo—

“—Eh?”

Gently, the world slowed down. In that extreme situation, his brain awakened, moving beyond the limits of comprehension.

In that sluggish world, he saw the ferocious tiger raise a front paw high, unleashing its razor-sharp claws. Even if he tried to immediately move his body, the thoughts of his awakened brain would have no effect upon his body.

The talons sharper than naked blades would lethally mow Subaru's torso apart—

"—You big idiot!!"

The loud voice slammed into his side, and simultaneously, a blow sent Subaru flying.

Before his eyes, crimson scattered. The world was still in slow motion. Red blood mixed in with the black of night, and a silhouette cried out in agony as it fell. The silhouette that had shielded Subaru, Otto Suwen…fell.

The claw gouged out his chest and abdomen, sending blood gushing out onto Subaru's cheek.

"Wha…"

Wound. Fresh blood. Shielded. Great tiger, surrender, darkness. Garfiel, Otto, talons, Return by Death, Petra, transfiguration, demands, why, why, whywhywhy—

"Gaaaarfiiiielllll—!!"

Subaru, howling with the emotions exploding in his gut, witnessed the ferocious tiger's wicked deed with bloodshot eyes.

His brain seethed with ferocious emotion, fury changing the blood in his body to gasoline. Coursing through his entire body, they poured onto the fires of his rage, causing a chain reaction of hot explosions burning his thoughts, his emotions, and his life away.

He shouted, he howled, in an incoherent voice. That moment, there was only anger and hatred within him. He wanted to burn the monster before his eyes to cinders. If anger and hatred became power, he would have ripped the monster asunder.

"_____!!!!"

But his voice was not imbued with the power to change fate.

Subaru's scream was blotted out by an even greater roar, and it seemed he would be the one to be killed instead. In fact, the voice accompanied the ferocious tiger raising an arm, slamming down with a blow identical to the one

launched at Otto.

It would penetrate his skull, rip out his rib cage, gouge out his inner organs, and with it, his life—he would die a squishy death.

“____”

He closed his eyes. With impending death before his eyes, Subaru swore to make him pay in the next world. He *would* get revenge. The flames of his anger would not abate. *I’ll chew you to pieces.*

Carving hatred upon his soul, Subaru awaited the moment. And yet, the surely approaching end failed to arrive. The timing of his death had been thrown off. Why? He opened his eyes, glaring at the great tiger.

The ferocious tiger remained right there, arm still raised. The single point of difference was that the beast’s jade eyes were aimed not at Subaru but off to the side.

Subaru followed that gaze. Something was flying in from the end of that gaze, striking the ferocious tiger’s head. Making a light sound, something fell to the ground and rolled around. It was a completely unremarkable rock.

The thrower of the rock was one of the young men of the village, blood flowing from his forehead as he wobbled to his feet.

“Get away from…Master Subaru, you, filthy monster…”

Wringing out his voice, groaning in pain, the young man strongly demonstrated his own intent.

It was clumsy, weak, ephemeral resistance against a ferocious beast he could not defeat. The other young men stood up, picking up the rocks and branches at their own feet, wielding them as weapons.

“H…ey…”

What do you think you’re doing? he tried to say, to halt their recklessness.

Where do you think you’re looking? he tried to say, slamming his deep resentment into the ferocious tiger.

He didn’t understand— But it was so simple to imagine the result that would

follow, even a child could do it.

“_____”

The ferocious tiger swung his claw, and fresh blood gushed. This continued a second and a third time.

There was the agonizing sound of death cries, the watery sound of the sharp gouging of flesh, the scream enough to ruin Subaru’s throat—

Why. Why. Whywhywhywhy. Why.

“Whyyyyyy—!!!”

He grabbed hold of the beast before his eyes. He bit into its thick hide. It threw him off. The blow had taken his front teeth with it. His thought process was overheated. He spat out blood and teeth, and leaped again. The tail slammed him from the side, easily blowing him into the air, and he landed on the ground, limbs spread out.

It was no time to sleep on the job. *Stand, stand, if anyone’s gonna die here, you die first.*

“W—ait, up… If anyone dies, it should be me… Let the others…!”

If he was going to kill anyone, just kill Subaru first.

In the first place, Subaru had to be Garfiel’s target. There was no reason to take the lives of such gallant, kindhearted men. He categorically rejected that. There wasn’t any reason at all, and yet—

“—U, aa?”

As Subaru clenched his teeth and coughed out blood, his body was hoisted upward.

There were blood-ridden black scales right next to him—Patlash. The profuse volume of blood coursing from her was visible proof that she had shielded Subaru from the ferocious tiger’s initial attack. Her wounds were deep; she was half alive, half dead. Just like back at the mansion, Patlash was protecting Subaru even at the verge of death.

“That’s…enough… That’s enough. It’s enough, Patlash…”

He begged her to stop. As Subaru clung to her, the deeply benevolent land dragon rejected his plea.

As she took Subaru in her mouth, there was a powerful will residing in Patlash's yellow eyes. With reserves of strength unthinkable for one near death, she rose on two legs.

To protect Subaru, to get him off the battlefield, the land dragon left behind those desperately fighting, ferociously breaking into a run once more.

"____"

Don't leave everyone behind, he tried to shout.

The instant he forced himself to look back, he saw the last person sent flying into pieces in the far distance. With a roar, the twin jade eyes swayed in the darkness, chasing after Subaru and the land dragon as they fled.

He was too fast. The distance was closing. Even if they ran, it was meaningless. Why was Patlash running?

"—Aa"

Putting strength into her jaws, Patlash's head twisted as she hurled Subaru as hard as she could manage. She hurled him forward, to get him even a little farther away from the menace, putting every inch of devotion into the act.

Then, as Subaru danced in the air, he realized that there was something, a light, twinkling in his pocket.

"____"

The crystal. Frederica's crystal. The stone in his pocket was shimmering blue.

Instantly, he understood. Patlash hadn't grabbed Subaru and run without a plan. She was sending Subaru as far as the barrier—to a place the menace of the ferocious tiger's fangs, the menace of Garfiel, could not reach.

"Patlash!"

As the world spun around him, he sought her, called out her name. Miraculously, they exchanged gazes.

In her yellow, narrow, reptilian irises, he saw a glint of impossible

compassion.

“_____”

The claw of the pursuing ferocious dragon slammed into the pitch-black land dragon’s side. Patlash was severed in two.

Without even raising a death cry, the loyal dragon perished, doing her utmost for Subaru until the very end.

“_____”

That was the same, too. It was completely the same result as at the mansion. His friends had died, his beloved dragon had died, his brain and his blood boiled.

He rolled onto the ground. A light glimmered. Had he gone past the barrier? Like he cared. The ferocious beast, the wild creature, rushed toward his eyes. It leaped, passing through the barrier, killing intent undiminished.

“_____”

There was a crash.

Instantly, light welled up, and Subaru Natsuki was bathed in blue.

—He had teleported.

6

When he regained consciousness, the first thing Subaru felt was a fiercely stimulating, repulsive stench.

“_____”

The foul stench, one that was impossible to forget, thrust itself into his nostrils.

The scent was like some kind of chemical. It made Subaru grimace as he sat up from the cold floor. He coughed as his body creaked with pain. Coughing more, he slowly put a hand on the wall and stood up.

The handkerchief on his wrist was grimy with dried blood and vomit. With that, he confirmed the passage of time and the fact he had not Returned by

Death. He had not died. The world had continued after the tragedy.

—In the back of his mind, images arose of people felled by the claws of a ferocious tiger, one after another, and of his beloved dragon's final moment.

"…Ugh."

He had survived. For whatever reason, he had survived.

His chest was choked with remorse that made him want to die that very moment. Subaru resisted the impulse to sever his tongue with his teeth, putting his weight against the wall as he unsteadily walked forward.

The stench made it easy for Subaru to understand just what that place was.

Groping through his memories, dragging his feet, he grudgingly dragged himself forward, heading for the exit.

He was in the building in which he had been imprisoned. He didn't know why he had made the jump to that place. But he instinctively understood that the crystal was the cause and that it had come in contact with the barrier.

"—!"

He grasped the crystal in his pocket and hurled it away. The stone made a light sound as it tumbled somewhere far away. The stone had no value any longer. Not in that world. Not then.

—It was a finished world. It was a world he had to bring to an end.

"_____"

Before granting himself death, he went to gaze at the world he had to bring to an end.

He had to take a good, hard look, drink it down, and smash it into dust.

After all, it was the duty of Subaru Natsuki to die when it was his time.

Straight ahead, the exit of the small building was near. The white wall his fingers were touching was so cold, it made them numb. The light filtering in from the outside made him narrow his eyes. During his time unconscious, night had ended, and morning had come.

It seemed that Garfiel had not realized he was there. *Lazy bastard,* thought

Subaru, exhaling a white breath, walking outside when—

“—Ah?”

—The snow blanketing the world was a blow far beyond his expectations.

7

Comprehension and despair, layered atop one another, canceling each other out over and over.

—Subaru’s soul blazed, for the painting was a portrait of hell.

Subaru had meant to exhaust himself to the brink of death to overwrite such a scene. In point of fact, he had crossed death twice, something that surely put him in reach of the painting’s brush.

Little did he know that the instant he touched the brush, the details of the painting had morphed into a different hell.

“*—Ha-ha*.”

The wintery world made his breath a white cloud, and as he trod through the snow, Subaru put his hands on his seemingly gasping knees.

It had already been several hours since he had left the structure, walking aimlessly ever since. Subaru safely reaching the settlement the night before had been thanks to Otto leading the way via his blessing.

At present, he was without that, in the heart of the Lost Woods of Cremaldi—the landscape changed abruptly by the falling snow, with not a single thing to aid him present.

“Sh—it…!”

His endurance was depleted, the snowy landscape’s low temperature robbing his body of warmth. To prevent a drop in body temperature, even to a tiny extent, Subaru tied Petra’s handkerchief around his forehead before resuming his walk once more.

“My promise with Petra…”

The sun had risen high. There was no longer any way to prevent the tragedy

from befalling the mansion.

He'd been unable to do anything. He hadn't saved Petra or Frederica. Probably not Rem, either. Beatrice was still clutching that magic tome; Otto was dead; Patlash was dead; what had happened to Ram? Garfiel, Roswaal, what were they thinking? Emilia was—

"But I'll…"

He'd take it all back. He'd redo everything. It was his duty to walk the path where everything was right.

Only Subaru could do it. It was something Subaru had to do.

For that reason, the memory of everything that had been lost had to continue in Subaru alone.

For that reason, the sacrifices paid for it had to continue on inside of Subaru.

For that reason, Subaru, and Subaru alone, had to pay a commensurate price.

He'd pay the commensurate price. He'd let the casualties pile up. And then, he'd bring everything back.

"____"

The instant his responsibility to do what had to be done burned within him, the forest opened before Subaru's eyes.

The landscape he thought would continue forever ended, and he rushed into the settlement, which was also buried in snow.

He wasn't surprised. He was already resigned. There, a giant tiger would suddenly blot out his vision, as he died laughing with nothing but hatred burning within him. His heart had long frozen over.

However, contrary to his resignation, the ferocious tiger did not appear. No, rather than that—

"No one's here…?"

The fallen bonfire had vanished in the snow. He couldn't sense that anyone was present in the Sanctuary whatsoever.

He couldn't pass it off saying it was a low-population settlement to begin

with. It felt like an uninhabited wasteland.

Indeed, he couldn't see even a single footstep on the accumulated white snow. There was no sign of anyone walking around.

"Snow fell… No one's here…"

Touching a hand to his forehead, he dug his nails into his forehead as he began to doubt his own sanity.

The Sanctuary was filled with tranquility. There was no sign of human presence, nor the sound of any insect. From time to time, he heard only the sound of the leaves swaying in the wind, a change announced by the faint shift in his eardrums. He heard nothing in this world—

"—Aa?"

In that soundless world, that white-marred hell, he was taken back by a change within.

At first, Subaru sensed something like a white ball of wool tumbling in the wind. However, he immediately understood that it was no ball of wool at all. It rolled to Subaru's feet, and there, made a tiny tremble. Then Subaru, eyes wide, realized it had two long ears protruding from it.

It had long ears, a soft white pelt, short legs, and two red eyes. With a tilt of its head, its mouth moved in unhurried fashion as it made a high-pitched *kii*.

"Rab…bit…?"

Subaru's eyes beheld a rabbit and a particularly small one at that.

The rabbit was as small as Subaru's closed fist, a creature no larger than a mouse. The long ears characteristic of a rabbit were fairly short and, combined with its round tail, all of the parts were in order, if at a very compact size.

In the Sanctuary, where insect, animal, land dragon, man, and all others had vanished in the snow, a rabbit had suddenly appeared.

"Why is a rabbit here…? …Should a rabbit be here?"

An inexhaustible supply of mysteries was born, and the crush of information made Subaru feel like even his brain wanted to retch. Was the rabbit at his feet

a clue for learning what had happened in the Sanctuary?

Clinging to that thought, he stretched a hand toward the rabbit—

The next instant, from the wrist down, Subaru's hand was ripped off.

"…Aeegh?"

Blood gushed out of the raggedly cut wound; his reddish-black arteries drooped downward. Perhaps the thin white threads pulled out were muscle fibers or nerves. Either way, the spectacle of human flesh being destroyed was particularly grotesque.

Such evasion of the reality of his lost hand prevailed for exactly two seconds —whereupon his brain was wrecked by the ferocious pain from another dimension.

"G, aah?! Uoaa! Aaa, gaggaaaa—!!!"

The world blazed white.

His mind, dominated by pain, had lost all *pain* ability to recognize *pain* reality. What *pain* had happened that *pain* he had to endure such *pain*? What was the cause of *pain*? What had *pain* happened? Why this *pain*? *Pain, painpainpain*—

Agonizing further and further, he pressed his blood-spilling left wrist against the ground. Unwittingly, he bit into the snow, a seemingly meaningless mixture of ice and mud. He tasted the soil, crunched down the ice, and his vision whirled in search of what had happened— At his feet, the white ball of wool had red spots scattered over its pelt. It was moving its mouth.



It was chewing. Subaru could see his fingers hanging out of its moving little mouth. He understood. It had been eaten.

His hand had been eaten.

“G— Gaaaaa—!!”

An understanding he didn’t want to be aware of, a pain he didn’t want to feel; the agony dragged his spirit toward madness.

His mind was like stained glass as it cracked, shattering and turning into vestiges of fine sand.

“Gi—iihigiiii!!!”

And yet, pain had roused his shattered mind.

He felt a burning sensation in his calf. His eyes reeled from a stimulus like flesh and bone being mercilessly raked by a file. Reddish-black bubbles poured into the middle of his throat, causing him to convulse like a fish out of water. He didn’t faint. He couldn’t. The pain was too strong for that. The pain was too strong for that. The cruel pain forced his mind to remain awake.

Kii, kii, went the countless cries that his eardrums picked up.

The number of these high-pitched voices was vast, and he was surrounded by presences he couldn’t bother to count. His eyeballs were already derelict in their duty, having giving up on looking at his surroundings. That was a mercy.

He was glad it was only his ears still working. He could not have borne the sight.

“_____”

Fangs tore into his entire body. From the feeling of the fangs biting into him, he knew it was a horde.

He screamed. He rolled onto his back, sending his voice toward the heavens. That very moment, he sensed something furry enter his mouth, ripping out his tongue. His throat was violated, opening a path from his windpipe to his stomach, from which his viscera could be voraciously eaten. He was being chewed away.

Fangs invaded from his anus, crashing inside his body against those that had entered from the mouth. As if in a contest, they raced left and right to consume his inner organs, making mincemeat out of Subaru Natsuki.

He was alive. He was being eaten alive. He could feel his flesh being torn into fragments.

He wasn't afraid. He couldn't feel pain anymore. He didn't even know where his mind was.

He was being eaten. He was being consumed. His left eye was eaten. His ears were gone. His inner organs had been torn away, and just then, the skin of his face was ripped off. A hole was opened in his skull, and fangs thrust into his brain—

—.

—.

———.

————————————aa—.

8

His flesh…had been rebuilt.

The torn, consumed flesh of his cheeks, the ripped-off skin of his face, his bitten-apart skull, his chewed-away nerves, his lapped-up blood, and his fiendishly violated, ravenously consumed soul—were restored to their former state.

"—aa"

Blood passed into his fingertips, and Subaru's entire body ferociously convulsed.

On the cold, hard floor, Subaru moaned as froth gushed out, his eyes rolling in every direction.

There was no pain. There was no sense of loss. His four limbs were connected to his torso, and his chest had all of the viscera required to sustain life. His flesh

and blood had been returned to him. But what of the spirit that had been eaten apart?

Whose mind could return to the world of the sane, when the memory of being “devoured” was still fresh?

“B, b, b…!”

Subaru slammed his head against the ground as if he was having a seizure. His brain bounced back from the hard blow, making his brain shake. For a moment, the vestiges of having been chewed away eased. In search of this, he repeated the act.

—Why.

It was not his spirit or his flesh, but his soul, which refused to acknowledge reality.

With the most critical part of his decision-making systems refusing to reboot, Subaru Natsuki could not return.

But his soul repeated the word *why* over and over again, searching for an answer.

What had occurred? Just what had happened? Why had such a thing taken place? Why did it have to be that way? What was happening with him now? What to do? What should he do?

—Why, why, why, why, *why*.

No answer came forth. Before that vague thesis, not even a written problem, his soul simply broke into lament.

—Why! Why! Why!!

Drowning in reality, haunted by a nightmare, having lost sight of the path of life, all he could do was ask himself, “Why?”

For that was—

“—Once more, you have gained the qualifications.”

As Subaru made little trembles, he heard a whisper-like voice in his ear.

“I invite thee— Come to the Witches’ Tea Party.”

The next instant, the soul of Subaru Natsuki returned but moments before, was once again severed from reality.

CHAPTER 5

THE WITCHES' TEA PARTY

1

Atop a small hill jutting up from a verdant plain, a gentle wind reminiscent of spring blew.

Subaru's forelocks and the tall, green grass swayed in the wind as cumulonimbus clouds danced, racing toward the blue yonder.

"____"

Subaru touched his forehead, tickled by the wind, and narrowed his eyes at the dazzling sun rays. Then, he slowly brought his gaze down from the sky, reorienting it straight ahead.

At some point, Subaru had come to sit in a white chair. It was large, resembling an easy chair, and before his eyes, there was a small pure-white table. Across from the table, in an identical chair, sat a figure with her long legs crossed.

She was a beautiful girl with long hair, precious little of her white skin exposed, and beyond that, everything was covered in black clothing—

"—That's not quite accurate. More like, you're a bound spirit that's spent four centuries unable to move on."

"Quite a greeting, such short shrift the very moment we are reunited? In the first place, where I am concerned, I was nineteen years of age at the time of my death—therefore my outward appearance is that of a young maiden much the same age as you?"

"Dying at nineteen is straight-up heavy stuff… Sorry. I shouldn't joke about the dead."

“—? Quite a laudable response. I suppose we have not known each other long enough for me to say that is not like you?”

As Subaru leaned forward, his fists opening and closing, the girl—the Witch Echidna—narrowed her eyes in apparent deep interest. She rested an elbow upon the table, and her cheek against her palm, provocatively looking back at Subaru with a sidelong glance as she spoke.

“It is rare for the same guest to be invited to a tea party twice. It does not happen often at all. You should be proud!”

“A host shouldn’t be so blunt to the guest. If I stop being honestly thankful, where will you be then?”

“Oh, my! Then you intended to be honestly thankful to me, yes?”

“Ugh…”

When Echidna hit the bull’s-eye, Subaru averted his gaze from her suppressed laugh. Thanks to his mental state just prior, he’d blithely let the words slip. But that “mental state just prior” was the very issue at hand.

“I…was in the tomb…”

The words he was too frightened to add were, *going crazy*.

As a matter of fact, Subaru’s spirit had completely broken down. That was how much death that time around had carved indelible wounds into his soul, combined with how repeated Return by Death experiences had beaten him down.

He’d rather have his mouth rent than ever speak the words *accustomed to death.* But he thought he was prepared for it.

So very easily, that assumption had been ripped away—

“But right now, I’m fine. So normal it feels bad.”

“You don’t like that? You would rather lose your cool, fall into a panic, pathetically bawl your eyes out?”

“…I’m not saying I want stuff like that. I thought you understood, Echidna.”

“I suppose so. Right now I’m being an evil tease. Sorry, I just wanted to smack

you around a bit.”

Sensing the rebuke in his voice, Echidna raised both hands as if to declare surrender. Then, with a flutter of her palm, she went, “It’s just,”—tilting her head as she said—

“I did not invite you to this tea party merely to tease you. Had I not done so, your mind would have shattered… You are aware of that, perhaps?”

“That’s why I was honestly going to thank you out loud, sheesh. Then you…”

“I see. It seems my words and deeds carry the same faults as they did in life. Now then, I would like to properly hear your words of thanks right now— Well, knock yourself out.”

With a wry smile, Echidna puffed out her chest, a posture for accepting words of thanks. Staring at the smug, proud look on her face, Subaru took in a deep breath, exhaling at length.

If he had to break it down into raw terms, she was being a very witchy witch.

“—? What is wrong; anytime is good?”

“…Is the reason I returned to form the instant I came here that I drank your tea before?”

“Ahhh, I would suppose so. The tea set your Witch Factor into motion to promote stabilization. Leaving and entering the tea party does not cause it to lose its effect… Incidentally, the words of thanks?”

“That so? I’m just a little relieved. Should I understand that to mean it’ll continue when I go outside?”

“Because we are discussing your mental state. Since you have regained your cool…… I suppose if you were to remember about this place, you might retain your peace of mind even outside of the dream. So hey, the thanks?”

The reply, including how she said it like it didn’t concern her, made Subaru’s breath catch.

If he were to remember this place, Echidna had said. As a matter of fact, that made things very difficult. The fact he’d come into contact with the witch twice, forgetting both times, proved the vow was at work.

The vow had made Subaru forget Echidna. As a result, Subaru had lost sight of even himself.

“—Echidna, is there a way to rewrite a vow?”

“Huh?”

“Is there a way to leave here without forgetting about you? As long as the vow makes me forget you, my mind will break. Isn’t that right?”

“Well, it is, but…”

“Besides, it’s not just an issue of my mind. Even setting that aside, I want to remember you.”

“—Eh?”

Yes. It was not an issue of Subaru’s mind alone. Remembering Echidna’s existence was a necessary piece to unravel the mysteries of the Sanctuary and prevent it from changing into that hell.

That was why Subaru thrust his hands onto the table, drawing near enough to the Witch’s face he could feel her breath, and made a firm declaration.

“If you need compensation, I’ll pay anything else. In return—”

“_____”

“Don’t hide my memories.”

“—O-okay…”

In the face of Subaru’s strong demand, Echidna acted particularly awkward, nodding meekly.

Her demeanor gave him an odd feeling, but the reply was a yes. *I did it,* thought Subaru, clapping his hands as he celebrated.

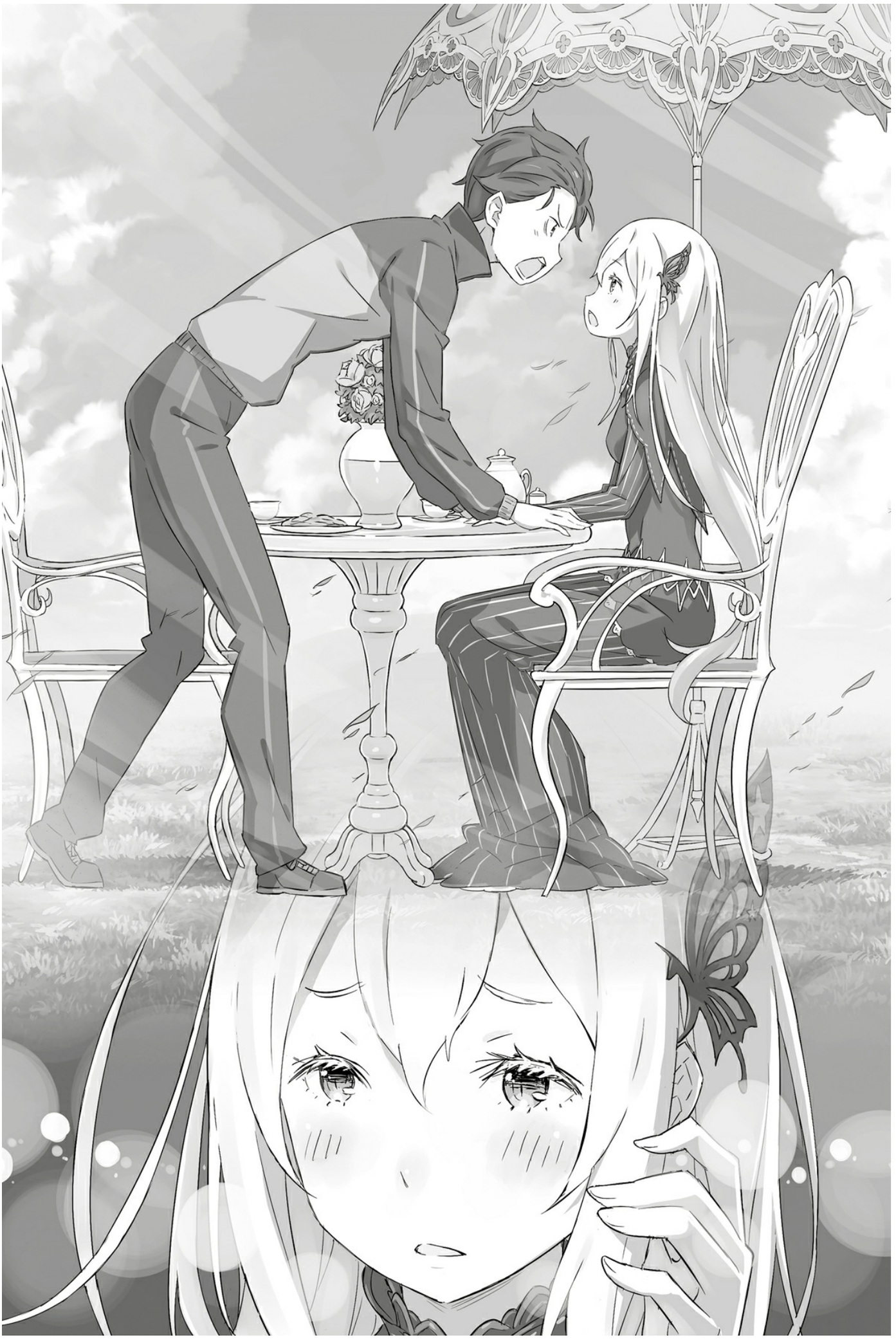
“Got you to say it! Big help! No taking it back!”

“I would not do such a shameless thing. I would not, but…you are somewhat underhanded, I think.”

Subaru cocked his head in confusion at the sudden accusation. His response made Echidna turn her face with a fairly sour look. Then, the Witch indicated

the opposing chair to Subaru as she said,

“Anyway, I understand what you have said. For now, do sit. Let us take our time and speak.”



“Yeah…er, I don’t have time for all that. More importantly, gotta take care of the vow business…”

“—I prefer you do not misunderstand, Subaru Natsuki.”

Her lackadaisical demeanor quickened Subaru’s mood. Echidna called out to him when he tried to hurry things up. The words brought him to a halt.

For some reason, her tone of voice carried a power that was difficult to defy. Then, as Subaru swallowed, Echidna—or rather, the Witch—continued.

“Rewriting a vow is not a difficult thing in itself. Nor do I mind how you are boldly stating things that are difficult to say. But I will not have statements ignorant of your position.”

“_____”

“In the end, you are a guest invited to this tea party. And this castle of dreams is my territory.

“Under my rule. If you say things that are simply too selfish, it becomes an issue of my honor.”

Her voice was quiet, with no change in its tenor; only the voice’s power had changed.

Having changed the atmosphere to such an extent, her eyes of bottomless darkness gazed up at Subaru.

—Therein rested the supernatural being known as a Witch.

“…a, uu”

The feeling of oppression grabbed firm hold of his soul, making Subaru recall the initial impression he’d had of Echidna: namely, his terror toward an overwhelming menace outstripping even the White Whale and the Witch of Sloth.

And that Echidna, the Witch of Greed, the Witch of white and black before his eyes, lived up to both name and title.

“Having been invited to this tea party, you have a duty to behave politely. That only makes sense, yes?”

With Subaru's spiritual body marred with an unbecoming level of cold sweat, the Witch stroked her own white hair as she continued. With his throat and tongue feeling dry and his breathing ragged, Subaru barely managed to wring out a reply.

"Politeness as a guest, you mean…"

"It is quite simple. I am the hostess; you are the guest— Let us behave as such."

The feeling of oppression was intact as Echidna slowly reached out with a hand. The Witch's slender fingers touched the table, tapping upon its surface thrice.

Her fingertips indicated a point atop the table—upon which rested an untouched, steaming cup.

"…Ah?"

"If you are a guest to a tea party, you should begin by accepting tangible proof of your invitation. Is that not proper?"

"…! You're not easy to understand."

"I am a Witch, after all. It would be a shame for normal girls if you were to lump me in with them, would it not?"

Smiling as if she'd pulled a fast one on him, the sense of oppression from Echidna's demeanor dissipated. Subaru felt like the mental anguish she'd inflicted as revenge for his rudeness was completely over the top, but at any rate…

"Shit… I get it, geez!"

Clicking his tongue, he snatched the cup from the table and poured the liquid down the hatch. Even though time had passed since its pouring, its temperature had not diminished at all, as might be expected of tea served by a Witch.

Subaru strongly gulped it down, concerning himself little with the taste, and raggedly wiped his lips with his sleeve.

"Well, I swallowed it down. Now you'll accept me as a guest of the tea party?"

“Having my bodily fluids swallowed down with such fervor… Mmm, it makes me blush a little.”

“Gehhh! I forgot about that—!!!”

The Dona Tea Trap was at the first tea party, and upon his second arrival, Subaru had fallen hook, line, and sinker for it once more.

The sight of her guest earnestly retching on the spot made the Witch hostess’s shoulders sink in chagrin. After that, the Witch abruptly clapped her hands together, seemingly just remembering something as she spoke up.

“Come to think of it, your words of thanks? I feel as if I have not heard them yet…”

“Thank you for pouring me tea that tastes like shit! You damned Witch!”

Though he thanked her just as she told him to, Echidna was less than thrilled with the words of gratitude he provided.

2

Beginning with Subaru and Echidna sitting on opposite ends of the table once more, the tea party recommenced.

Just like the previous time around, he had been unable to expel the Dona Tea he had absorbed no matter how desperately he retched. Pretending that nothing had happened, Subaru sought to blot out his sense of nausea with his sense of duty as he attended the tea party.

“Having the bodily fluids I offered rejected to that extent wounds my maidenly heart.”

“A maiden wouldn’t talk about offering bodily fluids once in her whole life. More importantly, I want to continue talking about important stuff. About the vow issue, you promise to… Nah, you’ll do it, then?”

“You have an aversion toward the word *promise*, do you? This, too, I accept.”

The joking exchange weighed on his mind, but Subaru was relieved he’d gained a firm promise from her: that even when he woke from the dream, he would not forget Echidna’s existence. This would surely prove a necessary key

to finding the answer to the Witch's laboratory known as the Sanctuary.

Having gained confirmation on that point, there was one other thing he wanted to confirm with the Witch—

"—Echidna, how much do you know about my circumstances?"

"What I know is how much I want to know about you. And how much I want to know is all there is to know in the entire world."

"Don't kid about this. I'm sure you've realized how weird it is that I'm here at all."

"That is not so. You fulfilled the conditions to be invited to the tea party—you reached my territory, and in that place, you were filled with such longing for some reason. And that desire aroused my Greed—"

Echidna made a play on words, whereupon Subaru placed his hand on the table once more.

By this he indicated he didn't mind playing along with the tea party…but he had no intention of playing along with a farce.

"It is strange. I mean, from your point of view, I only just left, right?"

"_____"

"I returned from the Trial…from overcoming my past. And here I am, right after that."

The reference point for that loop was set to right after he'd overcome the first Trial.

Even though Subaru had returned, he ought to have been in the stone room in the tomb. That was both immediately after his conversation with Echidna had concluded, and to the Witch, an extremely quick reunion—

"You're so smart, there's no way you wouldn't find that strange. If you don't, that could only mean…"

"…Could only mean?"

Hesitating to continue his words, Echidna gave his hesitant back a proverbial shove. He breathed in, then out.

If Echidna did not harbor suspicions about their reunion, that meant—

“—You know the circumstances that caused it.”

“_____”

When Subaru pressed onward, Echidna made a tiny smile and maintained her silence.

—The basis for his suspicion was the words he’d exchanged with Echidna in the virtual classroom at the height of the first Trial, when she’d stated that world was nothing but a charade.

Even that very moment, the answer he’d conveyed to his parents in the past had not changed. They rested strongly in his chest. Accordingly, it was not that which weighed on Subaru’s mind, but how that world had been constructed. Echidna had created a different world using Subaru’s memories as a reference, recreating even his school’s uniforms.

If that was the power of the Witch of Greed, sleeping eternally within the tomb, then—

“—You have the power to see my memories. So, you don’t think this situation’s strange.”

If she had the power to use his memories as a reference, she knew that from Subaru’s perspective, their reunion was not directly after parting inside of that classroom. She also knew he had spent several days since then, letting everything slip through his fingers as “death” greeted him once more.

—And so, too, did she know that Subaru Natsuki had Returned by Death, going back in time.

“_____”

Subaru hesitated, sealing his words away. His heart beat ferociously, as if to tell him that going any further was dangerous— That if Subaru revealed much more, he would most certainly brush up against the taboo.

He would expose Return by Death. That would violate the one inviolate rule that the Witch had laid down. And should Subaru break it, he would taste agony to his very limits as punishment.

Or perhaps he would invite a different tragedy, and those evil hands would take the life of someone precious to Subaru, as they had with Emilia.

“*Haaa…haaa…!*”

His spiritual body’s brow was drenched with sweat. The droplets fell onto his cheek, rolling down to his jaw.

The state of his soul vividly reflected that of his body. That was how far he was backed into a corner.

That moment, what backed Subaru’s mind into a corner was not fear of the taboo, but fear of the unknown.

Subaru’s tongue rejected spinning the words in that unknown state. After all, the current situation was different from any other situation he had encountered relating to Return by Death.

If Subaru spoke, willingly breaking the taboo, his heart would be crushed.

If Subaru pleaded from his heart that he wanted to reveal the truth—the evil hands would take the life of someone he cared for.

Then what happened if he said aloud that Return by Death had been exposed via a completely different tangent?

It was a complete unknown, a circumstance beyond all imagination—

“Why do you not try it?”

“—?!!”

To Subaru, afraid of the taboo and the unknown, Echidna casually tossed those words.

Taken aback by the casualness of it, Subaru was indignant next. Echidna didn’t understand. She didn’t comprehend what might arise if he just tried it, how horribly unprofitable the prospect.

But in the face of Subaru’s anger, Echidna shook her head and said,

“To test in hope of a result is an action to be praised. We only covet that which has value.”

Without even knowing if she herself might be harmed, she criticized Subaru’s

inde— No, that wasn't it.

The Witch Echidna had seen right through to Subaru's reason for indecision.

She knew it was possible that it would be her, not Subaru, who might be in peril. And, knowing this, she had said to do it nonetheless. She said this, because her conviction was unshakable.

The "Witch of Greed," the very epitome of hunger for knowledge, would gamble even her own life on an action with no way to foresee the result.

"You might not have time to regret it…?"

"If that time comes, may I expect that you will break down in tears before my remains?"

To Subaru, hesitating until the last moment, Echidna replied in a tone that was sunny to the bitter end.

Her position was one she adopted out of consideration for Subaru, so that her personal feelings might not excessively sway his decision.

That was less sympathy toward Subaru than the Witch's sincerely not wishing for an external impurity to skew the result wrought by his decision. There were no expectations, nor wishes, attached.

He saw that it was her way as a Witch to seek the purity of the result. And that gave his back a shove.

He felt like her way of life, not harboring the slightest of doubts, was mocking his own smallness—

"Echidna. I Return by Dea—"

He spoke the words that were taboo.

Just as he had done many times before, he spoke the words, the special phrase, that walked across the prohibited line.

Several times had he done this: to serve as a decoy for the demon dogs, to lure in the White Whale, to deceive the Witch Cultists.

In the course of doing so, he was robbed of words, and the world's time came to a halt—

“—th.”

Firmly closing his eyes, Subaru gritted his teeth against the ferocious pain he expected to come.

However, his touching resolve amounted to nothing.

“…Eh?”

He opened his eyes. The world had not changed. Time had not stopped. There was no pain.

And this being the case, he shifted his gaze toward the Witch sitting directly in front of him, who went…

“Hmm…”

Sitting in her chair, the Witch recrossed her long legs as the eyebrows of her refined visage grimaced ever so slightly. However, that was her only reaction. Even when he glanced at the area of her breasts, there was no change in the Witch.

“…If you keep staring at me like that, I shall be embarrassed. Though I am rather proud of my outward appearance, I have no such confidence about my figure. Unlike Sekhmet and Daphne, that is.”

“I ain’t starin’ at you for a reason like *that*. No, more importantly…”

Subaru responded to her misdirected demeanor, his thought process still at a halt.

No punishment of the taboo had been applied within the chest that Echidna hid from Subaru’s gaze with her arms.

In the face of that fact, his thoughts slowly began anew as he touched a hand to his mouth.

The roots of his teeth, and his voice, were shaking.

“When, when I die, I go back in time, and I restart the world. I Return by Death.”

“I heard you. And I perceived it before I heard. I see—it is an exceedingly rare circumsta…”

“I! Return by Death! Return by Death! Return by Death! Return by Death!!”

“W-wait a—?!”

Echidna was horrified at Subaru repeating the forbidden words over and over. Her composure from the moment before was lost; the Witch’s eyes opened wide as she hurriedly urged Subaru to calm down.

“C-calm yourself. I understand how you feel, but…”

“I’ve! Returned by Death! Over, and over, I die and restart! I! Return by Death…”

“I get it already! So let’s advance the conv…”

“I…! Return by Death, starting things over, over and over……!”

“____”

He shouted numerous times, unable to contain himself. As Subaru shouted, hot droplets poured from his eyes. The droplets trickled down his cheeks, rolling down to his jaw, and fell— This was not sweat. These were tears.

“All this time… I’ve…!”

He’d seen this dream so many times. He’d anguished so many times, wanting to shout it out. He’d probably begged for it many times over.

Yet he could reveal Return by Death to no one.

He thought he was forced to defy it, alone—

“I…!!”

“—I understand.”

His revelations became lamentations, and his shout scattered into sobs midway.

Faced with Subaru’s voice, the Witch quietly nodded.

As Subaru wept, the Witch stood at his side. Her fingers touched his black hair, seemingly ready to enter it. Then, her slender, delicate hand gently stroked his head.

“I know, the footprints you have made until now. I saw them, after all.”

“_____”

“But, I have merely seen them. If possible, I would like you to tell me about them from your own lips. I want to know what you thought, what you felt, how much you embraced.”

Stroking his head, the Witch added, “I mean,” and continued, “—I am Echidna, the Witch of Greed, she who craves knowing everything in this world.”

3

Bit by bit, Subaru spoke the words in what had to be an exceptionally plodding process.

However, as a long period of time passed, the Witch lending her ears to Subaru’s clumsy tale did not speak unnecessarily even once, nor had she done anything to hurry him.

Until the very end, she simply listened in silence as Subaru spoke. Then, seeing from Subaru’s lowering of his head that he had finished his tale, she offered a short remark.

“—How awful.”

The voice with which she spat out the words was tinged with unconcealed disgust.

For a single moment, the words made Subaru concerned. He feared the Witch was disparaging the footsteps Subaru had laid down up to that point. But his reaction made Echidna go, “No,” shaking her head sideways as she said, “I am sorry to have misled you. I was not speaking of your tale just now. I simply feel anger that is difficult to bear toward the being that made you walk such a path of suffering.”

“The being that made me walk a path of suffering…”

“—The Witch of Envy.”

When Echidna’s voice became like a whisper, Subaru came to a complete stop.

Amid the sense that his body, his breathing, and even the beating of his heart

had come to a halt, Echidna's black pupils narrowed.

"I am sure that you, too, understood long ago. The power to rewind death… No, the power to deny you the peace of death, could only come from Envy."

"…That's because I've heard so much about the Witch from so many different people. I've never met this Witch face to face, but I figured as much from the 'outstretched hands' that appeared once in a while…"

The shadowy woman who appeared in the world of stopped time to inflict the punishment for breaking the taboo—

On the one hand, the shadow granted him agonizing pain; on the other, it touched him lovingly. At first, it was only one arm, but now he could see two arms and the contours of a torso that was progressively drawing nearer.

He suspected that, as he Returned by Death more and more, a time of reckoning was approaching.

"I have absolutely no idea why she's infatuated with me, though. Do you know the reason?"

"Not really. After all, understanding that thing's way of thinking is beyond not only me but all others as well. Even if I could, I would prefer not to."

Averting her gaze, Echidna spoke with invective. Subaru raised an eyebrow at her attitude.

"Man, for someone who declares she wants to know everything in this world, you sure have a thing against the Witch of Envy. Well, she is the one who killed you, so that is kinda natural…"

Echidna was purportedly a supernatural existence in a different dimension than what mere mortals could ever achieve. Even if 'castle of dreams' was an exaggeration, the Witch had transcended death to construct an entire world while only a soul, yet she bore personal likes and dislikes the same as any normal human being.

Seeing a glimpse of humanity like that, Subaru felt an odd sense of closeness to her. However, Echidna herself noticed nothing of Subaru's sentiments, sighing as she said spoke again.

“I believe you harbor no small grudge either, but speaking of her depresses even me. Therefore, let us discuss something else. If there is something you wish to ask, ask it, whatever it may be.”

“Something else, huh…”

When she sought a change in subject, Subaru fell into thought. Put bluntly, he was disappointed.

By divulging Return by Death, Subaru had broken free of the sense of being besieged that had plagued him for so long, filling him with a sense of liberation at his confined world opening right up.

Accordingly, Subaru had gotten his hopes up for a dramatic change. But Echidna had affirmed that the Witch of Envy was the cause of Return by Death like it was nothing, opening her heart to other conversational topics.

The complete lack of dramatic developments made all those tears seem like they were just his imagination.

“For example…yes, how about, if there was a way to remove the powerful Authority that inflicts the never-ending agony of repeating death, would you be curious at all?”

“…Even if a way did exist, that’s a problem. Not interested.”

With Subaru at a loss for words, the Witch made a proposal, but he shook his head, refusing her statement without hesitation.

Certainly, the power of Return by Death brought Subaru great agony. But even so—

“It galls me to say it, but I need Return by Death. There’s a lot of results I couldn’t have gotten without it. There’s also a lot of people I wouldn’t have been able to save.”

“____”

“Without that power, there’s a lot of people I want to save that I couldn’t. So I need it.”

Putting it into words made him aware of the fact all over again; Return by Death was Subaru’s only weapon.

At the same time, it gave rise to something he wanted to ask, making him think of a question he'd always harbored.

"Echidna, do you think there's a limit to the number of times I can Return by Death?"

"…I see. That is a logical question for you to arrive at."

Since arriving in that world, Subaru had already experienced over ten Returns by Death. Tasting agony and a sense of loss, Subaru had restarted the world via death. The fear he harbored, that this time might be his last, was a natural emotion.

"I mean, that figures, right…?"

He'd already overturned the bounds of death many times over, something that by rights happened no more than once.

Over the course of each death, Subaru tasted the sense of despair from perishing with his objective left unfinished— Just how terrifying would death be, if it could erase that sense of despair along with everything else?

And just how long would that power of heresy against death postpone that moment for Subaru—

"Let me precede this by saying this is, in the end, purely my own speculation. My knowledge of the principles of your Authority is too vague for me to do anything but extrapolate. So I first wish you to forgive the vagueness of my reply."

"…Yeah, please tell me anyway."

"Your Return by Death, as a power that triggers according to specific conditions, I believe it likely has—"

He sucked in his breath as he awaited her reply.

Echidna's eyes were looking straight at him. The brief pause in her modest words made Subaru feel like he was waiting for an eternity.

And at the end of his nervous waiting, she said—

"—No limit."

“_____”

“Your deaths will never end. No matter how many times you die, no matter what results, your soul will go back in time, seeking to restart until such a time as you break past the fate that led to your death, no matter how cruelly you might be slain, or how mind and body might be broken.”

For a time, the inside of Subaru’s head was wholly occupied by a blank space that resisted comprehension of Echidna’s conclusion. Then, the conclusion spread forth, pushing into that blank space, causing it to break down little by little as comprehension permeated him.

At that point, he finally let out a quavering breath as words trickled out of him.

“—That so.”

“You accepted that surprisingly easily.”

“The thin reaction wasn’t to your liking? Sorry ’bout that.”

He finally returned to a state of mind that could manage a strained smile. That strained smile was still on Subaru’s face when he assented to the Witch’s view, running his thoughts over Return by Death being unlimited.

It was the most favorable conclusion among the hypotheses inside of Subaru. But—

“—Strictly speaking, what you said wasn’t unlimited; you said subject to specific conditions. What are those specific conditions?”

“…Though it vexes me, the Authority that allows you to Return by Death is rooted in the Witch’s wild delusion. If the Witch’s delusion were to expire, you would cease to reject death— I do not know what would occasion such a thing, but…”

“We don’t even know the reason she’s obsessed with me, so it wouldn’t be weird if she suddenly dropped me like a hot potato, you know?”

“Perhaps you have somehow picked up on that being utterly impossible?”

Subaru could not summon a retort to her teasing banter. In point of fact, he was oddly certain of it.

The Witch would not permit Subaru to truly die. By the same token, she would not permit Subaru to leave her grasp, either. That baseless yet absolute confidence had been driven into the innermost reaches of Subaru's being like a nail.

"…What do you think this power is for? What do you think about it?"

"The power is for not allowing you to die, for not allowing you to do wrong."

"Why would the Witch…the Witch of Envy hand me that kind of power? It might disgust you to guess, but do you know the…meaning, of my power?"

Gradually speaking faster and faster, Subaru feared the sense of evasiveness toward the odd certainty dwelling inside his chest.

Subaru gradually lost the composure in his demeanor, or perhaps it had never been there to begin with. At this, Echidna knit her brows and said,

"—I do not understand what you are afraid of. What has you so frightened?"

"I'm afraid? Yeah, I am afraid! I'm afraid of! I'm afraid of…"

Echidna's inquisitive bent mercilessly sliced open the part of Subaru covering his fears. In place of red blood, her slice resulted in the emotions stuffing his chest gushing out instead.

Fear, regret, unease, sadness—nothing but negative emotions flooded out.

"Even if I die, I'll come back… I didn't want to indulge in thinking I can die any number of times. I didn't want to think it… but if it's the only thing I can rely on, I'll rely on that. But…"

Even if death was without limit, gradually the Witch's shadow would take shape, and Subaru would inevitably have to confront it.

Besides, Return by Death was not omnipotent. It could leave situations where something could never be regained. And the greatest thing that he was unable to get back was—

"—I…couldn't get Rem back."

The biggest problem Subaru had with Return by Death was that it had not returned Rem's existence to him.

Subaru could never forget, knowing Rem was lost to him, the impulse to stab his throat before her as she slept; nor could he forget the despair when, immediately afterward, he'd returned to the point just before stabbing his throat.

"Why couldn't I get Rem back? If Return by Death is the power for me to restart my fate, why'd it put me in a place where I couldn't get her back…!"

"So that is the reason for your fear? …It is both the fountainhead of your remorse, and the source of your desire, I see."

Gripping his fist so much his nails dug into it, Subaru spoke through clenched teeth. Echidna narrowed her eyes.

The Witch's words made him raise his head. When black pupils crossed with black pupils, the Witch said,

"I am about to tell you something that is very cruel."

With that preamble, the Witch's expression hardened as she continued speaking to Subaru.

"—That thing does not take into consideration your regret at not saving the girl from her fate."

"—!"

"What it seeks is that your fate is not held captive to a dead end. The Authority is a means to that end and thinks nothing of the harm to anyone beyond you. Employing this power to save others is strictly your own doing, your own desire… The Witch of Envy has nothing to do with it."

"aa…"

"Therefore, I shall declare one more thing."

Subaru was still reeling from the blow, but Echidna continued speaking of cruel things.

That moment, it was what Subaru needed. The Witch of white and black closed her eyes but once, her expression seemingly enduring pain, whereupon the black eyes beheld Subaru within them.

“Hereafter, no matter what damage may occur, you will likely challenge fate without limit, breaking through its deadlocks. However, even if you do change fate, the numerous sacrifices that permitted you to do so…”

“—You’re saying a chance to get those sacrifices back will never come my way.”

“…That would be the end result, yes.”

Echidna thus firmly declared that the Witch of Envy held regard for Subaru’s fate alone. So long as Subaru overcame his fated death, everything else was trivial.

She trusted that no matter how much things looked like a stalemate, Subaru, challenging without limit, would break past his destiny. And someday, as he repeated, her shadow would thicken, become complete, and then the time of their reunion would—

“—Fine. If that’s how you want it, being partial only to me, I’ve decided in my gut.”

“____”

“This favor, the Return by Death you gave me… I’ll use it till it breaks.”

As a result, he’d arrive before the Witch, not allowing a single thing to fall from his grasp. That’s what he’d show her.

“Yeah, I’ve decided. I’ve decided— There ain’t a soul under heaven who can betray other people’s expectations like I can.”

Turning supposition into conviction, the flames of anger, resolve, and decisiveness were lit within him. Subaru Natsuki was back.

If Return by Death saved nothing but Subaru, Subaru would save everything else himself.

If the Witch showed no such discretion, Subaru would…and he’d use the Witch’s love to do it.

Obsession, obsession: he’d grab onto it and never let go. He’d pile it higher and climb over it, carrying everything with him.

—This would be Subaru Natsuki's first act of payback toward the Witch of Envy.

"…You certainly recovered rather easily…so, too, your recklessness in regard to this despairing situation."

"There's nothing easy about it. Maybe I'm just duct-taping my own heart, same as always, desperately stopping my heart from breaking like it did this time. But…"

That moment, the fact that he was not alone loomed large. He no longer had to bear Return by Death alone.

Somehow, that fact alone had been of great relief to Subaru's psyche.

And, considering just who was responsible for that—

"____"

"Mm? What is it? I mean, what? Hey, go on, won't you?"

"You totally know as you're saying it, don't you…?"

Subaru clicked his tongue in irritation as Echidna, talkative and in a jovial mood, prodded him to continue. The Witch saw completely through him, even as to what that click of the tongue meant.

Namely, that in having listened to him reveal the forbidden, Echidna's existence had been of great relief to him.

That was something he had absolutely *no* intention of saying to Echidna's face.

"Anyway! I'll take your opinion to heart, and the help with my resolve. I'll thank you for that."

"That is all? Those are all the words of thanks you wish to speak to me? Hey, really-really?"

"Shaddap! Be quiet! Yeah, that's it! Let's talk about the next thing!"

Yelling in anger at the pesky Witch, Subaru furiously pressed his hips down upon his chair.

Then, as the Witch went *booo*, he looked up at her, went "Please," and

continued his words with, “Lend me your wisdom. I can’t rely on anyone but you.”

“What convenient words. Though you say this, I believe I have entertained you more than enough as the hostess of this tea party. If you seek any more from me, then…”

“I get it. I’m sure I said it at the start about the vow. If you need compensation, I’ll pay whatever it takes. So please, that included, lend me your strength.”

Putting his hands to his knees, Subaru bowed his head deeply. Of course, if that proved insufficient, he was resolved to scrape his forehead against the ground, too. At a point like that, what value did pride have?

He needed a Witch’s wisdom to break through a Witch’s scheme— To save everyone, that was the best hand to play.

“_____”

Echidna gazed down at Subaru, silent for a time as he conspicuously bowed his head in request of her aid. But finally, the Witch let out a sigh, seemingly unable to endure her own silence any further.

And then—

“…It may well be that you have a talent for sweet-talking Witches.”

Her lips loosened, and a charming smile came over the Witch, the words trickling out as she reluctantly gave in.

4

There was no end to what he wanted to discuss with the Witch.

But, at that juncture, there was something Subaru first wanted to confirm that was completely separate from the rest.

“I know you called me to the tea party right after Return by Death. But what’s happening outside during the time I’m here talking with you?”

“Did I not speak to you of it previously? This is my castle of dreams, and you

and I are merely souls at present. During your time here, you are isolated from the outside, even the passage of time thereof. I will not say that time does not pass whatsoever, but the effect on the outside world is meager at best. Therefore, it is unlikely to the extreme anything is happening outside at all."

"That so… If that's the case, at least I'm not leaving Emilia on a cold floor for long hours at a time. That's good news."

Since the restart point had not changed in any way, Subaru's body was on the floor of the stone room that very moment. Emilia, challenging the Trial, lay right next to him, presumably writhing in a nightmare from which she could not wake.

He was worried that his chance encounter was prolonging that nightmare, which would be tragic.

"Such charming consideration for your Princess is unnecessary for the time being. So what is it you wish to borrow my wisdom about? Surely it is not the Princess's sensitivity to cold that is on your mind?"

"Well that might be true, but that's a pretty thorny way of putting it."

"Not really? It is simply, from a normal person's point of view, is it not poor form to pay attention to a different girl immediately after seducing a Witch?"

"I don't remember seducing you, and in the first place, you're the one who said it's rude to compare a Witch to a normal person."

He already had his hands full with obsession from a Witch of Envy he didn't remember knowing. Where would he be if he let Echidna's banter just then intimidate him? It was high time to set the teasing aside.

Just as Echidna had said, it was time to seriously discuss something about which he had to speak with her.

"This time around, there's so many things I don't understand. But among them, the biggest comes last… The stuff that ate…ate me to death."

"_____"

"It's pathetic, but I was killed by fist-size rabbits. They seemed omnivorous and acted like they were raised by someone who starved them. Thanks to that,

they cleaned me right off the plate…”

Subaru used frivolous words to describe the experience, which was horrifying to even remember.

He’d used a gentle expression, but it was just plain difficult to express the sheer gruesomeness of it. Having fangs bite into his entire body, the memory of having his flesh, bones, and blood violated left a deep mark on Subaru’s soul.

It was so bad, he was virtually certain that had it not been for the tea party, for Echidna’s intervention, his mind truly would have shattered.

“‘Raising’ is overstating it. As a matter of fact, Daphne did not train the Great Rabbit Horde whatsoever.”

“…Great Rabbit?”

“Correctly speaking, the Great Rabbit is plural, not singular. Great Rabbit Horde morphed into Great Rabbit. The demon beast Great Rabbit is considered one of the three great demon beasts, the negative legacies left by Daphne, the ‘Witch of Gluttony.’”

“So that was the Great Rabbit of the three great demon beasts that Julius talked about before…”

He remembered hearing about it. The name of the demon beast had popped up during the conversation when Julius had met up with them after the subjugation of the White Whale. From that, it posed a menace equal to that of the White Whale, worthy of being named among the three great demon beasts.

From Echidna’s words, she knew that a Witch had created the legacies that had gone on to cause much trouble for others.

“Three great demon beasts…? This, right after the White Whale was beaten? Gimme a break…”

“Even I cannot help but sympathize with your plight. Furthermore, the Great Rabbit is the worst of foes.”

Subaru clutched his head at the peril being beyond all expectations. Somehow, Echidna’s expression seemed very dark.

“I have a bad feeling from the look on your face… Between the White Whale

and the Great Rabbit, which is stronger?”

“In terms of pure combat power, the White Whale wins by a substantial margin. However, what should be prioritized under the circumstances is not combat power but the difficulty of subjugation. In that, the Great Rabbit is overwhelmingly victorious.”

“Difficulty level of subjugation…? You mean it’s hard to beat.”

It seemed the best result would be subjugating the Great Rabbit as had been done with the White Whale. As Subaru had such thoughts, Echidna went, “Now hold on,” and raised a finger as she said, “It seems that you humans think the three great demon beasts are merely a little more problematic than normal demon beasts.”

“Nah, I know they don’t really fit a lovely assessment like that, actually…”

“The appropriate term for the three great demon beasts would be ‘natural disasters.’”

When Echidna continued after his interruption of her words, he couldn’t laugh off her statement as an exaggeration.

It was precisely because Subaru had directly confronted the White Whale, and thus knew how frightening it was, that he could not laugh the Witch’s words off.

“The Great Rabbit always operates as a horde, fueled by an insatiable hunger that makes them consume all. To the Great Rabbit, all other living things are food. Aside from eating others and sating that hunger, it has no other desires whatsoever. It simply eats. There is nothing in its wake save uninhabited wasteland. You have surely seen this firsthand.”

“An uninhabited wasteland, you don’t mean… You’re talking about the Sanctuary from then?!”

When Echidna spoke of the damage characteristic of the Great Rabbit, the look on Subaru’s face changed as he shouted.

In an uninhabited Sanctuary, those rabbits had consumed Subaru’s entire body. What if those demon beast fangs had been turned against the people of

the settlement and that desolate scene had been the result?

Then Emilia, Roswaal, Ryuzu, and the bestial Garfiel were no exception.

With no one left out, they too had felt the agony and sense of loss from that horde of fangs shaving their lives aw—

“O, ee…!”

The instant the thought came to mind, Subaru was assaulted by a stomach-wrenching sense of nausea. Precisely because it had happened to him, he vividly sensed, and understood, just what pain everyone had experienced.

Locust plague—as Subaru retched, that was the term arising in the back of his mind.

A locust plague was said to be the phenomenon of a huge explosion in locust numbers. Strictly speaking, it wasn’t referring to the locusts themselves so much as their sudden appearance as a horde, and that enormously large horde became a calamity that devoured cultivated fields, ruining the farmland and causing outbreaks of famine.

What Subaru had just learned about the Great Rabbit greatly resembled what he knew about locust plagues. Though, unlike locusts, this was a true natural disaster that consumed not fields but the flesh and blood of animals.

“Isn’t there…some way to drive them off?”

“It is very difficult. Each individual Great Rabbit is not all that powerful, but the problem is its power to survive… Each individual is able to multiply without limit. You can hunt them to no end and it still won’t be enough.”

“Individuals…multiply without limit?! What are they, amoebas?! N-no, wait a minute! They’re a horde, right? You can’t take down the boss of the horde and they’ll scatter?”

According to the rules of the human world, take down the head and the group will crumble. In the animal world, it might mean the top one or the top two of a horde, but which living creatures did demon beasts take after?

Faced with Subaru’s hypothesis, Echidna went, “Unfortunately,” shrugging her shoulders as she said, “I did call them a horde, but the Great Rabbit does

not fit that concept. I said it, yes? It is a demon beast that can infinitely divide from a single individual. In other words, they all began from the same individual creature. The countless Great Rabbits share the same sense of hunger, and if they have no prey, they make do by eating each other. That is their nature.”

Even cannibalism was not beyond them. Their terrifying ecology left Subaru aghast.

Certainly, it was an iron law of living creatures that life was linked to consuming other life-forms. But infinite division and propagation from a single individual, then consuming each other to satisfy their hunger, was an insane concept.

—The Great Rabbit was a monster completely devoted to eliminating the very possibility of life.

“If you were to destroy the Great Rabbit, it would require destroying the thing in its entirety. I believe that would be an act on par with vaporizing the lot of them, not allowing a single droplet to fall.”

It was exaggerated talk for the sake of argument. But that simply represented the scale of the problem.

Accepting Echidna’s explanation, Subaru felt dizzy at just how difficult it was to beat the Great Rabbit. With subjugating it so difficult, the only realistic option to deal with a Great Rabbit attack was to flee.

But if the horde of Great Rabbits appeared inside the Sanctuary—

“—There’s the barrier. As long as that’s there, Emilia and the others can’t go outside.”

It was almost like a cage, meticulously set in order to obstruct those within.

The Great Rabbit’s ecology and the Sanctuary’s environment could not mesh in a more horrible manner.

There was a murderess coming to the mansion, the Great Rabbit coming to the Sanctuary, and both menaces would arrive in five days hence.

Before that, the Sanctuary’s barrier had to be lifted so that Emilia and the others could flee.

Before that, he had to assemble the combat strength to drive Elsa and company from the mansion.

—In that loop, that was Subaru's duty, one only he could accomplish.

"____"

He absolutely would not vent weak words like, *Can I do it?* It was Subaru himself who decided as much, for he had sworn to overcome, no matter what travails might stand in his way.

However, in contrast to that determination and that vow, just what ought he do to address the situation—

"—Echidna?"

Subaru, plunged into a labyrinth of thought, abruptly realized that something about the Witch sitting opposite to him had changed.

Echidna, so leisurely exchanging words with Subaru as she sat in her chair, had a faint crease on her brow. Subaru thought it was an expression of hesitancy about something in regard to him.

"Did you think of something?"

"…To be quite honest, it is not something I particularly wish to recommend."

"But it's something meaningful for breaking this situation open…isn't it?"

Closing her eyes, Echidna neither affirmed nor denied Subaru's words. Her demeanor was tacit confirmation in and of itself.

The Witch boasting vast reserves of knowledge had come to a possibility Subaru had not realized for himself. When Subaru leaned his body over the table, Echidna instantly thrust out her palm to hold him at bay.

Then, as she squished the tip of Subaru's nose, the Witch continued, "Please hear me out."

"I do not wish to recommend this means. It is truly dangerous."

"I'm aware of the dangers. That's why…"

Of course, he couldn't come out and say, *That's what Return by Death is for.* However, that prevarication aside, Subaru had no doubt conveyed his true

intent. Receiving this, Echidna shook her head from side to side.

“The danger is not external. It is here. Danger would befall you in this place.”

“Here…? What the heck are you trying to tell me…?”

“—What if I said I could grant you an opportunity to speak to Daphne, the Witch of Gluttony?”

“____”

Offered an impossible proposal, Subaru felt the rhythm of his breath thrown awry.

Before this Subaru, the seriousness on Echidna’s face did not falter. It didn’t feel like a joke. That being the case, the contents from the Witch’s mouth were genuine. And if that was true, then—

“All the other Witches are supposed to be dead. There’s no way I can speak with that Witch.”

“If that were true, how are you speaking with me right now? How do you explain this circumstance? Surely you know quite well the fact that I am already among the departed, and yet you claim there is ‘no way’ you could be speaking to me.”

“That’s, well that’s true, but…”

“Sekhmet, Minerva, Typhon, Camilla, Daphne—”

As Subaru hemmed and hawed, Echidna touched her chest, reciting the names like she would for those dear to her.

From their previous chance encounter, Subaru knew that these were the names of Witches from long ago.

“—They are dead, but their souls are here with me in this castle of dreams. So that I might not lose them, I gathered them all into my own flesh before Volcanica destroyed my body and sealed me away.”

“You gathered their souls…so you can call them here…?”

“Yes, albeit by allowing myself to serve as their avatar. During that time, I would be literally replaced by them.”

“That’s…!”

If that happened exactly according to her words, it would be quite an incredible thing. And more to the point, if he could speak to the Witch of Gluttony, he might be able to get a hint as to how to defeat the Great Rabbit.

However, in contrast to Subaru leaping at the ray of hope, Echidna had a truly unenthused look on her face.

“…For the one who proposed this, you really don’t look thrilled with it, you know.”

“I told you, it is dangerous. You probably harbor a misconception as to what kind of being a Witch is. You only know of me and that thing, neither holding any animosity toward you.”

“You’re saying the other Witches will hold animosity toward me?”

“…If you treat them the wrong way, it can be dangerous, safe, very dangerous, extremely dangerous, or absolutely dangerous.”

“The fact that ‘safe’ is part of that lineup actually makes it sound worse… So what about Gluttony’s case?”

“Absolutely dangerous.”

Closing her eyes, Echidna rubbed her brow at just how temperamental these Witches were. But her demeanor toward those Witches had been friendly just before. It wasn’t as if the Witches got along poorly with themselves.

Subaru had a number of cases where friendships and positions were badly mismatched, too. It had to be something like that.

“I understand why you’re concerned. But can I ask you to do it anyway?”

“If you truly desire it, I cannot stop you from doing so. Besides, if I may say something extremely personal—I am not disinterested in what you might think after meeting the other girls.”

Speaking thus, Echidna beheld Subaru in her own black pupils. The dark glint in her pair of eyes was inquisitiveness that knew no bottom—but this did not overwhelm Subaru as he twisted the corners of his mouth.

Faced with that witchy smile, he, as a guest to a Witch's tea party, responded with his dignity intact.

"Incidentally, what happens if I die here?"

"Only your spirit has been invited into this world. It is a world unrelated to death. Naturally, however, if your spiritual body suffers wounds enough to make you believe you have died, those cracks in your mind will remain even after returning to your body."

"In other words, I'd be a complete wreck? That's, like, a lot more risk than anything external?"

"So do you wish to stop?"

When Subaru raised his voice, the risk of becoming a wreck was pointed out to him, and Echidna sent a provocative smile his way.

That smile lit a fire in him. He couldn't back down.

"Do it."

"—I pray for your good fortune in battle."

It wasn't set in stone that her final smile was really meant as a prayer for his good fortune. The joyful craving in it—that of a girl waiting expectantly in ultimate delight for the result—was too strong for such an assumption.

Besides, Subaru immediately lost the free time with which to pay any heed to such a thing.

"_____"

Echidna's charming smile suddenly melted into the air. The particles from which Echidna was composed unraveled, and her very being was dismantled… only to be reconstructed into a completely different shape.

Right after that veritable blink of an eye, appearing across the table from Subaru was—

"Ohh, we finally meet…"

"…Huh?"

"Huh? What do you mean, 'huh?' Huh, what? Wow, aren't you a rude one?"

These words spoken, bare feet wiggled in front of Subaru as the other party's cheeks puffed up.

There sat a little girl maybe ten years old—a being one would never think a Witch.

5

The little girl had brown skin and a bright, adorable face—the very image of youth and innocence.

Her deep green hair mixed with big round red eyes. She wore a lovely white dress with blue flowers at its hem and similar blue flower decorations on her head.

The young girl was the epitome of the words *pure* and *innocent*, a sight that made Subaru's breath catch.

If what Echidna had said during their exchange a moment before was true, the little girl before him was—

"You're…er, you're a Witch, too, right?"

"Mm, you heard from Dona, right? And you're… I know, you're Baru! Baru it is!"

Dona had to mean Echidna, and *Baru* had to mean Subaru.

The way her reply came off as young—or younger than her apparent age—threw Subaru for a loop. Certainly, Echidna had portrayed making contact with the other Witches as a difficult battle.

"She didn't mean in the sense of having to deal with kids, right…? So uh, do you know what Echidna and I were talking about?"

"Kinda-sorta? I heard from inside Dona, so yeah."

"The inside Echidna part of that info kind of weighs on my mind but…anyway, I'm glad we at least have some basis to go on. So to get right to the point, about the Rabbit…"

Subaru leaned forward with every intention of asking about the Great Rabbit.

But his action made the little girl tilt her head. “Incidentally,” she went, bringing him to a halt.

“Baru, are you an evildoer? I’ve been wondering about that the whole time, you see.”

“…Evildoer?”

The question, from a completely unanticipated angle, made Subaru unwittingly drop his jaw. As he did so, the little girl swayed her legs, which did not reach the ground, and her chair rattled as she began rocking it back and forth.

“I’m asking if you’re an evildoer or not. Which is it…?”

“You mean like a bad guy…? Er, I’m not sure what you’re getting at with that question, but…”

“Hmm, I get it! I’ll check something out, then!”

She turned him an innocent smile, making painfully clear just how difficult it was for Subaru to converse with this Witch.

Ignoring that sentiment, the little girl leaped off her chair, trampling the grass with her still-bare feet, and walked over to Subaru. Then, going “Nn!” she showed her teeth as she smiled at him and put out her hand.

“…You wanna shake hands? You’ll know something if we shake?”

“Nnn!”

“I-I get it. I get it. If that makes you happy, hear me out, ’kay?”

He truly felt like he was touching a little girl. Nervous from how she gave off an air younger than the kids of Earlham Village, Subaru took the little girl’s hand. Her hand was small, and her palm was soft. But the body temperature was high, like a baby’s hand. He thought idly, *So spiritual bodies have body temperature, too, huh—*

“—I take this in compensation for your sins.”

“What?”

Failing to pick up what she’d said, Subaru initially tried to ask her to repeat it.

But before he could, he felt a light blow. Together with the feeling of his arm being ripped off, he felt a sense of liberation, as if freed of some heavy burden.

He gazed down at the girl, wondering what had happened. The little girl had a smiling face as she clutched a single arm to her chest.

It was an adult male's arm, the area where it had been torn right from the shoulder fully exposed—Subaru's right arm.

"—?!!"

"Ohhh, the fact it didn't hurt means you're not an evildoer. I'm so glad…"

In that emergency situation, Subaru looked at his own right shoulder—and the wound left from his stolen arm. The jagged surface of the severed arm was exposed, but just as the little girl had said, he'd felt no pain from his arm being torn off whatsoever.

There was no pain, no bleeding, no sense of anything different from before.

As he gazed at the bone and arteries marking the fresh, bloody flesh of the wound, it was like looking at meat in the window of a butcher shop.

Faced with the abnormality of what had occurred to his own body, Subaru screamed.

"A—aaaaaaaaa! M-my arm…my aaaarm?!"

"Hey, it didn't hurt, right? If you rant in a huge voice like that, Dona's gonna hate you!"

"Y-y-you?! What are you sayin'…? G-give it back! Give it back!!"

The little girl's easygoing and bizarre worldview blew a hole in Subaru's unaccepting brain. He instantly determined that he needed back the arm she was clutching to reattach it to his shoulder immediately.

A human body was not a simple enough thing that this alone would heal it, but he was too confused for that to sink in.

Anyway, I've gotta get my arm back, went Subaru, attempting to grab hold of the girl when—

"—Thou shall not be among the condemned."

The next instant, both of Subaru’s legs shattered from the knees on down.



Having lost his right shoulder, then both his lower legs, Subaru lost his balance, tumbling forward. The blow cracked his hips, sending a fissure into his chest, and his face was flattened at an angle.

“K—aa…!! Wh…ut dud…”

“Oh, you’re not an evildoer, but you have a guilty conscience anyway! Awww, Baru, you’re so nice, you poor thing. It must be so haaard…”

There was no pain from his shattered legs, his cracked torso, or his head. They were simply broken and lost.

Squatting, the little girl gently stroked Subaru’s head as he lay on the ground. The earnest benevolence in the stroke of her hand, and the voice she cast toward Subaru, became frightening.

He could not comprehend. It didn’t compute. He couldn’t cope with the abnormality.

“Typhon’s completed her goal— After that…eh? Ahhh, I get it!”

Standing up, the girl brushed off her knees and said something, but his mind wasn’t paying attention. The little girl seemed to have lost interest in Subaru, too.

In the view from lying faceup, the little girl vanished, and in her place, he saw the clear blue sky.

“_____”

Perhaps Subaru felt no pain because his body was a spiritual one, formed from his soul alone? He’d been advised that if it was wounded enough to make him think that he had died, it would be something that couldn’t be undone.

It’s all right, I’ll endure it, you’ll see, he thought, and this was the result.

The cracks on his limbs, his hips, his torso, his head, were growing, until finally, within the dream, he would become fine particles of dust—

“—Oooone! The absurdities of the human world must be punched!”

There was a voice. The voice strongly reverberated through Subaru, on the verge of shattering to dust.

The voice continued. It was imposing…imposing without a hint of shame.

“—Twooooo! Nefarious misdeeds can go to hell!!”

The voice echoing in the distance gradually grew nearer. Moreover, it was a voice with a high-pitched echo.

“—Threeeee! Be it unsightly or beautiful, all is part of this transient world!!”

As he broke, Subaru listened to the voice.

As his limbs turned to dust—his torso having already lost its shape—and his soul received wounds rivaling death itself, there was a great rumble as something stepped close. With wide-open eyes, Subaru saw something twirling around.

“—Do not think! You’ll just! Get away with this!!”

As Subaru lay faceup, the fist made a direct blow to the bridge of his nose, penetrating to the back of his skull and making the ground behind it explode. A crater was formed in the grassy plain, and a plume of dust rose from the destructive force of the explosive blow.

“—?!!”

He didn’t understand what had happened. But with his psyche on the verge of death, he was caught by his neck and forcefully swung about. It was as if he was being dragged away from death…as if it was too soon for him to die.

He was dragged up and pummeled. Fists punched wildly, continuing to dig into Subaru like rain.

Engulfed by the impact, he completely lost his bearings. His psyche was dyed white. His field of vision beheld only the unrelenting fists—and the side of the face of the girl hurling them, drenched in sweat and tears.

The girl’s tears glistened as they scattered into the sky. The girl wept as she swung one fist, then another, pounding the nearly dead Subaru over and over and over and over again.

“Through my fists, the world is reborn! Through my anger, the world is cleansed!! My wrath! My healing fists! This is my answerrrr—!!”

Putting her hips into what truly deserved the wording, she slammed a mighty blow into Subaru's face.

I'm gonna blow, thought Subaru, utterly certain the impact would do just that.



“————Eh?”

However, the blast he was certain would come never arrived.

His skull was intact, as was his life that was surely disintegrating, the fists affecting nothing at all.

—No, they had an effect. His arm, his legs, his torso, his head, his face—the cracks had vanished from them all as they returned to their former state.

Subaru’s soul, breaking apart to become dust of the dream, had been pieced back together.

“Th-this is…”

“Arm and both legs are fine, huh! That’s me for you. My work is awesome!!”

As Subaru sat cross-legged on the ground, confirming his limbs were safe and sound, he heard a powerful force come at him from behind.

When he nervously looked over his shoulder, he saw that the speaker truly was standing close enough to touch. When he looked up at the other party, what immediately leaped into Subaru’s eyes were—

“…Breasts?”

“—!! Wh-where the hell are you looking?!”

The other person was so close that he saw not her face, but the breasts that obstructed his vision before it. Subaru’s dumbstruck voice made the owner of the breasts go shrill as she leaped backward. Finally, he could see her entire body.

“P-please look at someone’s eyes when you speak with them. Eyes! Goodness! Men are always like this, that’s why I can’t trust them!”

Yet another unfamiliar girl raged, venting her naked anger at the male gender.

The beautiful girl had gleaming golden hair, worn in a side ponytail that rubbed against her face, and vivid, nearly transparent blue eyes. She wore a short skirt that prioritized ease of movement, wearing a white-based tunic over her torso. She looked similar in age to Subaru, though she was a fair bit shorter —and she had big breasts and a large butt that lent her a very appealing figure.

Combined with the person's demeanor, Subaru felt he ought to call it a healthy sex appeal.

The girl's hostile demeanor and actions put Subaru at a loss as to what he ought to say to her first. During that time, a change came over the girl. Her blue, fairly slanted eyes moistened dramatically.

"Y-you're crying…?"

"I am not crying at all! I'm simply angry! That's right, I'm angry! It's Typhon's fault! Hurting you this much when I hadn't had any intention of coming out…! Stupid Typhon! I hate the world that makes her do these things! I really hate everybody!"

Stamping her foot upon the ground, her tears flowed profusely as she made the ground tremble beneath her feet. When Subaru looked with greater care, this, plus the blow to him earlier, was causing extreme damage to their surroundings.

The hill upon which he'd had the tea party with Echidna had been flattened, and the table and parasol had been sent flying. It was abnormal for there to be such damage yet for it not to have any effect upon Subaru.

Between the exchange just prior and the girl's current behavior, he somehow guessed what the girl before him was.

"Th-thank you for saving me? But this must mean you're also a…"

"I am Minerva, the Witch of Wrath! No one is worthy of invoking her name!!"

"You did it just now, didn't you?!"

"Anyway! I healed your wounds! My duty is finished! You no longer have so much as a trace of a bee sting on you! That is a Witch's promise, so there!"

"Don't talk so casually about Witches and promises! Do you even know how much both of those things scare me?!"

Averting her face, the girl—the Witch Minerva—vented her anger in adorable fashion.

However, the abnormal claim was true after all. He'd felt the effects of literal "tough medicine." After receiving a thrashing that left the area around him

destroyed, his wounds had been healed. As far as mysterious phenomena went, this was something else.

But he could only think of events up to that point as having been broken and healed according to the whims of others—

“Gaaah…! I get it!”

Minerva abruptly glared at the sky, looking like she was exchanging words with an invisible person. When this made Subaru grimace, the girl finally pointed right at him as she delivered a scolding.

“Now see here, don’t do anything rash from here on out! Or next time I’ll heal everyone!”

“Don’t say that like you’re gonna slaughter everybody…”

With that finger thrust toward him, he was overwhelmed by her voice and the powerful will infused within. When Subaru somehow managed that mumbling reply, before his eyes, the sight of Minerva swayed like a mirage—

“…Seeing your face makes me feel so relieved it’s like I’m back at my own house.”

“…That appraisal leaves me somewhat conflicted. I was somewhat nervous that we would not be able to converse anymore.”

Before the exhausted Subaru, Echidna appeared with displeasure upon her face. The Witch twirled her long, white hair around a finger, not looking in Subaru’s direction very much.

Subaru sighed at the Witch’s timid demeanor.

“Your warning was correct. I almost died and got zero to show for it… Pathetic.”

“That could not be helped… More to the point, an issue came up, which forced that result. Even though my objective was to let you speak to Daphne, the instant I relinquished my body, Typhon ran on ahead and…”

“Mm? Wait, that was Typhon, not Daphne?”

When Subaru, seeing that the name was off, tilted his head, the interrupted

Echidna nodded.

“The first Witch to appear before you was Typhon…the Witch of Pride. I believe you know this from your contact with her, but she is such a child. She set off running, wanting to meet you with all her heart.”

“Meaning I almost got killed by a girl not even related to this stuff…?”

Strictly speaking, he was in peril not of death but of becoming a wreck of a man, yet the effect was the same. Besides, had she mistaken wanting to meet him for wanting to kill him…?

“She named herself, but the one who saved you from the verge of death was Minerva, the Witch of Wrath. In terms of what I explained earlier, that girl is the Witch you would be ‘safest’ with.”

“Yeah, she came off like a, hmm…a fresh-feeling explosive, Tsundere, big-breasted loli healer. Thanks to her, I didn’t have to die but…”

Subaru broke off his words and looked around the area. There was no little hill left anywhere to be seen on the grassy plain.

Sensing from Subaru’s gaze what he was getting at, Echidna flashed a strained smile and snapped her fingers.

Instantly, there was a puff of wind. Simultaneously, for a brief moment, the world was enveloped in darkness as if a curtain had fallen. Then, when the curtain lifted—everything was back as it had been for the tea party of dreams.

“Ohhh…man, you really are a Witch.”

“I am shocked you would doubt such a thing after all of our conversation together. Well then, what now?”

“What do you mean, what now?”

“Do you wish to continue? I can firmly state that this time, I can grant you an audience with Daphne for certain, without interruptions…but Daphne is more dangerous than Typhon.”

Subaru audibly gulped. Naturally, Echidna’s words had given rise to fear.

“…If Wrath was safe, where did Pride land on the scale?”

“Typhon was ‘very dangerous,’ I suppose? Just not as much compared to Camilla and Daphne.”

“Hearing that really makes a guy think, huh…”

When he was told he’d spoken to Typhon, conversation seemed like a distant memory to him. If he dealt with someone even less inclined toward proper speech, his life truly would be in danger.

Even if that was not the case, she was still the creator of demon beasts, which were collections of murderous instincts. Perhaps it truly had been a reckless challenge that Subaru had been doomed to lose from the beginning.

Then, just as he began to think of his battle as one with no chance of victory—

“—That’s why I have to pry the door open, damn it.”

If it was just a matter of victory or defeat, Subaru Natsuki couldn’t win against anyone. It was Subaru’s manner of fighting to challenge so that odds of victory might be born.

“Your determination is firm, then? Understood.”

Before Subaru’s eyes, Echidna’s provocative stance gave way to a sigh with an air of resignation.

However, the Witch then went “However,” raising a finger as she said, “I do want to make this much very clear. You absolutely must not free Daphne of her restraints.”

“Restraints…”

“Moreover, I forbid you from touching her. If possible, I would like you to avoid meeting her eyes as well.”

“If I upheld all that I’d be a guy so creepy I’d wanna die, you know?! “

In the first place, she hadn’t explained the word *restraints*, something he could not dismiss. But before he could pursue the matter further, Echidna had finished preparing on her end. The Witch’s form slowly wavered, her existence unraveled, and the world melted as she switched places with a different Witch.

Then, with Subaru’s body hard and tense, *it* slowly emerged before his eyes.

“…Come on, isn’t this a little excessive?”

Drawing back his chin, Subaru let those words out in a quivering voice.

If it was truly the Witch of Gluttony that had appeared before his eyes, the sight of her was truly difficult to ignore.

“—Subaruuu, is there something youu want to ask Daphnee?”

With a sweet voice, Daphne—the Witch of Gluttony—asked with a sniff of her refined nose.

—The Witch was inside a coffin, firmly bound by chains, both eyes sealed by a black blindfold.

6

It wasn’t that there was nothing distinct about her. Rather, the Witch’s external appearance was peculiar in very awkward ways.

The coffin was shaped closest to the torture device known as an iron maiden. The Witch, packed into the vertically standing black coffin, outwardly looked thirteen or fourteen years old.

She wore her ashen hair back in two tails that reached down as far as shoulder level. A pitch-black straitjacket worn over white clothing was affixed to the coffin with chains. Both of her eyes were covered by a blindfold wrapped to cross over the center of her face, lending her appearance an ominous witchiness greater than those who had preceded her.

“I came out because Donadona said to, even though sleeping felt really goood… I don’t want to be up that looong, so don’t talk about anything boring, okaaay?”

“Y-yeah, thanks for the trouble of coming out. That statement sounds more like Sloth than Gluttony, so…you’re the Witch of Gluttony, right?”

The other party was blindfolded and surely not at liberty to step back. But there was Echidna’s warning just prior, so Subaru carefully closed the distance by only a single step.

But that move made Daphne, inside the coffin, murmur “Ahh,” humming

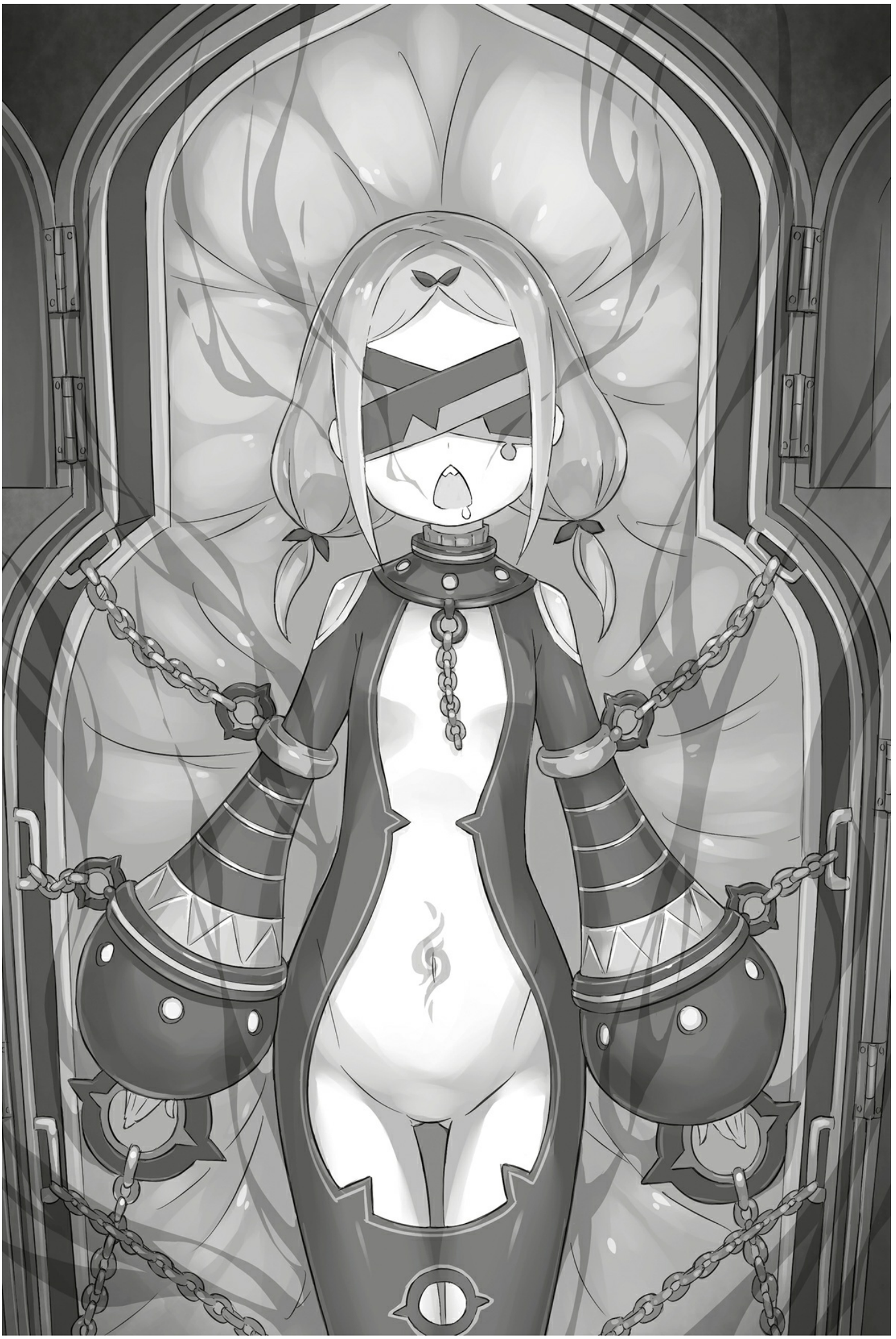
through her nose before saying,

"…This might be poison for Daphne's body—Centipede Coffin."

"—!"

She called out, and Subaru's surprise at the subsequent spectacle made his throat catch.

To put it matter-of-factly, all Daphne did was move backward, seemingly to maintain the distance with Subaru. However, it was *how* she moved that was beyond Subaru's expectations.



“_____”

The lower part of the coffin binding Daphne suddenly floated up off the ground. The cause was the legs that sprouted on the bottom of the coffin—legs moving like those of a crab or a spider. With these legs, the coffin moved backward.

It was like a mobile iron maiden—or, more accurately, it moved like a living creature.

“Can I…ask you what that is…?”

“Meaniiing? Daphne cannot see, so say it in a way Daphne can understand.”

“That um…super-aesthetic coffin you have there. From what little I know, coffins don’t have feet, and they definitely don’t move like insects at amazing speeds like that.”

With a creaking sound, the coffin set itself down, as if having reached its destination, drawing the legs it had sprouted back inside again. The action was like a turtle hiding in its shell, but vastly more repulsive.

“Daphne cannot move freely, so Daphne made the Centipede Coffiiiin for thaaat. It moves from Daphne’s sweat and pee, very convenient, yeees?”

“Suddenly I feel like that’s waaaay too much information.”

The gist was that it was a creature living off its host’s waste products. Inside his head, he mulled whether it was just poorly phrased, but the abnormality of it was conspicuous indeed.

The greatest abnormality was surely the part about her having “made” it.

“When Subaruu is by Daphne’s side, Daphne’s body throoobbbs… It’s a scent that Daphne really, reaaaally likes… It makes Daphne want to eat youuu.”

“By eating you mean, ah…swallowing me up?”

“Swallowing youuu…”

Daphne replied with a red face, almost like someone drunk. The words probably meant something different to her than they did to him.

Her expressions were adorable, but the Witch had said without hesitation she

wanted to “eat” Subaru. This indicated that she meant nothing beyond the literal meaning of consuming food—in other words, cannibalism was not too far for her.

Common sense or ethical considerations would be of no aid to him. Seizing hold of the pace required a preemptive strike.

“I get that neither of us wants the conversation to drag too long. I get it, so I’ll get right to my question. It’s about the three great demon beasts you made.”

“Three…great?”

“—!! The White Whale, the Great Rabbit, and the Black Serpent, those demon beasts! You made them, right?!”

Her demeanor, like she didn’t remember them, set Subaru off, making him shout the names of the demon beasts. At those names, Daphne tilted her head left and right a number of times as she answered.

“Ahhh, you mean Whaley, Buuunny, and Snakey?”

“That’s what I’m telling y…”

“But you called them by strange names. I don’t knoooow the names other people giiive them. I mean, those children just picked uuup and left Daphne all on their ooown…”

Squirming inside the coffin, Daphne seemed to try and evade Subaru’s anger. Apparently, she didn’t have much self-awareness about creating life being a veritable act of God.

—Meaning that in creating the demon beasts, Daphne wielded power rivaling that of proper deities.

“Geez, why did you create guys like that, anyway…?”

“—? Whyyy?”

“Why! Did you let! Guys like that loose on the world!”

Unable to bear her attitude any longer, like it was someone else’s problem, Subaru rang out an angry shout at the mother of demon beasts. Wrath made his face red, as he pointed a finger at Daphne and howled.

“Even if you’re dead, it’s been four hundred years! How much rampaging do you think those demon beasts have done?! All the people, tens of people, hundreds of people! The casualties are still increasing even now!”

The ferocious clash with the White Whale on the Liphas plains rose to the back of his mind.

He remembered Wilhelm’s tenacity, his shouting the name of his slain wife, the days of lament and anger spent by the knights participating in that battle— and the source of it all was the Witch in the coffin before his eyes.

“What for! What did you make a monster like the White Whale for?!”

“—? The bigger a creature is, the more people it can feed, riiight?”

“—Uh, wha?”

The thoroughly mystified look on Daphne’s face brought Subaru’s forceful, sharp recriminations to a halt. When, as her demeanor rendered his vigor fruitless, he murmured, Daphne inclined her head even farther as she said,

“The White Whale, it’s big, right? A lot of people could be satisfied from eating it.”

“What are you…”

“The Great Rabbit, weeell…they just multiply more and mooore. As long as it’s around, no one will go hungryyy. Isn’t that wooonderful?”

“That’s because the Great Rabbit ate so many of them!!”

Daphne’s speech was incoherent. If he took the words at face value, the reason she created monsters was to resolve the problem of hunger. To save people from the anguish of starvation, she’d created monsters as a source of food— And yet, so many people had fallen victim to those monsters.

“You got everything totally backward! The number of people taken by monsters is way higher than the people whose bellies were filled by…”

“You’re going to eat the other oooone, but you don’t think it’s possible you’ll be eaten yourseeelf… Isn’t that a little too unfaaair?”

As Subaru wore a bitter face, Daphne smiled charmingly, speaking the words

as if they were the most natural in the world.

“_____”

Drinking down her statement, Subaru strived to understand, and he finally understood that he could not understand.

He’d been mistaken. From her appearance and her capacity for words, he’d thought he could speak to her person to person.

But he was wrong. The girl before his eyes was not a “person” at all.

“That’s animal logic…”

The strong eat the weak—this was truly the concept behind Daphne’s actions. Furthermore, it was not that she saw value in a world where the strong ate the weak; her eyes were solely focused upon eating.

Now he understood Echidna’s explanation: Daphne really was dangerous, someone who could not be reasoned with.

Subaru and Daphne had different values.

She was a Witch. Even among the Witches, of which there were only seven in the world, she was a true Witch.

“Subaruu…don’t you think about easing everyooone’s Gluttony, toooo?”

“_____”

“In liiiife, Gluttony is the most important craving of all, you knooow? I meaaan, if you can’t satisfy thaaat, you can’t live, can youuu?”

“_____”

“Even if you have no peaaace, even if you are not loooved, even if you can’t vent your emoootions, even if you can’t respect yourseeelf, even if you can’t get what you cooovet, even if you can’t get excited about aaaanything, that won’t kill aaanyone. But…”

“_____”

“If you can’t eaaaat, you die, riiiight?”

Of all the seven deadly sins, only the sin of Gluttony was directly connected to

life itself.

In a proper sense, Gluttony meant a craving for food beyond that which was necessary. But in this case, Daphne truly believed it to mean the craving for food that was necessary to sustain life.

She had a point, one he could not refute. However—

“What you’re saying is partially right. I acknowledge that. But that’s just…”

“Subaruu, you should try hunger up to the very limit ooonce. Then you’ll understand what Daphne’s words meaaan… What kind of world Daphne and Buuunny live iiin.”

Certainly, when she referred to starvation in the utmost extreme, Subaru lacked any words to speak in reply. Subaru had never experienced hunger to the point that it had threatened his life. In a normal household in modern Japan, a lack of food to the level of starvation basically didn’t exist, and even once summoned to another world, he’d been blessed with the good fortune of meeting Emilia in short order and being taken in by Roswaal Manor.

—Even if hunger pangs assailed him that very moment, inflicting difficult-to-endure anguish, it wouldn’t make him understand the Witch’s psyche.

“So that monster, the Great Rabbit, was created out of your own hunger, then…”

“All those childreeen took after Daphne after they were born, especially Daphne’s empty stomaaach… You can understand how they feel when they eat each otheeer…”

“…Doesn’t that make your conscience hurt? How you made the monsters you created feel that emptiness in their stomachs.”

“—? Even if Buuunny’s stomach is empty, it doesn’t make Daphne’s stomach emptieeer?”

“…I was stupid to ask.”

They were talking past each other. No matter how long he tried, he’d never understand this Witch.

To Daphne, even the monsters she had created were nothing more than

emergency rations there for the nabbing whenever her belly was empty.

She gave birth to them, she ate them. It was the ultimate in self-sufficiency—truly, this was the mother of the Great Rabbit.

Perhaps it was pointless to exhaust words upon Daphne any longer, but—

“If I said I want to send that Great Rabbit packing, any hints you could give me?”

“Ehhh, you want to destroy Buuunny? That child, it’s weak but easy to eaaat and spreads so easy, tooo. It’s Daphne’s masterpieeeece.”

“If you’re gonna push that weak-eats-the-strong, eat-or-be-eaten stuff, then I’d like you to acknowledge that killing so you can live is basic survival instinct.”

Toward Daphne, who was stubborn in her off-the-wall judgment, Subaru framed his rebuttal in sophistry.

Their values were different, so they couldn’t communicate in the same realm. Trying to play ball and establish space between Subaru and Daphne where they could see eye to eye was a long shot, likely fruitless for both parties.

However—

“—The Great Rabbit relies on mana to search for prey, you seeee.”

“…What got into you all of a sudden?”

“I meaaan, if you have to eat to liiiive, you have to accept you have to kill to live, tooo, or it won’t make seeense?”

Subaru was suspicious about Daphne coming right out and telling him about the Great Rabbit as he’d asked. As he did so, Daphne nodded over and over, apparently accepting Subaru’s sophistry from earlier. He’d expected some kind of instant counterargument, but he’d apparently filled the chasm between his and Daphne’s values from different realms.

Ignoring Subaru’s surprise at that, Daphne spoke about the characteristics of her child as the mother of demon beasts.

“It’s attracted to large amounts of mana, sooo you could use a strong magic user as a decoy to lure them togeeether. Then you could take them out all at

ooooonce?”

“…I heard they increase with no limit. Won’t there be guys away from the pack?”

“No matter how many bodiiies, there is only one miiind. So it’s liiiike, one set of thoughts is shared across the whole hooorde. It doesn’t have any smarts for keeping it from being destroooyed.”

“That so. So if we do take them out, it won’t be like, they all come back from one survivor like something out of a cliché horror movie …”

It was an obligatory plot in a monster panic movie, but combined with the Great Rabbit’s characteristics, it wouldn’t be funny at all.

But the information from just then was a huge contribution for how to deal with the impending Great Rabbit. It didn’t mean he’d worked out a sure way to eliminate it yet, but the data was plenty to make all that worth the effort. He saw a tiny glimmer of hope.

“*Fuwaah*… Is it all right if Daphne rests noooow?”

To Subaru, his head pondering how to subjugate the Great Rabbit, Daphne yawned and spoke thusly. To the bitter end, she did things at her own pace—or rather, was heedless of all around her.

To Daphne, just like the Great Rabbit, all began and ended with her individual existence. Accordingly, the Witch had utterly no interest in the results; not for Subaru, not for the Great Rabbit.

Perhaps the only thing that interested her was insatiable hunger. What did that even mean for a Witch who was no longer alive?

“Yeah. Took a while, but I’ll keep that tucked away. Thanks—also.”

One was alive, and the other was dead; the eras of their lives were different. Had it not been for such a fashion, Subaru and Daphne were two lines that would never, ever have crossed. Hence, there was no issue whatsoever with giving up on their different values and parting ways.

There was no issue, but—

“—I will destroy the Great Rabbit. I already killed the White Whale. I won’t

accept any complaints from their mommy dearest.”

“_____”

“Four hundred years ago, you might have thought you did a good job. If you didn’t, well, setting that aside, they’ve rampaged on and on. They’ve done enough— I’ll erase them, with no trace left.”

There was a vast chasm between their values—and, fully aware of this, Subaru spoke.

Not knowing whether it would reach, he’d wanted to fire off at least one arrow at the Witches toying with him until the bitter end.

Faced with Subaru’s declaration of war, Daphne showed him a reaction like none before it.

“…Uppity *human*.”

The murmur that trickled out was utterly bereft of the sweet atmosphere up until that point.

The Witch’s mouth opened broadly to one side, and for the first time, he caught a glimpse of tangible will beyond mere Gluttony.

“—Do iiiit, if you *can*.”

Baring her all-too-sharp fangs and sticking out her red tongue, the Witch of Gluttony laughed with delight.

7

“_____”

A powerful wind blew, and Subaru unwittingly threw up his arms, obstructing his field of vision.

His eyes followed as the gust buffeted the grassland, and a swirl of wind made the petals of wild flowers dance aloft in the sky. He watched until they were swallowed by the light of the sun, whereupon his gaze returned. And then—

“—Sorry for insisting, Echidna.”

“I need no thanks. In this place, it is good for the girls to exchange words with

someone besides me once in a while. Of course, if it was not a being like you, he or she could not stand before us."

"…You pulling my leg?"

"It would be great if all could be solved by pulling legs, but many things cannot."

Echidna, manifesting in Daphne's place, spoke in a jesting manner as she shrugged her shoulders.

At the very least, though Subaru felt the same sense of oppression from his first meeting with Echidna, he did not receive the same urge to vomit. He'd felt the same when meeting the other Witches.

He'd felt fear due to the girls' abnormality. But there had been no instinctive sense of rejection. That was the difference.

"So did you pick up anything from that talk with Daphne?"

"I suppose so… First, I picked up that among the Witches, you're incredibly sane."

"*Ha…* Goodness gracious, this will not do. I cannot have you look at me more lightly from such lovely-to-hear words putting me in a good mood."

At Subaru's deeply felt reply, Echidna made a sound through her nose, plus some small jest. After that, the Witch hummed a tune as she put fresh tea and cookie-like treats onto the table.

The tune wasn't very good. At any rate, she was an easy-to-understand Witch.

"But I'll pass on your body fluids and cookies with who-knows-what mixed into them."

"I have not put any hair in them."

"At this point I've gotta second-guess each and every thing you tell me!"

From that moment forward, Subaru firmly swore in his heart that he would not eat or drink again at that tea party.

In contrast to Subaru's determination, Echidna made a pained smile and narrowed her black eyes. With those dark-colored eyes staring at him, Subaru

grimaced, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

“I don’t really like how those eyes seem to see through everything.”

“If I could understand everything about someone by staring, I would stare at you until you burst into flames… Besides, I really must say, you have little self-awareness, do you?”

“—? What are you talking about? Self-aware of what?”

“Perhaps the distorted situation? For instance…if you had a mind to, you could calmly exchange words with even Typhon, provided she said she wants to speak with you. Am I wrong?”

With Subaru tilting his head, Echidna tossed him a question. Accepting it, Subaru twisted his head one way then the other, pondering. What did the Witch want to say, or what was she trying to make him say?

“…If she wanted to talk I think I’d hear her out. What of it?”

“After Typhon did all that to you? Normally, a person could never accept someone who shattered his arms and legs and nearly killed him, not even if those wounds had been completely healed.”

“_____”

The instant she pointed that out, Subaru’s breath caught.

His reaction made the blackness of Echidna’s eyes thicken in ever-deeper interest. During that time, Subaru slowly remembered something he had forgotten—how to breathe.

“It seems you were not wholly unaware of it.”

“…I wonder if it’s an issue with how my mind’s working right now. Certainly I’m self-aware that my thinking is a little less than sane. But I can’t just come out and say certain stuff, right?”

What would happen if he said in anger about Typhon, who’d nearly taken his life, that he couldn’t forgive her?

Even Rem had killed Subaru once upon a time. And once upon a time, Ram had helped her do so. Even so, Subaru had forgiven them both. Love toward

them had won out against anger. He'd chosen a tomorrow he could spend with them over a tomorrow without them.

"Of course, it's different with Witches I only just met than with Rem and Ram. I'm not gonna put up with talking to Typhon unless she apologizes. Tell her that."

"…Understood. I do not know if she will listen or if she will desire to speak with you again, but I shall have a firm word with her about the matter."

Puffing out her chest, Echidna undertook to do as Subaru said in a most commendable manner. Nodding at her reply, Subaru abruptly looked down at his two hands.

He had an odd sense that something was off. He opened and closed his fists, knitting his brows with a questioning look.

"The heck? I'm getting this weird, creepy feeling…"

"—It would seem that the time for you to awaken draws near."

"Awaken? …Meaning…"

Subaru felt dizzy as his upper body swayed. Tasting something like dizziness from getting up too fast, Subaru, still seated in his chair, blinked, as he wondered what was going on.

Awakening meant liberation from the castle of dreams. But what was strange about that was—

"According to what you told me, I can't leave here so long as you haven't given permission?"

"That should be the case, but there are exceptions. For instance, in the case that your flesh and blood is being urged to awaken from without……but that is odd. Certainly this time we have spoken at length, but even so, this is not a common occurrence by any means."

"Woken from the outside…? Don't tell me, that means…"

Subaru's eyes opened wide as Echidna's explanation made him think of something.

In his present condition, Subaru was only a soul invited into Echidna's dream. The flesh and blood meant to contain it ought to have still been lying on the stone floor in the tomb, limbs spread like a snow angel. Time flowed differently between inside and out, so he figured it was basically impossible someone had sensed something wrong and entered the tomb.

In other words, there was only one person who could be waking Subaru up.

"Emilia's trying to wake me? No, wait, in the first place…"

That was when Subaru realized a strange fact. There was no mistaking that Emilia was challenging the tomb's Trial. Subaru had entered there during that time, after all.

But if those events were happening in the castle of dreams during that Trial, then—

"Weren't you playing the part of the examiner for the Trial? What are you doing here, then?"

"Mm?"

"I mean, Emilia's challenging the Trial, too, right? What are you doing here instead of supervising that? Isn't that weird?"

"…Ahhh, that is what you mean. But I already see the result, so…"

"You see the result…?"

The terribly blunt reply left Subaru unable to continue to the next phrase. This was because Echidna's apathy about Emilia's trial came from referencing Subaru's own memories.

So far as Subaru knew, Emilia would be unable to beat the Trial for three days hence.

Even if one thought she could do it with more time, the Great Rabbit would rob her of the time required.

"Therefore, I am no longer interested in the result of her challenge. I surely cannot expect her to have a breakthrough in three days, even through trial and error. Or perhaps you could do it?"

“_____”

“Would you, he who has decided to redo over and over, spread your wings for the cowardly Princess’s sake?”

The sarcastic, teasing way she said it made Subaru shut his eyes. On the back of his eyelids, all that floated up was the image of Emilia crying, her heart broken by the Trial.

To make her overcome the Trial, would he die over and over, to avoid making her wear that face?

His heart strongly implored him not to behave in a manner so cruel.

“I hate to be a sucker for your taunt, but I can’t let you make Emilia cry anymore.”

“Er…mm, it is not as if I am the one making her cry, however.”

“For that sake, I’ll challenge your bad-taste Trial. I meant to do that last time around, anyway. People got in my way, so I couldn’t then, but I’ll make it happen next time.”

“You really did not have to say it is in bad taste…”

Echidna commented with a pout, but that did nothing to dampen Subaru’s resolve.

Either way, the declaration he had made to Echidna was genuine.

This time, Subaru wanted to take the Trial. He’d already overcome the first Trial. If he broke past the second and the third, the Sanctuary would be liberated from the barrier.

After that, he could race to the mansion and, borrowing Beatrice’s power, send Elsa and the Beast Master packing.

For that, he’d challenge as many times as he needed to. The last thing to tug at his mind was—

“…Garfiel.”

Even then, having restarted, he couldn’t pin down how he ought to act toward the man who could bestialize into a giant tiger.

The fact was, the more he Returned by Death, the more the miasma thickened, prompting unnecessary disputes between him and Garfiel. If so, in spite of the overwhelming power gap between Garfiel and others, he wound up turning his claws against Ram, Otto, and the villagers.

Even if he survived, the other guy wouldn't listen—even if the circumstances changed, how could he reconcile with such a man?

"…There's no way."

At the very least, Subaru was incapable of forgiving Garfiel in his current mental state. Of course, it wasn't someone he ought to be antagonizing, either. He'd have to avoid confrontation as best he could.

There was no chance of victory through arms. He could not yet bring himself to imagine Garfiel becoming an ally, but…

"Shit, not good… My mind's really breaking down."

In the middle of such thoughts, his mind swayed. He was struck by the sensation that he was falling asleep. From the sight of Subaru, Echidna said, "It seems our time is at an end," and continued, "From my perspective, this time was particularly fruitful, and this after not even being asked a question last time. Have I lived up to the name of the Witch of Greed, at least a little?"

"I suppose you have… Yeah, to be honest, it's a big help…both for making a plan and for my psyche."

Compared to the previous occasion, when he'd indeed exchanged words with Echidna for only a short time, they had spoken long. During that time, a number of people who had not shown themselves before Subaru to date had revealed themselves. Most of all, he'd divulged Return by Death. His eaten-to-death psyche's wounds had also apparently healed.

Even if the outside world would doubt his sanity for the thought, he didn't find being aided by a Witch to be so mysterious.

"One Witch's power makes me redo from death; another's saves my psyche, huh?"

"What was that?"

“Nah, just talking to myself— Echidna, what should I do to come here again?”

“_____”

Through Return by Death, Subaru would be certain to return to the tomb. But an invitation into Echidna’s territory required qualifications beyond that. Opening the door of dreams required a key, just like his desperate struggling had acted as a trigger that time around.

“I know it’s selfish to ask. But down the road, a time will come when I want to borrow your wisdom again. You know a lot of stuff, and besides…”

“—Because I know about your Return by Death, yes?”

“…Yeah, that’s right.”

Until that point, Subaru had no one who knew he Returned by Death that he could also actually converse with. But that was possible with Echidna, the Witch before his eyes.

Echidna was sharper-witted than Subaru. Her power was necessary to overcome the current loop.

“I do not mind the feeling of being relied on. However, the living should not so easily welcome the dead into their thoughts or lend them their hearts… particularly when dealing with a Witch.”

“You mean, it’s no good?”

“I am not saying it is no good. But I believe it will probably be more difficult from here on.”

With dejection and hope both dwelling in Subaru’s eyes, Echidna’s cheeks went taut as she made a strained smile.

“The conditions for inviting a guest steadily become more difficult. The first time, I am free to call someone, but from the second onward, it is not so. This is the second time you have been invited. Your voice and its heartfelt craving to *know* reached me. The third time requires it be even greater than the second— Do you think you are capable of this?”

“A bigger voice than this time around, meaning I have to die with a bigger impact than being eaten by bunnies? …Even if I could, I would, um, prefer not

to.”

In the first place, when he’d died this latest time, it was enough to spark madness. He’d been in a veritable oblivion, his soul shaken to the very core of his being as he cried out, *why*— Just what kind of pain and loss would he have to arrive at to one-up that?

“Since you have rejected it, this may well be the final time you and I come face to face. But if you engage with the Trial according to your plan, that might not be so.”

“—? Ahh, I get it! So that’s how it is!”

He palmed a fist. He understood what Echidna was getting at. He’d have a chance to speak with her outside of a tea party.

Just like during the first Trial, if Subaru challenged the Trial in Emilia’s place, his desire for reunion would be granted when he met the Witch during the second and third Trials.

“So if I do that, then? That said, there’s more to that than a cup of tea…”

“If you insist, I am willing to pour you some there as well…”

“Nah, the more I see of what goes into it, the less I wanna drink that stuff.”

When he thrust out the palms of his hand, rejecting her offer, Echidna wore the most dejected face she had to date.

He had no idea why the Witch was trying to supply him with her own bodily fluids to that extent. Maybe it aroused her to have part of herself become part of another. That would be sinful indeed.

Either way, he’d put the next opportunity on his to-do list. There was one thing left to do before he departed.

“Feels like I’m about to wake up for real. So Echidna, please, before that.”

“—?”

“Hey, don’t leave me hanging! Compensation for the tea party! You’re the one who said it!”

“A-ahh, compensation. Of course, obligatory for a Witch’s tea party. It would

be bad if I forgot such a thing.”

For an instant, he was nervous that she had genuinely forgotten, but Echidna spoke those words with a suspicious-looking smile. Normally, Subaru would have wanted her to forget about making him pay compensation before being swept outside, but this time, the “vow” business was included in the compensation. He couldn’t omit it.

The vow would be rewritten, and he would return outside of the dream with his memories of Echidna, and the tea party, intact.

Worst case, if he forgot about the conversation with Daphne, the only future waiting for him was being eaten by the Great Rabbit a second time.

“Last time, I forbade you from speaking of the tea party. This time, you desire that I unbind you from that vow, and I have given you a warm reception in other ways still. I must have appropriate compensation.”

“Just thinking of it all makes me nervous about what I’m gonna pay for it.”

“Perhaps after you die, I shall collect your soul, and you may enjoy an eternal party with us…”

“Sorry. I can’t die, remember?”

“I suppose not. I find that thing’s obsession even more detestable than before.”

He thought it was a joke nonetheless, but as penultimate choices went, it was frightening compensation indeed. Just thinking about spending all eternity there with the Witches left him unable to stop shaking.

If I have to offer compensation on the same level as that— Just as Subaru was worrying along those lines, Echidna went, “In that case,” stretching out her hand as she said, “I really had my eye on that one, but I suppose this will do?”

As she spoke, Echidna’s fingers touched the white handkerchief wrapped around Subaru’s wrist.

Given to him by Petra, the proof of his promise to her to return safe and sound had followed him even to the world of dreams—

“This will do…? It’s just a handkerchief, right? There’s nothing special about it

at all.”

“Then there’s no harm in giving it to me, is there? If there is nothing special about it.”

“Er, well that might be true but…this is…”

Echidna’s behavior, clinging to obstinacy, made Subaru shield his wrist as his words grew awkward. The handkerchief was infused with a promise, one that would carry him back to Petra without fail. It carried Petra’s thoughts wishing him safety on his journey. He couldn’t simply hand it over.

After all, returning it to Petra safe and sound was one of Subaru’s goals.

“Besides, how can compensation be something physical like this? This is a mental world. You can’t actually keep something from the world outside, right?”

“How perceptive of you. Certainly, even if you hand it to me here, the handkerchief will not vanish from your wrist when you return to the outside. But there is the wish infused within.”

“The wish, in the handkerchief?”

Unlike with Subaru’s figurative thoughts, Echidna nodded with a completely serious look of conviction.

“The one who conferred this to you has heartfelt concern for you. The feelings behind her wish for your safety become a power that protects you. Such charms existed even in my time, but you must not mock them.”

“Had no intention of doing so… But, that so, huh?”

When Subaru gripped his wrist, handkerchief included, he felt the consideration from that adorable girl within. Gradually, his chest was filled with warmth.

In his heart, he vowed anew. He *would* rescue the girl from her tragic fate.

“This may be my territory, but that does not mean I am completely free to do as I please. Just as I cannot deny you your freedom, I cannot do with the feelings infused within the handkerchief as I wish. Therefore, no concern is necessary.”

“I’m a bit concerned about that preamble, but in that case, how does the handkerchief become compensation for you?”

“It lets me be certain of the existence of those feelings, and perhaps… interfere, somewhat?”

Replying thusly to Subaru’s question, Echidna touched Subaru’s handkerchief with her supple finger. The Witch proceeded to gently close her eyes, lowering her head as she stood right beside him.

The feeling of proximity and the Witch’s scent made him uncomfortable. Internally, he prayed for her to hurry up, but Echidna, unaware of this, took a full ten seconds before going “All right” and pulling back from him.

“With this, I have collected my compensation. There is a new vow between us. Do not forget this!”

“…Um, my old vow was to forget this stuff, you know.”

Using invective to paper over his embarrassment, Subaru took a step away from Echidna.

Already, Subaru’s vision had warped. The world lost its shape, save for Echidna alone.

“Well, big help. See you next Trial, I guess?”

“It would be nice if your challenging the tomb went smoothly, but…”

Subaru made a pained smile at how she could lob mental millstones with such ease. Then, it felt like this time he was truly being cut off from the dream—

“—Subaru Natsuki, if you ever come for a third tea party…”

“Eh?”

The instant he was enveloped by a floaty feeling, Echidna, fading from view, said something to him.

When Subaru spoke back, the Witch, growing misty, smiled as she continued.

“—If such a time comes, it shall be I who wishes to speak with you about something.”

“_____”

With those final words seemingly tugging at the back of his hair, the Witch vanished from Subaru's field of vision.

A misty feeling remained in his chest. But Subaru turned his way, facing overhead.

He lost the floaty feeling. He did not know if he was rising or falling.

But the dream was ending. And as the dream ended, the determination he embraced was—

"—Next time, there won't be any mistakes."

The murmur accompanied his resolve. The next moment, he heard a sound like ice cracking, and all at once, his vision went white.

CHAPTER 6

LOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVEYOU

1

“Uegh! Geho! Gehh!”

The instant he awoke, Subaru spat out the bitter taste of dirt inside his mouth in spectacular fashion.

Kneeling on the cold floor, he desperately retched until there were tears in his eyes. He earnestly spat out saliva reeking of mud and gravel.

“This gonna happen every time…?!!”

When he finished spitting out the foreign substances, Subaru cursed as he shook his head, urging his waking mind to fully awaken.

Slowly, he reflected on what had happened while he slept, and a fog seemed to lift as his memories came back to life—

“The Great Rabbit got me… I came back and got invited to the tea party…”

Tea party and Witch—when those keywords floated up, a rich variety of memories about the Witches played on the back of his eyelids. The fact that he remembered made Subaru comprehend that Echidna had fulfilled her part of the vow.

Without thinking, he touched his wrist with his hand. He felt cloth; Petra’s handkerchief was there too, safe and sound.

“…So Echidna kept her promise, huh? For a Witch, she really doesn’t seem that bad.”

Subaru made a little sigh. Perhaps it was a sigh of lament; perhaps a sigh of praise.

Echidna, not as witchy as her title suggested, was one of his precious few allies for that loop. She had both intellect and wisdom. The tea parties and the Trial provided limited opportunities to rely on either, but—

"—The flip side is, they bring the biggest advantage. That's a big deal."

Touching a hand to his chest, Subaru mentally trembled anew that he'd been able to confess Return by Death.

The conditions had been limited to that place, where it was only him, Echidna, and the other Witches. But being able to reveal Return by Death to someone and talk to her about it was something he didn't dare wish for by that point.

Thanks to that, he'd gained information on the Great Rabbit and hypotheses about Return by Death's characteristics.

Perhaps the most disturbing piece of information he'd returned with was that the Witch of Envy was the cause of the Authority dwelling in Subaru and that, one day, he would most certainly come to face the Witch.

"But right now, I'll rely on that power of yours. I'll use the lives you give me as many times as I need to."

If this put him closer to the answers, he was all the gladder for it. It was a small price to pay for the sake of the future.

Subaru crudely wiped his lips with his sleeve and stood up then and there. He wore a strong expression full of determination, but then it flipped; an ill feeling changed it to apprehension.

"Emilia had to have been the one who…woke me up, but…"

Properly speaking, Subaru's mind had been called awake through external interference. But in this case, it was a slight and trivial difference…one that evaporated in light of the larger current issue.

Namely, there in the tomb's stone room where the first Trial took place—Emilia was nowhere to be found.

"…No way, right?"

Murmuring in astonishment, Subaru looked all around the dimly lit stonework room.

However, there was no sight of Emilia anywhere within the Trial room. Emilia, who should have been in anguish from the nightmare she was having until the moment Subaru touched and awakened her, was gone.

“So she woke up before me, then tried to wake me up, and then…and then?”

—And then, with Subaru not awakening, she just left, leaving him there?

That would not have been a very Emilia-like act. It was more likely that Emilia would carry the unconscious Subaru out of the tomb than go outside to call for aid.

Or perhaps her mental state was so much at odds with its normal condition that she’d commit such an un-Emilia-like act.

“—!!”

It was then that Subaru realized he had come far too late.

As he repeated events, it was the fourth time he had awakened in that place. But until then, never once had Emilia awoken before him; this was the first time.

Now, he was unable to console the brokenhearted Emilia, a hole bored in her heart by nightmares from the past.

“Don’t tell me she ran outside all in a panic…!”

Thinking back to how much Emilia was flustered by the past, he couldn’t say with any certainty that it was impossible.

Ram and Otto were outside of the tomb. Even if Emilia did leave in tears, they ought to have been able to skillfully calm her back down. Besides, outside were —

“—Garfiel and Ryuzu are there.”

When he turned around, about to make a run for the tomb’s exit, his legs came to a halt. Right after Return by Death, Subaru’s miasma had probably increased in density again. He still hadn’t been able to work out countermeasures for that.

If his miasma was thicker than the previous time around, there was no telling

when Garfiel and company would come after him. It wasn't certain they wouldn't attack him right after he left the tomb.

"…Nah, I have to go."

He was concerned for Emilia's safety. There was no way he could put that on the back burner.

Besides, if his miasma thickened the more he repeated, every error in judgment made the situation worse. Subaru's excuses might only pass muster while the count was still low. That time might have been his last for that.

Subaru's emotional state also made the short-tempered Garfiel difficult to persuade. But he might get somewhere with Ryuzu by pleading that the miasma business was a misunderstanding.

"This time gotta bet on that conversation—!"

Betting everything on a possibility limited to that time around, he forced his once-stopped legs to move. After the first step came down, there was no more hesitation. He ran across the hard floor full-force.

The sounds of his shoes echoed throughout the cold tomb, mixing with Subaru's breathing as he hurried outside. A lukewarm breeze blew in from the entrance, rubbing Subaru the wrong way, something he brushed aside as he ran.

As Subaru clenched his teeth tightly, the moonlight filtering in straight in front of him brought the entrance into view. Subaru leaped over the vines covering the corridor's floor and walls, determined to move even if he could see nothing on his way outside.

When he raced out of the tomb, he wondered if it would be Emilia, or perhaps Garfiel, first entering his eyes.

"—Huh?"

Instantly, he hit the emergency brakes, crudely bringing his body to a halt. He pitched forward, then righted himself.

However, his heart, struck by surprise at the unexpected, could not be righted so easily.

“____”

In his mind, he traced two scenes—Emilia in tears, Garfiel turning with enmity as Subaru raced out of the tomb—that represented his worst-case scenarios. But the result was neither of the two.

There was neither Emilia nor Garfiel nor, for that matter, Ram or Otto or Ryuzu either.

What was there was—

“—A shadow.”

Haltingly, without thinking, Subaru let the murmur trickle out, bluntly describing the scene.

Outside the tomb, the Sanctuary, surrounded by both forest and barrier, was entirely engulfed in pitch-black shadow.

2

Shadow—truly, there was no other way to express the spectacle before his eyes.

A change had come over the landscape he surveyed from the entrance of the tomb. The clearing in front of the tomb, the settlement visible in the distance, and the bonfire for illuminating the nighttime path…none of these entered his vision.

He turned his face skyward. There, the waning, pale moon and the countless stars glimmered, giving off their light.

Neither the moonlight nor the starlight had any effect upon the shadow smothering the Sanctuary in darkness.

“____”

Swallowing his breath, Subaru hardened his will and stepped down the tomb’s stairs, setting his feet upon the clearing before his eyes. His soles came into contact with the shadow. He felt the soles stepping on grass and soil, though his eyes could not see either. There was no sign that he was sinking into the shadow like quicksand. But he was engulfed by shadow up to ankle level.

Instantly, the creepy shadow felt repulsive. Subaru's throat shuddered as he yelled.

"E-Emilia! Emilia, where are you! Where are you?! Please answer me, Emilia!"

The uncertainty about the world that was present, the warping of the world shown through his eyes—these sent fear running through Subaru.

His resolve in the face of come-what-may was blotted out by the absurdity of not even understanding what had happened.

Emilia did not respond. There was no sound or sight of her to be found.

"Ram! Ryuzu! Even Otto! You're here, right?! Come on out, please!"

If that moment was right after taking the Trial, all of the people he named ought to have been present in the clearing. What ought to have happened was Subaru soothing the panicked Emilia and being greeted by those people when he brought her outside.

That was what ought to have happened, but this time, nothing was going according to Subaru's experiences.

"Am I stupid…? No, I *am* stupid. This ain't the time to get cold feet. Whatever happened, I've gotta be as cool as if I was wearing a watercooler over my head…!"

Biting his lip, blood coursing to his jaw, Subaru strived to maintain his calm in the face of the anomaly. He'd wasted enough time in futile things like his mind going awry, getting emotional, and being buffeted by events; no more.

—Hadn't he only just hardened his resolve at the tomb, at Echidna's tea party?

However indecipherable the circumstance, if he faced it resolutely, even if he didn't arrive at the right answer but simply took a step forward closer to where his hand could reach, a step closer to payback, such a death would have meaning.

"…I have to find out where the heck Emilia and the others went."

Speaking aloud that which he must do, Subaru settled on challenging the shadow before him as his interim plan.

He was walking toward the settlement. His options were the Cathedral that had taken in the people of Earlham Village and the Ryuzu residence where Roswaal was convalescing—the Cathedral was closer and had more people. So he headed there.

Pursuing that thought, Subaru lifted up a foot from the shadow to break into a run—

"—Uh?"

The instant he tried to run, Subaru stopped moving at the very first step. It wasn't out of timidity. The reason he stopped was that the wind was suddenly blowing right before his eyes.

It was a lukewarm wind, and there was a color to it. Its black color greatly resembled the shadow enveloping the Sanctuary.

"____"

The wind brushed against Subaru as if licking his entire body, passing behind him. Feeling the skin on the back of his neck tickle from the graze, Subaru slowly, slowly turned around.

His eyes followed the wind. It was a foolish act, but there was a tangible reason why he did it.

"Aa"

In the Sanctuary, befallen by darkness, shadow shrouded the surface of the clearing, in which there was no one besides Subaru.

But there, close enough to breathe upon it, *that* shadow silently stood.

He hadn't noticed until it was very close. He hadn't noticed it getting very close. Even having come so very close, it had raised no voice, though it gazed at him.

He could not see the other person's face. And yet, it was that face he could not see, more than anything else, that revealed who this was.

"—?!!"

The next moment, the shadow blanketing the ground swelled up in explosive

fashion, and the fragile landscape known as the Sanctuary completely collapsed, swallowed by a sea of shadow that blotted out the darkness-covered forest, the settlement, and the world.

But faced with such an enormous anomaly before him, Subaru could not spare a thought for the world being swallowed by the shadow.

His thoughts were stolen by the being before his eyes and remorse that should not have existed.

“You’re…”

His voice trembled. He could not continue further. With Subaru’s voice caught in his throat, the shadow whispered in his stead.

It could not have expressed what it intended in a fashion easier to comprehend.

“—I love you.”

Thus did the shadow whisper, infused with hot, passionate affection, enough to set the entire world aflame.

3

Before the shadow’s erosion, physical barriers such as doors and walls held no meaning.

Stonework walls, weathered wooden doors, metal tables…they were placed here and there like a child’s toys of questionable value. They became dyed in shadow, along with the time and thought that had gone into piling them up.

“—Goodness. I truuuuly have no luck. To think I do not even know if the Trial was overcome or no.”

The individual lying upon the bed let such deeply sentimental comments trickle out while he gazed absentmindedly at the residence being eroded thus from the center of the room being engulfed by shadow.

The voice was not nervous. There was no surprise at the presence of the shadow whatsoever. It simply felt hollow, with an air of resignation.

Hollowness and resignation: these were the emotions lingering in the individual's differently colored eyes. However, to a degree others could not even begin to surmise, he felt deeply and at great length the pondering weight of months and years as they passed.

He had kept up the struggle for such a long period of time, only to ultimately arrive at hollowness and resignation. That was exactly how he felt.

"Lady Emilia went to challenge the Trial, and you go to save her. This, and eventually, inevitably, the situation shall change… But it seems it is not I who shall see it."

Sighing, the individual slowly sat up and then gently moved from the bed down to the floor. The room's floor had already been engulfed by shadow, and that erosion began to reach his feet as well.

The shadow was merciless, grabbing hold of his slender ankles. It writhed as it climbed higher and higher, blotting out his existence.

There had to have been pain accompanying erosion by shadow. However, as the shadow pervaded the flesh of his legs, the color of the individual's face did not change whatsoever— No, his face was concealed under white makeup. Therefore, his expression would never falter. Perhaps such mental strength was wondrous…or simply mad.

When the shadow swallowed his legs in their entirety, the erosion arrived at his hips. During that time, the individual unbound the bandages wrapped around his upper body, revealing the painful wounds remaining on his supple flesh.

He dropped the blood-smeared bandages to his feet. Not watching as they were engulfed by shadow, the individual stretched a hand toward the bed. He moved the pillow aside and picked up that which lay beneath.

Then, very, very tenderly, he held it to his chest: a black-covered, title-less book.

He embraced it like a loved one. It was as if the book itself was someone he cared for very deeply.

His crimson-smeared lips took on the shape of a strange-looking smile as his

voice trickled out like a whisper.

“If it is hell that you have chosen, it is there I shall greet you. If you walk the path of hell, I shall gladly accompany you. If it is in hell you live, then it is that hell I desire.”

His whisper reached no one.

It was simply a fruitless, meaningless act to kill time, a soliloquy that would be eternally unheard.

But he continued those lonely words, that lonely charade, as he tightly clutched the book.

In a place none could reach, with a voice that could reach no one, with only himself around to hear, he stated…

“—Next time, make no mistakes, yes, Subaru Natsuki?”

It was then, finally, that the smile was consumed by shadow. The book fell to the floor—whereupon all sank into darkness and vanished.

<END>

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's Tappei Nagatsuki, aka the Mouse-Colored Cat, doing the usual.

Once again, thank you very much for buying and reading through *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-*, Vol. 11! That expresses zero consideration for people going straight to the afterword looking for a clincher when deciding to buy, but no one does that with Vol. 11, right? So let's toss aside that consideration. Anyway, thanks!

Last volume we arrived at the major milestone of Vol. 10, which gave me the additional sense of accomplishment of plunging into Arc 4, but in Vol. 11, I had a different sense of achievement.

That's because, from this volume onward, the content differs substantially from the Web novel that preceded it. Of course, every volume's manuscript is completely rewritten in the shift to print publication, with the intent of making it easier to read, but it's only been since Vol. 8 that these changes have included core developments of the story.

It's just that for Vols. 8–9 I am quite confident these changes never extended beyond the realm of minor details. It is from this very volume onward that major revisions to developments have come in a form really visible to my eyes.

I think any author contributing to the Web would have such concerns, but it really does take a measure of courage to deliver a story to everyone with content differing from one already publicly released. So I eagerly await hearing what you think of the print publication Arc 4, portrayed differently from the Web version!

So I said various things, seemingly amounting to "I want feedback on the

content.” Well…put bluntly, that’s exactly what I meant. I’m writing this here because I actually do want to hear from you, so please and thank you.

Even if it’s on Twitter, I’m completely happy with that, but if I can be greedy, I’m waiting for letters. Just check the address in the back of this book for where to send fan letters. This same goes for the author of any book. If you gather the courage to send me your impressions, I will be pleased.

So now that I’ve written at length about soliciting feedback, allow me to shift to the established custom of thank-yous.

Editor I, I’ve completed every book meant to be sent out this year safe and sound. For this volume, I caused you all kinds of trouble, especially the time spent figuring out how to modify the book, but you were of great assistance to me. Truly, as always, thank you very much. Please give me your best regards next year.

To Otsuka the illustrator, I caused you a lot of trouble over the character designs for Arc 4—including this volume, with the number of characters growing even more—but you took incredibly good care of me. The Witches of the Deadly Sins truly came out splendidly. Thank you very much.

To Kusano the cover designer, this volume the cover had, rare for *Re:ZERO*, a normal everyday one-panel scene that puts a smile on your face (^_^).Thank you very much for maintaining that image while providing beautiful cover design.

To Daichi Matsuse and Makoto Fugetsu, in charge of the comic versions, you fill the parts that text alone cannot reach, so as always, thank you both very much! Arc 2 is finally reaching its climax, and Arc 3 is showing its stuff right before our eyes, all thrilling scenes in comic form! By all means, both of you, please show us more *Re:ZERO* looking so wonderful! As the author I’ll try super hard, too!

And just the other day, the *Re:ZERO* anime finally wrapped up production. It was a wrap-up with a big gathering of anime staff and cast members, but I was also exceptionally happy to hear such warm words from so many people there… I was truly moved. I have to keep trying my hardest, so I intend to put all that to good use. To everyone involved in the anime, truly, a job well done.

I'll continue to work hard on *Re:ZERO* from here on out! Thank you very much, everyone!

Finally, I wish to give my thanks to all of you readers that bought this book and enjoyed its story.

It's an author's dream to have your work turned into an anime. Now that my wish has been granted, I think I have another dream still. *Re:ZERO* isn't over yet.

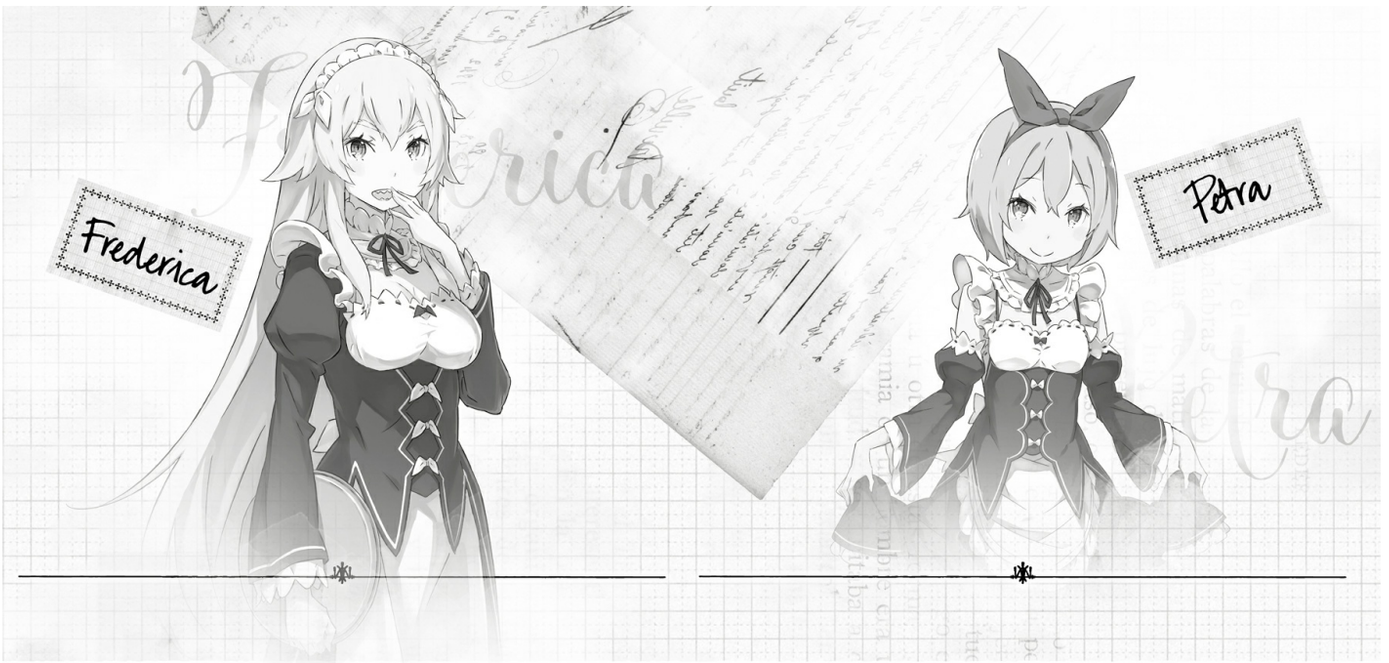
Around the same time as this book, there's a collaboration book with Natsume Akatsuki of *Konosuba: God's Blessing on this Wonderful World!*, and this coming February there's an event planned with Rem playing the lead role, so please give *Re:ZERO* your best regards, not only in 2016 but in 2017 as well!

Well then, let's meet next for Volume 12. Thank you very much!

November, 2016 <<Enthusiasm burning strong

after the anime wrap-up>>


Was Vol. 11 supposed to be a panty festival?!
Due to final alterations, the only underwear left in was Subaru's.
Shinichiro Otsuka
オオツカシンイチロウ
Daphne
Initial Design
Partly see-through
Frederica's Frontispiece Illustration
(pre-revision)
Typhon
Initial Design



“Miss Frederica! This time, it’s our turn to do the next volume preview!”

“Yes, yes, do not get too carried away, Petra. Never forget that grace is required of a maid. It is also important to be reserved.”

“Yes, Miss Frederica. But, but, it’s so reassuring to do this with you, Miss Frederica!”

“I’m happy the both of us are here, too, Petra. Now then, what are we discussing this time?”

“Err…first, just like *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-*, Volume 11, Volume 4 of the Alive version of the *Re:ZERO* comic is going on sale this December! As for the story…”

“For Master Subaru, Lady Emilia, and you too, Petra, the happy stories shall continue. But, it is because these exist that what follows shall shine so much… very important stories indeed. And then?”

“Yes! We’re talking about a very important collaboration! A miraculous collaboration between Natsume Aka-tsuki’s *Konosuba: God’s Blessing on this*

Wonderful World! and *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-!*”

“There will be a dialogue between the two authors, interviews with illustrators from both series, collaboration comics drawn by the manga artists for the comic versions of both, and so on, so it will be filled with must-see content.”

“I’m really looking forward to the collaboration book *Re: Starting This Wonderful Life from Zero!*”

“Volume 12 of the main *Re:ZERO* series is expected to go on sale in March of next year. It is far too early to take your eyes off *Re:ZERO*, I assure you.”

“I suppose so! It’s going to keep going, and going…”

“Lastly…we cannot fail to announce an event coming this February called Rem Day, to be held in Akihabara and Shibuya.”

“Rem Day… You mean, *that* Miss Rem?”

“As a celebration of that girl’s birthday, *Re: Starting Rem’s Birthday from Zero 2017* will be held in Akihabara and Shibuya, with the details to be announced by HP and Twitter hereafter, but…”

“It seems that all kinds of memorabilia will be sold at Miss Rem’s birthday celebration. There’ll be a lot of special illustrations drawn for the event, so it feels like everyone really, really treasures Miss Rem very much.”

“Petra.”

“That’s why we have to work hard so Miss Rem can get better even one day sooner. Isn’t that right, Miss Frederica?”

“—Yes, of course it is. After all, there are many things I must teach Rem, just as I did for you and Ram. For that sake, you and I must both do our very best. Let’s put our backs into it!”

“Yes! Please look after me!”

“A lovely reply— Ahhh, you are so adorable.”

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