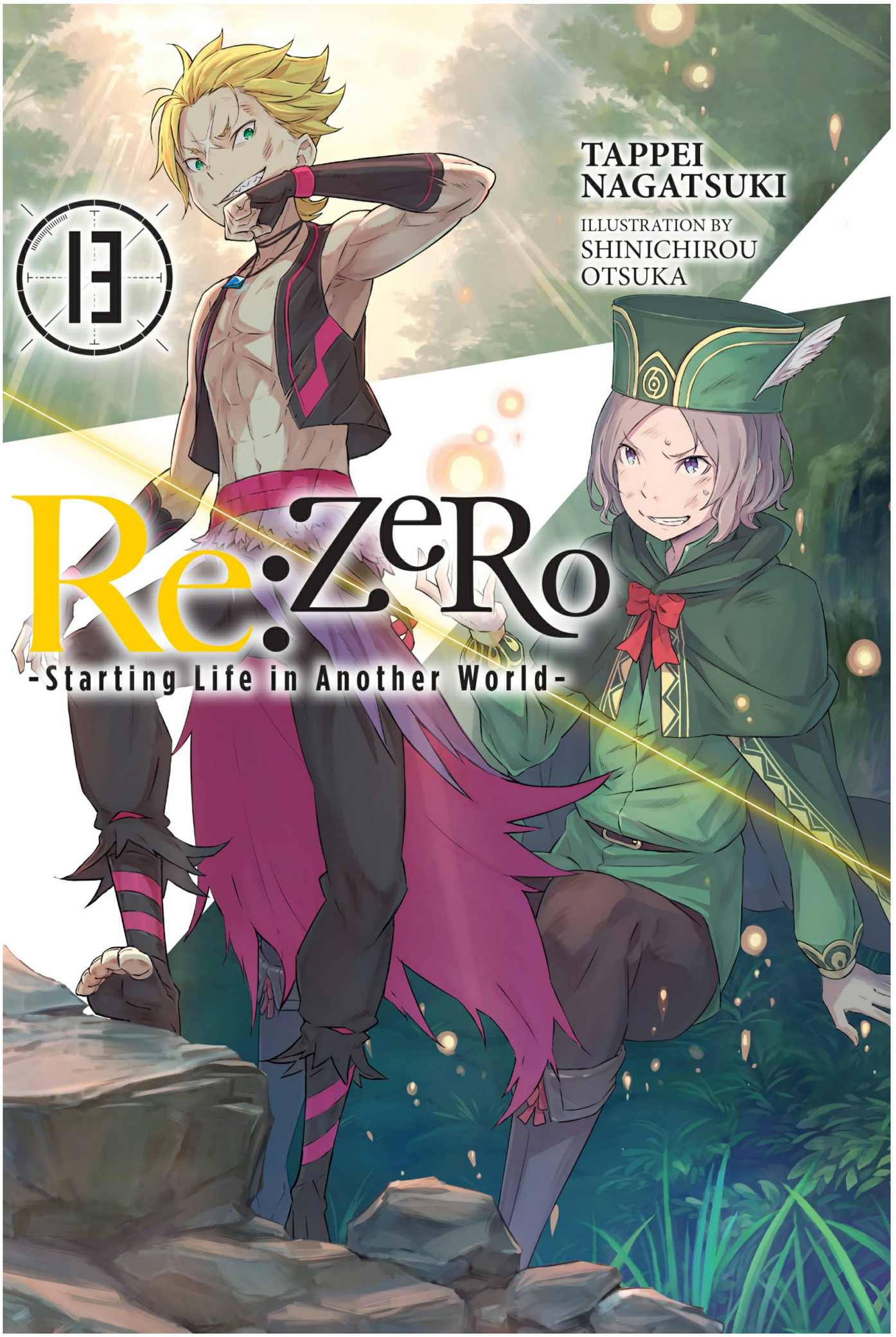
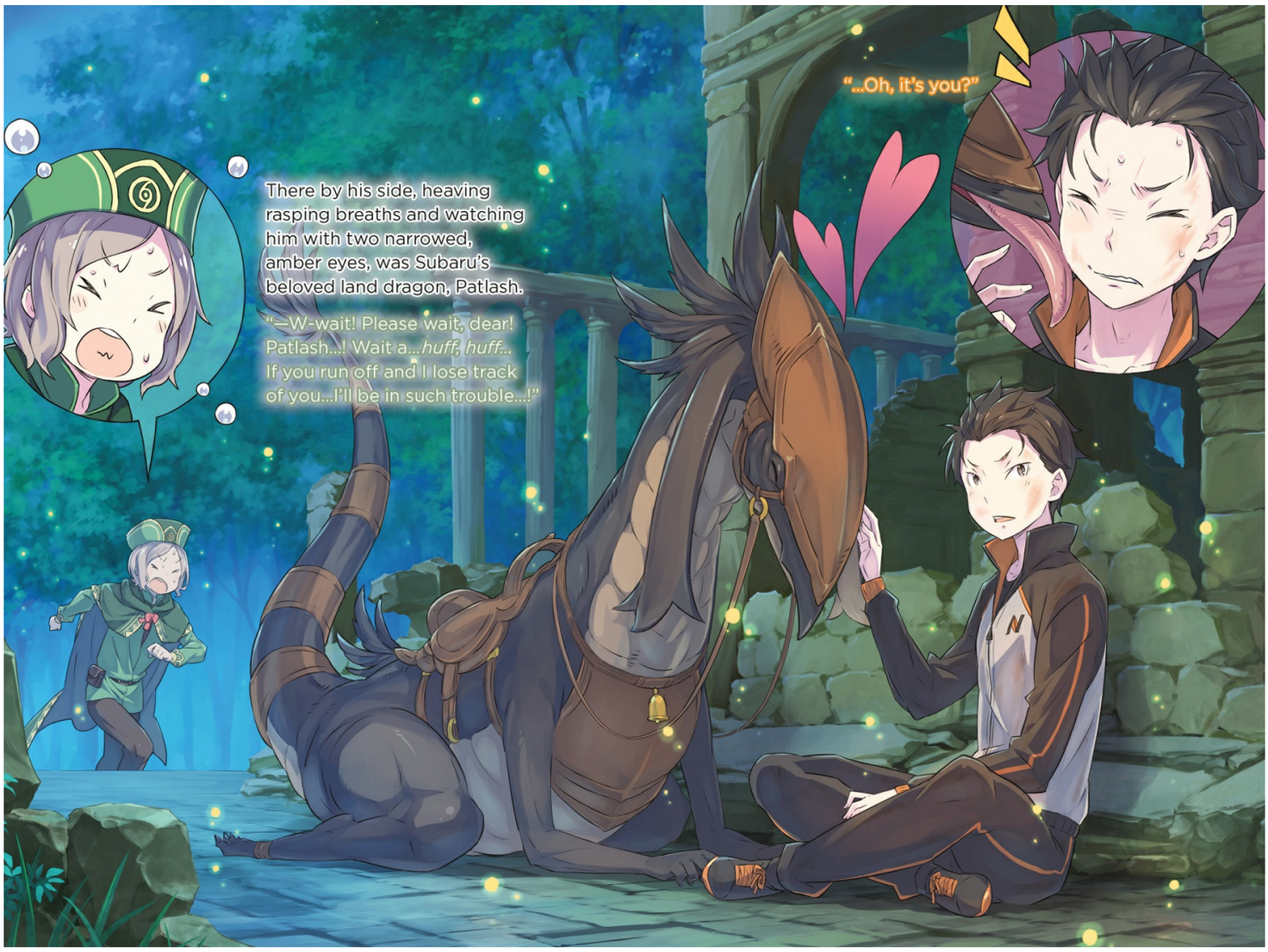
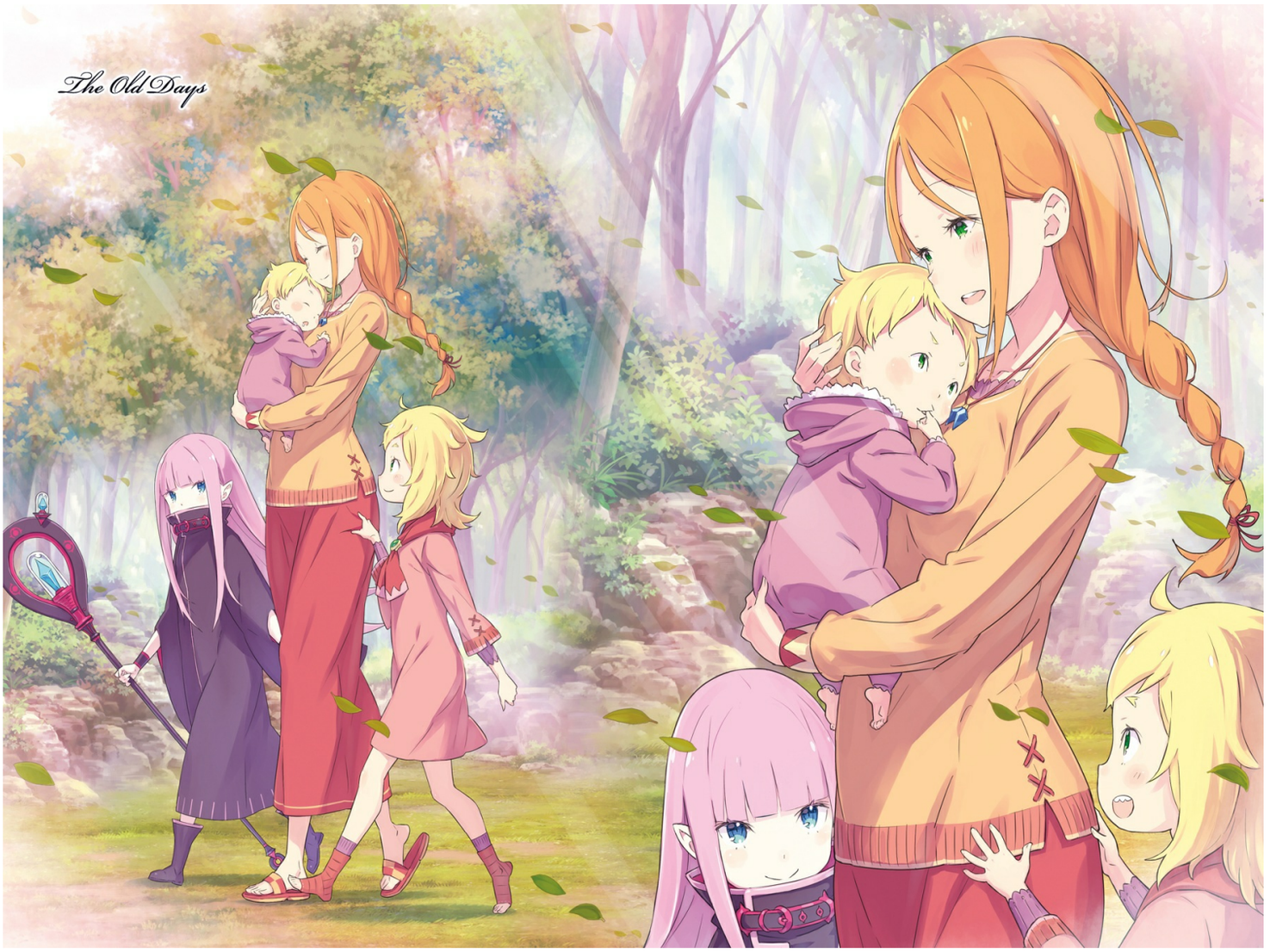

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TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI
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SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-


Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-


There by his side, heaving rasping breaths and watching him with two narrowed, amber eyes, was Subaru's beloved land dragon, Patlash.
"—W-wait! Please wait, dear! Patlash...! Wait a...*huff*, *huff*... If you run off and I lose track of you...I'll be in such trouble...!"
"...Oh, it's you?"


"I'm sure...in the morning... I want to think that by morning...I'll be all right."
"Y-yeah. That's, mm-hmm, I get it. So..."
"Hold my hand. Would you stay here until morning? If you do that, I'm sure I'll..."
Entwining her fingers with Subaru's, Emilia infused the sensation with that prayer.


The Old Days

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.

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Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 13

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

YEN ON

NEW YORK

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Re:ZERO Vol. 13

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Shinichirou Otsuka

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Re:ZERO KARA HAJIMERU ISEKAI SEIKATSU Vol. 13

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First published in Japan in 2017 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: July 2020

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Nagatsuki, Tappei, 1987 – author. | Otsuka, Shinichirou, illustrator. | ZephyrRz, translator. | Bourque, Jeremiah, translator.

Title: Re:ZERO starting life in another world / Tappei Nagatsuki ; illustration by Shinichirou Otsuka ; translation by ZephyrRz ; translation by Bourque, Jeremiah Other titles: Re:ZERO kara hajimeru isekai seikatsu. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2016 – | Audience: Ages 13 & up.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016031562 | ISBN 9780316315302 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398374 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398404 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398428 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398459 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398473 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398497 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301934 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975356293 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383169 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383183 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383206 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383220 (v. 13 : pbk.) Subjects: CYAC: Science fiction. | Time travel—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.N34 Re 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016031562

ISBNs: 978-1-97538322-0 (paperback) 978-1-9753-8323-7 (ebook)

E3-20200626-JV-NF-ORI

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CHAPTER 1

THE SOUNDS THAT MAKE YOU WANT TO CRY

1

—Atop a little hill rising out of a green, grassy plain that smelled of wildflowers, the Witch's Tea Party was about to commence.

The Witches in attendance were all notorious figures who had rampaged across every corner of the world four centuries ago. Joining them was a single boy from a foreign land in a foreign world—plus one final participant, who had just arrived.

This last-minute appearance elicited a variety of reactions from the six Witches already there.

One clenched her fists with a forlorn look. One shrank back in palpable fear. One closed her eyes with a languid sigh. One drooled in ecstasy. One spread both arms wide in an innocent, welcoming gesture.

And the last of the six—

"—Crossing multiple boundaries to intrude upon even my castle of dreams. Her rudeness truly knows no limits."

Echidna the Witch's gaze and voice grew pointed as she spat out those words, directing them toward the detestable shadow approaching the table. The sheer hatred and disgust reflected in those eyes made the boy—Subaru Natsuki—gaze in wonder.

Subaru had been roundly criticizing Echidna for lacking proper human emotions just moments earlier. It was only natural for him to be shocked by her display of such vehement feelings.

Even if those emotions were incredibly negative rather than positive.

“But right now…”

—There was an issue that took precedence over Echidna’s raw emotions.

Subaru and the Witches watched as the shadow slowly came up the hill.

The shadow was clad in a pitch-black dress, with a veil of darkness concealing her face. The oddly hazy impression she gave off was impossible to ignore. No one had any doubt about her true identity.

She was the one who had slain the six Witches now gathered once again in this place. She was the worst of calamities, and one who had nearly destroyed the world.

—This shadow was the Witch of Jealousy.

“___”

Cheeks stiff from tension and wariness, Subaru could feel every beat of his heart.

In the back of his mind, he could see the Sanctuary vanishing into shadow, swallowed by the madness and obsessiveness of the Witch who had already caused such devastation once before. What would happen if the same thing occurred in this dream world…? The thought alone left him aghast.

Of course, there were six Witches besides Jealousy in this place. Perhaps these Witches, who bore titles of similar power, would be able to resist her in some way. However—

“…Why…isn’t anyone…making a move?”

Subaru seemed short of breath as his confusion trickled out of him.

Jealousy was right in front of them, just now reaching the crest of the hill. Only a few scant yards remained between them; the looming apprehension he felt rivaled that terrible moment back in the Sanctuary.

But that was all. Jealousy wasn’t fanning out her shadows. Her old acquaintances, the other Witches, were also not doing anything besides waiting quietly in place.

Not a single one of them budged. Not a single one tried to avenge

themselves.

“The fact that no one is doing anything means…”

Abruptly, someone stepped forward, breaking the silence. She crossed her arms, emphasizing her bountiful breasts in the process. A terrible anger was visible on this Witch’s adorable face. It was none other than Minerva of Wrath.

“Is…this the you I know? Can I trust you?”

“___”

Without flinching, Minerva called out to Jealousy. There was no reply. But her act made Subaru open his eyes wide and gape. That was only natural. As far as Subaru knew, Minerva was the only one of the Witches besides Jealousy who lacked any means of directly attacking her opponent. She was the weakest Witch of all.

This was because her power to transform any kind of violence into healing was the least suited for combat.

“…So why isn’t anyone trying to stop her?”

Every last one of them had to have some kind of grudge against Jealousy, if not hatred that was comparable to what Echidna harbored toward her. And yet, no one made any move to prevent Minerva’s attempt at conversation.

Just as shocking was Jealousy, who had no answer for Minerva’s words. The Witch stood there, paying no heed to her whatsoever. The sight of such defenselessness left Subaru confounded.

In terms of brute force, magical ability, and Authorities, if the six Witches challenged her then and there, Jealousy would easily be—

“—I understand how you feel. I raise both hands in sincere approval. If we could erase her in an instant without leaving even a single fragment behind, it would settle so many of the problems swirling around you. Truly, it would.”

“You…”

Subaru felt utterly disgusted at how Echidna nodded with a knowing look. But as much as he hated to admit it, if there was anyone who could ease Subaru’s doubts at this moment, it was the Witch of Greed.

“Then why aren’t you doing anything? This is a chance to get payback after all these years?”

“Simple. If I attempt to eliminate her, I will expose my back to all the other Witches. Even if we ignore Minerva, I am not strong enough to survive making an enemy of Sekhmet or Typhon.”

“What…?”

The incomprehensible logic of Echidna’s explanation baffled Subaru.

“I just…don’t get it. Why would trying to kill the Witch of Jealousy mean that you’d end up fighting the other Witches? You might have a particular thirst for vengeance, but isn’t she an enemy to ev…”

“Th-that’s not…true…”

It was Carmilla of Lust’s halting words that interrupted Subaru’s question. She ignored Subaru’s gawking, keeping her eyes on the standoff between Minerva and Jealousy.

“A-all of us hold a…grudge against Jealousy… That is true. But this isn’t true… for that g-girl, you know?”

“The hell are you…? All of you hold a grudge against Jealousy, but this is different?”

“Thaaat’s right. You’re just overthinking it, Subarun.”

When Subaru failed to follow what Carmilla was saying, Daphne of Gluttony spoke in her stead, laughing with a sweet voice. She turned her blindfolded face toward Subaru, smacking her lips as she savored his delectable anguish.

“Everything comes down to whether it’s Tella-Tella ooor Jealousy who came. If we don’t know that, there’s nothing Daphne and the others can do. A candidate to be a sage should know that much.”

“Let him be, Daphne, *sigh*. He doesn’t know, *phew*. About any of that yet, *sigh*.”

“Ohhh, is that right? Daphne made an oopsie…”

Daphne wore a smile that seemed devoid of any malice as Sekhmet chastised

her. The Witch of Sloth lowered her eyes, which were rimmed by long eyelashes, before emitting a particularly lethargic sigh.

"—! Why you little…"

Subaru felt rage welling up when it became incredibly obvious from the exchange and their knowing looks that he had been left out of the loop.

He'd gotten this far by being completely and utterly swept along by recent events: a harrowing Return by Death, an undesired second Trial, and learning about Echidna's true nature on top of everything else. It felt like the Witches had toyed with his heart one after another until finally, he found himself face-to-face with the Witch of Jealousy herself.

Daphne's and Sekhmet's exchange was the last push that sent Subaru's head reeling. Just how much were they going to make a fool of him?

"Cut the crap already! I…I ain't got the time or the patience to be messing around!"

"Wow, Baru, so scawwy. Are you mad? You'll get tired, y'know?"

Typhon of Pride poked a finger into her cheek, tilting her head as she innocently questioned Subaru.

"Also, get it right. We're not mad at Tella. But we *are* mad at the Witch. And y'see, Typhon likes Tella, so…"

"Tella… You mean Satella? That's…the name of the Witch of Jealousy, ain't it…?"

"…To put it in simple terms, the world remembered Satella as the Witch of Jealousy. However, what was not recorded in history was that Satella had a type of personality disorder."

Echidna picked up where Typhon's explanation left off to fill in the blanks with words even Subaru could comprehend.

Unfortunately, he had no idea how he should interpret the words *personality disorder*. That could be—

"—Something like a split personality? That would mean Satella and the Witch of Jealousy are…"

“Perhaps it would be clearer to say that she absorbed a Factor that was incompatible with her, causing a mental abnormality that ultimately created the Witch personality within Satella…not that I personally have any inclination to distinguish between the two.”

Echidna was disgruntled, but Subaru could not conceal his shock at the new fact that had come to light.

He couldn’t recall ever hearing a word about Satella and the Witch of Jealousy being two distinct personalities. It was natural this information couldn’t be found anywhere in the legends. At the same time, this revelation finally allowed him to comprehend the current standoff.

Was the person standing before them the Witch of Jealousy or Satella? Even the other Witches apparently didn’t know.

“Accordingly, I cannot recklessly go on the attack. If I cross the other five just to eliminate her alone, there will be no hope for victory. After all, if my soul dissipates, even I cannot escape death.”

“…But this is a big risk for the other five, too, isn’t it? You were lending your soul out to them, right? If you vanish, won’t they go up in smoke, too?”

“They’ve already accepted their deaths. They have no lingering attachments to a prolonged existence as mere souls. Rather than struggle to remain, they would rather perish while living according their beliefs. It is because we are only capable of this destructive way of life that we are Witches.”

Not a single one of the other five disputed Echidna’s statement.

Subaru could not approve of the Witches’ way of life, for it was too focused on living in the moment for him to consider it pure of heart. Such fanatic devotion to a singular purpose, both in life and in death, was far from normal.

Moreover…

“I get you’re all like that. It’s…hard to accept, but I can at least understand where you’re coming from. But that only goes for you guys. For Sate…for that Witch, it’s different.”

He had managed to grasp the Witches’ perspective. However, this was

ultimately an account from the victims. He had yet to hear the offender's story. If that was even possible.

"___"

Without a word, the pitch-black figure watched on as Subaru spoke with the Witches. No, it was more accurate to say that Jealousy watched Subaru alone.

"It's better than her attacking without a word like last time we met, but only barely. What did she come to…? What does she want to make me do? What did she…?"

—What did she do to me? What does she want to make Subaru Natsuki to do in this world?

"If you want to know the answer…then ask her yourself."

"—!"

Minerva interrupted Subaru's thoughts with a voice that was mixed with both irritation and a sense of grief. Standing at Jealousy's side, she kept her blue eyes wide open, which were brimming with tears as she glared at Subaru.

"I don't want to hear your lame excuses. This girl came here to meet you. Speak to her directly… If you can't manage that, then you aren't the man we thought you are!"

"Aren't the man you…? The hell are you going on about?! Who asked you to pass judgment on me?! I'm not about to just roll over and do whatever you want!"

"If you aren't going to talk to her, *sigh*…then what would you rather do, *phew*."

Lying on her side, Sekhmet suddenly tossed a question toward the emotional Subaru. Not moving from the slovenly posture that was worthy of her title, Sloth turned her pale face until she was looking directly at Subaru's reddened one.

"As you can see, *sigh*. We are in a stalemate, *phew*. At this point, the key, *sigh*…literally rests in your hands, *phew*. For better or for worse, that is, *sigh*."

Subaru could feel on his skin how Sekhmet's words drew the gazes of all the

Witches to him.

Everything had been entrusted to Subaru Natsuki, the weakest, most foolish, and shallowest among them.

The relationship between Jealousy and the other six Witches was just as they had told him. The Witches kept one another in check, while Jealousy's attention was focused on Subaru alone.

"Echidna, you don't have any intention of letting me out of here, do you?"

"It is meaningless to neglect this situation, after all. I am a maiden suffering from a broken heart after a certain someone cruelly dumped me. At the very least, I want to see what you will choose in your current position. If I dared to wish for more, I would be very gratified to see you cruelly dump another girl."

"You really are a Witch…"

After hearing that malicious reply, Subaru closed his eyes, exhaling slightly. Then he steeled himself and slowly began approaching Jealousy, the Witch shrouded in shadow.

"…Took you long enough to decide."

What sounded like an insult slipped out of Minerva as she took a step away from Jealousy's side. With this, there was no one left to intrude between Subaru and Jealousy. The two faced off against each other, close enough to touch.

"___"

Though they were but a few short yards apart, Subaru felt the pressure increasing with every step. Even looking directly at her like this, he could see nothing of her face, hidden as it was behind a veil of darkness. This was not because the shadow was so thick that it obscured everything from sight. His primal instincts had chosen to not see.

"Everyone would prefer to avert their eyes from their most unsightly delusions."

"___"

"If you cannot see her face, the issue lies within your own mind."

From somewhere behind him, someone gave welcome advice that cleared some of his doubts. He wanted to suck his teeth, but he resisted the impulse. More importantly, Subaru didn't have enough composure to bother with Echidna.

Whether it was Satella or Jealousy before him, he could not take his eyes away from either. If his gaze wandered for even a split second, there was no telling what might happen that very—

"—Ah."

Suddenly, Subaru found two hands being offered to him. His throat froze over.

Subaru had been on guard, not taking his eyes off Jealousy for even a single second. And yet, in an instant, all his efforts were for nothing. It wasn't that he failed to see. He saw her move from start to finish.

It was simply that when Jealousy raised her hands toward him, all he could do was watch in silence.

"Seriously…what's with you? What do you want me to do…?"

Subaru shook his head from side to side, refusing the outstretched hands. Seeing Jealousy's actions and knowing that she was standing right there in front of him made Subaru feel something hot inside his chest.

It would have been easier if what he felt was hatred or disgust. But this was something else.

What Subaru Natsuki's soul felt was *relief* when he looked at the Witch of Jealousy.

"——i"

"——Wha?"

Subaru was mostly occupied by the chaos that gripped heart. That explained his delayed reaction to the faint sound that reached his eardrums. His comprehension was delayed as well. It took him a moment to realize that it was Jealousy who had made that sound.

Veiled by shadow, Subaru was unable to see Jealousy's expression as both her

hands still reached toward him, as if she was slowly attempting to convey something to him.

Swallowing hard, Subaru waited for her. Finally, the Witch of Jealousy spoke:

“—I have always, always loved you. You, and you alone.”

2

The instant he heard that confession of love, an indescribable impact shot through Subaru’s whole body.

From the crown of his head to the tips of his toes, he felt like a bolt of lightning had passed through him.

Every hair on his body was standing up, and every pore was open. All the blood coursing through his body seemed to be boiling and steaming. His chest beat so loud and hard that it hurt. Subaru breathed unevenly as he backed away.

Subaru knew: He could not stay here.

If he didn’t leave, her breath would reach him. Her fingers would touch him.

Instinctively, Subaru understood that if he did not flee to a safe place, he would be swept away by “love.”

“Stop it…”

“I love you.”

“Please stop…”

“I have always loved you, and only you, with all my heart.”

“I told you to stop, damn it—!!”

With a hoarse voice, he spurned her. Still, the fire in Subaru’s chest didn’t abate at all.

His mind rejected her, but his soul found her a source of comfort. This inconsistency set Subaru’s heart aflame as he wrestled against the contradiction within himself.

If he didn’t do so, he was absolutely certain that the very core of his being would become totally warped.

The very first ray of light Subaru Natsuki had found in this world was his love for Emilia.

Summoned to a foreign place with no one to depend on, she was the one who reached out to him in his time of crisis. How much had her existence been his salvation? During the dark days when he died over and over again, his feelings only grew as his soul cried out for her.

He could no longer say that his feelings for Emilia were the only reason he continued forging ahead. Subaru had gained a great many things since his arrival. He had met many people whom he now cared for deeply.

However, the Witch of Jealousy’s compulsion was so powerful that it rivaled all those emotions put together.

The conversations and warm touches he had shared, the time he had spent with others, the many bonds he had forged—all the love contained within these moments were in danger of being stripped from him despite the fact that there was nothing real between him and this Witch.

If this wasn’t the definition of repulsive, then what else could it be?

“You’re insane…you and Echidna both! This place…it’s filled with people who make no sense! I’ve had it! I’m done, damn it!!”

Subaru scattered angry shouts with a frenzied face, making his refusal as clear as possible.

He didn’t want to be by Jealousy’s side, in front of Echidna, or stay in the company of the other Witches for a single second longer. Subaru had countless other things he ought to be doing. There was nothing he needed here.

—This is a waste of time. I want to get out of here, right now. Please, release me…

“I won’t take help from any of you! I’ll deal with all the problems outside by myself. That’s fine, isn’t it?! That’s what I should’ve done from the start!”

“And then? You’ll die again, repeat the cycle, and make everyone cry time

after time? Then you'll excuse it by saying their tears are an unavoidable sacrifice? Wow, how admirable of you."

When Subaru bid them farewell, Minerva applauded him with a sour look on her face. Subaru turned his bloodshot eyes toward her, yelling "So what?!" and flaring his nostrils as he glared at Minerva.

"What does it have to with you? You got a problem with Return by Death? The pain, the suffering, the trauma—those are all my problem and no one else's, damn it. Either way, it's none of your business."

"Must be nice to say you're resigned to pain and suffering. No matter what the people watching you think, you can keep making excuses by saying you're the one who has it toughest."

"What did you say…?!"

"If your suffering is the most obvious, no one around you is allowed to say a word. You're the one suffering the worst, after all…so the weak voices around you just stay silent. Of course they do."

As Minerva spoke, the tone of her voice steadily grew stronger and angrier. Subaru could not remain silent.

"Are you—Are you trying to say I'm drowning in some self-made tragedy just to shut up everyone around me?! That I'm only at a dead end right now because I want to star in my own tragic drama?!"

"That's not really what I'm getting at. This *it's fine if I'm the one who's hurting the most* idea is low and unfair. I think Echidna's a blackhearted schemer, too, and I know exactly how underhanded she can be…but I think you're twisted in a way that's creepier than any Witch."

"___"

"More than anything, as someone who hits everything that's hurt to heal it, your way of living isn't just the direct opposite of mine—it makes you my natural enemy. Something like that is just too cruel for her."

After airing all her grievances and slamming them against Subaru's feelings, Minerva finally looked toward Jealousy.

Jealousy had gone silent ever since Subaru shouted at her, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Minerva, or showing any sign of reacting to the conversation at all. The faint tears in Minerva's eyes told Subaru that she found it a lonely sight. —But that didn't matter to him at all.

"Creepy…? Cruel…?"

Subaru bent forward, his shoulders trembling. The trembling gradually grew stronger until finally, Subaru lifted up his face and laughed. It was so overwhelmingly stupid, he couldn't help but laugh.

"The hell is that supposed mean? Creepy or not, why do you think I decided to do things this way? How do you think I ended up becoming 'twisted'? The way I see it, my methods and my way of thinking are just a natural result of what I've been through. Am I wrong?"

"___"

"You! *You* made me like this, goddamnit!!"

Subaru shouted his anger at Jealousy, who seemed to stand there in silence to escape all responsibility.

Through accepting and using Return by Death, Subaru had overcome many challenges. The despair he tasted from embracing death again and again was carved into his soul. That was how Subaru had gotten this far.

—This was the road of scars that had led Subaru Natsuki to his current way of thinking.

"The pain, the suffering! All that should be for me! If I'm the only one who gets hurt, that's better for everyone, ain't it?! No matter how hard it gets, I'll just clench my teeth and bear it… That way, no one else has to go through what I do! As long as no one but me gets torn up from start to finish…well, what the hell's wrong with that?!"

"Shouldering everything by yourself without saying a word to anyone else… It's as if you think no one besides you is capable of doing anything."

"If I didn't do anything, what would have changed? Wouldn't we just end up with horrible futures? If not me, then who?! Who else could've gotten this

far?!”

Through trial and error by repeatedly using Return by Death, Subaru had discovered the optimal path.

It was just like Echidna had said. He wasn’t thrilled to agree with the sweet whisperings of the Witch who was taking advantage of his resolve to fulfill her own selfish desires, but he could still stay the course regardless.

If a scarred Subaru could find a path to a future where no one else had to get hurt, then—

“Earlier, I said I can’t understand you and that I’m sick of all this. Sorry about that. Yeah, I’m sorry. I don’t take even one bit of it back, but it’s true I’m grateful to you, too. It was real shitty of me to forget that in the moment.”

“___”

“I’m grateful to you for one thing and one thing only. Thanks…for giving me Return by Death. That’s all I’m thankful for. Without that, I wouldn’t have been able to protect a fly. I’ll keep relying on this power from here on out as well. So for that alone, I’m thanking you.”

He was determined to continue making progress through trial and error. The option of running away had disappeared long ago.

—Ever since the moment he’d grasped a certain girl’s hands and asked her to run away together, only to be rejected.

Running was not an option. His only choice was to keep fighting. That was what he’d sworn to do. She expected that from Subaru, too. She trusted that Subaru wouldn’t give, wouldn’t run away.

She trusted that Subaru was a man who could climb back onto his feet. If he couldn’t do that, he’d never be able to face her again.

“That’s why I’m thanking you only for the power you gave me. Even a guy like me with no redeeming features can bust through a hopeless dead end like…”

“—Don’t.”

“A dead end…like…”

With one phrase, Jealousy stopped Subaru in his tracks, keeping him from venting the dark emotions dominating the inside of his chest.

That faint, whisper-like murmur dulled his momentum. His cheeks hardening, Subaru breathed hard as he blinked.

What did she say to him just then? After a momentary, silent pause, Jealousy spoke to Subaru.

“—Don’t cry. Don’t hurt yourself. Don’t suffer. Don’t…make such a sad face.”

Jealousy pleaded with Subaru, as if urging him or maybe even praying.

Her words clouded the fierce emotions in Subaru’s heart; part of it was anger, part of it was surprise, and the rest was a mix of various emotions that made no sense whatsoever.

“Wh-why are…you saying…”

His throat caught in shock. He didn’t know how he should respond. All he could do was stare at Jealousy, bewildered…

Subaru was already shaken, but Jealousy was not done yet.

“Love, please.”

“I-in the end, that’s what it’s all about…? You twist my feelings, then tell me to love you? Who’d love someone like…”

“—No.”

When Subaru tried to reject her through his trembling, Jealousy engaged him in conversation for the first time. Even then, he could not see her face. However, in his soul, he knew what expression Jealousy was making as she gazed at him from the other side of that curtain of darkness.

He knew what face Jealousy—no, Satella—was looking at him with at that very moment.

“—Love yourself more.”

—She was surely gazing at him with a look of affection.

Even though the meaning of her words had already permeated Subaru’s brain, it still took a fair bit for them to register. The moment understanding

spread through his mind, Subaru's heart was overwhelmed by a wave of indescribable sensations.

"What the hell…are you even saying?"

"Don't hurt yourself. Don't be sorry. Take…better care of yourself."

"Shit, you're the one who gave me Return by Death. You're the one who gave me this power that lets me move forward, damn it!"

"—I love you. That's why…I want you to love and protect yourself."

"If you take away the way I cope, the way I defend myself, then what the hell do I have left?!"

Rejecting Satella's whispers of inexhaustible love, Subaru shouted, pressing his hand hard against his own chest.

"You know, don't you?! I don't have any power! No smarts or special skills, either! I don't have a single advantage of my own! I don't have anything but the Return by Death ability you gave me! That's why the only thing I can pay with is my own life!"

"Don't be sad."

"If I'm hurt more than other people, if I see more things than other people, if I can run around protecting everyone, then no one but me has to go through this awful stuff! That's all I want!"

"Please don't cry."

"You don't really care what happens to me, do you?! Whatever happens to a guy like me, no one's gonna shed a tear! No matter how beat-up I get, if everyone can reach the future safe and sound, then that's…!"

After all, if Subaru didn't stay on the front line, continuing to be hurt like that —

"If I can get to tomorrow without losing anyone, that's…"

—There was a chance he might lose someone in a way he could never undo.

"…Rem's…gone."

"___"

“It never would’ve happened if…if I was smarter, if I had any power, if I’d cared less for myself, if only I’d laid my life on the line in the first place…”

The sense of loss and despair from that time still weighed heavily on Subaru Natsuki.

That was why Subaru chose to rely on no one but himself while continuing to fight his painful battles alone. If choosing to rely on someone else or seeking out aid meant he would lose another person dear to him, then—

“If I don’t believe that…if I don’t believe that there has to be a way to make this work…”

If he could master how to use it, Subaru wouldn’t have to lose anything.

He could solve everything with Return by Death.

If he lost faith in that idea, if he stopped telling himself his suffering was necessary and he couldn’t convince himself anymore, then how could he ever confront that despair again…?

“I…! I don’t wanna lose anyone else like how I lost Rem—!!”

Clutching his head, Subaru screamed in denial of anything and everything beyond himself.

He realized that at some point, he’d slumped to the ground. With Satella right before his eyes, he was cowering inside his shell, shutting out her soft, tiny whispers.

She was poison. A deadly substance. Satella’s very existence was like a sweet venom that melted Subaru’s hardened heart. As it melted, frigid despair seeped into the cracks that had opened up, dredging up the crushing loss he felt that day.

“You’re not a child, are you?”

Out of the blue, he heard a voice murmur.

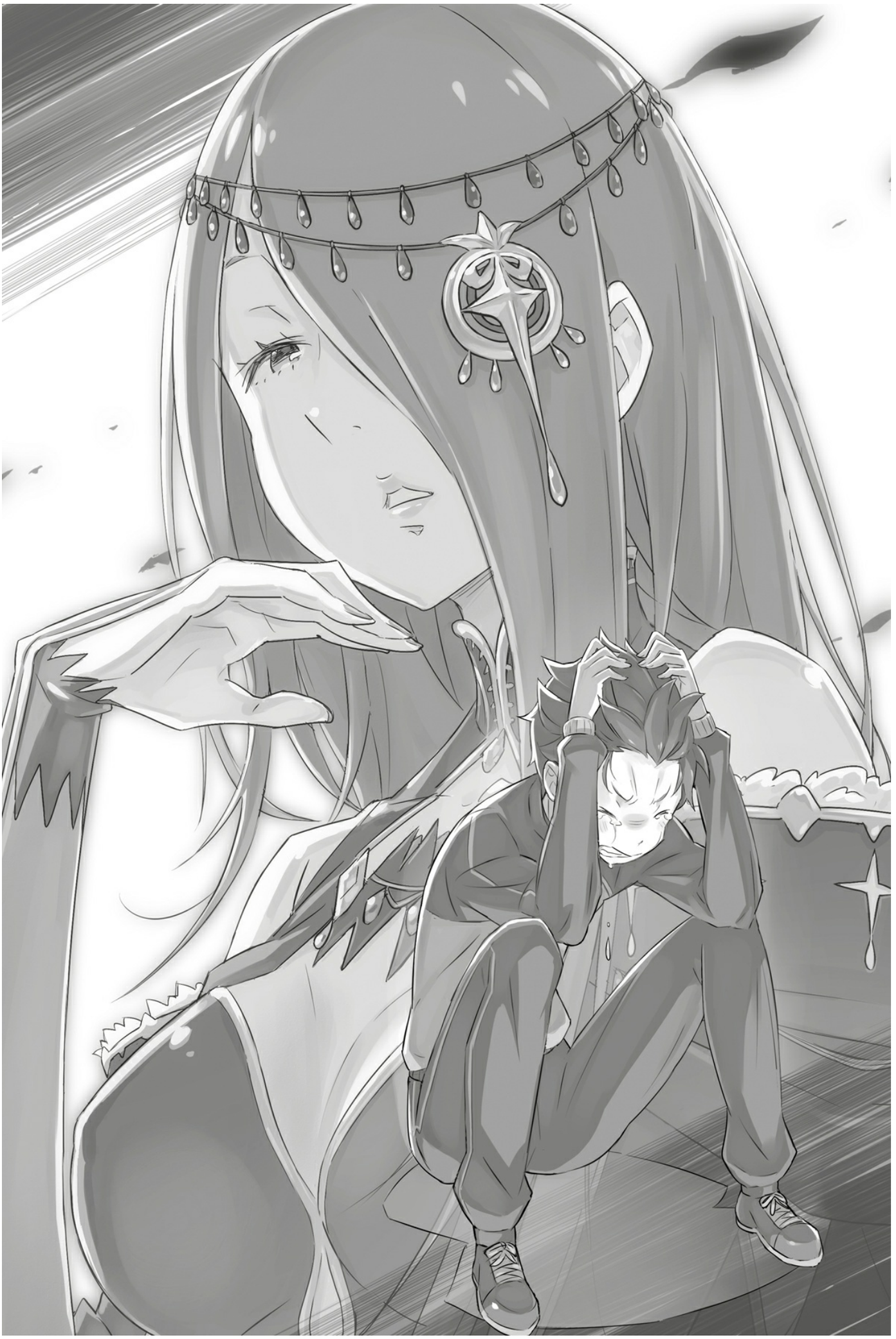
As Subaru tearfully shouted while stubbornly clinging to the conclusion he’d reached all alone, one of the Witches who had been silent so far looked directly at Subaru as she muttered, shaking her head in disapproval.

“Crying, mewling, throwing a tantrum, taking on everything by yourself… that’s just like…”

“___”

“…a sad, lonely child, no?”

With a pitying voice, Sekhmet passed judgment on Subaru. Not one of the wordless Witches present uttered a word of denial. Everything she had said rung true.



In this moment, Subaru was nothing but a small, frail child. It was too painful to even watch.

“—Baru, are you crying…?”

As he remained on his knees, Subaru abruptly felt his head being enveloped by something soft. Through his teary vision, he saw Typhon, the olive-skinned little girl who governed Pride.

Standing at his side, the little girl was gently embracing Subaru’s head. Then, without moving from her spot—

“It’s so sad seeing you cry like this… Who’s the one who made you cry?”

Pitying Subaru, Pride surveyed the Witches gathered at the tea party with her red eyes. He sensed that the dangerous look in her gaze was slowly but surely causing the strained, tenuous equilibrium between the Witches to crumble.

“Was it Tella? Daffy? Milla? Sigh? Or was it Nerva who…well, I guess probably not. Then was it Dona who did something bad to you again? Who was bad?”

“Wh-why did you take me off the list right away? Even I can h-h-hurt someone, you know.”

“Your face goes pale just from imagining it. You’re not capable. More importantly, why was I the only one who came out as a firm suspect, I wonder? It makes me want to meet the parents who raised you and question them in great detail…”

“Because that is a daily affair for you, *sigh*.”

Typhon vigilantly watched the Witches as they reacted. She was eager to root out the “bad person who made Subaru cry.” The fact that the suspects were her fellow Witches was no reason for them to be exempt from her punishment.

Still, these women all possessed supernatural powers that could destroy whole nations or perhaps even the entire world itself. With all of them gathered in the same place at the same time and ready to lash out at the slightest provocation, this tea party was more dangerous than playing with matches next to a powder keg.

Pride, clutching the head of the crying boy, was keen on punishing whoever

had sinned.

Wrath, siding with her own murderer, was adamant on making sure the quiet Witch's feelings were heard.

Sloth, keeping an eye on everyone equally, was lazily waiting to instantly smash whoever would make the first move.

Gluttony, showing no interest in the changing circumstances, was craving to take advantage of everything going on to satisfy her hunger.

Lust, maintaining her neutrality, was clutching at her own head as if to protect herself alone.

Greed, with a faint trace of hatred remaining in her glimmering eyes, was inquisitively watching for any shifts in the balance of power.

And finally, the Witch called Satella, who was apparently not the Witch of Jealousy—

"—I…love you. Because you…gave me light. Because you took my hand, and you taught me about the world outside. Because…when I trembled on lonely nights, you never stopped holding my hand. Because when I felt lonely, you kissed me and said that I wasn't alone. You gave me so many things… That's why I love you. Because you…you gave me everything."

She showed no intention of cutting short her whispers of love for the kneeling Subaru, who didn't seem to register anything she said.

He couldn't understand. He didn't get any of it. He'd never met Satella before, nor had he ever exchanged words with her. Everything she was saying had to be the product of her delusions. She wasn't any different than Petelgeuse, another person who had gone mad with love.

All that should have been true. And yet, Subaru Natsuki knew.

"What the hell…? What's this…inside me? I don't want any of these feelings. Don't…tie me to memories I don't have… How could… How could I…for someone like you…?!"

I hate you is what he wanted to add.

The word *hate* did not truly suffice. He detested this person. He didn't feel a

single shred of good will toward her. If she was going to force such self-centered feelings of love onto him, he might as well see what kind of face she was making. It would be something to behold, no doubt.

—How can you do this to her…?

"—!"

Having reached the pinnacle of a supposedly impossible contradiction, Subaru's mind went blank. The next moment, Subaru "addressed" the confusion. There could be no more direct way to do so.

"…Baru?"

It was Typhon, touching Subaru, who was the first to notice the change. The little girl's eyes went wide as she realized that strength had drained from Subaru even as he remained kneeling within her arms. She immediately noticed something else.

A large quantity of blood was dripping from his mouth. Subaru had bit his tongue.

"—Ahh, so this is another option you have, Subaru Natsuki."

As the various Witches reacted to his decision, Echidna was the only one whose cheeks slackened in joy.

"—Gh, puh."

This was Echidna's castle of dreams. Subaru's real body wasn't here. Accordingly, dying in this place was a death of the mind, which ran the risk of leaving his body an empty husk.

Even after considering the possibility, Subaru tried to end it nonetheless. Death was Subaru's only hope—

"You…absolute idiot—!!"

The moment Minerva noticed Subaru trying to take his own life, her face reddened as she flew into action. She raised her fist, brimming with the power of healing, and prepared to slam it into Subaru. But before she could, Typhon stood in her way.

The young Witch spread both arms wide, shielding Subaru behind her as much as her little body could.

“Baru chose this himself! Don’t get in his way, Nerva!”

“Hurting yourself, killing yourself, hurting others, killing others—I won’t allow any of it! Mental suffering is beyond me! If I can’t see it, there’s no way for me to know when someone’s hurt! So that’s why instead, I never ignore any wounds I can see, even it means destroying the world!!”

With one determined step forward, which left a crater in the hill, Minerva slammed her fist into Typhon’s face.

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say it hit like a cannonball that could crush whole boulders. However, the instant her fist came into contact with a living thing, the force of her blow changed from being destructive to healing—and so, only the momentum of the impact remained.

With an explosive roar, Minerva’s strike sent the young Witch’s childlike body flying. However, while she had managed to overcome the obstacle, it was not just Typhon who’d taken damage.

The right arm Minerva had swung with cracked like a shattered glass window. The Witch of Pride had deemed her actions evil; this was the result of being touched by her judgment.

The pain of having lost her arm made Minerva turn her face up toward the sky, opening her mouth wide in—

“—Piece of caaaaake—!!”

—what was decidedly not a scream of pain. The Witch of Wrath was so sensitive to the suffering of others that she put her own aside no matter what. Her calling Subaru’s methods twisted while stubbornly adhering to her own extreme ideals was truly the pot calling the kettle black.

“Anyway! With this, I’ll…!”

“*Sigh*…the next one to interfere…is me.”

An instant later, a blow that came from straight above knocked Minerva off the hill.

After her entire body was forced into the ground, Minerva left a human-shaped indentation on the grassy plain. Lifting up her head, she looked toward Sekhmet with a face marred with rage and shouted:

“Don’t interfere, Sekhmet!!”

“I can do no such thing, *phew*. Emotionally, I am on the boy’s side, *sigh*. You could probably say I’m also on Typhon’s side, *phew*. So you see, I have no reason not to interfere, *sigh*.”

Faced with Sekhmet’s declaration of opposition, Minerva resentfully bit her lip and scanned the area. Unfortunately for her, Daphne and Carmilla were maintaining their neutrality in this dispute, while Echidna was nothing but a detached observer awaiting the results. And Satella was—

“Agh, aghhh…”

Subaru continued heaving up terrible amounts of blood as the Witch knelt in her black dress, her voice shaking as she spoke to him.

The frothy blood pouring from the boy’s torn tongue was blocking his throat. Subaru was drowning in his own blood as he caught sight of Satella.

Finally, I’ll be free, he thought. But the moment he noticed her grieving, his relief evaporated like ephemeral mist.

“Why haven’t you realized…? That somewhere among all the things you wish to save, shouldn’t there be a spot for you, too…?”

Why did she think about Subaru that way?

Just how much had Subaru soothed her heart during those delusions she must’ve had?

“Just like many other people, fate has led you to many dead ends. But just because you have the chance to change those… Why can’t you see…that you’re someone who deserves to be saved, too…?”

There had to be…some mistake.

Subaru was an unredeemable person, unable to take care of even the things that were within his reach. He couldn’t even save just the people he wanted to save. He couldn’t break free from his inadequacy, his immaturity.

Hadn’t he sworn to change? To stop being such a fool?

Hadn’t he decided to act cool?

The part of him that was weak and the part of him that didn’t want to be weak anymore warred inside him.

He’d made a vow—a vow to the girl who had chosen him to be her hero.

He could not go back on that vow. He had to challenge death, to desire death, to face death head-on.

—If she knew of this, would she be happy? Would she be sad?

—What would she think of Subaru, who she’d wished to be her hero?

He couldn’t think about it. He couldn’t know about it. This was a dangerous line of thought.

Subaru Natsuki was fine with that. He did not think of himself as a person anyone would miss.

He was not a human being with that kind of worth. Subaru’s life was an expendable commodity. And so, like any other resource, all he needed to do was use it, and use it as much as necessary to make sure he reached the end.

It was simple. In order to gain something valuable, something worthless would be exhausted. It was only natural. The decision was so obvious, anyone would do the same, wouldn’t they? All Subaru had was his life.

He would save the lives of precious people who needed to be saved, lives that would never return.

If he could manage that at least, Subaru could—

“What happened in the second Trial…? What did you see…?”

Trial. —Trial. Trial, “Trial.” Trialtrialtrial, Trialtrialtrialtrial, Trial—?

Shock and insufficient oxygen had severely dulled his mind.

His vision was finally becoming indistinct, and the world began to flash red. White noise like television static filled his thoughts. Subaru hazily considered that the end was near.

The end would finally come.

With this, how many times would he have greeted death? It was annoying to count, but that was fine.

Sooner or later, he would confront death so many times that he'd be tired of counting anyway.

He didn't think the human mind could withstand remembering the number of deaths it had experienced.

He readied his heart into steel. A heart of steel that would not be swayed by anything—

Finally, Subaru's consciousness slowly, gently melted into the darkness—

"—I've got high hopes for you, son."

There was…a sound.

From somewhere on the other side of the white noise, from the chaotically reflecting noises, he heard…something very clear.

"—Come back soon."

There it was again.

He heard a different sound. But this resonated in his chest in the same way.

"—I…wanted to call you my friend."

A different sound, a sound that carried another feeling.

The sounds were far from calming. But still, they were comforting.

"Why…why?!! Why, Subaru… How could you do this so easily…!"

A different sound again.

The sound of parting filled his chest with a sense of desolation and something resembling longing, a feeling that made him want to say he was sorry.

"I knew that…at the very least, you weren't That Person…but…"

A new sound made his chest tighten.

It was impossible to remain detached and unemotional. This was a tearful

sound. It was the sound of someone who he shouldn't make cry. Who he had to protect. Who he had to save. Sound. Sound. Sound.

"Please show me your good parts, Subaru."

Reacting to the sound, a kind of *thump* rang out.

The inside of his body grew hot. A sense of duty stirred within him. That sound had always supported him.

And then—

"Thank you, Subaru."

There was…a sound.

"—Thank you…for helping me."

—A sound that heralded the beginning of…everything.

3

He wondered if they would cry.

Subaru wondered if the people important to him would be sad about his death.

In the world he would leave through selfishly experiencing death, would the irreplaceable people he left behind miss him? Would they be sad at his passing?

As Subaru repeated Return by Death, would they, too, be chagrined?

There were people who he thought of as precious, who he believed he had to protect, who he yearned to save.

—Did he have enough worth to make these previous people miss him?

Is it fine to be that conceited?

Do precious people think of a guy like me…as a precious existence?

Is it all right for me to believe that?

To believe I'm needed by the people I want to protect, enough that they want to protect even a guy like me?

Is it forgivable to even wish for it?

To wish that even a guy like me is worth enough that people would cry if they lost me, that they'd reach a hand out because they want to save me?

—Is it all right for me to even think it?

To think I don't wanna die.

To think I don't want to give up, to say this is the only way.

To think I don't want to become the cornerstone that protects the future of the people precious to me, and then disappear.

To think I want to be with those precious people in the future I've protected, together.

Is it all right to think like that?

Do I have that kind of worth?

If I really do—

"I don't…wanna die…"

A clump of blood made a sound as it fell. There was a sound of air leaking out, and it brought along a different sound.

His breathing eased. His consciousness was returning. His hazy vision had begun to return, and with it, color returned to the world.

And then—

"I knew that's how you really felt all along…you jerk!!"

…As he tenaciously crawled, the face of Wrath came into focus, right as she healed him with a headbutt.

4

Subaru coughed, spitting out clumps of blood. He rolled onto his back, faceup as he looked at the sky. He made repeated, ragged breaths, earnestly gasping in search of oxygen, the fuel needed for life.

His heart had no time to feel shame at how lowly and pathetic he looked as

he clung to life. Just…

“Am I…?”

“___”

“Am I…worthy of living…? Me, who can’t die…do I have…any value outside of dying…?”

Through Return by Death, he had saved people he held dear from horrific fates.

Subaru Natsuki had believed his only value was in the results he had obtained at the cost of his life.

But was it right to think that this was not so?

“Can I think that…a human being like me has value outside of Return by Death…? Is it all right for me to think that…the people I care for…care for me, too…?”

“…I wouldn’t know any such thing.”

Minerva gave Subaru’s frail question that very curt reply.

She was in a terrible state. Her arm was shattered, and there were bruises from blunt trauma all over her body. But she calmly rose to her feet, gritted her teeth at those wounds, and regenerated herself. Doing this, the Witch of Wrath stood solidly on her own two feet, crossing her arms as she looked down at Subaru. And then—

“Don’t ask me what worth you have. But that girl wants you to live so much… plus, you saw in the second Trial yourself, didn’t you?”

“…But the second Trial showed me the mistakes, the sins I committed…”

“What are you, an idiot? That wasn’t to make you take responsibility for worlds gone wrong. That was to show you just how sad people got because of the results of your mistakes. —That’s your answer right there, isn’t it?”

“*—hh*.”

They returned to the back of his mind. He remembered.

He remembered crying voices. He remembered voices clenched in regret. He

remembered strong voices sending him off. He remembered all the people sending him off so kindly. He remembered whispers of love from those who'd believed in him. He remembered the genesis, the trigger of his struggle against fate.

He remembered a life that supposedly had nothing awaiting him.

Subaru remembered he'd been invited into that world with nothing, with the things he was supposed to have falling from his fingertips.

To prove that someone like him had worth, he had to keep struggling. And as he kept struggling to protect those precious things he had gained, he thought he had no choice but to walk an even lonelier path.

I'd thought to myself, it's all others giving unto me. Is it all right for me to think it's not so?

—People will cry for my sake?

—People will lament their powerlessness for my sake?

—People wish to see the future with me, together?

—Precious people will give me the privilege of standing and smiling at their side?

Surely it was impossible for someone stubbornly walking a lonely path to the very end, as Subaru had been doing, to receive such a privilege.

With a heart of steel—a mental state that swayed before nothing—he was disconnected from the softness that would've allowed him to smile.

Then was it all right to believe?

That the choice to whittle away his own heart, deciding it was the price he had to pay for the future of those precious to him…

That the choice to desperately struggle to protect his own heart, thus becoming unable to walk his chosen path…

To believe that neither need be taken, and that there was another, greedier choice?

—Was it all right to believe and to want it?

“—I permit it.”

These were Subaru’s thoughts, thoughts he had in no way spoken aloud. And yet, there was a reply to those thoughts.

Still flat on the ground and faceup, he let his head tumble sideways. Over where Minerva was standing still, someone was kneeling on the grassy field. Her face was drenched with tears, but still she smiled.

Even then, Subaru could not see this face, which was covered by shadow. Obstructed by that curtain of darkness, he could not see the expression turned toward him. And yet, he knew she was smiling.

“I was saved by you. That is why I permit that you can be saved. And it is my hope to be saved by you.”

Satella’s words, her voice, and her smile permeated the cracks in his heart.

Subaru covered his face with his hands. Tears flowed. Sobs spilled out. He continued to hide his weeping face.

That moment, he didn’t want anyone, especially her, to see him like that—for the sake of his meager stubbornness.

“…I was surprised that Minerva broke through Typhon and Sekhmet’s obstruction, but I find this action by the two of you even more unexpected.”

Echidna made that small comment, ignoring Subaru as he covered his weeping face. —After all, before Echidna was a spectacle of talons stretching from the black, lacquered coffin to restrain Typhon while the coffin’s mistress, Daphne, faced off against Sekhmet.

Daphne responded to Echidna’s words with a low, throaty laugh. Released from her restraints, she stepped barefoot onto the grassy field, tilting her hips as she stuck out her tongue.

“There’s no mistaaake that Daphne’s compatibility with Ty-Ty is number oooone. The Centipede Coffin has no head for thinking because it’s Daphne’s arms and leeeegs. And its compatibility with Ty-Ty’s Authority is the woooorst.”

“Uuugh! Daffy, out of my way! Nnnn! Uuu!”

“So…*sigh*. That means you are holding me back yourself, *phew*. I’m not

Echidna, but, *sigh*. Why are you doing something like this, *phew*. Unlike Minerva, I do not understand your reason for getting involved, *sigh*."

Glancing as Typhon writhed under the coffin, Sekhmet made another weighty sigh. With Typhon taken hostage, the mightiest of the Witches apparently could not act rashly.

Responding to Sekhmet's words, Daphne shook her head, braids swaying as she said "Nahhhh" and laughed.

"Subaru, you seeee, killed the White Whale, then talked big and told Daphne that the Great Rabbit was neeext. Sooo I figured I wanted him to last at least long enough to chaaaallenge it."

"A most fascinating opinion. Certainly, if he puts his mind to it, he can achieve such a feat. You must understand this as well…but Daphne, do you want the Great Rabbit to be destroyed?"

"Not reaaaally? From the moment they were born from Daphne, those children's empty stomachs and Daphne's empty stomach weren't related anymooore. Where and how it's destroyed makes no differeeeence…but all the same, Daphne might be interested in just how the Great Rabbit, Daphne's own inexhaustible hunger, reaches its eeeend."

You see, she seemed to say, sipping her own drool.

"If Daphne is satisfied at how it eeeends, that would be a happiness unknoooown to Daphne…"

To Daphne, who was tormented by an inexhaustible sense of emptiness, satisfaction was a dream eternally out of reach.

And if the Great Rabbit was a reflection of her own endless hunger, it existed as the incarnation of her cravings. —Not that Daphne herself held any sentimentality toward it.

But Daphne harbored an interest, a curiosity beyond hunger.

To Echidna, this was a most satisfying answer. Smiling at this, Echidna nodded, turning her gaze to the other person to whom she had referred to—the Witch of Lust, standing apart from the group.

“Carmilla, what about you? Do you have a reason like Daphne’s, I wonder?”

“Wh-what are you…trying to say, E-Echidna…?”

“It is very simple. —You were the one who called him back from the brink of death, weren’t you? I do not understand the reason you would go as far as employing your Faceless Bride Authority.”

“___”

“You must have called forth countless bonds for him. I thought you were not fond of him. And so, I wish to ask: Why have you done this?”

When Echidna posed her question, Carmilla hid her mouth under the stole wrapped around her neck, glancing around in search of aid from the Witches around them. She wanted someone other than herself to come rescue her.

However, there was no Witch in that place who would fall under the lovely Carmilla’s charms.

Left with no other choice, Carmilla leaned forward, gazing at Echidna with upturned eyes.

“N-no r-reason, really? I’m satisfied with that boy refusing Echidna’s…mm, advances…so even if others fight, as long as I’m safe, then…just…”

“Just?”

“L-love is important…r-right? You mustn’t hold it in…contempt… You mustn’t. That boy…he thinks he doesn’t want to see it, when ‘love’ is right there, so…I won’t let him…deny what’s there. And besides, I……*really hate not repaying a debt*.”

Her words were halting and plodding. However, only at the end did Carmilla assert herself loud and clear. Receiving this, Echidna dropped her shoulders as she looked at the faces of the various Witches in turn.

“Sekhmet and Typhon tried to honor his will. Minerva, honoring his life, healed him. Daphne cooperated, extending his life so she might watch his battle. Carmilla, who’d kept her back turned to him, used her Authority to make him understand ‘love.’ —Now then, putting each and every person’s various assertions together…all of you were trying to help Subaru Natsuki.”

The Witches stood still, neither affirming nor denying Echidna's assessment.

Sloth, Pride, Wrath, Gluttony, Lust—all stood still.

Seeing the Witches like that, Greed twisted her cheeks in amusement. And then—

"This is indeed most interesting. —Do you not think so?"

She posed this question, casting it toward Subaru, looking haggard as he wobbled to his feet.

"___"

His head was terribly heavy. His entire body was languid as if he had a high fever.

Even then, his tears had not fully dried. Wiping from his cheek what remained of his tears with his sleeve, Subaru, somehow managing to stand on his own two feet, surveyed the faces of Echidna and the other Witches with insipid eyes.

"Really…the hell is wrong with you all…"

It was a question—a natural question for a puny human to have after meeting a Witch.

"Curiosity. Sympathy. Compassion. Sense of duty. Expectation. Hatred… Can't say I really understand or agree with the reasons you had to take my side. I get why they call you all Witches."

"From this insulting attitude, I take it that your willpower has returned?"

"…Dunno."

From the words that had trickled out of him, Echidna winked and bluntly laid out Subaru's mental state.

"I decided there were things I had to do. That hasn't changed, even now. And I'd…resolved that…to accomplish them, this was the only way. But…"

Haltingly, Subaru spoke—not to anyone else in particular, but to himself.

"My resolve…when I came to this place, the Trial…broke it. Just when I thought you were lending me a hand, I found out what you really thought, then even Satella appeared…my head's all a mess. You're all self-serving… I decided

what it is I had to do. But then…”

After coming this far, if he clung to his supposedly expendable life, what then?

After coming this far, if he yearned for life when using it was his only option, what then?

After coming this far, if he internalized that he was loved, what was it he ought to do?

“Now I…don’t know what I should do anymore.”

Logic pleaded that if he did not desire death, he could save nothing via Return by Death.

His memories told him that as death piled higher, the flood of tears from those who had lost Subaru grew greater.

Without his death, someone would be sad, and yet with his death, someone would be sad also.

“—Now, I ask you once more, Subaru Natsuki.”

With Subaru unable to sew his thoughts together, Echidna lowered her voice, speaking solemnly.

When he lifted his face, Echidna was standing right in front of him, slowly nodding.

“If I cooperate with you, the people you absolutely wish to save will arrive at a future in which they are saved. You will have no more reason to worry. In extremis, I will find the answers to the problems that you must directly confront. All you need do is put them into effect, thus climbing over the walls. If you are afraid you must continue to worry, one choice you have is entrusting those worries to me. I will not fault you for this. I will welcome it. Therefore, I now ask you once more.”

“___”

“Since you do not understand what to do, how about letting me lead you by the hand? I promise, I will bring you to the future you desire without fail.”

This spoken, Echidna stretched her hand out to Subaru.

If he took that hand, a pact would be formed. Echidna would cooperate with Subaru in accordance with her words.

It was an idea he'd rejected out of emotion a short while before. But Echidna's proposal hit the mark. If he truly wanted that future, he ought to sacrifice himself in a true sense and use her for that purpose.

He ought to take that hand.

If he did not fear being hurt and resolved to swallow down thoughts of pain and suffering as he continued to fight, he ought to take that hand. Hence—

"Echidna. —I'm afraid of being hurt."

"___"

"I hate pain, suffering, and sadness. I don't want to go through painful times, and I don't want to watch someone other than me go through bad things, either. —I don't want to die."

"___"

"So because it's predicated on sacrifice, I won't—take your hand anymore."

Not even Subaru knew what he might be able to do. But he could not walk the path Echidna had presented. He could not choose it. —For he was aware that he did not want to die.

He, who had thought dying was the only service he could contribute, had learned that there were people who would accept him without him having to die.

—Subaru Natsuki was not a man who had value only in death.

For the people who regretted Subaru's death would not have done so had they seen value in his death. No, what they regretted was—

"I don't know exactly what everyone felt like they lost yet. —But I think I want to find out. If I understand that, I think I can repay everyone in a way besides death."

"…But that is a path of thorns. The shortest way to the future is to choose to

use your life as a tool and cut it open. It would have been better if you offered your heart alone. To reject this, and to preserve both your own heart and someone else's future in your hands at the same time, is most difficult, and moreover—"

Echidna cut off her words with a pause of her breath.

Then the most charming smile he had seen on the Witch to that point came over her.

"—it is *greed*."

Affirming its greed, the Witch of Greed joyfully accepted Subaru's judgment.

Subaru did not understand the thinking of the Witch, who seemed so happy even though he had rejected her proposal. But.

"What is true is that you came and saved me a bunch of times over… Even if in the bottom of your heart, you think of me as nothing more than a lab animal, that much is true."

It was undeniable that for some travails, Echidna's existence had lent support to his heart, allowing him to overcome them.

Therefore, his gratitude for the times when she'd saved his heart was also definite.

"—Foolish, pitiable Garfiel fears the outside world."

"…Eh?"

"What he saw during the first Trial has bound his heart ever since. If you are to get through this situation with your own power, it will surely be necessary to break that curse."

"Echidna?"

"What, just sour grapes from a busybody. I would rather you did not think *All those other Witches are good people deep down, but that Echidna is a bad person to the bitter end* or the like. Whatever your thoughts, I am a girl, and it is the truth that I have some degree of fondness for you."

Speaking rapidly, Echidna gave Subaru's chest a light poke with the hand he

had not taken. Then she turned her back, her white hair swaying as the Witch of Greed put distance between them. During that time, Daphne was using her coffin to cuddle Typhon up to Sekhmet, and Carmilla had returned to the fold as well.

Seeing the Witches like that made Subaru sigh.

“You really are incomprehensible monsters. I don’t think I could ever come to like or understand you.”

These were his true, unvarnished thoughts. The values each Witch harbored never wavered, something that would never sit well with Subaru—no, that was true for any normal person.

Thus Subaru could not understand the Witches, nor could he cooperate with them.

But just like he thought with Echidna, understanding and gratitude were wholly different things.

“Thanks for trying to let me die. Thanks for not letting me die. Thanks for making me hear the voices that are precious to me. —Thanks for all that.”

He bowed his head to the Witches one by one. Pride smiled, Sloth sighed, Lust grimaced in disgust, Gluttony licked her lips in arousal, and Wrath turned her face aside.

Then he turned around—toward Satella, who was kneeling on the hill, and began walking to her.

As Subaru walked over, Satella looked up at him, her breath catching. Her body trembled in fear and unease.

Why was it that someone he had so dreaded filled his chest with such warmth?

What were these emotions he continued to harbor for someone he’d never come in contact with?

It was a mystery with no answer, but this dream castle had already given Subaru too many.

With not a single answer to that question, Subaru opted to keep worrying

about it as he crouched down, extending his hand to the Witch.

Seemingly bewildered, Satella stared at the hand offered to her.

“I…don’t know who you are. I don’t know why you told me you love me…and I don’t know the meaning of…you telling me that I saved you.”

“—Ah.”

“But it’s still a fact that you saved me by giving me Return by Death. It’s also true that I’ve relied on it to get me this far.”

“___”

“To me, Return by Death is…one choice, I suppose?”

“___”

“And you’re telling me…not to depend on it, but to love myself…right?”

“___”

“I’m not saying it’s as cut and dry as that. —But there’s no mistaking that you gave me Return by Death because you don’t want me to die.”

That was why…

“Just like you said, I’m going to…try loving myself, just a little more. I’ll take better care of myself. I don’t know what’ll happen because of it, but that’s fine.”

“…It’s all right?”

“Yeah…compared with death, it ain’t nothin’.”

Responding to Satella’s concerned voice, Subaru made a smile, frail as it was. Seemingly relieved by that expression, Satella took Subaru’s hand.

The next moment, Subaru’s eardrums caught a sound as if the very world had cracked.

The colors of the blue sky and the green, grassy field faded. Subaru Natsuki was being freed from the castle of dreams.

“—I’m returning outside, huh?”

Even then, it was unclear how, and why, he had arrived at that place.

What should he do first when he got back? His mind was in chaos over even an issue like that.

“Don’t worry all by yourself. Do it together, with the people who consider you precious…”

“___”

“Struggle together with the people who you do not wish to die, the people who do not wish to let you die. —And when even that fails, do not forget to fear death when you die.”

“___”

“Do not forget that when you die, it makes people sad—”

The world made a sound like it was breaking.

Satella’s voice grew distant. And yet, it clawed terribly at Subaru’s heart. The palm connecting him to her was hot. He felt a longing that told him he mustn’t take his hand away.

“I…”

He called out to her, but his voice would not come out. His voice could not call her…*Satella*.

If he called her that, he wouldn’t be able to reject her any longer. He would lose to his wanting to accept her. His soul kept on screaming at him, asking how he should deal with that emotion.

The sky was falling. The earth was splitting. Light flooded in, and the scene around them had already completely changed.

All signs of the Witches had vanished, too. The world consisted of Subaru and Satella alone.

There was a vanishing. And then, there was a beginning.

—Still unable to speak, Subaru stared at the Satella right in front of him.

“___”

Suddenly, the curtain of darkness lifted.

The subconscious veil that had hidden from Subaru what he had not wished to see became transparent, making visible what rested across it.

And then, when he saw the face peering at him from below, Subaru drew in his breath.

Looking at Subaru, Satella made her silver hair sway, narrowing her violet eyes. And as tears coursed from the corners of those eyes—

“And someday—you will come to kill me, yes?”

She vanished.

She was gone.

The world was being erased, and he could no longer see even the girl who was right before his eyes.

The only thing that was still certain was the warmth within his palm. And so, Subaru gripped it tight.

“—I will save you. You’ll see.”

That was all he said to the lovely girl whom he could no longer see.



CHAPTER 2

IGNORING THE ODDS

1

—The first sensation he became aware of was something rough rubbing against his cheek.

As he regained consciousness, his entire being was dominated by a sense of extreme languor. His body felt sluggish, as if it was sand coursing through his veins rather than blood.

When he opened his mouth in search of air, his parched lips refused to let go of each other and tore apart. The pain and the taste of blood on the tip of his tongue startled him. His slightly bleary eyes rolled around as he forced open his heavy eyelids.

His vision cleared, and the world gained color—and then, the sight of a pitch-black land dragon leaped into his eyes.

"…Oh, it's you?"

There by his side, heaving rasping breaths and watching him with two narrowed, amber eyes, was Subaru's beloved land dragon, Patlash. She extended her head, continuing to lick the sleepy Subaru in an apparent show of concern.

"So that rough tongue belongs to you, huh… Where…are we…?"

Subaru suspended the touchy-feely wakeup call, rendering Patlash silent. Lying at his favorite dragon's side, Subaru looked around the area, drawing his brows together when he saw he was outside the tomb.

—He remembered the encounter with the Witches that had occurred just prior in the world of dreams.

The condition for being invited to Echidna's tea party was to enter the tomb. According to previous experience, he should have woken up in the stonework room within the tomb.

Instead, Subaru was resting his body against the stone wall at the entrance to the tomb.

"Someone brought me out…? But who…"

"—W-wait! Please wait, dear! Patlash…! Wait a…*huff, huff*… If you run off and I lose track of you…I'll be in such trouble…!"

The question Subaru murmured aloud was interrupted by a pathetic voice echoing through the nighttime forest.

The speaker was out of breath, tripping as he earnestly ran up the stone stairs of the tomb. Then, when he spotted Patlash on the steps above, he was clearly exhausted as well as relieved.

"Ahh, I'm so glad! To think you were in a place like…er, ah? Mr. Natsuki?"

"…You sure are in high spirits on a night like this, Otto. What are you up to? Burglary?"

"I shall return that very same question to you. What are *you* up to? For that matter, you are hardly unrelated to why I am in these dire straits to begin with, Mr. Natsuki."

Otto's shoulders dropped as he addressed Subaru, who was sitting on the ground with his legs spread out. Seeing Otto, Subaru had reflexively joked around like usual, but he got down to business in short order.

"I'm not unrelated? Wait, what happened?"

"I mean our dear Patlash. In fact, Patlash went wild back at the stables. As these are unfamiliar surroundings, I untied her thinking I might take her for a refreshing stroll…and poof! Off she ran."

Otto made a gaze of protest toward her, but the land dragon in question had her face turned away from him, her expression one of lofty indifference.

"…She literally has no eyes for me… At any rate, she rushed out of the stables, and I was nervous that if she ran off entirely, my situation would become grave,

bringing us to the present, you see.”

“So she came right to me, then. Well, well, Patlash. You must be the sort to get lonely quick.”

“It did not appear to be…mere longing for you, Mr. Natsuki. I mean…”

Crossing his arms, Otto narrowed his eyes, suggestively turning them toward Patlash. Subaru followed suit, squinting as he gazed at the land dragon’s scales, which seemed to melt into the night. That was when he realized it.

Patlash’s black scales had wounds that oozed with blood. Surely, the hard scales covering her body could not be easily harmed, and more than that, her injuries looked like they were inflicted internally rather than externally.

—Instantly, the stated rules for entering the tomb rose in the back of Subaru’s mind.

“When someone not qualified enters the tomb, they get rejected…”

As a matter of fact, that rule was the cause of Roswaal’s grave injuries from when he had entered the tomb. There was no mercy for any violators of that edict, and it was effective not only against people, but even against land dragons.

“Don’t tell me you…got all hurt like this to pull me out of there?”

Murmuring, Subaru touched his own shoulder. There were traces of saliva left on his sports jacket. There was dirt on his back and hips from being dragged, too. It was Patlash who had brought Subaru outside.

In spite of her wounds from the penalty for entering the tomb, Subaru’s beloved dragon had brought him out.

“Why’d you do something stupid like…when I woke up, I could’ve just come outside on my…you didn’t need to drag me out and get all hurt like this…”

Unable to keep looking at her seeping wounds, Subaru hung his head. Patlash reached out once more, rubbing the tip of her nose against Subaru. Subaru couldn’t tell what she meant by it.

Unable to exchange words with her, the flow of thoughts and feelings ran only in one direction between them. He was always the one being saved.

“Otto.”

“What is it? If I am in the way, perhaps it would be best if I went somewhere for the…”

“Can you…ask Patlash why she saved me?”

—There was only one way to find out what Patlash truly thought.

Otto’s blessing of language. This power allowed him to converse with birds and animals, both of which could not normally engage in human speech. Surely, with this, it was possible to find out how Patlash felt.

However, faced with Subaru’s request, Otto twisted his lips and put on a disagreeable look.

“Er…to be honest, I cannot wrap my head around it. Mr. Natsuki, are you trying to be funny?”

“…Do I look like I’m trying to make a joke right now?”

“Even in such a sorry state, I feel like Mr. Natsuki of all people might make some sort of unfunny jest, and I must admit that I do hope you are joking. — You truly cannot tell?”

When Otto replied in a low voice, Subaru tried to respond only to be overwhelmed by Otto’s gaze.

Otto was looking at Subaru with an incredulous look, as if he was watching something ridiculous. Subaru felt like he was overlooking something rather big, but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

Seeing Subaru’s confusion, Otto let out an exasperated sigh as he touched his hand to his cheek.

“My blessing is not as omnipotent as you believe it to be, Mr. Natsuki. Mere transmission of thoughts differs from translation, so asking me to bridge the gap in this exchange is asking for the impossible.”

“___”

“Your eyes say to try anyway. Very well…though I wonder if there is a point, really…”

Though his sullen dismay trickled out, Otto grudgingly accepted Subaru's request. Otto gently stroked Patlash's back as she snuggled up to Subaru.

—A high-pitched, raspy breath came out of that very Otto's throat.

Through the power of the blessing of language, he had converted human speech into land dragon speech. Patlash responded to his call, turned her head toward Otto, and emitted a similar, high-pitched call.

Otto responded to this with a high-pitched call, and so it went, back and forth.

"I am finished…but, mm-hmm, it is difficult. How do I translate this into human terms…"

"Don't keep me in suspense. Just tell me, I'm begging you."

"I am not attempting to keep you in…ahh, this really puts me in a bind! Then again, would conveying this message be considered an extremely strange form of kindness?!"

Scratching his head, Otto repeatedly searched his thoughts for words that he would find acceptable. Finally, after noticing Subaru nervously clenching his teeth, he sighed with what felt like an air of resignation.

"It is closest to *Don't make me…say something like that*, I believe."

"…Eh?"

Scratching his cheek with a blush on his face, Otto averted his gaze as Subaru widened his eyes at those words.

Though Subaru waited for him to continue, Otto offered nothing more. Or so it seemed, but Otto raised his eyebrows toward the speechless Subaru.

"I mean, she said *Don't make me…say something like that*. I thought she might say as much…"

"Not making her say…what's that supposed to mean…?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. If I was to add my own personal impression, it'd be with an air of *Do I really need to say it for you to understand?*"

Otto's statement only further perplexed Subaru.

Though he was being asked *Don't you understand?* he really didn't. What was

it, exactly, that Subaru didn't understand, then?

"…Overcome with worry whether a certain person is in peril and unable to hold still, she comes rushing out to mount a rescue regardless of what wounds she may sustain, staying right at his side until he awakens, smiling at him in relief when he opens his eyes—in such a case, be it human or land dragon, I believe the feelings behind those actions are much the same."

"Ah—"

"And even if it wasn't Patlash, you would still get *Don't make me say it*. To not notice when her demeanor demonstrates so much is something beyond being merely dense… I suppose that ignorance is bliss?"

Otto looking exasperated from the very bottom of his heart made Subaru appreciate the depth of his own foolishness.

Next, when he looked at Patlash, who was right by his side, the land dragon stared at Subaru with a gentle gaze, drawing her nose close to rub against his neck once more.

By nature, he stroked the land dragon's head, gently petting her hard, rocklike scales.

"I see…you love me, don't you?"

"___"

"So you're in love with me… I see."

Thump, he felt, as something that'd been caught inside his chest seemed to fall away.

Subaru's acknowledgment brought a neigh out of Patlash, and the strength of her rubbing increased as if she was trying to conceal a blush. The sensation scraped his skin, but when Subaru tried to open his mouth to protest—

"Uh, ah…?"

Abruptly, hot droplets coursed down Subaru's cheeks. —Tears. They were tears.

From somewhere in the very back of his consciousness, something urgently

welled up and came pouring out. He rushed to touch his hands to his cheeks, but he was too late to hide it. Otto gaped right at him.

“M-Mr. Natsuki? Breaking into tears from realizing your land dragon is fond of you is a little…”

“You’re wro…this isn’t…it’s just, the timing is too darn perfect…shit, right when I was having doubts, the answer came flying into my face…!”

—It wasn’t fair. This came at the perfect time. That was Patlash for you. Too crafty, too cunning.

Internally papering things over with such foolish words, Subaru desperately fought to hold back tears.

He recalled how at the Witch’s Tea Party, he had confessed his true desire of not wanting to die. He confessed, too, his greed: His desire to be with the people precious to him was just as strong as his desire to protect them.

And how he yearned to know if the people important to him thought he was something precious to them.

“Who’d have thought you’d be the first one to tell me? —Thanks, Patlash.”

As if to reply to the faithful love trained toward him, Subaru poured his feelings into his palm as he stroked his beloved dragon.

Satisfied with his touch, Patlash lifted her head in a ladylike manner. Moreover, the swaying of her tail showed without a doubt that she was in a good mood.

“Now that you have reaffirmed your bonds with Patlash, are you all right?”

“Yeah, thanks to her. Sorry to cause you a lot of trouble, too… Whaddaya mean ‘all right’?”

“Mentally, but also physically. I can tell just by looking that you entered the tomb. You collapsed when you went in to save Emilia, so what was it this time? It is more than enough to make one worry.”

“So you were worried about me…by any chance, are you in love with me, too?”

“Could you please not say something creepy such as that?! Surely, you are not so unsatisfied with being loved by Patlash that you feel like asking this of all your acquaintances?”

“Some reason I can’t? To be honest, right now, I’d love even one extra message of support and consolation, but…”

“Yes, yes, I am quite happy to see that you have returned to your usual form… I believe that for the sake of my future, I will be supporting you, Mr. Natsuki. Even to the bitter end.”

Shuddering in the face of Subaru’s eccentric advance warning, Otto thrust both hands forward in a visible attempt to stop him. It was so very mercantile of him to use the roundabout phrase *for the sake of my future*.

“But if that precondition should come into question, and I find myself in peril, I shall flee with all available haste. Please keep that in mind.”

It certainly was a heartless statement, but drawing a line was a necessary ritual for tacit consent. Even though he’d said it like that, Otto’s good nature was on full display.

“Yeah, I get it. You’re—”

Subaru, about to give a nod to Otto’s realistic point of view, stopped.

Something felt off. And immediately realizing just what it was, he let out a little “Hah.”

“…What is it?”

“Mm, just remembered something. Yeah, that’s right…”

With Otto giving him a suspicious look, Subaru nodded several times over, lifting his face toward the night sky.

Amid the loop that had begun in that very Sanctuary, Subaru had cooperated with Otto several times over. And during that time, Subaru had many opportunities to observe him. Hence—

“If you find yourself in peril, you’ll flee with all haste…is it right?”

“Yes, but of course. I bear no duty to Mr. Natsuki and others to go quite that

f…”

“You won’t run.”

“—Eh?”

Subaru murmured to Otto, who was trying to lightheartedly adopt the role of a realist. Then, when Otto widened his eyes, Subaru faced him directly as he continued.

“—You won’t leave me and run, Otto.”

This was the man who hadn’t faltered in the face of Garfiel’s threats, who had come to rescue Subaru from imprisonment.

This was the man who had shielded Subaru from a bestial Garfiel, resisting him together with the villagers.

However unfeeling he might act, Subaru knew the truth.

“Otto. —That’s because you’re my friend.”

2

Having received encouragement from Otto and Patlash, Subaru gained a moment of mental respite.

To be blunt, he still couldn’t entirely digest what had happened in the castle of dreams. Even so, he chewed it over bit by bit, using it as fuel to drive himself onward.

“I shall take Patlash back… Goodness, this is really throwing me off my stride.”

Otto had continued to let out little grumbles as he departed, with Patlash somehow looking like a girl dragged off by her hair as they left the tomb. Seeing off the two people (or rather, one person and one steed), Subaru, left behind after claiming to want to feel the nighttime breeze, slowly turned back toward the tomb.

—Same as before, the tomb of the Witch of Greed stood there, illuminated by the pale moonlight.

Parting ways with the Witch who he’d sought to rely on was a deeply painful

matter to Subaru. The words *serious blow* did not quite suffice. But cutting ties with the Witch had been necessary, however heavy a blow. He couldn't pigeonhole her as an "evil" being. However, she was someone with whom he could not see eye to eye.

The same went for Minerva and the other Witches, and so, too, for Satella, aka Jealousy—

"It's fine that she told me to love myself more, but…"

Subaru recalled what she'd told him just before the parting promise he'd made to her, but the words left him at a loss.

"How the heck should I go about relying on the people precious to me…?"

He wondered if that was asking him to be honest with them. Yet, it was none other than Satella herself who had forbidden him from doing this—or rather, if he went by what he had learned in the conversations within the dream, it was the Witch personality that had forbidden Subaru from speaking of Return by Death.

Everyone there had asserted there was a discrepancy between Satella and the Witch of Jealousy. If that was so, then the promise at the very end had been with—

"—I've gotta put that on the back burner for now, damn it."

It was then that Subaru slammed the brakes, keeping his thoughts from coursing in Satella's direction. What he needed was a way to break through this stalemate of a situation, or at the very least, he needed to grab hold of a single strand that would lead him to a way out.

"The trigger at the mansion is based on when I return…in which case, I have to get a handle on the issues in the Sanctuary first. That means the Trial, Garfiel, and Roswaal's book of knowledge, huh…"

Each of the individual issues raised before him were troublesome in and of themselves, but the greatest difficulty was in how closely each related to the others. In particular, he still couldn't forget his shock at how Roswaal's grandiose plans factored in even death.

Roswaal knew of Subaru's Return by Death—or more precisely, he knew Subaru could loop. Knowing that Subaru had the power to turn time back, he sought to employ that for his own objective.

His goal was to make what was written in his book of knowledge a reality. For that, Roswaal made snow fall on the Sanctuary, turning the place into a feeding ground for the demon beast known as the Great Rabbit.

Beyond that, there was the barrier that would not be lifted until the Trial was overcome, preventing the residents of the Sanctuary from evacuating; and Garfiel, whose thinking grew more obstinate with each repetition.

Every time Subaru had looped, he found Garfiel standing in a different position. Once, he had pressed Subaru to take the Trial, displaying a cooperative stance toward resolving the Sanctuary's issues. In hindsight, that had all been an act so as not to convey that he himself was opposed to resolving those problems.

The more Subaru pursued the Sanctuary's liberation, the sterner Garfiel's measures became. It was difficult for Subaru to forget his anger from when Garfiel had bared his fangs toward Otto, Ram, and the people of Earlham Village. But Garfiel had also saved Subaru's life. Accordingly, the discordant sense he felt toward Garfiel's true thoughts had deepened with each new start of the loop.

Having received Echidna's final words of advice, those feelings had grown stronger, and deeply barbed.

"*Foolish, pitiable Garfiel fears the outside world*…was it?"

It was already clear to him that Garfiel must have taken the Trial at some point in the past. As a result, Garfiel had become an Apostle of Greed, gaining command rights over Ryuzu and the other replicas.

If it was his past that made Garfiel fearful of the outside world…if that was the curse that bound him to the Sanctuary—it was an issue that Subaru had thought of once, only to discard it.

He'd told himself it was not necessary to delve too deeply into who Garfiel was as a person. In so doing, he had once again averted his eyes from a pressing

issue in front of him.

“In the end, it really is important to learn, huh? But knowing nothing but that still gets me a failing grade.”

It was not possible to overcome the wall that was Garfiel without knowing his true intent. But even if he could do so, the problems of the Sanctuary’s barrier and Roswaal still remained. And to break through that worst of all combinations —

“—In the end, clearing the tomb to secure our line of retreat is the most pressing business, huh?”

When he put everything in order, he inevitably wound up back at the very beginning. Clearing the tomb was an indispensable condition for resolving the issues of the Sanctuary—the real problem being the number of remaining Trials.

“With the horrible time I had in it, did I end up clearing the second Trial or not…?”

Under the rubric of the event he’d come to know as behold the unknowable present, Subaru arrived at the worlds where he had chosen differently—experiencing what one might call a series of parallel worlds.

—These were glimpses into worlds beyond hell, impaling Subaru with particular cruelty.

After driving Subaru to lamentation with various second guesses and countless regrets, how exactly had the Trial graded him?

“___”

Audibly cracking the bones of his neck, Subaru powerfully exhaled as his footsteps echoed through the corridor in the tomb.

His largest reason for sending Otto and Patlash back ahead of him was so he could do this and check for himself which Trial the tomb would guide him to: the second or the third.

In other words, he was challenging the possibility he might have to behold the unknowable presents once more. The scenes frightened Subaru more than anything in this world, and his mind shuddered at the possibility of seeing them

again.

Even so, he could not ignore them. Forgetting them, or running from them, was out of the question.

He had no choice but to face them. He bore a duty to do so. And to fulfill that duty—

"——Uugh?"

He stepped strongly, his movements in line with his resolve. —But the very next moment, his vision swayed.

"Agh, guh!"

Losing his balance from the sudden dizziness, Subaru bumped into a wall and fell right to the floor. An intense wave of nausea hit him, stirring his brain. Unable to resist it, he got on all fours and vomited onto the floor.

—Alarm bells kept ringing. Ringing. Ringing. Ringing.

"Ugeh…hah, ach, ugh…!"

His thoughts were all tangled. He felt as if a hole had opened in his skull, and an electrode had been thrust into it, frying his brain. No matter how much he vomited, he didn't feel any better; instinctively, Subaru rushed outside, tumbling through the corridor as he did so.

"Wh-what was that just now…?"

Wiping tears from his eyes, Subaru looked back up at the tomb in a daze.

The tomb was unchanged, as was the tranquility in the air. —Aside from the fact that it seemed oddly malevolent.

When he tried to crawl closer to approach the tomb once more, Subaru's limbs were constrained by a painful sense of aversion.

—He was being rejected. That sensation brought him to a different realization, linking the two like a bolt of lightning.

It was a simple explanation. This was what had happened to Patlash's body but a brief time earlier. It simply meant the same rejection that had hurt Roswaal was now hitting Subaru.

A simple thing, but it demonstrated a most crucial fact. Namely that—

“—I’ve…lost the qualification to challenge the tomb? You’re kidding me, that can’t…”

Standing up, Subaru gazed upon the tomb as if trying to reject that conclusion. However, his feet would not take the single step that would lead him inside. He instinctively understood both the tomb’s rejection and his loss of qualification.

—From the back of his mind arose the image of a white-haired Witch clad in a black dress for a funeral.

“Why that malicious little…!”

Certainly, the Witch had posed the question to Subaru on their parting.

She asked him to choose which hand he would take: hers or Satella’s?

And Subaru had chosen Satella. If this was payback for his choice—

“Damn you! Just how much of a rotten personality do you have, Echidna the crappy Witch—!!”

Subaru wrung out an angry shout into the night sky, howling at a Witch who could surely could not hear him.

But however much he yelled, wailed, or raged, it would not change what had happened.

—Subaru Natsuki had lost his qualification to challenge the Trial, and thus, could no longer liberate the Sanctuary.

3

—To Subaru, it was a decision that required courage identical to that for challenging the tomb.

The Trial that thrust his mistakes before him in the worst possible manner, making even his legs recoil in fear. It was enough to make him question whether it wasn’t just his fear that had prevented him from going back into the tomb.

However, that was not in fact the case. Fear had not been the reason why his legs refused to move. And his decision was fueled by the same desire to overcome the deadlock that had made him push past his fear to begin with.

If the possibilities of challenging the tomb and gaining the cooperation of the Witch, had both been exhausted, the remaining choices dwindled to one—

“Visiting so late at night such as thiiiis is an unexpectedly haaaappy thing.”

Lying in bed, speaking these words, and greeting Subaru with a smile in his clown makeup was the man—no, this was the devil Roswaal L. Mathers, a creature harboring plots and an obsession so great that Subaru likened him to a monster more than man.

Propping his back up with a pillow, Roswaal was sitting up, his white-dabbed face illuminated by the flame of a burning candle inside the room, giving rise to a bizarre atmosphere that emphasized his inhumanity.

With that devil before him, Subaru dry swallowed and forced down his nervousness.

—The only choice left for Subaru was to rely upon the Roswaal before him.

However, that didn’t mean he intended to break through every issue facing the Sanctuary together. Given Subaru’s mental attitude, and his ultimate objectives, that was impossible.

Subaru could not forgive Roswaal for slaying Ram and Garfiel with his own hands, nor his sacrificing the villagers. Roswaal was similarly unlikely to abide by Subaru’s way of life when it ill-suited his own objectives.

Accordingly, what began from there was an elaborate ruse between two people whose hearts could absolutely not forgive the other.

“And? You have come out of your way to sneak in at such a late hour. Whaaat is it that you bring? Perhaps some seductive, persuasive phrases that might arouse my iiiinterest?”

“…Well, you’re not wrong that I’m trying to sweet-talk you. There’s something I want to ask you. —Is there a way to slip out of the Sanctuary while ignoring the tomb?”

Faced with Subaru's difficult-to-articulate opening move, Roswaal's smile gained a frosty air to it. He cracked open the side of the lips, which formed that clownish smile, and with his yellow eye, Roswaal beheld Subaru as he spoke:

"Subaru. —Is this the first tiiiime you have asked me this?"

The simple act of asking of that question established they were fully aware exactly where the other stood.

Roswaal knew that Subaru looped. Subaru knew that Roswaal knew. Now that both understood this, it was possible to play the conversation card.

With this in mind, Subaru shrugged his shoulders in a provocative gesture.

"It's the first time I've asked 'this' question. At this point, it's stupid trying to count how many times we've been feeling the other out like this, though."

"Is that…so. I see. From your demeanor…may I take it as meaning that…?"

"Well, who's to say?"

Averting his gaze, Subaru delayed revealing the conclusion Roswaal sought.

Subaru did not let the faint whiff of hope residing in Roswaal's eyes during that exchange escape his notice. Noticing a change that slight was an advantage that Return by Death provided him.

Roswaal, who knew only the fact that looping existed, had no way of understanding what emotions Subaru brought with him from having looped previously. Hence—

"I'm still in the middle of trial and error. Cooperation from you would be a big help, though."

—Even if Subaru pretended to be moving in accordance with Roswaal's will, there was no way for Roswaal to know it was an act.

The book of knowledge in his possession did not account for the finer details of Subaru's actions. He was able to deduce that from Roswaal's statements prior to the assault by the Great Rabbit.

In the end, Roswaal only had the gist of things spelled out for him. In other words, if Subaru played his role perfectly, he ought to be able to deceive

Roswaal and lead him around by the nose. That was certainly a possibility.

“And part of that trial and error involves breaking past the Sanctuary while ignoring the tomb? If so, that is quite timid of you. With the Authority you possess, surely you can challenge it an infinite number of times and overcome any difficulties. To cast that aside midway is an deficiency of resolve, is it noooot?”

“Being flexible is definitely an advantage. Just like you said, I have an infinite number of chances. But what we need now is results, not quibbling about the process…so long as Emilia gets the credit for liberating the Sanctuary, it’s all good, right?”

Forcing a calm, composed look onto his face, Subaru’s nerves frayed as he tried not to let anything slip. His heartbeats were rapid, and the sweat on his back was far from modest, but he had to pull the wool over Roswaal’s eyes no matter what.

He had to give a cruel explanation—for that was how Roswaal wanted Subaru to be.

By putting Emilia first, he was playing the role of the brave knight, faithful to a fault. For her sake, Subaru would choose methods that hurt him in the process—something he imagined would please Roswaal.

“I seeee… Certainly, that is the sort of answer I prefer to heaaar.”

Roswaal’s intimidating gaze had a glint that welcomed Subaru as a kindred soul. Physiological revulsion welled within him at having such a devil with incomprehensible thoughts acknowledge him as a comrade.

Subaru resented the label despite being well aware of how twisted he had to be for Roswaal to think of him that way…

“I am pleased at the change within you. But it is difficult to answer your question. After all, it has been four centuries since the barrier was first deployed. There is no precedent. There is no reason to doubt how it was woven, and when I think of who wove it, it iiis difficult to conceive she might have made such a blunder…”

“So it’s Echidna’s barrier, huh?”

“My, you are already acquainted with her?”

There was no way the faint whiff of envy in that seemingly teasing sentence was his imagination. Roswaal clearly had an obsession with Echidna. But this time, Subaru would make use of that.

“Yeah, of course I am. Just to mention, I’ve already picked up a bunch of things already, like about the Ryuzu Meyer facility in the forest and Garfiel being an Apostle of Greed.”

“Ahaaaa, that is most spleeeendid of you. I am graaaateful this speeds our conversation.”

As Subaru unveiled crucial pieces of information one by one, he could feel Roswaal’s suspicions begin to loosen. *At this rate*— His feelings of haste for success caused a tardy response to the words that followed.

“But if that is so, my doubts grow greater still. Why are you searching for a loophole out of the Sanctuary? Having resolved to act, it is most indecisive to probe for that possibility. —Indeed, your current proposal cannot but make me think…this is you before your resolve is at its zeniiiith.”

“…Well, take it as you will.”

For a single second, his reply to Roswaal’s counterattack stuck in his throat, but Subaru raised a finger and continued.

“As you know, I’ve had plenty of opportunities to earn fame for Emilia. Plus, I have to say, there’s not many people involved with the Sanctuary, so it’s a small-time event. Newsworthy moments, like the White Whale or the Witch Cult, take precedence. —This place holds no value.”

“Therefore, you are searching for a loophole? —I cannot heeeelp but find your answer suspect.”

“Suspect?”

Right when Subaru thought he’d snuck through, Roswaal surprised him, shaking his head from side to side.

“I have not confirmed your Authority with my very own eeeyes. This being the case, I am not obligated to go along with your foolishness. Therefore, we must

draw a line we can mutually accept.”

“An acceptable line, huh?”

“I wish for this to be the liberation of the Sanctuary. Not through a back door, but rather, liberation in a true sense. If you achieve this, my suspicions will be allayed, and you and I shall be coconspirators striving for a common goal…two men working to place Lady Emilia upon the royal throne. A rather profitable relationship, I truuuust?”

This time, Subaru hardened his cheeks as Roswaal’s words cut off any hope of retreat.

His words carried a power to them that was difficult to resist. Even if he was making liberal use of Subaru’s Return by Death, Roswaal was an irreplaceable force in making Emilia’s wish come true.

Roswaal’s patronage was a prerequisite for making Emilia’s dream attainable. To secure the royal throne for her required Subaru and Roswaal both. —He’d jabbed at a very sore spot.

But though the logical argument was a severe blow to him, Subaru had the odd feeling that something was off—as if a different scheme was being hidden behind an opinion that only seemed righteous at first glance.

Subaru probably noticed it because he was attempting to deceive Roswaal with precisely the same logic.

“Something’s bugging me a little…you’re really hung up on liberating the Sanctuary.”

—Almost as if he had a reason for wanting to do so that overshadowed the rest.

Subaru’s statement, containing that implication, made Roswaal’s smile deepen in an even more suspicious manner.

“—!”

It was that smile that made Subaru feel intensely wary toward Roswaal.

In other words, within his chest, there was an instant of clarity rivaling when Roswaal had murdered Ram and Garfiel just prior to being savagely consumed

by the Great Rabbit…a moment when the blackest depths of his obsessed mind, thinking nothing of sacrificing the lives of others, poured out.

“—Why do you think this?”

But it seemed that Roswaal had no intention of opening his own heart at that point in time.

Faced with the return question, Subaru clicked his tongue.

“It’s not very complicated. To be honest, I think your plan doesn’t seem very like you. Of course I’d notice how every word from you from start to finish lists liberating the Sanctuary as a condition.”

“I believe I already explained that. You are to exhaust all efforts for Lady Emilia. I am having you deal with the nearest problem at hand so that you might prove to me that this is your true stance. You take issue with this?”

“I don’t think forbidding every answer besides liberation is very fair. There’s plenty of other proof to be had.”

“We are speaking past each other. Indeed, there is something I wish to ask you insteaaad.”

This time, it was Roswaal who raised a finger, one eye closed as he spoke to the stubborn Subaru.

“You appear quite tiiiimid where it comes to the Trial. It almost feels to me as if you have a reason to not desire the liberation of the Sanctuary.”

“As if I don’t want this place freed! I’d just love to pry that barrier open and drag all the unresolvable problems outside! …But.”

“But?”

He was being carried away by the intensity of the conversation. Realizing this, Subaru instantly shut his mouth. If he spoke without thinking at this point, everything would be for naught. He strove to calm himself and choose his words with care.

“I don’t…I don’t want to see Emilia hurt herself challenging the tomb’s Trial any longer.”

“That is why it must be you. If Lady Emilia stumbles in the Trial, you need only do it in her place. Who lifts the barrier is not an issue, precisely as you yourself have said.”

“Nghh…”

He’d never imagined the conversation would go in this direction. Subaru clenched his back teeth at the resistance he faced left and right. Seeing Subaru pressed into anguished silence, Roswaal narrowed his eye.

“Surely, you are not finding it too hard to take the Trial in Lady Emilia’s place? It cannot be that you are seeking a way out to spare yourself? If so, then that means your feelings for Lady Emilia are meager indeed.”

“Don’t mess with…! It’s not like…”

“It is not like that? How can you be certain? Who would believe such a thing? If you are truly thinking of Lady Emilia, suffering any agony for her sake is only natural. If you truly love Lady Emilia, is it not most natural for you to do so? If it is for Lady Emilia’s sake, you should set your own heart aside…but can you?”

It seemed like an interrogation. Subaru felt like he was being swallowed up as Roswaal pressed him.

Those words constituted an extremist argument. However, it was a conclusion anyone comprehending Subaru’s Return by Death would arrive at.

—There was a time when Subaru had clung to that very conclusion himself.

Probably, had Subaru taken the hand Echidna had offered, he, too, would have trivialized everything save for the person most precious to him. He’d endure scars and pain both for the sake of the future.

But he could no longer live like that. He’d realized… he didn’t want to.

“—It would seem that your resolve has not been suffiiiiciently honed.”

Seeing something in Subaru’s black eyes, Roswaal abruptly let those words trickle out, making a sad-sounding sigh.

“I had hoped…yes, just a little, I had placed hope in you that by some chance, I might see what I yearn for with my very own eyes. But it seems things shall not go so well indeed.”

Roswaal did not conceal his disappointment as strength drained out of his body, whereupon he lay on the bed once more. His demeanor indicated that the conversation was over. Subaru was upset that the meeting had failed.

Based on his statement just then, Roswaal was conveying that he had no further reason to live *this time*. Having tested Subaru's mental state and found it wanting, he intended to lie down, content to merely watch Subaru's struggles, and end his own life.

But if the current Subaru allowed that, all his efforts would have been for nothing.

"Why do you have to…throw everything away all of a sudden like that?! Nothing's over yet!"

"It is indeed over. No, perhaps I should rather say, it has not even begun. You have yet to even stand at the starting line of resolve. So long as your feet do not find it, you shall never overcome these troubles."

"The starting line of resolve?! I don't get you!! Just how far do you want to push m…"

"—I had hoped you possessed the will to pursue your own objective, even if it tramples Lady Emilia's will underfoot."

With Subaru standing rigid, Roswaal went "Now see here?" as if teaching a little child.

"If you truly think it is for Lady Emilia's sake, you should ignore what Lady Emilia herself thinks. Like a little child dreaming of paradise, you do not possess the resolve to choose to walk through the cruelty of hell. To save her life, you should readily choose to ignore her wishes."

"Th-that's putting the cart before the horse, ain't it?! What's with that thinking, saying as long as it's for Emilia's sake …"

"There is life. So long as there is life, there is a future. If there is a future, there is hope."

With Subaru's words catching in his throat, Roswaal continued his own. He spat them out meticulously, cruelly; like lead bullets, they shot directly into

Subaru's heart.

"If there is hope, there is possibility. If there is possibility, a person can be saved. —Am I wrong?"

You're wrong, Subaru wanted to speak in a thunderous voice. However, he did not have another answer. Unable to make an emotional argument, Subaru's stranded feelings made him want to wail.

"—!"

"No response, hmm? How many more times will you disappoint me?"

When Subaru clenched his fists, his lips trembling, Roswaal turned his eyes toward him with a look of pity. Following this, he sat up once more, clutching a black book—his book of knowledge—to his chest.

Then, Roswaal stroked the book's cover with a finger as he spoke toward the rigid Subaru.

"Therefore, I shall hone your insufficient resolve. I shall back you into a corner once more."

Subaru was aghast. What more could he do? What would force him to even greater limits?

"Already, you must have come face-to-face with the issues occurring in this Sanctuary. You are likely better versed with them than I. But the problems before you are not within this Sanctuary alone."

"Y-you mean the mansion…? You know about that, too…?"

Subaru was horrified at the reference to the assault on the mansion coming from Roswaal's own lips. Was even that written within the book of knowledge? Or was Roswaal simply illustrating the issue with a hypothetical?

The next instant blew away Subaru's such thoughts without a single trace remaining.

After all—

"—But of course, for it is I who contracted the assassins to attack the manor."

—He had just confessed that the mastermind of the incident, the one pulling

the strings of the tragedy at the mansion, was none other than Roswaal himself.

4

It was crumbling. The ground beneath his feet was crumbling.

Having lost the firm footing that should've been there, Subaru felt like he was falling into darkness. Roswaal's confession was simply that shocking.

"Wait…wait. Wait a minute…you did what?"

"I sent assassins to the mansion. —To hone your resolve, you see."

"Resolve? What do you…mean by 'resolve'?"

"That is simple. Even with your Authority, you cannot save things precious to you that are imperiled in two places at once. You must choose what is most important to you. Once you make that choice, you can never take it back. Then, you will finally be complete. —A being who can save but one, single thing."

Subaru's words refused to come out. It was not that he was unable to face the unpleasant evidence, or had faltered before the argument. It was simply that words did not suffice to convey the ferocity of his emotions. That was all.

—Never to that degree had he experienced something that was truly *unspeakable*.

Frederica, Petra, even Beatrice…had they died for such a preposterous scheme?

For the sake of a banal plot to shape Subaru, had they been betrayed by and lost their lives to the master they trusted completely?

"Roswaal…you…are truly mad…"

"I am indeed. I went mad long ago. —Since I was bewitched by those eyes four centuries ago, I have been mad ever since."

"Four hundred…?"

Not understanding the meaning of the words tossed out, Subaru could only repeat them like a village idiot.

Once again, an issue arose from a time four centuries prior. However, it was

unnatural for such words to have come from Roswaal's lips. He, a man living in the present age, had no way to know of things four hundred years before.

And yet, Roswaal had spoken as if he had experienced those events firsthand —

"—Subaru Natsuki."

"Ah…"

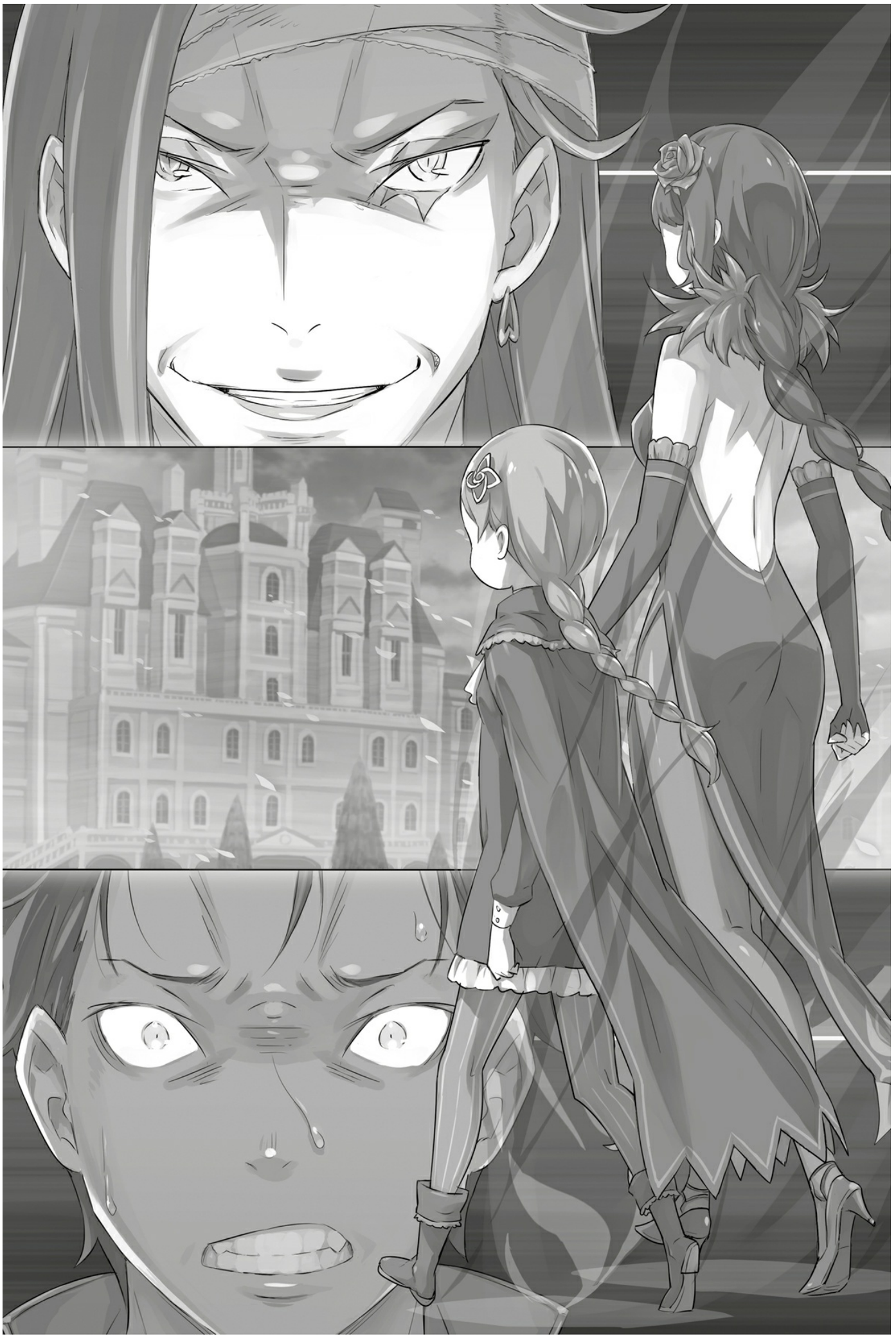
"Why are you not yet mad? Why are you not yet sufficiently insane? You should be just as crazed as I…no, more. When walking upon the lonely path through territory uncharted for the sane, a human heart is nothing but a hindrance. —That is what I shall strengthen in you."

As a means of shattering Subaru's heart, which was supposedly already hardened in resolve, the declaration struck all too true.

He'd underestimated Roswaal's knowledge of the loop. The advantage of his experiences via Return by Death had made him arrogant and presumptive.

Roswaal had devised a sieve so tight that not even Return by Death could break through.

"So what do you intend to do?"



Roswaal's chilling voice showered down upon him from overhead. Even though Roswaal lay in bed at a height lower than him, Subaru went down on all fours on the spot, scraping his head against the floor. He prostrated himself… There was nothing else he could do.

In an unsightly manner, Subaru touched his head to the floor, pathetically making his earnest plea.

"Please, wait… I'm begging you, please forgive me. I-I'm the one at fault. So please, save everyone… I-I'll…"

"Goodness, please raise your head, Subaru. You have nothing to apologize for. You have done nothing wrong. That is why I must…"

"Y-you're wrong… I can't do what you're saying. My feelings have nothing to do with it. I can't…take the Trial. I've lost my qualifications."

"…What?"

As Subaru sniffed his nose, the words he haltingly conveyed threw Roswaal off for the first time. Unsurprisingly, the fact was outside his expectations as well.

With Roswaal seemingly sinking into thought wondering why, Subaru smacked his head against the floor once more.

"Please! I'm begging you! I can't do it. Even if the mansion's attacked, it's no use! There'll be no meaning to anyone's death…so please stop. Please, stop this…!"

"—No, I cannot. Indeed, hearing this, the necessity has grown stronger still."

But his earnest plea earned only that cruel announcement. Shocked, Subaru raised his head.

Roswaal beheld Subaru with both his eyes. A gaze of black eyes intertwined with one of blue and yellow.

"To be blunt, your loss of qualifications is outside my calculations. However, that does not constitute a dead end."

"Why…no matter how much you whittle me down, those qualifications aren't

coming back! The sacrifices won't have any meani…"

"Is that truly the case? Deep down, you yourself surely understand?"

Subaru's entreaty was rebuffed by Roswaal's frigid voice.

Thump went the powerful leap of his heart. His surprise was not directed toward those unexpected words, for Subaru, too, understood what Roswaal was saying and his true intent.

His qualifications had been stripped away. They had been taken back. They had been lost. But that also meant—

"If she wishes it, Echidna could reissue your qualifications or anything else. If you have put her in an ill mood, you need merely reconcile with her. Such is the nature of her Greed."

In other words, Subaru needed to change his mind and take Echidna's hand. But that—

"Do not grow conceited, Subaru Natsuki. You are not the oooonly one who understands Echidna."

—Roswaal pounded these words, and the envy accompanying them, into the very bottom of Subaru's heart.

"You will regain your qualifications. You will rectify the situation. Accordingly, my actions will not change. By not changing them, I shall back you into a corner, hone your resolve, and make you whole."

"Ah…"

Knowing that even his earnest plea was futile, Subaru, still on his knees, sank into despair.

But his dry lips moved, and slowly, he spoke:

"If you…if you hate me, then make it me, and no one el…"

"Hate you?"

What other feelings could he have that would make him act like this? However, Roswaal seemed genuinely put off by Subaru's words, raising his eyebrows—and then, he smiled.

“It is impossible for me to hate you. You are my hope. If I harbor the emotion one might call *expectation* anywhere in this world, it is with you and Ram, and none others. —I trust you, from the bottom of my heart.”

Their resolve…was nothing alike. The sheer weight of Roswaal determination was on a different scale than his own.

Without the slightest altruism, Roswaal had crushed underfoot the tiny bit Subaru had learned from his experiences. He’d put Subaru in checkmate, leaving not so much as a gap for Return by Death to slip through.

At that point, even if Roswaal was killed, the attack on the mansion could not be stopped. In the first place, so as far as Roswaal was concerned, his life was not something up for negotiation. Without his existence, Emilia could not win the royal selection. Life, royal selection, plea, compromise…everything was in a jumble.

“___”

Without realizing it, Subaru had wobbled to his feet, bumping his back against the wall. He slid along the wall toward the exit, pouring his strength into leaving that place without a moment to spare.

Conversation was meaningless. No concession was forthcoming. All he could do was exhaust the limited time he had.

“I…”

They were not thoughts he consciously put into words. His voice simply tumbled out of his mouth.

“I won’t become like you. —I’m a human being. And I’m staying one.”

Leaving only those words behind him, Subaru left Roswaal’s room.

At the very end, Roswaal said nothing.

Subaru rued how pathetic he was that this brought him some small relief.

5

Distancing himself from Roswaal’s place of repose, Subaru walked unsteadily

under the moonlight.

"…What should I do?"

Trickling out was a question toward a situation with no future in sight. However much he went over it, the very same words echoed back toward him, as if no other reply was possible.

The situation was already a stalemate, but he felt that even the smallest hope, as fine as grains of sand, had been lost to him.

With this, all possibility of anyone cooperating with him had been exhausted. He could not comprehend them, Witch and devil both.

But oddly, he found Roswaal's confession easy to accept.

"The timing of the attack being when I return to the mansion, too…"

If the assassins were acting under Roswaal's instructions, that explained a lot. How they knew to encircle the mansion, how to invade the mansion with great ease, even the method to breach Beatrice's Passage. Roswaal surely knew these like the back of his hand.

That was not all. It was likely this was the second time that Roswaal had hired Elsa.

"Making Felt steal Emilia's jewel back at the royal capital, too…"

Had all of it been done knowing Subaru would intervene to save Emilia?

Everything on that day, from earnestly running about to dying three times to save Emilia, to Emilia's smiling face and her telling him her name—had he been dancing atop Roswaal's palm all along?

"If everything has gone according to the book of knowledge…then was Rem being robbed of her existence and the Sanctuary being sealed up…did all this happen exactly as someone predicted…?"

If that was so, had Subaru's free will merely been an extension of a string someone else pulled?

In ensuring everything proceeded according with the prophecy, Roswaal put a stop to any developments contrary to what was recorded. If the path was

crooked, he corrected it by force so that without fail, prophecy became reality —

“—Huh?”

That moment, he felt like something was…off.

Slowly, putting everything in order, he went over his conception of Roswaal’s book of knowledge. He had a definite sense that something was off. Something was nagging at him. But he couldn’t remember *what*.

“What? What…is wrong? Something’s…not right. Something’s wrong…!”

It was a mystery lacking an answer. It resembled the prior situation, but this was different than the dead end. This haze had a path leading forward. And he felt like this path was linked to the hope he had thought lost.

Roswaal’s book of knowledge, making its contents reality, Beatrice’s book of knowledge, the Witch Cult’s Gospels, blank pages, prophetic pages, results according to prophecy, correction, future—

“—Subaru?”

“—!”

Suddenly, a voice intruded upon that vortex of thought, making Subaru’s shoulders jump. He looked back.

Behind him, standing a short distance away, was a girl standing in the gloom, with moonlight showering down upon her—

Emilia, her silver hair sparkling as it swayed, gazed upon Subaru with her violet eyes open wide.

This unexpected encounter caused a dull ache in Subaru’s chest. But Subaru swiftly schooled his expression.

“Ah…Emilia-tan. What are you doing in a place like this? It’s already pretty late, isn’t it?”

“The same goes for you, doesn’t it, Subaru? I couldn’t sleep so I went on a stroll.”

“…That so. Ah, that’s right.”

“—?”

When Subaru nodded in acceptance, Emilia cocked her head with a mystified look.

This was not the first time he had encountered Emilia at night. On one previous occasion, he had met Emilia during a moonlit stroll and had spoken with her then. This situation surely differed from that time, but to bump into her here even so meant Emilia’s action must have been inevitable.

Subaru had been invited to the tea party, reaffirmed his bonds with Patlash, heard Ryuzu’s secret deep within the forest, learned Roswaal was the mastermind, and amid those various actions, Emilia had not been sitting still either.

That was an obvious thing, and yet, at that moment, it struck Subaru with great clarity.

“…Subaru, you’re not feeling well, are you?”

“That so? I thought I was feeling fine…”

“Liar. I can tell just by looking at you. Something happened, didn’t it? You can tell me if you like.”

Emilia walked close, seemingly examining the color of Subaru’s face as she spoke. Subaru’s supposedly smooth facade had been seen through with ease, making him truly resent his own weakness.

“It’s…my problem. I…don’t want to bother you, Emilia.”

“It’s no bother at all…”

“It’s fine, I’m all right. You’ve got bigger problems than me right now. You were pretty panicked after the Trial…are you all right now?”

“Mm, I’m fine. I’m sorry I caused you trouble back there…I’m really sorry, ’kay?”

When Subaru averted his face, desperate to avoid the subject, Emilia flashed a smile with no mirth behind it. Afraid of being hurt, he’d touched upon Emilia’s own unhealed wound—the worst thing he could have done.

Failing to notice his self-deprecating thoughts, Emilia gently touched a hand to her own chest.

“Seems like I butted into these issues without being prepared for them at all… really, it made me feel like I don’t have any resolve. I really, really want to just run away…”

“If you…if you want to run, isn’t that fine?”

“Subaru?”

Latching onto Emilia’s words, Subaru instantly tossed out a response.

Emilia’s long eyebrows jerked; she looked perplexed. Subaru glanced at her, digging his nails into his palm.

“If you don’t want to do it, what’s wrong with running away? By forcing yourself to face something you don’t want to, will you conquer it someday? Do you have to overcome it? If you see a path leading somewhere after you run that’s different from before you run…is choosing that something you should be criticized for…?”

The words poured out in a rush; he wasn’t even sure what he was trying to say.

Praised unconditionally for challenging, scorned unconditionally for fleeing—wasn’t that wrong? What good came of facing something head on if it broke you?

Even Emilia’s determination, Emilia’s will, and Emilia’s nobility were toys in someone else’s game.

“Echidna, Roswaal, Garfiel, they’re all self-centered. Stop getting jerked around by them. They’re all telling me *do something*. Even though I’m trying to deal with it my own way, they all complain, saying not this way, not that way—”

His emotions rising, it was then that he felt dizziness along with his senseless rage.

“___”

An arm wrapped around the back of his head, pulling him forward before he had time to think. He felt something soft and hot, bringing Subaru’s breath and

thoughts both came to a halt.

A warm touch pressed against him, and he realized that the gentle echo from the other side was a heartbeat. That was when he figured it out—Emilia was hugging him against her chest.

“Emi…”

“Take it slow. Take it easy. Just take it slow and listen to the sound of my heart.”

Her voice was like a silver bell, tickling his eardrums. Unresisting, Subaru did as he was told.

A pleasant, ticklish feeling on his back made his breaths grow shallow, and a hot sensation emerged from behind the corners of his eyes. His banal depression faded, washed away by a tide of much greater emotion.

For a while, he let Emilia’s heartbeats soothe his stricken heart.

“Have you calmed down?”

Emilia slowly took away her arms, freeing Subaru’s head from her chest. Facing the concern in the violet eyes before him, Subaru exhaled slightly.

“Sorry to get all flustered like that. I didn’t wanna cause you trouble like some little kid, but…”

“I’ve told you, I don’t find this troubling at all. You’re *really* stubborn, Subaru.”

Giggling, Emilia touched a hand to her lips as she smiled just a tiny bit. However, the smile was too strained for him to feel like smiling himself. Rather, it made him want to apologize until he ran out of words.

He didn’t want to make Emilia worry. He wanted to reassure her, to tell her it was all right.

“Really, nothing’s going right at all…actually, I was in a meeting with Roswaal just now, trying to see if there wasn’t some way to get out of here without the Trial.”

“Eh?”

“Really, it’d be best if I could just take the Trial in your place, but it doesn’t

look like that's possible. So I thought if I could at least find……sorry for being so useless."

He lowered his head. Even though he wanted to reassure her, he had obtained nothing that could offer her any comfort.

Even after repeating Return by Death over and over, he hadn't found even a single answer. His regrets on how he could've he'd done better were influenced by his memories of the second Trial as well.

Subaru's tragedy from birth was that he was lacking, even though that, too, should never have been the case.

"But I'll probably manage something. I'll manage somehow, because I don't want to make you go through hard, bad things. So I want you to trust me."

He didn't want to bare his weakness. So Subaru issued his declaration of war toward a darkness with nothing in sight beyond it.

He hadn't found a way, not yet. Even so, he would not fail Emilia, or everyone e—

"—Subaru."

As Subaru conveyed his resolve, Emilia turned her moist eyes toward him.

When he saw himself in those damp eyes, Subaru encouraged his own, pathetic self so that, within his swaying heart, at least the most important part of him would not become warped.

He would protect Emilia, overcome the Sanctuary, rescue the mansion, and save every—

"—I am happy for your feelings, Subaru. Really, I am. But I can't accept your kindness."

And yet, it was none other than Emilia herself who repudiated that resolve head-on.

"…Eh?"

For a second, Subaru let out a dumbfounded voice, not comprehending what had just been said to him.

Subaru was astounded, eyes completely wide. Emilia gazed at Subaru as he remained like that, piecing together the thoughts inside him word by word, trying to arrange them into a recognizable shape.

“I’m really happy you think and work so hard for my sake like this, Subaru. Really, *really* happy. You’re *really* reliable, *really* dependable… But I can’t let you look for a loophole or an easy way out.”

“Wh-whaddaya mean you can’t…this is just something other people forced onto you!”

“Even so, I’m the one who decided to do it. I have my own goal, and I have to work hard to achieve it…that’s why I’m here right now. I don’t want to make excuses.”

With her lips pursed tight, Emilia’s display of determination left Subaru at a loss for words.

Her resolute face glimmered, filled with a powerful will. It was not the look of a weak girl, one who could not walk down her path unless Subaru reached his hand out to her and dragged her along it.

“Besides, somehow, I get it, too. —The Trial in that tomb probably doesn’t have a shortcut or a loophole anyway.”

“___”

“It’s strange, but somehow, I just know. Even if I spend more time thinking about it, if I don’t really get my heart in order before challenging the Trial, the result will probably stay the same. I get that, too.”

He could offer no words to deny her.

He’d looked for a loophole. But Subaru knew, too, there was none to be found. He knew there was no way the Witch who had set up the barrier would permit such an illogical result.

—In the first place, why was Subaru desperately trying to refute Emilia like that?

“Hey, Subaru. —Subaru, why are you trying to help me?”

“___”

With Subaru hesitating amid a vortex of doubt, Emilia seemed to circle ahead as she tossed that question at him.

It was the same question she had posed once before, one that held deep meaning to both of them.

Just how much time had Subaru desperately spent so that he might tell her his answer? Just how many difficulties had he overcome so that he could convey it to Emilia?

Therefore, without hesitation, Subaru could give her the very same reply.

“I want to help you because I—because I love you.”

“—Mm, I know. I can do my best because I know.”

Touching a hand to her breast, Emilia’s cheeks reddened just a touch as she backed up a step, closing her eyes. She continued, her words infused with myriad emotions.

“So don’t think like you have to do something. Just having you watch me means I can work hard, Subaru. If you want to do something for me, if you’re willing to listen to my selfish words, then I want you by my side. I want you cheering me on. I want you there, pushing me forward.”

“Emilia…”

Emilia’s words made emotions well up inside his chest. He could not stop it, nor could he put it into words. It was difficult to comprehend, and Subaru did not know just what it was. But it asserted its existence ever stronger, seemingly trying to rob him of all thought, which Subaru, clenching his teeth, continued to resist.

“You’ve been spoiling me nonstop, so…this time, I want to try and do without. The only thing that pains me is making you and everyone worry as I fail…but I’m trying to overcome the Trial as fast as possible so that no one has to worry anymore.”

With Subaru unable to string words together, Emilia sent his way the stout smile that came over her.

It looked very beautiful.

“Please, watch over me as I do my best. —That’s what I want you to do for me, Subaru.”

6

“___”

Subaru forcefully kicked the ground, slicing through the wind. His heart remained restless. He still didn’t have a destination.

He raced down a slope with bad footing, seemingly about to take flight. Branches scraped his cheeks, leaving marks, and even as he tumbled repeatedly, he kept running so long as he had breath.

He raised an incoherent voice, screaming so much that his throat seemed ready to burst, and looking up at the sky, Subaru ran.

To the crisp, cool air, to the pale moon floating in the clear sky, Subaru cried out in shame.

—The final sight of Emilia’s strong smile was burned into the back of his eyelids.

That charming smile, and the resolve it conveyed, drove Subaru’s misunderstanding home. Finally, he realized the true nature of the urge welling up within him, charring the inside of his chest to ashes.

And because he now understood, Subaru had parted with Emilia, impulsively racing into the forest, rushing through the underbrush as if he were some kind of beast.

Deep within his chest, the emotion asserted itself, growing hotter, hotter, fiercer—this was what people called shame.

“I…I…!”

—How conceited! How prideful! How utterly foolish!

He recalled his anger at Roswaal’s words and actions for looking down upon, even pitying Emilia. He’d been indignant. He’d sworn upon his unforgiving heart, then he met Emilia immediately after, baring his thoughts to her—only to be gently rebuffed.

That was when Subaru realized it for the first time.

—That the one who believed least in Emilia's resolve, Emilia's determination, and Emilia's strength was none other than Subaru himself.

He had to protect her; he didn't want her to go through bitter thoughts or sad feelings—under the guise of such words, Subaru had decided that Emilia was incapable of doing anything.

Even while Subaru had contrived various schemes out of his desire to keep her under his protection alone, Emilia had hardened her own resolve and determination in her own, Emilia-like way, deciding to face the Trial.

In making that determination, Emilia had asked Subaru to support her more than anyone else, and yet—

—It had been none other than Subaru Natsuki who had underestimated Emilia the most.

"——!!"

The instant he realized that, unendurable shame slammed into Subaru, enough to make him want to die.

And so, without giving Emilia's determination a clear reply, he had turned his back to escape from her and her concern, fleeing into the forest with the same feet that still carried him.

Once before, Subaru had hurt Emilia in a similar attempt to monopolize her at the royal capital.

Of course, he had regretted it. Of course, he had reflected upon his sins. That was why he had returned, remaining by her side up to that point.

—And still, Subaru had made the same mistake once more.

He'd hurt himself in Emilia's place, taking her burdens for her to pave a road for her to travel.

He hadn't changed. He'd just become better at hiding his wounds. He'd simply discarded his pride in taking her burdens for himself. In terms of inflating himself and putting himself first in line, not a single thing had changed.

“I…I just…waah?!”

Out of breath, he lifted his head seemingly to gasp for air. That instant, he lost his balance, and his planted foot sailed into the air.

Immediately losing his balance, Subaru slid down a slope in the forest. Tumbling onto the ground, which was marred with dirt and fallen leaves, Subaru rolled and fell, spreading his limbs as he lay there on his back.

“___”

With his back pressed against ground so cold, it seemed to rob him of all heat, his breathing remained ragged as he looked up above. The sky was only visible through the gaps in the forest, yet even so, he beheld the light of countless stars.

—The heavens were filled with gleaming stars, seemingly mocking Subaru, their stray comrade lying upon the ground.

Surrounded by unfamiliar constellations, puny little Subaru was melting into the night.

Fatigue suddenly pressed upon him. Once again, even more than his body, his psyche had been terribly worn down.

—Return by Death, the Witch’s Tea Party, Roswaal’s true intent, Emilia’s resolve, and his very own shame.

Too much time had passed. Limited time, the time left to him, precious, precious time was slowly ticking away.

He’d been enmeshed in a labyrinth of swirling doubts, his heart eaten away by the gloom at finding no way out. Betrayed on every level, everything had backfired and been thrown back in his face. What to do—

What should I do, what should I do, what should I do, what should I do, what should I do, what should I do what should I do whatshouldIdowhatshouldIdowhatshouldI—

“—Perhaps I can tell you what you should do?”

“—?!”

The voice from above his head made Subaru sit up with a start. There was a figure standing with his back against the night, atop the slope from which he had fallen. Slowly, the figure glided down, his contours gradually growing more definite.

“…Otto?”

“Yes, indeed. Good morning. Yes, it is I.”

“Morn…?

With that out-of-place greeting tossed toward him, the perplexed Subaru noticed it, too, albeit most belatedly.

The aura of dawn had already spread throughout the world, announcing the impending end of the night. Just how many hours had he wasted in a daze, gazing at an empty sky…?

“It is morning. So you did not even realize that fact? Serious symptoms indeed.”

“Can’t deny it…but what are you doin’ here?”

“For the moment, I shall set aside what brought me here. More important is the situation you have been placed in, Mr. Natsuki, looking like you are dreaming as you mumble things to yourself over and over.”

Ignoring Subaru’s surprise at the hours having passed, Otto placed his hands on his hips and made an exasperated sigh. Subaru wobbled to his feet, using his sleeve to wipe away the dirt on his cheeks.

Only a short time had passed since Otto had seen him at another strange place the night before. Not only had Otto seen him crying when Patlash was consoling him, but he also saw him in a place like this, covered in mud and shame.

“Is that really something to care about at this point? In the few days since I have met you, Mr. Natsuki, I have only seen you clean at the Duchess of Karsten’s manor, I believe.”

“…I’m not really feeling up to joking around. More importantly, you…”

“You have reached a dead end? You wish to know what to do? Yes, I

understand.”

Prompted by Subaru’s words, Otto patted his own chest in a rather flippant manner. Subaru was taken aback by the sight of him being so carefree. But he wanted to cling to that humorous sight.

At a time like this, he didn’t mind if Otto just wanted to put him at ease. If there was even a slight chance to improve the situation, he wanted to hear it.

“Please do not rush me. All right? This requires preparation.”

“P-preparation…”

“Yes. First, take a big breath, nice and slow…”

Presenting a hand toward him, Otto indicated to Subaru that he should breathe deeply.

Subaru didn’t know what meaning it held, but he did as he was told, putting his breathing in order, closing his eyes and letting oxygen fill his lun—

“——?!”

Instantly, a hard impact pummeled the side of his face, and Subaru collapsed to the ground once more.

Unable to break his fall, Subaru tumbled and fell face-first into the dirt, eyes spinning. He shook his head, lifting it, and wondering what the heck had happened; seeing Otto shaking a fist, he realized he’d been punched.

Then, as Subaru drew in a breath, Otto shook his hardened, reddened fist toward him once more and spoke:

“—Stop trying to keep up appearances in front of your friends, Subaru Natsuki.”

7

Subaru could only gape, forgetting even the pain of being punched.

As Subaru lay upon the ground, Otto glared at him with a sharp look. Normally, he would seem pathetic, or laugh amiably, his facial expression always seeking to avert conflict with other people, but at that moment, it

blazed with anger.

With fury residing in his eyes, Otto Suwen gazed down upon Subaru.

“Rather than not knowing what to do, I imagine the inside of your mind is simply all a jumble.”

“___”

“I expect you are in a position where you must extend a hand to others, yet your own limbs and head are insufficient for the task, so you desperately flap your arms around, accomplishing nothing but wasting time.”

With Subaru pressed into silence, Otto threw words at him as the distance, and his patience, dwindled.

Subaru remained on the ground, immobile. He grimaced, the pain and heat of his left cheek belatedly becoming clearer, as he was unable to do anything but stare at Otto.

“I take your silence to mean you have no objections. In the world of us merchants, at the very least, such an imposition is the vilest of all conduct. — Are you listening?”



When Subaru made no reply, Otto grabbed him by his collar and pulled him upward.

“If you’re listening, then answer me!”

“—Gah!”

A sharp, hard blow struck his forehead, sending stars scattering across Subaru’s vision.

It was a headbutt. Otto had reared his head back, vigorously slamming both their brows together. His eyes were spinning. But Otto did not relent. He delivered one more headbutt, sending the wobbly Subaru reeling.

Forehead, forehead heat, pain. He reeled but did not fall. His legs came to a halt.

“Whaddaya think you’re…!”

“Oh my, knocking you back brought you to your senses, did it? The thought that you might be asleep forced me to engage in a violent manner to which I am not accustomed.”

“What’d ya say, you bastard—!”

Teary-eyed from taking a headbutt to the bridge of his nose, Subaru recklessly charged toward Otto. But Otto evaded his outstretched arms, sweeping his feet out in return. Subaru crashed magnificently to the ground.

“Just when your blood rushes to your head, you find yourself at my feet. Truly, Mr. Natsuki, there is only one word for your conduct: *pathetic*.”

“Is that…right?!”

Hopping up from his tripped position, Subaru hurled a handful of dirt toward Otto’s head.

However, Otto covered his face with an arm to block. With Subaru surprised that his effort to blind him had been foiled, Otto grabbed his collar and proceeded to hurl Subaru over his back, slamming him upon the ground.

The blow to his back made him lose his breath. Subaru, gasping, could not stand up.

“Gh, agh…”

“Hey, Mr. Natsuki. This is the strength you possess. It cannot hold a candle to a knight or to Marquis Mathers, let alone one such as Garfiel. Even I can do this to you.”

As Subaru desperately tried to draw oxygen into his convulsing lungs, he beheld Otto, his vision upside down as the latter walked over. Otto shook his head with an air of exhaustion.

“To even think you faced the White Whale and the Witch Cult. Mr. Natsuki, you are so weak, they could crush you with but a single finger. Surely, you too are well aware of this.”

“Haa, haa…”

“You supplement your strength with intellect, then? So far as my eyes have seen, Mr. Natsuki, you have made fervent use of the puny head at your disposal…but in terms of planning and decision-making capabilities, you certainly do not rise to a level that one could take pride in. Indeed, your common sense is quite lacking.”

What was Otto trying to say? Subaru breathed raggedly as irritation began to mix with his confusion.

The convulsion of his lungs, the impact of being punched, the pain on cheek and brow…all these were fading. Slowly, in their place, he regained the ability to think and strove to understand.

“You lack both strength and intellect. When I ponder what you might supplement these with, I can think of nothing. Mr. Natsuki, you are a puny, ordinary human being, the sort one can find on any street. And yet, you are living far beyond your means.”

“What have you…been tryin’ to say all this time…”

“I imagine that, knowing full well you are lacking with things beyond your reach, you gradually attempted to come up with various plans, driving yourself further and further into a corner…truly, I understand how Patlash feels.”

“Patlash…?”

Subaru was more surprised than perplexed at the sudden mention of his beloved dragon.

She was an excellent land dragon who was practically wasted on Subaru, and in his time of need, she had told him exactly what he needed to hear. He owed her a great deal. Otto was saying he understood her feelings.

He blinked his eyes. It was incomprehensible. Noticing his continued ignorance, Otto spoke with irritation.

“It is perfectly understandable to want to look good in front of a woman you’re smitten with. As I believe such vanity is a necessity, I respect it. While I might find fault with aiming above one’s station, let us set that aside for the moment.”

He must have meant Emilia. He must have meant Subaru’s attitude toward Emilia.

“Trying to look good in front of a girl who likes you, let us forgive this as well. This is a necessary thing. After all, I believe responsibility is shared in a romantic relationship between both the cherisher and the cherished. Showing off for the sake of someone who likes you—this, too, is important. Quite understandable.”

He must have meant Rem. Once upon a time, Subaru had spoken to Otto about Rem in such a manner.

He was striking at Subaru’s core, the treasured feelings he felt toward both girls—

“But you see, that is as far as it goes.”

Breaking off his words, Otto suddenly drew his head close.

To Subaru, who was on guard against a renewed headbutt, Otto looked like he was clenching his teeth as he continued.

“You are lacking. I am sure you understand this. You cannot do much of anything. I am sure you know this. You want to show off for the girl you like, I am sure. I am sure you want to be someone the girl who likes you can be proud of.”

“___”

“Then, for the sake of those girls, to at least supplement the portions beyond what their eyes can see, surely it is fine to have someone lend you a hand? —A friend, perhaps?”

Otto pulled his face away, placing one hand on his chest and the other on Subaru’s as he spoke those final words.

They left Subaru in a momentary daze, after which he audibly pulled in a breath.

—To be blunt, Subaru’s thoughts were *Wait, that…?*

Subaru had once thought like that: wanting to ask for aid, to cling to someone. Of course he had.

Just as Otto had said, Subaru was well aware of his own deficiencies. That was why he’d been running around, even humbling himself, to get Echidna and then Roswaal to cooperate with him.

The results of his efforts were that he’d gained the cooperation of neither. Subaru had that unpalatable truth rubbed into his face.

Hence, Otto’s words were way off base. That path had been long closed to him.

“I tried asking people. I looked for help… But it was no good.”

In the end, the arbitrary, overbearing *If I don’t protect her…* feelings he’d harbored were rejected by Emilia, and he’d realized he himself had been looking down on her.

Having his expectations betrayed yet refusing to give up, he’d spent the rest of the night lamenting to the stars.

Despite Subaru’s various experiences, despite Subaru’s numerous encounters, he was neither able to advance nor retreat. Subaru was even out of dry laughter as his own shame tormented him.

To Subaru, there in quiet despair, Otto’s lips trembled.

“But…but Mr. Natsuki, I do not yet recall you ever asking *me*.”

“___”

“Perhaps you think I am not worth asking, that it is meaningless to ask, or otherwise dismissed the notion in a similar fashion. Perhaps, Mr. Natsuki, I appear to you as one among the great throngs of people you must protect, or something along those lines.”

His voice trembled in an effort to suppress his emotions, though it only brought them into sharper relief.

This was Otto’s anger, Otto’s sadness, and only a fraction of more roiling emotions left with no place to go.

He’d hurt Otto very deeply. —Comprehending this, Subaru instantly lifted his face.

“Y-you’re wrong.”

“How am I mistaken? Otherwise, it would be very strange indeed. With what reason do you have to cower here by yourself without a single word to me?”

“I haven’t looked at you like…not telling you things wasn’t because I didn’t trust you…it’s not like that. You’re wrong.”

Shaking his head, Subaru denied it. Otto pressed him further into a corner with a wordless stare. Its power made Subaru lower his eyes, running dry on words as he desperately sought a reply.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Otto. If anything, it was the reverse. He trusted Otto. Just how many times over had Otto aided Subaru that loop? It wasn’t about money; Otto had saved him before out of benevolence, putting his sense of obligation and humanity first. When he’d called Otto a friend, there was no falsehood behind it.

But how could Subaru speak to that very Otto about his circumstances?

“___”

Instinctively, he knew. —The penalty for speaking of Return by Death remained in place.

Subaru could not divulge any information carried across the boundary of death. He could engage using fragmentary information if someone had knowledge of Subaru’s circumstances, like Echidna or Roswaal. But Otto was

different. It wasn't just Otto; Emilia, Ram, all the other people involved with the Sanctuary—Subaru could not speak to them about a single part of the unimaginable circumstances that surrounded him.

And those not knowing of Return by Death would dismiss Subaru's words as nothing but delusions.

"I can't explain any of it right. The inside of my mind's all a mess…it's a big jumble, just like you said. I can't logically explain a single thing."

"___"

"Even if I told you, it's all stuff no one would believe anyway… I don't know what to even say…not to you, not to anyone, nothing…!"

"…Please, just say it."

"—Eh?"

To Subaru, murmuring that he could not offer up proof to make anyone believe him, Otto spoke those words.

When Subaru spontaneously lifted his face, Otto crossed his arms.

"I said, please, just say it. Even if it isn't logical, even if it is all a jumble, even if it is not in chronological order, I will listen to it all without jumping to conclusions, so please."

"Er, but that's…"

"This…this is what I have been talking about! I told you to stop keeping up appearances!!"

Otto howled, as if this time he had truly reached the limits of his patience. Otto's outburst left Subaru astonished, only to find a finger pointed at his black eyes.

"This *you have no proof to make people trust you, no one will trust you without proof, you cannot explain things in a proper order*… I tell you, if you have the time to think up such petty excuses, it would be far healthier for you to spill out everything inside your mind than cower like this!!"

"Even if you say that… I…! Don't have anything to make anyone believe this

messed-up…!”

“—Tell me everything! Then, at the end of this messy tale, just say *Believe me!!* We’re friends, after all!!”

—He felt like a great many thoughts and feelings inside his mind had been torn away at the root and sent flying.

There was no basis to those words. They made no logical sense. They weren’t convincing in the slightest.

And yet, with Subaru unable to move a muscle, they had enough of *something* to give his back a shove.

“You might not believe me, but…”

Even though, in that halting manner, he spoke of all the issues he had been carrying alone until there was no more to tell, it did not take him all that long.

8

“—So Roswaal’s ordering assassins to attack the mansion basically to…push Emilia and me into a corner, leaving no place for either of us to run.”

Subaru finished his explanation, heedful of the minor details for fear of violating his taboo.

All the while, Otto had been creasing his brow, silent as he lent Subaru his ears.

“At this moment in time, this’s…all the information I have. There’s nothing more to hide.”

Of course, his explanation had left out the things he couldn’t speak of: the Witch’s Tea Party and Return by Death.

As that left crucial gaps in his story, it was fair to say his explanation was chock full of holes. The logical threads connecting various pieces of information were so frayed, even he thought they sounded strange.

That was how much he was waiting with bated breath for Otto’s reaction to the explanation he had received: the reaction of the same Otto who had

declared that all he had to do was just stick *Believe me!!* onto the very end.

Would this become hope, or turn into despair? Such worries and expectations had his eardrums on edge.

“Mr. Natsuki.”

Finally, after a long period of silent thought, Otto uncrossed his arms and spoke:

“Would it be so wrong to turn tail and run without a word to anyone else?”

“What…the hell?!”

His reply, which came from a completely unexpected angle, elicited a foul and uncouth voice from Subaru. Faced with that reaction from Subaru, Otto’s voice went shrill as he replied:

“I mean, we are trapped in a hunting ground for the Great Rabbit, escape depends on Lady Emilia breaking through the Trial, a prospect that seems doubtful; even evacuating the people not held captive by the barrier is being obstructed by an ignoramus, and even if somehow we arrive back at the mansion, there are assassins coming on the lord of the manor’s orders…just how many sins have you been committing on a daily basis for things to turn out like this?!”

“That’s what I wanna know! Why does this senseless situation have to barrel down on me like this?! I already knew, but God must seriously hate me! I hate me, too!”

If there was a God who governed fate, that deity most definitely hated Subaru, detesting him as if he were a venomous snake.

But resenting that made the situation neither progress nor withdraw, nor its level of difficulty rise or fall.

“Nah, before all that… Otto, I understand why you’re getting all worked up… but you actually believe this preposterous story?”

“___”

“A horde of demon beasts way beyond ‘trouble’ is coming our way. Even if we try to run, we can’t do anything without Emilia being up to the job, Garfiel’s in

the way of everyone escaping, and Roswaal's gone insane and betrayed us… You actually believe all this?"

To any objective person, the bad situations lined up one after another constituted an unfolding nightmare. It seemed far more realistic to think that Subaru alone had become touched in the head than believe everything he said was fact.

That's why he hadn't even thought of divulging all this. Even Otto had to—

"Now see here, Mr. Natsuki."

Otto raised one finger as he responded to Subaru's question.

"In the course of my travels across many lands, I have been involved with a rather considerable number of people."

"…Don't tell me—you can just look into someone's eyes and know whether you can trust them or something…?"

"No, and you should not believe in such superstitious nonsense. In my time as a merchant, I have experienced far too much firsthand of just how capable people are of shrouding their gazes in order to deceive others. It is nothing to boast of, but I have some experience with being deceived myself."

It really was nothing to boast of, so the fact that he was doing exactly that made it hard to respond.

This conversation was too important to make light of any part of it, so Subaru pursed his lips as Otto continued onward.

"I left my parents' home at fourteen, firmly believing in my abilities as a merchant like any other. The results of that choice were scarcely good…or rather, the unbelievable difficulties I encountered when taking chances, thinking I had a shot at winning, made for results that were quite poor, but…"

"Now just a…"

"Setting aside whether the results were fair or foul, I intend to live without regretting the decisions themselves. I am the one who placed my trust and made those wagers—something I believe I should remain well aware of."

Between them, only Otto knew what choices he was using as the basis of his

argument, but he surely meant he had engaged in some rather high-stakes financial battles of his own.

Accompanying Subaru to the Sanctuary and seeking to connect himself with Roswaal was one such idea. In contrast to expectations, Otto had been acting in a sound, realistic manner.

That was why Subaru had doubted Otto would lend his ears to such a baseless tale with scarce odds of victory…

“That is why this is a first for me, Mr. Natsuki.”

“…Eh?”

Subaru let his mouth fall open, staring as he wondered just what Otto was trying to say.

To that, Otto spoke with a stupidly cheerful look on his face. —It was a crisp declaration.

“Ignoring the odds and joining a side with no visible chance of winning…this is a first for me.”

9

—He hurried. He was short of breath. He raised an incoherent voice.

Subaru ran across the grass, irritation in tow, seemingly chasing his own emotions as they rushed ahead of him.

He cut through the crisp, morning air, kicked the soil, and leaped over rocks, each and every stride grand and powerful.

Finally, having run in a straight line, the building that was his destination came into view. Unintentional exultation made Subaru bare his teeth. He bared his teeth and laughed.

The door practically flew when he opened it. He powerfully barreled his way into the building.

And then—

“—Roswaal!”

Racing through the entry hall and the living room, Subaru vigorously kicked the bedroom door open so hard, it seemed a wonder he did not break it.

In the room were Roswaal, sitting upon on the bed, and Ram, in the middle of changing the bandages on Roswaal's body; both wore expressions of surprise as they watched Subaru's arrival.

It was rare to see such expressions on either the perpetually made-up Roswaal or the usually calm and composed Ram. An unprecedented occurrence was a good omen for the sake of changing the future.

A smile gushed from him. Then, jabbing a finger straight at the surprised pair, he announced in a loud voice:

"—Let's make a bet. You and me. And the chips will be our wishes."

CHAPTER 3

STRAIGHT BET

1

Subaru's breathing leaped, and he felt like gloating as he received shocked stares from both of them.

The two people inside the room, Roswaal and Ram, were a pair that Subaru never expected to see with surprise on their faces. As if to project that sentiment, Subaru twisted his lips, a wicked smile coming over him.

"—Bet?"

Recovering from his initial shock, Roswaal narrowed his differently colored eyes.

Roswaal, having his bandages changed atop the bed, gave off a visual impression that was slightly different than normal. The reason was that the makeup on his face, the makeup he always wore, was off, leaving his bare face exposed.

The flesh under the white makeup was pale, making the look in his eyes feel gentle rather than sharp, which gave Subaru the polar opposite impression from the usual. Still, he was quite handsome whether he did anything to his looks or not.

"Yes, a bet. I'm challenging you to a big, serious match…with what you and I want on the line."

"Wait, Barusu."

Subaru raised a finger, boldly making his statement to Roswaal. Roswaal narrowed his brows as he pondered the proposal, but Ram interposed herself between them.

Ram shielded Roswaal behind her, sustaining Subaru's gaze with a reproachful look in her eyes.

"What do you think you are doing, suddenly forcing your way into the room and spouting random things? Do you intend to burden Master Roswaal during his bed rest? This is too rude, even for you."

"You know as well as I do that he's not the kind of guy to just sit and wait to get better. Besides, the situation doesn't allow it. This problem is everybody's problem, so I'm gonna be a little pushy and reckless."

"Barusu—"

"No matter what anybody says, I don't have any reason to stop."

When Ram exuded a dangerous aura that was mixed with obvious irritation, Subaru thrust a palm straight at her. Then, anticipating just where her actions might lead, he tilted his head and called to Roswaal, sitting behind her.

"What about you, Roswaal? You're not gonna sulk about your schedule going a little out of whack, now are you? Do you have the guts to push yourself a little for the sake of your successor?"

"…What a roundabout and deeeeply interesting turn of phrase. For the sake of my successor, you say?"

Without directly touching upon the truth of Return by Death, Subaru made his proposal to Roswaal in a deviously indirect manner. Its contents brought a suspicious look over Ram, but Subaru's intent definitely got through to Roswaal.

His face still ghastly and pale, Roswaal slowly sat up higher.

"Ram, wait by my…no, for a brief time, could you leave young Subaru and I alone?"

"…Are you certain?"

"Do not worry; there is no concern that Subaru might cause harm to me. He is not here for payback, but for a quite diiiifferent matter, yes?"

"Well, even if I was here for that, I wouldn't be able to do a thing. You'd just nail me back. Pathetic, but yeah, don't worry, 'kay?"

Waving both his empty hands, he asserted to an anxious Ram that he had no hostile intentions. Not that this was the slightest bit convincing, but Ram let a sigh trickle out, then bowed to Roswaal.

“Please do not overly exert yourself. —And Barusu, please do nothing rude.”

“Man, you’re really only worried I’m gonna start something. Worry about *him* starting something, would ya?”

Exchanging these words as Ram headed for the room’s exit, Subaru slumped his shoulders as Ram snorted. Then, after the door was closed, there were but two people, Subaru and Roswaal, remaining in the room.

It had been just a few, scant hours since his heart was thoroughly broken, and yet, Subaru found himself in the same situation once again.

“I had not thought you and I would meet again face-to-face in this lifetime, and so quickly at that…did something happen to alter your state of mind?”

“Alter my state of mind…well, you’re not wrong. My shame was exposed, I got lectured a ton, I traded blows of friendship…nah, the punching was too one-sided to spin it like that.”

Recalling how Otto had pummeled him, Subaru smiled wryly over his complete defeat.

But it was a good loss. Over and over, Subaru had lost a variety of battles since arriving in this world, but never had defeat tasted so sweet.

“A most cheerful face… It was only last night that you became aware of your own lack of commitment, yet you seem to have put your thoughts in order. I grandly congratulate you for your swift return.”

“When it comes to the meaning of *grand*, you’ve got me beat, the thickness of your face included… You know, borrowing someone’s hand to get back on your feet ain’t so bad. Especially if it’s a friend’s.”

Upon receiving Subaru’s reply, Roswaal slowly shook his head. Despair rested within his eyes; his expression crestfallen, obvious pity projected by his demeanor, Roswaal sighed deeply.

“So soft. So weak, and so very young… Ultimately, you can only solve the

suffering in this world by yourself. Relying on a friend is a foolish plan, betraying only your own weakness.”

“Depending on people, connections, feelings…what, that’s no good?”

“No goooood at all.”

“That so. —Then there’s no way to settle this except a bet.”

With that one sentence, Roswaal’s expression changed. Subaru took a step forward toward the center of the room. He walked closer to the bed, closing the distance between him and Roswaal, and thrust a finger toward him once more.

“Just like I said, let’s make a bet. The chips are what we want most, and there’ll only be one wager.”

“…I shall hear you out, at the very leaaaast.”

Rather than dismissing the proposal as out of hand, Roswaal prodded Subaru to continue speaking. Having vaulted over the initial hurdle, Subaru exhaled, turning his finger toward the heavens as he formally stated his preconditions.

“What you and I want are on parallel lines. After yesterday, I’m sure of that. I want to save everything. You can’t forgive me for that. —Am I right?”

“Yes, you are indeed. Nor can you forgive me. However, you cannot distance yourself from me, either.”

“…You got me there. If we lose you, Emilia can’t fight going forward. I hate to say it, but you have the power here, no matter what you’re scheming, no matter how bad you and I get along.”

“And? Knowing that much, what is it you wish to do? With your naive reliance on others, you are incapable of resolving the situation. Compromise or honing —there are no other paths before us.”

“If it was just me, I’m sure you’d be right.”

Faced with Roswaal’s words, Subaru bluntly acknowledged the weakness of his own heart. Even if he stubbornly persisted, clinging to Return by Death, at some point, he would surely be worn down, just as Roswaal was saying.

Certainly, if it was Subaru alone, still relying on no one, clutching his knees

and cowering, then…

—But that was no longer the case. Because it wasn't, he could lift up his head.

"Roswaal, let's have one final showdown between you and me, here and now. —This time around, I *will* save the Sanctuary *and* the mansion. I'll blow away each and every one of your schemes."

"You say you will recover somehow from this dire position? And that you will relinquish your one and only Authority?"

"…Redoing and telling you about it are two separate things. I had that ground into me. We got too conceited, you and me both. My thing…isn't convenient like that."

In the second Trial, Subaru saw scenes from worlds where he had chosen poorly. The more Subaru faced death, the more such tragedies unfolded; this was no way to find salvation.

Besides, the search for salvation was the curse that haunted Subaru's and Roswaal's hearts.

"And you will confine your final chance to this life, hereafter doing as the Sanctuary…no, as I fondly desire?"

"Yeah, that's what it amounts to. I'm sick and tired of feeling each other out like this. I'm making this the last time."

"And what guarantee do I have that you will uphold your word?"

Roswaal sought confirmation regarding Subaru's assertion as if it was the natural thing to do.

"Given your Authority, you could surely make it so that the instant you said 'final' never happened. You are free to rescind anything inconvenient to you. The validity of a promise from such a person is rather…"

"—Roswaal."

With Roswaal concerned Subaru might go back on his word, Subaru quietly called out his name. His words stopping the moment he heard that voice, Roswaal widened his eyes as he found Subaru's gaze trained upon him.

Then, without changing his tone of voice, Subaru continued.

“Do you think I’d do that?”

“___”

“If you think I would, we have nothing to discuss. I’ll end this conversation here.”

He declared it strongly, strong enough that many opponents would break off the discussion in a fit.

Such words from Subaru made Roswaal close his eyes; from there, he lightly raised both his hands.

“…In proposing to make this time your last, what is it you seek from me?”

“—What I want is pretty simple. If I do manage to resolve the situation my way, that’ll mean a result different from what you want, right? If that happens, this unwanted development would make you lose your will to live and your drive to do certain things… I want you to set that aside.”

“Aside, you say? To not lose my drive, you say? Yet, I cannot help but call that a most difficult thing to achieve. After all, it is a matter of the heart. Of course, it is possible to engage in pretense on the surface, but…”

“Not really, Roswaal. It’s not like you and I are always going to be wrestling with each other.”

“…Hmm?”

With a doubtful look on his face, Roswaal was voicing dissatisfaction with the terms Subaru proposed. Seeing that Roswaal clearly did not understand, Subaru rubbed his own nose with a finger as he spoke:

“I know if I win, it’d lead to an unwanted development for you. But for the sake of my future, and for the sake of putting Emilia on the throne, you need to keep on staying close by. There’ll probably be times when she’ll have to rely on the power only I have. Setting aside the issue of priorities, I’ll still be working toward your goal in the end.”

“___”

“Roswaal, my demand is simple. If I can save both the Sanctuary and the mansion…throw the book aside and join us. I’ll make Emilia King. And I need your power to make it happen.”

“What foolishness.”

When Subaru extended his hand and spoke those words, Roswaal’s reply was brief, practically spitting out the words.

It sounded less like scorn than rejection and bewilderment.

“Your proposal is twisted, even for you. You will engage in your own methods, yet you will forgive me, whose thoughts are incompatible with yours? My actions are exceedingly wicked. Surely, those who I have sacrificed would hate me and curse me for what I have already done. Are you not at the very toooop of that list?”

“If the issue is forgiving you or not, there’s no way in hell I’m forgiving you. What you’ve done to me, to me and to Emilia, isn’t something that can be forgiven. —But that’s an issue of my heart.”

There was no way he could fail to hate the man. Many of the hardships Subaru had suffered were crafted and set into motion by Roswaal, courtesy of the poison fangs he had meticulously prepared. That venom had wounded Subaru in mind and body both, even robbing him of his life, making him taste despair many times over. But—

“—You won’t be kicking up anything fatal like that again. Not if I resolve things, see?”

“Even if I cease to commit such crimes, wicked deeds are wicked deeds. Surely, this is not so convenient a tale?”

“Me, I just *love* convenient tales. Emilia’s gonna work hard and become King, and I’ll live happily ever after right by her side, so get on the bandwagon, damn it. Let me make clear: I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“___”

When Subaru closed one eye, winking as he spoke those words, Roswaal was literally agape.

From there, Roswaal's silence continued for a while, until finally, he covered his face with his own hands.

"Succeeding in your goals, while letting go of nothing? On top of that, taking in even me, a man with thoughts irreconcilable with yours, and counting me as one of the cornerstones upon which to build your future? Do you even understand, Subaru?"

"Do I even understand, what?"

"To just what extent your answer is infused with *greed*."

Roswaal's words made Subaru's expression shift…not into surprise, but a smile of remembrance.

Just prior to leaving the castle of dreams, Echidna had told him the exact same thing.

Witch and devil alike had identically appraised his greed. —And that was just fine with him.

"You're the one who said it, Roswaal."

His smile of remembrance became twisted as Subaru Natsuki responded with a wicked look.

"Backing me into a corner will make me the strongest card of all. —It won't be the way you wanted it, but I'll be the strongest card you can play against your enemies. Still not satisfied?"

"…And if this strongest card is ineffective…?"

"I won't have any more hands to play. Your victory will be complete. I'll be your minion or anything you want."

If Roswaal won, his scheme would be fulfilled. This time, the terms proposed sent Roswaal into prolonged, silent thought.

Subaru quietly waited for him to voice his reply. And then—

"No matter how much you struggle, you cannot hope to achieve a breakthrough. Lady Emilia cannot overcome the obstacle before her, and the barrier will not be unraveled. The Sanctuary will be buried in snow, and the

mansion will sink into a tragic spectacle of blood.”

“Yeah. —It’ll be worth it to see how you react when I screw all that up.”

Subaru raised his middle finger in a fit of annoyance. The gesture made Roswaal sigh, whereupon he lifted a finger of his own.

“Just as you will run around attempting to fulfill your victory conditions, I shall give one more push to fulfill that which is written within my book of knowledge. You have no complaints, I trust?”

“Well, can I take that to mean you’re going along with my proposal?”

“As you say, it is not a bad thing to do something for my successor… Nor do I lack interest in whether the results will be in accordance with what is wriiiitten.”

In a world already contradicting the book, Roswaal was declaring he would act according to its contents even so.

Before all was said and done, Subaru had to wreck Roswaal’s plans, saving everything and everyone.

“Now that this is decided, time is precious. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll get started.”

“Subaru.”

As Subaru turned his back on the bed, seemingly about to leave the room, Roswaal called out to him. When Subaru looked again at him, Roswaal averted his gaze ever so slightly.

“The snow in the Sanctuary, and the attack on the mansion, will occur in three days. —I expect a valiant battle from you, and an ignominious defeat.”

“Say what you want.”

Roswaal’s mundane sarcasm made Subaru click his tongue and come back with a retort. Then, Subaru pinched his own cheek a little.

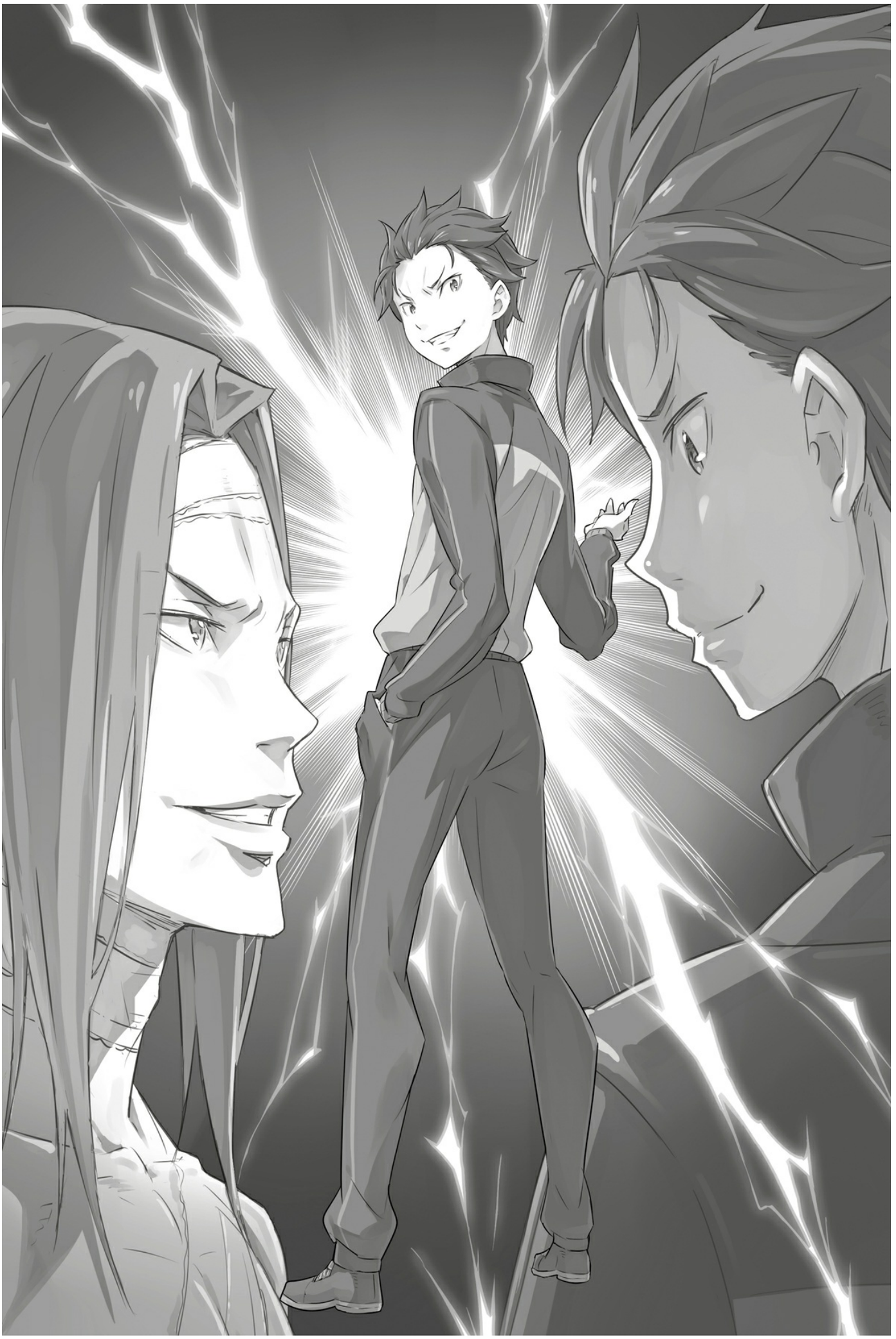
“Roswaal, you’re throwing me off my game here. Get that clown makeup back on, would ya?”

“Hmm. Come to mention it…this is the first time you have seen my bare face,

is it not?”

“I suppose in this world, it is.”

Once, in a world long left behind, they had entered the bath together. Subaru made a pained smile as he recalled the sight from back then that Roswaal knew nothing of.



“This is a bout between you and I, two clowns toyed with by fate. —Let’s do this fair and square.”

Leaving behind only those words, Subaru left the room.

They had come to terms on a wager over their incompatible desires. —And so, it began.

This was the start of Subaru Natsuki’s final challenge, to liberate the Sanctuary and save the mansion.

2

“—Barusu, you look like you are engaged in wicked deeds with your friend. What happened?”

Having formed a promise over the wager, Subaru was just leaving the building when a voice came from behind.

The bitter comment was all he needed to identify the speaker. When he turned back from the building’s entrance, Ram was leaning against the wall to the side of the door, hugging her own elbows as she stared intently at him.

“Stop talking about wicked deeds and stuff. That makes me sound super shady. You’ll scare people.”

“It aptly describes two little men quietly plotting about this and that, does it not? Master Roswaal permitted it so I did not interfere, but you should know your place.”

“…Sorry, Big Sis, but I’m not facing an opponent I can beat with halfhearted moves on the game board.”

As Subaru shrugged his shoulders, his reply made Ram narrow her eyes in a sour mood.

“You have done it several times, but please cease addressing me as *Big Sis*. Ram does not recall becoming Barusu’s elder sister. It is repulsive.”

“Saying *repulsive* is overkill, geez… Well, it’s like a bad habit. Forgive me, ’kay?”

“How self-serving of you. Why should Ram forgive such a…”

Right as she was about to strongly admonish him, Ram’s words came to a halt. This was probably because she noticed the deep, forlorn look in Subaru’s eyes. —It was not on purpose that Subaru called her Big Sis. He unthinkingly sought out her kindness.

In his moments of weakness, he leaned on Ram…because Ram let him.

“…I have no interest in your strange hobbies, Barusu.”

Just as planned, Ram accepted Subaru’s words as a joke without pursuing the issue further.

“I shall return to my initial question, then. —What is this conspiracy you are up to?”

“You really don’t beat around the bush, do you? You shouldn’t have been listening to me and Roswaal talking anyway…”

“Certainly, I was not listening. But I do have the means to peek.”

“…Clairvoyance, huh?”

When Ram pointed to her own eyes, Subaru remembered that she possessed the power of Clairvoyance. That ability allowed her to synchronize with another person’s eyes, pilfering their vision for her own—it was through this power that Ram had learned of the pair’s wager.

“You’re a serious housemaid to the core, but those poor manners are gonna make your master hate you.”

“It is the cute selfishness of a uniquely faithful spirit and a wavering maiden’s heart. Overlook it, please.”

Her statement was truly brazen in how it placed her on a pedestal, but Subaru hardened his cheeks. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to continue this fruitless conversation with her. He forced down such personal greed.

“Right now, is Roswaal accepting that cute maiden’s heart and faithful spirit?”

“___”

When Subaru posed his question, it was clear that Ram's emotionless expression had grown frostier. The edge of her pink gaze grew sharper still, but Subaru boldly took a step forward, closing the physical and psychological distance between them.

"You're the one taking care of his needs. You've seen his black book, haven't you?"

"If I told you, what would you do with the answer?"

"I'm taking that as a *yes*, okay?"

Subaru interpreted her demeanor as a clear attempt to evade a direct reply—meaning Ram knew of the book of knowledge. Indeed, Ram had not denied Subaru's assertion.

Ram knew of the book of knowledge. It was unclear whether her eyes had perused its pages, but…

"What's written in that book decides whether Roswaal takes a left turn or right. But letting him do as it says is no good. All hell will break loose in the Sanctuary. And if that happens, everyone'll…"

"Do you think speaking such words will move Ram's heart? If so, how shallow you are, Barusu."

When Subaru tried redoubling his words with an explanation, Ram crisply and sternly cut him off. The light in her eyes did not waver, not even as Subaru suggested Roswaal's actions would lead to a dead end.

"To Ram, there is only one thing that can be placed above all else. This is absolute. It will never waver. Therefore, if it is your hope to change Ram's heart, please stop."

"…There's no such thing as absolutes, Ram."

"Watch what you speak. —I shall not warn you again."

When Ram took Subaru's suppressed words as mocking her loyalty, her voice grew barbed. But Subaru's denial was not about Ram's feelings toward Roswaal.

It was directed at Ram herself, who had forgotten her other half, the most important thing to her in life. It was toward her using the word *absolute*.

“Barusu. —Do you really…expect something out of Lady Emilia?”

That was why, while turned toward a door, Ram continuing the conversation over her shoulder was truly unexpected.

Her emotions remained hidden as Ram tossed the question Subaru’s way. He immediately realized this was revenge—having questioned Ram about her loyalty, she was now questioning his own.

“Yeah, I do. I trust her. She asked me to support her and everything.”

Subaru replied to Ram’s question honestly and without reserve.

Even while respecting Emilia choice to challenge the Trial herself, he’d schemed to push the matter away several times over. However, this was not because he viewed it as impossible for her and had given up.

He’d never questioned whether she *could* overcome it, not even once. Subaru had arbitrarily judged that time did not permit it, and nothing more.

“…Lady Emilia being unable to overcome the Trial is through no fault of her own.”

“Ram?”

“There is a reason she stumbles without knowing why herself. Being unaware of this, she merely repeats herself, to no avail.”

Without touching upon Subaru’s proverbial question mark, Ram said only this before opening the door.

Before her petite physique vanished into the building’s interior, Subaru instantly opened his mouth.

“Ram, the situation’s already contradicting what the book says. —Roswaal is free.”

He didn’t think of it as returning the favor for her words of advice. But he put the words on his lips all the same.

The events had already strayed from what was written in the book of knowledge, and the world proceeded apace toward a new future. It was yet to be determined whether this was linked to tragedy, with all laid to ruin, or to

breaking through fate itself—

“___”

When Ram receded from sight, closing the door behind her, Subaru let out a sigh. In the end, Ram’s position had not changed, nor had she spoken of things beyond her personal opinion.

“But she gave a lot more advice than I expected. Maybe she likes me, too…”

“—Are you still speaking such things? I believe the person concerned would be quite angry if she overheard you…”

“This Feel-the-Love Campaign is still ongoing. Go ahead and give me more good news to celebrate if you’d like.”

As Subaru shot the breeze, Otto, with leaves stuck to his hat, emerged from the shadow of a nearby tree, which he had been hiding behind. The sight made it hard for Subaru to deny Ram’s assertion he was engaging in “wicked deeds.”

“Hiding ’cause you’re scared of Ram? She won’t bite. She’s not as scary as she looks.”

“I think that would also make her angry if she overheard it…! …At the moment, Ram is cooperating with the Marquis, so that makes us enemies of a sort, yes? It’s only natural to be wary of her.”

“Ram, an enemy?”

Subaru was fairly surprised when Otto made that assertion with eyes of reproach. In return, Otto gave him a questioning look, leaving Subaru agape at his own self.

Otto’s thinking was certainly correct. Given her position, Ram was on the opposing side. He should have thought of it in those terms from the beginning. Though he knew she couldn’t be counted on as an ally, he’d still arbitrarily assumed she was a neutral party in this contest of wills.

“*Haa*… Mr. Natsuki, I understand just how much you have trusted Miss Ram in the past. There are also your feelings for Miss Rem remaining back at the mansion, to be sure.”

“Just lay off for a second, all right? I’m still reeling from how naive I’ve been.”

“That is fine and well. Self-awareness is important. —But more importantly, what of the Marquis?”

Having finished with his opening jabs, Otto cut straight to the point. Subaru twisted his cheeks as he jutted a thumb straight up.

“Negotiations were a success. The bet’s been made.”

“I am relieved to hear it. Well, I certainly thought he would go along, but tripping up here would have made all the plans for what follows come to naught.”

“You’re quite an optimist…it was plenty possible Roswaal wouldn’t go for it, right?”

“Very little, really. —The Marquis appears to lack experience with losing.”

As Otto sank his shoulders, Subaru went “Aha,” accepting his view.

Certainly, just as Otto supposed, Roswaal seemed strong in a fight. He was cunning, and he had guts, too. In fact, 80 percent or so of the crises Subaru had been placed in were schemes of Roswaal’s devising.

“A human being who schemes that much will not back down, for if he did, it would be none other than himself who he betrays. There is also the fact that it would seem like weakness…”

“Ohh, somehow, you feel really dependable… You haven’t died by any chance, have you?”

“I am quite alive! Besides, please stop flattering me. When I let compliments go to my head, I am bound to trip up somewhere soon. I speak from vast experience.”

“Not that I’m one to talk, but that’s some sad experience…”

Both of them lost often enough that they could not relax, even if the circumstances seemed to be running smoothly.

Either way, Otto had made his own proposals, which had set the stage for the showdown with Roswaal. Of course, in the end, this succeeded only in creating the preliminary conditions, but—

“—At least I avoided having to play this game all by my lonesome.”

“For the moment…however, this is still only the first game board. And we must discuss the next…”

No temporary sense of accomplishment arose in Otto as he immediately switched over to the next issue at hand. At this point, Subaru crossed his arms and donned a grim face. The creases of his brow displayed his inner discord. The cause was—

“…Garfiel, huh?”

Otto led the conversation toward a single answer—namely, the conclusion that Garfiel’s cooperation was necessary and irreplaceable for breaking free of the Sanctuary.

To date, Subaru and Garfiel had borne enmity toward each other several times; at times, this descended into killing. Subaru could not forget how his fangs and claws ripped the people dear to him to shreds. Naturally, he had not forgotten his anger, either.

“Certainly, he is a moody opponent, but in the present situation, he is the easiest to bring onto our side. His position is different from that of the Marquis, whose views are absolutely irreconcilable with yours. Surely, you understand this, Mr. Natsuki?”

The explanation came from none other than Otto, who had been a murder victim himself once. Subaru nodded solemnly.

If Subaru ignored his own reluctance, it wasn’t impossible to fight alongside Garfiel. Indeed, Subaru had cooperated with him twice already.

The first was against the Witch, and the second was to confront Roswaal. Both had resulted in tragedy, but…

“So the only problem is how I feel, isn’t it…”

“Well then, please forget about that here and now and let us speak of it no more.”

“Forget and speak of it no more…man, that’s easy for you to say.”

Subaru was less angry than taken aback at how bluntly Otto had put it.

However, he said “Now see here?” as he thrust a reproachful finger forward.

“Mr. Natsuki, we have no time for this. There is no time to worry about such sentiment. As we speak, time is steadily passing us by. It is the same as merchandise growing stale. Before irrevocable damage is incurred, we must set aside our personal feelings. They are unproductive, *unproductive*!”

“I—I get it, I get it… Really, you’re a lifesaver.”

To Otto, who was urging him to use all of his head rather than part of it, Subaru let the last part of his sentence trickle out in a small voice.

He needed to cut off his emotions and deal with the top priorities. In terms of cutting things away, Otto’s demand differed little from Roswaal’s. And yet, it felt like a world of difference to him.

“Guess whether it’s looking forward, backward, or sideways, the speaker makes a big difference…”

“We have no time for idle banter. That is not your job, Mr. Natsuki.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Against Garfiel, the key would be the Witch’s advice that he was *afraid of the outside world.*

He hated relying on Echidna, but in this current situation, he couldn’t let himself get hung up on that. If he wasn’t going to depend on Return by Death, he needed to use anything he could, be it a cat’s paw or the words of a Witch with a foul personality.

“I will do as we planned. As for Emilia…”

“That’s the one thing I won’t let you stick your hand into. I suppose I can’t exactly stick mine in, either.”

Subaru was unsure whether he should have nodded his head or shaken it from side to side in response to Otto’s worry.

Having lost his qualifications, Subaru could not aid with the Trial. The tomb’s barrier could only be undone by Emilia challenging the Trial. At the very least, if he only could find a clue…

Even though he knew that clue was to be found in Emilia's past, a past she feared, filled with excessive grief—

"I still haven't asked Emilia about it. In the end, I guess I chickened out."

Unable to watch Emilia shed tears after she was crushed by the Trial, he had not confirmed anything beyond that. He'd danced around the issue…it was the price of having a weak, loving, tender heart.

"Because I didn't have the courage to stare straight at her scars, I gave her a pat on the head to console her and pretended to not notice. How many times do I have to repeat that before I learn…"

"——My goodness. I have to question your love if you can't even handle this much. Please stop playing innocent all the time. It is quite ridiculous."

"…Why, you…"

Subaru twisted his lips over Otto's rush of words, making light of the somewhat embarrassing exchange. Sighing deeply at his reaction, Otto lightly stretched on the spot.

"Well then, have you resolved to treat Lady Emilia's wounds?"

"Resolved to ask if it's okay for me to, at least. Unlike with Garfiel, I'm not afraid it's gonna get me killed."

"I am somewhat torn whether it is all right to laugh about that."

If he carelessly picked at Garfiel's wounds and earned his ire, that would simply put him mortal danger. Compared with that, he had no concerns about asking Emilia, save a fear of being intrusive.

What spurred him to do so was Ram's words of advice: that Emilia stumbled without even realizing why.

"So for that, too, it all comes down to my Emilia…huh?"

"She is not yours yet, Mr. Natsuki. I suppose that is me telling you in Lady Emilia's stead?"

"Oh, shaddap."

Glossing over his worries with a frivolous tongue, Subaru turned a clenched

fist in Otto's way. Seeing this, Otto scratched his head, then answered in kind, meeting Subaru's fist with his.

"Anyway, we gotta do this. Let's have one hell of a party when everything's settled. Don't screw up, man."

"Indeed. For the sake of not just yours, but my own sparkling future, I'd certainly like it if everything goes nicely."

"Don't talk about stuff like your own sparkling future. You're worrying me."

"Just what do you mean by that?!"

After wrapping up their exchange, the two bumped their fists together and turned away from each other.

Otto had his role to play and Subaru had his. With this in mind, he took the first step toward fulfilling his role and headed for the forest—his feet hastening to the place hidden within.

3

—When he placed the crystal into the white wall, the dazzling light gushing forth filled his vision.

"…Even when you know it's coming, it's still a surprise."

Covering his face with an arm, Subaru commented idly as he waited for the blue light to abate. Then he timidly lowered his arm, looked at the brightly lit wall, and was relieved to find what he had sought.

"The fact the wall opened up means that even if I'm stripped of the challenger status, I still haven't been expelled from the Apostles. Is this Echidna's scheming or a simple oversight…? I'll bet Otto's soul that it's just an oversight."

Speaking such words, Subaru used the crystal as a key to a hidden room—and stepped into the Ryuzu Meyer replication facility, which was hidden deep in the forest of the Sanctuary.

Inside, Subaru eyes found a giant crystal and the girl sealed within it. Arriving to find the sight utterly unchanged from before, this served as proof that Subaru's status remained similarly unchanged.

This was one method for Subaru to confirm his status as an Apostle of Greed. He had paid this place a visit with that exact intent. Besides, coming here meant that—

“I can meet the people involved, too. But the smell here is just awful. Wouldn’t it be better to clean this out?”

“—I am of the same opinion, but it is a measure to prevent insects and small animals from approaching. If you wish to complain, I would prefer you lodged it with its wily designer.”

“Nah, I’ll pass. I don’t want to meet her ever again if I can help it.”

With this, Subaru trained a pained smile toward the figure who had appeared at the entrance to the hidden room. It was a girl with long, pink hair—Ryuzu, an individual with an elderly air about her. Walking over, the girl stood beside Subaru, gazing up due to their height difference as she peered into his black eyes. The air felt parched as she squinted at him with her round eyes.

“Now then, from the fact that you are here and the statement just now…it would appear you are already rather well versed concerning us?”

“It’s pretty much what you suspect. I already have a general idea about that… and the purpose of this place.”

“I see. I had wondered if that might be the case when you went into the tomb to bring out Lady Emilia last night…there is now no question that you are a qualified Apostle.”

Ryuzu was surprised by Subaru’s reply but immediately nodded in acceptance. Somehow, she had a tired expression on her face; the look in her eyes was rich in deep sentiment.

“So it is you, Young Su, who Young Ros was waiting for…”

“Ah, sorry. That plotline’s been scrapped. The editors said the readers don’t want to see that.”

“—Huh?”

“Also, I want to confirm something about what you said just now. Somethin’ really important.”

The way he ignored her solemn discovery with a lighthearted demeanor took Ryuzu aback. But while she was still reeling, Subaru placed a hand on her shoulder, earnestly meeting her eye to eye.

“Ryuzu, how much do you know about Roswaal’s thinking?”

“Young Su…?”

“Tell me, Ryuzu. I don’t want to think of you as an enemy.”

Staying in place, Subaru bowed his head as he pleaded to Ryuzu. His intensity brought a conflicted look over Ryuzu. Finally, the corners of her eyebrows fell.

“If you wish to ask, you need only exercise your rights as an Apostle and ask away. I am sure that at your age, you must love being able to do with a girl as you please, Young Su.”

“I might be a young man, but your outward appearance is outside my suitable age range, Ryuzu. Besides—”

“Besides?”

“I don’t want to rely on command rights to talk to a replica. I came to talk to *you*, Ryuzu.”

Subaru’s words made Ryuzu’s breath catch. Her somewhat long ears trembled in surprise.

If all he cared about were results, Subaru should have brandished his rights as an Apostle right then and there. But if he treated Ryuzu as a replica—a doll—Subaru felt he would end up damaging something important to him.

—As long as there was life, a future, hope, possibilities. Yes, that was what Roswaal had said.

Subaru didn’t think he was mistaken about that. But that was all. Roswaal was not correct, either. The proper path surely rested elsewhere.

That was why Subaru wanted to speak to Ryuzu the proper way.

“…All I know is that Young Ros inherited a book from Her Lady the Witch.”

Perhaps his sentiments had gotten through, for the surprise in Ryuzu’s eyes faded as she haltingly began to speak.

“Surely, one part of what is written within the book is to administer the Sanctuary. This, and all else, is for the sake of greeting the awaited one…yes, it was a previous generation of Roswaals from which I heard this.”

“That’s it, huh?”

“I swear, that is all. Or do you wish to question whether it is true or false as an Apostle?”

“…I’m gonna pass. I trust you, Ryuzu.”

Perhaps it was more precise to say he wanted to believe her.

Drawing in her chin, seemingly satisfied by Subaru’s reply, Ryuzu looked at the hand resting on her shoulder.

“I must say, though, this is quite passionate of you. It makes even my heart beat a little faster.”

“That’s painting a problematic picture, but still, this is a big help. I mean, Ryuzu, if even you turned out to be a devil, I would’ve been this close to ordering you as an Apostle to go sink into a smelter or something…”

“You are a boy who likes saying very scary things with that childish face of yours, aren’t you…?”

When Subaru removed his hand from her shoulder, Ryuzu tut-tutted as she slapped her hip. It felt like an act of consideration to brush the stifling atmosphere aside. Going along with it, Subaru let his cheeks slacken.

And then, having finished checking up on the initial scare, Ryuzu inclined her head.

“Now, from the look of things, this is no trifling matter. Young Su, are you in some kind of argument with Young Ros?”

“It sounds more impressive to call it a match than an argument. The results will be better for everyone if I win, so I wanted you to cooperate with me, too, Ryuzu…”

“Young men resort to posturing so quickly… So what kind of dispute is it?”

“The easiest way to put it is: What’s the best way to liberate the Sanctuary, I

guess?”

So far as their relationship with Ryuzu and the others was concerned, the conflict between Subaru and Roswaal began and ended with that. Both wanted the barrier lifted; the only difference was in how to bring that about.

Subaru pinned his hopes on Emilia; Roswaal pinned his hopes on Subaru.

“And I know that while you support liberating the Sanctuary on the surface, you’re actually part of the opposition. And that Garfiel holds the same opinion.”

Finally, Subaru cut to the heart of the matter, which he hadn’t had a chance to directly confirm to date.

Previously, he had heard from Ram that not all residents of the Sanctuary supported its liberation. Some residents were part of a faction that wanted to remain.

Subaru was already confident that Ryuzu and Garfiel formed the vanguard of this remain faction and were the ones wielding the most influence within it.

Once before during that loop, Subaru proposed that he liberate the Sanctuary on his own. But the proposal courted Ryuzu’s ire and resulted in Garfiel crushing his plans by force. It could mean only one thing: Neither of the two desired the liberation of the Sanctuary.

“I understand how you feel. I don’t intend to stand here and say heading outside is the absolute right thing to do. I understand the feeling of not wanting to change your environment. But…”

Opening a path to the outside created change, like it or not. It was instinctual to disdain this and seek to protect the present status quo, which was familiar. He didn’t want to force that sentiment down. However—

“But it’ll inevitably bring misfortune, and that’s something I can’t let happen. This once, it’s necessary, by hook or by crook.”

In the near future, disaster would strike the Sanctuary. When that time came, the only thing remaining would be death. To avert this catastrophe, the barrier had to be lifted.

He needed to liberate this place. But the decisions did not end there.

“If it comes down to it, you can make a choice then and there. Whether one stays or goes can be left up to each person. But I won’t let you keep the door locked. On that, I won’t budge.”

“Young Su.”

“I don’t want to resort to it, but I will if I have no choice. So please don’t make me. Let’s settle this by talking to each other.”

He didn’t want to depend on his right of compulsion as an Apostle or anything like that. That was why he desperately wanted to settle things through dialogue.

“That’s why…er, um, Ryuzu?”

When he raised his resolve-imbued face, Subaru furrowed his brows, perplexed. In front of Subaru, contrary to his expectations, Ryuzu listened to his words with what felt like a very conflicted look.

Then, her face still conflicted, Ryuzu audibly cleared her throat.

“Ahem. I am sorry to interrupt when you are being so heartfelt…but where did you hear that I oppose liberating the Sanctuary?”

“—Somewhere that’s not quite here. You don’t need to hide it.”

“Don’t go spouting something vague like Young Garand give me a serious reply. Where did you hear such idle gossip?”

“Idle gossip…er, um, I heard it myself, with my very own ears…”

Faced with Ryuzu’s souring demeanor, Subaru’s voice gradually lost its strength. After that, Subaru gulped, his eyes faintly avoiding Ryuzu’s gaze.

“…Ryuzu, don’t tell me you’re actually not opposed to liberating the Sanctuary?”

“As far as whether to lift the barrier, I have no intention of obstructing its removal. Just as you said, Young Su, whether one stays or goes should be an individual choice…that is what I believe.”

“The hell?! That’s crazy!”

This unanticipated comeback sent Subaru reeling. He had come here with the

intention of persuading Ryuzu, who apparently held Garfiel's reins. And that was supposed to put him one step closer to dealing with Garfiel, the lynchpin to all his plans. Her reply had shaken those plans to the core. —No, disrupting those plans was far from the only issue.

"Then, that time, why did you…? I was sure I was being imprisoned so that I couldn't liberate the Sanctuary. If I'm wrong, what was that all about?"

Clutching his head in confusion, Subaru desperately tried to make sense of all the inconsistencies. Ryuzu, watching Subaru with narrowed eyes, let out a delicate sigh.

"This is all quite a jumble… But I cannot dismiss your doubts as pure delusion."

"Ryuzu? Do you have any idea what…?"

"Before that, Young Su, I wish to ask you something."

Interrupting the hasty Subaru's flustered thoughts, Ryuzu's serene eyes seemed sincere as she spoke.

What is she going to ask me? thought Subaru, blinking his eyes in surprise as Ryuzu hesitated ever so slightly.

"…Young Su, what do you think of Young Gar?"

The question came out of the blue, but Subaru immediately understood the reason for her unease.

"Ahh, I see…that figures, huh."

Subaru's acceptance of what was natural became a sigh that trickled out from his lips.

It wasn't complicated. Ryuzu was worried about Garfiel. From their conversation to this point, anyone could tell that there was antagonism between Subaru and Garfiel.

That would no doubt have an impact on relationships after the Sanctuary was liberated. To Ryuzu, it was unmistakably a major issue that went well beyond her personal affairs. That was why—

“To be honest, I don’t have a good impression of him. At this point, he’s my closest potential enemy.”

Thinking that hiding it was futile, Subaru offered Ryuzu a crisp answer. His reply made Ryuzu lower her eyes. “I see…” was her faint response.

However, seeing with that sunken expression, Subaru continued, “But.

“By closest potential enemy, I mean that he’s the one I’ll clash with first. Once that’s taken care of, I won’t know if we can get along well or not until everything’s said and done.”

“Ah…”

“To figure that out, among other things, I’d want to learn more about him, see…”

Scratching his cheek, Subaru resigned himself to coming off as someone spinning a convenient tale. But these were not words he had chosen because they sounded good; they expressed Subaru’s true views.

Just like Roswaal, he didn’t harbor a good impression of Garfiel. But he’d confirmed for himself Garfiel did not have a wicked heart on Roswaal’s level, leaving Subaru with no reason to make an enemy of him.

“…You are good at pulling the wool over your elders, Young Su.”

“Ryuzu, you’re seriously trying my reputation in the neighborhood, aren’t you?”

Ryuzu shook her head with a muted smile. Then, taking a step forward, she placed a hand on the blue crystal before her—the object that touched her very own roots.

“It seems you heard about us from our mistress the Witch…that we are replicas of Ryuzu Meyer…or perhaps, the objective for which the replicas were created.”

“…I know that it was an experiment in immortality, and you and the others are the products of that experiment.”

Strictly speaking, it was not Echidna, but Ryuzu herself from whom he heard the explanation on a previous lap. That briefing included how the Sanctuary

containing Echidna's tomb was a laboratory for her search for immortality, that Ryuzu was an example of its success, and that the replicas' roles were to serve as vessels in which to pour a soul.

Also, that even among the replicas in that place, Ryuzu held a special, individual role.

"I am one of the original four. Even now, I watch over the magic crystal as more replicas continue to be born. I bear the duties of administrator and overseer. The four of us were to bear these duties in sequence."

"I heard the part about being one of the first four. So besides you, Ryuzu, there's three other people?"

"Four…people, is it. It is likely inappropriate to count us, born by unnatural means, as people…"

"I don't want to treat you, who's currently living a full life as a loli hag, like some doll. Don't try to convince me otherwise, okay? The other three people… wait."

Breaking off his words there, Subaru licked his dry lips once.

Instantly, a sense of déjà vu arose. Something stood out in his memories. Subaru carefully selected his words for the question that needed to be asked.

—On a previous time going through the loop, Ryuzu herself had made a request to him.

Her role had been assigned. They sought individuality in all other things: in tastes, in hobbies, and in names. Therefore, what he needed to ask at that point was—

"My name is Subaru Natsuki… Ryuzu, what's your name?"

"___"

Ryuzu narrowed her eyes at the question, looking like she was gazing at something that dazzled bright.

"My name…is Ryuzu Arma. I am…one of the first four replicas."

"—Arma."

As Ryuzu gave her personal name, Subaru repeated it, closing his eyes. He nodded but once.

“The Ryuzu I first met named herself Ryuzu Bilma, I’m pretty sure. Meaning you didn’t have any intention of hiding it at the start, did you, Ryuzu?”

When he asked for her name, she answered. —For hiding it meant repudiating the very individuality she had gained.

Finally, Subaru understood, too. The four Ryuzus, the overseers of the Sanctuary, shared their role with one another. The four had been pretending to be a single person.

“But why go through all that trouble? Couldn’t you have just acted like quadruplets?”

“Our replica bodies are not of flesh and blood, but false *Odo* shrouded in mana. Mana depletes according to how active the body is. It is insufficient for even a full day’s worth of activity.”

“I see, it’s just like with spirits! So to make sure your job doesn’t go unfilled during the time you can’t materialize, a substitute Ryuzu does the job for you!”

Subaru snapped his fingers; it all made sense. But he did think it was an awkward way to live.

Ryuzu’s role of overseer was being performed by multiple people. One could also say that four people’s lives were chained to that single role. That was—

“—That is a matter for the ones in question to take on. To interfere in that would be an act of arrogance, Young Su.”

“…I get that. I won’t say a word if you don’t have a problem with it, Ryuzu. But.”

“But?”

“If you don’t accept it, please tell me. Then I’ll have Roswaal put you four girls…or maybe it should be dozens of sisters…on a family register, even if I have to smack him.”

If the replicas of Ryuzu Meyer, numbering over twenty, who existed in the Sanctuary intended to search for a life beyond that of a replica, Subaru wanted

to help.

“Young Su…mm-hmm, you are a good child.”

The term *family register* probably didn’t get across, but Subaru’s intent must have been conveyed nonetheless.

Ryuzu smiled, her eyes filled with the same affection as if gazing at a baby. This was doubtlessly the glimmer of individuality that Ryuzu Arma had gained over the lengthy passage of time.

“…Ahem. Anyway I get it. I get it, so let’s get back to the original discussion.”

“You may blush all you like. That said, it is I who began this discussion… The four originals fulfilling the role of overseer, myself included, shared the same intent. Had we not, we would have been unable to act as if we were a single person. However, this only remained true until ten years ago.”

“Ten years ago?”

“Ryuzu Shima. —She who has strayed from the original four, and the one and only exception to this rule.”

She named the person that ought to have shouldered the same role as her.

Ryuzu Shima—the one from the original four who had strayed from her duty as overseer. Subaru remembered hearing her name. The first one he had met was Bilma; the one before his eyes was Arma. And—

“I shall uphold my promise. I shall tell no one. —This, I swear upon the name of Ryuzu Shima.”

—On that problematic night, those final words had been the trigger for his imprisonment.

The Ryuzu who had been together with Garfiel in that place had named herself Shima. And Subaru had most likely been incarcerated by Garfiel on this Shima’s orders.

“Ryuzu…Shima…”

“Yes. The issue arose roughly ten years ago. She was relieved of her duty as an overseer and has lived in the forest like the other replicas ever since.

Accordingly, it is now three people who fulfill the role of overseer.”

“What was the issue that got this Shima stripped of her duty?”

When Subaru asked about the details from ten years prior, Ryuzu hesitated. However, it only lasted a single second. Ryuzu sighed, perhaps thinking that silence came off as insincerity.

“—She defied our vow to our creator, the Witch. Accordingly, she was stripped of her duty.”

“By vow, you mean…”

“Ryuzu Shima defied the vow by entering the tomb. She went against the Witch’s command, entering the tomb to bring back Young Gar…Garfiel, who had not returned from the Trial.”

“___”

Upon receiving that explanation, Subaru felt a jolt run through him as disparate pieces of information inside him were linked together.

Garfiel had challenged the Trial, only to fail and become an Apostle of Greed. Ryuzu Shima, who had brought him back, had been stripped of her duty as overseer. And multiple replicas were playing the role of Ryuzu the overseer.

So the reason Garfiel opposed liberating the Sanctuary, even resorting to force to do so, was that—

“Shima put the idea in his head? She was stripped of her duty for rescuing Garfiel from the tomb, and that became her reason for being against liberating the Sanctuary?”

“That, I know not. I have never met Shima since she was stripped of her duty. But it would not be strange for Young Gar to have…met with Shima, for they share memories in a fashion we do not.”

“Memories that you other Ryuzus…don’t have…”

“—What Young Gar saw in the Trial at the tomb was the past.”

When Ryuzu lowered her eyes and replied, Subaru went “Ah,” letting his voice trickle out like a village idiot. And he felt the hazy connection between Garfiel

and Ryuzu grow stronger and more distinct.

Garfiel knew it was Shima who had saved him. And as for Garfiel's past, what Garfiel felt toward that past, and what feelings he harbored about it up to that very moment—only Shima knew.

"Young Su, do you know of Young Gar's family?"

"Only a bit. I know that Frederica is Garfiel's sister through a different father, and that's why their family names are different. Also, how only Frederica, who's thin-blooded, left the Sanctuary ten years ago…"

After getting that far, the *ten years ago* time frame made Subaru open his eyes wide. What if the events of ten years prior made up the barb deeply embedded in Garfiel's heart…?

"Don't tell me—the past that Garfiel saw was the sight of Frederica leaving?"

"No, it is not so. Fuu…Frederica left the Sanctuary after Young Gar took the Trial. Therefore, what he saw was surely…"

After correcting Subaru's mistaken assumption, Ryuzu trailed off at the end. It was the hesitation of a human being who had a strong suspicion. Then, after a pause of several seconds, Ryuzu voiced her thoughts aloud.

"—What that child saw was most likely when he parted with his mother."

With a *shudder*, Subaru felt like something had torn into his own chest.

Leaving your mother—and in the Trial, at that—hit Subaru close to home.

"If that child of ten years ago had seen something powerful enough to leave scars upon his heart, it must be parting with his mother. I cannot think of anything it could be, save for when Young Gar and Fuu's mother left them here."

"Parting with his mother…and being left behind…"

When Subaru put the possible past on his lips, to be blunt, he felt a little disappointed.

It would be wrong to quite call it *hope*. But he'd imagined a much grander past than that.

But if Ryuzu's guess was correct, and Garfiel separating with his mother was the barb driven into his heart…

"Him obstructing the Sanctuary's liberation isn't caused by negative feelings for the outside world so much as…for the mother who chose it over him…?"

"Perhaps he hates it. There is also Fuu leaving after the fact. The outside world stole his mother and his elder sister from him. Even if he wanted to go after them, there is the barrier blocking the path. He cannot bring us outside with him. Surely, the child anguished over who is more important to him…his family or us."

"I'm sure he's still doing it…Hey, does he actually resent or hate his mother?"

Garfiel's anguish was one that was impossible for Subaru to understand.

Through thick and thin, Subaru's parents had never abandoned him or given up on him.

It was because he had been so blessed that the notion gave Subaru pause.

"That child came to call himself Garfiel Tinzel. That is the family name of the child's mother. I believe Garfiel calls himself this so that I do not forget about her."

"So that you…don't forget…"

Nodding at Subaru's words, Ryuzu looked up at the crystal, narrowing her eyes. She had her own issues that were difficult to forget. She gazed at their core, seemingly thinking of Garfiel as she did so.

"He did this so that the feelings he harbors for his past are not forgotten. — Whether this is out of anger or sadness is something known only to him and Shima."

4

He knocked on the room's door, waiting for several seconds. But there was no response. When he turned the knob and easily let himself in, Subaru knit his brows at the carelessness of it.

"This is a security issue. Have to tell her to properly lock up…"

He grumbled to himself as he peered into the room through the gap made by the opened door. His intent was not to peek out of inquisitiveness, but to confirm whether there was a person inside sleeping defenseless.

Fortunately, there was no one present on the bed at the back of the room. He was relieved by this, but also a bit conflicted.

“Dang, I heard she was in her room. Where is sh…”

“…Subaru?”

“Er, ah? Emilia-tan, you’re here?”

Subaru was struck by surprise to hear only a voice, with the girl herself nowhere in sight, whereupon a white hand slowly emerged from the other side of the bed. It belonged to an individual sitting on the floor there.

“What’s wrong, Emilia-tan, sitting on the floor like that? You’ll get your butt dirty.”

“Er, I was tossing and turning in my sl…sorry, that’s a lie. Really, I was having a bit of trouble sleeping.”

“That’s an odd thing to lie about. I’ll pretend I didn’t hear it…but I see.”

Hugging her knees as she sat on the floor, Emilia greeted Subaru with a guilty look on her face. The whiff of gloom upon her comely, lovely features had likely been caused by a lack of sleep and overwork, just as she had stated.

There was no mistaking the mental strain. Subaru knew, having had plenty of experience sitting alone on a sleepless night.

“Did you sleep a little after meeting me last night?”

“…Mm.”

He did not take her frail nod to mean *yes*, but merely as conveying that she was listening to him.

This was hardly the only loop that involved greeting the morning without having slept a wink. All-nighters caused a gradual collapse as both mind and body were worn away.

“…Sorry. Making you see me in a sorry state like this.”

“Emilia?”

“And it was only yesterday I asked you to watch me do my best, Subaru. I can’t have you seeing me weak like this, can I? It’s all right. I’m going to sleep properly until nightfall, so…”

Emilia pinched her own cheek as if to show an obviously worried Subaru that she was trying to bolster her spirits. This somehow adorable expression of resolve made Subaru spontaneously loosen his lips.

“Emilia-tan, it’s almost noon. Announcing you’re going to sleep from now until sunset…that’s sloth.”

“Ugh…somehow, the way you worded that makes me feel *really* weird. Subaru, you meanie.”

After Subaru’s flippant words made Emilia smile, the two proceeded to spend a few brief, relaxed moments together.

He admired Emilia’s determination and resolve. Emilia’s words from the night before had not only smashed Subaru’s conceit but also showed she, too, had courage. It was an important realization.

Emilia had said she wanted him to support her. Subaru had come to do just that.

“—Emilia. Are you willing to talk to me about…what you saw in the Trial?”

“—!”

When Subaru shattered the gentle, lingering atmosphere, cutting straight to the point, Emilia’s breath caught. Grief spread across her violet eyes. Before she could wipe it away, Subaru pressed the issue further.

“I heard from Ryuzu and the others, so I know that you see your past in the Trial. You see your hardest moments from the past…and I know that’s the reason you’re suffering.”

The only reason Subaru was passing it off as hearsay was to conceal that he had his own experience challenging the Trial. Having already lost his qualifications, talking about his encounters with Echidna would only court confusion.

Besides, in that moment, he wanted to devote all his feelings for Emilia's benefit.

"I was happy when you told me you want me to support you. That's why I want to help you…properly, and not just try to keep you all to myself. So I want to know what's worrying you."

"Subaru…"

"I won't claim anything like *talking will make it easier*. But if you talk about it, we can at least worry about it together. I don't know how dependable I'll be, but won't you let me fight the same enemy you are?"

He had lost the qualifications to take Emilia's place, to fight the suffering pouring down onto her in her stead.

Therefore, Subaru hoped to come close and give Emilia a shoulder to lean on when she was tired.

"___"

Perplexed, Emilia fell silent. Subaru quietly awaited her reply.

The sway of Emilia's eyes bespoke of her profound gloom. A vortex of various agonies raged within Emilia: bewilderment, hesitation, guilt, self-loathing.

But finally, Emilia closed her eyes tight.

"Subaru…Subaru, you'll believe me…"

Won't you…? were the words surely to follow, but Emilia did not voice them. Her nobility would not permit the unfairness of doubting someone who was asserting his sincerity.

…The very unfairness that Subaru had once beaten into Emilia, unable to resist trying to monopolize her for himself.

"I…I think that the past I see is probably from before I slept."

Opening her closed eyes, Emilia haltingly began to tell her tale.

…The tale of the wounds of her past, the memories she had harbored all alone that she'd kept Subaru from touching all this time.

Drawing in his breath at her confession, Subaru took Emilia's hand into his

own.

“Thank you for talking to me… This could get long, right? We should sit.”

“Mm, yeah.”

Nodding, Emilia sat upon the bed, with Subaru sitting down right beside her. When Emilia deepened her brow, seemingly unsure of what to speak of, Subaru glanced at the side of her face as he spoke:

“Hey, I don’t want to interrupt, but what do you mean ‘before you slept’?”

“…I haven’t told you about being in the ice all that time, have I, Subaru?”

“Inside the ice…wait, do you mean while frozen?”

The unexpected words made Subaru blink. For a moment, an image from the facility in the forest—the crystal in which Ryuzu Meyer was sealed—came into the back of his mind. Strictly speaking, that differed from being frozen, but the images were terribly similar. Provided that Subaru had not misunderstood…

“I was frozen in the forest for a long time. A very, very long time until Puck found me…he said I’d been sleeping within the ice.”

After a pause, Emilia’s confession established that Subaru’s striking mental image…had indeed been true.

“___”

Touching the crystal at her neck in which Puck was sealed, Emilia closed her eyes. No doubt the memory of the spirit at her side when she had awoken was playing out on the back of her eyelids.

That was probably when the loving bonds of trust between Emilia and Puck had begun.

While he certainly felt envy for that, the keywords *ice* and *forest* stimulated Subaru’s memory.

“—I see, the Eternally Frozen Great Elior Forest! Come to think of it, back at the royal selection meeting…”

His memories of the opening speech conducted at the site of the royal selection returned to him.

With a great throng of people surrounding them in the royal court, Emilia had most certainly spoken of herself: that she had lived in the forest, spending *a long time* within it…

—And how she had lived in the frozen forest and had been called *The Freezing Witch*.

“Emilia, if you were in ice in the forest all that time…exactly how long were you there?”

“…My memories are really hazy. I was probably…six or seven at the time.”

“Six or seven…do elves count years the same way humans do?”

As Subaru counted on his fingers, Emilia meekly nodded.

Being frozen solid during your childhood and waking up years later was tantamount to a time slip. Emilia had probably been hurled into a new era like a distant cousin of the mythic Taro Urashima. It was only natural that the time she subsequently spent together with Puck made them just like family.

“So the memories you see in the tomb are from before you were frozen…and the forest was frozen when…?”

“Apparently, it was about a hundred years ago.”

“I see, a hundred yea…eh, a hundred years?”

As he tried to put the timeline in order, her casual reply took Subaru by surprise. Noticing his reaction, Emilia asked “What is it?” as she tilted her head.

“Er, ah, I was imagining a span of ten years, so I wondered if it was off by a digit… I mean, uh, Emilia-tan, you look like you’re the same age as I am, so I figured the time frozen was…”

“I…kept growing physically while I was inside the ice. That’s why, right after I woke up, it was like being in another person’s body, enough to make me trip and slip up all over the place…”

“A-ahh, I see. Errr, so putting everything together…”

Emilia was around seven years old when she first slept, and it had been a hundred years or so later when she awoke. In other words, Emilia’s

chronological age was a hundred and seven years old at this point in time.

“So Emilia-tan, how many years has it been since Puck woke you?”

“…I think it was probably six or seven years ago…”

Emilia’s reply was not very precise, but the response convinced Subaru that his doubts were true.

She was a hundred and seven years old after emerging from the ice. From there, she had lived seven years, making her a hundred and fourteen.

—Emilia was a hundred and fourteen years old, eighteen years old going by outward appearance, and mentally, fourteen years of age.

“R-real age, apparent age, and mental age…they’re all disconnected.”

The elven blood Emilia had inherited made her age a vague concept in ways not normally possible. At the same time, it resolved many doubts Subaru had about Emilia’s behavior.

For someone who had lived for over a century, she was fairly ignorant of worldly affairs, often used phrases and gestures that stood out as childish, and from time to time, she liked using words that seemed oddly archaic.

All of these things could be attributed to the fact that Emilia had spent most of her life sleeping within the ice.

“Fourteen—that’s no different than Felt…so why…?”

Why did this girl have to bear such heavy responsibilities?

The competition for the throne, the frozen forest of her homeland, the Sanctuary with four centuries of stopped time—the sufferings pouring down upon her were so numerous, so illogical, that he wanted to yell *Why?!*

“Subaru?”

“…Sorry, and I said I wasn’t trying to interrupt…”

With Emilia growing concerned, Subaru forced himself to smile as he responded. Her sufferings with the royal selection only made his ire for Roswaal grow within his chest. But had it not been for that, Subaru would have never met Emilia…hence, his irritation.

“…Emilia, did you live a normal life before the forest froze?”

“I…probably did…when I lived together…with everyone in the forest…”

When Subaru tried to get the conversation back on track, Emilia touched a hand to her forehead as she replied haltingly. It looked suspiciously like she was enduring some kind of pain. Subaru touched her slender shoulder with a hand.

“Emilia? Are you all right? If it’s hard to talk about…”

“I-it’s all right. It’s just, um, my memories…aren’t very clear. Even though I saw my past at the Trial, I…really didn’t understand what I was seeing.”

“You can’t remember the memories you saw? Is that even…?”

Whether it was possible was beyond Subaru to judge.

Subaru had challenged his past but once, and with that one time, Subaru had overcome the Trial. Accordingly, his memories of both his parents were clear, but he didn’t know what would have happened to those memories if he’d failed.

There was no guarantee the Trial hadn’t been wickedly put together to make repeat challengers suffer.

“How about trying to remember one bit at a time? For example…who did you live in the forest with?”

“…There was…a tiny settlement in the forest. All the elves lived there together.”

“Emilia, what about your family?”

He wondered about both her parents and any siblings. It was with that intent that Subaru asked the question, but he instantly realized his error. —Emilia had always spoken of Puck as her only family.

That she’d lost her entire birth family was something he should have deduced without thinking.

“Don’t worry about that. My family wasn’t living inside the forest. Everyone was really nice to me, and I liked everyone…but, mm, family.”

With Subaru regretting his slip, Emilia resolutely smiled and shook her head.

“There was someone like a mommy to me. She was *really* gentle, beautiful, amazing…”

“Mommy?”

“She had a look in her eyes like you have, Subaru. Just a tiny bit. That…er?”

Still smiling, Emilia was finding something in common between Subaru and her memories of her mother. However, that smile abruptly stiffened, and Emilia blinked her eyes several times.

“Uhhh…why Mommy…Mom…my? Why did I…call her that…”

Seemingly in disbelief, the shaken Emilia touched a hand to her own lips. Emilia’s gaze began to wander around the room, as if searching for an answer, yet it was unable to find one.

But there was no reason a lost fragment of memory would be found fallen on the floor of her temporary abode.

“Emilia, calm down. Take it easy. There’s no need to rush.”

“___”

Emilia was on the brink of panic when Subaru wrapped an arm around her head, pulling her close against him. Her long, silver hair flowed down her back as Emilia found, in her surprise, that her forehead touched Subaru’s chest.

He let her hear his heartbeat. Just like Emilia had done for Subaru the night before.

“…What happened to everyone when the forest froze?”

“—. Just like me, they were inside the ice…they’re still frozen even now. I was living inside the forest with Puck, waiting for everyone…”

“I see… That’s really kind of you.”

The days she had spent together with Puck, living in that frozen forest—that was time truly and literally spent alone with the spirit, among the ice statues who had once been like family.

Even just picturing it in his mind, it was a forlorn, lonely scene…

“I waited for everyone to wake up…but that day never came. That’s why…

That's why I…left the forest and participated in the royal selection."

"—? Why is the forest related to the royal selection?"

"I made a promise with Roswaal."

His breath caught. That one phrase, *promise with Roswaal*, sent a shudder through him.

What kind of promise had Emilia, tormented by loneliness in the forest, made with the devil that was Roswaal?

"He made me hold the crest he had…after he made sure the Dragon Jewel was glowing, he spoke about the royal selection, but, I didn't understand a single thing about the Kingdom of Lugunica."

Of course she didn't. There was no way a girl who had lived in the forest since infancy would know about the outside world. So just how had Roswaal lured Emilia out of the forest? That was—

"To me, who understood nothing, Roswaal said this. *—If you are able to gain the throne, surely your wish to melt the forest's ice shall be granted.*"

"___"

Subaru imagined his seething blood blotting his entire vision red.

Roswaal had used Emilia's pure, innocent wish to lead her out of the forest. That Emilia held the qualifications to join the royal selection was probably written in the book of knowledge.

Not because he held any hopes for Emilia, but merely so that he might add the strongest card fated to appear under Emilia—a card named Subaru Natsuki —to his own deck.

—If he were honest, it made him loath the idea of keeping Roswaal in Emilia's party once all the issues were taken care of.

"Subaru, do you think less of me?"

"…Huh? Why would I?"

As soot-black anger burned in Subaru's chest, Emilia, her face still buried against it, posed that delicate question.

“All the other candidates…they’re participating in the royal selection with all kinds of wonderful goals, but my reason is really, really personal—”

“—So that’s what you meant by your own selfish reason, huh?”

After parting ways right after the opening speech, when Subaru was reunited with her and conveyed his feelings for her, he firmly recalled that Emilia, spilling out her words while bewildered by his goodwill, stated that her reason for aiming for the throne was very selfish.

Perhaps it really was a wish that did not consider the future of the kingdom, or the welfare of all its citizens. However, it served as no more than the trigger. —Her wish was her starting point, but that was no reason to belittle it.

“There’s nothing wrong with your motive of wanting to save your family and the people precious to you. Saving people isn’t any less legitimate just because it’s the few and not the many. Besides, that’s not the only thing care about, right?”

Whatever the initial reason for leaving the forest might have been, Emilia undoubtedly changed in the days that followed. Had she not, she would never have been able to speak her wish so boldly at the meeting place of the royal selection.

She had said she wanted to be seen with fairness, with equality. That was something Emilia had surely gained in the outside world.

“…Yeah. I’m *really* grateful.”

Still resting her head against Subaru’s chest, Emilia nodded several times as she spoke. As he felt her squirmy movements, Subaru was pensive as to whether he’d been able to support her as intended, even just a little.

But infusing his hand with his undiminished love, he continued gently stroking Emilia’s head.

“…Emilia?”

Just how long had he been doing that?

Midway through their wordless embrace, Subaru called out Emilia’s name. Exhausted, she made no reply; instead, he heard faint sounds of sleep.

Given her mental fatigue, it was only natural Emilia had quickly fallen asleep the moment she found even a tiny measure of peace. Seeing that her face bore the hallmarks not of nightmares, but of sleep to recover from fatigue, Subaru sighed.

Thinking back to the night of the Trial, he should have asked her about her past in more detail.

However, in the end, Subaru had not. That was not because she had been tormented by nightmares, and though it was partly to let Emilia rest when she had been worn down mentally and physically, it was not just that, either.

The biggest reason was something else. —Clearly, something strange was affecting Emilia.

Emilia had revealed to Subaru her birthplace and her reason for participating in the royal selection. The decision to do so must have required a fair bit of courage, but her memories related to the actual Trial had lost their vibrancy. It showed on her face that she didn't want to talk about it—but that wasn't the only reason. She had gaps in her memories.

The Trial had likely shown Emilia happenings from a hundred years prior, before the forest was frozen. And yet, she did not properly carry those memories with her.

—She was stumbling, and she did not even know why. Truly, it was just like Ram had told him.

Properly speaking, she could not recall the memories that were causing her to stumble. And this was fatal to her efforts.

If things proceeded like every time before, Emilia would challenge the Trial in a fresh state each night. It would be as if Subaru didn't retain his memories after a Return by Death and only knew of the events in the current instance of a loop. He would be able neither to reflect upon nor improve on his prior efforts. It made perfect sense why she kept failing.

If this was a trap Echidna had set up, it was the worst kind possible, but—

"—She's not the type to watch and laugh as you challenge an absolutely insurmountable wall, is she?"

Echidna's rotten personality was an established fact, but he trusted in the fact that there was a certain aesthetic to her wickedness. That Witch would never establish a Trial that could not be overcome. In that, the malicious Witch no doubt put on airs of godhood.

Then again, there she was, resting in a world of dreams even after death. Maybe her power really did rival those of a god.

"Even if you are some deity, I'm not praying to you. If I'm gonna pray, I'll pray to my own goddesses."

But at the moment, both of Subaru's goddesses had their hands full. That left Subaru to put his meager brain to use in both their steads.

"If Emilia has no means to search her own memories, then…"

Laying the audibly sleeping Emilia upon the bed, Subaru looked inward in search of an answer.

Had something in the past broken Emilia's spirit when she took the Trial? — The question made him recall the completely similar thoughts he'd had toward a different individual a scant few hours before.

Garfiel was haunted in the same way Emilia was. If there was a difference, it was that Subaru couldn't ask someone who had the means to know his past—

"—Wait."

Having thought it through that far, Subaru's brain came to a halt.

Subaru had contacted Ryuzu in order to learn of Garfiel's past. It had resulted in a failure that took a wholly unexpected form, but the idea itself continued to have merit. And since he was facing a similar situation in Emilia's case, couldn't he try to adopt the same approach there as well?

"Even if Emilia herself doesn't remember…if I ask someone who does know…"

There were precious few who could possibly know what had happened in the Great Elior Forest.

The first was Roswaal, but their hostile relationship made getting an answer out of him rather difficult. Even where Ram was concerned, he couldn't expect her to know all the fine details. Given her position, just approaching her was

difficult.

But there was one person—or rather, one creature who did.

He was a being who had been right by Emilia's side and whom she considered the same as family…a being who had spent a very long time with her.

"—Puck."

Surely, Puck—Emilia's contracted spirit, professed as her only family, that little cat who'd been present when Emilia awoke from the ice—would know the circumstances.

The problem was that, at present, there was no way to contact the spirit—since several days before traveling to the Sanctuary, Puck had neither shown himself nor answered Emilia's calls.

Puck's absence weighed heavily on Emilia's mind. Even setting that aside, it was necessary for Subaru to speak with Puck personally.

"Think, think, thinkthinkthinkthink. Think, damn it…"

Covering his face with his palms, Subaru desperately searched for a way. He wasn't responding to Emilia's call. It was meaningless to attempt to set Puck in motion through any normal means as a spirit mage. Therefore, he needed some other way to forcibly wake up Puck. —He dug through all his memories of Puck to date.

They included his first meeting with Emilia in the capital, their reunion and fighting side by side at the Loot Cellar, the repeated exchanges of words between them during the mansion loop, and the times, after the start of the royal selection, when Puck had even taken his life—

"—How many times was it that you killed me?"

Murmuring to himself alone, he was referring to fact that Puck had been the cause of Return by Death more than once. Subaru was not rekindling his grudge; he was purely confirming to himself what had happened, and how deeply their fates were connected.

Three times, an angry Puck had taken Subaru's life. And in each of those cases—

“___”

Subaru’s breath caught, arriving at the possibility as he looked down at Emilia’s sleeping face.

Emilia was peacefully sleeping, too deeply to dream. There was nothing more Subaru could offer her than that tiny measure of peace. —Or so he had thought.

“Sorry, Emilia.”

With that brief apology to her sleeping face, Subaru drew close to Emilia. Then he put both hands on her slender neck. Feeling her smooth skin on his fingertips, Subaru felt like he couldn’t breathe.

His heartbeats were so noisy. Sensing the fierce flow of blood with his eardrums, Subaru followed where that possibility led.

If Subaru’s expectations were correct, this would summon Puck. All he had to do was put strength into his fingers—

“—As if I ever could.”

Immediately after, Subaru seemed to be enduring pain as he wrung out his voice.

The sensation was real. Feeling the sharp sting of clamping his molars together, Subaru breathed raggedly as he backed off. The palms of both of Subaru’s hands were covered in white frost.

His hands burned like they had been immersed in a bucket of hot water; but in reality, the effect was the polar opposite. This was not agony from an excess of heat, but a biting ache from overwhelming cold.

And the one who had made it happen was—

“You knew what I was aiming for so you didn’t need to go that far, damn it…!”

“—Hmm, I wonder. There’s no guarantee that a certain mix of love and hate wouldn’t result in harm to Lia, is there? And your love runs deep, Subaru.”

“Hey, how did you know about my day care teacher’s reply to the love letter I wrote her in kindergarten…”

“Ehhh…it really is scary to leave Lia by your side. Should I erase you, maybe?”

“Don’t casually use the word *erase*, geez. Besides—”

Waving both his aching hands, Subaru trained his gaze directly before him in resentment. His gaze arrived at Emilia’s neck—or rather, at the green crystal hanging from it.

The crystal was giving off a faint, pale light. —The voice reaching Subaru was most certainly coming from it.

Though, just as before, there was no tangible sight of him, for he had not materialized.

“Emilia-tan’s all sad that the family pet ran away from home.”

“Rather than leave, I have been right here the entire time, though. But, mm, yes, I should say this.”

Replying glibly to Subaru’s biting sarcasm, the crystal—or rather, Puck—would have probably been floating there with a big smile if he had taken physical form. In this strange atmosphere, he spoke:

“You have done well to call out to me. —I am happy, Subaru.”

CHAPTER 4

LIES, LIARS, AND CON ARTISTS

1

—The first thing she felt when she awoke with her right hand empty was loneliness.

As she woke up, her head feeling blood-deprived, she had a hazy thought. Before she slept, and even while she slept, she felt like someone had been holding her hand. Realizing this was an extremely selfish sentiment to have, she rose.

"…What a terrible girl I am. That's incredibly selfish of me."

Her face reddened from shame and self-derision, the girl—Emilia—curled up in the center of the bed as she let those words slip.

The sensation on her palm was that of the boy who had spent time together with her until she slept. Just how self-centered was she to feel lonely because that sensation was gone when she awoke?

He'd stayed close to her all that time, yet she was still trying to cling to him.

This, right after speaking of such lofty ideals the night before to Subaru. She was always relying on him. She was truly relieved when he'd asked about what really happened in her past, wasn't she?

Once again, she harbored the selfish hope that Subaru—that someone—would come save her while she did nothing.

"___"

Pursing her lips at the weakness of her own heart, Emilia subconsciously touched the crystal on her neck.

That faint sensation was connected to the spirit that had been at her side for all that time—the part of her family whose face she hadn't seen in these last several days. That moment, she thought very strongly, *I want to hear his voice.*

"Maybe it was a dream… I thought I heard Subaru speaking at my bedside like he was talking to Puck…"

If her weak self really had hallucinated what she'd heard, her ears were being terribly convenient. It was not as if her ears, a little longer than those of others, were somehow deprived of the blood coursing through her body. It was just that she thought—

"…Why can't I remember properly?"

"—You mustn't blame yourself too much, Lia. I am partly responsible for this."

"Eh…?"

She suddenly someone speak, not with her eardrums, but through the echo of telepathy directly to her mind. Even though there was no audible voice to accompany it, Emilia immediately knew who it must have been.

"Puck…?!"

Emilia practically shot up as she placed the crystal upon her palm. Within Emilia's field of vision, a faint green light grew, taking form little by little, its power manifesting into a tangible shape.

"Hmm, this is a little smaller than usual? Well, I'm pretty like this anyway, aren't I?"

Speaking in high spirits, a gray-colored cat twirled around on top of Emilia's palm—with a long tail, round eyes, and a pink nose, this was the adorable spirit, Puck.

"Puck…ahh, Puck…!"

"Heya, Lia. It's been a while, huh. I forced myself out so we could have a little family discussion."

"Family…discussion…"

Their reunion after several days spawned joy, surprise, and a little bit of anger

in Emilia's heart. But though she yearned for an explanation, the teary-eyed Emilia immediately realized something was wrong.

The Puck on her palm was smaller than his usual size, and moreover, his existence seemed ever so fragile.

"…Tee-hee-hee. Seems I'll hit my limit faster than I expected. Well, I willingly broke the pact, so it can't be helped that my perks as a spirit got yanked back."

"Broke the pact…? Wh-what are you saying? …No, never mind that. More importantly, where have you been until now…and after that…"

"—Then, as now, I've always been by your side, Lia. I couldn't speak because of my own personal circumstances and your own issues, Lia. But from here, I…"

Putting his paws on his head, Puck's blushing smile went away. His innocent, adorable face turned serious, sending a distressing chill down Emilia's spine.

This was a face she had not seen once from Puck in all that—no, she had seen it before.

This was the face he had shown when Emilia, frozen in ice, awoke.

It was the face he had shown Emilia right before her life came under threat, and when the pair formed their pact.

And for Puck to show Emilia that face in that moment—

"Eh…what, eh…? Wait a minute…"

Emilia's voice stiffened out of shock. Beneath Puck's feet, the crystal upon which Puck's tail rested had a crack running down it. This crevice was slowly, but inexorably, expanding.

"Oh, oh no! This is terrible, Puck! The stone, the icon…at this rate!"

"I'm sorry, Lia. I really want to properly explain, but I don't have time. That's something I truly regret, but I'm entrusting you to…the child who holds you most precious after me."

"What are you talking about…? Such a person…! Such a person doesn't…!"

Even as she shook her head in denial, the crystal's destruction would not relent. Accordingly, little by little, Puck's entire form grew indistinct. The way he

was vanishing didn't come off as a prank.

Puck really was vanishing, so very suddenly, and his bond with Emilia went with him.

She didn't know what had happened, or what was happening. Nor, with acceptance on Puck's face, did Emilia understand just how she looked to those black eyes that moment.

"—Lia. The pact between you and I is rescinded. I'm really sorry it's so one-sided."

"___"

Emilia was overcome as a fear she had never even imagined turned into reality.

To be separated from Puck, for a day to come when the pact would end, was something Emilia had never thought of. After all, Emilia and Puck had made a promise.

"If I'm gone, the lid covering your memories will come off. I'm sure that will cause you a great deal of sadness, Lia. You might cry even more than you are right now."

She didn't understand the meaning of Puck's words. Puck softly floated up from Emilia's palm. Swaying his long tail, he hovered at the tip of Emilia's nose.

His little, white paws touched her cheek. It was as if he was gently trying to wipe away one of the teardrops coursing from the corner of her eye.

If she was going to lose this much warmth, even the frozen forest of her homeland was—

"—Emilia. I reaaally love you."

"—No!!"

As she tried to stop their bonds from fading away, she thought the unthinkable when a voice echoed in the back of her mind. The voice came from "someone" speaking to Emilia from her indistinct memories.

She was being made to choose. That instant, she was being forced to choose

between the warmth before her eyes and the cold past sealed within the ice.

And the right to choose rested in Emilia's hand. That moment, if she reached out her hand, Puck would—

"—Yeah. This is for the best, Lia."



Her arm would not move. Her shaking fingers would not reach Puck, even as he wiped the tear from her cheek.

She could not prioritize the warmth of that instant if it meant ignoring the voice that tied her to the past.

She had spent time together with Puck in the forest, watching over her neighbors, who had been frozen into ice statues, day after day. In all that time and in all the days that had come since then, he never made Emilia face her memories of the past.

—This was the moment those days came to an end.

“Lia. —In this whole world, you’re the one I love the most.”

“___”

They were the words with which, in the past, he had conveyed his affection, and so, too, his love.

Instantly, the little cat’s contours became a phosphorescent green, scattering as he seemed to melt into thin air. The crystal on her palm was split into two. —Already, it had completely lost its light.

There was no room for doubt. The crystal had split, Puck was gone, and the pact between them had been undone.

She felt no connection. The connection that she could always feel was gone, almost as if it were a dream.

“…But it’s not a dream.”

Training her fingers upon her own cheek, Emilia pinched herself. It hurt.

She didn’t wake up. She had been left behind in a silent room.

“…i…ar.”

She released her cheek, her fingers covering her own face. She raised her head toward the heavens, almost so none might see it. But such concern was unnecessary. There was no one by her side.

Only her quivering voice filled the air.

“Puck… Daddy, you liar…!”

2

The first thing he felt when he awoke was irritation toward the hollow, empty feeling inside his chest.

“…Tch.”

Clicking his tongue, he sat up, violently clawing at the short, blond hair on his head.

He was not the sort to wake up badly. But the nightmare had been bad. This, and everything else, was doubtlessly the fault of those uninvited guests who had disturbed the peace of the Sanctuary.

“Young Gar, are you awake?”

Then, as he sat cross-legged on the bedding with a curled back and a foul mood, a familiar voice addressed him. When he turned, she was visible at the back of the small, crude cabin and was wearing a white poncho—Shima, his grandmother.

Garfiel, his cheeks twisting at the sight of her, slowly rose from the bed.

“Sorry, dozed off there. Nothin’ happened while I was asleep?”

“You worry too much over a few short hours. You’ll lose your hair at an early age at this rate.”

“…I ain’t the type to strain or get too tense or nothin’, but this is rattlin’ even me, old hag. I mean, I heard straight from ya that the guy with the stupid smile on his face is drippin’ with miasma.”

Garfiel replied to his grandmother’s teasing tone with a dead serious voice. Lowering the corners of her eyebrows at the sight, Shima said in an apologetic tone, “Sorry.”

It was Shima who could literally smell the miasma coming off of Subaru Natsuki—the miasma that came from interacting with the Witch.

Shima had been concealed in the woods, performing her duty as one of the

“Eyes” of the Sanctuary. Unlike other replicas, she possessed individuality just like Ryuzu and met with Garfiel regularly.

—He had first heard that someone tainted with powerful miasma was mixed in with Emilia’s party on the first night of the Trial following their arrival.

Ever since, Garfiel’s eyes bore a glint of wariness and enmity toward Subaru and those with him.

No matter who it was, he would not forgive anyone who brought calamity to those Sanctuary.

“…However. I have spoken of it already, but that boy…Young Su does not appear to bear any relation to the Witch. Besides, from what I have heard, there are much larger concerns.”

“Much larger concerns…the princess, then? Ya heard somethin’?”

Shima’s assertion made Garfiel twist his neck and look outside the window—up into the darkened, nighttime sky.

Properly speaking, Garfiel had no time to be catching a nap at a time like this. With Emilia having entered the Sanctuary, he was supposed to be one of the observers for her Trial at the tomb each night.

But there would be no such Trial that night. The schedule had suddenly been changed. And the reason for that was—

“—So the spirit mage lost her spirit. No good to us while she’s in a panic, huh?”

Garfiel clacked his fangs, sighing deeply at the reason behind why the challenge of the tomb was being put off.

“Do not say that. You should have compassion where someone’s mental foundation is concerned… Young Gar, you would cry like a baby if I were gone, would you not?”

“I would not!! I’m not a little kid. I wouldn’t cry. I wouldn’t, but…”

I ran my mouth without thinking, thought Garfiel, lowering his eyes. He did not care for the gentle eyes with which Shima gazed toward him. “Hah!” he snorted, standing fully.

“Young Gar?”

“Nothing’s gonna happen tonight. Me, I’m gonna go check things out. Get some sleep, you old bag o’ bones. *Stay-up-late Rudy came to regret his short legs* and all.”

“And yet, it seems to me it is you who should not be up late, Young Gar.”

Shima saw Garfiel off with a pained smile as he left the cabin. He hated being treated like a child, but his grandmother—only Shima and Ryuzu was special.

In terms of outward appearance, they were peas from the same pod, and they behaved nearly identically. Even so, Garfiel firmly separated Shima from Ryuzu as an altogether different person. He considered the empty replicas to be different beings as well.

As an Apostle of Greed, he had the right to issue commands to the replicas. He felt no pangs of guilt from employing that right to make the replicas do as he told them. They looked the same, but they were different.

He considered Ryuzu and Shima to be his grandmother while the other replicas were nothing more than dolls. This was a firmly held thought inside Garfiel. He told himself that one’s true nature was on the inside. He told himself that this was the truth.

—That was why, when he spotted Ram leisurely loitering in the middle of the night, Garfiel’s heart beat fast.

As far as Garfiel knew, it was she who had the most beautiful core of all.

“Heya, Ram. It’s dangerous goin’ for a nighttime stroll at an hour like this.”

“—I suppose so. There are many dangerous nocturnal beasts roaming about, such as Barusu or Garf.”

“What a sharp-tongued girl. That’s good about you, but…”

When Garfiel called out to her, Ram, enveloped by the moonlight, turned around and narrowed her eyes.

The place they met was the path leading from Shima’s cabin, which was concealed in the forest, back to the settlement. Normally, there ought to have been no reason for her to be in the area, so of course, it was unnatural for him

to run into Ram here.

“Out for a stroll. After all, Barusu should be right at Lady Emilia’s side right about now.”

“…All right to leave her to him…? Isn’t takin’ care of her part of yer job, Ram?”

“A job consisting only of holding her hand on a night of worry is something even Barusu can handle. Besides, he wants to do it, so I pushed the responsibility onto him. Win-win. Is there a problem?”

With her facial features composed, Ram boldly shrugged her shoulders. Unable to summon a retort to her gesture, Garfiel copied her and shrugged his shoulders, too.

Emilia had lost her spirit, the center of her mental support. Staying by her side was the black-haired boy with the Witch’s miasma hovering about him. —It certainly did not give him a good impression of either, but…

“…Looks like this ain’t gonna work out, huh…”

Judging from the abandoned Trial and from her state the night before, Garfiel didn’t think Emilia could overcome the Trial. He sympathized with the sight of her breaking into tears, crushed by her past.

Of course she had failed. The past was something you regretted, but could not change. There was no way to win against regret.

“Ram, do you have any regrets?”

“Why, all of a sudden?”

Abruptly, Garfiel put into words something heavy that rested inside him.

That hateful Trial was a collection of malice that made you vividly relive the regrets that haunted your heart. But would that even work on someone who had no regrets? Maybe it wouldn’t work on R—

“Of course, even I have my regrets.”

“—! Y-you regret something…? Wh-what do you regret…?”

“I regret having to stand here answering Garf’s trivial questions. In addition, my shoes have become dirty from entering the forest. This, too, I regret.”

Letting out a sigh, Ram patted her chest as she lamented such things. This left Garfiel gawking at her, but he soon accepted a fact—she really didn't have any meaningful regrets.

Her lack of regrets made Ram pretty. This, her typical strength, was what charmed him.

"Something is missing. —I am unsure of just what, but perhaps that would constitute a qualm."

"Ahh?"

"Nothing at all. More importantly, walk me back. Or do you intend to make me travel this path at night alone?"

Declining to touch upon what he had heard her murmur, Ram immediately began walking toward the settlement. It was extremely self-centered behavior, but Garfiel walked after her without a single word of complaint. Along the way, for a single moment, his thoughts lingered on Shima, left back at the cabin. But Ram's unhesitant gait spurred him onward.

There was nothing going on that night. He was certain this quiet night over the Sanctuary would continue, unchanged.

3

"Emilia…are you really all right? It might be better to let all the hard stuff…"

"Mm-hmm, it's fine. Really…really, I'm all right."

With Subaru gloomily sitting in a chair at her bedside, Emilia shook her head. She smiled to try to put him at ease, but her trembling lips failed her. The sight made Subaru's face cloud over even more.

—It had been half a day since the crystal had cracked and Puck had vanished, his pact vanishing with him.

When she touched her neck, her attachment to the cracked crystal remained. Though it had completely lost its warmth, and her fingertips only drove the loss home, she could not part with it even so.

"I'm sorry… I keep apologizing like that, don't I. But I'm sorry… Even though I

really have to take the Trial tonight, too…”

She ought to have hardened her resolve, determined to make up for the prior night’s failure at the Trial. Of course, being unable to make up for that, or even challenge it whatsoever, was disheartening to her.

However, as Emilia apologized, Subaru said “It’s all right,” gently smiling at her.

“No big deal! It’s not like any of this is your fault, Emilia. The fault’s with the guy who decided…”

“___”

“A-anyway. You need to take it easy on yourself. If there’s anything I can do… my hands aren’t very big, but I’ll lend you anything I can.”

Hesitant to touch her wounds—that was how Subaru showed his consideration. Accepting this, Emilia sat on the bed as she lowered her eyes, making a little “Mm-hmm” in her throat.

It had been several hours since Emilia had lost her pact with Puck and was left alone before Subaru realized something was wrong—and during that time, over and over, Emilia had gone over her conversation with Puck before he had vanished.

It’s been a while, he had said, yet the final conversation exchanged between them had not lasted all that long. Even so, the anguish of remembering the moment of their parting ways throbbed in her chest time and time again.

—That was not all, for the memories she had touched upon displayed scenes unfamiliar to her.

She heard a voice. A gentle voice, a soft voice, a voice full of love was calling Emilia’s name.

This was—

“—Emilia? You really are tired, aren’t you?”

Leaning forward, peering into her face, Subaru spoke, his voice echoing alongside the voice in her memories.

“Emilia?”

Subaru’s voice was a little surprised. That was because Emilia had suddenly held onto his hand.

Numerous times, Subaru had been the one to hold hers, but the opposite was rare.

And right that moment, it was the other way around for once because Emilia wanted to be sure.

—Not about Subaru. Emilia wanted to be sure about herself.

“I’m sure…in the morning… I want to think that by morning…I’ll be all right.”

“Y-yeah. That’s, mm-hmm, I get it. So…”

“Hold my hand. Would you stay here until morning? If you do that, I’m sure I’ll…”

Entwining her fingers with Subaru’s, Emilia infused the sensation with that prayer. It was a different sensation than the last time she had touched Puck’s paw. But she felt like there was something there between them.

“Please, Subaru. I’m sorry. I’m sorry… Please.”

“If that’s what you want, granting your wish is easy. You don’t need to apologize over and over.”

Drawing his chair close to the bed, Subaru smiled as he continued holding Emilia’s hand. With his other hand, he stroked her head, making Emilia close her eyes from the ticklish feeling.

“Morning…if it’s till morning, okay. I believe in you.”

To those gentle words, Emilia closed her eyes, the sensation on her palm calming her heart.

Instantly, she finally felt sleepy. —For what she would surely see from that point on was her past.

Before dreaming of her past, she wanted that feeling on her palm from that moment to be the last thing she remembered.

4

—She truly looked small as she walked amid the snow.

Her feet caught on the snow, and she tumbled forward, landing flat on her face. She was clumsy, with a look on her face like she was seeing snow for the first time. In fact, it was. That was the first time she had seen snow.

It was beautiful enough to make anyone tremble, yet so fragile that it crumbled to the touch, and cold enough to elicit tears.

—Emilia understood that this scene from her dream was a fragment of her memories of the past.

Puck had said the lid on top of her memories would be lifted the instant their pact was no more. Indeed, but a few scant hours later, Emilia was visited not only by pain, but by countless scenes unknown to her.

There was a humid, green forest with smiling people and girls with hair as silver as Emilia's, and those girls had happy conversations with men unfamiliar to her. Her homeland was daubed white—those were the moments of time within the dream.

"Emilia!"

Amid the dream, amid the snow, amid the past clawing at her heart, the young Emilia heard a voice call her name.

A woman with silver hair and violet eyes practically leaped through the air as she raced over. Besides these features, the same as Emilia's, she had short hair and almond-shaped eyes. The sight made her heart powerfully, audibly creak.

"I'm sorry, Emilia. I'm sorry. I never taught you any of the important things. I hid everything from you… I just wanted our princess to be happy…please forgive us…forgive me…"

The woman embraced the young Emilia tightly, pleading to her in an earnest voice.

"I love you. I wanted to protect you. I spoke white lies so that no one would hate you."

She desperately pleaded, but the young Emilia of the past shook her head from side to side. She rejected the desperate plea.

The woman loved her and wanted to protect her. Yet she had spoken lies, to avert hatred.

Emilia hated lies. She detested lies. Lies brought nothing but sadness. Lies left Emilia alone. Lies ruined anything and everything. That was why she hated lies.

“—Emilia. I *really* love you.”

This, too, was a lie. All of it was a lie. Lie. Lie. It was a lie. —It was a lie.

Not that she wanted to believe that everything had been a lie…

“Mommy Fortuna, you liar.”

Opening her eyes, Emilia spoke those words to the lovely woman seared into her memories.

“Puck, you liar.”

Touching the split crystal with her left hand, Emilia spoke those words to the spirit who had rescinded the pact made with Emilia.

And then—

“—Subaru, you liar.”

Staring at her empty right hand, Emilia spoke toward the boy who had made a promise to her before she slept.

She spoke to the boy not there.

“…Liar.”

There was a moon outside the window, tracing a half-crescent. —It was still in the sky, with the promised morning far-off.

5

It was when Garfiel visited Shima’s cabin in the morning on a whim that he realized something was wrong.

The great number of human outsiders currently present made the Sanctuary’s

situation different from the norm. Because of that, despite Shima being little indisposed due to her secluded life in the forest, he figured he ought to have another word with her at least.

“Old hag? Hey, where the hell’d you go?”

When he looked around the cabin interior, Garfiel twisted his neck, for Shima was absent. It was very early in the morning, but the bedding had already lost its warmth; there was no mistaking that she had left at quite an early hour.

Since going out on a stroll at a rather odd hour ran a high risk of strangers spotting her, Garfiel was internally conflicted. He didn’t want to restrict his grandmother’s movements. He didn’t want to, but—

“…Right now, there’s Roswaal and the miasma bastard here…”

Touching the white scar on his forehead, Garfiel twisted his cheeks. Touching his scar when he was thinking about something was akin to a force of habit. He’d borne the scar ever since the moment he entered the tomb in his youth.

He behaved like an idiot who did not know fear, but that memory was of the single most foolish thing he’d done. Haunted by the presence of the scar, he touched it to make himself remember to regret and reflect. Hence, it had become a habit.

“A stroll, huh? Days sure get long when ya get old. Maybe I should pour some tea ’n’ wait…”

Spotting the teacup placed on the table, Garfiel felt a sense of thirst rising in his throat. *Where are those tea leaves*, he thought, but something struck him as wrong. —There were two teacups on the table.

Garfiel hadn’t had any tea when he’d been there the night before.

“—!”

The sense that something was wrong made Garfiel put his nose to work, practically shooting out the cabin as he rushed outside. There were no footprints remaining on the forest floor. There was virtually no trace of Shima’s replica scent, either.

If it was nothing, fine. But if it was something—

Almost flying as he raced through the forest, Garfiel made a beeline back toward the settlement. There were two potential destinations: the Cathedral, to which the outsiders had been exiled, or perhaps—

“Tch! Like there’s any doubt!”

Garfiel clacked his fangs as his feet carried him straight toward the back of the settlement. Then, just as his destination was coming into sight, Garfiel raised his voice in a “Hey!”

“—! Garfiel?!”

With a pale face, it was none other than Subaru who turned around. There were two others at his side: Ram, and that third-rate guy whose name he didn’t remember.

The trio was standing in front of an empty house—the house currently being used as Emilia’s place to rest.

“The hell are all of ya doin’ out…”

“Hey, do you know where the heck Emilia is?!”

“—The…hell?”

Garfiel, all worked up trying to find Shima, was about to ask if they had any idea where she was when Subaru’s words took him by surprise. This instantly left him at a loss.

Garfiel’s reaction brought an irritated look over Subaru’s face.

“What gives? Do you know where…you didn’t abduct her, did you?”

“Don’t talk stupid. Why’d I go abductin’ the princess? What’s goin’ on?”

“—Lady Emilia has gone missing. It happened this morning, right under our noses.”

In place of the uneasy-looking Subaru, it was Ram who laid bare the circumstances. But the explanation did not induce Garfiel to close his mouth. Emilia was missing. —That made two people missing.

“It seems Mr. Natsuki was holding her hand during the night. When morning came, Mr. Natsuki apparently went to switch with Miss Ram so that she might

get a change of clothes…”

“…Well, that’s your mistake, ain’t it?”

When Third-Rate added more detail, Garfiel let that comment slip. Subaru hung his head with a pathetic look on his face.

To be blunt, Garfiel had suspected it might all be some kind of scheme, but he didn’t think Subaru being shaken by Emilia’s absence was a ruse. Who could put on an act with a face that pathetic?

If that was so, Shima and Emilia both being missing made this an emergency situation.

“___”

No choice, thought Garfiel as he took the blue crystal in his loincloth into his hand. He didn’t want to employ his rights as an Apostle of Greed, but if there was ever a time to use the replicas’ power, this was it.

—He just needed to mentally order them. Order them to search for Shima, and next, Emilia…

For one second, he was tempted to order Shima to come to his side, but Garfiel forced the notion back down, throwing that option away. He didn’t use his rights on Ryuzu or Shima. That was the moral code Garfiel had to protect at all costs.

“…So what, you lookin’ for her with other people?”

“We only just found out! We’re gonna ask the people from Earlham Village to…”

“You do whatever ya want. Me, I’ll do it my way. Ram!”

If they had their own ideas, he wouldn’t object. When Garfiel called her name, Ram nodded deeply, seemingly guessing what he had in mind. Surely she could make use of everyone in the Sanctuary, native and stranger alike.

Garfiel would leave the matter of Emilia in their hands, for he had to search for Shima himself. —He would not divulge Shima’s existence to Ram or the others. It was a secret of the Sanctuary, after all.

“If ya find somethin’ out, lemme know! And don’t do anythin’ stupid, ya hear?!”

Driving that one thing home, Garfiel kicked the ground, leaving Ram and the others behind. Activating his explosive leaping strength, he made a full turn, this time racing back to the forest in one go.

He’d rendezvous with a number of the replicas, leading them in an organized search. As he resolved upon this—

“—Damn it all! What the hell’s goin’ on here?!”

He couldn’t get the others to search for Shima. Even the residents of the Sanctuary did not know of her existence. Ryuzu was the exception, but Ryuzu and Shima…he thought it would be cruel to make his two grandmothers meet each other.

He hadn’t heard the particulars of the situation. But the gist was that Shima had once been Ryuzu but had stopped being Ryuzu somewhere along the line. Given the sad way she talked it, he didn’t need to hear anymore.

All Garfiel needed to do was keep it to himself. That would protect the secret.

In that moment, it was for that sake, for the sake of secrets, for the sake of the Sanctuary, that Garfiel ran.

6

“This is…”

Wiping the sweat on his brow, Garfiel grimaced at the disagreeable scent.

Garfiel did not like this place. Better put, he hated it. The pungent scent hovering in its environs was akin to a mortal enemy to his sensitive nose, but the largest reason was the purpose of the facility’s existence.

—The Ryuzu Meyer replication facility. That was the white building’s role.

“Why would the old hag come here…? She hates this place as much as I do, damn it.”

Muttering curses as he entered the building, Garfiel squinted in its dimly lit

interior.

Garfiel had met with the replicas at Shima's cabin to receive their reports as Eyes.

The replicas lurking in every corner of the forest bore the duty of being Eyes, observing the Sanctuary to find intruders from the outside or anomalies that might occur within. When he made proactive use of his rights as an Apostle of Greed, it was usually for that.

Ryuzu and Shima laughed it off, but in actuality, the Eyes had been very useful. On the first day that Subaru and the others had visited the Sanctuary, it was thanks to them that he'd been able to capture the group so quickly after they'd crossed the barrier. Finding out that Shima was at the facility right then was another result of their work.

The Eyes had not spotted Shima. But that meant by implication that Shima had gone to a place where no replica was on duty. That strongly pointed to the facility and its surroundings.

Of course, he'd made the replicas continue the search, but—

"—It's open. So this is the place."

Having arrived at the spacious room in the back of the facility, Garfiel clicked his tongue in certainty. At the tip of his gaze was where a white wall ought to have been—but the entrance to the hidden room behind it was wide open.

Garfiel pretty much dragged himself there only once in several months to a year's time—to pick up a new replica created from the device within the chamber.

And only those with the same status as Garfiel bore could enter that place.

—For the conditions to enter were twofold: to bear a crystal and to be an Apostle of Greed.

Garfiel knew of only one person beyond himself who could possibly fit those two conditions.

"Old hag! Are ya here?! Can ya hear my voice?!"

Shouting loudly, Garfiel advanced to the back of the chamber with ragged-

sounding footsteps.

He was halfway certain. He was being lured there. Some kidnapper had brought Shima into the facility, lying in wait as he came searching for her.

Knowing that much, he ought to have been cautious, but Garfiel was nothing if not bold and impetuous.

If it was a trap, he'd crush it underfoot; if a scheme, he'd clamp his jaws and shatter it. —His conclusion was plain and simple.

"Old hag! Old hag—!!"

Surely, there was no reason to inflict harm upon her. He could surmise no reason to do so. At the very least, she'd served the other party tea. Even if the opponent was some strategist with a devilish mind at work—

"___"

Hearing no reply, Garfiel set foot into the chamber, resting his eyes upon the so-called magic crystal.

In its blue light, there was a girl hugging her knees sealed within. This was the girl from which all the replicas originated—Ryuzu Meyer.

Garfiel felt bad about the presence of the girl, one he took for granted, which he could call neither materials nor a corpse. He felt himself reflected in that presence: already ended, yet continuing to exist.

Perhaps it was because her existence jabbed deeply into his chest that he was slow to respond to the footsteps behind him.

"Who—?!"

Turning around and raising his voice, he immediately scolded himself for the stupid question. There was only one sort of person who would show up at that time and place. In other words, the presence belonged to Subaru Natsuki—

"—I am terribly sorry I cannot live up to your expectations."

"—?!"

The whisper in his ear and the pat on his shoulder sent Garfiel into shock. In other words, this was proof he had been approached from the opposite

direction of the footsteps he had heard. And the one who had done this was—

“The host of the banquet is absent. May I serve you in his place?”

Speaking these words, the gentleman with delicate features bowed, touching his hat to his chest. He remembered his face. His face was all he remembered. He did not remember his name. That was why Garfiel called him *Third-Rate*.

“Why are you…where is that bastard…?”

His surprise over the young man’s emergence undiminished, Garfiel searched the room for any sight of Subaru.

The young man was unexpected, but he could guess who’d set this up. Of course, the uproar over Emilia’s absence was a pack of lies, too; the shaken look on his face, and all the rest, was purely the product of acting—

“Actually, this circumstance truly was unexpected.”

“—Huh?”

“It truly was our blunder to let Lady Emilia slip out while our eyes were turned. To be blunt, I am tempted to wonder if even my fortune is so poor. However…”

Cutting off his words at that point, the young man returned the hat in his hand back to his head.

After that, he rubbed his own nose with his finger, making what seemed like a blushy smile.

“My friend asked me to, you see. Knowing full well ’tis a minor role, I shall play it to the fullest regardless.”

7

Dragging her feet, she walked toward the pale glow with darkness hovering all around it.

The exhaustion of her willpower robbed her of endurance as well. Even though she was moving but a short distance, her body felt heavy. Even so, the girl—Emilia—was unwilling to halt, forcing herself to move forward.

Puck's prediction had been correct. The lid on her memories had been lifted, and recollections came back to her one after another.

She didn't know what connected the two. She did not know why Puck's absence was related to her memories. Was it Puck who had sealed her memories? If so, why would Puck—

"—Mommy Fortuna."

Instead of that doubt, what she put on her lips was the name of the woman who had been like a mother to her and was strongly carved into her memories. She was not her birth mother. She was sure she'd heard that from the woman herself. Those memories, too, would surely come back to her in short order.

Her memories of Fortuna were gentle, warm, and strong—to Emilia, she was the ideal woman.

—The mother who should have been turned into a statue of ice was somewhere in the frozen forest that very moment.

"Ugh…hkk…"

The memory of the sin she could never undo throbbed. A sob trickled out from Emilia's lips.

Not everything had come back to her yet. And yet, a feeling of guilt welled up from deep inside her chest. Even without her memories, surely her body, her blood, and her soul remembered.

It had always been like that. Always.

Desperately, earnestly, with all her strength, she didn't intend to hold back in the slightest, yet Emilia's hands could not even glance across the surface of that which she truly wished to reach.

That was probably why Puck, why Subaru, why Fortuna had slipped through her fingers—

"That's why I…"

Even as she sobbed and cried tiny tears, Emilia pressed on.

At the speed of a crawl, she headed for a particular place in the dense sea of

green.

She did this because in her present state, that was the final stronghold in which Emilia could place her trust.

“…Liar.”

There was no one to hear the word of blame that fell from her slender lips.

Nor was there anyone who clearly understood who the word was for.

8

“—Ya ain’t got what it takes for this role, Third-Rate.”

Immediately after recovering from the initial shock, Garfiel seemed to chew on the words before spitting them out.

The tone of his voice was intimidating. The young man on the receiving end of it made a pathetic-looking face.

“…Well, I imagined you might say as much. I, too, believe I am behaving rather recklessly in courting this circumstance. Truly, I had intended to settle this with dialogue between us.”

“Dialogue, ya say?”

“Yes. Ryuzu…no, Shima should have been here. At Mr. Natsuki’s initiative, we wished to have Miss Shima in attendance while we were to speak with you… However…”

Scratching his cheek, the young man let a weary sigh trickle out.

“The incident with Lady Emilia has completely thrown off my plans. Having said that, I have already engaged in wicked deeds all over, so I must adjust appropriately to changing circumstances…”

“…What of the old hag?”

“As I could not read the situation, I had her distance herself. There is no one here save you and I.”

“That so.”

He'd asked what he wanted to. If neither Shima nor Subaru, who had hatched the scheme, were present in this place, he was done here. Coming to this conclusion, Garfiel glared at the young man. However—

"That bastaaard…playin' his little games…!"

Putting his fierce, seething emotions onto his tongue, Garfiel raggedly vented his rage toward Subaru.

—Since the beginning. Yes, from the very beginning, Garfiel couldn't stand Subaru.

With sharp eyes in contrast to the soft look of his face, he always behaved flippantly and frivolously. Yet, in spite of that, from time to time, he had a look in his eyes like someone who'd gone through crises that Garfiel could not even imagine.

That gaze of his, as if he was staring off into some place far away, struck Garfiel the same as that of the man he liked least in the entire world. Of course it had annoyed him.

If he'd used his own hands to pinch and crush him sooner, none of this would have happened.

"I am inclined to thank you for not being quite that rash."

"What the hell did you stay behind for? The guy in question ain't here so there's no talk to be had."

"You have a point. And yet, right now…I wish to buy time for a man and a woman to have a moment with each other."

The young man raised a finger to his lips, winking with one eye. The gesture brought a questioning look over Garfiel's face.

But as soon as he understood the meaning of his words, and just which man and which woman he meant, the impact ran through him.

"___"

That instant, what shot through Garfiel was intuition beyond anything he could explain. Hence, Garfiel, a man who judged things in accordance with his instincts, was certain it was fact.

That moment, Subaru was searching for the supposedly missing Emilia so that he might meet with her.

Meet her, and do what? What could that man, qualified to be an Apostle of Greed, do—

“Oh my! I cannot let you go as you please. I told you, did I not? However minor, I have a role I must play.”

“___”

“I feel obligated to warn you, I may not be much for direct combat, but I have a bounty of tricks up my sleeve. For instance, employing water and wind magic to cast the sound of my footsteps into the distance…”

“Yeah? Here’s what I gotta say, Third-Rate.”

When Garfiel turned, seemingly intent on leaving the hidden chamber, the young man stood to bar his path. And as that young man attempted to recite some list, Garfiel said it in one, brief sentence—and one alone.

“Ya ain’t got what it takes for this role.”

“—Guh, ugh!”

The blow to his solar plexus elicited a trickling moan from the young man as he proceeded to crumple. He swooned, spewing the contents of his stomach. The punch had avoided his vitals. That was Garfiel’s show of mercy and restraint.

“That’s payback for the little trick with the footsteps earlier. See ya.”

Leaving the fallen young man those words, Garfiel hurried, racing out of the facility.

He had to return to the Sanctuary. —No, it wasn’t the Sanctuary he needed to head for: It was the tomb.

He knew intuitively. Garfiel trusted his intuition—that letting Subaru and Emilia meet, and giving them time to exchange words, would bring a bad situation forth.

Besides, Garfiel sympathized with Emilia. He pitied her.

His memory of Emilia looking heartbroken, the cruelty of the Trial pounded into her, was still fresh. Garfiel had tasted the same fear himself long ago.

They were similar. Even setting aside the blood that flowed through their veins, of course he'd harbor empathy for her.

That was why Garfiel thought he shouldn't let Subaru meet Emilia. It had nothing to do with their fondness and attraction for each other. —If you challenged the past, you got hurt. He'd put a stop to that.

"The replicas…!"

Garfiel thought that, in the time between leaving the temple and returning to the settlement, he ought to give urgent commands for the replicas to search for Subaru and Emilia. Shima weighed on his mind, but at this moment in time, the other two came first. In particular, he needed to mercilessly twist Subaru to the ground by force, even if he needed to use the replicas to do it.

With that thought, he rummaged through his pocket—and it was then that Garfiel realized that the crystal wasn't there.

"___"

The instant he realized it, the blood drained from his face. He kicked a tree to kill the momentum of his sprint. He searched inside his loincloth once more. However, the crystal was not there, either. There was no way he'd have dropped something so precious.

After all, to Garfiel, it was part of a memory he could not afford to lose—

"—! That…third-rate bastard!"

Garfiel howled as his guess set his thought process ablaze.

In the hidden chamber, he'd deliberately thrown the sound of his footsteps with the aim of getting close. The various exaggerated gestures were all distractions—so that Garfiel would not notice Third-Rate pickpocketing his crystal.

Garfiel hesitated for a moment. But then he immediately cast it aside, turning back toward the facility.

It was not that he was afraid of being unable to give commands to the

replicas. In the end, the crystal was a tool; all he needed to make a new one was to break a piece off of the magic crystal sealing Ryuzu Meyer within.

Objectively speaking, there was no reason to be nervous.

But to Garfiel, it was not so. To Garfiel, and to one other—

“Third-Raaate—!!”

He returned to the facility with enough force to break through a solid wall. But there was no sign of the man he had punched in the gut, the man who ought to have been lying there. He realized that the swooning had been an act as well. He’d been had.

Garfiel had been completely, utterly ensnared and was still being toyed with that very instant…!

“___”

He raced out of the facility, whipping his head all around. His nose wasn’t working. It was useless. The foul odor of the place violated his nostrils, rendering them unusable. He squinted, acting like a beast in search of even the slightest change around him. Casting all dignity aside, he went down on all fours and crawled. Footprints. Footprints from leather boots. These he followed.

Ferociously breaking through the forest, he trampled all manner of foliage, eyes bloodshot as he pursued traces of leather. Finally—

“I found ya!! Don’t ya dare think about gettin’ away from me!!”

Leaping, Garfiel twisted in midair, throwing up dust as he landed. His eyes were trained upon a gap in the trees standing straight before him. He’d caught sight of the young man in question.

From the nimble way he fled, the earlier punch had taken little out of him.

“You con artist…!”

“Calling me a con artist is quite offensive…er, no, perhaps I should puff my chest out in pride at my opponent claiming he was deceived, for such are my long-cherished goals as a merchant…”

Spinning worthless words, the young man calmly stood in defiance of the

angry Garfiel. Garfiel straight-out admired his nerve. He admired it and, while admiring it, would crush it with his fangs.

“Give back the stone. That’s *my* stone. I know that you stole it, you thieving bastard…!”

“*Third-rate*, and now *thief*…it is truly difficult to be appraised in line with my own ideals. —I understand how Mr. Natsuki and Lady Emilia feel.”

“I ain’t askin’ about that! And I got no intention of playin’ along so ya can buy time!!”

When the young man murmured disconcertedly, Garfiel glared at him, unreservedly yelling in anger.

He understood. He finally understood. These were enemies, and mortal enemies at that. The more the young man before his eyes, and Subaru, made Garfiel talk, the more these mortal enemies backed him into a corner.

Just as he entrusted his life to fang and claw, they entrusted theirs to words, tongues, and schemes.

That was why he had to settle the conflict right then, right there.

“___”

The sharpness of the glint in Garfiel’s eyes increased as he paid conscious attention to the young man’s each and every word and action. In the earlier battle, all his gestures had been a trap. He could not lower his guard, not relenting for even one moment, one second.

“Finally…you are looking at me, Garfiel.”

Seeing right through his hostility-filled eyes, the young man laughed.

Shudder went Garfiel, feeling a chill run up his spine. Why was this man laughing?

“*Third-rate*, *thief*, all that is fine. People like me do not even enter the vision of people like you. You are prejudiced toward opponents such as Mr. Natsuki and I. That is why you never paid me any heed.”

He had no objection to the rambling words the young man spoke. It was all

fact. Garfiel had never considered the young man someone he should pay the slightest heed to, let alone be wary of him as a potential foe.

And look where it got him. He'd been led by the nose, extensively toyed with, and reduced to his current state.

That was why, that moment, he was being so wary, absolutely not turning his eyes away for a single instant—

"A merchant reads his chances for victory, acting several moves ahead. I am no exception."

"Huh…?"

"Last night, it was Mr. Natsuki who spoke with Miss Shima over tea. I do not know what occurred in the immediate aftermath, nor does Mr. Natsuki know of my actions, I am sure."

Shaking his head side to side, Otto backed up bit by bit. Seeing this, Garfiel realized he had once again been slow to decide due to indignation at what he was being told.

—He needed to ignore the words. The man before him was his enemy. Whatever the scheme, he simply needed to make his enemy submit.

"I'll deal with ya here and now. And next…"

"Yes. That."

One instant, he made that assertion, stepping forward in pursuit of the young man—the next, he was assaulted by a floating feeling.

His right foot plunged through the ground he'd stepped on, causing him to lose his balance. Instantly, he stretched a hand to a nearby tree. Tree trunk and all, Garfiel was swallowed up by a frighteningly large cave-in.

"Uooaaaa—?!"

He made an anguished cry as the blow of the fall came immediately. He fixed his posture, glaring immediately upward. The depth of the hole was several yards; going back was trivial. But in that case, why had he made a hole like that?

—What was this hole, at a size and depth completely beyond human strength

to dig, doing here?

As he had the thought, he squinted at the hole. It was then that Garfiel realized that something was off: not with the top, nor the bottom, but with the earthen walls. They contained countless points of light; these were countless winged insects enshrouded by phosphorescent light—

“Since long ago, I have had few human friends. Instead, I get along quite well with my friends beyond humans.”

Garfiel was taken aback by the voice coming down at him from overhead. He could not instantly comprehend the meaning of those words. But his instincts rang an alarm bell warning him of danger.

And once again, even that very instant, Garfiel was listening to his enemy’s words.

Accordingly, the next moment, his just rewards blew up in his face.

“Now, the forest itself is your enemy. —First, have a taste of the Zodda bugs’ warm welcome!”

Drowning out his sentence was the sound of wings, raging like a gale inside the hole. Garfiel raised an angry yell in response.

Yell and roar.

The reverberations echoed. And so—the Battle of the Lost Woods of Cremaldi commenced.

9

—When it felt like he heard a roar far off in the distance, Subaru’s breath caught.

For an instant, he looked back; the urge to run there and confirm the situation raced through him. But he somehow managed to resist.

The die had already been cast. Garfiel had to have realized by then that Subaru was involved in Shima’s disappearance. It was not difficult to imagine his anger over the number of covert activities and dirty tricks, which must have been driving him mad.

He'd truly have liked to settle things nice and properly at the discussion table beforehand, but that was no longer possible.

"Counting on you, Otto. Just don't do anything really crazy…"

Fully expecting Garfiel to be in an agitated state, it was Otto who had volunteered to take responsibility for explaining things. At the replication facility, Otto had made arrangements to await Garfiel's arrival. Surely, Otto would be able to soothe his anger. In contrast to that thought, Subaru was fiercely uneasy as well.

"After all, that Otto bastard is a total idiot with surprising disregard for his own life…"

He was worried about the fact that Otto often risked his life for the sake of others.

He'd said if he came into contact with Garfiel, he'd tell him everything and let himself be taken prisoner. But with the plan already thrown well off track, it was crucial for both of them to adjust to the changing circumstances thereafter.

"Don't make me pay for the incense at your funeral, Otto."

Even if it came to that, Subaru wouldn't be sending any money. It'd get sent to him and Otto both.

He didn't want it to come to that. And partly so that it never would—

"—Right now, I need to fulfill *my* role."

Spitting out words of resolve, Subaru stood boldly before his destination.

The entrance before him was open, dark, and filled with cold air. The instant Subaru stepped inside, his entire body felt languid, and he was seized by the alien sense that his blood was flowing backward.

"Nggh…"

Putting a hand to his mouth, Subaru forced himself to ignore the rising sense of nausea within him as he advanced further still.

His eardrums were violated by the hard echoes of shoes, sounds of his own making. The air licked at his eyeballs. Subaru put his hand to the wall, heading

within as he struggled against the sense that the very world was rejecting him.

Fortunately, he'd kept his stomach empty in preparation for this. He became accustomed to the feeling of his innards being wrung and forced the sensation down with willpower, lightly closing and opening his eyes as he crept forward at a turtle's pace. And then—

"—Ahh, I'm so glad. Finally found you."

After passing through a corridor that seemed to stretch for all eternity, Subaru let his shoulders drop in relief.

Before his eyes, leaning against a weathered wall, there was a girl clutching her knees in the dry corridor. When the girl noticed Subaru, she opened her violet eyes in a daze.

"Suba…ru…?"

Even though it was a faltering voice, he was satisfied knowing she had called his name.

After that, Subaru sat as well, right by the cowering girl's side.

"All right, Emilia-tan. Let's talk, okay?"

CHAPTER 5

OTTO SUWEN

1

—To the young Otto Suwen, the world was a cradle straight out of hell.

“xxxxxxx” “●▪●▪●▪●▪” “***! ****—!!”

Unceasingly, twenty-four hours a day, Otto continued to hear incomprehensible voices.

Sometimes, they were weeping aloud; sometimes, they were crazed with anger; sometimes, they sounded like songs; sometimes, they sounded like death cries. Little by little, the voices forced Otto to be their audience.

No matter where he was in the world, the voices would not release the young Otto from their grip.

—How did everyone else live while taking such a noisy world for granted?

Such was the question Otto lived with in that hell, where he could not even hear the voices of the people next to him as he pleased.

When his parents picked him up, he could not hear whatever it is they said along with their smiles. No matter how deep the affection in their words, their voices were swallowed up by background noise, never reaching Otto’s comprehension.

The reason Otto had grown up without a smile, without anger, without tears, and with virtually nothing worthy of calling an emotion was because to Otto, everything happening on the outside sounded like the exact same thing.

His parents struggled to understand their son’s abnormality. They had him assessed by various healers, who strove mightily to ascertain the cause. But

Otto's abnormality was a listening deficiency because he was hearing too much—something utterly incomprehensible to those who did not possess his blessing.

Hence, it was only natural that his parents' love shifted away from Otto and onto his older and younger brothers. Unlike Otto, his two siblings grew up without difficulty, thriving as they were raised with love for three.

He did not resent his parents or his siblings for this. One might say that he did not have enough concern for others to resent them, but even he was able to understand that his family had tried their best.

Even if he could not understand it in words, he was grateful—particularly to his older brother.

—If voices could not reach, perhaps he could express his thoughts through writing?

Realizing this, it was his older brother who began trying to read aloud to Otto. Taught by his brother, Otto began to learn the written word. However, learning proved exceptionally difficult.

After all, he could not use sound to comprehend the meaning of words. Even though Otto came to understand what individual words meant, it took ten times longer for him to learn than for a normal child as he spent day after day facing a desk.

Fortunately, this did not seem like suffering to him. Ironically, it was not because Otto was desensitized to hard work; to the young Otto, unable to live a normal life, study was a way to kill time.

"—Thank you for everything."

Otto remembered the day when his parents broke down in tears at the page upon which he'd written his clumsy words of gratitude.

He couldn't claim to have understood the emotion of *gratitude*. It was just that he was aware he was being treated in a way he ought to be grateful for, so it was his youthful judgment to put together an obligatory display of gratitude. And yet, his parents were brought to tears, their hearts shaken.

What was this? Why were these two people crying? What was it they were feeling?

—When he raised his voice and cried, it might well have been the first time he had cried since birth.

If so, to Otto, it was the cry of his second birth.

“Berukubikinodomesaesere” “NRTMKMEEIAA” “mi—mi—mu—me—mi—”

It was soon after that he discovered that the hellish, incomprehensible chorus did have a rhyme and rhythm.

By the time Otto became able to separate the countless noises he heard unceasingly and could completely able to isolate human words from the rest at will, Otto had greeted his eighth year of age.

Otto’s life was still behind that of others of his age group, but his growth after conquering his blessing dazzled the eyes; he greedily absorbed all kinds of things like how parched sand absorbed water. He soon caught up to the rest of his age group—nay, the youthful Otto displayed talent beyond that.

—And he became isolated from that age group, grandly failing at human relations.

“Why does everyone take living in a difficult world like this for granted?”

He’d already made up for his supposedly lagging education. However, his problem was now human relations—Otto, who lagged behind his age group in terms of growth as a person, made a string of blunders that should have played out in early childhood.

And the biggest problem of all was indeed the blessing that had shadowed Otto since birth.

“There was a big light.” “I came, I saw, I won.” “Hey, a monster’s coming.”

When he reached ten years of age, Otto realized there was a change in the voices he was consciously filtering. Noises that had once been meaningless had changed into something that did hold meaning. And as he verified the change in the voices more and more, Otto learned he bore a blessing, and so, too, he learned the true nature of the hell of his youth.

Having discovered the existence of his blessing, Otto immediately spoke to his older brother about this power. When anything happened, his older brother, who had taught words to the young Otto, had become the one he could most rely on for guidance.

“Mm, I see. Mm…well, you see. Otto, this power, mm, it’s amazing. Because I think it’s amazing…you, ah, see. You really need to stop speaking to Zodda bugs where people can see.”

When Otto revealed his blessing, his older brother’s face went pale as he earnestly spoke those words of advice.

I see went Otto, greatly appreciative. A blessing was a boon from the world, but there were people in this world that might use such a power for evil purposes. As expected of his older brother, his words of advice, spoken to protect him from such malice in the world, were right on target.

—It was three days later when Otto’s blessing was exposed to those around him, making him hated by all others his age.

The trigger was his little brother seeing him secretly conversing with the family land dragon. Seeing no other option, Otto spoke to his younger brother about the blessing, whereupon his brother carelessly let word slip to a friend of his.

Boys and girls gathered around. To prove that his younger brother was not a liar, Otto had no option but to prove that the blessing’s power was real. To illustrate this, he called over every Zodda bug in the city.

—In a single instant, the name of the *Zodda bug bastard* who could not read the mood spread far and wide.

Thereafter, Otto concealed his blessing, determined never to make use of it again. Over the course of several years, he covered up his foul reputation, succeeding at erasing the abominable darkness in his past by the time he reached the tender age of fourteen.

—And during the wet season of his fifteenth year, Otto made an enemy of the daughter of a powerful figure in his city and was exiled from his homeland.

The extremely short version of the circumstances was this: He had become

entangled in a love-hate drama between a man and a woman.

On the night of a birthday party for the girl in question, her lover hurled angry shouts into Otto's house over her being with another man—along with insults of *You Zodda bug bastard!!*

Accused of a crime he did not remember committing, with his dark past dredged up at that, Otto lost his presence of mind.

Accordingly, Otto released the seal, seeking the cooperation of the living creatures in the city so that he might clear himself of suspicion. And having established that on the night in question, the aforementioned girl had actually fooled around with seven other men, he stated loud and clear to the poor man, *It seems you were the eighth!*

On top of being punched by the man, he was targeted by an assassin hired by the girl for his exposing her relations with the opposite sex. Otto finally abandoned his homeland, and his father used his connections to get a merchant who was a friend of his to hire Otto.

After training under that man, he was sixteen when he set off as a traveling merchant—this marked the start of Otto Suwen standing as his own man.

His subsequent journey as a traveling merchant was truly a chronicle of one hardship after another.

It seemed Otto was born under a star with a great love of calamity and misfortune. If he hauled fruit, foul weather would come calling; if he took a shortcut through the mountains, bandits would attack him; if he camped with other traveling merchants, he and he alone would suffer insect stings all over his body.

Even as such days of misfortune befell him, Otto had managed to live on without going bankrupt because he was blessed with mercantile talent as great as his luck was poor. Even when making great gambles, he rarely lost, and while maintaining that noxious balance, four years as a merchant passed in the blink of an eye.

"Lad, go get some sleep already."

Such were the nighttime exchanges Otto had with his Fulfew, his beloved

dragon and only traveling companion.

It had been five years since he had been exiled from home. Fulfew's presence loomed large in keeping Otto from returning home with a broken heart. Since it was the land dragon, Fulfew, who had been the trigger for his blessing being exposed to his little brother, they had, in truth, been a pair for the last ten years.

"If you don't, it'll hold you back. You have a large deal to make tomorrow, yes?"

Fulfew's considerate words made Otto nod with a smile. Otto was certain the big job waiting for him the next day would turn his fortunes as a merchant around.

And so, the momentous day came. —He'd been completely had and laden with a vast debt to boot.

The oil he'd hoarded became unsellable; in contrast, the metal wares he'd relinquished had precipitously climbed in value. Having misread the market trends, Otto knew his life as a merchant had fallen into grave peril.

If he did not turn things around in a single blow, he would inevitably have to let Fulfew go. Not only that—it was even possible he would be forced to return to his birth family in tears.

To Otto, that was something that had to be averted at all costs.

Otto loved his birth family. He was aware of their love for him. And so, too, was he aware that his younger self had brought his birth family trouble over and over.

In that span of a decade and a half, Otto had already caused his family an entire lifetime's worth of trouble. He needed to use the remainder of his life to make up for those fifteen years.

He would properly pay his debts in full. After all, Otto Suwen was a merchant's son.

—When an acquaintance told him of a lucrative offer, Otto immediately raced toward it.

The contract was not to secure merchandise, but to use his dragon carriage as transport. Otto hastened to arrive before anyone else. "*Lad, stop this already*," said Fulfew, but he would not listen, employing his blessing to make a beeline to his destination. And then—

"My, my, my…where are you going in ssssuch a hurry?"

—And then, he landed in quite a mess.

Captured by a group with strange looks in their eyes, Otto firmly believed that his misfortune had reached its zenith. Separated from Fulfew, Otto was rolled up in a mat in a cold cave, despairing amid its tranquility.

Despair. Yes, he despaired. For the first time in his life, Otto despaired.

After all, at the time, the power of Otto's blessing had completely abandoned him. He rested his hopes on his blessing, seeking the aid of living creatures in the forest and the cave so that he might search for a way to escape, intending to use that nostalgic hell to find a way out.

—But in that place, he could not hear a single word of the hellish chorus he had found so irritating.

It was an overwhelming quiet of a sort he had never before tasted. In that silence, Otto, resigned to hell, found out what hell truly was. It was then that he understood that true silence was the sound made by the footsteps of impending death.

This is the end, he thought. Strength drained from his limbs, and light vanished from his eyes. Without having accomplished a single thing, he would pathetically meet his end in a cold cave. —And then, that despair suddenly came to an end.

"The hell? Thought them Witch Cultists were indiscriminate! They playin' around or somethin'?!"

A great voice echoed through the cave, bringing Otto, on the edge of oblivion, back to reality.

Lifting his face, he called out for aid with a raspy voice. The one who heard this and emerged was a large-framed dog-man who spoke in the Kararagi

dialect.

“Bro, ya got some good luck! If we hadn’t come ’ere, those guys would’ve killed ya for sure! Ya better give our boy general a big ol’ thanks!”

“B-boy general…?”

“Our commandin’ officer’s still a kid, so boy general! And your savior, bro!”

“R-right…u-understood. Thank you very much. Then, I must also offer my…”

Thanks to that person, Otto was about to say, but when he lifted his face, he realized.

The dog-man before his eyes had a look of surprise trained toward Otto. Without Otto understanding what the reaction meant, the dog-man pulled a white hand towel from his pocket and tossed it over.

“Hey, if ya gonna cry, cry where people can’t see. A man can’t be cryin’ in front of people.”

“Er, erm…c-cry?”

“Tears are what ya use to clean yer heart! They say that in Kararagi a lot. Gah-ha-ha-ha-hah!”

That was all the dog-man said before turning his back to Otto out of consideration. Clueless, Otto touched the towel he had received to his own face —it was then that he finally became aware of his tears.

His tears were trickling, falling out. The instant he became aware of that, their force began to increase all at once.

“Ah, da…wh-what—why is…why is…!”

Otto pressed the hand towel to his face, desperately resisting the ceaseless torrent of tears.

He did not know why they poured out. —No, this was untrue. He actually knew.

“I-I’m glad to…b-be alive…!”

He still hadn’t accomplished anything. Otto had nearly met his end without even having found meaning to his birth.

Surviving like that had made him able to appreciate that.

—Otto felt that, as his tears flowed, his life was being reborn.

He had cried for the first time on the day he was born into the world.

He had cried for the second time on the day he learned the love his family had for him, discovering his own heart.

And on that day, he cried for the third time, for his brush with despair and death had taught him the meaning of the goal called *living*.

—On that day, Otto Suwen cried for the first time all over again.

2

"—Not that he really asked me to buy time for him like this."

Otto made a pained smile as he kicked the surface of the ground, exerting himself in physical labor for which he was not suited.

He would have liked to forget the unsightly memories of him bawling his eyes out, but unfortunately, his memories of crying were all precious to him, so he could not forget them if he tried.

At the time, the beast man named Ricardo, who had saved him, had kept Otto's bawling secret, not telling a soul. That debt was one he had to repay someday in full.

And—

"A debt must always be repaid. —I am a merchant, after all."

—So, too, the debt to the boy general who had saved his life.

Otto Suwen had a debt he had to repay to Subaru Natsuki as well.

He would make up for that obligation by wagering the life that Subaru had saved.

As a merchant, seeking to repay all his debts was only natural. And more importantly—

"—It's for my friend, after all!!"

As a merchant, and as a single human being, Otto wanted to step forward then and there—and add himself to the ranks of *men*.

Accordingly, Otto Suwen, on his own initiative, had challenged a battlefield upon which his chances of victory seemed slim.

He'd made the gamble by ignoring the odds and piled up every chip he had, including his own life, to bring about Subaru Natsuki's victory.

With his mercantile spirit, Otto would prove his friendship true.

"—!!!"

—In the distance, from the direction of the trap he had left behind, he heard an angry, bestial roar reverberate through the sky.

With that as the prompt, Otto continued to run as he unleashed his own blessing—devoting himself to that familiar hell to wring out the entirety of his power.

3

"Something incredible is coming."

—I understand. Yes, I do understand.

"Behind, incredible, coming, right now."

—I told you, I understand! This is exactly as I predicted and expected.

"You'll die. You'll die, mm. Poor thing."

—I'm begging you, would you please stop with the pessimism already?!

With his blessing of language unleashed, countless voices flew into Otto's ears as he raced through the forest.

To take the voices of the various sentient creatures within the forest—birds, insects, small animals—and separate them from the voices directed toward him, while carefully discriminating between each one, was a punishing act that whittled away at the soul.

The time Otto spent with his blessing perfectly lined up with the twenty years of his own life. But even in those twenty years, never once had he attempted

something so reckless.

The quantity of voices Otto's eardrums picked up from within the forest's expanses was…vast.

Countless living creatures existed in the sky, in the trees, in the soil, in the rocks. He heard all their voices.

The problem was that he could not simply listen to the great throng of voices and nothing more. The blessing of language compelled Otto to *understand* them. In other words, Otto's brain was working to process and interpret all the voices of living creatures coursing through it. This, too, was beyond its limit—

"Bhh…!"

A sharp pain ran through Otto's head. He immediately leaned against a tree that was standing right beside him. When he wiped the sweat off his brow, he found there was blood upon his sleeve. A nosebleed. The oozing nosebleed might have been from pushing his brain beyond its capacity. Come to think of it, the ringing in his ears was continuing at a vociferous rate.

"Ahh, I didn't know. So this is what happens when I keep on using my blessing like this. So this is what they mean by being difficult to use…not being convenient really places the user in a bind, doesn't it."

In the brief span of time since the preceding night, he'd continued using his blessing virtually without cease. He'd conversed with the creatures of the forest, implored them for aid, set traps, and formed plans with all his strength, enough to make him heave blood.

Gruffly wiping his nosebleed, Otto let his grumbles trickle out as he set off running once more.

His gait was unreliable. But he could not stop using his blessing. Without his blessing to create not sea of people, but a sea of creatures, his chase scene would not continue for long.

Relying on the eyes and the voices of creatures within the forest, he could do nothing except buy time.

"Mr. Natsuki…this will let you speak with Lady Emilia, won't it…?"

He was buying time so that Subaru could exchange words with Emilia, whose whereabouts were unknown.

Everything that Otto desperately endured, from his splitting headache to the alarming nosebleed, was for this sake. This action of his was linked to victory—no, victory did not loom large among his motives.

In the end, he wanted to give Subaru time to meet Emilia face-to-face. That motive was strong in him.

He was not worried that Subaru would not find Emilia. He probably would find her. Whatever he would do after finding her was up to him. All Otto could do was help.

—Why was he taking Subaru's side to this extent, he pondered?

Perhaps it was due to the distraction of the headache and the ringing in his ears that this question wedged itself into Otto's thoughts.

It was indeed fact that he wanted to cooperate with Subaru so that he might repay his debt to the savior of his life.

Nor was it a lie that he was doing this for the sake of his friend Subaru, lending his own power as a friend.

However, he wondered: Was he such an earnest human being to ignore profit and loss, seeking nothing more as he labored out of care for others alone?

"…Ahh, I see."

Otto suddenly smiled, feeling like a path had opened amid his worries.

He realized it. He realized just why he was desperately taking Subaru's side like that.

"Incomprehensible suffering…that's something I understand better than anyone, isn't it?"

The blessing of language, which made him hear voices others could not, had forced Otto on a lonely path.

The blessing had made Otto temporarily distance himself from his family's love, created a chasm between him and many friends, and had landed him in

predicaments others could not comprehend. He bore the suffering of not being able to convey to others words known only to him. He had become resigned to this, which eventually coalesced into despair he felt toward himself.

—This was the same anguish Subaru had harbored before revealing his troubles to Otto.

That was why Otto trusted in Subaru, and why it was both the sight of him and his past self that had sent him running.

That moment, he understood. He finally understood.

It wasn't complicated. Otto did not want to save just Subaru Natsuki. Otto wanted to save his past self. He wanted to save *Otto Suwen*.

"Found ya…!!"

"—?!"

The instant he realized the other true intention inside himself, an impact sent Otto flying. He'd sustained the blunt attack while his headache had set his ability to concentrate awry. He fell down face-first onto soft soil.

"Bah, *ptoo*! Is this as far as I…nghh!"

"Won't let ya! Won't let ya do anythin' ever again!!"

He was spitting out a fallen leaf and trying to get up when claws dug into his flank. His breath caught, and he let out an anguished cry as the contents of his lungs were wrung out of him. Otto tumbled onto the surface of the ground, faceup.

His limbs were sprawled as he gazed up at the sky. He felt the rays of the sun through the gaps in the forest canopy—whereupon Garfiel's sour, upside-down face thrust into Otto's field of vision.

Garfiel pushed up his soil-stained forelocks, scratching his nose with his finger.

"…Man, ya really laid into me with all those lil' tricks. Nose wouldn't work, bugs made my eyes not work, hid yer sound with all the bugs yappin'…was rough. But it's all over now."

“I—I wonder about that…the match is not yet deci—mnff!”

“I told ya, I ain’t lettin’ ya do anythin’. —Takin’ ya too lightly is how I got into this mess.”

Not even letting him air sour grapes, Garfiel put his foot on the fallen Otto’s stomach. He proceeded to put strength into that foot; this strength, which was completely at odds with his small frame, made Otto’s entire body cry out.

The creaking of his bones made Otto himself cry out in agony as his limbs flailed against the ground.

“Gu, ugh, gahh…!”

“I don’t wanna be rough with ya. I ain’t got no time. Gimme my stone back now. This is enough, ain’t it?”

Increasing the strain bit by bit, Garfiel was trying to seize the stone back from him. Otto was in agony, froth bubbling from the corner of his mouth, rummaging in his side pocket and grasping hold of the crystal he had pickpocketed.

Who was strongest was so clear, it was laughable. As living beings, they stood on different platforms. After such terrible pain, what was wrong with acknowledging defeat? He’d fought hard enough to buy time. If he only returned the stone—

“Hhah!”

“…Why are you laughing, damn it?”

Garfiel grimaced as Otto, who was being stepped on with his face marred by a nosebleed, suddenly laughed. He’d seen that creeped-out reaction when he was a little boy. Otto concurred with the eyes viewing him as a foreign entity.

What was wrong with him? He had spent so much time in a cold cave in so much despair that he’d wanted to die. It had only been several days since then, and here he was—cheerfully placing his own life into peril.

“It would be a waste to give up here… For at long last, I have a thrilling role to play…”

Garfiel immediately realized that the exchange at the facility was the cause

behind Otto's words. Otto was paying him back for saying he didn't have what it took.

"Why you little…!"

It was just as Subaru had said. He found it amusing to do things people firmly thought he could not. It was the mark of a bad personality, but there was no mistake: It felt so good, it hurt.

When Otto laughed, deeply appreciating what a bad friend he was, the air Garfiel gave off completely changed.

The coarse anger in his jade eyes was stripped away. In its place rested polished, refined hostility. This was proof that Garfiel had acknowledged Otto as his foe.

It was proof that Garfiel regarded Otto as someone he had to take down without delay.

"…May I say one last thing?"

When Garfiel removed the foot on his belly, straightening his posture in a display of respect, Otto addressed him. Receiving his words, Garfiel went "Ahh?" and quietly scratched his head.

So Garfiel had enough mercy in him to listen to Otto's last words. Had he been savage to the core, he would have simply finished Otto off.

Garfiel was a warrior. —Hence, he'd fallen for it, giving Otto enough time to lay one final trap.

"I may have induced you to…but you have disturbed these woods quite a bit on your way here, Garfiel."

"—The hell?"

"The residents whose homes you have disturbed say this. —You must be punished."

He touched a hand to his belly as he sat up. Then, as Otto spoke, the air around him was enveloped by light.

This was an accumulation of mana so vast that it became visible to the naked

eye. Those cooperating with Otto had allotted him the building blocks of magical energy—all for the sake of a single, grand blow.

Garfiel realized that something was wrong. He bared his fangs. He moved. But it was too late.

"—Al Dona."

Otto chanted, relaying the mana filling the forest through his own Gate, causing it to interfere with the world around him.

The explosively welling magical energy sank into the earth, creating a flow of sediment with enough intensity to pulverize the trees. This incredible force danced toward Garfiel, who was standing atop the ground, smashing him all at once with the violence of its sheer mass.

"Gaaghhhhh—!!"

His howl echoed into the sky until even this was swallowed by the wave of sediment and crushed.

As a result of employing magic that should have been beyond his reach in this lifetime, Otto was out of breath.

This. It was this that was his final trap, triggered by the ace up Otto's sleeve.

Having been in contact with the living creatures in the forest for an entire day, alongside ascertaining where Shima had holed up, he'd laid numerous traps—all laying the groundwork for this final, great magic.

He had not immersed himself in the blessing of language to merely to use it as a *tool* for his escape. Nor did he use it only as a *trap*, revealing his hand to put his opponent off guard. He had combined *tool* and *trap* to create a *weapon*.

Garfiel had swallowed Otto's scheme hook, line and sinker. Scorned as small fry, Otto gained his recognition with a layer of traps, only to use Garfiel's acknowledgment of him as a warrior itself to create an opening for his true attack at the very end.

All of it had gone according to Otto's plan. In other words, this time, it truly meant that—

"—All out of schemes now, ain't ya?"

“Give me a break, would you…”

When the torrent of earth abated, a cloud of soil erupted. Clawing his way out of the dense curtain of dirt and trampling the disturbed ground of the forest was Garfiel, messy but quite intact.

Seeing Garfiel like that caused Otto to sigh in grudging respect.

“T’ be honest, I’m surprised.”

“That I resisted you with little regards as to the means?”

“Not that. Even after ya did all that, I didn’t think ya were serious. Not only that, I looked down on ya and assumed you’d just give up. —Forgive me. That’s bad o’ me to do to a man.”

Otto greeted the meek look on Garfiel’s face with a shake of his head. No apologies were necessary.

What he wanted to hear was *Darn it*. However, even when Otto was committed to fulfilling his role with his entire body and soul, it was not enough to overcome Garfiel’s raw strength.

He had no moves left. Otto’s defiance had come to an end.

“I did everything I could…didn’t I…?”

So he murmured. He’d played every card he had. He felt it in his bones.

That he could not reach all the way even so could not be helped. Not anymore.

That was why—

“See ya. —It’ll be all over by the time ya wake up. “

“Let us hereby put my solitary battle to rest, shall we…?”

When Otto drew in his breath and murmured, Garfiel snapped his eyes wide.

The statement did not sound like it came from a man throwing away victory or bearing any sense of defeat—

“Don’t tell me that…”

There’s still something more, thought Garfiel, aghast as he searched the

surrounding area for any presence. Every hair on his body was standing up, his wariness plain as his eyes roamed the area. There was no presence on any side around him.

Just paranoia… Rather than lazily dismissing it as such, Garfiel looked up.

And there—

"—!!"

Garfiel bared his fangs, moving as if to howl at the approaching figure. But his reaction instantly slowed. Shock left his howl stuck in his throat and even impeded his actions thereafter.

He bellowed. Not enmity, not bloodlust—but a name.

"Why are you here?! Raaaaam—!!"

"—El Fulla!"

The chant from the girl descending from the treetops—Ram—overlapped with Garfiel's cry.

The next instant, an explosive blade of wind mercilessly slammed onto Garfiel.

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The chant rewrote the world around it, weaving wind into a blade that bore down upon its intended prey before it exploded.

The invisible blade of wind raged up and down, left and right as it pleased, grandly slicing through forest, earth, and flesh.

It was a decisive, well-aimed blow that would inflict a mortal wound on anyone it struck. However—

"Ain't no way—!!"

The howling Garfiel slammed his foot down, his heel pulling up a block of the forest floor. This became a wall, dulling the wind blade's advance as it bore in on Garfiel. Of course, this was not enough to completely fend off magic of such force, but it created a momentary opening sufficient for him to evade it.

Leaping powerfully behind him, Garfiel distanced himself from the impact point of the wind. Seeing this as she landed upon the ground, the girl—Ram—made a small *hmph* through her nose, glancing sidelong at him.

It was then that Otto, driven into a beat-up state as a result of his valiant fighting, wilted.

“I expected as much, but such a pathetic sight is unfit for my eyes.”

“Even for you, that is a little too harsh a thing to say to someone fighting to the brink of death…”



“The brink of death? Even though Garf has the blessing of earth spirit, you chose an earth-element Dona spell as your trump card? …That is no good.”

“Never before have I seen a maid as little comforting as you!”

Ignoring Otto’s laments, Ram kept her attention to the front, the tip of her wand never wavering. There, as he glared at the pair’s exchange, Garfiel was crinkling his nose and keeping his guard up. He audibly clacked his sharp fangs together, staring at Ram in anger.

“I’ll come right out and ask, Ram. Why are you takin’ their side, ahh?”

“Is there something strange about that?”

“Don’t ya get it? Goin’ with them means turning yer back on what that Roswaal bastard wants. At the very least…the bastard has no intention of lettin’ the princess take the Trial.”

“You have grown quite impertinent, speaking to Ram of what Master Roswaal thinks. Surely, you have known me long enough to know? Ram *never* lends her ears to such attempts at persuasion.”

Puffing out her chest, Ram proudly proclaimed her own obstinacy.

“I know you were a hardhead to the bitter end. That’s what I love about ya. That’s why I can’t understand it. You’re that bastard Roswaal’s maid, ain’t ya?”

“Of course. That is why I shall exhaust all efforts for my master’s desire. — However, I will do it in my own way.”

Ram had no intention of cordially replying to Garfiel’s question.

She sighed heavily, turning her gaze toward Otto and leaning against a tree as he stood.

“So weak in the knees. Do you intend to make a woman fight by her lonesome?”

“Y-you’re a slave-driver! Terrifying! …Is this person’s younger sister, the sleeping girl, truly so kind? I am tempted to think Mr. Natsuki has lied to me…”

“Such a noisy complainer.”

His body was wobbly; his nosebleed had finally stopped. Of course, he was in

no condition to stand, let alone meaningfully participate in battle. Even so, Otto stood, which Ram considered only natural.

Garfiel clicked his tongue in annoyance at the pair's attitude.

"Don't get carried away, ya hear?! What are ya tryin' so hard to slow me down for? What's he plannin' to do while you keep me here?! And more importantly…that bastard got enough value for ya to trust him?!"

"Mr. Natsuki's value? Ah, if we are discussing whether he has worth, the answer would be no, I suppose."

"…Huh?"

Garfiel was dumbfounded at the unexpected reply. But when Otto scratched his now hatless head, he brushed his hair off his forehead as he made a rather smug smile.

"I am saying, at this time, Mr. Natsuki does not hold all that much value. But I am a merchant. I think of this as an investment. Ensuring the future of one's investment is not ruined, brushing the insects aside and pruning the flowers, eagerly awaiting how they shall bloom—that is how I feel at the moment."

He is truly a time-consuming person, Otto seemed to say, his shoulders sinking as he gave off an air of fatigue from the bottom of his heart. Otto's words brought an audible snort out of Ram.

"Hah! To be honest, Ram cannot understand why he expects so much of Barusu, either. Barusu is weak, useless, and his talent is insufficient even for pouring a single cup of tea. My opinion is the same as yours, Garf."

"That is going too far……though, on second thought, perhaps not…"

"But when he is most needed, Barusu is a man with oddly good timing."

Ignoring Otto's nervous attempt of support, Ram maintained a casual tone as she made that firm declaration.

Her words made Otto widen his eyes, and Garfiel grimace.

"It's timing. A man who's there when you need him. That is Barusu."

Even though, in normal times, he was a useless man with seemingly no

redeeming features whatsoever, the human being named Subaru Natsuki was a man who was mysteriously at exactly the time and place you wanted him.

There was nothing attractive about him, and he was without a single shred of charm as a member of the opposite sex. Ram didn't understand what part of him was any good; indeed, she found him irritating. —When was it that…? At the moment, it didn't matter.

Either way, that was all there was to the man called Subaru Natsuki.

That was why, once more, Ram did as he'd asked. —When Otto had revealed Subaru's plan to her the night before, she made the decision to trust him.

"Barusu's good timing is reason enough to believe in him. —If Barusu sees an opportunity and has taken action in order to seize it, then it must be the one and only chance to obtain victory."

"…After all that, it seems you trust Mr. Natsuki as well, Miss Ram."

"That is Lady Ram to you."

"Are you hiding a blush with incredible aggression?!"

Not caring for the grin that had appeared on the face of the man standing beside her, Ram shot a scolding gaze at Otto to silence him.

But their views were one and the same. They had formed a pair, comrades in the common pursuit of Subaru's aim. They had mutually agreed to keep quiet to Subaru about their fight to buy him time.

Many would say they had already bought sufficient time, but—

"—Ya don't intend to move aside, do ya?"

"___"

When Garfiel posed his question, Ram and Otto replied to it without a word.

Otto brushed off his knees. Ram made sure her wand rested comfortably in her hand.

With neither lowering their guard, Garfiel shook his head from side to side. The hard clattering of his fangs was the only thing echoing through the forest. Then, gloom fell over Garfiel's face.

“—Enough.”

He wove that single word with a raspy voice. Otto and Ram simultaneously knit their brows.

In front of the pair, Garfiel seemed to hug both his shoulders as he balled up his body and howled.

“——!!”

The bestial roar, which seemed to echo across the entirety of the Sanctuary, made the very air shudder.

“___”

The sudden appearance of a fiendish beast, its entire body covered in golden fur, struck Otto with the force of a gale. But his body did not tremble. Nor did he shudder. Perhaps he was simply all out of fear.

Moreover, right beside him, he saw a pleasant smile come over the face of Ram—a girl smaller in size than he.

“Garf’s easy-to-understand decision is mistaken. —In this match, victory belongs to us.”

You Serious…? internally retorted Otto, forgetting his usual formal manner of speech.

At that very Otto’s side, Ram lightly hopped from heel to heel, repeating the warm-up exercise several times over. After that, she walked straight ahead toward the enormous beast, her gait looking as if she was out on a pleasant stroll.

“Wait a—! Miss Ram?!”

Her bold action made Otto’s eyes bulge. However, Ram did not cease her feet as she moved in front of the ferocious tiger.

Garfiel, transformed into a fiendish beast, had no glint of reason left within his eyes. To the beast, she was not a lovely girl standing before him, but a weak, fragile being—a walking mass of soft flesh.

The beast reacted accordingly, smashing its upraised claw onto the small,

pathetic figure.

That instant—

“Too weak, Garf. —Who do you think you are facing?”

As Ram crouched, evading the bestial claw, she spoke words of pity as she slammed her fist into the beast’s wide-open lower jaw.

It was a slender, delicate girl’s fist—and with this, she sent the ferocious creature flying high into the air with all the force of a cannonball.

“—?!”

“I wonder, have you won against Ram in a fistfight even once?”

The beast turned over in midair, landing upon the ground. The beast understood that the girl was not helpless prey. Raging wildly, it leaped, four limbs lashing out…only to sustain another punch to the face, crashing to the ground once more.

“No way.”

The astonishing scene left Otto unwittingly gaping.

Even to an amateur’s eyes, Ram clearly had the upper hand, using their difference in physical stature to circle into her opponent’s blind spots; the terrifying beast was waving its burly arms without the slightest technique, hitting nothing but air as the one-sided pounding continued.

“It…it’s working! With this, Garfiel can be…!”

Never mind buying time—did this development not bring outright victory within sight?

As if to bolster that glimmer, Ram plunged her fist into the side of the tiger’s face. Snapping back from the sheer force, the beast kicked up a cloud of dirt as it was sent flying in spectacular fashion.

And then—

“—Pff.”

Along with a moan of being able to endure no more, a ferocious torrent of blood scattered into the air from Ram’s forehead.

—Her limit, which had been reached far too soon, made Ram grit her teeth, halting her steps there.

With her horn long broken, she knew making her blood awaken would instantly bring her to the brink. Even so, having waited for the conditions for a short, decisive battle to align, she'd intended to win nonetheless.

"—You've grown strong, Garf."

Haltingly, Ram murmured, her voice flowing with emotion that she rarely let others hear.

Still smiling softly, Ram leaped in and drove a knee into the great tiger's torso. She bounced off hard; the damage to her kneecap was severe. She'd already run dry of the mana she'd used for physical enhancement; now, her body was only as strong as her petite appearance suggested.

She relied on intuition and talent to evade the countless claw swipes coming her way as she leaped backward.

"—Ngh, phew."

She took a deep breath and coughed. The next moment, the clot of blood made a sound as it fell to the ground. As if that had been all the strength her body had left, her posture crumbled as she went down on one knee.

This time, the ferocious tiger did not let the opportunity slip. Opening its maw wide, fangs bared, it leaped to the front.

And then—

"——!!!!"

Otto, his fist clenching the crystal, let up a ferocious roar unthinkable from his slender throat.

It was the same roar a fiendish beast erupted with at the moment it began to consume its prey.

This was the power of Otto's blessing, which Ram had heard of beforehand. The power of his blessing allowed him to converse with any creature; with it, Otto was using bestial words to speak to the beast that had lost its mind.

Ram did not know what meaning the roar held.

For but a single moment, there was hesitance in the ferocious tiger's movements, with that slight pause giving Ram just enough opportunity to evade the blow. The great exploit made Otto smile in admiration of his own achievem —

"Er, whoaaaa—?!"

Faced with the fiendish beast's charge, Otto was sent flying by the fierce collision. He spun as he plunged into thorn bushes, vanishing from sight.

At that point, whether he survived or perished was completely up to Otto's resilience.

Ram expended no thought on the results of his decision or action, for she had judged that this was the best way to repay Otto for what he had done.

And Ram used the time provided by Otto's honorable death to draw her wand once more.

The tip of that wand glowed with an aura from the mana she had poured into it even at the height of the fistfight.

"___!!"

The ferocious tiger realized it might too late. It charged toward Ram. Too slow.

"—Al Fulla."

Incredible light gushed forth. Bathed in wind, the fiendish beast opened its great maw, its roar echoing through the sky.

—And so, the Battle of the Lost Woods of Cremaldi came to its conclusion.

CHAPTER 6

THE REASON I TRUST YOU

When he found Emilia, cowering and clutching her knees, Subaru felt relief, which seemed out of place.

Having found Emilia was the first part of it. That Emilia was here was the second. As he had firmly believed she could be nowhere else, her being here had fulfilled both his wishes.

“Though, I have to say, you really thought about this, Emilia-tan.”

“___”

“Sure, here’s a place you can hole up without anyone finding you…especially since the people who can enter are limited in the first place, and none of the ones who could were likely to do it.”

At the very least, besides Emilia, there were three candidates to enter this place—Echidna’s tomb. One rejected the Trial with every hair on his body, one had lost her role as the price for going against her creator, and the last had been stripped of his qualifications after earning the Witch’s ire.

Beyond those three, the others possessing qualifications were forbidden to enter under the terms of the pact they upheld. Truly, it was the perfect place for Emilia to hide in.

Emilia hung her head at Subaru’s words of praise. Then, with her head still lowered…

“Subaru…why are you here?”

“If you have to ask why, that’s a tough one. Probably because I’m always thinking of Emilia-tan, so I’m the one with the best grasp of Emilia-tan’s feelings?”

Though, if that was truly the case, none of this would have happened to begin with. Emilia wouldn't have passed the night with enough worry to wind up so backed into a corner that she was cowering in a place like this.

And this time, too, Emilia replied "No" to Subaru's answer, shaking her head.

"That's not what I… Subaru, I don't mean the reason you're here… Subaru, you're in a place people without qualifications can't enter, you know?"

"Oh, you mean why my body didn't get thrown back like Roswaal's? Fact is, even without being thrown back, I had to put up with a lot. It wasn't bad enough to make me collapse, thanks to my Gate being so puny. I suppose I should be grateful that I have no talent for magic."

"Is that how it is…"

When Subaru replied that he'd *put up with a lot*, Emilia's eyes became filled with gloom. Tilting her head as she rested her chin in the gap between her knees, Emilia turned her gaze toward Subaru.

Her gaze bore the colors of uncertainty and resignation—an un-Emilia emotion he had never before seen on her.

"…I half believed and half hoped that you'd be here, Emilia-tan."

"Half, half…"

"Since I ran around here, there, and everywhere and couldn't find you, I had to turn my thinking on its head…not *where*, but *why*. Then, after I figured you were probably here, I'm relieved I actually found you."

"…You were relieved?"

"Hm?"

As Subaru smiled to try and put her at ease, Emilia posed that brief question.

Her voice was quiet, ready to vanish at any moment. When Subaru raised his eyebrows, Emilia stared straight at him.

"You're saying that finding me here makes you relieved? That's all? …You're not angry?"

"What, Emilia-tan? Don't tell me you were scared you'd made me angry?"

Emilia's meek, trembling voice made Subaru loosen his lips without thinking. Having set off without telling anyone where she was going, she was scared of being scolded the instant she was found, just like some little kid.

"I'm not angry at all. I was nervous, and to be honest, it didn't exactly make me comfortable, but I'm not angry. I'm just really glad about everything, finding you here included, I'm just really glad."

"…That so?"

Subaru had exhausted all the reassuring words at his disposal, trying to loosen Emilia's tense heart.

"You're…not angry."

And yet, there was no relief infused into Emilia's murmur.

"Emilia?"

"You're not angry with me. —You won't even get angry."

Her small, raspy voice was trembling.

When Subaru, suspecting something, drew his eyebrows together, he had already realized too late.

Emilia was looking down, biting her lip, her eyes wide open.

It was as if she was trying to keep the tears filling her eyes from coursing…

"Why won't you get angry with me?"

"Ah—"

"I did something selfish, didn't I? I bothered you, didn't I? I left without saying anything, so you worried… I made you unsure if I'd run away…that's what I did. That's what I did, right? It's natural to be angry, isn't it? Subaru, even you must be…"

When Subaru tried to interrupt by calling out her name, Emilia poured out her emotions with a rapid flood of words.

Emilia was asserting her own selfishness, apparently to draw blame to herself. Overwhelmed by the sheer force of her negativity, Subaru came to realize the error in his thinking.

Emilia hadn’t been afraid of angering Subaru. Emilia was afraid he would not blame her for her actions.

After all, that meant—

“Why won’t you get angry…? Are you not angry because you d-didn’t expect anything in the first place? You being kind to me when I fail like this means…my failing didn’t disappoint you at all? Isn’t it because you…thought I wouldn’t do well?”

Perhaps, just perhaps, this was an insecurity that had always rested at the bottom of Emilia’s heart, one she had never before put into words.

Over and over, Subaru had greeted Emilia with warmth when she failed in her challenge of the Trial, crushed by her own, cowardly heart. As he did so, he had both aided Emilia and instilled anxiety within her.

She was despondent over betraying his expectations. But Subaru had never showed that to Emilia, not even once.

As the failures added up, continuing to gently console her might have saved her heart temporarily, but only by searing ever-greater anxiety upon it.

All that time, Emilia had been frightened of Subaru and Puck’s kindness.

“You’re wrong, Emilia. That’s not how I think of you.”

Subaru earnestly tried to reach out to the great ripple arising in Emilia’s heart. If he let go of her heart there, it would be lost for good; he would never be able to capture it again.

“It’s not because I think that way that I’m not angry with you…”

“Then…! Then why…why didn’t you…keep your promise?”

She instantly raised her voice. The word *promise* held him in its snare.

When Subaru, who was hit right where it hurt, was cowed into silence, Emilia shook her head in rejection. He could offer no response. —It was a fact that Subaru had let go of Emilia’s hand the night before.

“I asked you to hold my hand until morning…! Subaru, you promised …! Why did you let go of my hand? Why didn’t you keep your promise…?”

Her tearful voice strictly levied blame on him for not keeping his word.

He could have listed reasons if he wanted. To liberate the Sanctuary. To learn more about Garfiel. —But those words were thin, light. Besides, it wasn't just that.

Subaru's reasons for breaking his promise, for leaving Emilia's side, were not limited to those things.

"Subaru…Puck…you all break your promises and go off somewhere else. You go off somewhere and leave me behind…liars. Subaru, you liar. Puck, you liar. Liar, liar…!"

Face lowered and tears flowing, Emilia bumped her head against Subaru's shoulders, her hands powerlessly pounding his chest. There was virtually no force behind them. And yet, the pain felt like it was enough to tear his body asunder.

That was probably the same pain Subaru's insensitivity had caused Emilia.

"I—I told you before how important promises are to me…! How to spirit mages, to *me*, promises are so important… That's why I wanted you to keep them… Subaru, you apologized for not keeping them before…so why did you break your promise again…"

"Emilia…"

"You mustn't break promises…you mustn't lie. You have to keep your promises… I mean, if you don't…if I'd only kept mine, I… Mother and Geuse wouldn't have…"

Her face still pressed into Subaru's shoulder, Emilia slammed emotions into Subaru that had nowhere else to go. Her upsurge of sadness and anger over his betrayal had sliced her thought process into thousands of tiny pieces.

"You mustn't lie…you mustn't…!"

The grief-filled voice that spilled out tore at Subaru like a claw to his heart.

Promise—that was a word that had passed between Subaru and Emilia, bearing different meaning to each. He'd hurt her before by taking their promises too lightly, and the memories of that were still fresh.

And yet, once again, the word *promise* held no gentle echo but instead a crippling weight that bound them both, enough to make Emilia bury her head between her clenched knees and continue crying even that very moment.

With every second that passed, seeing her like that carved feelings of guilt into Subaru's heart. As he listened to her sobbing voice, he desperately pondered what he should say.

Was it right to apologize? Was it right to act as if he understood? Should he earnestly console her?

The thoughts went round and round inside his head, but try as he might, he could not grasp which answer was correct.

What should he—ought he—did he need to do? What he needed most—

How could Subaru best convey how he felt?

Subaru thought and thought, searching for the best words he knew, the ones that could reach the heart most—

"Emilia. —I love you."

What he voiced was a confession that was clashed enormously with the time and place.

"…Eh?"

Subaru's confession made Emilia lift up her face, as if wondering if she had misheard him.

She beheld Subaru with her violet eyes, which were dotted by tears even then. He saw himself distorted by the droplets—and yet, he held something strong within him that absolutely would not waver.

For then and there, he bore no uncertainty whatsoever about the words he needed to convey.

"You're trying to take the same Trial over and over, night after night. I don't know what past you're seeing, but the past isn't something to squirm about forever."

"…Agh, gah."

“And instead you’re all like *I’ll try my best*, *I have to do it*, all stubborn and everything. If you cleared it, that’d be one thing, but the result was that you failed after running your mouth, wasn’t it?”

“S-Subaru…”

“In the end, with your pet and your guardian gone, you can’t even walk properly by yourself. So what, you’re gonna drown your worries in tears, abandon your duties, and go to sleep? I can’t watch you like this.”

The abuse Subaru seemingly spat out made Emilia open her eyes wide and still. Her surprise was such that he could see few tears left in her moist eyes; she trembled weakly, her lips unable to speak even a single word.

Without doubt, never had Subaru hurt Emilia’s heart more than he did that moment.

This was the malice and disgust that Subaru Natsuki had never once turned toward Emilia to date. Receiving this, Emilia’s expression slowly dried up as a smile came over her.

“That’s…right. E-even Subaru…thinks about me that way. It’s only n-natural…”

“___”

“I’ve done…terrible things, even though I was told better, haven’t I? Ever since I came here…no, since long before…I’ve caused nothing but trouble… that’s why I…”

Without a word, Subaru accepted the trembling Emilia’s self-deprecation. Emilia’s throat contracted, seemingly swallowing down her sobs, yet a pain-filled smile remained upon her even so.

“That’s why it’s natural to…abandon me…Puck and Subaru both…”

“—Got that right. After failing this many times, I still don’t see any sign of improvement. It’s only normal to think that this is less *I’ll manage somehow* and more *Who cares what happens*.”

At the end of her self-denunciation, Emilia tried to conclude that she was hopeless. With bitter words, Subaru was in full agreement, stealing the conclusion from right under her. And then—

“—But.”

One step before coming to that exact conclusion, Subaru cut off his words.

Emilia lifted her face. Subaru understood the emotions hovering in her eyes so much that it hurt.

He understood, for this was the same despair he had once harbored toward himself.

That was why—

“Emilia. —I love you.”

Subaru would not let Emilia escape, using the same words that had once cast an inescapable curse upon him.

“___”

Subaru made his confession, staring into her eyes, bordered with long eyelashes, which shuddered from the impact.

“I love you. I love you I love you I love you. I’m hopelessly in love with you.”

“Why are you…all of a sudden…?”

“I love your super-pretty silver hair, I love those purple eyes that are like glistening gemstones, I love that voice that makes you feel good just from hearing it, I love those long, slender limbs, the white skin, the height difference and stuff is so ideal I can’t stand it, I mean, just being with you makes my heart beat like crazy, and it’s really bad.”

“Agh, aah…”

“I love the fact that you’re a little ditzy, it’s cute how you try so hard at everything, I really respect how you’re so frantic to help other people, I think how you put others before yourself is adorable, and I want to see all your emotions right by your side, forever.”

“A-at a time like this…stop messing around!”

The words seemed to slide out of his mouth as his feelings for Emilia poured out.

Subaru passionately confessed, but Emilia loudly and angrily shouted back.

“Why are you saying this all of a sudden?! This isn’t what we were talking about! S-Subaru, even you think I’m no good! You can’t watch someone like me…that’s why!”

“Yeah, I suppose so. By rights, seeing you failing and giving up like this would make anyone’s love run out. Normally, even I’d abandon you, turn tail, and run. And if you weren’t Emilia, I would.”

“Why?!”

Even as Subaru concurred that the results were hopeless, he denied the most important part at its root.

As if to say *it settled nothing*, *it was unforgivable*, Emilia rose her eyebrows anger.

“Even though you know I’m no good and unsalvageable…why do you forgive me despite that?!”

“If you’re looking for an answer, I’ll say it as many times as you want. Because —I—love—you!”

When Emilia pressed close with a tearful voice, Subaru once again raised his own, their foreheads close enough to touch.

Overwhelmed, Emilia recoiled, but this time, it was Subaru who closed the distance. With the two close enough to breathe each other’s breaths, black eyes mingled with violet as he threw his words at her.

“I love you. That’s why no matter how sorry you look, I only feel like I’ve discovered a new side to you. The way you keep trying even when you don’t stand a chance makes me wanna cheer you on, and no matter how much you get disgusted with yourself, I will never hate you.”

Subaru absolutely would not allow Emilia’s wavering eyes to escape.

“Even if you hate yourself for your own shortcomings, even if you worry that the people around you can’t help but hate you…I’ll keep expecting things from you, and I’ll never use your weakness as a reason to hate you, or ever abandon you. Never.”

He understood how Emilia felt. But he also knew how to take her hand and

pull her out of it.

For once, someone had refused to abandon him, even when Subaru tried to abandon himself.

“My love for you runs deeper than you’ll ever know. All of you is like a shining light to me. Of course, parts of you are no good. You’re not an angel or a goddess; you’re just a normal girl…you’ll cry when things are tough, and you’ll feel like running away when things happen that you don’t like. I get all that.”

But. But even so.

“But even with those weak parts, even with the parts I said terrible things about, I love all of you, Emilia. That’s why…even now, I’m not disappointed in you.”

“—! That’s! That’s so self-serving, isn’t it?!”

Emilia stubbornly refused to listen to the myriad claims that feel from Subaru’s lips.

Unable to push her confusion aside, she kept on tossing out words of denial, and therein lay his hope.

“After saying I’m no good in a way like that, you say you love me even so… that’s unbelievable! Why do you believe in me like that, Subaru…? I don’t understand it at all!”

“You’re wrong! You’ve got this wrong from head to toe. It’s not *I love you ’cause I believe something*. —It’s not like that. I love you. That’s why I believe in you!”

“Love alone isn’t a reason to believe in someone!”

“——! If love wasn’t enough for me to believe in you, then why else would I go through such horrible shit just to save a troublesome girl like you!!”

Their voices loudened as their mutual feelings clashed.

When Subaru put his hand against the wall and rose to his feet, Emilia did the same, standing so that she might face him. At a range close enough to butt foreheads, both had furrowed eyebrows as Subaru and Emilia vented their feelings at each other.

Never before had the pair launched spittle, faces red, as they exchanged ragged words that all amounted to *You're wrong!*

"I love you! I love you enough to make my head go nuts, enough to be happy to die for you! That's why I'm putting up with the pain and suffering, standing in front of you even though I wanna hurl right now!"

"That's…! I never asked you to! I never asked you to say all those selfish things… Subaru, you're not thinking of my feelings at all, are you?! This is how you…take the brunt of everything, always getting hurt because of me…you don't understand anything about how that makes me feel!"

"Like I could, like I've even thought about it! What I think of all the time is just ways to look good in front of you! I think about what I should do that'll make you think the best of me, what I should do that'll let me see your happiest face …it's hard work, damn it. Put on a cute face like I want a little more often, would you?!"

"Don't talk about me like I'm some sort of doll! If you're thinking of my happiness…wh-why do you break your promises?! I asked you to keep them and everything! Why? Why won't you?! You actually hate me, don't you?!"

"I love you!!"

"Liarrr!!"

Subaru's desperate attempts to slam how he truly felt into her overlapped with Emilia's loud voice.

Just how much had he once told himself to put off conveying his feelings to her? Just how many obstacles had Subaru overcome so that he could tell her the words that would convey them?

He piled on his confessions of love so much that they must have come off as cheap, empty words. But to Subaru, they were his true feelings, a confession that came once in a lifetime with his entire body and spirit—the real deal infused with all of his being.

"I'm not lying! I love you! What do you think about me anyway?! You always act like you know it all! How much do you think you've shaken my heart, stringing me along with that cute face of yours like I've got a chance?! Stop

toying with me!”

“I-I’m not toying with you! All I did was act normally. Don’t say weird things about it! Even though I have so much to consider right now, you’re asking me how I feel about you… I can’t think about that, Subaru! Stop it! Don’t make this hard for me!”

“Who’s making this hard for who?! You’re making it hard for *me*!!”

“You’re the one making it hard for me, Subaru!!”

Like little children having a tantrum, both were reduced to emotional arguments without a shred of logic between them.

With irreconcilable force, Subaru and Emilia slammed their fierce emotions into each other with loud voices.

Inside the tomb, purportedly a place of tranquility for many years, the pair’s irrational arguments continued to echo without pause.

“I don’t know how many times I’ve said it! Subaru, you’re a liar! You break your promises, but you come to me with a calm look on your face… Y-you thought I wouldn’t notice, didn’t you?! I’ve been watching you! I’ve been watching to see if you keep your promises with me, Subaru!”

“That’s a bad personality right there! Testing people like that… What are you, a Witch?!”

“A liar who breaks his promises has no right to talk!”

“This and my breaking promises are two different things!”

The unconcerned way Subaru changed the subject left Emilia so angry, her words caught in her throat. She was so seized by emotion that she couldn’t give voice to her thoughts.

She made ragged breaths. Breathing in and out multiple times, Emilia’s eyes were in tears as she asked him.

“Why…why did you break your promise…?”

“…I feel bad about breaking my word. I really wanted to keep holding your hand and stay with you until morning. That’s the truth.”

“That’s not what I asked. —Why did you break your promise?”

“…I can’t tell you.”

Clenching his teeth, Subaru responded to Emilia’s question with a low, anguished groan and a shake of his head.

Subaru refusing to give her an answer at this point made Emilia cover her face with her hands.

“You won’t keep your promises. You won’t even tell me why you broke them… What do you want me to do now? If you have something to tell me…just come out and say it! If you don’t, Subaru, even I can’t believe you…!”

“Emilia.”

“If you’d only kept your promise and stayed with me until morning, I’d probably believe you, Subaru! I’d believe you and probably have given you everything! Instead, you broke your promise…”

Her face disheveled, Emilia embraced her own, slender shoulders. Anxiety and fear rested in her quavering, violet eyes, for Emilia was speaking not to Subaru, but herself.

“After Puck was gone, my memories…they’re coming back, little by little. Inside me, scenes I don’t know and conversations I don’t remember are gushing up one after another.”

“___”

“All these things I didn’t know until now, things that by rights I should have remembered…just how much have I forgotten? I forgot them and then acted like they never happened…!”

These were the memories Puck had called back in exchange for his pact with Emilia: the true memories kept under a lid that she had turned her back upon long ago.

The lid had been removed, and scenes of a past she did not wish to remember had been restored. However, to Emilia, this came with the fear that she would no longer be able to be certain what was her true nature.

“When all those memories come back…what will I do then? Is who I am right

now really me? I forgot so many precious things, I forgot about Mommy…is who I am right now wrong?”

Nature dictated that everyone accumulated memories over the course of their lives, binding each person to others around them.

If that was so, was a life underpinned by false memories not wrong in every respect?

If the point of origin was wrong, did that not make the path walked and the destination reached all wrong as well—?

—What’s important is not where you start, or what happens midway, but how it ends.

Suddenly, a voice reverberated in the back of his mind.

The distant voice, one that was very familiar to Subaru, was the voice of someone who was very close to him yet would never meet again.

When they were parting, at the very, very end, in the name of homework, she had given Subaru a gentle present.

—Yeah, you’re right, Mom.

However it started, whatever path one walked, who had the right to decide what was right or wrong until the very, very end?

“Emilia, no matter what memories you remember, nothing’s gonna change. I love you. I’ll always love you.”

“—! I can’t…believe you. Subaru, the version of me you say you love…m-might not be here anymore. You can’t…say something like…”

“I can. No matter what happens, you’re not going anywhere. I…love you.”

“…Those are…the words of a liar. Coming from someone…who can’t even make me believe him…”

“—Then…I’ll make you believe.”

With trembling eyes and a trembling voice, Emilia rejected Subaru.

Words weren’t getting through. His demeanor couldn’t convince her.

But words weren't the only way to convey feelings. That was why—

"Suba…"

"If you don't like it, dodge."

They were at a distance close enough to breathe each other's—no, there was not even a breath's distance between the pair.

Reaching his hand to Emilia's shoulder, Subaru brought his face close to her. When Emilia saw Subaru approach, bewilderment rose into her eyes as her body went rigid.

For one second, he waited. It was the only chance he gave her to throw him off.

"___"

But Emilia closed her eyes.

Whether this was surrender or the product of hesitation, Subaru knew not.

"—Mm."

Their respective breaths became one. Emilia's breathing caught as Subaru knit his brows in pain.

For the tiny sound that resounded was that of the pair's teeth forcefully bumping against each other. The first thing they tasted was a faint, throbbing pain. However, the powerful heat that followed erased it even from the most remote corners of their heads.

Her lips were so soft. It was a kiss where they simply touched.

To Emilia, it was her first. To Subaru, it was the second time he had kissed her.

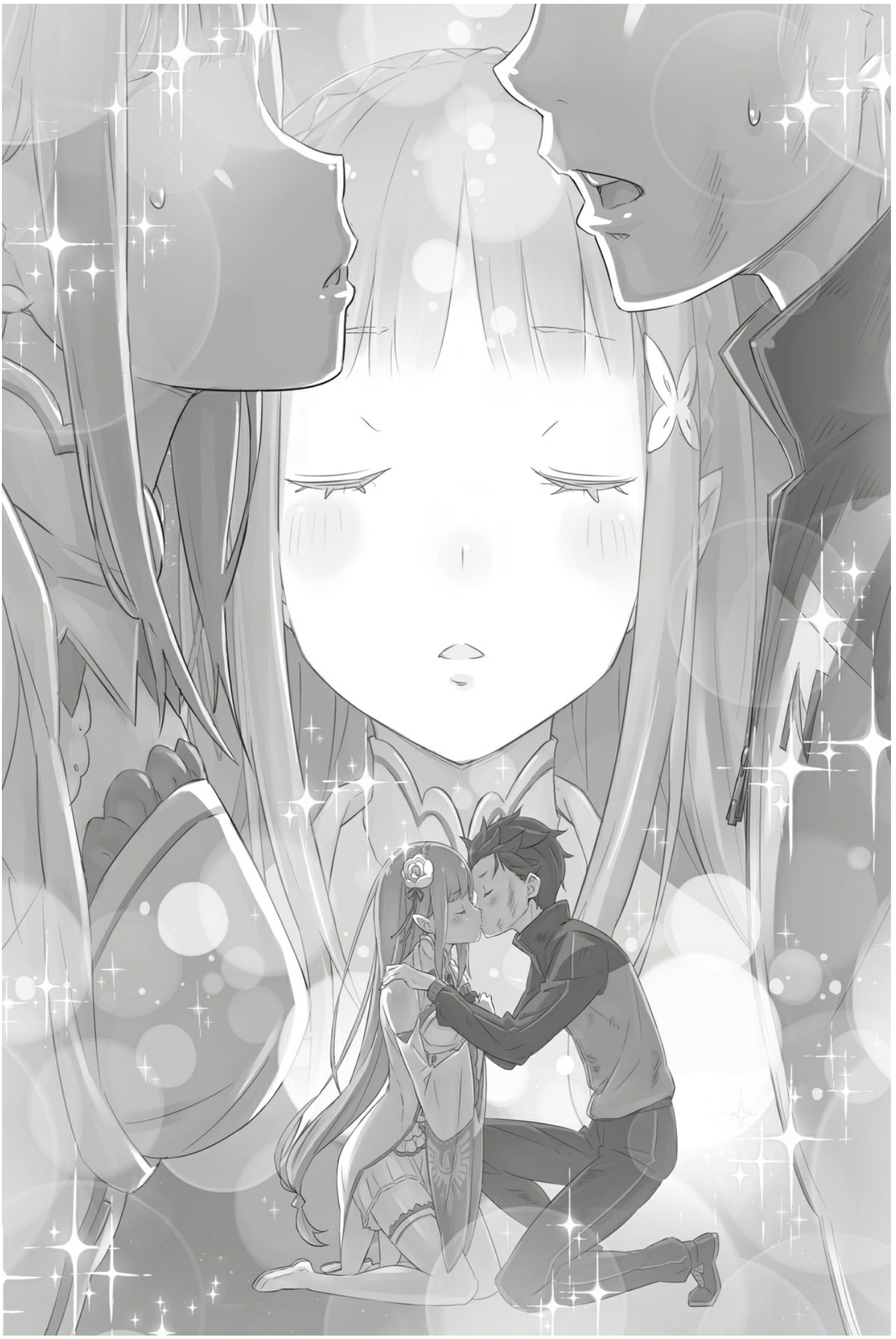
It was not like the first time, which carried the cold taste of death. The second kiss…bore the hot taste of life.

"—Ah."

"I love you."

When their lips mutually pulled apart, blood rushed to Emilia's cheeks as Subaru unhesitatingly spoke those words.

“No matter how sorry you look, no matter how we argue like this, I’ll still love you the same way, Emilia. No matter what happens, that’ll never change. It’ll probably make me love you even more than before. —That’s why I’ll believe in you, forever. And if you have to ask why…



“Because you love me…”

In a daze, Emilia finished Subaru’s sentence as she touched her own lips. She stroked her soft lips with her fingers, as if the touch of what had been there yet lingered. White tears coursed down her cheeks.

“It’s natural to be anxious when memories you don’t know about come gushing out. I understand why you’d feel scared that a version of you that you never knew is coming out. But it won’t erase the path you’ve walked. You’ll be all right, Emilia.”

“How can you talk…like that…?”

“Because it’s not important where you start, but where you end. —The woman I respect most in the world said that.”

Normally the worst guesser that could be found around the globe, his mother had taught him the most important thing he would ever learn.

It wasn’t that he truly understood the answer to her homework assignment, but she’d made him *want* to understand.

At the very least, he wanted to show Emilia his good side when anxiety was making her stand still.

“It’s all right, Emilia. No matter what you remember, I’m on your side. Whether you forget or remember, it’s all fine. If you’re still scared even so, we’ll find it.”

“Find…find what…?”

“Just like I sent you my feelings of love full speed, I’ll send your worries packing full speed, too. That’s how we’ll find your precious feelings.”

Emilia did not fear any choice that hurt her for the sake of others. Through these, she prioritized the people around her, a stance that was noble and beautiful and that Subaru deeply respected.

But though the words *It’s for someone else’s sake* were gentle, they were also sad…because how she felt for someone whose face she couldn’t see did not even come close to how she felt about those she could see.

“All that said, I was kinda hoping you’d turn some of those precious feelings my way…”

“My…precious feelings.”

Perhaps Subaru’s words had not really sunk in as Emilia touched her hand to her breast. Her fingertips were touching the crystal where Puck had once been, cracked with its light long lost.

It was a vestige of a bond that should have been there. However, Emilia grasped it firmly nonetheless.

“If I get all my memories back…will my precious feelings be among them?”

“Yeah. I’m sure they will. Along with a reason to keep on walking.”

“—Mm.”

He wouldn’t call it half trust and half doubt, but Emilia certainly didn’t agree completely as she nodded.

Seeing Emilia like that, Subaru closed his eyes and turned his face skyward.

—He felt like the words that had previously saved him the same way had been…gentler.

He felt like he was saved by words that were gentler. Harsher. Stronger.

—Can I really be there for Emilia like that?

“___”

Asking that out loud would have been too uncool, though, so he didn’t actually say it.

He exhaled, exhausted. Then, the very instant he forgot about it, the tomb’s rejection slammed directly into Subaru’s spirit. Putting his hand to a wall without thinking, he barely managed to avoid tumbling to the floor.

“Subaru! A-are you all right?”

“It’s nothin’…well, that’s what I wanna say, but it’s definitely somethin’. It’s pretty bad right now. For the time being, if we’re gonna continue this lover’s quarrel, I’d like to do it outside.”

“Goodness…as if I have any intention of that.”

When Subaru, blue in the face, tried to put on a strong front, Emilia faintly smiled.

It was a strength bereft of strength, but the sight of Emilia returning to normal was a sign to Subaru that she had become more positive, if only ever so slightly. She was still anxious, and answers were yet to come. Even so, she smiled.

“___”

When the wobbly Subaru rested his weight against the wall as he walked down the passage, Emilia hesitated to lend him a supporting hand. Perhaps this was an aftereffect of having earlier touched each other’s lips.

Thinking back, the sheer boldness of it made his face run hot.

But for that one moment, he set a number of such deep sentiments aside.

“___”

At the end of the passage, orange-colored sunlight was entering at an angle.

And there—

“—Heya. Sorry we kept you waiting.”

“Tch.”

When Subaru spoke those words, there, raising a hand—

“—Not like I was waitin’ for *you*.”

—and clicking his tongue in annoyance, was Garfiel, waiting for the pair, his entire body drenched in red by blood and the setting sun.

CHAPTER 7

NONE CAN LIFT THE QUAIN STONE ALONE

1

Garfiel stood in front of the tomb with wounds all over.

His entire body was smeared red with blood, and his shoulders rose and fell with ragged breaths. His head and body showed traces of blunt trauma all over, and only his loincloth remained upon his honed physique, leaving him close to naked.

Without even shoes on his feet, he stood barefoot and still before them as Subaru lowered his hand.

“…That’s a pretty primitive style to go with. Took a bit too much of a liking to war paint?”

“Never mind ’bout that. Only place that’ll get ya is rollin’ on the ground.”

When Subaru shot the breeze with him, Garfiel snorted through his nose and gave him a sour look.

Jokes aside, the fact remained that Subaru was surprised to see Garfiel wounded. He’d expected Garfiel to show up at the tomb, but being covered in injuries was beyond his expectations. And the cause was—

“That stupid bastard Otto. I told him not to do anything crazy…”

“I underestimated ’im. I never thought he’d put up that much of a fight. On top of that, he sweet-talked Ram…that’s how I ended up like this!”

“Ram, with Otto?”

Garfiel twisted his cheeks in disgust as he nodded and confirmed what Subaru had guessed.

If his words were to be trusted, the wounds carved into his body were the results of Otto and Ram's exploits. Just how hard had those two noncombatants fought him? They'd probably done it simply to buy time.

They'd made time for Subaru and Emilia to talk. That was what the pair had fought so hard for.

"But if you two die, it doesn't mean anything…"

Subaru imagined the worst possibility as cold sweat trickled down his brow.

Given the state Garfiel was in, it would not be strange if the difficult battle of which he spoke had resulted in him putting an end to their hard fighting with his claws. This, Subaru feared deeply.

"—Subaru."

When Subaru clenched his fist and bit his lip, a voice like a silver bell called out to him. When he looked, Emilia, standing right beside him, was touching his shoulder, her concern-infused gaze peering into his black eyes.

Those eyes of hers had not yet come to terms with the emotions inside her. Emilia couldn't have had any way of knowing what the situation meant. Of course it would throw her for a big loop.

Even so, Emilia was more concerned than doubtful, putting her consideration for Subaru first.

"…Sorry I looked pathetic. Now that I've remembered who's standing beside me, I'm all fired up."

"Mm, I understand. Don't do anything rash."

Replying to her gentle words with a nod, Subaru once more looked at Garfiel, who was standing on the grassy field in front of the tomb. With the stone steps between them, Subaru looked down at Garfiel as the latter crinkled his nose.

"Garfiel, what happened to Ram and Otto?"

"Ya don't think…me bein' here is answer enough?"

"Unfortunately, I'm considered a poor guesser. I'd like to hear it straight from your own mouth."

Garfiel clacked his sharp fangs, his fierce response making Subaru grimace. The two exchanged sharp gazes. Garfiel made a low growl in his throat.

“It don’t matter what y’all are plannin’. I’ll cut off whatever stupid things ya want right here.”

It was not a reply to his question, but rather, he was making plain that he had no intention of giving a straight answer. In its stead, Garfiel was referring to the real reason he was baring his fangs toward the pair.

If the man named Garfiel was the man Ryuzu and Shima said he was, then—

“You didn’t kill them, did you?”

“I said that’s got nothin’ t’ do with this! Livin’ or dyin’…livin’ or dyin’ has nothin’ to do with it. If I smash the entrance to the tomb and end it all right here…”

Irritated, Garfiel put a hand to his forehead and spat out his words. His blunt, violent conclusion was the optimal method of putting an end to the Trial for good. But to Subaru, it sounded like nothing more than an excuse.

Garfiel was searching for an excuse not to have to kill Ram or Otto, or Subaru, either.

“If you do that, the Sanctuary will be a closed, fenced garden for eternity. You all right with that…?”

“—It’s fine. Every other option’s worse.”

Brushing Subaru’s words aside, Garfiel put a foot against the tomb’s stone steps. His advance, seemingly to cast aside all doubt, made Subaru feel he could see the gap between the determination and anxiety inside Garfiel’s stubborn mind.

His body bloodied, covered in wounds, Garfiel was determined to destroy the tomb, seeking nothing beyond a definite conclusion.

But—

“…What do ya think ya doin’, ahh?”

Halfway up the stone steps, Garfiel halted as his pupils narrowed. His feline

gaze, reminiscent of a beast's, shot right through Emilia, the one standing before him to bar his passage. To Garfiel, Emilia's strength as a combatant was unknown; and so, seemingly by nature, he strongly clacked his fangs and gave off a wary growl.

"Outta my way. I'll get rid o' what's worryin' ya with my own bare hands. Once I do that…"

"Garfiel. —What are you so afraid of?"

Pheeew went Garfiel, Emilia's assertion leaving him short of breath. For a second, he was taken aback; however, Garfiel immediately reddened with anger. His fangs were shaking.

"Me, afraid…?"

"You're afraid, aren't you? That's why you're speaking so loudly, stretching your arms as far as you can, stomping the ground with your feet… You're pushing yourself, aren't you?"

"What are you—?! You! Don't know nothin' about me…!"

"I do know. —I mean, I've lived in fear of so many things for all this time."

Because she was weak, because she was afraid, she knew.

Putting a hand to her own breast, Emilia touched the broken crystal to make sure it was still there. Her violet eyes did not conceal her sorrow for the past, even as she pleaded to Garfiel, his eyes wide open.

"Up to today, I've lived in fear. When Puck was with me, I put all the bad things onto him, relied on him, and forgot… I think I understand a little now that I finally remember them."

"Shaddap."

"Right now, I only just started remembering everything I wanted to forget. I don't really know what it is I really need to do. But there's *something* there. I have to find out what that *something* is. Most likely, to me, it's something to be found inside the tomb…that's why I cannot move aside. But."

"Shut up. Get lost. I…I'm not listenin' to any of this."

“But you’ve already found that *something* for yourself, haven’t you?”

When she posed the question, Garfiel’s endurance was already nearing its limit. An emotion beyond anger rested in his two eyes; it seemed like Garfiel was ready to train his claws on Emilia. But—

“—Everything you do is half-hearted, Garfiel.”

With Emilia’s assertions stabbing him, Garfiel was left with violence as his only resort. Subaru slowly shook his head from side to side at the immaturity and shortsightedness of his actions.

Subaru meant for Garfiel to turn the brunt of his anger toward him. —No, such intent was not necessary.

There was no plan or calculation involved. It was something Subaru wanted to say, something he needed to say; and so, he did.

“If I can’t do it, no one can. That’s how I think, and there’s no mistaking he’s someone like that, too. —Just how much of a conceited brat are you?”

“___”

“Certainly, it’s just like you said. Emilia’s failing at the Trial over and over. I can’t deny she’s all crying and sobbing over being made to see a past she doesn’t want to. It was hard to watch her lose herself after Puck was gone. I can’t even say with a straight face she’s bounced back yet.”

Standing right beside Emilia, Subaru motioned to her with his chin, mercilessly critiquing her disgraceful behavior.

It was a sudden topic, one that put a suspicious look on Garfiel’s face, but Emilia received it with dignity. The assessment was certainly not one that was pleasant on the ears, but it was correct nonetheless.

She would stand, face her own shame, and take it head-on, for that was what she thought would make Subaru proud of her—

“If she challenges the Trial right now, the results might not change. She might fail again, too, coming back in tears once more.”

“If ya know that already, why make her do it over an’…?”

“But Emilia will challenge it, as many times as it takes. —Unlike you, who lost and ran.”

She had recoiled from her past. She feared the Trial. Her legs cowered from it over and over. But he could not lie to his own heart.

He believed that whatever it was Emilia wished for, it was not a wish beyond her reach.

“That’s just you glossin’ things over with words o’ hope, makin’ the girl ya love see Hell over and over…!”

Declaring thus, Garfiel’s teeth creaked, and he chipped a fang. Heedless, he howled.

“Who the hell can win against yer own regrets?! The Trial was set up by a foul-minded Witch to teach people that! Don’t ya get it?!”

“…Regrets are hard, painful things. I think they’re pathetic things you can’t face, either.”

“Ahh?!”

“The pain of looking at the past is real. But that said, I intend to swallow it all down. Just like you said, the Witch has a foul personality. I’ll never forget my grudge for her betraying my trust.”

Even though it was a fraudulent farewell, with his parents fabricated from nothing but his memories in an illusionary world…

Subaru had faced the greatest regret inside himself; from it, he had gained one farewell, and one answer.

—His grudge toward the Witch who had granted him this would never fade. But these feelings, too, were real.

“I’m grateful to the Witch. I’m glad I faced my past. I ran, and I ran, and I kept running from it…but I’m glad I couldn’t run from it.”

Neither Emilia nor Garfiel could comprehend Subaru’s gratitude toward the Witch. Perhaps they took his words as wild delusions. It was fine even so.

For at the very least, inside Subaru, his stance toward the past was set.

And—

“Garfiel. —Do you hate your mother who left you behind?”

“Wha…?!”

Subaru’s question caused the color of Garfiel’s face to change dramatically.

From red with anger, it turned pale with shock, and finally, when it lost all color, he closed his eyes.

“From the old hag…? Damn you, buttin’ into other people’s pasts…!”

“Sorry. Even though we take off our shoes when entering someone’s house, we keep them on when stepping into someone’s heart. It’s a Natsuki family tradition.”

There were the words of the Witch, the words of his biological sister, the words of his grandmother, and the words of yet another grandmother.

The night before, Subaru had heard straight from the lips of Shima, who held Garfiel dear to her, confirming that Arma’s speculation was correct. —The past Garfiel saw had indeed been the moment he and his mother parted.

He openly confessed to trampling all over Garfiel’s heart in order to learn more.

“I have some notion of what past you saw. Frederica and your mother left you both in the Sanctuary and went out into the world. So you saw that, and then what?”

He told him of what he’d heard from Shima. However, he left the conclusion blank as he tossed the question.

The question Subaru posed made Garfiel shake his head, repulsed. Subaru heard his fangs clattering nonstop. This was no act of intimidation, but simple shaking from fear.

Seeing this, Subaru took a step forward, not allowing any escape as he redoubled his question.

“Frederica left the Sanctuary. She believed you’d open the Sanctuary someday, so she left to make a place in the outside world for the people here.

So what have you been doing on the inside?”

Garfiel had rejected the warmth of the hand his sister had offered him, continuing to cower within the Sanctuary instead.

Feelings of guilt sprung up for digging into the scars on another person’s chest. Subaru forced down the feeling, pressing Garfiel for the truth, his fingers digging into the wounds, drawing blood in the process.

“Was it that your mother abandoned you, so you hated your mother, so you hated the world that had stolen your mother from you, so you stayed shut inside the Sanctuary? Here, because you didn’t want to get hurt!”

“That ain’t…! What do you know…? Don’t flap yer damn lips like ya understand!”

“That’s right! All I’m saying is my own arbitrary guess, flapping my lips like I know what I’m talking about. Only you know what you really think. I’m not your family, so I’m not gonna know unless you come out and say it!”

When Garfiel retorted on reflex, Subaru harshly scolded him, pummeling him with words.

“If you don’t say it, we won’t know! If it’s not in words, no one’ll get it!”

“—!”

“If you hate your mother for abandoning you, go outside and get revenge or whatever right this minute! Don’t pin this on us people on the inside! That’s what it is, isn’t it? You’re just lashing out?!”

Garfiel’s expression contorted. He went down the stone steps, as if trying to put distance between them.

There was no escape. Grasping Garfiel’s arm, Subaru brought his face close enough to take a bite out of him.

At breathing distance, he glared into that sad, blood-smeared face and asked. And kept asking.

“You hate your family. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be…”

“No!! Me…I…!”

In Ryuzu's words, the truth about Shima, Echidna's advice, Roswaal's and Frederica's behavior, the soft gaze Ram sent Garfiel's way—there, Subaru had found a different answer.

There was a basis for Garfiel's actions. This basis was hatred toward his mother and fear of the outside world.

He raised that conclusion aloft. He raised it, so that Garfiel's objection might strike it down.

Even that very moment, he was not killing Subaru or Emilia but trying to destroy the tomb in order to prevent the liberation of the Sanctuary. He wanted to keep Emilia from taking the Trial, because his fear of the Sanctuary being liberated was exceeded by his inability to watch Emilia being tormented by her past.

—If there was a basis for Garfiel's actions, it was not hatred or estrangement toward his past.

"What is it you really think?! Tell me, damn it!!"

"Me…I…want Mom to…!"

Swallowing his breath, Garfiel turned his face to the sky, his fangs quivering and voice tearful as he spoke:

"—I wanted her to be happy…!!"

2

"We were in the way, right?! Sis and I, we were in the way of her being happy, right?!"

They poured out—the feelings that had been resting inside Garfiel for ten years.

"I got it, of course I did! She abandoned Sis and me. Isn't that right?! We were kids she never wanted, and half-bloods at that. Of course we were in the way of a better life on the outside! What's strange about abandoning us…she wasn't wrong about anythin'…!"

Unable to hide the trembling in his voice, he tried to at least conceal the

trembling in his eyes, covering his face with his hands.

“Of course she abandoned us. That’s why I don’t hate Mom for it… Of course she did. Sis and I were in the way, so she went outside to be happy!!”

On that day, when he was still very young, Garfiel watched his mother leave them in the Sanctuary.

And then, when he challenged the Trial, Garfiel saw his mother abandon them once more.

Garfiel had been abandoned by his mother twice. Who could blame him for the cracks in his young heart?

But what truly left Garfiel feeling helpless was not the sight of his own mother abandoning him.

“But I saw. When I went into the tomb without telling Grandma, I saw…Mom, who left us…right after she left, she got caught up in a landslide, and then…!”

“—!”

“Sis doesn’t know… Sis still believes Mom’s living somewhere far away… But that’s not really true! Right after abandoning us, Mom…died!!”

In a tearful-sounding voice, Garfiel proclaimed the fragmentary truth he had seen with his own eyes.

That cruel truth slammed into Subaru, who already knew, and Emilia, who did not.

“She died…she never got to be happy…”

Garfiel kept his face covered with his palms, sobbing raggedly as he continued:

“Why? Didn’t she go to the outside world so she could be happy?”

Subaru gave no reply.

“Didn’t she leave us so she could go off and be happy?”

Emilia gave no reply.

“If she abandoned us, only to die right away without ever being happy,

then…”

Garfiel kept tossing unanswerable questions to a pair unable to answer them.

This was likely a question that Garfiel had kept asking, echoing at the bottom of his heart—

“What should we do with the loneliness and sadness from her abandoning us…?”

—In those ten years, he had continued searching for the answer to that, finding none.

“I wanted Mom to be happy…!”

He put his strength into that tearful voice. Removing his hands from his face, Garfiel made his fangs creak.

Clenching his teeth enough that it seemed they might split, blood dripped from his tattered lips as he howled.

“This sadness! The loneliness from being abandoned! I wanted to believe that if they made her happy, there was meaning to them! I wanted to make Mom hate me…!!”

His feelings for his mother had nowhere left to go. Garfiel had shut his heart inside the Sanctuary. With nothing left to slam them against, his ferocious emotions had kept on burning like a flame, consuming his soul as its fuel.

Amid the flames of his smoldering heart, Garfiel vowed to himself.

“—I ain’t lettin’ anyone leave anymore.”

His voice was shaking.

There was anger, sadness, and the vestiges of fierce emotions forming a fire that continued blazing that very moment.

“Just changin’ doesn’t mean you can be happy. There’s lots of people around who can’t do anything like that! What are they supposed to do?! Should they just become sacrifices and take on all the sadness so others can be happy? Are they all supposed to become changed like me and Sis?!”

Garfiel spread both arms wide, hoisting the Sanctuary, isolated from the

outside world, onto his own shoulders.

“Me, I’ll—protect.”

Powerfully pressing down with both feet, Garfiel stopped howling, calmly stating his words.

“I’ll protect. I’ll protect everything as far as my hands can reach. Protect, protect, I’ll protect them… I won’t lose anyone else… I won’t let anyone go through what Mom had to…”

It was not anger that made Garfiel’s heart tremble. It was not sadness.

Ten years’ worth of resolve, ten years’ worth of determination, ten years’ worth of desires: It was these that infused Garfiel’s shout.

“I’ll be the barrier!! A real barrier that separates inside from out!!”

“Garfiel!!”

“That’s why! I’ll! Protect everyone in the Sanctuary! Protect Grandma! I’m the only one who can do it! I’m the only one who knows! I’m the only one who has to know!!”

Spitting blood as he raised a mighty shout, Garfiel made a great leap backward. Abandoning climbing the stone stairs, Garfiel landed on all fours in the middle of the grassy field.

With a shudder, every hair on his body stood up. Subaru understood what he intended to do like it was the back of his own hand.

“—Subaru.”

“It’s all right, Emilia.”

When Emilia addressed him, Subaru nodded, heading down the stone stairs on his own, turning toward the grassy field.

In that grassy field, dyed in the color of the setting sun, Subaru faced off against the gradually transforming Garfiel.

“You ignorant, blockheaded bastard.”

Garfiel could no longer be stopped with words. So that only left one thing to do.

“I’ll put you on your back and drive it into you. —That you’re a kind and really stupid jerk!!”



“—Oooooo!!”

A howling voice accompanied the ground cratering as Garfiel, on all fours, transformed. His bones audibly creaked as his body swelled, and he bared his fangs as golden fur appeared all across his skin.

Having turned into a ferocious, mindless beast for the purpose of killing Subaru Natsuki, Garfiel roared.

“Gaaaaaaa—!!”

This was a decision to kill. Garfiel deemed he had no choice but to kill Subaru. Subaru could not be stopped short of killing him. The last ten years had left Garfiel unable to sheathe his fangs.

Hence, Garfiel transformed as a last resort, for the sake of taking a life.

—Turning into a mindless beast so that he would not avert his eyes at the critical moment.

“But that’s your mistake, Garfiel.”

Not wanting to slay his foe, to thrust his claws through his opponent, was kindness.

The decision to use his body to protect the hearts of those around him, to protect the Sanctuary, was kindness.

But making excuses for supposedly unclouded wishes and feelings in order to kill someone who couldn’t be left alive, averting his eyes to his own actions, and going as far as to stop thinking at all—that was not kindness. It was weakness.

And Subaru Natsuki did not hesitate to take advantage of that weakness.

“I’m counting on you, body of mine. Don’t break down on me when we’re inside the ring!”

The transfigured Garfiel bent all four limbs, widening his fangs as if to bite Subaru with them.

Instantly, Subaru pictured a gate above his navel that was connected to the very center of his body and chanted.

“—Shamaaaaaaak!!”

Just before the great tiger leaped forth, Subaru shouted with all his spirit, and the world shouted back.

An incomprehensible darkness explosively spewed forth, swallowing the fiendish beast, who was extending his sharp claws whole. Those claws, which should surely have shaved away Subaru's life, never reached their target; the fiendish beast's bloodlust was erased somewhere in that abyss. The next moment— "—Ah."

Subaru realized that a fateful impact had destroyed something in the deepest part of his body.

He'd abused the Gate he'd been told not to use. He'd used the magic that he'd been forbidden from using.

He'd gone against the warnings of his personal healer, the greatest healer in the kingdom. The cost of betraying those words might have been to never be able to use magic again.

The Gate that had been at Subaru's core collapsed. Violently, chaotically, oblivion clawed at his mind.

"Thanks."

The cord he had relied on so many times to date had been cut.

To this feeling of losing something he could never regain, Subaru spoke words of parting.

The magic he had relied upon several times over had finally had enough of him. It could not be helped. But he was grateful nonetheless.

With gratitude in his chest, he took a powerful step forward.

"___"

His goal of landing a single blow had been met. The darkness magic he activated did not even cover the whole of the beast. Subaru had no talent for magic. This was all he could do with the final spell cast under his own power in his lifetime. Thanks to that, he made a beeline toward the beast's wide-open right shoulder— "—Come step onto *my* turf, Garfiel."

With all his strength, Subaru pounded the blue crystal he gripped in his hand

into that right shoulder, which was as thick as a log.

Light gushed forth.

“—Gnn!”

Incredible particles of light surged forth. Subaru felt something akin to wind pressure as he fell backward. Landing on his butt, he backed away. Before his eyes, the fiendish beast, who had been swallowed by the black cloud, had yet to comprehend what had occurred.

But the light-emitting crystal was consuming all the mana around it, turning the impenetrable darkness enveloping the fiendish beast into its own fuel. And with that crystal pressed into him, Garfiel himself was no exception.

“Wha—?”

Freed from the incomprehension slammed into him, he was assaulted the next moment by chagrin.

When the black cloud lifted and the light gradually abated, what was there was no great, ferocious tiger. —His transformation undone, Garfiel had returned to his human physique, both in size and internal bone structure.

Having regained his human form, Garfiel wore the most incredulous expression of all. Lifting up both hands, he stared at the bestial fur shedding and falling from his white fingers, seeing for himself with his own jade eyes.

“Wh-what…why did I turn back…huuuh?”

Patting his own body as he searched for the cause, Garfiel noticed the crystal in his shoulder. It was a crystal that marked one as an Apostle—one Garfiel knew well.

The blue crystal from Frederica that Subaru had carried seemed stuck, unwilling to leave Garfiel’s body.

“This is…Sis’s stone…but why is it…drainin’ my strength like…? What trick did ya put into this stone…?”

“Who’s to say? Maybe there’s a very hungry kitty inside it?”

Perhaps transformation had taken much of his endurance; Garfiel was out of

breath as he clawed at his shoulder. But the crystal rejected his fingers, biting into his flesh and showing no sign of coming off.

“—This is all the help I can give you.”

As light faded from the stone—the blue crystal—he felt like he heard a laugh coming from it.

Having kept silent, the incomplete communication had made him keep worrying all that time, but…

“If you’re gonna be quiet, keep quiet, you noisy, glimmering jerk…”

With that listless comment, Subaru saw with his own eyes that the assist from the crystal—his trump card—had worked.

“—Watch this, Emilia.”

Slowly standing up, Subaru took a deep breath, then spoke to the presence he felt at his back.

Behind him, atop the stone steps, Emilia was watching over the pair’s fight. It probably looked like a fight that Subaru had no hope of winning. There was no mistaking that in her head, she wanted to stop this.

Even so, she didn’t; Emilia, who had so angrily tried to stop Subaru from engaging in repeated fights out of unsightly stubbornness.

Subaru, too, knew there was something that he could not quite call *trust*. There was no need to put a label on that something; at the very least, not then, at that instant.

“Look at me, Garfiel.”

“Ahh…?”

“If you wanna stop me, stop me with your own hands. Don’t chicken out and rely on your blood, you coward. How long are you gonna treat me like an idiot?”

He stepped forward, bringing him to stand and face Garfiel, who was rooted to his spot.

They were both within arm’s reach. Garfiel was in a state of exhaustion;

Subaru was in tip-top shape. It made for a pathetic tale, but at that time, in that moment, Subaru could stand on the same ground on equal terms— “No matter what you say, we’re heading to the outside world. If you want to stop us, stop me first. Emilia will challenge the tomb. The Sanctuary will open…whether you want it or not.”

“Don’t decide all that shit on your own! Who asked ya to?! Who gave ya permission?! This place—this place should stay as it is, never changing!!”

“Of course it can’t stay like this, always the same, stopped and never changing. Someone ought to have said it centuries ago before it turned out this way.”

“There’s people who! Who want it to never change, damn it!!”

“If you could stay here and protect this place forever, that’d be one thing, but…”

Someday, the time and the era would leave Garfiel behind.

It was inevitable that this never-changing Sanctuary would one day be forced to change.

“A day when you drive all of us together into the same corner, when you can’t do anything about it by yourself, is definitely coming. It might be tomorrow. —It might even be today.”

Cutting off his words, Subaru raised his arms, adopting a fighting pose.

Talking wasn’t going cut it. After the *pushing in the crystal* part, his plan was pretty much blank to begin with. Knowing that each other’s words would settle nothing, his means were reduced to one.

When the opinions of two men differed like that, the only way left was to fight until their souls were spent.

“I’m gonna knock you on your ass, Garfiel. —Respect the power of numbers.”

“Ain’t ya got a different way of sayin’ that?!”

Garfiel howled at Subaru’s line, their fists both unleashed simultaneously and landing in each other’s face.

Letting out anguished groans from the sharp pain, the pair backed heavily away from each other. Setting Subaru's fist aside, Garfiel's blow was tragically weakened. The crystal embedded in his shoulder was absorbing his mana even then; thanks to its aid, they were able to have a good, honest fistfight.

If not for Otto, for Ram, for the crystal—for Puck—Subaru could not have climbed onto that stage.

"He-he, thanks to them I'm managing to make this a fi—*bwah!*"

He took a direct hit to the wide-open side of his face. His vision swooned, which he put a stop to with a stomp. In return, he kicked upward into his opponent's gut, sending a straight punch right into his opponent's lowered face. He was hit back. The hard blow made his eyes spin, and nosebleeds oozed—from Subaru and Garfiel both.

Both their faces marred with blood, the objectively awful and clumsy brawl continued. Each and every blow was weak, but they reverberated in each other's core because of the feelings infused in their fists.

Subaru was physically exhausted; Garfiel was exhausted in both body and spirit. Thus, the damage spread further.

"E…nough of…this!!"

When both sides were depleted in strength, what separated victory from defeat in a fight was skill.

Evading Subaru's attack, Garfiel spun his body, plunging an elbow strike into the pit of Subaru's stomach. When Subaru moaned in agony, his movements coming to a halt, Garfiel delivered a hard chop to the back of his head, and when Subaru fell down, Garfiel kneed him in the face.

Subaru's vision ferociously shook. He proceeded to move backward and—not fall.

"You still…! Just sleep already! Give up, and I'll end this!!"

"Don't make me look uncool in front of my girl…not giving up makes me look way better than giving up, damn it. If you're a man, let me look cool, you stupid jerk."

Garfiel probably hadn't been able to look good in front of Ram, the girl he longed for, not even once.

Snorting out the blood blocking his nose, Subaru put a smile on his awful-looking face. His expression made Garfiel swallow his breath, from which Subaru understood how creepy he must have looked.

"___"

Subaru felt like praising Garfiel's strength. *You've done well coming this far.* Simultaneously, Subaru felt sadness about his strength. *Why did you push it this far?*

There was a future coming that Garfiel could not change, no matter how stubbornly or valiantly he fought.

Perhaps by telling him about the future assault on the Sanctuary, Subaru might have been able to move Garfiel off that spot. But that would not settle the issue within him.

Even if his body moved for a time, his heart would remain in the same place. Garfiel would ignore all those watching over him, all those extending a hand toward him, and continue to cower, grieving for his dead mother.

"Take a good look, Garfiel. There's no wall here for you to be afraid of."

"There is a wall! There is for me! An absolute wall, separating inside from outside for me! For me, Grandma, and all the others! We're standing still! We're shut in! It's over for us!"

"Don't you dare go and say it's over…don't you dare lose hope!"

In anger, Garfiel lamented that by giving up, his own future was closed, finished.

Something burned inside Subaru's chest. Amid that war of fists, amid that war of words, nothing made sense anymore.

Something was wriggling around inside his belly. His Gate was dead. He could use magic no more.

Then what, in the deepest part of his body, was beginning to assert its existence that very moment?

“No matter when! No matter the time! If you wanna do something! If you wanna change! When you think it, that’s your starting line, damn it!!”

When you’re frustrated, with nothing left, immersed in resignation, stopping your feet, clutching your knees, and cowering…

When you’re despondent toward yourself, disappointed with others, despairing from feelings of loneliness by being abandoned by those precious to you…

“When someone says *Lift up your face and walk forward again*, who the hell replies *Why don’t you just give up*?!”

Give up, go off and die, cower somewhere. —Garbage. All of it was worthless nonsense.

If you’re clutching your knees and someone has the courage to speak to you, respond, would you?

Hang in there. Do it. You may not know how or why, but if you stand and run, you’ll get somewhere.

—The inside of his chest was hot.

“Isn’t that right, Garfiel…?!”

He called out the name of the small-looking man before him, eyes swaying weakly.

—The inside of his belly burned.

“Isn’t that right, Emilia…?!”

He called out the name of the girl watching them from behind, the one who was sandwiched between weakness and the threshold of something yet unknown.

—Something from the back of Subaru’s eyes flooded out.

“Hey—isn’t that so, Rem?!!”

He called out the name of the one who’d made him lift his face, open his mouth, open his eyes wide, and stand tall.

The one who had taught him that even when your feet were stopped in

surrender, that didn't mean it was over.

Subaru Natsuki desperately wished for the power she had given him then to somehow reach all the others.

"___"

A power that was not Subaru's wriggled inside his body, making its first cry of birth.

As if to bless its arrival, as if to celebrate its birth…

"Damn it all…! I—I—!!"

Once more, Garfiel swung his claw upward.

It was no longer with words, but with actions that Garfiel denied all that Subaru claimed.

Lacking anything else to say, unable to give up on his feelings, Garfiel had no other option.

Having closed his eyes to so many things and averted his eyes from the future, he could not face Subaru; hence, he had not noticed.

—That where he leaped, invisible hands were waiting.

"This new move sure gives off a bad impression."

The world moved in slow motion. Subaru could clearly see Garfiel leaping at him.

His hostility had grown to its limit. And yet, his face was in tears, like a child throwing a tantrum.

He aimed at the tip of Garfiel's chin. *That's enough*, he knew—not with words, but with his heart.

—And then he pounded that spot with all his strength.

"___?!"

The power he released exulted with joy, striking the unwary Garfiel directly below its unseen form.

The invisible blow took the form of a fist, smashing into Garfiel's face and

driving him toward the sky.

“Gu, oh…!”

The moment after seeing it through, Subaru, too, went down on one knee. He violently retched from the sense that he had shed something from inside him, with agony as if his very soul had been whittled.

Not a single drop of spit or blood came out. That one blow had truly taken everything out of him.

This time, even that stubborn Garfiel—

“Hey, hey, you gotta be kidding me…”

He was sure he saw Garfiel fly skyward, with nothing to break his fall as he was slammed into the ground. Covered in wounds that were mostly there before clashing with Subaru, he’d endured a string of battles without any rest. On top of that, there was a spirit in his right shoulder sucking his mana right out of him. How did he explain this?

“Just how tough are you…?”

“Don’t…look down…on me…me, I h-haven’t broken…yet…”

His fuzzy head was swaying, but even so, Garfiel was standing on his own two feet.

His gaze was unfocused. But he stood out of pure tenacity, rejecting Subaru’s final push.

“Hah. Well, this sucks… Having come this far, I’ve got to face facts.”

Subaru had exhausted all his schemes, played his one trump card, and even used a hidden trick that had suddenly sprouted up. Even with Otto and Ram’s valiant fighting, Puck’s assistance, and all the rest, he had still been unable to defeat Garfiel.

Garfiel was strong. Even when he was weak, he was strong. This Subaru acknowledged from the bottom of his heart.

That was why—

“Now, no one else’ll…!”

With wobbly footsteps, Garfiel walked forward as Subaru rested on his knees.

Garfiel was at his limit, but so was Subaru. His consciousness probably could not sustain even one blow, no matter how little strength was behind it. Accordingly, Garfiel poured his entire nervous system into his claws, intent on beating Subaru with them.

That was why Garfiel never noticed the approaching sound or the shaking of the ground.

—The final blow that would drive Garfiel to defeat.

“This…is the…end for…yaaaah?!”

“—!!!”

His announcement of the final blow was blotted out by the piercing neigh of a slender and tall land dragon.

Shaking the ground, the charging, jet-black land dragon heartily slammed into Garfiel, sending him hurtling into the air.

“—Goeh?!”

The blow, which carried his entire body away, made Garfiel’s eyes roll back, his body thrust away as if he weighed no more than a pebble. He bounced on the ground twice, then a third time, ending in a sprawl.

This time, he did not move a muscle.

Upon seeing this, the leading actress who had delivered the final blow looked toward the sky, letting out a roar.

“How about that, Garfiel…?”

Standing beside Patlash, loudly taking pride in her victory, Subaru spoke to Garfiel, who was prone upon the ground, in a voice so raspy, he couldn’t even tell if it was really him that was talking.

Both had used up all their strength and played every card they had in their hands. What was the decisive thing that separated victory from defeat?

It was simple. —The powerful Garfiel had fought alone. The weak Subaru had not.

“Like I said—the power of numbers.”

“There’s…other ways of…sayin’ that, damn it…!”

The immobile Garfiel resentfully responded to Subaru’s words.

His voice made Subaru lightly scratch his cheek.

“Then everyone’s feelings bundled together to form bonds of victory.”

“*Haa*…so this is, like, *none can lift the quain stone alone*…ngh.”

Leaving those words behind, Garfiel finally fell silent.

Watching this, Subaru waited several seconds. Certain of victory this time, Subaru turned his head upward.

“Finally, one of those sayings made sense…”

Those satisfied words slipped out as he collapsed, bringing his torso to the ground, and his consciousness along with it.

3

Loudly, the land dragon’s neighing voice echoed across the Sanctuary’ sky, announcing that the battle was decided.

For once, Patlash, the one who had delivered the final blow unto Garfiel, held a triumphant look on her noble face, jubilant from her feeling of achievement at having redeemed herself for past humiliation.

—To Patlash, Garfiel was a mortal foe who had inflicted a mortifying defeat upon her.

On the initial day of their arrival in the Sanctuary, Patlash, who was pulling the carriage, fought Garfiel, who had come to capture the intruders that had crossed the barrier. Though she did her best to protect Subaru, she had lost.

Patlash, eagerly awaiting her chance to avenge herself, had splendidly achieved her aim.

“—!!”

Having witnessed Patlash’s joy at restoring her honor, Emilia let out a deep

sigh.

It had been a battle so fierce that she had genuinely forgotten to breathe.

Just as Subaru had asked her to, Emilia had continued watching that grand battle until its conclusion.

The sight of the two clashing had no doubt made her want to rush over and stop them many times over.

But over the course of that, Subaru's voice and gaze had held Emilia's weak heart in check.

It was a scene where she was permitted neither to lend a hand nor speak.

It was torture. It was a terrible thing to endure. Yet, it was a scene where the one thing she could not do was to avert her eyes.

The scene, the pair's argument, and the pair's clash made something burn inside her chest.

Subaru had been so stubborn. Garfiel had cried in such a tearful voice. Two men smelling of mud as they pounded each other to settle their dispute—Emilia did not understand even a fragment of what drove them.

Even so, *something* that was hot, ebbing, and flowing inside her chest probably served as answer enough.

"Er, oh no! Subaru's going to die if I don't heal him!!"

Snapping back to her senses, Emilia practically flew down the stone steps, seemingly gliding as she raced to Subaru's side. Standing beside Subaru, Patlash gave Emilia an almost wary glare.

"Ah, you don't need to make a worried face like that; it's all right. Without Puck, my control is a little shaky, but I can borrow the power of minor spirits for something like simple healing, so…"

As she said this, the minor spirits of which Emilia spoke gave off a pale glow as they lent her their strength. Soft light enveloped Subaru and Garfiel and began to slowly heal their wounds.

Subaru's pained expression softened bit by tiny bit.

Making a thin smile at the sight, Emilia gently brought his head onto her lap.

Somehow, lending Subaru her lap like this had become a very familiar development, even though she would have much preferred fewer opportunities to give an injured Subaru her lap pillow.

“When you wake up, there are so many things I *really* need to ask you, so…”

But perhaps the things she wanted to say to him numbered more just then.

As she murmured, Emilia gently combed through Subaru’s hair as he slept with the face of a child.

Subaru grimaced for a moment. Then his lips truly slackened.

—It was soon after that Otto met up with them, carrying Ram upon his back.

CHAPTER 8

LOVE LETTER

1

—Deep inside the being known as *himself*, something set down roots, asserting its own existence.

Subaru did not even know if the heat it bore was hot or cold. Yet, the strange feeling of something black and stagnant circulating in Subaru Natsuki from corner to corner gave him some idea as to what it was.

Therefore, he asked not *why* or *how*, or even *what for*.

There was no reason to ponder such things. That left only one matter for him to worry about.

—Invisible Blow. Unseen Palms. Blindside Impact.

Each sounded atrociously derivative. They weren't stylish at all.

These were arms that none save Subaru could ever see, and none save Subaru might ever control. Accordingly— "A divine will unseen by the eye…therefore, I dub thee *Invisible Providence*…"

"…Er, what did you, say just now?"

When Subaru weakly opened his eyes, murmuring with his mind still vague, a questioning voice called out to him. Leaping into his vision, her eyes open wide, was a beautiful, upside-down face—not an angel's, but Emilia's.

Slowly comprehending this, Subaru blinked several times, realizing he had awoken from a dream. Simultaneously, he took in the sight of Emilia before his eyes and the soft sensation under his head.

"Ahh… Emilia-tan's giving me a lap pillow again…"

“Mm, that’s right. How many times have I given Subaru a lap pillow by now?”

“I’m a little hazy, but this is the third time, maybe? It’s a reward for getting over the first big hurdle, so…”

“Yes, yes.”

Emilia let Subaru’s playful words of savoring his reward glide over her in her familiar manner. From there, Subaru accessed his memory from just prior to losing consciousness, recalling he had been punched extensively.

“Hey, Emilia-tan. How’s my face? It’s not in a state you’d never want to look at again, is it?”

“Ahh, it’s fine. It’s not that weird.”

“And she’s not even trying to be mean!”

Subaru gazed at Emilia’s mystified expression as he lightly tried to move his own limbs. Somehow, he managed to budge them. His bones creaked, and he was bruised all over his body, but he didn’t mind it enough to complain.

“Ah, goodness, don’t be rash. It’s no good unless you rest.”

“I really don’t want to leave the paradise that is Emilia-tan’s lap, either…but I have to go searching quick. Otto and Ram could be out there dying in the woods.”

From his restored memories, Subaru recalled that it was Otto who had driven Garfiel into a corner. According to Garfiel, Ram had assisted him, but he remained concerned for the pair’s safety. Judging from Garfiel’s personality, he shouldn’t have actually taken their lives, but— “Before they expire in the forest, I’ve gotta save Ram at least…”

“Stop imagining us expiring and worry about me a little more, would you?!”

“I-I’d recognize that fierce comeback anywhere…”

When Subaru tried to put life into his wobbly body and sit up, he widened his eyes hearing the voice immediately beside him. When he shifted his gaze from Emilia to the direction of the voice, a filthy-looking young man sitting on the tomb’s stone steps entered his vision.

Though marred by soil, mud, and blood, the sight was, beyond any doubt, Otto Suwen. Seeing Subaru's gaze, he raised his clasped hands, his lips loosening into a leer.

"This applies a fair bit to me, but it seems you went through quite a terrible time as well, Mr. Natsuki. But…"

"Why, you—!"

"Gyaah—?!"

As Otto exuded a casual air, Subaru leaped at him, delivering a headbutt. Taking the blow in the gut, Otto fell at Subaru's feet as he raised an anguished moan.

"Wh-what is this all of a sudden?! I was praising our shared experience in a hard fought battle just now!"

"Shut up, you stupid moron! Don't go acting all cool! You freelancing almost blew up the whole plan! But without your assist, I wouldn't have been able to nail Garfiel, either, so it's not like I don't feel grateful, okay?!"

"I don't even know what you're saying anymore!"

Though relieved he was safe, and grateful for his aid, Subaru's blushy, contradictory expression of that gratitude left Otto shouting in a loud voice.

That truly Otto-like reaction made Subaru pat his chest with relief.

"Either way, glad you're safe. If you died, I figured you'd turn into a ghost and haunt me at my bedside… Is Ram all right, too?"

"Yes, though my liver went cold when I awoke and found Ram lying on the ground. I was quite relieved to find her state was not as bad as it looked. If anything, the poison she spewed after I carried her on my back was worse."

"She talks super-strict to anyone but the people closest to her… How'd you convince her anyway?"

"One of the conditions for her cooperation was that I would not to speak about it to you, Mr. Natsuki."

Covering his mouth with both hands, Otto's demeanor made it clear he had

no intention of explaining further.

To be blunt, it was probably futile to try and make Otto spill the beans, not that he had a chance even if he wanted to. Surely, such a sensible human being wouldn't be foolish enough to risk his life to go along with Subaru's crazy demands.

"Damn it."

"Ow! What did you punch me for just now?!"

"He's hiding his embarrassment, Otto. That's all."

Emilia smiled as she joined Subaru and Otto's exchange. Then Subaru saw Patlash, who, at some point, had come to Emilia's side. When the land dragon brought her nose close, Emilia gently stroked it with her white fingers. The interaction was most unexpected.

"My Emilia-tan and my Patlash are getting along so well…what a nice scene."

"Don't say stupid things. This girl has been worried for you this entire time, Subaru."

"Mm, I get that."

Subaru smiled wryly at Emilia's scolding, walking close to Patlash on his own two feet. Then he reached a hand out to her black scales to give her some gratitude-infused petting. However— "Gwah?! Wh-why?!"

When a blow from her tail made him pull his hand back, Subaru objected to Patlash with teary eyes. But rather than relent, Patlash glared back at him with reproach in her yellow eyes. She even raised a sour growl that made Subaru cringe.

"Shall I interpret?"

"Nah, even I don't need you to interpret this…"

When Otto offered some consideration from behind, Subaru shook his head, letting out a small sigh.

"—*Don't make me worry like that*, right?"

"Also, addendums with a sense of *Don't get cocky*, *There won't be a next time*,

and *Become mine already* with a fair hint of anger.”

“That’s some serious heroine power at work. Jumping into the race to be my leading girl?”

With a content face, Subaru extended his hand once more. This time, when he did so, Patlash accepted Subaru’s hand, acting as if it couldn’t be helped as she took it as an apology.

Otto and Patlash—in the Sanctuary, these two had done nothing but save him.

Just like usual, he had to borrow the strength of many in order to overcome a mountain that his strength was insufficient to overcome himself. Would a day truly come when he could pay it all back?

“Now that I’m thinking of the mountain I’m indebted to you all for breaking past, where’s Garfiel?”

“Ah, Garfiel is over there. I think it’s best not to get in the way, though.”

“Whaddaya mean, get in the way?”

As Subaru inclined his head, Emilia touched a finger to her lips.

“You see…right now, Ram is looking after him, so…”

2

“Garf, are you awake?”

The first thing he saw when he awoke was a girl’s lovely face.

He felt conflicted. It was the first thing he’d wanted to see, and also, it wasn’t. The fact that his chest was faintly beating louder made Garfiel avert his eyes as he cleared his throat a single time.

“Yeah…I’m awake. —Dah?!”

“Then move already. My legs are getting numb.”

Instantly, Garfiel was thrust from a soft sensation down onto the grassy soil. When he shot her a resentful glare, Ram, sitting her hip on the grassy field as she brushed off her thigh, went “What?” as she made a sour face.

One would never think it was the demeanor of a girl who'd lent the unconscious Garfiel her knees up until moments ago.

"Just like usual, a girl without one shred o' kindness…"

"Ram believes that kindness is something one must give to a person worthy of receiving it. If Ram fails to give any, Ram did not believe that it was appropriate."

"…I ain't worth it, huh?"

"From that sentence, it is obvious you prefer I had said something else. This is why you and Barusu are both hopeless. You must be smoother than that if you wish to hear a girl's true thoughts."

"Ow!"

As he lowered his eyes, Ram flicked a finger off his forehead.

The blow was inflicted upon the scar on his brow, which he had a habit of touching. Rubbing that white scar, Garfiel rested his eyes on the sight of Ram in her filthy clothes.

It was none other than he who had made them that way, yet Ram was exerting herself for him nonetheless.

"Ram, ain't no scars left on yer body? If there are, be my bride and I'll…"

"I shall not. Take responsibility for my scars some other way. —In the first place, you had a lot of cheek to do that, Garfiel. How you dare leave an injured Ram behind back there."

"___"

Ram's harsh, overbearing gaze cowed Garfiel into silence.

The anger in her eyes also held criticism for the end of their battle. Having knocked Ram to the ground and thrust Otto into a thicket, Garfiel, out of weakness, had not sought to settle things with their deaths.

He'd hesitated against someone he cared for. There was that. But Garfiel hadn't been serious against Otto, who he didn't care for, or even Subaru.

—Because he lacked the most important thing for a warrior: courage.

That was why he'd tried to rely on his blood, turning into a mindless beast to avert his eyes from the consequences. His hypocrisy, for relying only at times like that on the blood he normally detested and cursed, made him sick.

How could Garfiel protect the Sanctuary with one deceit piled upon another—

"Garf…you're an idiot, so thinking about it is useless."

"…Wha?"

"I am not saying to turn into a beast and abandon all logic. I am saying that transforming makes you even stupider than when you try to think. It is far better to fight thinking of nothing with a completely empty head."

As Garfiel sat cross-legged on the ground, the irritated Ram's assertion made his eyes bulge in astonishment.

It was better to say that Ram, the victor, was gazing down upon Garfiel, the vanquished. He didn't mind her talking like that, but was it really necessary to speak to Garfiel about things that might lie ahead?

After all, he was the vanquished. A suitable punishment was sure to be forthcoming.

"Watch out next time. After all, you will be fighting for Ram and Emilia hereafter."

"—Whaa?!"

At a juncture where he expected her to pass judgment on him, Ram's words shook him to his core.

Garfiel's face reddened. He clacked his sharp fangs as he digested the statement.

"Stop messin' with me! After doin' all this, bein' your enemy, stompin' all over what you people think…you're sayin' you'd forgive me and take me as one of yer own?!"

"Don't be absurd. I'm saying you need to work for it because we don't forgive you. You cannot beg for forgiveness without offering something in return, can you? Ram won, and Garf lost. Be a good boy and do as I say."

“This is so messed up!!”

Hopping to his feet, Garfiel stomped his heel against the ground.

Instantly, his body wobbled, but his wounds were largely healed. He tightly clenched a fist.

“I accept that I lost! But acceptin’ and yieldin’ are two different things! Me, I’m in fightin’ shape even now! If ya wanna do things I don’t want, ya shoulda just killed me! If ya wanna pick up where we left off right…”

“Enough whimpering!”

It should have been an angry, awe-inspiring shout, but one rebuke from Ram laid Garfiel’s efforts to waste.

Her pink eyes looked upward. The raw intimidation in them made Garfiel draw in his breath.

“You lost, didn’t you, Loser Cat Garf? Just how long do you intend to dawdle and look pathetic in front of the girl you like? The instant you lost, you went from blaming others to blaming yourself, pointing your fangs inside instead of outside. That’s all, isn’t it? So, so stupid.”

“Uh, um…”

The barrage of words hit the bull’s-eye so accurately, Garfiel’s words caught in his throat.

“…J-just because I lost, what, I should make some stupid smile and line up on your side? There’s no way I can do that! I accept I lost, but I ain’t acceptin’ I was wrong!”

This was neither desperation nor an attempt to wiggle out. It was how Garfiel truly felt.

“Yeah, that’s right, I accept I lost… Losing ’cause of numbers ain’t no excuse. But me, I don’t think I was wrong. This feels half-done.”

He could not betray himself from up to that moment. It was impossible for him to submit to Ram and the others, even for pretense’s sake.

“If you do not wish to stay half-done, prove that you are not standing still.”

“…What did you say?”

As Garfiel breathed raggedly, Ram spoke those words in a quiet voice. Unable to grasp what they were meant to convey, Garfiel knit his brows—and the next moment, his eyes widened and froze.

Sitting on the grassy field, Ram lifted up a hand, turning its white fingers toward him. —When he realized what those fingers were showing him, Garfiel’s heart froze solid.

“I can largely imagine what Barusu would say. Also, you do not need to be afraid, Garf. —So you should go see with your own eyes.”

“The tomb’s Trial…”

The instant he put the words to his tongue, Garfiel’s back was drenched with cold sweat. His breaths quickened, and his heartbeats became ragged. He heard his youthful self’s sad crying ringing in his ears.

“Garf, can you change? Or will you remain a cowering, unmoving little boy?”

“Cut that out. The way ya said that makes even me wanna deny it…”

Garfiel rang out in protest at Ram’s words. Tensely, he realized he had not firmly told her *I won’t go*, remaining in the chasm between the two choices: *I’ll go* and *I won’t*.

—He was being completely taken for a ride. By Ram. By Subaru Natsuki.

Even though he remembered that fear, a part of him did want to make sure.

His body was stiff with fright, his body was letting out wails of rejection, and his soul howled fiercely.

Even as he spat blood, Subaru had stood before Garfiel and shouted what he believed—namely, that he needed to find out if he could win against himself on that day of his childhood or not.

“Your face says your resolve is set.”

He realized that the trembling of his fangs and the cold sweat over his entire body had eased.

When Garfiel turned around, Ram was brushing leaves from her hip as she

stood up beside him. Gazing at her face, Garfiel suddenly had a thought.

Deep down, he felt that Ram didn't regard getting Garfiel on her side as all that important.

Why, then, had Ram cooperated with Subaru and the others and scolded him then and there?

—Wasn't Ram simply putting her foot on her childhood friend's back to give him a push?

If that was true, the woman he loved was quite a woman indeed.

"Well, it'll be fine, Garf."

Garfiel was pressed into silence. Taking that silence as unease, Ram, for once, spoke with a warm tone of voice as she peered at Garfiel, giving his bare shoulder a light pat.

"If you see something scary enough to make you cry, Ram will console you. — A favor to an old acquaintance."

3

—When he entered the tomb for the first time in ten years, the air was as stagnant as the last time.

Passing through the cramped, stonework corridor and walking amid a cool wind, Garfiel grimaced at the scent of settled dust in his nostrils as he advanced toward the back to the sound of his own bare feet.

"Don't wanna stay long in this place."

Garfiel murmured as, within his chest, the sound of his heartbeats gradually sped up.

Go to the back, and the Trial was there. As a half-blood, Garfiel held the qualification to challenge it; as night came, the tomb's lighting came on, as if to welcome its challenger.

Go to the back, and the Trial was there. So, too, the past that had inflicted an indelible wound on him in his childhood.

Go to the back, and the Trial was there. Would touching it one more time change anything?

“…Pathetic. That’s what I came all this way here to find out, damn it.”

Dwelling on that sound logic, he scorned the timidity of his own heart.

He’d been angrily yelled at by Ram, beaten to a pulp, and treated as a tiny fool before yielding like a little girl. He hadn’t wanted to realize or understand just how cowardly he truly was.

—Then and there, it was within his power to destroy the tomb’s corridor, rendering everything else moot.

The recuperative power of the blessing of earth spirit was extraordinary. Already, he had regained enough strength to destroy the tomb. Ram and the others waiting outside had no means of stopping him. He could spoil the results of such an agonizing battle, rendering it all for naught. —Hadn’t she and the others realized that much?

“Damn it all.”

Of course they had.

Setting aside Emilia, who knew too little about doubting people, and Otto, who was short of a few important components, there was no way the highly observant Ram or the very calculating Subaru would fail to see that possibility.

In other words, they firmly believed that Garfiel would not destroy the tomb. Perhaps they thought he was too chicken to do it. —Or perhaps, they trusted him.

The answer to that question, too, likely lay beyond the moment he overcame the Trial.

“___”

In all bluntness, Garfiel had kept inside the Sanctuary, worrying about everything with his woefully insufficient head. In only a few days, ten years of that had been turned on its head.

He never dreamed his own feet would carry him to the tomb’s stone room once more.

“…Ahh?”

He arrived at the innermost chamber, a stonework room enveloped by a faint, blue light. Having visited this place after ten years, Garfiel crossed his arms, sensing that something was off. Something gave off some kind of strange impression.

A difference in the stone room entered his keen nocturnal vision. Garfiel squinted his eyes at this— *“—First, face your past.”*

That instant, his vision swayed, and something indistinct covered his thoughts.

The past was coming—

4

One might call it a mysterious feeling to awaken within a dream.

“___”

Crinkling his nose, Garfiel slowly stood up and surveyed his surroundings.

What flew into his vision was a most familiar forest—but compared with the scenery Garfiel knew, this forest was over ten years “younger.” Garfiel, who was in contact with the forest on a daily basis, knew as much.

This was the past. The Trial had begun, and he was in the Sanctuary of ten years past.

“No doubtin’ it now, huh…”

Clenching a fist, Garfiel let the words trickle out as he made a bitter face.

It was obvious that this was the past. It was expressed more eloquently than any words, more obviously than seeing how the trees were young again—and it was thanks to the scene spread immediately before Garfiel’s eyes.

—It was a scene of three women exchanging words in a place close to the Sanctuary’s barrier.

One had youthful features with long, pink hair—Ryuzu. Another was ten years of age, give or take, and she was a girl with delicate, silky, beautiful golden hair

—his older sister, Frederica.

And standing facing the two of them was a woman with golden hair in a triple braid, her eyes downcast with a gentle look on her face. She was holding a young child against her chest.

“—M-Mom.”

The sight of his mother and Garfiel’s younger self made a weak voice trickle out of his throat. However, the tiny voice with which he called his mother did not reach, failing to affect the scene in any way.

Of course it didn’t. No one could change or interfere with the past.

“___”

As Garfiel trembled and stood rooted to the spot, his mother and Ryuzu exchanged words.

And yet, the contents of the words and the reactions to those words—nothing reached Garfiel at all.

Ryuzu’s sense of loneliness, Frederica’s feelings as she held back tears, the thoughts of their weakly smiling, seemingly conflicted mother, or even his innocently smiling, idiotic younger self—none of it was conveyed to him, for this was Garfiel’s memory of the time.

The conversation could not be replayed, because the young Garfiel had no memory of it. The silent projection repeated itself over and over, as if to rub in that he was powerless and far too late.

“…Either way, no doubtin’ it was a stupid argument in the first place.”

Considering what happened afterward, he could guess what they were talking about.

His mother was trying to abandon the forest to go to the outside world, and Ryuzu and Frederica were trying to stop her. Garfiel was the only one with a blissfully ignorant look, thinking only of his happiness at being embraced by his mother.

Youth was his excuse for not realizing he was watching his mother go off to her death— “—!! You shitty brat!!”

Seeing the smile on his younger self's face, Garfiel angrily thrust his claws forward.

He wanted to rip the guy to shreds—his past self that was ignorant and powerless to do anything but watch.

And yet, his claws passed right through the young child, and right through the arms of the mother who held him. He stomped the ground, trying to send it flying as if to kill off his past. The blessing did not activate.

—He could not interfere with the past. That was the absolute rule of the Trial.

"Then…then why?! Why show me this scene, damn it?!!"

What Trial? What past? What Witch of Greed testing ground?

Nothing changed. Nothing could change. His mother was dead. He was weak, able to save nothing. Nothing.

Was that just how it was? Was this all there was to the world? Was the Trial there to teach him that?

"___"

He went down on one knee. The actresses playing out the tragedy of the past did not notice Garfiel kneeling.

He'd come to gaze directly at his never-ending regrets, digging into his wound from ten years prior and making it bleed. Was this fine? Was this to be the conclusion of his challenging the Trial after being kicked around by the girl he yearned for?

"No…"

He clenched his teeth so much that they creaked. Glaring at the soil, Garfiel's desires trickled out from his lips.

No. No. No, no, no. He would not have it end like this.

—After all, Garfiel had hoped that something would change, that something would change him.

He knew it was convenient talk, but Garfiel had hoped. Having held for ten years that never changing was right, he'd hoped for a change, for turning over a

new leaf.

After all, a powerless man had shouted it to him. A man strong enough to defeat even him had shouted.

The past. The barrier. The Sanctuary. His family. Just like them, he stood still, never changing.

Yet, even though he stood still, never changing, it wasn't over.

—The guy said it, didn't he? If he wished *I want to start*, he was free to start again.

"Then…!"

"—You are leaving no matter what?"

Abruptly, as Garfiel leaned down, a familiar voice struck his ears.

However, by rights, it was a voice he should not have heard. It was a voice from the past, one that surely could not reach him.

"Yes, I shall go. Though, it shall cause you a great deal of trouble, Lady Ryuzu…"

"I do not particularly mind. The issue is how these children feel."

Words were exchanged between family he was used to hearing from, and family he was not.

Ryuzu wore a grudging look as his mother spoke to her. For as long as he could remember, it was the first time he had heard his mother's voice.

Drawing in his breath, Garfiel's thoughts were stolen what was unfolding.

Gazing lovingly at the Garfiel in her arms, his mother gently rocked his body. Gazing up at that same mother, Frederica grasped the hem of her skirt and wrung out her voice.

"M-Mother…I—I…"

"I am sorry, Fuu. I'm sure I will make you worry a great deal, too."

"That's fine. I am all right…but I feel sorry for Garf."

"I want to go together, but your Mommy is a klutz, so I am sure it would be

very hard for Gar. Fuu, though you are Mommy's child, you are very responsible, so please."

Lonely as she felt, Frederica was dutifully seeing their mother off.

For the first time, Garfiel learned that his older sister had agreed with his mother leaving the Sanctuary. For her part, Ryuzu embraced the trembling Frederica's shoulders, respecting her will.

"Give these to both of them. One to Fuu and one to Gar."

Their mother took off the two necklaces that hung from her own neck. Both of them had blue, inlaid crystals hanging from them. It had nothing to do with qualifications as an Apostle or anything of the sort. She simply wore them because they were pretty.

And because she loved pretty things, she handed them to her adorable son and daughter as gifts. That was all it was.

That was all it took for Garfiel to never, ever let go of his stone.

"Gar, your mommy is heading out now."

As she addressed him, Garfiel's mother lifted up the necklace and smiled toward him. His mother's resolve unbeknownst to him, the little child innocently smiled. His mother gently kissed him on his forehead.

She'd kissed him on the same part of his forehead where his scar now was.

"I'm sure I will bring your father back. Wait for me until then, yes?"

"—!!"

Her eyes were filled with kindness and love, her words overflowing with sympathy.

Then, finally, she handed the young Garfiel over to Ryuzu.

Firmly embracing Garfiel's body, Ryuzu nodded and smiled to his mother. From there, his mother and Frederica embraced each other; she kissed her beloved daughter's forehead in the same manner she had her son's.

Garfiel slumped to the ground, gazing at that in a daze.

—What was happening? What was this scene? Whose memory was this?

The Trial of the past he'd seen ten years prior, when he knew nothing about anything, was more irredeemable than this, wasn't it? It was a memory of despair that bit into his very flesh, wasn't it?

After all, his own mother had abandoned him and his older sister, leaving in search of her own happiness, hadn't she? She cast away the lives that inconvenienced hers, walking toward a life of her own.

Now everything, *everything*, had turned on its head, wasn't it?

"Mother loved us. She loved me, and she loved you."

Reflexively, Garfiel lifted his face toward the voice that was directed toward him just then.

It was his young older sister who had spoken to the kneeling Garfiel. Staring at him with the same jade eyes as his, the past that Garfiel could supposedly never interfere with was staring right through him.

The world had come to a halt; so, too, his mother, Ryuzu, and his younger self. That left only his older sister, and the current him.

In that stopped world, his older sister inclined her head, posing Garfiel a question.

"Mother left the Sanctuary for the sake of her family. Are you dissatisfied with this?"

"D-don't mess with me like this! What's up with telling me she loved me?! What are you tryin' to do to…?"

"I suppose this would be easier on you if she did not love you."

The young Frederica spoke to Garfiel, whose voice was caught, as if pitying him.

The difference in their heights was literally that of an adult compared with a child. And yet, regardless of his sister's physical height, she mercilessly showered words unto her troublesome younger brother.

"If you think love goes only one way, you can justify your own scars."

"You're wrong…!"

“If you come to know you both love and are loved…that leaves you unable to justify your choice to remain in the Sanctuary, does it not?”

“No!! No, no!! You…you don’t even know nothin’ about…what happened to Mom next!”

“—How could I not know?”

Garfiel, shouting as he gave in to anger, instantly lost his voice as if impaled by ice.

Frederica hardened her young cheeks, her expression holding back tears as she stared at Garfiel.

—What was his big sister telling him that moment? Was she saying she knew?

“Of course I would know. *If* Mother was visited by misfortune immediately after distancing herself from the Sanctuary…of course I would not fail to hear of it.”

“Then…then why…?!”

“Surely, you understand why I would not tell you that at such a young age? Garf. You are not a child anymore, so…”

Frederica knew what had happened to his mother. Ryuzu and the other residents likely knew as well.

Only the young Garfiel, persistent in his youthful ways, did not know. If he had not seen it in the tomb’s Trial, he likely still would not know, even to that very moment— “Really, you remembered that Mother loved you, didn’t you?”

Garfiel had become obstinate in order to trample many feelings underfoot.

“Your forehead wound—you did that to yourself so you could forget Mother’s kiss, to act like it never happened, didn’t you?”

The white scar on his forehead—a wound he did not have when his mother held his younger self.

The wound had happened in the immediate aftermath of his first Trial. Knowing his mother had died, Garfiel fell into a panic, bashing his head against both wall and floor to carve an indelible wound.

His wound was his proof of innocence. —It allowed him to forget and distort his mother's feelings, and so feel sorry for himself.

"—The past…is ending, isn't it?"

Frederica murmured.

Before he realized it, the contours of the world of the past were growing indistinct, gradually losing their shape.

The past was ending. Did the end of his visit to the Trial mean some kind of results had been achieved?

"Wait. Please, wait…"

But that moment, it was all the same to him. All he wished from the vanishing, collapsing world was for his slowly fading mother, Ryuzu, and his young older sister not to go.

"What…should I do?"

"Goodness…must you rely on a tiny older sister like me to arrive at an answer?"

"I know it's pathetic! But, Sis, you're the only one I can count on. Hey, tell me… Sis, why'd you go outside? Should I go outside, t…"

"Garf, what do you want to do?"

Frederica interrupted her pathetic younger brother, who wanted to hold her hand.

For a second, Garfiel was at a loss for words. He wasn't talking about what he wanted to do. That moment, he wanted to hear a response, a compass needle pointing to what he *should* want to do.

"Garf, what do you want to do?"

As her younger brother prevaricated, the older sister gave him an exasperated, benevolent smile, repeating the same question.

That was why Garfiel drew in his breath, and…

"I want to be wanted."

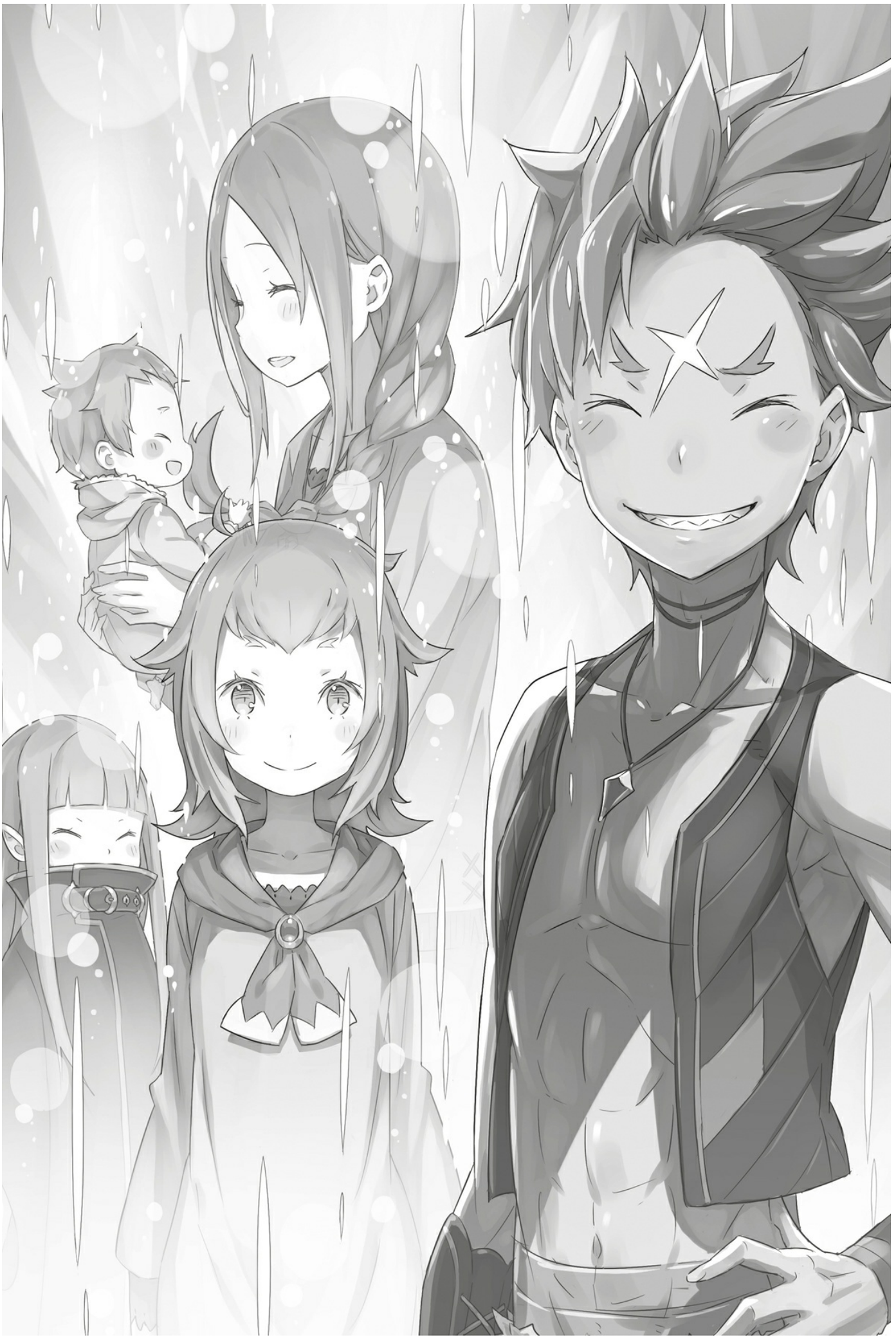
“Who do you want to want you?”

“I want…I want to be wanted by people who need me.”

“Why do you think that way?”

“Because they…they helped me remember.”

His older sister did not speak the words *Remember what?*



But her jade eyes, the same as his, posed the question more eloquently than any words could.

“—That my mother loved me.”

—The next instant, the world of dreams faded into white. The past, and his family, receded, vanishing into the ether.

5

A mere hour had passed since they had seen Garfiel off to challenge the Trial.

During that time, Subaru and the others remained seated in front of the tomb, tensely continuing to await his return.

“If he breaks his promise and destroys the tomb, I am not sure what we are going to…*gyafnn!*”

As Otto made that statement, intending to ease the tension but failing to read the mood, Ram bluntly sent him flying with her shoe. Fortunately, the luckless Otto’s worries ended then and there.

“…Young Gar!”

The loud shout came from Shima—who was there as part of Team Ryuzu, watching over the tomb.

After the battle with Garfiel concluded, Subaru used the time spent waiting to give a shout out via the crystal, getting the group to meet back together there.

That same Shima had rendezvoused with Ryuzu Derma, the current Ryuzu. Emilia, unfamiliar with the circumstances, was surprised to see two Ryuzus in one place. To wit…

“So is Miss Shima Miss Ryuzu’s older sister or younger sister?”

That being her level of comprehension of the matter, a detailed explanation would have to wait until after various things were settled.

Either way, Shima’s voice made everyone present look at the tomb. —There, at its entrance, stood Garfiel Tinzel, having returned by coming through the corridor.

“He’s…”

Garfiel, eyes narrowed as he bathed in the wind of the Sanctuary, showed no sign of being flustered. To Subaru, his face gave off the impression of someone who’d cast some kind of burden aside.

“Hah!”

With his face remaining like that, Garfiel leaped from the top of the stone steps toward the grassy field. Then, he landed in front of Subaru and the others —no, in front of his two grandmothers, Ryuzu and Shima.

Standing up, Garfiel looked from one to the other. One was a grandmother he had spent a great deal of time with; the other was a grandmother he considered the savior of his life.

“Y-Young Gar. I…we, ah…”

“Don’t make faces that don’t suit ya, old hags… Sorry to make ya worry.”

“Young Gar.”

“Still, I gotta say, I’m used to different old hags with the same face standin’ next to the others, but I sure ain’t used to the same two old hags standin’ next to each other.”

As the grandmothers stood side by side, Garfiel spoke quite bluntly as he simultaneously put his hands on both their heads.

His hands made both Ryuzu and Shima go stiff. However, with faces ready to break into tears, they accepted his hands nonetheless.

Their family relationship was a complicated one. That was particularly true because the “First Four,” all the Ryuzus, were one and the same grandmother from Garfiel’s perspective. It was a difficult issue with no easy answer.

But in the moment that he watched the three of them, Subaru thought, *Might not need to worry about them after all.*

“Garf, how was it?”

Gazing at the exchange between that family, Ram clutched her own elbows as she posed Garfiel that question.

In the end, it was Ram who'd given his back the final push toward the Trial. Her words brought a tiny growl out of Garfiel.

"Way my eyes see it, ain't no results to celebrate. Felt more like, *wha, that's it?*"

"That sounds like an impression from a proud middle school shoplifter… But you did it?"

"—Far as I'm concerned, it's a clean break."

Responding to Subaru thus, Garfiel made a deep exhale from his nostrils. Those words made everyone present draw in their breaths for a moment, but different deep sentiments immediately poured out.

In other words, inside the Trial, Garfiel had come to terms with his own past.

This was proof not only that he had passed the Trial, but that the Sanctuary was one step closer to liberation.

"So how about you take that momentum into the two Trials left…"

"Don't mess with me. —And that ain't my role, is it?"

"Yes, that's right. What comes after is my job. I won't have anyone go and snatch it away."

Clicking his tongue, Garfiel gave Emilia a nod of his chin. Accepting this, Emilia puffed out her chest at the torch passing to her. The firmness of her enthusiasm made Subaru slacken his cheeks.

Then, to that very Subaru, Garfiel went "Ahh" toward him, awkwardly scratching his cheek.

"Besides that…the hell is this?"

"Is what? This touchy-feely stuff doesn't suit your character at all. You're clearly a zero ingenuity, muscle-brain type, so just be a barbarian about it."

"Hey, I know ya makin' fun of me with that. Ya askin' fer…nah, that ain't what I wanna say."

He began to lose his temper, but Garfiel lowered his arm without doing a thing. Subaru tilted his head at the atypical action. In his stead, all by herself,

Ram made a little smile with an air of exasperation.

“Garf.”

Then she gave Garfiel a gentle little poke in the vicinity of his hip.

In the face of Ram’s lethal attack, Garfiel exhaled in apparent surrender.

“Me, I probably…accepted what was in the Trial ’cause of you. Thanks.”

“…Did you just say thanks?”

“I ain’t sayin’ it twice! Just, it made me remember somethin’ important. That’s why…aw, crap!”

Perhaps both his anger and embarrassment had risen during the time he spoke, for Garfiel bared his fangs. Then he thrust a finger toward Subaru with so much force, it seemed he might bite Subaru’s head off.

“Listen here, ’kay? Yeah, I lost! The Trial’s results changed, too! But that sure don’t mean everything comin’ out of ya is right! The proof is in what happens from here, or else! If you open this place up and bad stuff happens to the old hags, no mercy!!”

“R-right. Of course, that’s what we…”

“I’m sayin’, I’ll watch with my own eyes whether ya jerks are all talk! I’m seein’ this through to the bitter end, ya hear?! —So ya better get this done right, General!!”

“___”

Roughly shoving Subaru’s shoulder away, Garfiel cut off his words and twisted his cheeks into a smile.

His demeanor and the unexpected manner of address left Subaru taken aback. During that time, Garfiel instantly turned his back to Subaru, turning his feet toward his two grandmothers.

“Just now, Garfiel made a *really* red face.”

Having witnessed the same thing, Emilia spoke to Subaru, her voice infused with a giggle. If Emilia saw it, too, it was no hallucination. Of course, he hadn’t heard the statement incorrectly, either.

“General…? The commander in chief here is Emilia-tan, not me…”

“You’re the one who smacked Garfiel down. It was a clash between men, right? Because he acknowledges that, you’re Garfiel’s general, Subaru. General—that’s so amazing.”

Emilia’s honest, not-sarcastic-whatsoever praise made Subaru wryly twist his lips. As Subaru bore a conflicted look, Ram came right beside him, shrugging her shoulders.

“Just give in. He is in such high spirits, it cannot be helped. Let him do as he pleases.”

“Incidentally, I’m waaaay weaker, so it’s not like I set out to be some kind of accidental main charac—”

“It feels more like you have made a brother. You are the elder, so be magnanimous.”

“Well, if it’s like that, it is what it is……wait.”

Subaru raised a stop sign with his hands, having heard one portion of the statement he could not let pass. Gazing at the back of Garfiel’s head with exasperation and affection in her eyes, Ram went “What?” and turned back toward Subaru.

“What did you say just now?”

“Which part?”

“The part where you said Garfiel’s younger than I am?”

“Ahh,” went Ram, nodding as she seemed to grasp Subaru’s question.

“This year, Garf finally turned fourteen.”

“___”

This information, which was opposite Subaru’s expectations, left him aghast. Incredibly disturbed, he closed his eyes, turning his face up to the sky.

He recalled a number of incidents. How Garfiel called him *General*, a variety of his statements and actions to date, and how Garfiel advocated himself as the *World’s Strongest Man*—all these began to sink in.

And as they did, Subaru shouted:

“—That makes him a delusional eighth grader!!”

6

“…Staying here too long will only dull your resolve, won’t it?”

With Garfiel having come to terms with his internal conflict and Subaru having felt the impactful blow of his actual age, things had calmed down a notch—whereupon Emilia, brushing off grass as she stood up, retightened that relaxed atmosphere with a single sentence.

As Emilia gazed at the tomb with a sober visage, Subaru posed a question.

“Going, huh?”

“Yes, I’ll go… Just watch. I’ll do as Garfiel did, then go farther.”

“Sure you can do it…?”

“I’ll do it…because I’m not afraid of changing anymore.”

Her forceful reply was made possible from having experienced her argument with Subaru at the tomb. Garfiel clacked his fangs at the reply; Subaru’s chest burned with pride.

Then, as she began walking toward the tomb, Subaru lined up right by her side, heading as far as the entrance with her. He could not go inside and hold her hand from beside her. Therefore, he at least wanted to be with her until she set off.

“Hey, Subaru. About what happened inside the tomb…”

Abruptly, as they walked shoulder to shoulder, Emilia broached the subject like thus.

Subaru imagined it was something related to the Trial. Thinking this, he waited for the words that might follow, but it was difficult to read what they might be. Emilia made little glances as she looked at Subaru uneasily.

For some reason, her cheeks were faintly red.

“Emilia?”

“I—I mean, what happened inside the tomb! Y-you know, *that*…”

“That…? Ah, er, um.”

Emilia’s slightly anger-tinged words made Subaru’s face redden as he recalled the preceding events.

The grand developments that followed had washed away the initial momentum, but now that he thought back to that moment, he’d incredibly brash—enough to spontaneously set him on fire from the facedown.

He came to belatedly realize that having stolen her lips, practically biting them in the process, was a pretty big deal.

“Inside, er…Subaru, you and I…you know?”

“A-ahh…yeah, we, ah, we did.”

“I mean, I think it’ll be really rough from here. But this is important, so…when the Trial and a lot of other things are taken care of, we’ll have a nice, long talk, okay?”

Subaru nodded to Emilia’s proposal, the motion making his head rattle from the already precarious state inside it.

To Subaru, this was his first experience; to Emilia, it was probably her first experience, too. Having mutually slammed their feelings into each other, they had a mountain of things they needed to discuss.

“But you’re pretty confident if you’re talking about having a conversation after all this, Emilia-tan.”

“Is this confidence? I wonder. It might be just bluff and bluster, you know?”

“But that means you ain’t ready to blow it, right? I’m sure it’ll go well. I’m willing to bet on it.”

When Subaru raised up his thumb and flashed a grin, Emilia tilted her head, looking mystified.

“Bet? Bet what?”

“Dating rights! If I win, I get a date with Emilia-tan, and if you win, you get a date with me.”

“Yes, yes, whatever you say.”

Just like usual, Emilia elegantly parried Subaru’s advances.

By the time they finished bantering, the two reached the entrance to the tomb. The place of the Trial welcomed its challenger. The dimly lit corridor, which was filled by a pale light, invited Emilia within.

If she continued forward, the Trial of the past awaited her. Despite this, Emilia smiled at Subaru, not tense at all.

“Well, I’m heading out for a bit.”

“Come back soon. Watch out for carriages and strange men.”

“Don’t say foolish things.”

She shared a wry smile and after that, a lovely smile. Leaving this behind her, Emilia went into the tomb, vanishing from sight.

The faint light that wrapped around the tomb did not reach the back of the corridor. Watching her back as she boldly strode away, Subaru brought his hands together once, going down on one knee as if to pray.

From there, Subaru could do nothing. The rest was Emilia’s battle alone.

“*Now Giltirau takes one step*… Gonna look less of a man with a worried face like that, General.”

“Huh, it’s easier to absorb those peculiar sayings when I know they’re coming from an eighth grader. I had a phase like you, quoting all sorts of sayings from important people.”

As Subaru saw Emilia off, Garfiel came to the stone steps below. He stood beside Subaru, hesitating only slightly before chiming in.

“Hey, ah, General, I gotta apologize to ya for just a teeny tiny bit.”

“Well, isn’t that admirable of you? You can talk to your general about anything. It’s embarrassing if you put it that way.”

The lack of defiance made Subaru scratch his cheek in a blushy manner. Then, Garfiel let out a heavy sigh.

“Well, I went inside, okay? So I was in the back there, too…”

“Ahh, so you were.”

“That’s why I saw. The, uh, product of all the general’s hard work.”

Garfiel prevaricated, finding it hard to put it into words. Subaru, not grasping what he was trying to say, made a questioning look. But he immediately realized it. He had a guess. His face turned deep red.

—He saw it! He saw it, he saw it! He saw *it*!!

“N-nooooo…! I forgooot! I mean, I mean… I didn’t expect you’d actually go into the tomb yourself…s-so, if you went in, you…aaaahhh!”

Covering his face with both hands, Subaru squirmed as he fell on the spot.

Shame. Shame strong enough to want to die. Few were the souls who could live with so much shame. That moment, he detested Garfiel, perhaps hating him more than when they’d come to deadly blows.

“You glarin’ at me like that puts me in a bind! …But…my bad for seein’ it. General, you’re a huge stupid bastard, but I’m glad you’re the general I lost to!”

“Shaddap, forget you saw it! You can just pretend you didn’t see it, damn it! You’re not a little kid…wait, you *are* a little kid! Damn it all!!”

When he tried to call Garfiel a brat, Subaru immediately realized it was he who was at an overwhelming disadvantage, what with his soft spot in his opponent’s grip. The resentful shout sent Garfiel bursting into laughter, slapping his knees.

As he rested, exposed to lukewarm gazes, Subaru prayed for Emilia’s good fortune, simultaneously praying that she would not notice the “graffiti” he had left behind.

Now that someone else had seen them, those little love letters had become quite a farce.

7

—And of course, Subaru’s second prayer went unanswered.

“…Subaru, you…idiot.”

Tense as she passed through the corridor, Emilia entered the stone room where the Trial was undertaken. She traced the faintly glowing stone walls with her finger as words trickled out of her in a giggly tone.

After being so frightened, Emilia had fought her fear, challenging the tomb with resolve and determination in her breast. And yet, when Emilia arrived at the stone room in question, she was greeted by an unexpected sight.

"…I mean, this really is stupid."

In contrast to her words, Emilia's expression softened, filling with affection.

—Who could blame her? Anyone seeing it would surely have the same thought.

The walls Emilia traced with her fingers had marks on them that they should not have had. Every single one of the four walls of that cramped, stonework room was buried in many, many markings.

The shadows from the glow gave those marks tangible shape. Emilia touched her hand to them as her chest grew hot.

—Carved into them were pictures, characters. Emilia was surrounded by many words, many feelings.

The pictures were the adorable Pucks that Subaru had drawn many times before. The drawings of Puck had various expressions on them, and surrounding these were writings in I-script, as if they were written by little children.

"Hang in there, you can do it." "Puck and I are both cheering you on." "Once this is done, let's go on a date." "I'm counting on you, Emilia." "I love you. That's why I believe in you."

"Idiot…idiot, idiot, idiot… Subaru, you…dunderhead."

Even though she had to challenge the Trial, even though painful, sad memories surely awaited her, his efforts to cheer her up nearly had her in tears. What a terrible person he was.

—Something dawned on her. That moment, she understood.

Since Emilia had come to this place two days prior, the only chance to engrave these characters and images was the night before.

Subaru had taken the time. Subaru had distanced himself from Emilia's side during that time. And what he'd done during that time was the one thing which Subaru absolutely would not speak to her about.

—What a very stupid thing to break a promise for.

"—I am absolutely, absolutely not forgiving you until you apologize for this, you know."

Adoringly touching the characters, she voiced her thoughts for the boy who had carved them.

The next moment, she felt like her consciousness was being lulled to sleep and sensed the world's contours growing vague.

The Trial was coming. The past she had feared so much was coming.

—And yet, a smile remained on Emilia's lips.

8

—Emilia did not understand if the experience of being invited to her past ought to be called a *dream*.

Dreamlike might have been appropriate to describe sinking into the familiar forest in the innermost part of her memories and stepping into it with her own feet.

Surrounded by tall trees, she felt the tranquil breeze and the warm soil beneath her soles as she breathed in deeply.

This place, inside the Trial, was not the snowy landscape dotted by white-laden trees that loomed large in her memories. This place had not yet reached that point. That said, it was undoubtedly on the path that would arrive at the snowy landscape Emilia so deeply regretted.

And then—

"—My, there has been a flood of guests of late."

"___"

Without a word, Emilia turned her gaze toward the person who had abruptly

spoken so glibly.

Deep in the forest reproduced from Emilia's memories, which was filled with the green scenery just as she remembered, one figure decidedly not from her past stood askew in the shadow of a tree.

Leaning upon the trunk, the white-haired woman casually studied Emilia. There, clad in black clothing and bearing a face beautiful enough to bewitch any onlooker, stood Echidna, the Witch of Greed.

When Emilia noticed the Witch's gaze, the latter smiled charmingly at her, slowly stepping out of the tree's shade and walking over.

"Truly, a flood of guests. Both guests who ought to be welcomed—and guests who surely were not invited."

As she walked over, Echidna turned a casual voice and a frigid gaze toward Emilia. This was no sarcasm; they were pure, unadulterated feelings of disgust and scorn.

"It's quite something for you to crawl back here after putting on such a shameful display. Even I am shocked at your audacity and refusal to quit."

Her frigid black eyes both resembled those of the one closest to Emilia, and yet did not. This malice was directed not toward half-elves, but toward Emilia personally. —It was raw hostility.

"No matter how dejected and teary you are, you get to curry favor with a man who'll console you and forgive you. You defile my personal world over and over. Selfish in the extreme—you are a loose woman, shameless and immoral. —What do you have to say about that, Witch's daughter?"

The sheer ferocity of her words would have torn the old Emilia's heart apart, utterly smashing it to pieces.

Without mercy, without hesitation, the Witch hurled insults to whittle down Emilia's spirit. It was not the only reason she'd been broken by the Trial before, but her challenge began there.

The Witch neither wanted Emilia to challenge the Trial, nor to overcome it.

The Witch did not expect Emilia to overcome the Trial whatsoever.

—Ahh, I see. Here, I have to do that thing Subaru told me to.

Now she understood. It really was exactly like Subaru had told her.

When throwing down the gauntlet, when forcing courage to well up from deep in her heart, she needed to be like Subaru Natsuki.

“—My name is Emilia…just Emilia. The Freezing Witch who hails from the Great Elior Forest.”

Emilia could tell that naming herself rubbed the Witch the wrong way.

Privately satisfied with that reaction, Emilia jabbed a finger toward the Witch, seemingly shooting right through her into the sky.

“Another Witch’s malice will not affect me. —I am a troublesome woman like that.”

<END>

AFTERWORD

At your service as always, Tappei Nagatsuki aka the Mouse-Colored Cat!

Thank you for sticking with me through *Re:ZERO*, Volume 13! Sorry that the font size for the afterword might have gotten a bit smaller these last few times. I keep warning myself to not let this become some kind of new standard, but just like before, this volume was packed with content!

Arc 4, often known as the Sanctuary arc, is finally reaching the comeback phase. Here, we'll dive into the part of the story where senseless circumstances are broken through. Please look forward to Volume 14, where not only the problems of the present must be confronted, but also those of the past!

Also, I have to say, this volume's cover illustration is the first one to feature only men (even Vol. 7, featuring Wilhelm, included his wife), which is a milestone that actually gave me an inward sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Even while engaging in such banter, the space limitations are strict this time, too, so onto the customary thanks!

Editor I, just as I predicted at the end of Volume 12, Volume 13 was quite a ride! That goes for Subaru, too, but even your dear author's brain felt like it would boil over from the intense combat. Sorry about the repeated phone calls in the middle of the night! And thank you very much!

To the honored illustrator Otsuka, a huge thanks for every volume's illustrations, but thank you in particular for drawing an all-male cover this time around! It's such a simple thing, but even with men in over 50 percent of the book illustrations, it's something that simply hasn't happened in all this time.

With Volume 13, we finally did it! Thank you very much!

To Kusano, the cover designer, thank you very much for finally whipping up a stylish picture with nothing but smelly, grimy men. It's amazing how cool Otto looks in it!

To Daichi Matsuse, who's in charge of the manga edition, and Makoto Fugetsu, too, thank you for continuing to stick with me and this tale! From the Arc 2 side stories to Arc 3's Battle of the White Whale, I couldn't pull my eyes away! I hope you'll continue to take care of me from here on out!

And with a whole year having passed since the start of the anime broadcast, this author's excitement is undiminished. I'm so grateful for how much everyone related to the anime has done for the story and motivated me to work even harder. I can't thank you enough! Many of the letters I received from fans also said *The anime was terrific!* Thank you very much!

To others, such as everyone at the MF Bunko J editorial department and everyone involved in each and every bookstore, like always, I sincerely want to thank you all. You all always make me feel blessed.

And finally, my greatest of thanks goes out to the readers who have bought this book and had their hearts leap after seeing how this tale has developed! As usual, thanks a million!

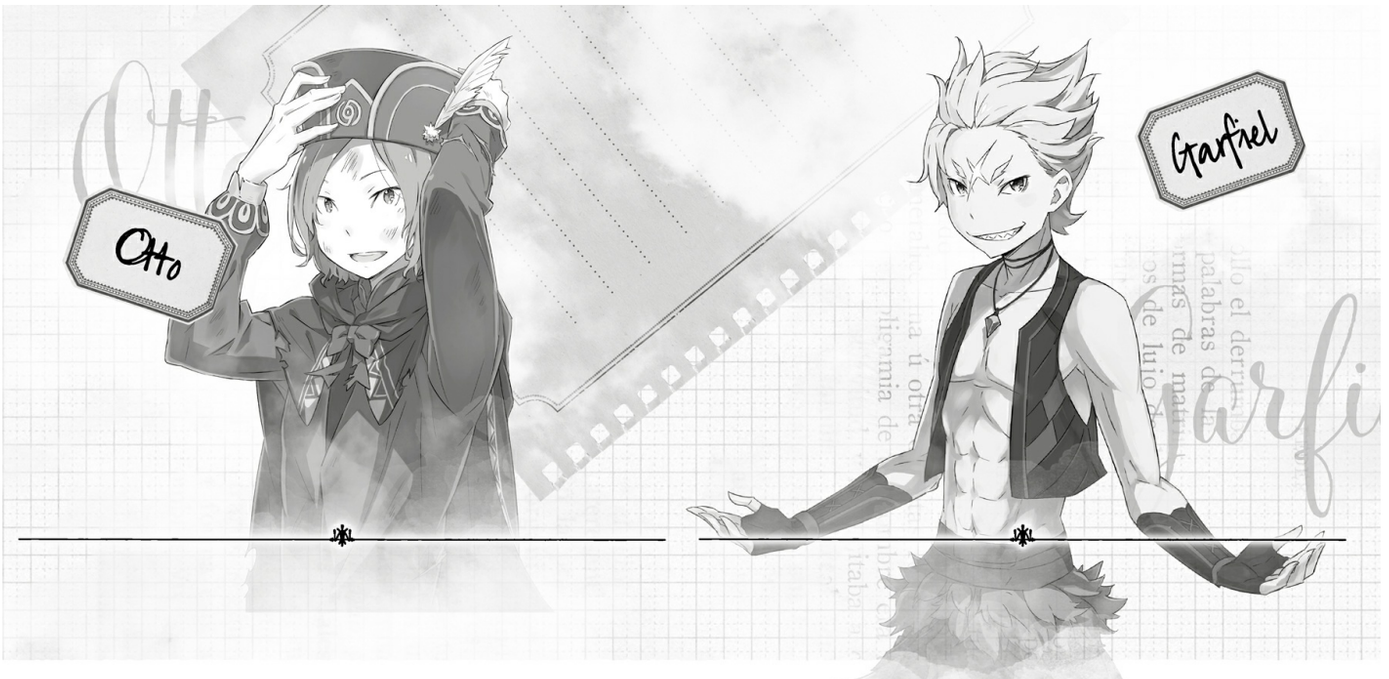
I'll be working really hard again for Act 4's final stretch, the resolution phase! I hope you'll stick with me for it!

Well then, let's meet again in Volume 14! The next one's going to have some pretty intense twists and turns, too!

May 2017

<<The year is already half over! Gotta put some oomph *into the second half!>>*


IN REMRIN'S DREAMS
Shinichiro Otsuka
オツカシンイチロウ
ZZZZ...



“So Ram ’n’ I are doin’ the next volume prev…hey, what the hell are you doin’ here?!”

“To be honest, I also wondered at first what they were thinking. Now, I cannot help but think this selection was based on the contents of the most recent volume. Besides, this is my second shot at doing the preview!”

“I came ’cause I thought Ram was gonna be here. No one told me I had to do it with Third-Rate…”

“It would seem Ram deceived you… Though I feel bad for your heartbreak, Garfiel, this, too, is work. Let’s begin. The first announcement concerns information about the opening of an event in Shibuya for August: *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Eternal Summer-.”*

“E-eternal summer…? Seems like *Gurigori is bustling*, but I don’t really get it.”

“I suppose the details are being shared on Twitter and the website. That said, judging from the name, perhaps the contents and structure have a different theme from other events to date?”

“There’s also *Re:ZERO -Starting Emilia’s Birthday 2017*-happening in September, so there must be some celebration for the princess. Even though she’s half-useless, she sure gets blessed with this kinda stuff, huh.”

“I can imagine Mr. Natsuki would be terrifyingly angry if he heard you say that…but as it seems you are accustomed to this by now, perhaps you could continue with the other September information, Garfiel?”

“Hah! I don’t like this one bit. Why do I have to listen to you…?”

“It will show off your good side to Miss Ram, too.”

“…On September 10, MF Bunko J is openin’ *Summer School Festival 2017*. It’s old-fashioned, but millin’ around these events is fun, so give it a try, all right?”

“This applies to Mr. Natsuki as well, but it is incredibly easy to push your buttons…”

“Also, on September 23, a *Re:ZERO* artbook for the princess’s birthday goes on sale, too, ya hear?”

“A collection of illustrations drawn by Shinichirou Otsuka for the *Re:ZERO* series, yes. These were attached to the novels on a special store-by-store basis, never before published in book form, which makes them quite a hot commodity. So buy, buy, buy!”

“I’m fine with introducing all this other junk, but what about Volume 14?”

“How surprising! *Re:ZERO*, Volume 14 is expected to go on sale in September. September is set to become a very special month. We hope you follow not only the events, but also the next book in the main series as well.”

“So that’s it, huh?”

“Yes, so it would seem. I say, you have pulled this off unexpectedly well.”

“Ahh? Get real, it was obvious I can do this much, at least. Don’t go lookin’ down on other people so much, Third-Rate!”

“Does that form of address not indicate you are looking down on me?! Goodness, and to think I was giving you honest praise… Truly, do you not have any intention of getting along nicely with others?”

“That’s my line, damn it. Just like the general, I ain’t givin’ my approval that easy.”

“Then, difficult as it might be, I suppose I shall have to try my best… I’m a bit concerned for the future.”


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