

AYAMATSU IF

This is a translation of the IF story which was posted for April Fools 2017. It is a story separated from the 'main' timeline of events. It diverges considerably from how the story goes in the main timeline.

This story contains spoilers for Arc 5. If you are virginal and pure, unblemished by spoilers, you may want to close this document.

If you don't mind spoilers, or have read the Wiki summary of Arc 5, or have read Arc 5, or hang out in any community which regularly discusses Re: Zero, you will probably be fine. (The spoilers concern the gimmick behind the power of one of the enemy characters in Arc 5).

I opted not to use dialogue tags for this story, half out of curiosity, half to separate it from main timeline chapters. I might come back and change this sometime if I decide I don't like it.

<https://mega.nz/#F!VNdzDYYK!nK9fNU3LeprlZSbRAnlsRganka.burner@gmail.com>

RE ZERO EX: LIFE IN ANOTHER WORLD ERRING FROM ZERO

—What pervades his mind is the violent HEAT at his stomach.

“Ghhgg! Hot!”

With his face suffering the hard surface of the floor, Subaru knows that he has fallen prone. But his limbs won't get him to his feet, and lie motionless.

It's as if he's no longer himself, as if his body has been stolen from him.

And still the inferno burns Subaru persistently. So nothing about the situation is fallacious.

—Hot, hot hot hothothothothot.

He opens his mouth, and instead of a shriek out flows rivulets of blood.

In pain and in anguish, almost drowning in his own blood as he is subjected to the pinnacle of agony.

—What on earth did he do?

He pleads escapist pleas as means to flee from the suffering, the whiny complaint repeating through his head.

What on earth did he do?

He knew that his life was not one meriting unabashed praise. But that statement applied to more than just Subaru. Nobody could live a life so pure that they could brag about it to all of humanity. People felt guilt, people felt remorse, people feigned ignorance, and people made compromises.

So why did he alone have to suffer this?

Why was the fate that all other people could ignore forcing itself onto only him?

“Ahh, fuck...”

Spills the whisper from between streams of blood.

It carries his remorse, his loathing for his powerlessness, his hatred for fate—

—and his exasperation with himself.

“—”

Even with all this injury, even with all this agony, even with all this deathly suffering. Even if the fire scorches him, even if the pain breaks him, even if it threatens his life.

The girl ingrained in his mind will, smiling, face inexorable repeats of woesome death. So,

“I,”

One again, he voices his resolve. Voices his resolution. Voices his rue, and his regret.

While seeking a future that, with innumerable attempts, innumerable scrambles, and innumerable wishes, he will regardless never reach.

The PAIN and the HEAT and totality all grow distant, and like the simpering dog he is, he howls.

“No matter what,”

The flourish of a blade looms heartlessly down on his last dying ember of life. But not even that blade enters his view. He has already reached his decision.

—Will save you.

The instant he renewed that wish, Natsuki Subaru lost his life.

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—Witnessing the familiar scene makes Subaru feel strangely relieved, and exhausted.

“You have safely made it back, there is no need to fear, I guess.”

While gazing at the traffic of the Royal Capital, Subaru draws multiple tallies of '||||' in the ground with a stick. He continues doing this until he is satisfied, then erases them with his foot and sighs.

Natsuki Subaru hails from the Third Planet From The Sun What Is Earth, his station being a run-of-the-mill third-year high school truant.

Should anyone observe his casual getup of track suit and sneakers, and the plastic convenience store bag in his hand, surely they would not doubt the fact.

However, that principle only applies to those from regions familiar with such concepts as 'track suits' and 'sneakers' and 'convenience stores'.

So, getting to what he was truly trying to say—

“—This whole 'summoned to a parallel world' thing's rougher than I thought it'd be.”

A carriage drawn by a horse-sized lizard kicks up dust as it zooms past Subaru.

Such a sight was of course impossible in the world Subaru knew. So you could suggest that it had been a horse dolled up in special cosmetics, like some kind of theme park character. But Subaru would not agree.

Because the lizards amounted to more than one—the city's streets teemed with them—and the people commanding those lizards also presented a massive demographic of special cosmetics. Anthropomorphic animals—people wearing the trappings of so-called beastmen or demihumans. Perhaps twenty or thirty of them were present Subaru's visual field. Naturally, there were also many others around who shared Subaru's make, but the mayhem inflicted on the 'individual' half of 'individual appearance' drowned them out and generally blocked them from Subaru's attention.

But he can't stay here trying to escape from reality forever.

Neither the beastmen nor the lizards are any part of a movie shoot or production. This scene is an ordinary one in this place, and the alien here isn't them, it's Subaru.

—After the ten-or-so days Subaru has spent experiencing this, he understands that fact to a painful extent.

“...Time to go.”

Done with his useless contemplations, Subaru pats his rear and stands up. He keeps the stick in his right hand as he meanders down to the street—not the main street where he'll disappear into the crowd, but into the backstreets.

Unlike the bustling main street, the backstreet is unpopulated as it rests crammed between tall buildings. The place could aptly be called a back alley, simply a single lane isolated from the outside world with its silence.

Put short, something could happen here, and the screams would not reach the main road.

So if a blatant outsider like Subaru wandered into here, villains targeting him would naturally appear.

“Hey, buddy. You come play with us for a second.”

Subaru turns toward the voice, to find three silhouettes blocking the alley. They come in a neat all-purpose set of a big, medium, and little guy, and Subaru can sense their abilities of examination. No idea what they're examining though.

“—”

Subaru tilts his head to look at the path opposite the three. The alley hits a dead end behind Subaru, so the only exit from this backstreet means having the trio let him pass by.

And if we're asking whether or not the trio have any intention to let Subaru back onto the main street—

“Hell're you looking so spaced out for?”

“He don't understand what's goin' on. Say we make 'im find out.”

Subaru's remiss behaviour prompts the three to smile obscenely, ideas for abusing him clicking into place in their heads. From their perspective, Subaru is an obvious rookie.

You can't fault someone for licking their lips when faced with such easy pickings.

But they are absolutely and utterly wrong.

True, Subaru lacks any real experience with fighting, and he has no secret history where he learned martial arts. Rookie, was the part of their estimations where they weren't wrong.

But if we're talking in terms of fighting these three people specifically, then Subaru is already a veteran.

“—Huh?”

At the inattentive giant—Tom of the Tom Dick and Larry trio—Subaru thrusts out his arm.

In Subaru's grasp remains the stick he picked up before, and although it lacks any sharp point, it wedges into a soft portion of Tom's throat and with only minor resistance spears into his neck.

“Wha?”

Tom's eyes shoot open at the instantaneous affair, while Dick and Larry freeze rigid.

Tom can no longer fight. While the others are still petrified, Subaru's free hand shoots for the medium one—Dick. He grasps him by the hair and the ear, swings him. Subaru allows no resistance. Riding the momentum, he smashes Dick's head against the wall. Something solid crunches, cracks, and Dick draws a trail of blood down the wall as he crumples.

Simultaneously, Subaru jabs his knee into the impaled Tom, whose eyes bulge open as he topples over. The direction he falls in is poor. He falls forward, and so the stick plunges into him deeper.

Now two of them can no longer fight. Only one left—

“Eep.”

The small one, Larry, pales as he watches the instantaneous defeat of his two allies. If he proceeded to abandon the others and sprint for the streets, it'd turn into a contest of his leg strength against Subaru's and he might have a chance of surviving. Instead he looks at the fallen duo and hesitates on whether to flee. Unaware that it is already too late for them, he wastes the single second of time he has.

Idiot. Imbecile. He'd get his reward for that moronic decision.

“Ghau, ghg...”

Subaru closes his hands around Larry's skinny neck, squeezing down as he presses Larry's back against the wall. Larry struggles as he is lifted up against the wall, the force on his neck compounding as Subaru strangles him. He is raised until he is on even eye level with Subaru. Larry's eyes bulge as he is choked, his mouth flapping open and shut in search of oxygen. But his windpipe has been forcibly blocked, and Larry will not be saved.

“Now do you realise how many times I've met you guys total?”

“Khhg, hgh...”

“Eighty-eight. Good for you how your share's always increasing. You're meant to laugh.”

Says Subaru as he glares at Larry's face—growing bloodier, and running with spit and tears. Larry has no leeway to say anything, of course. Actually forget about leeway—having lost any capacity to resist, his body falls limp and Subaru dumps him to the ground.

After looking down at the defeated trio, Subaru starts stomping their necks just in case. Once he feels the crunch of something breaking beneath his sneaker's heel, he can relax. Tom has such a big neck that it takes five good stomps to do it. Subaru just can't get the trick down for this guy. Though every so often his luck is good and he does get them all in one go.

“Wasn't smart to strangle him. ...Feels gross too, won't do it again.”

After having that moment of reflection, Subaru loots two knives from Dick. Then he drags their their corpses to the end of the alley, leaves them there, and exits the backstreets as if nothing happened.

Both entering the alley and encountering Tom Dick and Larry happened rather quickly. Taking care of the trio did take a little time, but still ultimately less than a minute.

Subaru hurriedly travels down the main street in pursuit of his destination.

“—”

After observing the street, he puts his hand to his chest in relief. Made it in time. This is a primary street called the Shopper's Lane, chaotic and bustling with people just as the rest, tasked with the job of demonstrating the Capital's health and prosperity. You can just stand on this street doing nothing, and it'll be more than enough to earn your ears a flood of cacophonous noise. But a shift comes to this bustling scene.

“—Wait! Ah! Please wait!!”

It is the enchanting voice of a silver bell which shreds through the market's din. Although teeming with desperation, the voice cannot conceal the kindness of its owner, its addressee being a small silhouette which dashes out of the crowd.

“Hehehee.”

Laughs the blonde girl as she weaves through the mob, grinning like a feline. In her hand she clutches something sparkling, and her demeanour clearly attests that she has completed her job. Aiming at that girl, a shimmering blue light—a spear of ice—soars down the street.

“—!!”

Surprised by the unanticipated attack, the girl hops and bounds to avoid the icicle. That magic attack had been cast in a street teeming with people. The sudden happening creates chaos as the people of the Capital instantly open a path, raising their arms to show that they do not want to get involved in the fight. It's the predominant response. Getting caught up in tussles is an everyday thing in the Capital—would be one hell of a statement, but perhaps it's not too far from the truth.

Regardless. Sprinting down the path opened by the crowd is the person Subaru has been looking for.

“—”

The instant he lays eyes on HER, Subaru feels that the whole world has frozen. The wind, people's voices, even time falls out of his perception as absolutely all of his focus is redirected onto her.

Her long, silver hair flutters behind her and her amethyst eyes gleam with strong volition. Her slender, pale arms and legs come donned in white attire so mythical it could have been crafted for a pixie—

In this world stopped of time, she alone is permitted motion, as she utterly passes Subaru by.

Her objective is the blonde girl who just ran past, Felt. Felt has stolen something from her, and now she is sprinting around the Capital in an effort to retrieve it. Which will lead her onto a track of nigh unavoidable doom.

But Subaru will not let that happen. He will never let a fate of DEATH ensnare her.

“I, no matter what, will save you.”

As he watches her grow distant, Subaru swears his pledge for the eighty-eighth time. Being that he's broken the pledge so many times, it's unclear exactly how persuasive it is. Unclear. But if keeps on without surrender, if keeps fighting, if he keeps wishing to save her—

“Be waiting for me. —Satella.”

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RETURN BY DEATH. The power to reverse time upon death. Subaru has used this power to redo the world eighty-eight times now.

He's already getting close to breaking one hundred attempts, and all of it has been spent on saving the silver-haired girl, Satella, from the dead end of fate.

“I mean I've done some trial and error on this one... but it's not going to work like with Tom Dick and Larry.”

Is Subaru's conclusion regarding his greatest adversary in this fate: Elsa Granhiert.

The person who commissioned Felt to steal Satella's insignia is this shadowy woman named Elsa. She is a hazard who has brought Satella to her death countless times. Subaru has tried inordinate times during these past eighty-seven attempts to remove Elsa and secure Satella's safety, but he always suffered the loss when confronted with Elsa's transcendental combat prowess, and has died with his belly slashed open over fifty times.

This sadist who enjoys disembowelling people is not someone Subaru can beat in a fight. When the opponent is someone like Tom Dick and Larry, Subaru can figure some degree of a pattern in their movements and devise plans for absolute victory. But when they're as strong as Elsa, it's rather reasonable that Subaru's head be lopped off the second he tries to do anything. And although it's not his head, he truly has been instantaneously disembowelled many times.

Subaru cannot fight her and win. Neither can Felt, or Rom, or Satella. Having reached that conclusion, the strategy that Subaru chooses is—

“Wonderful! Beautiful! Although I'd be happier if you could let me enjoy myself more!”

“GhhhaaaaAAH!!”

Every time the blades slice through the air, blood spouts. Too many fallen bodies litter the streets to count on your fingers as bloodsoaked Elsa transcends ecstasy, seeming to be relishing in steady doses of rapture.

Although in such a gruesome situation, Elsa's sensuality only compounds the more blood she bathes in.

There are anecdotes about women who bathed in virgin's blood to maintain their own youth who were called vampires, and Elsa presently does appear exactly like such a VAMPIRE.

“...Another failure, huh.”

Sighing, Subaru narrows his eyes as he observes the grisly scene from a rooftop.

He's in a ward of the slums which is particularly run-down and abandoned. The stage for the conflict is a space you could maybe call a square, where the massacre escalates unilaterally. Those trading blades with Elsa, and consistently being felled by her knives, are the Capital's guardsmen.

Information from a virtuous citysperson led them to detect the dangerous Elsa Granhiert, and following their attempts to arrest her their lives lay scattered and slaughtered—being that he is the virtuous citysperson, the sight does pain Subaru's heart.

“Didn't think there'd be this big of a power gap between normal guards and Elsa...”

This was just presenting Elsa with lambs to gleefully slaughter.

Subaru had expected that, being that they are guardsmen who protect the Capital, they would empower themselves with some kind of magic first and then fight on even par with Elsa. But it looks like his hopes were too high.

So yes. Elsa is overwhelmingly powerful even by the standards of this world.

Subaru's resentment for Elsa compounds. But no matter how furious he is, Subaru will never be strong enough to stop this wicked woman.

He doesn't think for an instant that the guards will get a lucky hit in and defeat her either.

“Pointless to just keep watching.”

He does feel bad for the sacrificed guards, but Subaru will be ending this experiment here.

He has no intention to hold back, but if Subaru ultimately fails and loses his life, those who died here will resurrect in the reset world.

For now Subaru will swallow his tears and let the sacrifices stay dead. Next time he won't expect the slightest thing from them, so they can go back to preserving the Capital's harmony without worries.

Having reached that conclusion, Subaru moves to start leaving the scene—when.

“—Oh my.”

Freezing still with her kukri raised high, Elsa licks her bloody lips.

The crazed delight and bloodlust overflowing from her proves best that Elsa, having grown bored of slaughtering the guardsmen, has found new prey. The identity of this hapless victim is—

“—Go no further.”

A pillar of fire is standing there, hallucinates Subaru.

“—”

Swallowing his breath, straining his eyes, taking a closer look, Subaru finally recognizes that it is not flame but a person standing there.

A young man with fiery red hair and eyes as blue as pristine sky.

He may look lean, but his frame is muscled and limber beneath his white regalia. At his waist sits a sword which is probably larger than what is custom.

One hundred out of one hundred people would turn to glance if he walked by, and his looks are so attractive that this work of god would charm any beholder. Chaos resultant from beauty transcendent of gender—is not what he produces, perhaps because of his calm bearing.

Just one glance is enough for Subaru's soul to inform: this man is different from the usual riffraff.

“Sir Reinhardt!”

“Everyone, please withdraw. That woman is the GUTHUNTER. The sacrifices already number far too many. I don't want that count to increase.”

Says Reinhardt, his eyes lowered, in response to the trembling voice of a surviving guardsman. It sounds like he's pitying lives that were butchered like rats, and like he's indignant at the murderer, Elsa, who did it.

Even Subaru as he watches from afar can perceive the nature of this young man, Reinhardt. His reasoning is just, his conceptions are just, his mentality is just, hence he is angry.

Mourned death, detested murder, lamented failure, overwrote his remorse with his conviction. That was this man Reinhardt's—this knight's—way of being.

“Reinhardt Van Astrea. From the SWORD SAINT bloodline. Wonderful, excellent!”

“I often feel crushed by the expectations. And you are the GUTHUNTER?”

“Yes, I certainly am. Oh, goodness. What am I to do? I need to be doing my work, but now I've come face to face with you.”

With a fevered, passionate breath, Elsa looks ardently at Reinhardt. But Reinhardt's expression is the definition of serious, his eyes filled with duty, not a speck of frivolity in him.

Both are facing the other with antithetical stances, but their hearts lead them to the same answer.

They must slay each other and achieve their goal.

“Fundamentally speaking, this is where I would advise you to surrender, but...”

“You're faced with this slaughter, and you're telling me this? Very kind of you. So kind that it's cruel both to me and to them.”

“—No, I share your opinion. It is impious to their deaths if I am lenient on you. I cannot ask for you to surrender.”

Elsa cheerfully kicks one of the fallen corpses as Reinhardt slowly shakes his head. He reaches out to the guardsman at his side and promptly states, “A sword, please.”

“Please do accept it.”

The guard presents a sword, which Reinhardt takes. He confirms its feel in his hands while Elsa

furrows her brows, looking to have qualms about this.

“You're not using the sword on your hip? But I wanted to feel the cut of the fabled Dragonblade.”

“Unfortunately, this sword ascertains which opponents it ought to be drawn for. It's a rather troublesome trait, and it doesn't seem that you've earned its graces. Instead, I will oppose you with this.”

“Hrmpf.”

Elsa sighs at Reinhardt, who has readied not the sword at his waist, but the one he accepted. But Elsa's displeasure only lasts for an instant. She immediately changes gears, and feeling premonitions of battle and bloodshed, licks her lips.

“Elsa Granhiert, Guthunter.”

“Reinhardt van Astrea of the Sword Saint bloodline.”

They introduce themselves, both becoming wind as they charge at the other. The fight concludes with this one bout alone.

A completely banal slash births a maelstrom of light, the shockwaves destroying this section of the slums.

The slash from the man called the SWORD SAINT is the exact definition of POWER.

Natsuki Subaru, eyes wide, observed this scene.

With a tear on his cheek, his knees shaking, and utterly ignorant as to why.

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Things went a different way from what Subaru arranged and expected, but it's safe to say that the primary goal of defeating Elsa has been accomplished.

He didn't predict Reinhardt's participation, but being that it granted his wish he's more than fine with it.

Now the trouble surrounding Satella's insignia will be safely resolved. And so long as Felt and Rom fail to reconvene with their hirer, Elsa, it shouldn't be asking the impossible for them to keep Satella's insignia stored. Subaru doubts that Satella will succumb to rage and kill them.

This story revolving around the Loot House will be completed using the bare minimum of characters.

It's a desirable outcome for Subaru as well.

And so—

“—Why could you be helping me?”

“I mean you don't need to trust me. If you're fine with being surrounded by guards and losing all possible chance of revenge, just kill me and run away.”

“—”

Spits Subaru as he leans against a wall, speaking to a crouching Elsa. She is covered in blood, her black outfit torn in places and her white skin exposed. That said, her flesh is coated with horrible wounds which leave Subaru no room to feel the slightest bit bashful. And Subaru has no sexual interest in Elsa anyway. He just thought she could be useful, and wanted to capitalize on the opportunity.

“The guards' eyes're bloodshot looking for you. I misdirected them to be somewhere else, so it'll be a little while before they notice us. Your wounds?”

“Hurt very much. Very, very much, I could die. Huhu, it's wonderful.”

“There's a sentiment I don't understand. Gonna be a problem if you die on me, kinda looking to do something here.”

Subaru has gone out of his way, risking danger to misdirect them so that Elsa may live. If he is felled here, or gets wrapped up in the guards' search for Elsa, this spontaneous route where Satella survived will turn to dust. Though, if that happens, it just means more rolls of the dice to get these events to unfold again.

“Can you make a path to the southeastern section of the slums? I'll be able to reunite with my younger sister if you do. She'll treat my wounds and prepare an escape route.”

“Sister! Hah, you have a sister, that's both on point and a complete tragedy.”

It's probably not that she trusts him, and if she does trust him that's still disgusting, but either way Elsa's information means Subaru can calculate ways to overcome this predicament. Their flight has already brought them rather considerably south. It shouldn't take them too long to relocate to this place Elsa's talking about. Using the holy golden coins in Elsa's possession, Subaru bribes residents of the slums to interfere with the guards' search and lead them on an incorrect course. No problems.

“What I don't understand is your goal in this.”

“Just wanted to put you in my debt. It might be helpful to have you around one day.”

“A debt. How strange. —When you are so eager to kill me.”

Is what Subaru has to hear while lending Elsa his shoulder and helping her run away. Elsa's dark eyes look up at Subaru, trying to peer into his emotions. But she already nailed it and there's no need to peer. The answer Elsa gets from Subaru's dark eyes is exactly what she stated. Subaru would like to kill Elsa right now if possible. But he will not manage to beat even a dying Elsa if he fails to consider the possible branches, and besides that it's a hasty idea.

Subaru feels that he's been placed on a hideously lopsided side of the board. It's a battle which presupposes that he consider every method possible, undergo trial and error, and make the optimum moves. Think of it like shogi, where no amount of randomly moving pieces around will procure you any victory. If it's possible, swap out foes and allies. If there's opportunity, don't hesitate to alter your circumstances.

For this he must utilize even those he abhors and would rather murder.

“I do want to kill you. And I will kill you one day. But not now.”

“I see.”

It's not even worth hiding. Subaru reveals his true feelings to Elsa.

If Elsa were someone more prudent, she would kill Subaru right here to quell some future anxieties. But Subaru is confident that she will not do that.

It's a blood-soaked confidence, which Subaru gained through more than eighty deaths to Elsa.

“Wonderful. You and I are bound by loathing. One day, yes. You will prove yourself right. And it's very, very lovely.”

“__”

Elsa's bloodsoaked lips relax, smiling like a girl with a crush.

With her smile right beside him, from the very depths of his heart, Subaru thinks: *repulsive*.

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“Let us meet again, yes?”

“See you, mister. Thanks for helping Elsa.”

The blue-haired girl they meet up with takes charge of Elsa, and Subaru breathes a sigh of relief. This girl waiting in the hovel Elsa mentioned is very young, in her tweens. Though her age shocks Subaru at first, she does tend to Elsa's wounds in a practised manner, promptly completes arrangements for them to flee the Capital, and speedily vacates the shack.

He just barely manages to secure means to contact Elsa, which serves as his payment. Though it's not clear whether that payment truly compensates for the danger he risked.

“Guess what happens from this point on depends on how I move.”

Subaru takes off his bloodstained tracksuit jersey, ties it around his waist, and starts walking. His course leads him away from the slums and towards the Loot House. Elsa had failed to ever reach the place, but had Satella managed to safely reclaim her insignia? The question plagued him.

“__”

After some time, Subaru reaches the Loot House. His eyes go wide at what he sees.

“Didn't expect that.”

What unfolds before him is the sight of a frozen Loot House.

Or rather, 'sealed inside ice' is a more accurate description than 'frozen'. What on earth happened here? Subaru quickly interrogates a nearby resident, and:

“The loot house's old-guy boss and his granddaughter got nicked by the guards. Something about them making enemies with a scary magician... don't wanna stick my nose in it.”

“Are the old man and his granddaughter safe? The magician?”

“They're saying no one's hurt, but I didn't get a good look at either of them. Look, enough, okay?”

Perhaps unnerved by Subaru's eerie intensity, the man pushes Subaru's arms away and briskly escapes into an alleyway's darkness.

Subaru ruminates on the man's words as he watches him go, then puts his hand to chest in relief.

He doesn't know how accurate the man's statements were, but at very least his account couldn't be confused with a hypothetical situation where people died.

That the guards arrested Felt and Rom is inevitable considering what they do for a living. They ought to enjoy prison for a while, and reflect on their occupations.

And now that Subaru knows Satella is safe, as he hoped—

“—Alright. What do I do now?”

Subaru scratches his head, aware that he has completely exhausted himself of goals.

He was summoned to a parallel world, given RETURN BY DEATH, utilized it, and saved an adorable kindhearted silver-haired half-elf.

Though it took him eighty-seven deaths to achieve it.

“Ah, crap. Maybe I better've died, reset, and had Elsa tell me why she was trying to steal Satella's insignia...?”

He really ought to have asked this while transporting the wounded Elsa, but lapsed.

However, if Subaru asked questions deeply involved with Elsa's affairs, and that led her to discover that Subaru was sentimentally on Satella's side, he'd have no idea how Elsa would react.

In the end, both Subaru and Satella are alive now. We'll assume it's the correct solution.

“Though really, I'd like to know more about Satella if I could...”

Where did Satella come from? Where was she going? Would he meet her again? He didn't know.

Though, he could always repeat things until he did know.

But assuming there were some other method—

“—So, could you guys teach me?”

Standing before the frozen loot house, Subaru shoves his hands in his pockets and turns around.

No one feels present. But Subaru's eyes see the several silhouettes standing there.

All mundane looking people, with a moderate jumbling of ages and sexes, an incoherent group.

If there was anything about these people that did cohere, it'd be their eyes.

All of their eyes were dead. Good for being steeped with madness, and pursuing crazed ecstasy.

And Subaru suspected that, if he looked in a mirror, his eyes would be the same.

“—”

His cheeks relax at the sentiment. And he looks to the sky.
An eerily lustrous moon gazes down, at the frozen loot house, and the madmen.

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It happened almost two months later that Subaru learned more about Satella.

“In the Royal Selection! A silver-haired half-elf! Backed by Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers! Not Satella, Emilia—!”

Swooping at the sudden rush of detailed information after a period of radio silence, Subaru claps his hands, looking overjoyed.

This unexpected procurement of information resulted from an official announcement from the Royal Palace, giving news not only in the Capital but all through the country about the competition for the throne.

When Subaru first saw the bulletins posted around town about it, he mocked them as just being some stupid country election—when his eyes shot open.

The candidates consisted of five women—and one of them was the girl he was seeking.

“Royal Selection, the Royal Selection... if she's a candidate for ruler it means she has pedigree. Of course she does, think of how graceful she is when she's just walking around. Emilia, she's Emiliaaaa...”

Learning her real name makes Subaru's heart feel light, as if it's sprouted wings.
He'd figured out ages ago that Satella was an alias. And also figured out why she—Emilia—had introduced herself to Subaru with a fake name.
After all, if a silver-haired half-elf introduced themselves as Satella—

“People'd think she's involved with us guys and stay away from her. It was a desperate measure to keep me from danger. Her face's so adorable, her thoughts are so adorable.”

While speaking sadly about being a half-elf, and looking scared of being rejected, she showed consideration for others and utilized her lineage in an attempt to distance them from harm.
What a noble, piteous girl. So emotional it's squeezing his chest.
When,

“—Natsuki Subaru! Beloved of disciples! Are YOU PRESENT!?”

“—”

A shrill voice like a strangled fowl echoes unpleasantly through the room, calling Subaru's name. Subaru grimaces, puts the bulletin he pinched from the Capital on his bed, reluctantly opens the door, and exits his room.

He leans against the closed door, waiting, when an unhealthily pallid man comes into view down the poorly-lit hallway.

“I had been SEEKING YOU! Why, why, why is it that you were here, INDULGING IN SLOTH!? When!

We! Must! Follow the Witch's auspices, and answer to her love with diligencceeeeeeeeeee!!”

“Cut it out with the false accusations, Bete-san. I'm just obeying the gospel's instructions. Gospel's telling me to spend my time here.”

“What! The gospel so instructed you!? At this juncture, at this opportunity, in these circumstances, what cogitations must the Witch have, to instruct a disciple as devout as you to idle, even that slightest conjecture lies beyond! MY! FACULTIES!”

Not only is his screaming noisy, his movements are obnoxious too.
Indeed a madman, this Betelgeux Romanée-Conti. It truly does take an effort not to sigh.

He's an unlikable lunatic, but definitely a conductive character for Subaru.
After all, everyone in the group of Subaru's affiliation is a selfish portrait of egotism, and it's questionable whether the normal disciples have any sense of self-consciousness.

Subaru's arbitrary speculation is that the normal disciples' dull emotions might be due to something operating on their consciousness, so their affiliations won't leak while they're doing everyday things.

But who cares about supposition. The important thing is what Betelgeux, in a position of authority very different from the normal disciples, is trying to achieve with this visit.

Subaru has been part of this group for two months now, and life's been generally alright.
Though, while the living's alright, movement- and mental health-wise it's a nightmare.
Having frequent interactions with madmen and religious crazies is, being that Subaru's humanity cannot depart the realm of the commonplace, entirely agony.

His dwelling is a cave hidden in the mountains.
It's a surprisingly liveable spot, and hospitable enough that Subaru can fashion a section as being 'his room', but stuff like how it's far from civilization, and has hard floors and cold walls is something that generation Z Subaru has to endure.
But that said, he isn't a good enough actor to succeed in hiding his connections to this group. As a compromise, he's living here, being productive by learning and stockpiling information about this world.

“So, you have some business with my hermit self?”

“Are you NOT AWARE? Of the foolish event being conducted in this country!”

“Stuff happening in this country'd be... you mean the Royal Selection?”

“INDEED! The Selection! HOWEVER the problem does not LIE THERE! The Selection itself offers no importance, it is the one participating! That being, the silver-haired half-witch!”

So that he can lecture the ignorant Subaru, Betelgeux presents the official notice for the Selection—the exact same thing Subaru has decorated the room with—and jabs his finger at it.
Naturally, on that flyer is the face of a girl so cute that Subaru's staring has burned holes into it.
Betelgeux's bony finger, quite expectedly, points at her.

“WITNESS! This visage! This stock! Twin blasphemies against the Witch! This being is not one we may overlook! The time of the Trial is UPON US!”

“Trial.”

“EXACTLY!”

Screeching, Betelgeux slaps the flyer flat against the cave wall before slamming his fist into Emilia's personal description, sending blood flying everywhere. This self-harming madman, intoxicated on pain and blood, has desecrated Emilia's paper image.

“If it coheres, take her! If not, forsake her! Should she be verified as a suitable vessel for the Witch, we shall accept her into OUR FOLD! The Trial must commence!”

“And you're asking for my help?”

“Yes, CORRECT! I have contacted others, but doubt those nonbelievers will respond! WRATH alone may present possibility, however she is presently distant from this nation... thusly! We alone shall depart!”

With duty in his heart and a torrent of tears streaming down his face, Betelgeux shoves his bloody fist into his mouth, sucks his wounds. The corners of his mouth tear as his teeth bite down on his hand, wounding his skin and flesh in a gruesome and repellent display. But Subaru instructs himself to withstand the sight with ironclad will and dons a cool facade.

“Mind if I come along, then? I don't exactly know the details though, Cardinal.”

“So you are kindly accompanying! Aaah! AaAaAa! How so very so very so very so very very veryveryveryveryveryveryveryveryveryvery... JOYOUS!”

“That's getting way too enthused when I'm just saying I'm going with.”

The wry smile Subaru gives is legitimate. After nodding so many times his head could practically fall off, Betelgeux snaps his legs back into proper posture and whips around, his back to Subaru.

“We DEPART IMMEDIATELY! I have already given my fingers instructions along journey here... we will reunify with them, and travel to Mathers' Domain. Then we shall follow the GOSPEL'S LEAD!”

“Roger. ...And also, what's the Trial?”

“A SOUND QUESTION. It is a test to ascertain suitability of the Witch's vessel... namely, a trial to determine whether the receptacle possesses the strength, the quality, and moreover the qualifications to host the WITCH'S SOUL!”

Subaru replies to the unhelpful explanation with a knowing nod. He knows none of the specifics. But compared to his time spent in agony not knowing anything about Satella=Emilia, it's inestimably preferable. And it sounds like this means he'll get to be involved with Emilia again.

Though it also involves—

“—Now, now now! Now now now! WE DEPART! WE TEST! Should the vessel be suitable, then upon us now is the WITCH'S ADVENT! A chance after these many centuries that we may fill all of our seats!”

“If the Witch Satella descends here, does the vessel...?”

“MARTYRED! HOWEVER, that is VENERABLE! So venerable that I would take the role were it possible! Were my person capable of befitting Satella's spirit, I would endure all iterations of inestimable suffering for my desire to SEE HER AGAIN!”

“So she gets erased. Does she now.”

Mumbles Subaru as he follows behind Betelgeux, who has begun walking. It doesn't reach cackling Betelgeux's ears, secluded in his own world as he is, that faint and quiet murmur—

“Oh, does she now?”

—Neither does the madman notice Natsuki Subaru's dark smile.

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He thrusts the sword into their skinny body, twists. The feedback coming from the point of the sword informs him that he has just severed something vital. And with a thin rasp of breath—

“Don't think you're gonna believe me when I say this, but.”

“Wh, y...?”

“I thought you were one of the better ones out of a group of unlikable people, Bete-san.”

His eyes are wide in shock as they look down despairingly at Subaru's. Surprise remains with him as he slowly topples backward, Subaru unsheathing the sword from his chest. The momentum makes Subaru stumble backward. He breathes deeply.

At Subaru's feet lies Betelgeux Romanee-Conti in pool of blood. Betelgeux, dying, his heart destroyed at Subaru's personal doing.

“It was a real effort setting this whole situation up. For how crazy you act, you're just a little too meticulous. Seriously, I got stuck so many times.”

“What, are... YOU... SAYING?”

“I'm talking about all the trial and error it took for me to get here. I mean this goes for planning out my strategy too, but getting my trump card and stuff was seriously dicey. You have no idea how relieved I am.”

Betelgeux crawls, forcing strength into his powerless limbs. But he lacks the strength to get to his feet, merely creeping backwards, as if retreating from death. Subaru doesn't have to do anything. Betelgeux doesn't have long to live.

“I couldn't see Unseen Hand at first, was panicked about what the heck was going on. Dealing with your fingers was posing a bunch of trouble too... right now, I really feel like I accomplished something.”

“Ghh, auhhh...”

The blood flowing from Betelgeux is the last dregs of his life. It shows no signs of stopping as it instead compounds in intensity, Subaru watching him bleed out while he reveals everything, mastermind style.

The black, invisible Unseen Hand.
Betelgeux's confidants and reserve stock of bodies, the Fingers.
And the ability to migrate to those bodies, his life-extending Possession.

Making full use of all three, Betelgeux had been the very picture of his beloved 'diligence' as he attempted to corner Emilia. Downing him had truly been a back-breaking effort. In fact it took Subaru over four hundred runs of trial and error to get here.

“Which makes you the person I've spoken to most in the world. I know how crazy lopsided this is, but I feel like you're kinda a friend. Watching how you do everything you can to reach your goals, playing all the cards you have, I mean I have to say I was touched.”

“What are you saying... what are you saying what are you saying are you saying areyousayingareyousaying!!”

At the very end of the end, livid strength enters his moribund body. Focusing absolutely all of that strength on himself, Betelgeux uprights his dying form. He spits blood—literally, as it spills out from his mouth, his bloodshot eyes shooting open as he turns toward Subaru.

“Betrayer! Traitor who spurns the Witch's love! You cannot be, you cannot be, FORGIVEN!!”

Betelgeux reaches out his blood-soaked hand. He's not doing it to activate Unseen Hand. There's no point to an invisible arm when it's perceptible. What Betelgeux is clinging to is—

—The terms for evil spirit, Betelgeux Romanee-Conti, to hijack another's body. The process for him to possess the bodies of those with groundings as spiritualists. There is only one person here who meets those qualifications—

“Your body is—!!”

Mine! Is what Betelgeux intends, but Subaru just sighs. He leisurely walks over to Betelgeux, and slams a kick into his dying face. The force of the blow dislodges some of Betelgeux's teeth—stunned, Betelgeux recoils.

He hadn't be able to transfer to this supposedly-pilferable body. Subaru's response comes not in words, but upon his raised left hand—where there, upon his fingers, floats a dim, red light.

It's an entity called a minor spirit. Which has entered a contract with Natsuki Subaru who has groundings as a spiritualist, a cute tool

for lighting dim pathways.

Evil Spirit Betelgeux can only possess the bodies of spiritualists who lack contracts. Who could guess how many deaths it took Subaru before he figured that one out.

“It's been the longest three days of my life. Though from your perspective we didn't know each other very long at all...”

“NATSUKI SUBARUUUUUU!!”

“You targeted Emilia. —Regret it.”

Betelgeux spits a shriek of enmity, when Subaru kicks him in the chest and swings the sword down on his face. The blade plunges into Betelgeux's skull, demolishing his brain and his life. The grating death-wail comes to a pause. Subaru leans his weight onto the sword in Betelgeux, sighing.

In reality very short, but by Subaru's perception incredibly long, the battle with Betelgeux is over. Feelings of both accomplishment and despondency flood into him.

“Hmmhmm? Looks like you're already done too.”

After a period of silence, a voice addresses Subaru.

He turns around, to find a massive silhouette skulking through the shrub and bush—belonging to a black-pelted beast with a lion's head and four horrible limbs, approaching him.

Naturally, the one addressing him is not the beast. It's the girl mounted on its back, giving Subaru a flirty glance.

“Yeah, I'm all done. Thanks, Mei Lee.”

“No worries. You're paying us, and you looked after Elsa. But are you sure about this? I thought they were your pals.”

“Have to wonder. If he hadn't tried to kill me at the end then maybe you could've called us friends with an age gap, but he tried to kill me so... unfortunately disqualified from friends, I guess?”

While using his sleeve to wipe away blood that rebounded on him, Subaru shrugs at the girl, Mei Lee. She puts her finger to her chin.

“Hrmmm. I'm not trying to kill you, so does that mean we're friends?”

“Following the logic, it does. You and me are friends, Mei Lee.”

“Ahh, yay! Now when you count Petra-chan and the others too, I have lots of friends!”

Clasping her hands together, Mei Lee happily rocks her shoulders as she sits atop the beast. Her childish attitude makes Subaru raise his brow, and her statement about having friends astonishes him.

“Huh, I'm surprised. It's one hell of a thing to say this, but you actually have friends.”

“I doo. I killed them all though.”

“—”

Says Mei Lee, smiling slightly, and not looking guilty in the least. Killed them. So they were probably people she was involved with through work. He had been thinking that Mei Lee had some childlike aspects to her, but yeah her morals are twisted. Well she's Elsa's sister so what do you expect.

“Either way, it was a serious help that you filled in where I couldn't. If you weren't here, I never would've managed to kill all the fingers by myself.”

“Don't worry 'bout it. But, did you really need to go out of your way hire us? You could've asked someone more proper, like the Knights.”

“Wouldn't be able to realise part of my goal if I did that.”

“Goal?”

Mei Lee tilts her head as she attempts to probe Subaru's thoughts. But Subaru gives no further explanation, just crafts a smile and,

“Rest of this talk's for the adults. Children such as yourself would not need to hear of it, Mei Lee.”

“Ahh! Geez, you're treating me like a kid! I don't care 'bout you anymore mister, I'm done, I don't caaaareeee!”

Says Mei Lee angrily, for the beast to growl as if set off by her anger. She's siccing her pet on him. After all the effort he went through to finally kill Betelgeux, he'd really rather not have this attempt end in failure.

Labouring to repair Mei Lee's mood, Subaru toils his best as her bootlicker.

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A few days after the Royal Selection began, a rather large change came to the territories of Lugnica.

The biggest change was that the front-running candidate for Ruler, Duchess Crusch Karsten, dropped out of the running—although the only one who understood the whole truth of the situation was Subaru.

Because all traces of this so-called 'Crusch' have been erased from the world, eliminated alongside the fact of her having ever existed, revised by the world as having never been there at all.

Which means that the Royal Selection had now always been four people, that the memories of Duchess Karsten's supporters have been twisted, and they became allies of other squads.

“Man, the White Whale's fog's terrifying. Just going off erasing records of people.”

It's a mystery why it's ineffective on just Subaru. But, being that Subaru doesn't feel any particular sensation himself, it's just a pain with how weird inconsistencies keep popping up when he's having conversations with people.

He wishes he could just forget about this stupid Crusch Karsten.
Someone who died because they fought an enemy they couldn't hope of rivalling would never get opportunity to come back.

The only person in the world who could get that opportunity is Natsuki Subaru.
And so the defeated do nothing but act as reminders: don't do the idiotic things they did.

But a change other the one irrelevant to everyone except Subaru also occurred.
Which is—

“Royal Selection Candidate, Emilia. Who subjugated perennial tormentor of the world, the Witch Cult's Cardinal of Sloth!”

The Kingdom is alive with the news, and apparently even foreign nations know about the achievement.
Even Subaru is surprised at what effective propaganda it is. A victory dovetailing from 400 years of death, claimed by Natsuki Subaru—which he transferred in entirety to the shady clown man supporting Emilia.

The question of how the Margrave would respond to negotiations to give Emilia the achievements was honestly a bet on par with subjugating Betelgeux, but—

“He was so cool with it it was gross.”

Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers received Subaru's proposal, easily consented to it, and immediately announced that the Betelgeux subjugation was Emilia's achievement.
Although feeling something fishy about him, Subaru has no qualms about Roswaal's actions.

This world disparages Emilia for stupid bullshit reasons. And still Roswaal announced himself as her supporter, became her patron and promoted her participation in the Selection.
Perhaps it was simply whimsy, or more likely he was hoping to benefit should the one-in-a-million chance occur that Emilia takes the throne.
The way he swooped in with spit trailing everywhere in response to Subaru's Betelgeux report made good proof of that.

“No issues. Do whatever you want, Mister Margrave. So long as you're on Emilia's side, I'll dump myself on your side too. Just as you expect, the Ruler will be Emilia.”

Subaru will do everything he can with his death-defying power to achieve that.
But if it happens that Roswaal has some foul desires or unbecoming thoughts about Emilia, then—

“All it means is another gravestone erected for Emilia's sake.”

If he's going to keep operating in the shadows, unknown to Emilia, then he has no choice but to entrust the more public activities to Roswaal.
In exchange, Subaru will bring every single possible plan into fruition from behind closed doors.
And for that purpose—

“Went out of the way to salvage you. Gonna be getting your help, Blue.”

“—”

In the back of the cave sits a metal-barred prison.
Chained inside that cold space is someone wearing dirty clothes. Cat ears sprout from the head of this dainty, knight-uniformed girl—ish man, apparently.

While Subaru was running around putting things in order after Betelgeux's death and the White Whale's rampage, he found these spoils and took the tool home.
But as of present, Subaru has had very few chances to behold the healing talents of the fabled Blue. Hell, he's not even healing his own injuries, just staring at the prison floor and weeping without end.

“...Someone, tell me. Tell me. Why am I... where's His Highness? What was I for? There was somebody. There had to be somebody. Everything's strange if there wasn't. But...”

“Man, I'm stuck. Gonna take some time for this one.”

Subaru scratches his head as he withdraws from his chest pocket a note. It is the notice which informed about the start of the Royal Selection, which Subaru has been keeping zealously and unfailingly on his person.

The notice no longer looks like what Subaru's familiar with. There are supposed to be five candidates listed—but now there's four, and the descriptors have diminished.

Change owing to the abolishment of Crusch Karsten's existence had affected the notice.
But Subaru remembers. He may have been utterly ignoring her, but he has reread this thing more than countless times. Crusch Karsten's Knight is named Felix Argyle.
Which should be the same as this healer here, Blue.

“My guess was that when someone's erased by the Whale's fog, your memories compensate by changing in a way that doesn't feel awry, but... just look at this.”

“Someone, someone tell me... His Highness, His Highness? His Highness, and, someone else...?”

“When they're so huge that you can't compensate for the missing memories, guess this's what happens to you.”

When the missing person is such a massive part of someone's character, of course they'll collapse when that person disappears from the world.
Which is why Blue has wound up mumbling over and over like a broken doll.

Unfortunately, not even Subaru knows how to mend Blue's broken mind.
Subaru never interacted with the one who safeguarded Blue's heart. And even supposing that he does go back in time, it's not certain where he'd return to.
And so Subaru does not know what story had been spun between them.

“But still, I did find a nice pawn here. Everything's fine. I'll fill your heart's fractures in for sure.”

“Someone, please... tell me. I, why am I...”

Blue shows absolutely no reaction to Subaru.
It might look hopeless, but Subaru proceeds with no alarm. He's prepared to take his time.
A Knight healer bereft of his support. You don't get pawns as easily manipulated as this very often.
And so, Subaru earnestly, wholeheartedly,

“This time, I'll definitely figure out how to keep you from killing yourself.”

I'm ready to die any number of times challenging you, he asserts.

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All entrances to the mansion are boarded.

The doors are nailed shut from inside, and planks of wood cover all windows. Should he have been attentive enough to find the state of this shut-curtains mansion strange, perhaps he would have noticed it.

Though naturally, Subaru arranged these operations with confidence that he wouldn't.

A raging inferno swallows the whole of the mansion, steadily burning it to cinders.

The flame which started this fire knows no pause, blazing fiercer and fiercer as it consumes the whole of the mansion, screaming frenzied demands that everything return to dust.

The furniture and ornamentations of the inflamed manor aren't the only things getting charred.

The many women who have spent a long time in agony in this mansion, too, lose their lives in the embrace of flame and smoke, their forms disintegrating into soot, indistinguishable as having ever been a person.

A gruesome deed. Anyone would think so of this barbarity.

But this was in fact the what the burning women desired! Is what you could claim, but who would believe you?

“Fuck, fuck, fuck this inanity!!”

Tongues of flame compound in intensity, buffeted on further by the wind. Through this blazing mansion echoes the sound of a man cursing.

His voice is so strained it's pathetic as he yells inside this burning, collapsing building.

He screeches in utter frenzy, the situation beyond his belief, unaware of what the hell has happened.

“#99! #114! Even #123 would suffice! Where are you!? Where'd you run off to!? Who do you think I am!? Leaving me behind while you go off and expire, what kind of irresponsible, selfish women are you!?”

His voice breaks as he screams like a child throwing a tantrum, this white-haired young man.

White clothes garb his form, his banal face grisly like a demon's as he raves.

He makes for a very strange sight inside this disastrous mansion fire.

A sane person would be doing everything they could to escape the blaze.

But the man shows no indication of doing that at all. In fact it's like he hasn't considered for an instant that he would die, operating off some kind of dogma that transcends mortality.

He's insane, or rather not.

—No, it's incorrect to deny that he's mad, but in truth he is soundly confident.

This fire cannot kill him, he believes.

And so the man's screaming and cursing has absolutely nothing to do with fear for his own life.

It's due to the inestimable rage he has towards his wives, who probably committed the arson.

“All of these accursed people, taking my limited assets and disparagin—”

“—I'd appreciate it if you could close your unpleasant mouth.”

“Nuh”

The frenzied man's face eats a kick from the foot which comes crashing in through a blazing wall. Dizzied by the unforeseen angle of the strike, and moreover by the unforeseen attack, the man flies easily down the hallway. Even burning wall turns brittle, unable to withstand the collision with him as it shatters.

He tumbles to stop spread out on the floor and stares up at the burning ceiling in dumbfounded shock.

“What, is...”

“This fire is the parting letter from your many wives. Spoken plainly, it seems that this is the end to these terror-born fetters of love.”

The voice that replies to the astonished man is the same one he heard when he got kicked. The man jerks himself upright, crawls through the broken wall—for a woman garbed in black to come entering the burning room.

Her smile is resplendent, and her long black braid is characteristic. But what speaks most of her identity is, held in her right hand, her kukri—

“Burglar! Who do you think I am!? Your tomfoolery is what you'll...”

Regret, prattles the man as he swings up his arms in an attempt to attack the woman. But a light impact and the sight of his arms, severed at the elbows and flying through the air, foils him. He looks down. Observes that his arms are missing. Impossible. What on earth is happening?

“Immortal? Invincible? I forget which it was, but I know the trick to how it works. Now all you are is a very unpleasant insect of a person.”

“—! A strumpet like you—”

“—”

Forgetting about his missing arms, the man attempts to swear at the woman. But she doesn't let him say a word of it.

She swings up her leg, sweeping in between his legs as he sits on the floor and proceeding to kick him in the crotch. The blow is strong enough to shunt him into the air as the woman flourishes her blade of death.

She now severs his arms at the shoulders and butchers round cuts of meat out of his legs from his feet up to his thighs. His toes, his ankles, his shins, knees, thighs, all subject to slashes, blood abounding as the man's body swiftly turns into something atrocious.

“—My”

“It's incredible that you're still trying to speak in that condition.”

The woman plunges her foot into the man's torso, now a considerable smaller target, which blasts him through the supposedly-boarded window and outside the burning mansion. Alongside shards of broken window glass does he fall, incapable of catching himself with his missing limbs, to the earth. It's fortunate that he only fell from the second floor, which lets him escape fatal wounds from the fall.

Though, his lack of limbs and overwhelming blood loss is already plenty fatal.

“As if I could stand this abject idiocy. ...I, I am the most perfected being in the world. Wanting of little, conscious of adequacy, humble and without avarice, that's how I live my life... and so, why do I, of all people, have to face heckling from human failures of your..”

“When you insult people like that on the regular, of course you're gonna get hit with the divorce papers, Regulus-san.”

“Hauh!?”

Even turning around on his side is an arduous task for this man, when the sight of someone new cuts into his vision.

A boy with dark hair and dark eyes who dons a dark robe—Natsuki Subaru.

It's pitiful how little the man has grasped the situation. Subaru sighs at him.

“I never wouldda thought everyone'd collaborate so well to pull it off, Regulus-san.”

“Why're, you here... no, then, you devised this?”

“Could anyone else?”

The man, Regulus, finally catches up with what's happening as Subaru shrugs, mouth twisted into a grin. Belittled, Regulus's eyes house fury.

“Curse you, bastard scum! Do you comprehend what it is you have done!? Took my wives, my beloved wives! And in my presence, burned them dead along with my mansion! Do you comprehend the immorality and wickedness of your deeds! Wife-murdering prat!”

“Man that angle's so unexpected I'm too stunned to speak. ...Just saying, your wives offered their own lives for the anti-heart strategy.”

“—Im, possible.”

Subaru picks his ear, looking astonished as he informs Regulus of this. Regulus falls speechless. It's this thing where Regulus finds it so utterly unexpected that Subaru finds incomprehensible.

Regulus kept many women so dubbed 'wives' in his mansion, extolling the greatness of a married life where he threatened to violently murder them if they ever disobeyed him.

If that was all it was, then it'd just look like a horrendously malicious kind of harem, but the Cardinal's repulsiveness doesn't end there. The scoundrel entrusted his own heart to his wives, rendering his own body stopped in time, immortal, and invincible.

The only way to kill the Cardinal of Greed Regulus Corneas is to return his heart to him.

This means killing all of his targets for housing his heart, his wives, and robbing it of anywhere to hide.

Even Subaru agonized over calling the decision.

But it was Regulus's imprisoned wives—no—the imprisoned women who resolved the conflict for him.

“They were content with dying so long as it got them payback on you. Man even I haven't really heard of verbal abuse bad enough to drive people to do that.”

“Who would possibly believe that, nonsense... I, I loved my wives! And so they ought to love me back! Yes!?! You don't think it's strange otherwise!?! And still! Why have those damn women inflicted such suffering on me, that would indispose them as wives!”

“...You're being serious. That's the terrifying thing about you guys.”

Mutters Subaru, looking irked as he averts his gaze from Regulus.

What his gaze lands on instead is the black silhouette which leaps from the burning mansion and lands in the garden. Elsa. She brushes the soot off herself before noticing Subaru's look.

“Goodness, you were worried about me? Rest easy. I wasn't injured anywhere at all.”

“I'm not worrying about you. Anyway, the heck's up with this. I didn't tell you to do this tasteless crap to him.”

Subaru's lips twist into a frown as he points at the limbless Regulus.

Regulus had limbs the last time Subaru happened to see him, so it's definitely Elsa who did this. She shrugs.

“It felt like he'd be obnoxious if he had them... And wouldn't you want to convey what they said?”

“...Yeah. You're right.”

Surprisingly, looks like Elsa can be considerate to people.

It is wrong to let Regulus die without communicating to him how the sacrificed women resolved themselves as they caught him in this trap.

And now that they've communicated that,

“GghaaaaAH!”

Elsa stabs her kukri into Regulus's chest, using it to slowly raise his light body aloft. It's like he's some kind of food on a stick, blood streaming from him as he unremittingly thirsts for life.

“Instantaneous?”

“No...”

Subaru puts his hand to his chin as he replies to Elsa's question, in thought.

He might not be Elsa, but Subaru does have a heart which feels sympathy and indignation just as anyone's would. And that heart is demanding that he repay the women who yearned, crying, for death.

And so, Subaru orders Elsa:

“Throw him into a weaker part of the fire. We'll watch him burn.”

“Very well, understood.”

Elsa nods to Subaru's cruel instructions, not looking conflicted in the least. She proceeds to throw the cursing Regulus onto a pile of smouldering woodscraps at the edge of the blazing mansion.

“—”

His body burning, to be roasted in flames until death, the man's shriek echo through the night sky. Without their expressions changing in the slightest, Subaru and Elsa watch him die.

“An insect, for how their noise is calming, would be preferable to him.”

Once the long, long, death wail comes to its end, Elsa gives her thoughts. And Subaru does agree.

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—To Subaru, the shattering glass carries the sound of shattering trust.

“This, is...”

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't want to do this. I really, really didn't.”

His voice trembling in shock, the man presses his elbow to the countertop. But that fails to support him and his upper body slips off the counter, toppling his chair over as he collapses on the shop's floor.

Caught in the fall, the glass and bottle on the countertop drop, shattering against the floor and dirtying the man's white uniform with an alcoholic reek.

His limbs fail to operate properly, his life slowly slips away. His lips fade to purple, his vision grows blurrier as he blinks and blinks and blinks, trying to drive away his impending demise. Subaru watches the man's frantic scramble for life from his seat at the table.

The man's face is a refined one. His body is lithe, and both his bearing when he entered the store and use of speech while addressing his friend abounded in elegance. Indeed the knightliest of knights.

“Can agree with you being called Impeccable, Julius Euclius-san.”

“You, cur...”

“But, if you were thinking more about your position, you would've best paid to be a little more mindful of others. You're the Knight of a Royal Selection candidate who's sitting at peak popularity. You gotta factor in that it's not just your master, you're gonna be targeted too. Though...”

Subaru stands up, pontificating at Julius who is panting in agony, and reaches out. His hand's course heads for the person in the chair beside the fallen Julius.

Flax-brown cat ears and loveable features. Subaru gently draws their dainty shoulders closer to him, deigns to pat their head. By that alone, Blue's eyes relax in drunken ecstasy.

“Fhel, is... you...”

“You know it took me some pretty good effort to capitalize on his grieving? Never thought I'd ever wind up putting in so much trouble for anyone's life except hers. Did pay off though.”

“What, scheme are you...”

“Has nothing to do with you anymore. Relax. My guess is, if you're gone then your master won't suffer any damages and things'll go good for her. Dunno what'll happen if she rallies herself though.”

Julius's yellow eyes race through a chaotic medley of confusion and rage, sorrow and turmoil, grief and suspicion.

But not a single one of those breakneck emotions means anything.

“An old friend calls you to go drinking, and on the first sip you get this. Trust is sure a sweet poison, Mister Impeccable. You drowned in it, and miscalculated.”

“...oi, son.”

“It sure is nice to be someone anyone can be proud of. Life's so easy it's enviable. You're dead though.”

Subaru squats down and peers at Julius's face. He isn't even looking at Subaru. He isn't hung up about the man who ordered his death.

What does rest in his eyes is his concern for his friend, made to commit murder against his will, and his penitence toward his absent master—

“—”

“A knight to the end. Abhor it.”

Spits Subaru as he looks down at Julius's dead face, silent forevermore.

The nauseous feeling in his chest is probably coming from the fact that Subaru had absolutely no reason that he needed to kill the Knight Impeccable.

This is about the first time that Subaru has ordered a death without justification.

It did not pain him to have cultists or Cardinals die. But this time the killing purely results from Subaru picking the easier one to torment.

He is less cautious than Anastasia Hoshin, always surrounded by guards, and more importantly the Blue he wheedled into dependency is usable on him.

“Did I do well, Subaru-sama?”

“You did great. Sorry for forcing you into it.”

Blue quietly inquires of Subaru, standing at his side as Subaru watches Julius's death through. Subaru shrugs at him and gives him another pat. If doing this is enough to calm his unstable mind, then he'll pat him however many times.

“It's fine, so long as it helps you, Subaru-sama. After all, doing this was necessary for crafting the future that yourself and His Highness desired, right? Right?”

“Yeah, it is. That's why we couldn't have your friend stay alive.”

“Yes...”

Blue's face is dull of emotion, but still his friend's death seems to fracture his mind as he clings to Subaru's sleeve, as if filling the void in his heart. The aroma of death hangs thick in the air. When,

“—Oh, are you occupied?”

The entrance to a place nobody should be entering opens, and a delicate-looking man enters the store.

For a moment Subaru does think about silencing the witness, but fortunately, there's no need to silence this man. He's an insider.

“You're sure on time.”

“I am. Time is finite, and us merchants believe that time is money.”

“Look at you still calling yourself a merchant, audacious. More of a death dealer.”

“I truly have no reply to that.”

It is a thin, grey-haired man who scratches their head in response to Subaru.

With his slick black suit and black tie he could look like someone returning from a funeral, but a closer inspection reveals the unobfuscalable scent of death upon him.

His features are gentle, as are his eyes, but the way he casts his gaze around his surroundings reveals clear wariness of others, and signals that he has survived slaughters.

But most of all, Subaru likes his dreary eyes. Those were the eyes of someone who found no benefit in staying alive, had lost sight of all purpose for living, and nevertheless chose to keep being alive as an animate corpse. Eyes of a similar nature to Blue's.

“Your name's... don't think I ever caught it.”

“I've never introduced myself, and neither do I intend to. Naturally, I have no inclination to ask for your name either, esteemed client. This way we can both relax.”

“Well, you're right. Since it's not like we could ever be friends.”

“Exactly. We'd become enemies the instant that something happens. And isn't what we see here the result of calling such people friends?”

Banters the man as he gazes at Julius's prone corpse, and at Blue who latches close to Subaru. Both acquiring the poison and the afterwards clean up are things that Subaru arranged while

collaborating with this man. Because currently, Subaru is walking some pretty dangerous tightropes.

“Tell Russell thanks for me. Counting on you again for it. I mean you are his right hand.”

“That man's right hand is at the end of his arm. What I am is a slave.”

He sure thinks in clean rationalizations, thinks Subaru fondly of the man's realistic reply. While also feeling some regret.

If they could be friends, they'd surely be good ones.

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Subaru repeats his secret operations to whittle away at the candidates and at the Cardinals getting in his way.

A mysterious group, a hive of dangerous people, and more importantly, not a place where anyone interferes with each other too much.

The Witch Cult has been a very convenient masquerade for Subaru.

A masquerade that he'd eventually have to extinguish, yes, but utilizing them with that precondition in mind means he can throw them away with so little guilt it's refreshing.

He felt not the slightest trace of camaraderie for even the Cardinals.

He constantly watched them for openings, meditated on ways to kill them, tested, and if the plan felt fruitful then he would set up the groundwork. Even if he failed, Subaru had the power to reset the world and try again.

Even Subaru, with his situation, managed to form relations which could perhaps be called accomplices.

Even though he knows that not a single cultist should be trusted, and that he shouldn't be getting more people in on it.

“But haven't we been working together all the way, ever since the start? It makes me happy when you let me help you out with all this fun stuff, mister.”

“I don't particularly intend to support you unconditionally, but even now, you're thinking to kill me should you get the chance. For some reason, I truly find it pleasant.”

“His Highness's dream will come true if you're here, Subaru-sama. And so I'll always stay with you. ...But, huh? Subaru-sama, when, where did you and His Highness become...”

“Our relationship is surely just requests for dirty work. Accomplices? An asinine idea. The two of us are filial bankrupts who can't show their faces to their family. It'd be nicer to die if I could.”

“I've come far enough that one more step, just one more step remains before the wish might be granted. Iiiiiiiiiif that's what I'm doing it for, then I'll sell my soul to a demon. A demon called you, thaaaaaaaat is.”

—Subaru does not think his actions praiseworthy in the least.

Regardless, before he could even realise it, there appeared people who are endorsing his deeds. And perhaps that fact was his solace.

Using Return by Death's power, Natsuki Subaru struggles on, wishing to save Emilia. He thought the battle would be a solo one, always fighting only ever on his own.

And perhaps the fact that, at some unknown juncture, it stopped being solo was—

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Inferno engulfs the Capital. Subaru gasps in pain, staring up at the sky.

He feels very awake.

The pain stings, but it leads his mind to sober rather than blur. Everything, from what happened to his reason for being here, is vivid.

In his arms, Subaru cradles a motionless Mei Lee.

Her open eyes are devoid of life, staring at somewhere absent in this world. Her cheeky attitude, her unfittingly sugary voice, her tantrum-like behaviour when treated as a child—nothing Subaru will ever see again.

—After all. This is where Subaru arrived after Returning by Death.

Return by Death's spawn point can change, but Subaru has never gone further back than a previous spawn.

This is where Return by Death's spawn point shifted, and being that the Mei Lee in his arms is a corpse, her life is beyond saving.

Aware that he is only comforting his own heart, Subaru gently shuts Mei Lee's eyes. He has no right to pray for the dead's posthumous happiness. These hands of his are far too filthy with blood.

And it's the same for Mei Lee. She committed so many wrongs that she could not possibly hope for peace after death. Piling sins upon sins, the chains linking Subaru's group to hell will never come undone.

“But, still..”

A meeting with death cannot be reason to give up.

Did he not get here by dying multiple times? Over one thousand, ten thousands times has he already disparaged life and desecrated lives, greedy to grant his own wish, and so got here.

He bordered on breaking beneath the agony of death many times. But every time he did, a fire scorched his heart.

That very first inferno, the touch of those fingers, is what let Subaru reach this point.

He is only one step away from realising his deepest desire.

He made victims, sacrifices, to finally get here.

And still—

“—Go no further.”

The voice descends, vicious, from on high.

'Fire engulfs the Capital' had not been a figurative statement. The visage that appears atop that hill, as if amassing the furious blaze into themselves, looks dazzling.

“Reinhardt, van, Astreaaaa....”

“It seems that I don't need to introduce myself. I don't have much to say to you, either.”

Reinhardt's blue eyes pierce the kneeling Subaru through.

The gleam in his eyes differs from what Subaru saw long ago, fraught with emotion as they are.

This man, who had remained calm when facing a butcherer, was, at Subaru—
—the emotion so intense as to be nigh indescribable, glaring with hatred.

“So you were capable of hating people after all, Sword Saint!”

“It surprises me as well. I didn't think these feelings were in me.”

“So you found a new you. Congratulations. Happy birthday, Reinhardt.”

“Unfortunately, today is not the day of my birth. But it will be the day of your death.”

Subaru can prattle affected lines all he wants. A man of Reinhardt's calibre won't be put off. Hit with Reinhardt's own breed of death sentence, a smile arises on Subaru's face.

Destroyed that unflappable face of his, and drew out the emotions buried in there. Subaru knows that it's utterly pointless, but it's the only thing he can boast victory about.

“Don't make me laugh, Reinhardt! Sword Saint! Sword of the Kingdom! You're a knight who protects the Kingdom of Lugnica!? Did you protect any kingdom at all!? How about telling me that!”

“—”

Subaru shouts, arms spread wide, spit flying.

The two are facing each other outside the palace gates. Everything of the Capital visible from this vantage point is engulfed in flame—or no, it isn't just the Capital.

This inferno is raging over the entire territory of the Kingdom of Lugnica.

No matter how strong Reinhardt is or how superb a knight he is, what can he do on his own? He can do nothing. So is Subaru's conclusion.

“This is my gift to you! A trap I set to kill you!”

“To kill me...?”

“How many times! Do you think I've tried to kill you!? How many times, tens and hundreds and

thousands of times, do you think I've faced you!?"

“__”

Subaru's incomprehensible yelling leads Reinhardt's cheeks to stiffen in confusion. He wouldn't understand. Nobody except Subaru would ever understand.

Subaru has already gone through every conceivable form of trial and error to kill Reinhardt.

He studied Reinhardt van Astrea, researched him extensively, tested every idea he could think of, fiddled with his plans, used every possible track he could imagine in attempts to kill Reinhardt. But no matter what methods Subaru used, Reinhardt bested it. As if Natsuki Subaru's hideously weak brain, as if his very presence, could not effect him in the slightest.

Subaru sacrificed Elsa, sacrificed Mei Lee, sacrificed Blue, sacrificed the man who perhaps could've been his friend, sacrificed the clown who proclaimed to be his co-conspirator, sacrificed the Witch Cult, sacrificed the Cardinals, committed every conceivable crime and injustice and iniquity there is, and still couldn't kill Reinhardt.

And so. Having no means to sever Reinhardt's lifeline, Subaru decided.

“I'm killing who you are as a knight. I'm dropping your ostentatious name of Sword Saint to the earth, stomping my feet all over it, spewing spit and mucus on it!”

“All of this, only for that.”

“Only for that! Yeah, I did, only for that! Only for that I used the lives of everyone there was, dropping you to the earth!”

Subaru sets Mei Lee's body on the ground. Jabs his finger at Reinhardt. Reinhardt cannot hide that he's shaken. Feels nice.

“You're a hero, Reinhardt. It's not possible for me to kill you. But I can kill a hero. —This is how to kill you, Reinhardt.”

“__”

Subaru boasts, his voice unhinged, at the silenced Reinhardt.

Worked his hardest, tried so many plans, sacrificed people, shed blood, accumulated deaths, and finally.

With Mei Lee having protected him and drawn out his survival, finally, Subaru has managed to confront Reinhardt like this.

After piling so many sacrifices, finally, he has managed to stand on the same stage as Reinhardt.

“...Why?”

The hot breeze blows away Subaru's previous momentum. His voice when he speaks is frail.

“Why are you so strong? Why are you so strong, that I had to let them die, to match it?”

Trembling voice, laced with sobs. Hearing it makes Reinhardt's face stiffen.

He surely has no idea what on earth Subaru is thinking. Of course he doesn't. Subaru doesn't even

have any idea any more.

He doesn't know why he's crying. How long has it even been since he last shed tears? Surely. That day, when he was brought to this world, was the last.

The tears from the day that brought Natsuki Subaru to this sight of flames were the last.

“I wish I'd been like you. I wish I'd been honest like you, been strong enough to save everyone like you. I think you're enviable. I think you're contemptible.”

“You...”

Flowing out alongside his tears come Natsuki Subaru's true feelings.

Back in that very first loop in the Capital, when Natsuki Subaru witnessed the man who freed him from an endless cycle.

—Back then, Subaru was jealous of Reinhardt.

Disembowelled times upon times, suffered death, but still unable to change anything, Subaru's heart grew swiftly ragged, its outer skin peeled away, and then, practically by coincidence, as if kicking a pebble off the road, he altered that fate so easily.

Subaru aspired to have that strength, envied it, begrudged it, loathed it.

“—I wanted to be you, Reinhardt.”

“—I don't understand you.”

Reinhardt discards Subaru's honesty as worthless codswallop.

And he's correct. Reinhardt, you hero, you are just always, always correct.

—Where did the mistake happen? At what point did Natsuki Subaru err?

He doesn't know. Though actually, he does. But nobody would be capable of understanding it. Which is why. Which is exactly why.

Natsuki Subaru has, for a long time now, been an unempathizable madman.

“—”

Reinhardt narrows his eyes and stoops down. He isn't reaching for a sword. Meaning that not even he thinks a weapon is necessary to defeat Subaru.

He's right, he's absolutely right. One strike from him will leave Subaru's flimsy body disintegrated. So at the very least, and the very absolute least—

“—You don't think it too soon to be giving up?”

“You!”

The instant that Reinhardt begins his charge, a black silhouette swoops in from aside. Discordant noise peals out as Reinhardt meets the silhouette's slash with his hand, held flat and open like a blade.

It's stupid. How can he meet a knife swung with that much momentum using his hand? The knife shrieks, shattering to bits. It's stupid. Why is the knife the one breaking?

“You truly are outside the norm, aren't you.”

Elsa, covered in blood, spins through the air before making touchdown on her hands and feet. Subaru thought she was dead. He thought he had used her as a chess piece to create this situation, believed that her life had burnt to nothing, and had been acting with consideration to that. And yet.

“Apparently I didn't die. Though in this situation, it feels that I've arrived to visit death again.”

“Elsa...”

“Then Mei Lee is dead. Her poor sister.”

Noticing Mei Lee resting on the ground, Elsa mutters a shade sadly. But she switches her gears in the blink of an eye, turning to face Reinhardt properly.

“It seems you're my sister's enemy as well. Shall we dance?”

“You've already lost your weapon. And do you understand who exactly you are protecting?”

“Difficult subjects aren't my favourite. I do the things I want to do. This man behind me lets me do what I want to do. That makes him a prized customer.”

Licking her lips, Elsa gives a reply based in logic that only murderers would understand. Reinhardt swallows his breath, and poises to take Elsa as his opponent.

“This will be the last chance for it. I had fun. It was wonderful.”

“Elsa! I..!”

“Farewell.”

Ever like her, the goodbye happens smoothly and without any consideration to Subaru's ideas at all. Immediately following, Elsa leaps with animalistic dexterity in a dance toward Reinhardt, the hero and butcher engaging in furious combat.

To be concluded in only a short time, Elsa Granhiert's last blood meal.

“—Fuck!”

Subaru cannot die here.

Averting his gaze from Elsa's battle and Mei Lee's corpse, he breaks into a run down the hill.

The spillovers of battle echo behind him, distant.

Buildings collapse one after another throughout the blazing Capital, shrieks and wails echoing through this hell. Children calling for parents, parents calling for children, men calling for women, women calling for men in the screeching pandemonium of this hell.

Yes. This is the hell that Subaru created.

Created this hell, destroyed Reinhardt's false image, and achieved his goal.

All that's left is—

“Y-you're....”

“—σσσσ”

Subaru stumbles, almost trips and falls—when a massive beast grabs him in its mouth and flings him onto its back. Subaru clings on desperately as its black pelt bursts into his view, alongside the sight of its ferocious lionlike visage as it runs.

“You're... but Mei Lee's, already dead...”

It is one of the witchbeasts Mei Lee controlled, carrying Subaru in this dash through the burning Capital.

Ferocious Guiltlaw sprints with Natsuki Subaru on his back. He no longer has a master, and has no obligation to obey him—but still Guiltlaw carries Natsuki Subaru, wholeheartedly.

“Please, find her. She has, to be somewhere...”

Subaru prays, wishing for Guiltlaw to pull off a miracle.

What to call this feeling in his heart? Relief? Resignation? Constricted by cryptic emotions, Natsuki Subaru's mind wavers between consciousness and unconsciousness.

But what truly makes him hit his limit is what happens next.

“—That's enough.”

The sharp ice projectile skewers sprinting Guiltlaw in the side.

Guiltlaw shrieks, tripping over his own feet before crashing to the ground. Caught in the beast's fall, Subaru also bashes against the stone roadway.

“Ghau... what, was...”

His vision blurs in pain as he forces his eyes open, looking around to see what happened.

He finds that Guiltlaw has uprighted himself, countless icicles speared into his left side as he faces off against a silhouette engulfed in dim light, just about to begin charging.

Guiltlaw raises his vicious paw, roaring. Perhaps this was his dignity as a witchbeast, or his pride as the last animal which obeyed young Mei Lee to the end.

His strike is more than strong enough to shred a human being to bits should it hit.

However, before the blow can land, a single sharp icicle goes plummeting—

—to invade Guiltlaw's open maw, spearing down his throat before again entering through his chest, piercing out his behind, transforming him into a witchbeast on a stick.

Immediately following the ruinous but nonlethal attack, the air echoes, crackling as white frost spreads across Guiltlaw's whole body, transforming him into an ice sculpture.

Having watched Guiltlaw's demise, Subaru slowly stands up.

He can't raise his left arm. Maybe he dislocated in the fall. He should be in intense enough pain that he breaks into tears, but his brain isn't feeling it.

After all. If Subaru starts bawling now, here, it will ruin everything.

“—That's enough, villain.”

The two face each other, burning city townscape on either side of them, a frozen witchbeast between them.

Amethyst eyes blazing with duty and indignation meet dark eyes fraught with irrepressible joy.

Silver hair of lunar hue, eyes of finest-cut amethyst. Her celestial countenance electrifies Subaru's heart without end, and the silver chime of her voice sounds to him as a pixie's aria. What he has pursued, sought, craved, never stopped loved, her visage, is here.

“—Emilia.”

“You know me?”

Emilia's brows shoot up in surprise. Seeing it makes Subaru laugh.

Exactly in line with his envisionings—no. Exactly in line with his impression of her when they first met, and ventured around the Capital together.

She doesn't have a single clue how much national attention is focused on her, being a Royal Selection candidate. It's not that she's lacking in self-awareness, it's that she has low self esteem.

Despite being known worldwide as the hero who took the Witch Cult's Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, Wrath, and Lust, evils which tormented people for eras, and exterminated them. And her track record would, on this day, in this instant, reach completion.

“Is something funny?”

“No, I'm sorry. Just, how to say, I'm happy. It's that thing, where you're, well. You haven't changed a bit, so it feels like I've been rewarded.”

“What do you mean? When did you and I ever...?”

Emilia attempts a frantic search of her memories.

But Natsuki Subaru does not exist anywhere in her recollections.

Of course not. Their momentary tryst only remains in Subaru. And that momentary tryst alone, that final pledge of penitence alone, was what brought Natsuki Subaru here.

“You're...”

“Lia, it's no good. Don't take anything he says seriously.”

“—Puck, huh.”

Emilia searches for some clue in her memories. But she is interrupted but the grey cat that appears on her shoulder—a spirit, which Subaru remembers well.

His memories from that day are distant. But that's exactly why he spent even more time endlessly thinking about that day than he did individually recollecting it.

It's inconceivable that he would forget about someone who occupied a part of that memory.

“How nice of you to call my name so casually. With how flamboyant your crimes are, how are you thinking of paying compensation enough to settle them?”

“I'll be paying compensation. Exactly what you want. —There's no way for me to escape anyway.”

“—? That's rather sporting of you. Suspicious.”

Subaru unzips his track suit jersey and spreads his arms wide, displaying non-resistance. Track suit. Yes the track suit. He has taken that track suit which, until this very day, he kept sealed and now is wearing it. He had it in his head that if he was going to have a reunion with Emilia, this'd be the best.

All while yearning for the day he would wear this outfit, and stand before her again.

“Everything I'm about to tell you is a crazy person rambling. Please don't remember it.”

“—Huh?”

“I'm the one who set the Capital on fire. And it's not just the Capital, this fire's meant to burn down the whole country. No one could safeguard against it. That's the nation, and knights who protect this nation, mishandling the situation.”

Subaru's choppy speech confuses Emilia greatly. Puck looks lost on whether to stop Subaru's talk, but does abort his attack after seeing Emilia's situation. Grateful for that, Subaru continues.

“Reinhardt's prestige as Sword Saint's fallen to earth. Since we don't know what started the covenant which's meant to be protecting the Dragon's Kingdom of Lugnica, the Dragon's no rescue either. That's something I tested heaps of times so it's definitely right. In the end, Reinhardt and the Dragon are equal.”

“Burning the country? You're burning the country? To try and destroy this nation?”

“No, wrong. I'm doing this to make you the Ruler. It's the only single way how.”

“—”

A smile arises on Subaru's face, while Emilia's eyes shoot open, thoroughly shaken. There is no way that anything Subaru's saying could be making sense to her.

Being that he's prefaced this as being rambling, he doesn't mind if it doesn't communicate properly. It comes to Subaru's deepest wish, should it produce results.

“Flames of demise driving the nation to its destruction—the one to slay the culprit behind it won't be Reinhardt, won't be the Dragon, it'll be you. None of the Selection candidates left can achieve anything to top this. The hero who broke through four centuries of standstill and saved the world is you!”

“That, isn't... what on earth are you saying!?! Stop it, I don't understand! I don't understand anything you're saying!!”

Emilia clutches her head, blocks her ears, trying to keep Subaru's words out. Tears well in her eyes, and as he sees one trail down her pale cheek, a sweet shock strikes Subaru's chest. Part of it is guilt for making her cry. Part of it is from seeing that his actions have shaken her heart, and his consequent dark cheer.

“You don't have to understand. It's fine that you don't understand. Everything that comes next'll be settled when others boost you up of their own accord. Then you just have to grant your wish. That is the only reason I set the country on fire. All of it was for you.”

“Liar, liar, liar! I mean, I... you, how come, you...”

Emilia wails at the devotion she never anticipated, and at the offerings she never desired. It's inevitable that she's sad. It's inevitable that she can't understand.

Subaru knows that he is erring.
Subaru knows that he is incorrect.
Subaru knows that this methods will not bring joy to Emilia.

But this was the only method he had.
Grant Emilia's wish, make Emilia Ruler, and demonstrate his feelings for Emilia.

With these things in mind, and knowing from the very beginning that he was wrong, Subaru got here.
And so Natsuki Subaru laughs. Snickers. Smirks.

“—Watch me, Emilia. See me, detest me, remember me.”

“Who, are you? Who in the world, are you...?”

Asks Emilia, her voice trembling, as Subaru slowly approaches her with his arms open wide. Subaru closes his eyes.

It feels like he's been yearning for this forever.
Yearning to answer that question in Emilia's presence, forever—.

“—My name is Natsuki Subaru.”

“Su, baru...”

Just hearing that weak call of his name is enough for a flood of emotion to surge through him. Emotion so great that, by that alone, Subaru is completely satisfied with having come here. With those feelings in his heart, and praying that he'll finish this sentence without his voice shaking because of them—

“—Witch Cult Cardinal of Sin, Bishop of PRIDE, Natsuki Subaru!”

“Cardinal...!”

Giving the greatest introduction he can, Subaru puts all his strength into his legs and kicks off the ground.
Natsuki Subaru focuses all of his scattered strength into one point in his body for the final sprint of his life.

Sacrificed many people, maltreated those who could perhaps be his accomplices, found solace in those he perhaps had bonds with, and now finally arriving at this darling girl—

“I'm the man who burned the world, rocked the country, killed the hero, and—”

“—”

“—you will kill.”

Feeling the impact spear through his chest, Subaru smiles.

He falls to his knees, unable to support himself before collapsing, tumbling down.
He never reaches Emilia as his body gracelessly pitches across the stone.

“Why?”

Subaru closes his eyes, ready to accept the end, when something prompts him to raise his eyelids.
Emilia is standing right as his side, looking down at him. One of the tears streaming from her eyes
lands on Subaru's cheek, making him open his eyes.

“Why?”

Repeated, overlapping questions.
What on earth could this 'why' signify, wonders Subaru.

Why did you do this?
Why did it have to be like this?
Why did you come here to die to me?

There are definitely many 'why's in that question.
And he would like to answer all of them, but Subaru only has the scarcest of time left.

So he lets his final breath carry his answer.

“—I love you.”¹

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Death draws near. Old, familiar death.

Every time that Subaru meets death, he is taken to a dark, lonely, unknown location.
And it truly, truly is a lonely place, somewhere unbearable to be on your own.

Every time that Subaru met death, he was sent out of this place.
Into that world of blood and anguish, tears and woe, and a very slight presence of love.

But it's fine now.
He's satisfied.

“—”

Subaru gets the sense that someone in this dark world has whispered something to him.

It is comforting, it is encouraging, it is confirmation, it is confession.

But why? This isn't the lover that Subaru sought.

His lover is somewhere else, somewhere where he isn't, with her dream coming true and efforts being rewarded.

Subaru had sacrificed many people, and in the end himself, for that purpose.


And so, it's fine. He doesn't need to be saved. Solace and saviour is what he already got, at the very beginning.

“__”

Definitely calling him.

Calling his name with kindness, with mercy, with love.

And so Subaru separates himself from the spiral of death, while accepting that distant presence.

While accepting them, he answers to that 's words.

“__”

—Even if you reject me, I will never forget you.

1 Aishiteru.

This is the big boy of I love yous and I was half tempted to write it as 'I'm in love'. Ultimately didn't for consistency with A4C49-51 etc. Couple points nip readers would pick up:

1. Subaru in MU has so far only used aishiteru on Beatrice. This is a pretty big fat line though it kind of gets lost in English because I made all the sukis in A4C110 and other assorted places 'I love yous' but trust me reading it's like 'woooooaah there it is'
2. This is the 'I love you' that WoE/Satella is fond of breaking out all the time.