

RE: ZERO DETAILED SUMMARY

It's taken 100,000 words, but Subaru has finally died! I've consequently decided to close one file on LibreOffice and open up another, to last me another 100,000 words. I am calling these changes of files 'phases', otherwise being dividing points of the arc, instigated to keep my laptop from collapsing under the weight of this overflowing text. They are completely decided by me and completely arbitrary. Best not pay them too much mind.

This document assumes you have already read chapters 1 to 23 of arc 4 through some source or another. If you have not, how did you find this and who linked this to you? Please close the file and return once properly prepared.

This document is still a highly detailed summary rather than a translation, and is still a work done with the mentality and purpose of being written for a friend. It is technically not meant for public inspection, and has been written by someone certifiably uncertified to translate Japanese. I urge that you regard it more as 'how the writer of these summaries reads Re: Zero' rather than 'Re: Zero.' With this warning in mind, I regardless hope you enjoy it.

For those of gregarious nature, bountiful free time, and keen intelligence for the Japanese language, my email of anaka.burner@gmail.com is always open if you wish to descend from the heavens and indicate where I have mistranslated, so I may rectify it. Or, wait a moment? Hold on, it appears that restricting incoming emails only to the Japanese-learned is impossible? Then, it would seem my email is always open to anyone!

Here is one excellent question I saw raised recently, which I had completely overlooked. Why is Emilia suddenly saying 'sooo' sooo much? Emilia has a verbal tic of すごーく, which I am translating as sooo, for, predictably, Reasons. Half of those reasons are because sooo is sooo versatile and handy and easily shoved into sooo many sentences. The other half are Reasons.

Updates and previous chapters I have summarised can be found at <https://mega.nz/#F!VNdzDYYK!nK9fNU3LeprlZSbRAnlsRg>. For anyone interested in following my expedition through the monster that is arc 4 (and then ideally through the less-monster that is arc 5, and baby monster that is arc 6), I recommend bookmarking this link and checking it at semi-regular intervals, perhaps once a week.

Now, time to continue with arc 4: phase 2.

CHAPTER 24: HE WAITED

The first things that plunges into Subaru's consciousness is discomfort.

Subaru: “Ueuegh! Oeue! Ubggelgh!”

He feels something like gravel and grit dancing atop his tongue, which he coughs out as he opens his eyes wide. The world around him is black, and he vaguely feels a cold touch across his whole body. Focusing his attention on that sensation, he realises that he's toppled sideways, and with further casual inspection of the surroundings, understands that he is inside an old, familiar ruin.

Subaru: “Inside the, tomb?”

This sensation of puking gravelly shit out of his mouth is a pretty recently-had one, too. Meaning,

Subaru: “Right after the first TRIAL? Came back this far... no, more importantly,”

If this really is right after Subaru's first TRIAL, then that means,

Subaru: “Emilia!”

And he finds the silver-haired girl at his side, collapsed in the darkness. Subaru nears her and sees the anguish in her expression, but hesitates one moment to reach out his arm and touch her. He knows that if he touches her, regardless of what's going on in her TRIAL, the thing will be interrupted and she'll return. It's highly likely it will result in her failing from a third party's hands. Subaru needs to pay extreme caution regarding touching Emilia inside the tomb. But,

Subaru: “I already know this attempt won't work...”

Subaru shakes his head to kill his hesitation. He gently lifts her body up, burning the image of her sleeping face into his memories, settling her in his arms. Emilia's anguished expression instantly recedes, herself being guided back to wakefulness.

Emilia: “Suh, bahru?”

Subaru: “Yeah, that's right. It's me, Emilia-tan. Are you okay?”

Subaru answers Emilia with a reassuring smile while waiting for her to get a hold on the situation. Waiting for her to remember what she was doing, to catch up with the results of her TRIAL, and to start bawling like a child.

Waiting for his weakness, knowing she will break down crying, but being unable to do anything. Waiting for her purity, her acting firm regardless, and standing back up.

Holding her tenderly so she won't break, Subaru keeps Emilia in a strong embrace until she calms, never letting go.



It's after a bawling Emilia gets brought to Lewes' house and put to bed by Ram that Subaru calmly

begins sorting the situation and his RETURNING BY DEATH.

The others wanted to hear about what happened inside the tomb, but Subaru declined them by asking to wait until Emilia woke up first, so he was now alone. He stares up at the night sky outside Lewes' house, bathed in wind, his feelings complex.

Subaru: "But either way... again, huh?"

Touching the left side of his stomach, Subaru's fingers confirm the non-existent wound. A deep, gouging cut, from which his intestines had spilled. He thought that getting chances to see one's own internal organs was not a particularly common thing, but Subaru's personal experiences of exactly that had already placed him easily superior to most in the world.

Subaru: "Whether I'm happy about that's another story. I don't have twisted sympathies that make me feel hungry or ecstatic or whatever at seeing my own stuff... someone who would'd be..."

The words float up in Subaru's mind.

???: <—Didn't I tell you? Didn't we promise?>

A sensual, female voice. Subaru remembered that voice, that promise, and that deviancy to the point he was sick of it. This wasn't the first time Subaru had had his stomach slashed open like this.

Subaru: "This's seriously where the GUTHUNTER makes her reappearance... gimme a break..."

Putting his hand to his forehead, Subaru laments as he looks up to the sky. Arising in his mind is the image of a beautiful woman, her long hair the same black as Subaru's. She was a killer who wielded wicked blades, and had robbed Subaru of his life twice. Elsa Granhiert.

Subaru: "I didn't see them, but it was almost definitely Elsa. Actually I don't wanna think there's others like that around. We'll say it's Elsa."

In Subaru-time it's been over two months since he last ran into her, but in real time it's barely been one month. The wound she gave him back then supposedly hadn't been shallow, but it had already completely healed.

Subaru: "Safe to think the wound's gone, I guess. Considering healing magic, it's like this world's one where you can do something about anything so long as it isn't death. And getting on that topic, I'dve already died heaps of times... I mean, I actually did die, but."

Hard to get a grasp on this when he's had so many cases of being on the brink of death and reviving, and being on the brink of death and just dying. Either way, Subaru concludes that the threat which attacked the mansion was Elsa. The problem now is—

Subaru: "Why Elsa was in the mansion, and what happened to Frederica and Petra."

When Subaru arrived in the mansion, the place still had slight feelings of being lived-in. Petra's room had its lights on, and the entry hall was bright. The office had been used to access the escape passage, so that one could be excluded. But considering those two lights,

Subaru: "At least, nothing had happened until that night... maybe?"

It's difficult to make a conclusion about. Subaru takes considerations not to rush it. If the lights in Petra's room, the entry hall, and the office had been left on for a whole day, Subaru's thoughts that they'd been safe until that night might be mistaken. But if you were going to raise a point to reject that hypothesis, it would be the lights' sustained operation time.

Subaru: "Different from lagumite crystals, crystalights need to charge on the mana in the atmosphere throughout the day. I know from experience that if they're left on, they won't stay continuously operational for half a day."

Subaru's had an experience of forgetting to turn off the crystalights and being suddenly plunged into darkness while studying his writing in the mansion.

Subaru: "If they were left on since afternoon, it's strange they'd still be alight at night. It should be safe to discard the idea that the mansion's been empty since prior the day before. Which makes the limit... night of the sixth day. Now is night of the second day, so four days left. No, three and a half days."

Subaru's remaining time limit is about 84 hours. His role for this time is,

Subaru: "Defending the mansion getting attacked by the GUTHUNTER, or otherwise securing the people in the mansion's safety."

Subaru doesn't have definite proof that Frederica and Petra managed to safely escape from that snakelike, spiderlike killer. He didn't know where the escape path led, but if Frederica and Petra had evacuated the mansion, they should've been looking to meet up with their Master, Roswaal, in SANCTUARY. But despite that, Subaru's group hadn't run into Frederica's group on the way back to the mansion.

Subaru: "One idea is that stupid-long evacuation tunnel connected somewhere unknown and they escaped there. Otherwise..."

He didn't want to consider it, but another idea was they hadn't managed to escape. Subaru's had some notable experience with meeting powerful people in this parallel world, Elsa being one of them. Taking her pure combat power into account,

Subaru: "Above Julius, below Wilhelm-san... or about." Subaru complains about her being just a little too tough of an opponent.

Subaru's fundamentally weak at the best of times. The power difference between him and her is that of a cat and a tiger. The chance of him winning is flat zero. And even considering the fight with her last time, ultimately it was the influence of a random element he'd run into and relied on that was huge.

Subaru: "If invincible Reinhardt-san could just happen to stop to by this time too, that'd be great, but... Even if he's the proper protagonist hot guy character, having him show up here'd be seriously asking too much."

It'd be shameless opportunism, but gladly-welcomed shameless opportunism. Subaru sighs his futile escapism away.

Subaru: "Elsa's reason for going to the mansion... probably to same as last time, to interfere with the Royal Selection. Whoever's fucking hiring her's getting in Emilia's way."

The case in the Capital of Emilia's insignia, stolen by Felt. Elsa was the one to hire Felt, and Elsa herself had been working for some secret mastermind. If you consider the particulars of who would steal the insignia, which qualified one to participate in the Royal Selection, from Emilia, then Subaru figures it was more than likely one of the rival factions. But,

Subaru: "After seeing the other candidates... doesn't feel you can fully assert that."

Start with the perspective of hiring an assassin to rob the insignia.

From that very juncture, Crusch is out. Subaru, who had seen Crusch's laudable character with his own eyes, could state that with his chest held high. Crusch was assuredly not the kind of person to do such a thing.

Then, just by the circumstances, Felt is out. The only candidates left are Priscilla and Anastasia, but —

Subaru: "Priscilla... would that haughty young madame really favour a backstage fight like this? If I'm not misreading her, she's a person who seriously believes she's the centre of the world. Doubt she'd actively take these pre-measures. Which leaves Anastasia-san, but..."

The purple-haired merchant woman comes to Subaru's mind.

Amid her her soft features was the spark of a sharp-nosed hunter, conscious of her own conduct and able to perfectly balance to anything—to the point that even Subaru had utilized this disposition of hers.

Perhaps she would rationally choose to have another person eliminated. Her imaginations also likely could harbour the plan of hiring an outsider, and gleefully going through with a somewhat forbidden tactic. If there was any element to refute this theory, then,

Subaru: "Doubtful that Julius'd let that happen. Er no not like I've made any assessments about that guy or anything. Nope, but just, got that kinda feeling is all."

Otherwise she may have concealed it from the COURTLIEST KNIGHT, but would she really go so far as to irreparably fracture their harmonious master-servant relationship? Subaru couldn't erase that doubt.

Ultimately, Anastasia's faction could also be more or less discounted.

Subaru: "No candidates out of the candidates. But... even so, there's lots of leftover room for thought. Considering how, Emilia's treated."

If the commissioner wasn't one of the Royal Selection candidates, it could simply be someone belonging to a faction who wanted Emilia out of the running. If this was someone who detested half-elf Emilia electing for a simplistic plan, it would further make sense. Speculating on whether anyone would go so far in itself meant Subaru's thinking was naïve. The hatred toward her half-elf lineage was just that ingrained.

Subaru: "But if that's true, then it's impossible to find out who the commissioner is. So long as Elsa herself doesn't spit it up."

And Subaru lacked the power to make her spit it up. Going in circles.

Ultimately, thinking over who could possibly deal with Elsa's attack,

Subaru: "It's disconcerting how weak our faction is. I'm completely useless. Otto's just number-filler. Emilia can put up a fight, if Puck's around. If you consider it turning into a drawn-out battle

then Ram's stamina gives unease. Roswaal's injured so he's useless as ever. I don't know how much Frederica can do, and Petra possibly being a cheat character with hidden power... isn't happening. Which means..."

Subaru reaches two ideas for breaking out of the deadlock.

The first is to return to the mansion, and take Frederica, Petra, Rem, and Beatrice along in a retreat to SANCTUARY, avoiding Elsa's attack.

The second was,

???: "—Hell're you doin' with yer dawdlin' out here?"

Says Garfiel who comes out of the building and looks down at Subaru, seated on the ground and leaning his back against the wall. Subaru experiences the fresh and uncommon feeling of being looked down upon by the short Garfiel. He shakes his head.

Subaru: "Nothing,"

Subaru: "Just had some things I wanted to sort out, did some thinking. Emilia?"

Garfiel: "Princess's still sleepin' like a damn log. Better hope it don't turn into DAWN TO DAWN MOROROK DOZES."

Subaru: "Dunno who he is, but this Mororok dozes too much."

Subaru stands up and faces Garfiel properly. He's half a head shorter than Subaru, with short blond hair. A sharp gaze and a white scar on his forehead. His oversharper canines and somewhat bestial body emit the willies. Self-confidence, possessed only by the strong.

Subaru's second plan that came to mind for dealing with Elsa was this young man.

If the TRIAL was conquered and SANCTUARY was freed, Garfiel could leave this place. And if Garfiel was as strong as he boasted, Subaru anticipated he could fight Elsa.

Subaru: "Hey, Garfiel."

Garfiel: "Nnwhet?"

Subaru: "You're the strongest, aren't you. You're confident you wouldn't lose to anyone, right?"

Garfiel: "Ohh? Well 's obvious. My amazin' self'll right smash anyone, right bash anyone, right kill anyone 'n boast 'f the winnin'."

Garfiel's self confidence doesn't waver a bit. Subaru nods.

Subaru: "There's a time coming very soon where your power'll be needed outside of SANCTUARY, I think. When that time comes, I'll probably be relying on your being the strongest."

Garfiel: "Wha?"

Subaru: "Prove those words to me. This, is the thing which feels most reliable."

Subaru taps a confused Garfiel's shoulders, and heads inside Lewes' house. Ram, Lewes, and Otto's gazes fix on Subaru as he enters, Subaru heading toward Emilia's sleeping room.

Ram: “Barusu, Emilia-sama is still...”

Subaru: “Nwell, she should be waking up soon. —Emilia-tan, I know it's hard to show your face, but let's talk. Everyone's waiting for it.”

Calls Subaru through the door, and the faint sound of breathing comes from the other side. A slight hesitation. And after a few seconds, the doorknob turns and there appears Emilia. She looks up at Subaru.

Emilia: “Um... I'm so sorry, for causing so many problems. Inside the tomb, and now...”

Subaru: “The problems you cause aren't problems they're the things I wanna do everything's fine. More importantly, does anywhere feel heavy or hurt? If anywhere feels weird, I'll tenderly pat and stroke and heal it for you.”

Emilia: “Mm. It feels like I hit my hip when I fell down, it's kind of tingly...”

Subaru: “Right got it. Now, quickly and carefully I'll... Ram-san? Ram-san? Your wand is stabbing something in proximity of my liver!?”

Ram has approached Subaru from behind and indeed has poked him with her wand. She wordlessly drives the point in deeper, punishing him until he yelps like a puppy and jumps away.

Ram: “Would you be feeling well, Emilia-sama? Please disregard Barusu's impolite statements and clearly inform me as to your body's condition.”

Subaru: “It's amazing you haven't commented on what you just did! Look, I'm seriously bleeding a little here. Just how much force did you put in, piercing these thick-ish clothes?”

Subaru rubs at his still-painful waist. Ram shoots him a glance as if looking at a bug and snorts a breathy laugh, turning back to Emilia.

Ram: “So, would you be well? If there are no issues, then...”

Emilia: “Ri-right. I'm okay. We have to... talk about the TRIAL, right.”

Emilia nods and continues into the middle of the room, Garfiel enters shortly after, and now we have the usual cast circled around Emilia. Emilia gives a stuttering explanation of what went on in the TRIAL, just like last time. If there's anything in this conversation that went different than before, then it's—

Otto: “Then, just why is Natsuki-san alright after entering the tomb?”

Asks Otto who raises his hand. Subaru had entered the conversation so little, that this question actually came up.

Subaru: “Didn't I say? I went inside while having the QUALIFICATIONS. If you're gonna ask where I got them, it was probably afternoon in the cemetery. So, if you're wondering what happened when I went in... I took the same TRIAL Emilia-tan did. And it kinda looks like I passed.”

A shake goes through the room at Subaru's statement, Emilia being the most surprised. She looks at

Subaru with confusion rising in her amethyst eyes. Subaru nods at her.

Subaru: “Just saying in advance, it's not like I got through the TRIAL because I was better. The TRIAL was facing your past. I had more or less worked that out, so it was just a bonus stage kinda thing for me.”

Lewes: “Don't know what this bohnas er whatsit is, but if yerve passed the TRIAL, Lil' Su... Hrmpm. That's sermthing werth serprise.”

Ram: “However, according to what Emilia-sama has said, the TRIAL doesn't end with simply one, correct? We can expect a continuation from the word 'first.’”

Subaru nods at Lewes and Ram, then examines Emilia. She's still silent, a wave of complex emotion in her eyes. Though Subaru can imagine what she's feeling, he shakes away his sweetness. Balancing the time limit against the difficulty of Emilia's TRIAL, there aren't many options for him to take. Thus,

Subaru: “When I beat the TRIAL, I heard... that if two challengers try the TRIAL at once, the next TRIAL won't start. The day has to change before you can enter.”

Ram: “...Mhm, meaning?”

Subaru: “If me and Emilia-tan enter the tomb together, Emilia-tan's TRIAL starting means my TRIAL... it means I can't take the second one.”

Otto: “Whawh, please wait, Natsuki-san.”

Otto plunges his hands into his grey hair, heedless of Subaru's suspicious gaze upon him.

Otto: “From where this conversation is going, you wouldn't also be intending to challenge the TRIAL, Natsuki-san? But, wasn't this something done for Emilia-sama's securing achievements in the...”

Subaru: “Idiot, Otto.”

Subaru's slow to hold Otto back as he blabbers on. Otto looks back on what he said, realising he mentioned something he shouldnt've, and hurriedly shuts his mouth. But everyone—including Emilia—had already heard it.

Emilia: “What did you just say?”

Subaru: “Let's calm down, Emilia-tan. That was, um...”

Emilia: “Don't cover it up, tell me. —Please, Subaru.”

Anyone who could deny a beautiful girl's tearfully-voiced entreaties was no man, and anyone who could deny such when it was Emilia was not Natsuki Subaru. His shoulders droop.

Subaru: “If you clear the TRIAL, Emilia-tan, the villagers from Arlam'll be released from being hostages, and the people of SANCTUARY can say goodbye to living bound to this land. If you can conquer the TRIAL, both camps'll give you support... was the real plan behind all this.”

Emilia: "...That was, it. You knew, Subaru?"

Subaru: "No, I had completely not at all noticed it until someone told me."

Lies Subaru gallantly, chest high, before Emilia who can't hide her shaking. Ram and Otto look at him with gazes suggesting they're chewing something bitter, but Subaru shuts both of them up with a glance. He turns back to Emilia.

Subaru: "All of it was Roswaal's plot. I've honestly been suspecting his wounds were part of a bigger performance for this purpose."

Emilia: "Even Roswaal wouldn't go that... as if, I can't finish saying that. Thinking about the situation, he would do something like that."

Subaru something somethings about hating going along with the plot just joking haha not but demo soreyori

Emilia is confused, her head lowered slightly. Subaru bends down and looks up at her face from beneath. Her eyes tremble in surprise.

Subaru: "I want to be your strength. I don't know what you saw when you faced your PAST. But if it's something that makes you feel so much pain, that's so agonizing, that brings you that many tears, that makes it seem your heart will break... I want to offer you my hand."

Emilia: "...Subaru."

Subaru: "If it's just taking the TRIAL and freeing SANCTUARY, then there should be no problems with me doing it. If the achievement is necessary, then I give all I have to you. My achievements are your achievements. Everyone out there harbours a PAST... but deciding that all of those have to be sorted out doesn't make for anything good."

They were the words Garfiel had told him, the previous loop. Emilia's eyes open in surprise. She bites her lip, expression thoughtful.

Subaru knows what's conflicting her. In absolutely honesty, she should feel some desire to shrink back from this PAST she didn't want to face. Emilia is also a very pure person, who wouldn't even think of pressing painful roles on people. Exactly because of that, the conflict is huge.

Subaru couldn't clearly state that the remaining TRIALS would not wound his heart, as her PAST had wounded her.

Subaru: "It's all right if you're deliberating. I know it's not something you can immediately decide. —And because it's all right, I'd like you to try giving me at least tomorrow."

Emilia: "Tomorrow?"

Subaru: "Either way, I'm not gonna be some evil instructor who drags an exhausted you to the tomb tomorrow and demands you take the TRIAL, Emilia-tan. While it also means we'll have some foresight into the second TRIAL, with me still having reserves left, I should be the one to challenge. And if it seems like I can beat the TRIAL, then that makes it a profit."

And if he could get that profit in one day, then manage something over yet another day, then he could hope to free SANCTUARY by the day after tomorrow. This was the most ideal plan—no burden

placed on Emilia, goal achieved, time left to rescue the mansion.

Subaru knew Emilia was wavering at his proposal.

It did bother him that he was wheedling her when she was weak, but putting out a big condition upfront, and then following with a smaller, preferred condition was one technique of negotiation. Her presently being mentally unstable, she wouldn't have the capacity to reject the second, consolation plan after already denying the first.

Tomorrow and the day after, Subaru would take and conquer the TRIALS. They could surely prepare another chance for Emilia to stand, taking the time she needed.

But the timing here was bad. No time. This unreasonable fate had once again—

Garfiel: “Yer think yer gonna just move things ahead how yer like, with us shuttin' up n' followin' along?”

There comes the voice from behind Subaru, which had waited for this moment, just before Subaru's underhanded aims were realised. The obstacle has blond hair, his emerald-green eyes narrowed fiercely, his sharp canines clicking as he steps forth.

Garfiel: “F it's not the Princess... not Emilia-sama takin' the TRIAL, then my amazin' self rejects it. 'T very least, 's you alone who I absolutely, absolutely, absolutely don't wanna get freed by.”

Subaru: “Wha—!?”

Unexpected words.

Subaru swallows down their meaning, but unable to connect the content and the speaker, all Subaru does is voice his confusion. Garfiel bends forward.

Garfiel: “Listenin'? Want me t' repeat? My amazin' self ain't gonna accept anyone but Emilia-sama takin' the TRIAL. Thinka this's a condition comin' from me, that not even th' granny's gonna get'ta bend.”

Spits Garfiel, his nose scrunched up, displeasure in full display.

CHAPTER 25: FOREST OF ICE

Garfiel: “Lookin' like yer gonna cry ain't gonna change anythin'. My amazin' self's already decided. Decided n' not budgin'. 'S PUSHIN' DONMORAKIN'S SHIT STAYS STUCK.”

Says Garfiel as he looks at Subaru, whose eyes are wide open in shock. Hearing Garfiel's condition threw Subaru's heart into confusion and chaos, and nothing else. Because,

Subaru: “Of all people, how the hell are you the one saying this?”

Garfiel: “Ohh? 'S my amazin' self objectin' really so surprisin'? Jus' how goddamn stupid optimistic are ya? 'F you think you can understand my amazin' self after just some tiny little conversations, we're gonna havva problem.”

Garfiel frowns at Subaru, but Subaru'd very much to pull a bitter face and bitch as much as Garfiel. Because this idea that Garfiel is rejecting, was a proposal composed by that very same Garfiel in the first place.

The narration has a moment to reflect on the shit that happened in chapter 22 and Subaru comments on having complex emotions about it but forget about that for now.

Subaru: “Why the hell are you objecting? Raising the chances of SANCTUARY being freed shouldn't be a bad deal for you.”

Garfiel: “Eh, I do know that 'f yer wholeways agree with th' granny's plans, acceptin' yer idea'd be efficient. —But, I dunwanna.”

Subaru: “Why are you talking like a kid!”

Garfiel crosses his arms and looks away. What he's saying has no logic to it. No logic to it, so he might be speaking entirely off emotion, which would make things complicated.

Garfiel has a bit of a moody streak—or more accurately, his views are heavily under the control of fluctuations in his mood. If a generally-accepted idea isn't sticking with him, Subaru's not sure what to do that'll work.

Subaru: “Lewes-san...”

So Subaru turns to Lewes. But she just waves her hand, her overlong sleeve flapping.

Lewes: “When Lil' Gar's like this, even I cern't budge him. And unferternartly, there ain't any kinda thing in SANCTUARY to brute force others into listening to yer. Wanner try challenging him and see how it goes, Lil' Su?”

Subaru: “I'm not suicidal enough to challenge a guy who tosses around dragon carriages. ...Shit, just what is this?”

What Lewes is saying doesn't exactly approve of Garfiel's words, but since she's not proactively denying him either, she probably agrees with him. Lewes is still thinking that Emilia should be the one to conquer the TRIAL. Subaru doesn't know just how much she respects Roswaal, but it's safe to think that she and Roswaal agree on the fundamental points.

Emilia: “...Subaru.”

Says Emilia, sounding concerned, as she looks up at a Subaru who harbours too many emotions to express.

Emilia: “I-I'll do my best, so it's okay, you don't have to force yourself. It was a little... yes, a little sudden so I was surprised, but if I know what's going to happen...”

Subaru: “No, you're the one who shouldn't be pushing themselves, Emilia-tan. I'll persuade that stubborn bastard. And once I have, this TRIAL thing'll...”

Emilia: “Subaru, you...”

Subaru gets starting kneading out some logical arguments to convince Garfiel, prepping for the coming debate. But,

Emilia: “Subaru, you... you also... can't leave this to me?”

Subaru: “...Wha?”

Emilia: “I-I showed you me doing badly, so you're thinking you can't leave the TRIAL to me... so, in my place...”

Subaru: “No. That's not it.”

Emilia: “No, I can tell when your thinking is anxious, Subaru. You were able to overcome it properly, but far from overcoming it, I... I hadn't even resolved myself to face it... that PAST, with this name of TRIAL...”

Emilia shakes her head, not accepting Subaru's denial. Her lips tremble slightly, and her pale cheeks turn further pallid. Subaru knows this is happening due to her reflecting on her PAST.

Subaru: “You don't have to remember it!”

Emilia: “But If I don't face it, I won't overcome the TRIAL! Right, that's right... If I don't overcome the TRIAL, don't overcome the PAST... I'll never be Ruler. If I don't let the villagers, and people from Sanctuary, outside...”

Subaru puts his hands to her shoulders, but Emilia's not listening. Actually it's gotten to the point that the more he objects, the firmer her will gets.

Emilia: “I can't just impose on you all the time, Subaru. I musn't do that. Just a little while ago, you got so hurt, but you still worked so hard for me... and I, I'm making you shoulder absolutely everything again...”

Subaru: “It's fine, let me. This phrasing might not be great, but it's give and take. Putting the right person in the right place is best, right? When it comes to this TRIAL, my affinity is good. If that's all we're considering, then going any further than that is pointless. It seems like I can do it, so it'll be certainly faster if I do it. It's not often there's things it seems like I could do. There's still lots of chances out there for you to do you best, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “But isn't now an important one of those chances? If I look away from unpleasant things, and keep running away... what will happen to me?”

—What's so wrong about running away!? Would be something he'd very much like to scream. If running from unpleasant things, averting your gaze from painful things, and turning your back on agonizing things meant you could live in peace, then that was not a bad option as one way of life. Subaru himself had lived taking as much distance he could from tribulations. So, he believed that there was no reason to criticise that way of life—albeit it being a weak way of life—and had also stated as much.

But even so. Right now, with him understanding Emilia's stubborn heart and her weakness, Subaru should affirm it. But—

For some reason, he can't get the words out.

Emilia closes her eyes and looks down. Hands still on her shoulders, feeling her body heat, Subaru had no idea what to do.

Garfiel: “*Ha*. Yer free 't have yer talk n' have yer bout, but listenin' from aside sounds like Emilia-sama's winnin'. N' actually, the TRIAL was somethin' prepared for Emilia-sama t' challenge. Buttin' in from sideways's...”

Subaru: “Shut up! You... you don't know anything yet, so you...”

Garfiel: “Ohh?”

Subaru explodes in anger at Garfiel, Garfiel starting to get dangerous. But Subaru glares at Garfiel unafraid.

Subaru: “Do you know what'll happen if you push this on her? Can you really be fine watching her get injured, worn down, suffering? ...What was wrong with me?”

Garfiel: “...I got no idea what yer sayin' all a sudden.”

Subaru: “I'm saying that you're thinking entirely based off conditions and benefits, you haven't considered Emilia herself once. I'm sure the gains that'll come from overcoming the TRIAL will be huge. But, you're not entering the wounds, the tears, into your calculations. ...Not her will, either.”

Despite being the one who was closest to Emilia as she degraded last loop, Subaru never once told her to stop.

Emilia: “What, do... you know, Subaru?”

Subaru: “Emilia?”

Emilia tugs on Subaru's sleeve, her eyes open wide as she looks at him. Her eyes host a whirlpool of emotion, drowned beneath her rising tears. She shakes her head.

Emilia: “No... No,”

Emilia: “You know? Subaru, you, do you, know... my, PAST?”

Subaru: “Wait, let's calm down. Take deep breaths. The conversation's going somewhere bad. So,”

Emilia: “N-no... I, didn't mean to... I, just... just...”

Emilia returns to the state she was in inside the tomb, just after the TRIAL ended. Confused, disordered, her words becoming incoherent. Her wet eyes reflect Subaru without seeing him. She reaches her fingers out, gripping on Subaru's sleeve.

Emilia: “Everyone is, at me... because, at Mother and me... but, no. That's not true. The truth is different. Back then, I... what really...”

Subaru: “Emilia, what're...”

Subaru can't do anything, when a figure suddenly moves before him. It's,

Subaru: “—Ram.”

Ram doesn't answer to the address, slipping behind Emilia and swiftly plugging Emilia's mouth with her hand. Emilia's eyes open slightly in shock.

Ram: “Please excuse me.”

Emilia: “...ah”

And Emilia crumples. Subaru quickly reaches out for her and manages to hold her close before she hits the ground, breathing a sigh of relief. He looks up at Ram.

Subaru: “What was that?”

Ram: “A swift method for calming her down. Would you be mad, Barusu?”

Subaru: “I wanna complain about it being forced, but... I think that was optimal. Sorry, caused a pain.”

Ram: “That you be the one apologizing for Emilia-sama's circumstances is certainly odd, Barusu. When did you inherit the Great Spirit's position as Emilia-sama's guardian?”

Subaru: “I'm not trying to...”

Do that, is what Subaru's about to continue with, when he notices that there is absolutely nothing persuasive in what he's saying. It's true that he's been keeping more intense watch on Emilia than usual, with Puck absent. And now that he knows challenging the TRIAL wears her down, that feeling has multiplied.

And it certainly feels true that, without her relied-upon spirit at her side, Emilia's been leaning on Subaru.

Garfiel: “F she's gonna need babysittin', the talk ends here.”

Snorts Garfiel as he looks at Subaru, tenderly holding a sleeping Emilia. Subaru goes to object, but feeling Emilia fidgeting slightly in his arms makes him unconsciously shut his mouth and he loses the chance. All he can do is watch as Garfiel turn his back on him and starts leaving.

Garfiel: “We'll put today's TRIAL 's an exception. From tomorrow on, th' one takin' the TRIAL'll be Emilia-sama. My amazin' self won't accept you takin' it.”

Says Garfiel, bearing his teeth, as he leaves Lewes' house.

Lewes: “Sorry about him, Lil' Su. But, I agree. Faster SANCTUARY gets freed the better, but... followin' Lil' Roz's plans's convenient for us too.”

Subaru: “Convenient, which means...”

Lewes: “Even if SANCTUARY is freed, nothing changes abert us being part of Lil' Roz's fief, and under his patronage. So, we'd like to avoid making displeasing exceptions much as possorable. ...Our intenierns aren't so self-centred that we want him to think bad of us.”

Lewes' statements do reflect a serious issue for the residents of SANCTUARY. Subaru loses even more room for debate. Team SANCTUARY Garfiel and Lewes exit the house, leaving the remaining people inside being the members of Roswaal's mansion +- a.

Subaru: “So element a Otto, how do you see this situation?”

Otto: “Could you please not drag me, who feels extreme discomfort and poor future prospects here and had been intending to keep quiet and let this pass, into this? ...But, if I were to sincerely state my impression after hearing that conversation, I think Garfiel's argument is more sound.”

Otto raises his finger and nods several times as he looks at Subaru.

Otto: “It aligns with the Margrave's aims, and Emilia-sama's position is that of a Royal Selection candidate. I do believe that should you undergo the TRIAL, Natsuki-san, that achievement would become Emilia-sama's own, but... putting aside third parties who hear of this in the future, do you believe those currently present in SANCTUARY would agree? Put otherwise, would this bring their support?”

Subaru: “...It is that I understand the reasoning here. No mater how you consider it, it's infinitely more beneficial that Emilia be the one to free SANCTUARY. But...”

Ram: “Emilia-sama is incapable of overcoming the TRIAL?”

Says Ram so bluntly it's refreshing. Subaru's expression actually calms down at it.

Subaru: “From what I've seen, I think getting any results in a short time'll be harsh. It's kind of a hopeless story talking about this without actually knowing what Emilia's past was, but... I'm sure you two understand this situation isn't one where we have that kind of time.”

Ram: “I would at least appreciate this be ended within the three years settlement of the Royal Selection.”

Subaru: “That's being way too patient.”

Ram's probably joking but since she said it with a serious expression, Subaru crushes the chance of her being serious about this in advance. Otto notices what Subaru's saying and nods.

Otto: “There's the burden on the evacuees, and the circumstances surrounding SANCTUARY's food. From a long-term perspective, it's unrealistic to keep sustaining this number of people.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that's about it. Just living as evacuees'll build stress, but then if you add food

insufficiencies onto it, people'll immediately explode with dissatisfaction. There's no point in the SANCTUARY guys keeping hold of hostages when it's worsening their standard of eating. —At least, not in holding everyone.”

Ram: “Do you believe Garf may cull from the villagers?”

Says Ram, her voice somewhat raised. Subaru's eyebrows raise at her rather unexpected reaction, Ram herself perhaps feeling discomfort at her own behaviour as she pats a finger through her bangs.

Ram: “I would prefer not to think of it, but with Garf's personality, it is possible. Should it come to the eleventh hour, he would unhesitatingly act according to his own set of precedences.”

Subaru: “He's like you on that. I agree with it too. ...So I wanna suggest we get the hostages out of SANCTUARY before that happens.”

The condition of 'SUBARU TAKES THE TRIAL' isn't going to work this time, so the negotiations will likely be tougher. But ultimately Subaru still expects they'll prevail.

Subaru: “Either way, if the guys from SANCTUARY are going to push Emilia into taking the TRIAL, then I want them to let us do something to curtail some of her unhappiness for it.”

Ram: “...Surprising. I had expected something more akin to a disobedient child's dissent from you, Barusu.”

Says Ram at Subaru's putting aside his worries about Emilia taking the TRIAL. Subaru nods.

Subaru: “It's annoying, and it annoys me, but... going along with Roswaal's plans is what makes the most sense. Yeah. If you can just ignore that Emilia'll be hurt, then it's obvious that doing things this way is best.”

Ram: “You know she'll be wounded, but force her to walk on. Quite an oni you are.”

Subaru: “Having an oni tell me that makes me an unusual one, too. Just... no, nevermind.”

Ram furrows her brows at Subaru's shutting up, but Subaru doesn't intend to continue. He lifts up the Emilia in his arms carefully, so she won't wake up. She's light. Unconscious people are meant to be heavier than usual, but she's light as a feather.

Subaru: “Ram. After Emilia's settled in the bedroom, I wanna talk to Roswaal. Can I?”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama is in the midst of recuperation. Nobody may enter his room for a time.”

Subaru: “I want to talk about the TRIAL. This alone's something that if I talk with lower-rank people like you, it won't go anywhere. I need the brain's opinion.”

Ram closes her eyes for a while, scrutinising Subaru's words. She eventually gives a tired sigh.

Ram: “Come seek advice from Roswaal-sama. Barusu, you take Emilia-sama to the bed... without engaging in anything suspicious.”

Subaru: “What a thing to say to serious-mode me. I wasn't even thinking anything, but now thanks to you saying that I'm aware of this direct feeling of Emilia-tan's softness my knees're shaking, take

responsibility for this.”

Ram: “Stand watch, Otto.”

Otto: “Most certainly!”

Ram exits the house, leaving behind Otto, Subaru, and Emilia, Otto still keeping a saluting pose as he looks toward Subaru.

Otto: “Now, you're welcome to take Emilia-sama to the bed. If you'd like any help...”

Subaru: “Before that, what's with this submissive attitude you've got toward Ram?”

Otto: “Well I mean, Ram-san is directly subordinate to the Margrave, yes? Considering that, I would say cajoling and buying Ram-san's favour rather than yours, which is firmly stuck to Emilia-sama, will give more hope for making relations with the Margrave, hehheh.”

Subaru: “Can you do something about how you're making my first impression of you being a capable merchant progressively shift into a sly little villain? Soon you're gonna get purposefully left out and butchered in the shadows.”

Subaru sighs and carries Emilia to the bedroom. He lightly fixes the disorderly sheets and carefully puts Emilia to bed. When,

Subaru: “Ah...”

Just after he pulls the sheets up to her shoulders and is about to leave, Subaru notices Emilia's fingers clutching the hem of his outfit. Feeling the sensation of her reliant fingers, and her sweetness, he unhooks them. He cradles her separated fingers in his hands.

Subaru: “Wait for me, Emilia.”

Subaru: “I'll do something soon. I'll settle things, without you crying or suffering any further. I will.”

Pledges Subaru, and he releases Emilia's hand.

He stands up, turns around, and heads for the house's exit. —Heads for Roswaal.

There were just a few too many things he needed to hear from that warlock.



Roswaal: “—Iiiiiii see, I do coooooomprehend the situation.”

Touching his chin, Roswaal nods after hearing Subaru's long story. Location is a room of Roswaal's private recuperation hut, people present are only Subaru and Roswaal. Roswaal's lying on the bed, body upright, his gaze on Subaru sharp.

Subaru's like, and so I think that kinda thing would be best as a common ground, incorporating SANCTUARY people's side as much as possible.

Roswaal: “Weeeeeell, the moment that Emilia-sama entered within SANCTUARY’s barrier, Garfiel's group's intentions essentially became reeeeeeealised. Overcoming the TRIAL is necessary for Emilia-sama heeeerself to exit SANCTUARY. If the hostages they took for insurance turn simply into food-expending burdens, releasing them is reasonable... is the concept.”

Subaru: “I think it's a sensible idea. It's not that we'll be abandoning or putting off SANCTUARY's problems. Just, it's the idea that everything except the purely necessary should be whittled off.”

Roswaal: “Whaaaaat pleasant words. This is the doubt inside you, correct? That if prospects for releasing SANCTUARY disappear, or otherwise Emilia-sama's heart cannot withstand the TRIAL, the hostages will become materials for coercing Emilia-sama. And you're dispelling that concern beeeeforehand... is what it looks like.”

Says Roswaal, one eye closed, looking at Subaru with his yellow eye. Subaru crosses his arms and while nodding,

Subaru: “Uh no sorry, didn't think that far. Or actually that you immediately came up with that terrifying train of thought kinda makes me recoil.”

Roswaal: “Ooooooh myyyyy? I overthought, or rather misthought? My apologies. Hoooooowever, that is another manner in which you could coooooonsider matters.”

Seeing Roswaal smile, Subaru thinks that Garfiel wouldn't go so far. While Garfiel is stubborn and inflexible, and has a slight trait where talking doesn't always work with him, he wouldn't do anything illogical or immoral. Subaru's only known Garfiel a few days, but that's how he appraises him.

Roswaal: “So? What is it you waaaaant to do with me, Subaru-kun?”

Subaru: “I want, if it's possible, for you rather than me to be the one taking charge of what we just talked about. This time it's... it looks like my relations've gotten bad.”

Roswaal: “And whaaaaat would that mean?”

Subaru: “Seems that bastard Garfiel isn't too fond of me. Not like I've given up on persuading him, but I can tell it'll be rough trying to talk to him today or tomorrow.”

Subaru remembers the sharpness of Garfiel's gaze when they parted, filled with hostility and malice, a glare as if looking at the enemy of one's parents. Subaru has no idea why he got hit with it. Either did something Garfiel considered impermissible, or made some gaffe that completely overturned his faith. Either way,

Subaru: “When he's emotional, it's likely he'll just completely reject my ideas. And on top of that's Lewes-san, seems like she'll passively accept what he says if Garfiel does object. Since I can see that possibility happening, I'd like for that possibility to be cut short.”

Roswaal: “Which is my turn, iiiiiiiis what this is. Well, that's fine. I'll speak with Lewes-sama and Garfiel. Although Garfiel dislikes me as well, so I don't know if heeeeee'll agree immediately.”

Either way Roswaal's in. Subaru gives a sigh of relief.

Roswaal: “Nooooow then. Is that all the business you haaaaave with me?”

Subaru: “No, there's more. —We haven't had the vital, vital conversation yet.”

Roswaal tilts his head, brushing his long hair behind his back and closing one eye. Maybe it's become a habit, but again he stares at Subaru with his yellow eye. Subaru fixes his posture.

Subaru: “The TRIAL in the tomb showed Emilia her PAST. Do you have an idea what PAST would make her suffer seeing it?”

Roswaal closes his yellow eye and nods, in thought. The room falls into silence, the waiting getting to Subaru.

Roswaal: “Don't you think that questioning me, without asking Emila-sama directly, iiiiis quite cowardly?”

Subaru: “If you want to insult me as underhanded, as cowardly, go right ahead. I'd certainly like to hear everything from Emilia's mouth if I could. But,”

There was surely no way Subaru could make Emilia talk about something that made her cry and hurt her that much.

Subaru: “I want to know about her, and there's things I have to know, as well. If there's anything I can use for that purpose, I'll even grasp at straws.”

Roswaal: “I've had people call me many things, but being treating like straw iiiiis indeed a new experience. ...Weeeeelll then.”

Roswaal gives a small laugh, his expression then suddenly vanishing, gazing at Subaru. He touches his hand to his chin.

Roswaal: “Emilia-sama is a half-elf. Aaaaand, due to the WITCH OF ENVY's influence, half-elves are horribly regarded with discrimination. Thiiiiiiiis much would be something even yooooooooou would already know, yeeeee?”

Subaru: “...Yeah. You can tell that Emilia gets treated unjustly because of that, if you've seen how she acted at the palace, and so on. She ran into that unpleasant bunch, too.”

The malicious witch cultists arise in Subaru's mind. He dispels the image with a shake of his head.

Roswaal: “Hoooooowever,”

Roswaal: “While it is true that half-elves receive particularly bad oppressioooooon... the matter does not end there. Incidentally, Subaru-kun, haaaaave you ever seen an elf while in the Capital?”

Subaru: “Elf? Not a half-elf? ...no, I don't think I have.”

Roswaal: “Right?”

Roswaal: “Half-elves aren't the oooooonly ones to receive harsh oppression all across the world. Elves, one portion of what begets a half-elf, are also targets.”

Subaru: "...! No, that's way too indiscriminate no matter how you say. And if you're speaking logically..."

Roswaal: "Humans would also have to be exterminated? Uuuuuunfortunately, humanity is faaaaaar more populous in this world than demi-human races, and their nations are also large. The result of the divide between demi-humans and humans growing too wide was the Demi-human War, buuuuut that has nothing to do with this conversation."

Subaru: "So, either way elves have a past of being oppressed."

Roswaal: "Iiiiiin suuuuum,"

Roswaal: "It's obvious that half-elves wouldn't show their faces in places like the Capital, and their parent race of elves also have difficulty making appearances. That you saw noooooo elves in the Capital, was likely laaaaaaargely coming from that."

Subaru: "That's... agreed. But, how does this tie into it?"

Roswaal leans his back against his pillow, looking up faintly.

Roswaal: "As an extension of half-elf discrimination, elves are also oppressed and meet bitter experiences. Then, juuuuust where should the elves liiiiiive?"

Subaru: "Elves'd be... it feels a given they'd have villages in the forest or something. In the middle of a forest where humans don't tread, while hunting or whatever just quietly."

Roswaal: "I don't know how much you know, buuuuut it's fine to generally go off that impression. The elves constructed towns, and quiiiiietly went to live deep in the forests. —Elior Forest, used to be one of those elf territories."

Roswaal's tone changes. Subaru's shoulders shake. It feels as though the room's temperature is dropping, as if Roswaal's words hold some indescribable power. Subaru remembers hearing the name of this forest before.

—Elior Forest was a name that had come up several times while negotiating in Crusch's mansion. It was a location rich with magic ores, in a territory under Roswaal's management. And,

Subaru: "It's frozen solid, and nobody can get near it..."

Roswaal: "The first freezing of Elior Forest, and its subsequent spreading is now recorded as an event from over 90 years ago. It is a world of absolute zero which freezes all, which freezes every living creature. —She lived in that world, all by herself."

Roswaal: "—Deep in Elior Forest, both the elves and their village even now remain frozen solid, stopped in time."

Subaru falls silent.

Roswaal: "All except the single half-elf girl, who committed the slip."

CHAPTER 26: PACKING OF SHIT

—He shouldn't have asked.

Sweat trailing down his forehead to drip off his chin, Subaru is once again made to realise his idiocy. The ringing in his skull sounds from far off, his heartbeat hammering with pain.

Roswaal: “You regret asking... doooo you?”

Roswaal tilts his head as he looks at the silent Subaru. Subaru can't reply immediately, taking quiet breaths to calm himself down,

Subaru: “Just, a bit surprised. How to say... Emilia's a little older than me than I thought.”

Roswaal: “Ahya, you didn't know? Half-elf Emilia-sama, albeit not as long as elves, does belong to a long-lived race. With elves, they even go so far as to say that they don't die unleeeeeeeeess they are killed.”

Roswaal goes along with Subaru's distracting himself. It seems these elves aren't so distant from your usual fantasy elf. Not clear how much the 'half' part plays in, but at least if you believe what Roswaal's saying then Emilia's true age—

Subaru: “A 60-year difference at minimum... I like older sister characters, but even I'm not that experienced with the patten of having an age gap on such a target.”

Roswaal: “Although not particularly relevant... from how you're speaking, have you perhaps encountered members of long-lived races apart from Emilia-sama beeeeeeeefore?”

Subaru: “Well, immortals and vampires and whatever're staple patterns in galge. You've even got a category for loligrannies like Lewes-san, truly scandalous.”

Subaru's not too into loligrannies or nonhumans. Subaru's targets are more older sisters and high school upperclassmen. So of course he has some 'what's about a sixty-year age gap, but,

Subaru: “Everything's permissible when they're that cute. No problemo. Changes nothing about Emilia-tan being my #1 star.”

But now exists the possibility that long-lived races are slow to mature to adulthood, and need a different amount of time before they mature than humans. Like how animals and humans have differing age rates, perhaps a 20-year old human is equivalent to a 100-year old elf—

Subaru: “Thinking like that, 90-year-old Emilia-tan's still a young'un. Merely a lass... no, maybe from an elf's perspective she's still a little girl. Oioi, there's this cutesexy hot lady and she's still a little girl... there's probably already a genre for this somewhere.”

Roswaal: sorry for this while your delusions are chugging along but, “Reality is faaaaaaaaar harsher than you think. They mature at the same rate as humans. It surely wouldn't be common for there to be mentally immature elves, yeeeeees?”

Subaru: “And just when I was frantically setting up rebuttals to counter how Emilia-tan's kept treating me like a child...”

It was just some wishful thinking, but still having it so smoothly cut down sucks. Roswaal speaks up.

Roswaal: "I'm noooooot particularly fond of you attempting to end matters by aaaaaaaverting your eyes to your aaaaaaactual emotions. Noooooooow, Subaru-kun."

Subaru goes quiet.

Roswaal: "Do you reeeeeegret that you asked me, and think you shouldn't have?"

Subaru: "...You really are unpleasant."

It seemed Subaru had almost managed to swallow down his emotions with bullshitting, when Roswaal just digs them back up. Subaru again curses himself. For his duplicity, in hearing about the cross Emilia's dainty shoulders bore not from her mouth, but another's.

Subaru: "...The TRIAL showed me my past. I'm sure it showed Emilia the same. Which means the past she saw was..."

Roswaal: "If it faces you with the past you least wish to see... then what Emilia-sama saw was almost unmistakably, the daaaaaay of Elio Forest's freezing."

Roswaal affirms Subaru's concerns, informing Subaru of just what exactly he had been forcing on Emilia.

Subaru: "Then, could I really face a past where I froze a bunch of people solid..."

The scale of the errs left in Subaru and Emilia's pasts were different.

Though of course, the thing with his parents was a huge problem for him that had ought to get settled. He had no intention to look down on that, and likely would permit no looking down on it.

But then, what about Emilia's problem?

Would Emilia be forgiven for her error and given approval, as Subaru's parents given him? And could she accept that, and part with her past?

Subaru: "Is it certain that Emilia froze the forest... that she the froze the elf village?" something something something there isn't some mistake?

Roswaal: "It is certainly true that the facts are uuuuuunknown. Hoooooowever, Emilia-sama has told me of these details from her very own mouth. Emilia-sama herself has confessed that she was the one to freeze the forest. What room is there for interceding statements?"

Subaru: "Then if we don't know what's really true, it could be a misunderstanding... and anyway, Emilia's not the kind of girl who could..."

Roswaal: "Wroooooong, you don't understaaaaaaand, you muuuuuuuustn't, Subaru-kun."

Subaru's gaze is sharp and dangerous, but Roswaal waves his hand, feigning ignorance.

Roswaal: "By this point, the actual truth iiiiiiiisn't the problem. The problem is that Emilia-sama is certain that SHE WAS THE ONE WHO FROZE THE FOREST."

Subaru goes quiet.

Roswaal: “Inside Emilia-sama, that is the truth. And inside the tomb, she tumbles into a past originating from that truth. —Noooooow, what do you think should be done?”

Subaru: “You... what the hell are you thinking?”

Roswaal questions Subaru happily, Subaru unconsciously lets slip with that one. Why, how, could Roswaal smile in this situation?

Subaru: “This isn't about demanding you be compassionate toward Emilia's past, or that you try empathizing with her... Knowing the weight of her burden, knowing that it's painful, and while making her face a TRIAL we don't know if she can overcome, how can you be so cheerful?”

Roswaal: “Hmhmhmhm.”

Subaru: “It's strange, right!? You... don't you want Emilia to be Ruler? Isn't your position one of helping her be the Ruler? I understand what you're aiming for. If Emilia overcomes the TRIAL and frees SANCTUARY, the people of SANCTUARY and the villagers from Arlam might back her. ...I understand that.”

But,

Subaru: “In making that happen, you're not taking the vital point of Emilia into consideration. When it's a gamble that needs SANCTUARY's release to pay off... when things are coming to a standstill, how can you be so damn relaxed!”

Roswaal says nothing.

Subaru: “Emilia says she has to be the Ruler. I want to make that happen for her. ...Do you actually, have any urge to make her Ruler?”

Roswaal: “—Of course I do.”

Subaru raises his voice, shoulders quaking. His face runs hot with furious emotion, which Roswaal's response feels to douse in icewater. Roswaal glares Subaru straight in the eye.

Roswaal: “Do I have urge to make her the Ruler? Absolutely. Decidedly. —There is surely no existence which yearns more for Emilia-sama to be Ruler than I. Emilia-sama of course does, there is no need even considering it with your breed, and I do have a reason.”

Subaru: “Rohz, wahl?”

Roswaal: “And then asking me whether I'm determined. It makes me laugh. Makes me laugh, incredible. —You haven't even gotten that far yet?”

It's the first time Subaru's heard quiet rage in Roswaal's tone. But the heat of it fades halfway through, the final whisper being nothing but a smoulder.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun. Uuuuuunfortunately, this will be all for tonight. I'm stiiiiiiiiil recovering from iiiiinjury, after all. I'd like to have some time in peace and quieeeeeeeet.”

Subaru: “Ser... no, nevermind.”

Subaru reaches out to stop Roswaal, senses that it's pointless, and withdraws his arm. Roswaal's obviously going to deny any further meaningful talk. And if Roswaal's serious about rejecting everything, Subaru has no methods to make him speak.

Subaru turns his back to the bed, although feeling some reluctance. He communicated what he ought to communicate. It wasn't clear how the Arlam villagers would be dealt with, but at least Lewes would probably accept Roswaal's proposition. If they could overcome that, it would definitely be moving forward. Though, this was merely one of the many goals Subaru had to achieve.

Roswaal: “—Subaru-kun.”

Subaru's feet stop and he looks back, to find Roswaal, head rested on the pillow, still looking at him.

Roswaal: “You did get the qualifications?”

Subaru: “Ah. Right, I didn't tell you. Yeah. I can take the TRIAL too. If getting that baptism is the condition for it, then perhaps you could...”

Roswaal: “—No, liiiiiiiiiikely not. It's doubtful that tomb will accept me. You can clearly tell, with how I've been wounded in rejection.”

Subaru's brows raise faintly in surprise. In the last loop when Roswaal learned Subaru was qualified, it had put him in incredibly low spirits. But right now, it's something like loneliness that surrounds him.

Roswaal: “...Choose the optimum, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “What?”

Roswaal: “You are the one most free to move in this place. You aren't bound to SANCTUARY. Neither are you tied to obligations toward the Royal Selection.”

Subaru goes silent.

Roswaal: “Act, struggle for your desire, and acquire it. If by deliberating and agonizing, perplexing and faltering, you procure that... even if you're not satisfied with it, even if you can't agree with it, I'm sure you'll be able to see the conclusion.”

Says Roswaal, his face not visible. It's not like him. All Subaru can do is stand there, dumbly and dumbstruck. A short time passes before Subaru realises he just got encouraged out of the blue.

Subaru: “Wha... this's nothing like you. What's with this, Roz-chi.”

Roswaal: “I felt like doing something not like me, iiiiiiiiiiis all this would be. —Since it appears I won't be making it in time, mmmhm?”

Subaru doesn't get it. But before he can question Roswaal back, Roswaal waves his hand, urging Subaru to leave the room. Subaru sees it, and Roswaal rolls over in the bed, shifting his attention

away from Subaru. Subaru gives a long sigh through his nose.

Subaru: “Good night.”

And leaves the room.



Ram: “...You wouldn't have burdened Roswaal-sama, correct?”

Asks Ram the second Subaru exits the room. Ram's supposed to be half a head shorter than Subaru, but when it comes to Roswaal-related stuff, the pressure she exerts makes her seem twice as big.

Subaru: “It was just an extremely calm conversation. Didn't grab him by the lapels and wrestle him, so don't you worry.”

Ram: How optimistic. “After stepping inside and being rejected by the tomb, Roswaal-sama was in terrible condition... it is because you are ignorant to that, that you can speak this way.”

Ram doesn't conceal her discomfort. Subaru smiles wryly at her blatant priorities.

Subaru: “He's sleeping or I guess I just got driven out. ...Though, I said the things I needed to say, so I don't think that's a problem.”

Ram: “I see. ...At very least, I believe that should the demand come from Roswaal-sama's mouth, Lewes-sama will accept it. Garf would... I'm not certain yet how he would respond.”

Subaru: “If he starts complaining anyway, you try a round of seducing him. If you come up with just a bit of flirtiness and cutely coax him... is it possible for you?”

Ram: “Do you mean to say I am not cute?”

Subaru: “Nope, if we just take your looks I'd say you're super crazy cute.”

She looks exactly like Rem except for the hair colour, after all. It's not that she isn't cute. The problem's her refreshing personality which more than sufficiently counterbalances that cuteness.

Subaru: “He's interacted with you, but man does Garfiel go for some nasty food. Or no, just going by looks you can't tell... a lady like a blowfish, you ar—owowow!”

Ram: “I can tell that was not a compliment, so this is how I'll react, Barusu.”

Ram drives her heel into Subaru's foot with as much force as she can, snorting as Subaru tears up. Ram then goes to stand before Roswaal's sleeping room.

Ram: “I will change Roswaal-sama's bandages, and afterwards rest. You will be sleeping in the same cathedral as yesterday. Even you would be able to remember the location, yes, Barusu?”

Subaru: “My sense of direction's surprisingly solid. And it's the biggest building. I'm not gonna miss it. Kinda a pain there's no lights though.”

SANCTUARY relies on starlight. But tonight the sky is cloudy. Subaru glances outside the building to see faint spots of light from the houses, and pitch darkness everywhere else. There is some unease to be had about getting back.

Subaru: “Me getting lost and wandering into the forest, bumping into an encounter with a wild animal and getting a bad end—probably won't be happening. All good all good.”

Ram: “I feel that your statement just increased the likelihood of an unlikely possibility but, fine. Barusu, after leaving the building the cathedral is to your right and straight ahead.”

Subaru: “I gooooot it. The side you hold your chopsticks in. That custom, doesn't exist in this world though.”

This place's food customs are knife-fork-spoon, so Ram doesn't seem to understand what Subaru just said. Subaru considers, one day, if there's a chance, whittling down some wood and mass producing chopsticks.

Subaru: “Anyway going back to the cathedral... It's not certain whether they'll be able to return to the village, and giving them false hopes'd be something so better not talk about the releasing thing, yeah?”

Ram: “I would say there is no concern there. The conversation will be tomorrow... and although fast it may turn out being the day after tomorrow. Echidna's tomb and how to face it is what I recommend you consider over that time.”

Subaru stops in his exit of the building. Ram's expression is dubious, and becomes even more confused when Subaru turns back to look at her.

Subaru: “...What did you just say?”

His voice is hoarse. Ram's confusion eases not as she trawls through her memories.

Ram: “Tomb and how to face it is what I recommend you consider.”

Subaru: “No. A little before that.”

Ram: “Do you mean to say I am not cute?”

Subaru: “Wow that went back! ...you said, Echidna's tomb, right?”

Ram nods reluctantly, Subaru puts his hand to his forehead—a torrent of revived memories rush through Subaru's thoughts.

Echidna.

The name of the Witch of Greed. A white-haired girl in what looked like a mourning dress. Self-proclaimed thirst for knowledge incarnate. Precious parallel world bokukko.¹ And,

Subaru: “What was she doing... goddamn putting blocks on people's memories...”

1 A girl who uses the pronoun 'boku'. Echidna is one except when she isn't.

Perhaps to ensure Subaru wouldn't tell others about herself, she was the being who had messed around with Subaru's memories. When the tea party ended, and when they parted at the end of the TRIAL, she forced a pledge onto Subaru. Though, with the compensation for that being qualifications to challenge the TRIAL, Subaru had intended to just be content accepting that.

Subaru: "Call it imperfect or half-assed... either way, the ban's lifted!"

The restrictions Echidna was supposed to have placed on Subaru had lifted, and his memories were unbound. He remembers meeting the witches at the tea party, facing schoolgirl uniform Echidna, all in a hodgepodge. And remembering it, Subaru hits upon one possibility of breaking the deadlock in SANCTUARY. It was essentially a forbidden technique, but,

Subaru: "If the cathedral's toward where you hold your chopsticks, the cemetery's toward where you hold your bowl!"

Ram: "Barusu?"

Subaru: "Gonna be staying up a little late tonight! Don't you make that convalescing guy do anything that'd wear him out too much!"

Subaru raises his arm at Ram's call and bounds out of the building, running into the night. His path heads not to the cathedral, but toward the tomb he had only just exited two hours ago. Speaking temporally, it was unlikely that Subaru'd get to confirm his idea right now. Unlikely, but he couldn't just sit still. If nighttime was no good then he at least wanted the result of knowing it was no good.

Subaru: "After I took the first TRIAL, a goddamn ton of things that're bugging me came up. Invite me to you tea party again, witch... no, Echidna!"

Relying on the meagre natural lighting, Subaru runs off the path and through SANCTUARY. Cold wind, wet earth, sweaty brow, ragged breath—feeling everything, Subaru pushes his yet-tired body onward, onward. And, finally reaching his destination,

???: "Hey. ...Thought yer'd be comin."

Blocking Subaru's path is a blond young man—Garfiel, watching over the cemetery.



Garfiel: "Good on yer, goin' runnin' this late 'n the night. Men're born with th' duty t'work t'get strong. 'S WINBROOK QUALIFIES THE WARRIOR."

Standing in the road with his arms spread wide, Garfiel bears his bestial fangs as checks Subaru. Goosebumps rise across Subaru's skin.

Subaru: "Ah, sorry but I'm not doing anything so passionate as running. I got no intention to chat with you right here right now. It's not like there's a time limit, but gotta strike while the iron's hot and so..."

Garfiel: "Y'dun gettit, oi."

A sharp crack—the noise of Garfiel stomping the ground once, faster than the eye can see, rupturing the earth. Dirt scatters through the air as Subaru watches a gash gouge through the firm ground beneath his feet, his eyes wide. Garfiel clicks his fangs.

Garfiel: “M sayin' that 'f yer pull back right here right now, I'll put this'n down as you doin' just some late-night runnin'.”

Subaru: “Now that's two people in this short timespan that've been treating me like I'm some stranger... just what topics am I getting left out of?”

Garfiel: who knows. “But, 'S least no doubt yer ain't been payin' 'ttention t' yerserlf or th' people 'round you.”

Subaru tries to loosen the mood, but Garfiel's eyes keep their hostile blaze. Garfiel traces his finger over the white scar on his forehead.

Garfiel: “All th's forward 'f here's the tomb. Sure ya don't wanna come out this far t' take'a piss, yeh?”

Subaru: “Wanna come along and piss together? Man, pissing on a witch's grave. I can tell just thinking of it's something that'd get you some crazy revenge.”

Though, Subaru has a feeling that the Echidna he knows would find that amusing rather than enraging. Either way, still keeping his guard up toward Subaru, Garfiel seems to want to keep talking.

Garfiel: “Yer ain't tryin' t' challenge another TRIAL the same night ya already passed one, are ya? 'S bein' straight greedy, that.”

Subaru: “I'm not thinking of anything that wild. Just kinda planning out a different approach.”

Garfiel: “Yer plottin'.”

Subaru: “I'm plotting.”

Call it backhanded, a forbidden method, a mysterious data disc or whatever you want. He'll swallow anything down to the bone, clinging to whatever chance of light in this darkness.

Subaru: “So get outta the way, Garfiel. I'm going in the tomb. I might just come up with an amazing masterplan to do something about everyth...”

Garfiel: “Real sorry, abs'lutely not. Yer are, absolutely, not gettin' in this tomb.”

Garfiel isn't bending. Subaru goes past confusion and starts feeling anger. Why, for what reason, was it this guy of all people who was blocking Subaru's path?

Subaru: “You were supposed to have thought that. And so that's what you were like to me. And then still.”

Garfiel: “Yer sayin' things that ain't makin' sense. My amazin' self don't ever bend on my decisions. You ain't getting' through. Even unrelated t' SANCTUARY.”

Subaru: “You're even fucking saying that... just what the hell about me is pissing you off?!”

Garfiel's attitude is clearly different from the first day and the previous loop. Subaru raises his voice, seeking the reason behind this over-absurd difference in Garfiel's reaction. Garfiel scrunches up his nose, his face resembling that of a beast.

Garfiel: “—Yer stink.”

Subaru: “—auh?”

Subaru replies, unconsciously, with a groan.
Garfiel's hand goes to his nose.

Garfiel: “Ever since yer came outta the tomb, yer body's been fuckin' stinkin' with witch's miasma. —Yer sayin' I trust yer witch-smellin' ass n' a half-witch? Who fucking could!”

Garfiel raises his arms, bares his fangs, his rage in full display.

Garfiel: “This is SANCTUARY! The Witch of Greed's test site! Where mishmashes and half-dones gather, their destinations gone, a packing of futureless shit!!”

CHAPTER 27: WHISPERS

—The sound of that rage is very familiar to Subaru.

Subaru: “The witch's, stink...”

This makes it the second time that Subaru has been faced with hostility for this reason. Picking up the scent that Subaru himself can't smell, Garfiel glares with a hatred as if Subaru were his parents' enemy.

Subaru already knew the sharpness of that gaze, and that torrent of hostility.

The witch's stench. The criminal's lingering scent. A man bewitched.

That was how she had sworn at him, it worsening his relation to the point she even once stole his life.

Garfiel: “What're yer lookin' so damn spaced out fer. Hittin' the bullseye make yer mouth stop workin'?”

The shock and shivering blocks Subaru's throat. Garfiel speaks with unending anger, his arms hanging loosely at his sides, but guard raised. He's keeping watch on Subaru's every move, the faint familiarity supposedly existing between the two of them thoroughly driven away.

Subaru: “That, witch's stink thing...”

Garfiel: “Ah?”

Subaru: “The stench drifting around my body, after I left the tomb—ever since after the TRIAL, is it safe to say it's been there?”

Garfiel: “...Yeah. 'Till then it wasn't anythin' t'worry 'bout, but second y'came back yer fuckin' stank. Dun givva crap what ya did inside, but my amazin' self ain't so soft 's to trust some bastard who makes that kinda fuckin' stink.”

Garfiel nods. Subaru gives a small sigh and closes his eyes.

The witch's stench. The timing when its thickness increased was almost undoubtedly directly following his RETURN BY DEATH.

It was an enigma that he'd been having suspicions about for some time, but unconsciously avoided giving and answer to. Now, although belated, Subaru accepts one piece of that answer.

—The thing that made Natsuki Subaru RETURN BY DEATH, was the Witch.

He didn't know the reason. They should have no relation. But there was a mysterious kind of comprehension and acceptance to be had in it. The sensation was as if being stuck on a puzzle one piece away from being solved, last piece in hand, and finally completing the image, stating the answer he had already known.

Subaru: “Just what on earth connection does this have to me? ...My life was completely unrelated to supernatural phenomena until I came to this world. And even since coming here, I've never had a direct meeting with the great and topical Witch... Far from it, I was dead like six hours within being summoned.”

Subaru had been granted the trait of RETURN BY DEATH when he was summoned to this world. If that had a relationship to the witch, then the summoning itself would also be connected to the witch. He hadn't even once desired a clear answer to this question, but—

Subaru: “In the end, can't avert my eyes to this, either...”

Garfiel: “Hell're you mutterin' about. 'F yer got time t'fuss over nonsense n' crap, get yerself to the cathedral and sleep. 'Causin' trouble fer my amazin' self.”

Subaru: “...You're really overlooking this? If I'm gonna say it like you would, I'm some suspicious bastard making witch stink drift around his whole body. We're alone in the middle of the night with nobody around. This's the perfect situation for a tryst or an assassination.”

Garfiel: “Ha. Ain't like my amazin' self's too impatient t' think that far. ...It'd be easy t'chew yer throat t' shreds right now. But what happens if I do? I at least know that if the half-witch's buddy—you—dies, it'll cause problems even more annoyin'.”

Subaru tilts his head, unable to catch what Garfiel's intention is.

Garfiel: “But,”

Garfiel: “You gettin' closer t' the tomb 'n havin' that stench multiply's a no thanks. Right now the only one who's notice'd be my sharp-nosed amazin' self, but... wouldn't be weird for the granny 'n others 'n this packin' of shit t' notice. Not for more annoyin' ones to, either.”

Subaru: “More annoying...”

Garfiel: “You gotta have one 'er two ideas, yeah? Yer stinkin' cant've been somethin' that only started now. I'm sayin' the fucks who'll smell yer stink, and come.”

Garfiel clicks his fangs, Subaru's breath catching at the excess of possibilities. Garfiel snorts at Subaru's reaction and waves at him as if swatting away a bug.

Garfiel: “So I'm sayin' get outta here. Go now 'n my amazin' self won't do anythin'. 'F you behave tomorrow on too, I ain't gonna chew yer up. But if yer get near the tomb, yer gonna get my amazin' self n' the granny involved. Gonna be a bad experience fer both you n' us.”

Subaru: “Mutual non-interference, you mean. And if that happens, you won't do anything. That sure is tolerant.”

Garfiel: “SURVIVE STEPPIN' ON A GRINGAM'S TAIL. Get gone 'fore I change my mind. 'F it's possible, my amazin' self don't wanna have Ram hate me.”

By putting the name of his crush out there, Garfiel announces his resolve. That his self-restraint is barely keeping the hostility emanating from him in check is clearly communicated. There's still room for Subaru to keep debating, but,

—Retreating from this place would be a good plan.

Coming to that decision, Subaru sighs, shoulders slumping, and takes a step back. Garfiel's posture relaxes. He closes an eye, gives a long sigh out his nose and plops himself down on the road to the tomb, looking up at Subaru who still has his arms crossed.

Garfiel: “Good. Don't you do anythin' unnecessary. —From t'day 'till the TRIAL's over, my amazin' self's gonna spend his time right here. Tomorrow, day after, day after that, mornin' day'n night, I ain't gonna let you get through. Get that remembered.”

Subaru: “...At least take baths, so Ram won't hate you.”

Garfiel: “Go spend yerself so Emilia-sama's capable 'f bustin' through the TRIAL 'fore my stinkin' gets worse than yours. —Get outta here.”

Garfiel closes his eyes, apparently completely serious about spending the night here. He looks covered in openings. Subaru might be able to leave, make a huge detour and reach the tomb by passing through the forest, but,

Subaru: “Let's not.”

Garfiel's probably paying some caution to that possibility too. Garfiel's stopped Subaru here now, while he's been visible, with words. But if Subaru does something that tramples over Garfiel's consideration, Garfiel will put away that restraint. Subaru can come up with no plans of beating an opponent who can throw around Patrasche alongside the carriage, or of escaping beastlike Garfiel's nose.

Subaru: “Here's my payback for ignoring the damn tea party...”

Subaru puts his hand to his forehead, regretting not making good use of his fortune in having had that chat with the witch waiting there for him. Though, it was true that he had nothing to ask her back then, so it wasn't something he could criticize himself about.

Subaru: “But tonight's useless, at least. Have to, take some measures...”

Without getting through Garfiel, Subaru can't get to the tomb. And if Subaru doesn't get to the tomb, he loses a route other than having Emilia take the TRIAL. As far as Subaru's experienced, it's impossible for Emilia to overcome the TRIAL in three days. And if he's unable to take some action within those three days,

Subaru: “Elsa attacks the mansion. I lose the chance to repel Elsa right from under me.”

Although it being dependency on others, Subaru had wanted to speak with Echidna seeking some sideroad. Garfiel has obstructed that. And even should Subaru attempt to conquer the TRIAL devoid of Echidna's opinion, Garfiel will likely obstruct that too. Thinking that far, Subaru realises that the situation is stuck.

Subaru: “Wait, wait, wait... Isn't this situation just plain bad?”

Being that Subaru can't bust through Garfiel, Subaru has to flex his linguistic muscles or otherwise prepare some other plan for getting Garfiel aside if he's going to face the TRIAL. But that's impossible for Subaru to do independently.

Subaru: “But even if I recruit helpers... with these conditions, neither Ram or Otto're on my side.”

Regarding the Royal Selection and the TRIAL tangenting together, Ram and Otto have judged that Emilia being the one to complete the TRIAL is best. That said of course they'd be likely to change

their opinion in two days if they see Emilia getting worn out, but

Subaru: “Then we won't make it in time for the attack. There something... anything I can do?”

There's a time difference between the danger Subaru's anticipating and when those around start noticing how distressing the TRIAL is for Emilia. Subaru being rather adamant that he take the TRIAL would also possibly inspire doubts in his belief in Emilia. Just considering what Emilia would think of that gouges Subaru's chest with pain. It was not as though he didn't believe in her. On the contrary, Subaru's firmly believed that if Emilia had the time, she would assuredly fulfil the roles given to her.

—Knowing the task she is to shoulder is an excessively heavy one, can you still think that?

A low, dark whisper from inside Subaru's heart stops his feet in their advance. Subaru occasionally heard whispers like this. Coming from some near-lightless place inside him, aimed at his foolishness in intending to reach out pursuing the ideal, spoken in a voice mocking him from behind his back.

Subaru: “The TRIAL will eat away at her. But, for others' expectations and her for own wish, she'll try to proceed even if it hurts her. That's right.”

—She'll be able to overcome it if she proceeds without contemplating her wounds. Is this idea one you can truly believe?

Do you think that if she keeps walking, bearing the pain, bearing the tears, bearing the wails, the road will someday assuredly open, and her wish will be granted?

—There are wounds unnecessary to shoulder, pasts unnecessary to face, and pasts unnecessary to atone for.

Subaru: “Because she thinks she's obliged, because she thinks she has to do something, she faced her past, and is suffering...”

—But is that truly now? Isn't this just a case of bad timing?

Is the past something you truly should face, or is it not?
Must committed sins be atoned for? Should redemption be forced?
Emilia rejected this past, not wishing to know of it. And if it weren't for this TRIAL, Subaru would have never thought to have this past exposed against her will.

One day, as time passes and she swallows it down, there might come a chance for her to overcome it.

But was that truly now? Was this an appropriate time for it?

Would an answer reached when stirred by obsessive need to do something truly be one with a significance she could be proud in?

Subaru: “I'd say I'm glad I got to face my past, at least. I managed to overcome it, and even knowing it's nothing more than self-satisfaction, my standing here as I am now is my answer.”

—But wasn't that because the preparations for me to face my past were already in place?

There was a girl who was in love with and approved his own self who he had hated. It was because that girl was there, it was thanks to that girl, that Subaru could expose his unsightliness to his parents, lay bare his ugly insides, and regardless raise his head and announce his farewells.

—Right now, are those preparations in place for Emilia?

Having touched one one fragment of the weight of the past she harboured, just how much strength had Subaru's words and actions until now granted her? Just how much had his thin views on life, minuscule efforts, and unsubstantiated voicings of love supported her back?

Subaru: "...Just what should I do with you?"

He loved Emilia. Was in love with her. Wanted to live being in love with her, were his thoughts. He wanted her to think of him with love. Wanted to be loved. Wished to stay in love, was another of his thoughts.

He wanted to do things that would make her happy. He wanted to be her aid. When her thoughts were bitter, painful, sorrowful, he wanted to bear them in her place. And even if he could not, even if he would not be permitted so, he at least wanted to be her support.

—Subaru wanted to do what the girl who had made him stand, do what Rem had done for him.

Like Rem who loved him with all her soul, Subaru wanted to support Emilia. If he did, he believed he would for the first time gain the qualifications to make what he pledged to Rem true. So, right now, the thing that Subaru should do was,

Subaru: "The time you need to stand, the resolution to carry through with something, everything possibly like that... it's me making that for you, huh."

Balling his hand into a fist, Subaru amends his views on what he should do, letting slip a sigh mixed with a smile.

The hell. What he was going to do hadn't changed at all.

Subaru: "Do my best for her. —Put it in words, and that's all this ruminating's about. Well, gotta be aware of what it is you have to do."

For now it was the unavoidable problems and the obstacles attached. Clear those, and then it was breakthrough plans overflowing with novelty and surprise. He'd start drafting them. He wouldn't be getting time. It was limited. And he couldn't run off of hastily-made, incorrect conclusions. The amount of things he had overlooked until now, doing that, were excessive.

Subaru: "Things're bad and headed worse with no upturn. That things're getting worse the more time that passes feels so real it's mortifying."

The pattern of 'just leave it to time and things'll sort out' definitely wasn't coming. That said, it was exactly because the world was—as far as Subaru was concerned—so strict, that his struggling, floundering, and opposing had worth.

Subaru: "Conditions are their worst. Time is none. Drowning in things I don't understand as usual, but..."

Completely mundane, same case for anyone, but just by having been given the chance for do-overs, he was so, so much better off.

Subaru: “You believe that Natsuki Subaru's courage, will save Emilia!”

So let's try struggling through one with his best, and see how it goes.

CHAPTER 28: TALK OVER TEA

Feeling the morning daylight burning his eyelids, Subaru uprights himself in the darkness. Looks like he wound up falling asleep while he was thinking. But since he was submerged in the sea of thought late into the night, it means he only slept one, two hours.

Subaru: “Would never think of this back in the old world. Sun being up in itself'd be my sleeping hours.”

Subaru glances around at those awake inside the cathedral. They notice Subaru's gaze on them and wave, Subaru giving replies to the Arlam villagers greeting him as he stands up and heads for the cathedral's entrance. The refreshing morning air welcomes him outside, where it seems the people of SANCTUARY and the evacuees are cooperating to start with food rationing.

???: “Oh, you're awake, Subaru-sama.”

Subaru: “Hey, good morning. 'Nother fresh morning today.”

???: “It is. The wind's chilly... it seemed you managed to get some good sleep as well, Subaru-sama.”

The woman acquaintance who addresses Subaru smiles as she touches her finger to her cheek. Subaru also tries touching his cheek, to find a something mushy—a sticky track of drool.

Subaru: “Augh no embarrassing”

Why was it that sleeping for short hours made it easier for this sloppiness to show up? Seemed even little catnaps could have regular sleeping habits attached. Smiling at Subaru as he thinks about this pointless crap is the woman, and another woman who has dog ears. Subaru accepts the wet cloth she presents him, thanks her, and wipes his mouth.

He asks for confirmation that the shit is off his face, the women affirm it is. Subaru tells them he's gonna use the cloth for washing himself/his face too and heads off for the waterin' spot, waving the women goodbye.

Subaru glances back at the two, seeing no signs of discomfort or disagreement between them as they chat. These different races definitely have some natural-feeling communication going on between them.

Over these few days—include the days overwritten by RbD and it's a week—there hasn't been any discord between the evacuees and the people of SANCTUARY.

The evacuees have high morale, and loathe to say it but the presence of their Lord Roswaal brings them some relief. In reality you can add that they have faith in Subaru who's eating meals alongside them, but Subaru views his own influence scanty and doesn't think far enough to notice that.

Betraying the leeriness of this place, there're a good number of SANCTUARY dwellers like the dog-eared chick who've come to be open for conversation. It's so pervasive that Subaru can believe that the divide between the humans and the half-bloods is entirely something that exists only in their minds.

Subaru: “Though what's definitely dividing is the existence of the damn barrier... Dunno what the person who put it there was thinking, but it wasn't nice of them.”

If we're believing Garfiel's words, this place is apparently the WITCH OF GREED'S TEST SITE. Which

would mean that this barrier being here to stop half-bloods from leaving was probably the witch's work.

Subaru: "Echidna... huh. Just getting less and less apparent what that witch's goal is."

White skin to white hair, a monochrome girl garbed in black dress. Lost her life 400 years ago, but still bound to the present day as a ghost. Contrary to her blustering that she wasn't interfering with the present day, she'd been meeting with Subaru at the TRIAL's location and butting in on his activities. Subaru figures she has some deep and mysterious reason for it, but,

Subaru: "If she's just a meddler who likes watching the aftermath, she's seriously hopeless. Or actually what're you supposed to think about a lady who makes people she's meeting for the first time drink bodily fluids for no reason..."

The unpleasant memory of drinking the Chidna Tea is resurrected. Although, that was supposed to be something that happened in a mental world, so Subaru wanted to believe that his body did not actually absorb any Chidna bits.

Either way, regardless of Echidna's plans, the fact of SANCTUARY being surrounded by a barrier and the residents stuck inside remains true.

Subaru: "For that to change, the biggest obstacle is... yeah, it's probably Garfiel."

Even if Subaru gets to talk with Echidna, even if Subaru gets to challenge the TRIAL, the coming bottleneck is how to deal with Garfiel, whose hostility towards Subaru has shot up. If Garfiel's change in stance toward Subaru is coming from the Witch's stench—from a negative side effect of RETURN BY DEATH—then to change that stance is gonna be a monumental effort.

Subaru had utilised the stench against the Ulgarm and during the White Whale fight, where it acted as a key to break the deadlock, but,

Subaru: "I can get stinkier, but I don't know if there's a way to remove the stink... doubt it's something that'll go away with deodorants. Or what the hell am I saying. Stinky, not stinky, what am I, garbage?"

Either way, Subaru can consciously make the stench intensify by attempting to tell someone of his RETURN BY DEATH. And taking that thought into consideration, it doesn't seem like the stench remains elevated indefinitely at that thickness. It seems alright to say that just like usual odour, it weakens with the passage of time. Though taking that the other way, it means there's no way to weaken the smell outside of that.

Subaru: "So there's no chance of hoping Garfiel'll ease up. And, this isn't something I really want to consider, but... if I fail, and RETURN BY DEATH again..."

If he loses his life again, and restarts inside the tomb, the lingering scent on Subaru will overlap with the Witch's stench. Just thinking of how Garfiel will react to that is terrifying.

Faced with the worst of conditions and losing his life, Subaru could alter the result through do-overs.

Salvage absolutely everything—was Subaru's greed, but presently it was not the case that he had fulfilled everything. There were yet still things he could not bring back.

But regardless, Subaru intended through his do-overs to select a future better than the ones from before said do-overs. It was hard being grateful for RETURN BY DEATH, but he could think of several one-way paths toward abysmal futures that would have proceeded without it. However,

Subaru: “By repeating, I can do something... but with every re-do, my relations worsen. Having the difficulty rise with every re-do is definitely a first.”

Subaru could still establish rational discussions with Garfiel presently, but whether the chance would come again to converse with him following the multiplication of the stench was unclear. Unable to trust a Subaru wafting in stink, Rem at the very least had stolen his life with her flail.

Remembering the people left in the mansion—remembering the sleeping Rem—next leads Subaru to the thought of the assassin. Here again appeared that gleeful killer, blade-wielder who had jumped right to the top of the Subaru Kill Counter. Incidentally that grey cat spirit shares first place, and in equal second place with one kill are many of his buddies, is the state of things.

Subaru: “Looking back on it, it's a depressing kill count. Or in this case a killed count? ...Anyway, counterplans for Elsa. We get in a fight and I can't beat her, and the choices for actual fighters wind up as Roswaal or Garfiel.”

But even Roswaal would be affected by those wounds of his. So in the end the best solution to the problem is, after all, to make Garfiel an ally. And for Garfiel and Elsa to fight, it was essential to break the barrier around SANCTUARY. In the end, the important things are,

Subaru: “Conquering the TRIAL before the mansion attack and freeing SANCTUARY, appeasing Garfiel and getting him to come along to the mansion, repelling Elsa, happy end... or so.”

Stating that much, Subaru scrunches his brows at the conflicting problems.
To appease Garfiel, SANCTUARY had to be freed.
To free SANCTUARY, Subaru had to break through Garfiel and challenge the TRIAL.

These two points conflicted. He couldn't do it.
Otherwise it may be possible to appease Garfiel through conversation, but thinking back on his experiences with him so far and the talk they had last night, Subaru wanted to clutch his head with how low the probability of that succeeding was.
For better or for worse, interacting with the straightforward Garfiel is simple, thus changing his opinions on matters he's already decided on from the start is difficult.
Meaning that if there's any chance for Subaru, it's,

Subaru: “Aim for a chance to sneak into the tomb, contact Echidna and maybe get some other opportunities. Otherwise sneak in when it's time to challenge the TRIAL and conquer it.”

Washing his face at the waterin' spot, Subaru reaches this conclusion and heads for a direction separate from the food rationing grounds. He wipes his face with the wrung-out cloth, his destination being the lesser-populated edge of SANCTUARY. He continues down that road, crossing over a hillock AND

Subaru: “...And of course, I was expecting way too much with that opportunism.”

Sitting in the middle of the clearly-visible and direct road to the tomb, in the exact same posture as yesterday night, is Garfiel.

—Go to the tomb first thing in the morning, and sneak in behind Garfiel's back.

This potentially profitable plan for the morning is for now stuck at a standstill.



Subaru: "You're sure putting in work early in the morning."

Garfiel: "Speak fer yerself, don't goddamn show up right first thing 'n the day. 'S there any damn point 'n you goin' outta the way t' work my amazin' self up?"

Subaru raises his arm in greeting at Garfiel, who opens one eye, his displeasure on full display. Subaru draws his arm back down at the expected reaction, turning his attention to the petite figure standing beside the seated, cross-legged Garfiel.

Subaru: "I figured Garfiel'd be here, but I didn't expect to see you here, Lewes-san. Good morning."

Lewes: "Nnr, is a nice morning. Are yer going on a stroll too, Lil' Su?"

Subaru: "Call it a stroll and you could say it's a stroll, but it's nothing so pleasant. I came here packed with some 'just maybe' expectations, and also to annoy Garfiel."

Garfiel: "You..."

Ignoring Garfiel's getting pissed off, Subaru tilts his head at Lewes.

Subaru: "'Too', then you're out on a stroll, Lewes-san?"

Lewes: "My havin' a stroll cerms ertached, 's where it is. I heard Lil' Gar hadn't come home and wers sitting out here on the ground... well, I'm seein' how things'll go, alongside."

Lewes fiddles with her long, wavy pink hair with her finger. Her other hand holds a small package, which from its size and shape is evidently a simple foodstuff. It's probably stubborn not-moving-from-this-spot Garfiel's breakfast. Subaru rubs his chin as he looks at the two.

Subaru: "Have you known eachother long, Garfiel and Lewes?"

Lewes: "Least since Lil' Gar wers small.. he's still small now, though."

Garfiel: "Oi, look'ere granny. 'V far overshot yer height, yeah?"

Lewes: "But yer haven't grown any bigger than erkspected. Either way, I've known him since he wers much smaller than now. I'm even used to these erkschanges."

Subaru's eyebrows rise as he notices something.

Subaru: "Going from your phrasing... Garfiel hasn't been in SANCTUARY since he was born?"

Garfiel: "...Don't probe into anythin' unnecessary. You wanna case'a STRIKE SUDDEN BLACK BAUTAUk TABLES TURN?"

Subaru: "Right, that did not communicate and so it cannot not stop me. Which means, if you'd like to answer, Lewes-san..."

Garfiel's about grinding his teeth at Subaru's attitude as he completely ignores last night's warning, but Subaru doesn't give a shit and keeps right on going. Lewes gives a tired sigh.

Lewes: "Lil' Gar enterin' SANCTUARY wers ten-and-something years ago. He wers still a toddling little baby. Lil' Roz brought him along with..."

Garfiel: "—Granny, don't say anythin' unneeded more than that."

Garfiel narrows his eyes, voice low. Subaru internally panics that he might've just carelessly trampled too far, but,

Lewes: "Who're yer speakin' ter with that kinda lip, yer moron."

Garfiel: "Aaaouw!"

Lewes gives Garfiel's head a good whack. Lewes has little girl arms. They're probably not that strong, but Garfiel clutches his head as he looks up at Lewes, his expression as if he's been struck by lightning.

Garfiel: "Gr-granny the hell're you doin' all sudden..."

Lewes: "Ers that any way fer yer ter speak ter me, who's most all raised yer and ers like your parent? I swear, ert's so pathetic and embarrassing and sad I'm about ter cry. Take this'nthis'nthis"

Garfiel: "Sto—ow, au, we're, we're bein' watch, aug,"

Garfiel manages holds back Lewes' blows, his expression one as if his secret shame were being observed. Subaru manages to keep himself from accidentally, unconsciously smiling at their exchange.

Subaru: "I've just managed to surmise objectively the depth and length of your relationship. ...Garfiel, are you seriously planning to sit here forever?"

Garfiel: "Gonna be here fer everythin' 'cept doin' my business. 'S a good chance there's guys 'round who'll take advantage 'f the gaps when my amazin' self ain't lookin'."

Garfiel's got his guard up against anyone sneaking in, and is maintaining it even through this conversation. For Subaru, with his 'just maybe' tier expectations, it's not something to be dejected about. If Garfiel's attitude and statements for the past half day have been a sudden change, it's probably necessary for Subaru to re-evaluate his assessment of him. But either way, that getting stubborn Garfiel to move is difficult hasn't changed.

Subaru: "Actually, isn't the TRIAL at night? I'm not gonna get anything from it even if I sneak in at day. Isn't your sitting here like this pointless?"

Garfiel: "Yer ain't gonna get my amazin' self t'move like that. You sneak in th' tomb at daytime n' wait for night, and with my not goin' inside yer conditions get all fulfilled. My amazin' self ain't the only one ready f'r a long fight. Don't underes'mate me too much."

Subaru: "Tch, got leaked."

Subaru raises his hands, shrugging, indicating he's given up. Garfiel snorts and glances at Lewes.

Garfiel: "So I ain't movin' from this spot fer a while. Granny, food."

Lewes: "What attertude is that when someone goes outta their way to bring it to yer, deplorable. Here."

Despite the complaints, Lewes hands him the parcel. Garfiel accepts and opens the package to find some dumpling-esque food inside which he steadily settles into his stomach. With Lewes assisting him like this, the battle's going to be one of endurance.

Subaru: "It'll be hard to do something about these conditions... Nothing for it, I'll come back again."

Garfiel: "I said yer don't hafta. You ain't getting' through, I ain't lettin' yer through, I ain't permittin' ya through. All you gotta do's shut up n' make yerself small."

Done eating, Garfiel licks his fingers as Subaru goes to turn his back. Subaru gives him a wave with his back turned and leaves, Lewes coming up beside him.

Lewes: "Lil' Gar's dern with his food, so. I wanna talk with yer a bit, Lil' Su."

Subaru: "What a coincidence. I have things I'd like to ask you too, Lewes. Though I really wanted to do it after seeing Emilia's face, but..."

Subaru glances up the sky. Sun's only just risen.

Subaru's memory has it that the morning after the first TRIAL, Emilia woke up around midday. Subaru wanted to go along with his desires and look at her sleeping face, but he should probably proceed along with this other event.

Subaru glances down at Lewes, observing her. Her expression looks sleepy and she's powering her little legs to match Subaru's pace. The loligranny was a creature which tickled the heart, even should you know its true form.

Subaru: "Want me to give you a piggyback?"

Lewes: "...And jerst when I was wonderin' why yer were looking at me with eyes all tender. Lil' Su, are yer one of them attracted to little girls? Yer even less salvageable than Lil' Roz."

Subaru: "That suspicions of a loli complex toward me are false accusations's a good point of mine. The thing which determines which galge games I buy is whether there's an upperclassmate or older sister character in the romancable heroines. Even now the one I'm desperately trying to get to glance back at me's in the older sister class... or actually recently, I found out she's seriously kinda older than me but, my mind's never gonna change. That's just what I'm like."

Lewes: "And just what is that like, ers something I wanna ask but, I'm sure it's fine. No piggyback. Yer hips and legs get weak if yer don't walk around proper."

Subaru: "And there's another amazing statement showing the appearance gap!"

And just how true does the state of her only looking young and truly being elderly feel! There's also the possibility that only her skin or whatever is young and her insides are geriatric. The loligranny, in surprisingly dire states.

Lewes: “Yer look like yer thinking of something erhverwhelmingly stupid.”

Subaru: “Wha, no, seriously? But I was paying attention not to let it slip out on my face and keeping my expression posed, supposedly.”

Lewes: “Yer face looks the same ers when Lil' Gar pinches hidden pastries. Children do always the same things, no matter the child.”

Subaru: “This granny, keeps showing off her granny appeal one-after-another...”

Lewes' granny appeal aside, Subaru tilts his head.

Subaru: “Huh?”

Subaru: “This talking's... fine but, where are we going? Or actually this is seriously late to be asking but with Emilia-tan borrowing your bed, where are you staying, Lewes-san? Outside?”

Lewes: “Yer instantly treating me like I'm homeless after I lend my house's... a statement which means I can only think yer fergot about my more-er-less standing as this place's head. I do have friends I can make lodge me fer a few days.”

Subaru: “Well, that'd be right. Might be a few days, but all the people here are unexpectedly nice people.”

It's not just the citizens at the food rationing. As Subaru thinks back on the frequent chances he's had to interact with the residents of SANCTUARY, his eyebrows furrow, wondering if the friction Garfiel talked about wasn't just a huge exaggeration. Subaru elects for silence, Lewes shooting him a glance and nodding.

Lewes: “Hm,”

Lewes: “Something not sitting right with yer?”

Subaru: “No, I mean saying it like this's something, but... it's just, it's different from what I envisioned. Half-elf Emilia got some incredible treatment at the palace, so I was thinking maybe half-bloods get treated like that everywhere. And so then I was thinking the half-bloods' feelings towards pure-bloods might be pretty complex.”

At very least, for being trapped here in the test site aka SANCTUARY, the residents aren't particularly displaying any grim emotions. Of course they internally probably did think this wasn't amusing, but Subaru hadn't caught sight of any displays of such negative emotions.

You have indiscriminate-with-his-words-and-feelings Garfiel acting as proxy, but his emotions seem closer to righteous indignation than his own personal anger. That is, anger for the sake of others, rather than himself.

For being such a nasty environment, the people of SANCTUARY have absurdly high morale. Rather than unconventional, you could even call it incomprehensible.

Lewes opens her eyes in surprise.

Lewes: “What, Lil' Su, yer mullin' over more than yer looks would say.”

Subaru: “Than your looks would say, really wasn't needed. I'm at least confident that my appearance

is closer to an intellectual type than Garfiel's, okay? Well, we're talking about my thinking-deficient, etc-deficient self here, though.”

Lewes: “Ern't it good to be aware of yer deficiencies? Yer get people who steady their grit and get serious knowing that they're deficient. ...Ah, this way.”

They come to a split in the path, Lewes guides a lost-on-where-to-go Subaru along. The path goes down a direction different from the cathedral and Roswaal's housing, to the outskirts of the village opposite the cemetery—where Lewes' temporary lodgings sit, isolated. It's different from the sporadically-placed houses of the residents, this one just mysteriously sitting there entirely separated from the others, monopolizing this spot.

Subaru: “This's super lonely. Why are you staying out here?”

Lewes: “No herlping it. This's most the only building in SANCTUARY with no one living in it. It ers a tidge far from the village proper, but it's big and I value it.”

Subaru: “What happened to you having friends who'd lodge you? Why did you choose a bed where you'd still be alone? I know many loligrannies but a loligranny dying alone's too heartrending I've never seen it before.”

Lewes: “I ain't gonna be findin' out whether yer worried fer me er makin' fun of me. Here, in yer go. I'll at least make tea for yer. Can't do it as nice as Ram, though.”

Subaru: “No matter what leaf tea I drink all I sense is the taste of leaves so proceed without any concern.”

Lewes: “Yer speak for yerself, should pay mer concern to what exactly yer saying.”

Sighing, Lewes invites Subaru in. Subaru pushes the door open and enters. The building's about half as spacious as Roswaal's temporary housing. That said, Roswaal's lodging is excessively big for just one person, so this three-roomed house has room aplenty.

Subaru sits at a nearby chair and looks the room over—it's compact and plain, but has clearly had attentive maintenance done. Lewes was supposed to have said no one was living here, but,

Subaru: “For an unresided house, it sure feels like someone's been here frequently. Even me, labourer of high-class sheets that I am, would give the airiness of this bed a passing mark... No Lewes-san it couldn't be you”

Lewes: “What're yer doing with that 'Lewes spends her time coming here ever and whenever she wants to 'be one', then lies there idly waiting for the heat to cool off' face yer got.”

Subaru: “That sure was a specific and complicated expression I just made, huh!”

With that fast-spoken excuse perhaps being something she's thought about before, Lewes becomes a sadder person. That thing about her dying alone was a joke, but the part where she's elderly and dying alone without relatives is hard to refute. Lewes turns away from Subaru as she wordlessly enters teamaking mode, Subaru casting his gaze around, looking for some chance to change the topic.

A nice and orderly room. Slightly dulled dresser and clothes-shelves. Vases without flowers and metal shields hanging on the wall. —Shields?

Subaru: "Why're there shields here? And two of them?"

Lewes: "Lil' Gar's things. Using the place as a derved storehouse."

Subaru: "So he's been hanging around here too. It does feel like a spot for naughty kids to hang out, but... no way he'd be doing the cleaning so it's this thorough, right?"

Way too out of character, mutters Subaru too himself as he observes Garfiel's shields. It's pretty common in manga and things for noble's mansions or whatever to have crossed swords hanging on the wall. The shields are getting similar treatment, tilted diagonally in their display. But the repairs on them aren't fitting for an ornamental piece, with nicks and dings over them. Doesn't seem like these are battle-ignorant antiques.

Subaru: "But what kind of battle can you have with just shields?"

Lewes: "Used ter have batterin' matches with the shields in the field outside the house all the time. Each'd hold a shield, going round round round round as they bumped each other."

Subaru: "That sounds super dangerous for just playing around. ...Do you mind if I ask, Garfiel and who?"

Through all his time in SANCTUARY, Subaru's never seen anyone Garfiel's been especially friendly towards. Though of course, being that he's an important person here, it's apparent that he has good relations with the residents who show up at the food rationing. But if you remove that, and then question who exactly Garfiel has a close relationship with, Subaru can't come up with any specific names.

If forced to say, Subaru would name Lewes, but the image of her holding a shield getting in a battering match with Garfiel sounds perilous.

Lewes goes silent for a period. She sets two steaming teacups on a tray, comes over to Subaru and offers him a cup, then seats herself on the bed. Subaru accepts the hot cup, places it to his lips, wets his throat.

Subaru: "Yeah, just tastes like leaves."

Lewes: "No use'n brewing tea fer yer. Well, I did figure that much so I used cheap leaves. ...Even tealeaves are precious things, here."

Seems like said precious things and luxury items get brought here once a month thanks to Roswaal. For a while, the two silently sip their tea. And, after several passages of these cozy silences,

Subaru: "—Frederica."

Mutters Subaru. Lewes' brows quiver as she shifts her gaze up from her teacup and looks at Subaru.

Subaru: "The name of the person Garfiel butted shields with was Frederica, right?"

Lewes: "...Did Lil' Gar tell yer?"

Subaru: "Nyah. I just strung it together from some fragmentary talks, thinking 'kinda could be this.' And I sorta understood that Garfiel and Frederica have a complicated relationship."

Frederica, who at Roswaal's mansion named Garfiel as someone to pay special caution towards in SANCTUARY.

Garfiel, whose expression changed upon hearing Frederica's name. There was also that time where he indirectly seemed to be trying to find out her present status. It's impossible not to suspect some relation between them. And the clincher was,

Subaru: "Their fangs're way too similar. Not even the Buddha would permit this be unrelated."

Lewes: "...ahh, I swear. I can't think of anything to say ter refute that."

Lewes gives a resigned sigh at this decisive factor, and slips some laughter. It was the biggest point of commonality between Garfiel and Frederica. The oversharp canines, the overmenacing smiles, and that was enough. You could tell their relationship wasn't one of lovers or anything salacious. What seemed like the best guess for their relationship was —

Subaru: "Older brother, little sister... no, feels sorta older sister, little brother. If we're wondering which, Frederica's more the older sister type."

Lewes: "Goodness... if yer figuring out all that just off yer interition, I'd call it almost too incredible."

Says Lewes, more and more astonished. She gives an accepting nod, places her remaining tea back on the tray, and fixes her posture.

Lewes: "Just as yer thought, Lil' Su, the owners of these shields are the siblings Frederica and Garfiel. Frederica Baumann, presently distant from SANCTUARY, and Garfiel Tinsel, are family tied by blood."

Affirming Subaru's guess, Lewes lets slip a gloomy sigh,

Lewes: "—But they've had their disagreements, and've wound up on differing paths."

CHAPTER 29: OMNIVORE MALE

Getting to the point of what he wanted to hear, Subaru puts his cup to his lip. The hot tea passes down his throat, alongside several suspicions he had had, settling in his stomach. Subaru ponders seriously over what to say, and,

Subaru: "To what extent are you willing to answer my questions?"

Lewes: "...It seems yer already sensing it'll be indirect but, please dern't expect much. With the ties ter the contract in place, there's little information I can give you, Lil' Su. I'm subject ter strict command ter avoid things that'd influence the TRIAL from outside the tomb."

Subaru: "I can tell from your phrasing you're already giving me hints, but... strict command, huh."

Lewes goes silent. Going off her behaviour and statements so far, the contenders for people who could influence her like this are limited. More than likely it's Roswaal's work, but,

Subaru: "Then it just makes his goals even less apparent. Does he want me... want us to clear the TRIAL? Doesn't he? I can't tell if he's trying to cooperate with us or not."

Lewes: "He'd be hoping yer'll reach the answer ter that question yerself, is about how I'd say. Lil' Roz's always been a roundabout rascal with lotser oblique things about him. All that's grown about him's his height, wouldn't say his root aspects've changed at all."

Seems Lewes has known Roswaal since he was young. Subaru, who only knows him as a pervert, can't hide his shiver at the idea that he has been a pervert since before he was even fully grown.

Subaru: "Well, but I'm sure he must've definitely had some charm left to him still mmhm probably maybe."

Lewes: "When Lil' Roz was young... hrm. This relates to conferdential Mathers family infermation, so I can't dervulge any ferther."

Subaru: "Wuaaah, I'm interested... no, wait, am I interested? I don't really mind not knowing much about that guy's personality."

Subaru crosses his arms and tilts his head.

Subaru: "Alright, let's throw that one away. What's necessary for me is to know his plans not understand him."

Lewes: "That went by mighty easy, again."

Subaru: "I don't worry about things there's no use worrying about. Humans aren't made in a way where you can comprehend them from 0 to 100%. But the want to understand them regardless is just that thing you call love. And I can love Emilia-tan but not Roswaal!"

Lewes gives an impressed nod at that fucking RUTHLESSNESSS, and puts her hand to her chin.

Lewes: "Well then,"

Lewes: "I don't feel there's too many topics left I could talk ter yer about..."

Subaru: “Oop, but my question time simultaneous with me figuring out the range of your contract's prohibitions's still going and going. As of now we're leaving aside Roswaal's personality, but my personality of looking to question knower-of-SANCTUARY-and-granny Lewes-san has more things to ask.”

Lewes: “Hr, mm. Well, jerst asking is free, so go and ask. But if I violate the contract it ain't gonna be a problem just fer me. Yer do take care not to forget that, yeh?”

Lewes bends forward, glaring up threateningly at Subaru. However Lewes is an adorable little girl so there is absolutely no force behind this. Subaru hugs his shoulders and makes a show of shaking and shuddering, making his eyes go wet.

Subaru: “Aug scary”

Subaru: “Alright, now that we have the scary assailant and weak victim all graphed out, time for questions.”

Lewes: “I can't agree with me terning into the villain from that.”

Subaru: “A man once said: that is that and this is this. So, question—you said Frederica and Garfiel are siblings, so Frederica's been in SANCTUARY?”

Lewes scrunches up her face, Subaru intervenes with an insincere smile and enters into the main topic. Lewes' expression changes, Subaru wags his raised finger.

Subaru: “And Frederica who's supposedly been in SANCTUARY, is presently dressed in a maid outfit servicing Roswaal's mansion. But tying together what I know, this situation's strange.”

Lewes: “Hrm, how so?”

Subaru: “Her being Garfiel's sister means she's a half-blood, too. And being that she's a half-blood, with the barrier around SANCTUARY currently in place, she shouldn't be able to leave.”

The barrier around SANCTUARY reacts to half-bloods, keeping them inside once they've crossed over. It made Emilia faint, is what's kept Lewes and Garfiel stuck here indefinitely, and is presently one of the huge walls blocking Subaru's path. Subaru had been deliberating over what to do about that wall, but now there's an exception of someone leaving anyway. Meaning,

Subaru: “There's some kind of side-road around the barrier. Otherwise the barrier's been just a complete hoax all along.”

Lewes: “Hoax... ers a little saddening. It is true that ever since I've been around, I've never once had a prayer of exiting the barrier. This and that and everything, erll's the fault of the barrier erksisting.”

Subaru: “You're bound by a contract that's deceiving you... is another mean viewpoint that's possible, yeah? It's also possible you'd just never think of the thought of confirming it, if the risks is too high that you'll test whether or not it's true. But...”

It's possible that every single resident of SANCTUARY is being tricked about the barrier existing. Though with the TRIAL in the tomb unmistakably existing, this idea isn't especially realistic. Although Subaru can't completely deny the possibility that it's all been some over-meticulous plan

to trap the Arlam evacuees and give Emilia more fame.

Subaru: “Thinking of the revolt that'd happen when the truth got found out makes it too disadvantageous, and chips away at its feasibility. The latter possibility autonomously erases itself... So, that just leaves the former, and...”

Lewes: “A side-road... yer sayin'. So, if yer find out about it, what'll you do?”

Subaru: “If the side-road applies to everyone, well it might take time but if all the residents can leave SANCTUARY through that, then there's no need to take the TRIAL.”

Says Subaru casually. Lewes' jaw drops.

Subaru: “Right?”

Subaru raises all his fingers, waving his hands around.

Subaru: “I'm sure there's things to gain by taking the TRIAL. And honestly, being that I kinda got a bit of a blessing, I can't completely refute that. But, maybe it's fine to slip past the TRIAL—or PAST, in this case. I'm sure there's timings and people where facing the past shouldn't be forced.”

Lewes: “Yer mean Emilia-sama? But, it isn't that yer can choose when hardship will visit yer. Running away in the face of a coming calamity is...”

Subaru: “I'm not saying to run away entirely. It's a retreat to make the preparations for a proper intercept. A strategic withdrawal. I'm sure there's cases where you have to fight on disadvantageous ground, but rushing about to prepare the most advantageous ground possible, is both to the person themselves and those around them's credit, right?”

Subaru butts in through Lewes' talking to pile up statements to justify running around. To conclude that turning your back is not a shameful act.

Subaru: “Even if she doesn't face it now, Emilia will someday assuredly face her past. It's ironic, but the TRIAL's made her remember it. She can't choose to forget it or swallow it down. So, as best I can, my role's to build the conditions where she can settle it without suffering.”

Lewes: “...Yer planning to distance yerselves from suffering, but merely not running away from the single most painful part.”

Subaru: “Running from that's surely also an option. But I believe she... that Emilia won't do that, yup.”

Lewes: “How can yer believe in her that much? It's impossible fer me, at least. After seeing how outer sorts she was leavin' the tomb, to hold that kinder expectation is...”

Subaru: “Well, I'm crazy in love with her.”

Lewes goes to pile up more denials, when Subaru casually drops that one on her. While Lewes' been shocked several times through the conversation, this is the one that has her fucking gobsmacked. An embarrassed smile rises on Subaru's face as he scratches his cheek.

Subaru: “I love Emilia, and I think she's mega cute. So, I believe that this loved mega-cute girl of

mine is a strong girl, who'll ultimately overcome anything, no matter how hard or painful. I expect of her, expect of her, expect of her, and believe she'll meet that.”

Lewes: “Th... that ersn't an answer at all. No matter how much you love them, there're things in their heart which'll stay futile. I'm sure you understand that too, Lil' Su...”

Subaru: “Sure I understand. Emilia's a girl. She's not all strong parts, she's got frail parts too and though they're super super small I'm sure she doesn't not have some ugly parts too.”

Lewes: “Are yer accepting it er not...”

Subaru: “Believing, that even with that weak part there the strong part will shine its light, would be what devotion is, right?”

Devotion. The strongest expression of love, is the belief engraved in Subaru's heart. When he truly, with body and soul got to offer his devotion, he felt felicity. So,

Subaru: “I'm giving all I can, to Emilia. I believe she'll conquer her weak parts and raise her head strong, and I'll be working to trawl in the scene where I gloat that believing in her was correct.”

Lewes: “...Even so, the only one who gets to face their most painful heart is the person themselves.”

Subaru: “Well of course, right? I can't be at Emilia's side when she faces her PAST. If I were in her PAST, I could take her hand when she's crouched down crying and pull her back up, stand her up, give her the best cheerleading I can from beside her, but I'm not there. What happened in the PAST has no relation to me. Reach my hand out and it's just clinging, the people watching a drama can't interfere with what's on the TV.”

It's the truth. PAST was the PAST, and Subaru couldn't touch it. The PAST Subaru overcame was nothing more than forgery, he didn't communicate a single word to his real parents, and all he gained from it was a sense of self-satisfaction. But,

Subaru: “It's definite that being rewarded with something is better than being rewarded with nothing. I can't lend her my hand when she's facing her PAST. But it doesn't contradict the rules for your present self to lend your old, insufficient self a hand, does it?”

Lewes goes silent.

Subaru: “I can't lend her my hand, but my words and actions and love and... well, I'd be happy if she put me first, but Emilia's received other things from lots of people as well. She at least has more things now than she did in the PAST. If you have lots of weapons to use, those also get sent to the insufficient PAST. The difficulty rating of this TRIAL's based on the premise that you'll overcome it doing that, yeah?”

Subaru: “I will help Emilia. I'll completely devote myself so that she can overcome her past. And for that purpose, I'll use side-roads or obstinance or cheat donation items or damn anything. That's how I devote myself.”

Lewes: “Gracious... ain't that beyond the peak of loving someone egocentrically.”

Subaru: “Neither herbivore nor carnivore, call me the omnivore male!”

Subaru clicks his fingers and flashes a grin, entering a thumbs-up winking pose. Lewes gives a long, long, resigned sign.

Lewes: “Those were sure some pretty words yer lined up, in that excuse of yers to be wily.”

Subaru: “Heheh!”

Lewes: “Twaddle. ...Sorry, I can't tell yer the details of that side-road. But I can say that if yer relying on that, it ain't going to werk. Frederica's leaving SANCTUARY was an erksception. Yer can't bring everybody out of SANCTUARY.”

And thus Lewes crushes Subaru's prospects with a shake of her head. Subaru's dejection, slumped shoulders, collapsing to the floor on his knees—etc, doesn't happen.

Subaru: “Oh well. It was just a thought that'd be a profit if it went well but we'll put that as fine. Then, the next question'd be...”

Lewes: “It's weird with me sayin' it but, that sure didn't discourage yer, Lil' Su.”

Subaru: “If this much was enough to break me, I have no idea how many times I would've wound up inside a whale's stomach. Me saying this's something too but, I've got no weapons except how bad I am at giving up and the depth of my love.”

Lewes is again fucking amazed. Subaru claps his hands.

Subaru: “Snap outta that,”

Subaru: “Though, I know that Emilia revealing her true power at full strength and overcoming the TRIAL just like that'd be the most hero-epic-ish way for it to go. As a 老練な TRIAL 挑戦者, would you have anything to comment on that, Lewes-san?”²

Lewes: “Feels I jerst got called sermething incredibly stupid. And all I can answer to that question's that I don't know. I've never taken the TRIAL before, so there should be no way that I would know, yer?”

Subaru: “Whu?”

Subaru: “Would you have perhaps just proclaimed that you have never taken the TRIAL?”

Lewes: “Why're yer speaking polite all the sudden. Ain't it obvious? Me taking the TRIAL, with its practice of having outsiders take it, wouldn't be allowed. Same fer the others. Least as far as the 70 years I know, it's never happened. Yer the ferst, Lil' Su.”

Subaru: “Nnonononoweirdweirdweirdweird. Hold on pause, stay, wait, things're weird information's off. I'm checking my heart's notepad so just a moment please.”

Lewes: “Yer got five minutes.”

Subaru nods gratefully at Lewes' unexpected patience, puts his fingers to his temples, and frantically files through his memory. He goes back to the day before the start of the last loop, and to

² This is me being tongue-in-cheek because of Lewes' line but holy shit imagine what a fucking catastrophe Subaru's dialogue would be if you did this for all the English shit he says.

the point just after he'd overcome the TRIAL, putting together the minute inconsistencies.

Subaru: “—Wha?”

Subaru realises that, there in his memories, is already an inconsistency which shouldn't be there. His face stiffens at this truth, and he somehow manages to keep himself from muttering 'What is this?'. But he can't stop the pip of suspicion from budding, its stem from growing, its flower from blooming.

Inside Subaru's memories, the night before the TRIAL, Lewes said this:
—Nobody has challenged the TRIAL until now. There has never been a challenger since I've been around.

Inside Subaru's memories, right before and right after the TRIAL, Lewes said this:
—I've taken the TRIAL before, I didn't beat it but I'm here and safe. Proof that even if you challenge, there's no damage.

In the span of just one day, her statements completely flipped. If these were just some statements based on emotion it'd be one thing, but these are about lived experiences based on reality. Such a huge change in the information has to mean there was, intentionally, a lie.

Subaru directs his gaze to Lewes. Lewes waits there, fiddling with her pink hair. Her legs don't reach the floor, dangling as she sits on the bed, her visage as she distracts herself from boredom completely contrary to her granny insides and the very picture of a little girl. Subaru didn't want to think that she'd been toying with him maliciously all until now, but,

Subaru: “If one of them is true, which one should I believe?”

Subaru's stance until now when faced with differing information was to believe in the one he wanted to believe, but with Emilia's fate resting on the decision, he can't make it so lightly. This was literally a life-threatening problem. He had to be careful.

This was now the third time the topic of challenging the TRIAL had been brought up with Lewes. The first time she said she'd taken it, the second time she didn't know about the TRIAL. Frequency alone didn't indicate truth, but taking that stance here, then perhaps the side to believe is that Lewes doesn't know about the TRIAL.

Thinking like that, then her fooling him that she had taken the TRIAL could be interpreted as her being considerate to ease an uneasy Subaru. But if that was the case, Subaru figures she would've mentioned even in passing afterwards that it was a lie.

Subaru: “There's some reason she couldn't do that... maybe she's started going senile...”

Lewes: “Did yer just try finalising a rather rude theory towards me?”

Subaru: “Just tried my hardest to interpret things positively, is the effort I put in and I'd be glad if you could respect that and let that counterbalance things, Subaru tried asserting with a posed look.”

Lewes sighs and shakes her head, exhausted.

Lewes: “So did yer get an answer outter that conversation with yer heart or whatsit?”

Subaru: “An answer, or more like a conclusion of 'well maybe it was this'. Um, so hey Lewes-san

were you maybe just kinda worried about me? Like outside the tomb.”

Lewes: “Worried?”

Subaru: “Yeah,”

Subaru nods and brings his hands together, interlacing his fingers, entering otome mode

Subaru: “You said during that one conversation you hadn't taken the TRIAL, but outside the tomb you said you had taken it but you said like it wasn't such a big deal? So, that might've been you being thoughtful towards me when I had my propensities for getting spooked going or I guess proneness to worrying going or I guess, well I only just realised that might've been it and...”

Lewes: “—Ah, so that's it.”

Says Lewes in a comprehending tone, cutting into Subaru's fast-paced awkward-headed dialogue. Subaru furrows his brows in confusion, Lewes smiles.

Lewes: “Lil' Su, I'll tell yer some advice. As something special.”

Subaru: “Advice?”

Lewes: “With the ties ter the contract in place, I cannert tell LIES. So when I'm asked an inconvenient question, the only option ter avoid answering is ter choose silence. There's no exceptions, and it has nothern ter do with being fer anybody's sake. LIES are banned. Not just fer me, fer all the people of SANCTUARY.”

Subaru: “You can't tell, lies?”

All Subaru has at this sudden confession is confusion. If what Lewes is saying is true, it messes up the central basis of Subaru's idea. Or no, if the things Lewes was saying before were truths, then the very fact he'd come up with this question of his towards her contradicted it.

—How did Lewes, who supposedly can't tell lies, create a situation that couldn't happen without telling lies?

Subaru: “Um...”

Lewes: “Fer as I'm concerned now, this's the limit of what infermation I can voice. Asking anything more ain't going ter werk. Bad things'll happen fer both of us if the contract isn't abided. If yer want to know more, don't question my stopped-up self, ask it ter one who's gone forward.”

Subaru can only close his opened mouth and fall into silence. If Lewes rejects him like this, being that Subaru has no methods here except coasting off her goodwill, he really has nothing he can do. But taking this as truth, Subaru firmly grasps that Lewes's desire to be freed from SANCTUARY was not a falsehood.

Subaru: “Okay, I won't ask more. Let's change the topic. To something else.”

Lewes: “Yer've got strange tastes. Yer know you won't learn anything about the core point, but are yer still gonna chat over tea with this old lady?”

Subaru: "I missed breakfast, and I've got free time until Emilia-tan wakes up. Looking at Roswaal pisses me off, Garfiel's bearing his fangs at me, it's tiring having Otto make me make comebacks, I'm gonna deepen my precious friendship with the loligranny."

Standing up, Subaru collects the two cups of thoroughly cold tea and heads for the kitchen, Lewes watching him go.

Subaru: "You don't have to worry, it's only been a sorta-kinda short-period thing but I am living as a servant in Roswaal's mansion. I've at least been taught how to brew tea."

Lewes: "Hrm. Then, allow me ter wait with expectations."

Subaru: "Wuou, pressure,"

Subaru gets new tea in the teacups, hands one off to Lewes, and returns to his original spot. They face each other, again taking their first sip.

Lewes: "Yer not too bad."

Subaru: "Made it myself but leaves're still leaves. Also, so about changing the topic..."

Lewes: "If yer gonna continue that conversation I ain't listening. Instead... well, on any other topic I'd like ter answer yer as earnestly as possorable."

Subaru: "Alright, so I'll be obliging."

A nasty smile rises on Subaru's face.

Subaru: "Is there anything that Garfiel's weak to or hates, or things he'd faint at just by seeing?"

Lewes: "Lil' Su, are yer aware that yer way of devoting yerself is a tidge crooked?"

And with that, Subaru prompts Lewes to make the most incredible expression she's made over this whole hour.



After their chat ends and they clean up the teacups, Lewes states she wants to be alone and Subaru leaves her behind as he exits the house. Subaru thinks that they spent a little longer than an hour, but the sun which had supposed to have only just risen now sits high in the sky, the temperature risen. Feels like just past 10 am.

Subaru: "This's perfect sunlight to be airing out a futon, what a waste... wow that thought feels like I've completely shed being a shut-in."

Subaru: "Time's time, Emilia'll be waking up soon. After yesterday, she'll probably be downcast so I'll imprint my existence on her by taking advantage while she's weak."

With that rather underhanded line, while sincerely wanting to see the worried Emilia, Subaru gets moving. He goes fast as he can, wanting to be with her to ease her for a long time. Because,

Subaru: “Tomorrow, I’ll wind up having to not be there.”

Afternoon of this day, Roswaal will likely formally propose the liberation of the Arlam village evacuees. Then immediately get everything arranged, and the departure from SANCTUARY will be tomorrow.

Subaru would be going along. He had to return to the mansion.

Subaru: “If you wanna know anything deeper, don’t ask someone stopped-up, go ask one who’s gone forward... that’s sure some goddamn roundabout speech.”

But not being roundabout meant she couldn’t communicate what she wanted to communicate. Feeling pity for what a goddamn pain that is, Subaru sighs.

Subaru: “I’m expecting some answers about your dumb little brother and annoying hometown, Frederica.”

CHAPTER 30: UNEASE ON THE ROAD HOME

Roswaal's proposal—the release of the evacuees from Arlam village.

Just like last time, the proposal goes through without much trouble. That keeping the evacuees in SANCTUARY is almost completely unbeneficial hasn't changed, but what has is the pruning of the conditions attached. Last time there was the condition that Subaru take the TRIAL, but,

Subaru: “This time, the guy who raised that condition absolutely hates me...”

Emilia: “What's wrong, Subaru?”

Subaru: “Nnnyope, nothing. More importantly, are you okay, Emilia-tan? All calm? If my being here's a bother I'll concede as far as going outside the room.”

The scene: Subaru and Emilia, inside Lewes' Emilia-lodging house, sitting beside each other on the bed in the bedroom, passing time together without the topic ever being anything particularly lively. It's already evening, and night will come very soon. Subaru had a late breakfast with Emilia after she woke up, then had those proceedings with Roswaal and Lewes and so on about the Evacuee Problem sorted. The matter proceeded without problems, the evacuees' release would wind up as tomorrow, and—

Garfiel: “So, 's obvious t' say, but... yer know Emilia-sama is challengin' the TRIAL tonight too, yeh?”

If Garfiel hadn't thrown in this reminder, they could've dodged the issue. Suppressing the urge to click his tongue, Subaru glanced at Emilia. Seeing the instant of fear and piteousness that ran through her expression, he judged that no, Emilia would not be able to overcome the TRIAL this time.

Unlike Subaru who has his memories carry over, the conditions here for Emilia ultimately haven't changed. So if Emilia's going to be able to overcome the TRIAL, it has to be through Subaru's activities causing a dramatic shift in the environment around her. And this loop, the prospects to greatly change her environment in this short time frame weren't looking bright. —She challenges tonight, and probably all that happens is she'll be worn down.

Subaru: “But how she said she'd do it without any complaining was really Emilia-tan.”

Emilia had immediately concealed that instant of emotion, and firmly stated “But of course I'll do it.” Even Garfiel narrowed his eyes impressed with that one, though hearing Roswaal's quiet whistle made Subaru seem about to snap with anger. Either way, unable to avoid putting it off, the start of tonight's TRIAL was now only a few hours away.

It had already been three hours since the conversation ended, they had their lunch, and returned to the house. Subaru had been with Emilia the entire time and they'd been talking without any breaks, but—with the time for the TRIAL closing in, Emilia's contribution to the talks have noticeably decreased. Presently, she's just giving the barest minimum of conversation-filler replies to whatever Subaru's saying. But even so,

Emilia: “Umm... that's no, don't.”

Subaru: “Ah, roger. All good. Until you're calmed down, Emilia-tan, I'll be focusing on breathing in the air you breath out, you relax.”

Emilia: “That's sooo creepy. ...But, stay here.”

Shrugging at the complex emotions of a young maiden's heart, Subaru does exactly as told and stays there. While sitting next to her, albeit pathetically lacking the courage to place his hand on hers, he's earnestly happy about being wanted. And by Emilia.

Even if it's only because he's a substitute, arising from absence of the one she relied on most.

Ever since coming to SANCTUARY—No, more accurately—even since their return to the mansion where Puck had stopped answering Emilia's calls, Emilia's attitude toward Subaru had been softening.

Part of Subaru was simply overjoyed that she was relaxing her guard around him, while another part harboured a quiet doubt.

That part stated: Emilia's lost her supports and may be in a dangerous situation.

Emilia: “...Hm?”

Subaru: “Nothing. Just thinking 'Emilia-tan's eyelashes're so long and cute, wanna eat 'em.’”

Emilia: “Subaru, you keep saying you want to eat my hair or eyelashes or lick my cheeks, but... um, are you into that?”

Subaru: “It's sorta the biggest expression of love you can give where I come from.”

Subaru considers licking the greatest statement of courting you can give, but if he ever tried attempting it the receiving party'd probably back the fuck away. And especially so when in a world where the underlying intention wouldn't be understood. Had to be careful with his words. Super belated on that though.

Distracting Emilia by saying this pointless bullshit is the best that Subaru can presently do. Subaru knew a fragment of the past Emilia would face. And if he mentioned that, there'd surely be a dramatic shift from what happened last time.

—But it wouldn't be a change for the better.

No matter what the circumstances, the essential factor is time.

That went for Emilia facing her past, but also for her heart to steady its resolve. For Subaru to present that fragment of past out to her, and hear what actually happened from her mouth, would also need time. Time, time, time. There wasn't enough.

Subaru: “I gotta be running around like crazy with this cramped schedule. Have I ever had a chance to pass the time quietly since I came to this world?”

Searching his memories, the only time that could be called peaceful for Subaru was the couple of weeks after the Ulgarm incident. Before and after that event things had been over-tumultuous, and if he did say so himself, it was a mystery how he hadn't died from overwork.

Emilia: “—Subaru.”

Subaru's slow to react as he looks towards the voice—towards Emilia, who looks at him, her eyes wet. Enamoured, Subaru's heart gives a thump so loud as to think it might be stopping. Subaru's breath catches. Determination and indecision waver in Emilia's eyes. Like she's going to reveal

something to Subaru, but is lost on whether to do it.

Subaru: “What is it?”

So with all the tenderness he can muster, Subaru pays caution not to rush Emilia as he picks his words. If her determination is the one to manifest, he absolutely won't be hindering that. But Emilia averts her gaze.

Emilia: “ah... m, sorry. No. Just, calling.”

Subaru: “—. Ri, ght. Just calling! Sounds like something a newly-dating couple'd be doing all the time!”

Emilia: “I, have to go soon, so...”

Her determination folds. Lamenting that it got away, Subaru puts on false bravado so she won't sense it. Emilia stands up, and looks outside the window at the beginning of night.

Emilia: “—I have to go to the tomb. Subaru, you'll be there until partway.”

Subaru: “I'd like to bow to Garfiel and have him let me see you off to the entrance, but I don't know whether I can persuade him. ...Emilia, saying this might be pointless, but...”

Emilia: “—It's pointless. That's nooo good, Subaru.”

Don't force yourself, is how Subaru was going to stop her, but Emilia reads ahead and cuts him off. She gives a hardy smile, putting her finger to her lips.

Emilia: “It's okay—is something maybe you can't think after seeing how messed up I was yesterday, but I'll do my best. I want to do my best. I have to do my best, is what I think.”

Emilia balls the hand before her face into a fist.

Emilia: “So,”

Emilia: “If you're going to tell me anything, don't make it a 'YOU CAN STOP', cheer me on with a 'DO YOUR BEST'. Then if I can think that there's even one person out there expecting things from me, I'll definitely be able to use that as strength.”

Subaru: “I am expecting things from you, Emilia-tan. There's no man out there except maybe your cat dad who's expecting things from you as much as me. —Do your best.”

Emilia: “Mm, I will.”

Emilia gives her first genuine smile of the day. Feeling relief at seeing that smile, Subaru stands up and follows Emilia as she exits the building. A cold, chilly wind blows through the night in SANCTUARY.

Emilia's silver hair dances on the breeze. Watching the light catch on that river of silver, Subaru stares at her back, his every step strong.

—Tonight's still not going to work, is what he feels.



Subaru's returning to Roswaal's mansion with the evacuees happens two days earlier than in the previous loop.

But if you remove the time difference, it's basically otherwise the same. The evacuees file into their respective carriages that they'd arrived in SANCTUARY on, they and the merchants freed to exit SANCTUARY. Subaru and Otto are accompanying them too.

The biggest point of difference from last time is,

Subaru: "Someone volunteered to guide the way, but I'm surprised that it's you, Lewes-san. Usually this'd be for an underling... or, a post for someone in that kind of position, right?"

Lewes: "What, er yer not satisfied with me? Lil' Su, fer being their tea-drinking friends, yer sure cold ter yer elders, my poor heart."

Says Lewes as she pretends to cry. She's squished up next to Subaru and Otto on the driver's platform, making the space here pretty tight.

Otto: "Yes, I empathise. Natsuki-san truly has no mercy or constraint, and so I'm sure he's forgotten to consider such subtleties while speaking with you, Ma'am."

Lewes: "Oi, Lil' Su. There's some guy I don't know 'ere, who's that, this guy?"

Otto: "That's what my position is to you!?"

Otto's attempt to raise a conference for those wounded by Subaru fails nicely. He's holding the reins, carries the lifeblood of the carriage, and he's still getting made fun of. A shadow falls over his face.

Otto: "Ah... The impression I gave was one of somebody who'd been constantly yelling like this ever since arriving, but it certainly stuck well on Margrave Mathers."

Subaru: "You got to show him your usual not-worked-up self, and he laughed so hard the wounds on his stomach opened so I'd say that impression you left was pretty strong?"

Otto: "There are good and bad impressions in this world, but thinking normally, which side do you think the impression you get when your stomach tears open belongs on?"

Subaru: "This's what he says after leaving people's stomachs ripped open... guy's beyond help."

Otto: "If I'm beyond help then by your accompanying you're well beyond help, too!"

So this time Otto managed to get his meeting with Roswaal without any fuss. Roswaal, who laughed his ass off at Otto's normal demeanour, likely does not hold a low opinion of Otto. Although it doesn't seem Roswaal particularly regarded Otto in terms of being a merchant.

Subaru: "Well, that's fine so long as I keep cornering you further through our relationship. Besides, knowing top secret information of the Mathers domain, escape is already beyond you."

Otto: “Meeting you was when my luck ran out, Natsuki-san... or no, I've now reached a sort of enlightenment and that part is fine.”

Plummeting down a road of misfortune without being disheartened, Otto indeed possesses the strong will of a merchant. His destiny would almost certainly never be one that brought him great success, but he still wouldn't regret the choices he made. Internally, Subaru indeed feels friendship toward this dude.

Subaru: “I'll be working you from now on too, so good to have you, Otto!”

Otto: “What the heck is he saying with such a sunny expression, this man!”

Subaru taps Otto on the shoulders and shoots him a thumbs up. Lewes gestures plugging her ears, squished between the noisy two as Subaru looks down from the carriage.

Subaru: “—So, see you soon, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Mm, take care.”

So Emilia's there too and she gives a little wave.

—Last night, accompanied by Subaru, Emilia challenged the TRIAL. She failed. Since Subaru couldn't accompany her inside the tomb, her TRIAL wasn't interrupted partway through and she crawled stupefied out of the tomb herself, collapsed into Subaru's arms, and lost consciousness.

Having spent the entire night at her side as she slept, Subaru couldn't remember just how many times he wiped the tears from her sleeping face. Saying that Subaru felt no unease about leaving her behind, harbouring this mental wear, would be a complete lie. He wanted to be at her side as much as possible, supporting her trembling body.

Subaru: “I'll be back in a day or two, so don't force yourself. There's no need to rush if the villagers are gone. Let's slowly, take our time in conquering this.”

Emilia: “Right... right. Mm, if that's what you say, Subaru...”

Different from the smile last night where she'd gotten some slight strength back, this smile is weak and feels only fleeting. That she was nevertheless standing here seeing Subaru and the others off itself meant she was forcing herself. Otherwise it might be that there's something else tugging at her attention, and she's doing this to forget it.

Subaru: “Ram, I don't mean that as a reminder but...”

Ram: “I have my suspicions what that may have been other than a reminder. ...Do relax. Loathe as I am to say, I share your opinion, Barusu. This problem is fundamentally one that should be viewed as an extended battle. So long as Roswaal-sama does not order otherwise, I'll keep Garf controlled.”

Subaru: “I'm in your debt... is terrifying actually. I'll thank you some other way.”

Ram: “Tch. Unexpectedly good intuition from Barusu.”

Subaru: “I just casually avoided a death flag there—hk”

Clicking her tongue, Ram gives a graceful and polite bow, that being the only polite thing she's giving him. She takes a step back, and Subaru rights his seating on the driver's platform for departure—when he spots Garfiel, far behind the row of see-offers, glaring with his arms crossed.

Garfiel notices that Subaru's noticed him. Their gazes meet. Neither can tell what exactly the other is feeling, but with the thing with Emilia last night, the riskiness hasn't softened a bit.

Subaru mutters about finding a way to start the Befriend Garfiel route.

Otto: “Natsuki-san? Now is about time for departure, shall we go?”

Subaru: “We shall. Lewes-san, escort pleaaase!”

Lewes: “Leave it all ter me.”

Lewes nods, Otto gives Patrasche and Frufoo the signal. The carriages slowly start moving, and the migration of evacuees begins. The carriages move at a pretty sluggish pace, which is inevitable out of consideration for all the kids, elderly and women aboard.

Subaru: “But still, everyone looks good, knowing they can go back.”

Lewes: “Home, ers something with that power. No matter how little there is ter see, no matter how boring it is, yer always wind up leaving yer heart there in the end.”

Mutters Subaru, and Lewes follows up. Subaru crosses his arms and tilts his head.

Subaru: “Really, huh?”

Subaru: “Do you love SANCTUARY too, Lewes-san?”

Lewes: “...Who cerld say. I'm in a special case where I don't know anywhere outside it. Thinking of other places is frightening, is a thought I do have.”

Subaru: “Frightening?”

Lewes: “It's frightening to tread into somewhere unknown, Lil' Su. Specially fer old biddies like me.”

An aged smile rises on Lewes' face, her eyes looking somewhere distant. But since her appearance is a little girl, no matter how serious she gets, she just looks like a little girl overcompensating and it falls apart.

Sharing conversations here and there along the road as they go, the line of carriages proceeds slowly though the forest. The trip's about 8-hours one way. The Windbreaker Blessing guarantees that the travel's smooth, which ironically makes it all feel like it's taking longer.

Lewes: “Yer've got a pretty clever dragon. Even if I weren't escortin', would barely get the road wrong at all.”

Subaru: “She's my adorable pride and joy. It's kinda wrong for me to be bragging about it, but the people around me are pretty high level, yknow?”

Starting with the cast of Roswaal's mansion, everyone Subaru's met since the start of the Royal

Selection has been a somebody. His own banality and averageness is incredibly pathetic, but Subaru rationalises that for now just looking up is acceptable. His start might've been late and he may be a lap behind, but he has begun running. All he has to do to catch up is continue—and the strength to do that, has already been given to him.

Subaru: “That reminds me, it's all good that you're escorting us halfway, but what are you going to do for getting back, Lewes-san? All the carriages are returning to Arlam Village, there won't be any transportation for you.”

Lewes: “Yer don't hafta worry, I'm of course going back on my own two feet. I'll let yer know that these legs still gotta go a long way before they lose to any youngster.”

Lewes slaps her short, skinny little legs. There is not a single speck of persuasiveness in what she's saying, but Subaru has no inclination to break the heart of a confident little girl.

Subaru: “Got it got it... hey, Otto. You have the willpower to run back to SANCTUARY carrying a little girl?”

Otto: “I'm afraid I have no idea what that question would be implying, so would you mind if I said no?”

Subaru: “You hear that, Lewes-san? Seems like this guy doesn't even have the integrity to carry a little girl who has to walk through a big, dark forest alone. One, two little girls, he couldn't care less.”

Lewes: “It's terrible. How barren people's hearts have become.”

Otto: “Did you two prepare this beforehand!?”

Otto's yelling rips through the forest's silence. Subaru and Lewes look at each other, smiling, when Lewes suddenly looks up.

Lewes: “About here.”

Subaru furrows his brows, when Lewes abruptly slumps toward him. He catches her.

Subaru: “Otto, stop. There's something weird about Lewes-san.”

Otto: “Are we returning to the village?”

Otto brings the carriage to a stop and conveys instructions to the other carriages through hand-signal flags, the other vehicles stopping and the dragons growling. Lewes raises her hand.

Lewes: “...Sorry. Yer don't hafta go back. It's just the effect of coming so close to the barrier. I'll probably go unconscious if we go far as exiting the forest.”

Subaru: “The barrier... then it's the same as when Emilia entered SANCTUARY.”

Subaru: “But man there's really no making it out, this barrier. Not sensitive-skinned me or dull-skinned Otto are really feeling anything.”

Otto: “What is 'dull skinned'. There isn't any such thing as skin being sensitive or dull.”

Subaru: “Young people who neglect their skincare like that will come to regret their past ignorance when they steadily and steadily get troubled with freckles and blemishes from their late twenties on.”

Otto: “I sincerely haven't a clue what you're saying any more, but returning to topic, this would be where we part with Lewes-sama... correct?”

Lewes: “Yer, would be. This's far as I go. Those of SANCTUARY have terrerrble compatibility with the barrier. Came fer the first time in a while ter see what'd happen... but no, there's nothing going.”

Subaru: “Was part of you coming along perhaps to test that?”

Lewes: “I thought this was a serprisingly convenient thing fer me, too. But the barrier's just as yer see. ...If I'm no good, then SANCTUARY won't be freed unless the TRIAL's over. I'm sure yer knew that, Lil' Su.”

Subaru senses that Lewes is showing him what conditions are like for those trapped in SANCTUARY, that Lewes yearns to leave the place, and that such a thing is an extremely natural want.

Subaru: “And Emilia'd feel the same thing if she came this far.”

Lewes: “Since she entered inside, yer. There's more people living in SANCTUARY than just ones who were born ernd raised here. Lil' Roz's sometimes brought along ones in similar circumstances from outside. Those kids became the witch's property the instant they entered SANCTUARY. Emilia-sama's nert an exception.”

Subaru: “...Kinda feel there's some information in there I can't let slide, again.”

If these people Roswaal's bringing in are effected by the barrier, that'd mean they're half-bloods.

Subaru: “Then he's bringing them here and trapping them? What the hell's he thinking?”

Lewes: “His intentions fer that... hearing that from my mouth'd be a breach. Yer should ask Lil' Roz directly when yer come back, Lil' Su.”

Lewes gets out of Subaru's arms and hops down off the driver's platform, going to stroke Patrasche's neck.

Lewes: “Good dragon. Yer go help yer master good, now.”

Patrasche nuzzles her back, seeming to agree with Lewes. And not being conceited but this was the first time Subaru'd seen Patrasche be so friendly with anyone except him. For being able to talk with her, Otto eats quite the number of headbutts.

Subaru: “I've got lotsa things to do in SANCTUARY, so I'm coming back right after I've asked Frederica what I wanna ask.”

Lewes: “That'd be best. ...This ers just my intuition, but I don't think things in SANCTUARY'll move without yer.”

Subaru: “And there's another serious overestimation... it's just intuition though.”

Lewes: “It's the intuition of a woman who's lived over 100 years.”

Subaru something something somethings and gives Lewes a polite bow from atop the driver's platform. She backs off from the carriage, Otto quietly announces they're going.

Subaru: “Well, see you again, Lewes-san. Take care and get back safely.”

Lewes: “Mhm. Yer'll leave the forest if yer go straight ahead from here. Keep going till yer hit the road, and yer dragon'll handle the rest. Take care.”

Lewes waves at them, Otto again signalling with the flags to get the group of carriages moving. While watching them leave, Lewes turns her back and heads deeper into the forest. Subaru watches her gradually disappear into the gaps between the trees, praying for her safe return—even though inside Subaru's chest, he had felt an inexpressible disquiet.

Subaru: “...Kinda, felt uneasy there.”

The unease arrived during that last conversation. Still unable to specifically express what it was, Subaru entrusts his weight to the rocking of the carriage.

They exit the forest, the sunrays beam down, the road expands—they cross the barrier, and exit Sanctuary.

There's still a long, long road ahead.

With things he had to do, and conversations he had to have.

CHAPTER 31: MAID MAID MAID

—This makes it the second time Subaru's returned to Roswaal's mansion from SANCTUARY.

Subaru: “Which's because I had a terrible experience the first time...”

Mutters Subaru as he dismounts from Patrasche before the mansion gates, scratching his cheek. The evacuees, Otto and Subaru safely returned to Arlam Village after parting with Lewes. Though, that was something he already accomplished last loop, and he didn't have any worries there considering his trusty Patrasche.

Subaru: “The villagers being delighted and Otto staying behind a bit's same as last time. If I'm being honest I'd want to bring Otto along as a human shield, but...”

Subaru had hesitated to insist Otto come along to the mansion. Considering the potential that there's danger here, bringing along Otto, who doesn't seem capable of responding to split-second conditions, wasn't something he should do. Subaru can't beat Otto in a straight fistfight, but that doesn't make Otto some amazing strong-guy. Subaru would prefer not to be stuck with seeing Otto's entrails if faced with the Guthunter.

Subaru: “Please let nothing have happened...”

The last time Subaru came here, it was six days after the start of the TRIAL. This time it's the third day—three days of space left, compared to last time. The concept of the night Subaru got killed being the same time the mansion got attacked lines up with various speculations. The problem is,

Subaru: “Three days left... So the schedule to get Frederica talking, get straight back to SANCTUARY, promptly solve SANCTUARY's problem, and return to the mansion is tight. Looking purely at time alone, it's not impossible, but...”

The route between SANCTUARY and the mansion takes about 8 hours travel one-way. A two-way trip by itself eats up practically a whole day. And if you considered the time loss between those moments, Subaru's freely usable time would likely get even more severe.

Subaru: “There's several methods for solving the problem, but... the optimum one, or I suppose most expedient one is expectedly strict.”

Being that he knows of Elsa's attack beforehand, the optimum path as far as Subaru's concerned is to repel her. He'd like this settled, if possible, with a victory that meant they he wouldn't have to be afraid of that assassin any longer.

Necessary for that was a combat force superior to Elsa, and that could only be achieved with either Roswaal or Garfiel. Presently, the chances of returning to the mansion again with them wasn't looking good.

Subaru: “Ultimately, have to go ahead on the second-best track...”

Laments Subaru as he scratches his head, Patrasche bringing her snout over. Subaru smiles wryly as Patrasche nuzzles his shoulder, patting her rough neck.

Subaru: “There's reward corresponding to the risk, but in exchange it doesn't look like we can prepare chances of winning to balance the risk. Haveta go with the plan of turning tail and scattering like a bunch of baby spiders.”

This was one of the ideas that had passed through his mind during the fight with the Witch Cult. He could see possibility with the amount of pieces he had last time, but this time his hand is paltry. Even just sensing the attack beforehand and managing to escape could be called highly satisfactory. But there was a problem there, too.

Subaru: “The people in the mansion. Rem, Petra, Frederica, and... dunno if Beako'll be cooperative about evacuating. Honestly if I carry Rem on my shoulders and hold Petra's hand, seems like we could go, but it's gonna take a lot convincing the other two.”

Subaru of course had the intention to force them into the carriage and abduct them if he had to. He didn't think he could beat either of them in a fight, but he wanted to believe he could manage something if he twisted some arms and insisted he wouldn't give up.

Subaru: “—Huu.”

Subaru sighs, aware of the building weight of responsibility on his shoulders. Just how many people would his statements, actions, and resolve dictate the fates of? He'd been conscious of this same feeling the night before the White Whale fight, too.

Subaru: “Can't just stand here at the gates freaking out forever. Still dunno if anything's happened inside. I'll go see everyone's uninjured faces, start there...”

???: “Start there?”

Subaru: “And then think of ways to persuade them. Yup. They don't know so if I make up some lie about it being on Roswaal's instructions or whatever...”

???: “S-Subaru, that's naughty!”

Subaru: “I'm just the age for aspiring towards being one of those naughty wild badboys... er,”

Subaru hears a giggling behind him and turns around. On the other side of the gates, in the mansion garden, stands a little maid—a familiar young girl, Petra. Subaru's brows rise in surprise as she tilts her head cutely, her chestnut hair swaying.

Petra: “I am graced to welcome you back, Subaru-sama. Your return has come earlier than I thought.”

Subaru: “Right, I'm home... and thank you for that reception, can see Frederica's advanced-learners lessons peeking through.”

With his cheeks unconsciously going loose with relief at Petra's grabbing the hem of her skirt and bowing, Subaru opens the gate and enters the property. Subaru tilts his head toward the ground dragon stables to indicate Patrasche go hang out there, and looks down at Petra beside him.

She makes a bewildered expression at Subaru's staring at her, then hurriedly turns around and rights her hair and clothes with her hand.

Petra: “Good,”

She says satisfied, nodding, and turns back to Subaru.

Petra: “What is the matter, Subaru-sama?”

And she gives a lovable smile even sweeter than the last. Her cuteness paired with her pretty, bright-future-having face gives that smile a devilishness to entrap those of the opposite sex. It was a smile calculated and perfect, with complete understanding of how others would perceive it. Faced with that, Subaru swallows his breath.

Subaru: “Ahh, augggh! Seriously, just too cute, you!”

Petra: “Wa-waah!?”

Without noticing even a fragment of her underlying intentions, Subaru embraces her body in a hug and pats her head vigorously-yet-lovingly. Petra makes a confused noise at the sudden action, but,

Subaru: “Dunno what people're feeling and you're damn going all boing ding zoom. This girl, this girl! Augh, man goddamnit!”

Petra: “What, what is ti!? Ah, wait, Subaru... it's still so early...”

Subaru: “Seriously, god damn it.”

Petra: “—Subaru?”

Petra's expression changes. Still settled in his arms, Petra looks up at Subaru, his voice low, the bashfulness and joy in her expression disappeared.

Petra: “Does somewhere hurt?”

Petra reaches her hand out to touch a trembling Subaru's cheek. Subaru presses his palm over those fingers of hers, shaking his head.

Subaru: “Nope,”

He breathes in through his nose, stops. Opens his closed eyes.

Subaru: “I'm just truly, from the bottom of my heart, relieved. —I'm home, Petra.”



—Subaru returns Patrasche to the stables, holding the hand of a handhold-desiring Petra as he returns to the mansion. According to Petra, there's been no conspicuous changes in the mansion since Subaru and the others left.

Petra: “Big Sis Frederica's out checking the barrier in the mountains, so we'll maybe kinda have to wait 'till she gets back... until her return.”

Subaru thinks back on the barrier—the algorithm which had sealed the ulgarm. The ulgarm in the mountains are supposed to have been exterminated, but seems like the barrier's still around and in use. The barrier apparently has some property that keeps nasty witchybeasty things out even if

they're not ulgarm, and it's Arlam village's and landlord Rowaal's faction's job to keep it maintained.

Petra: "I think the job to patrol the barrier for cracks'll come back after all the villagers are back, but since not everyone's come home right now, Big Sis Frederica..."

Subaru: "Your calling her Big Sis's getting across that your relationship deepened while I wasn't looking, feels kinda tickly but nice. And also, all the villagers're back."

Petra: "Really?!"

Subaru points toward the village, Petra's voice bounces up and her eyes sparkle. Her parents would've gone with the group to the Royal Capital, and should've been safely back in the village, but that didn't change that all her close friends the villagers were all split up. Petra happily claps her hands.

Subaru: "You go visit them afterwards. You show them your maid outfit and they'll be overjoyed."

Petra: "Mmhm. After I get permission from Big Sis Frederica, I'll get changed and go back!"

Subaru: "No, don't get changed... you're so cute, so if you show everyone..."

Petra: "Ehehee, I'm cute? I'm cute?"

Subaru: "You're cute, you're cute. So make sure everyone..."

Petra: "Right! I'll get changed and go back!"

It's as if every time Subaru picks 'No' it gets drowned out by a peal of thunder. Perhaps having something she's not going surrender, stubborn Petra isn't flinching so Subaru decides to give up. Subaru clicks his neck, gives a deep breath, and stops.

Setting is the second floor of the mansion—shoesoles sliding over the carpet, Subaru raises his head and stares at the door. Petra somewhat sadly unhooks her fingers from the handhold. Smart girl.

Subaru: "Sorry, Petra. Let us be alone for a while."

Petra: "Mm, understood. I shall be resuming my cleaning in the west building, so please call me if there is anything."

Petra puts back on her discarded maidliness, gives a small bow, and leaves. Riding off her thoughtfulness, Subaru pokes himself in the head, knowing he has things to do closing in on him. Pokes himself, but still—

Subaru: "When it's to talk, wondering what I should prioritise... this is where I wind up."

Pushing the door open, Subaru slowly treads into the room.

A room where time remains still. Inside that plain place is a bed—and upon it, a sleeping girl.

Stripped of her familiar maid outfit, wrapped in a pale blue nightgown.

Her eyes closed, not even her breathing is audible. Only the quiet thumping of her heartbeat provided the meagre proof that she was yet tied to existence.

Subaru: "...Rem."

Surely the whirlpool of emotion packed into that word would be apparent to anyone. A torrent of endless emotion he could direct at only one in the entire world.

Subaru had steeled himself to face any hardship without wavering, turning his heart to iron. Had steeled to raise his head and proceed without leaning on anyone.

—That determination and resolve vanishes the instant he's with her.

Subaru had told Emilia to leave it to him, pulled her hand forward to do something, strongly exhibited that he would do it. That outer layer of determination peeled away the moment he was with her.

Subaru: “So pathetic... I'm seriously, so weak.”

The second he's with Rem, back to being the once-weak Natsuki Subaru does Subaru revert. Back to the time when Rem's devotion affirmed him, and he first stood, does Subaru revert.

He slowly reaches for her sleeping face, his fingers brushing away her bangs. Her expression hasn't changed at all, the prospects of the EATEN girl returning still as yet unrealised.

But if he regardless left her sleeping here without doing anything, even this vessel would be lost.

Subaru: “You might not feel this way, but it's thanks to you that my resolve hardens.”

Subaru can tell that the surface of his weak and brittle heart has been peeled, and is steadily being replaced with a covering of steel.

Rem's sleeping visage, her assuredly present heartbeat, just the very fact that she was there, sent Natsuki Subaru back to that time. To that moment, to that feeling of being born again.

Subaru: “It's because you told me that my weak self was fine, because you proposed me that I get stronger... that I've been able to stand up so many times, saying that I'll do something.”

No matter what pain, suffering, hardship, or other unpleasantness awaited, her full-souled love healed Subaru. Spurring him forward, his heart wishing to match up.

Subaru: “You, and Petra, and everyone else... I'll get you all out of here safely.”

Tenderly stroking her forehead, Subaru holds back his desire to touch her further. The breeze blows into the room as he simply sits there, silent, seated, at her bedside.

Pouring all of a section of precious time into her was the best Subaru could currently do to present his heart to her.

Who could say how much time passed calmly like that.

A knock on the door pulls Subaru's consciousness away from vacantly staring at Rem and back into reality. He raises his head, looks towards the door.

Subaru: “Yes?”

???: “I apologize for my intrusion. —It delights me to find that you have returned without incident, Subaru-sama.”

A tall maid silently pushes the door open and enters the room. Her blonde hair sways, her body accustomed to her graceful movements—Frederica. She looks at Subaru beside the sleeping Rem, and bows her head.

Frederica: “There would be several inquiries I would like to make... but I am certain you are in the same mind, Subaru-sama. Let us change the setting. Sleeping as she may be, I suspect you would not especially desire for her to hear.”

Subaru: “Makes things quick. ...Do you have an idea what I want to talk about?”

Frederica: “Most probably.”

Subaru gives a small sigh as he stands up. He gives Rem's face one last touch, and balls his hand into a fist to dispel the regret.

Subaru: “Your rowdy foul-mouthed little brother, and the gap moe who looks like a loli but has granny insides. Then the test site in SANCTUARY, and Roswaal's plans. Let me look forward to just how quickly and how many answers I'm gonna be getting.”



Frederica: “That the Master neglected to return would suggest the TRIAL is yet to be finished.”

The two have left Rem's bedroom and relocated to the parlour. Setting a steaming cup of black tea before Subaru, Frederica seats herself opposite him with that statement as her first line. Subaru stirs his tea with his spoon, nodding.

Subaru: “Yeah,”

Subaru: “Seriously makes things quick. —You know, I kinda wanna object to how little you told us seeing us off when you knew so much about the place.”

Frederica: “I shall present you no excuses. That I neglected to exhaustively speak regarding SANCTUARY, the TRIAL, and my doltish little brother is truth.”

Frederica's matter-of-fact tone carries no guilt in it. But to say there was no meekness in it would be wrong. It was also hard to pin it as her suppressing her emotions, and was ultimately a presented apathy which kept Subaru from supposing her true feelings.

The same kind of type as Ram—but considering the length of Frederica and Subaru's relationship, Frederica is harder.

Subaru: “Like I said in the room before, I've got some things I wanna ask... but is it safe for me to anticipate I'll get an answer for all of them?”

Frederica: “...I certainly doubt I will be able to answer to your expectations. Being that SANCTUARY has not been released, the contract between myself and the Master remains as tied. So long as I am following the contract, the information I am capable of conveying to you shall be limited.”

Subaru: “Contracts again... goddamn everybody.”

Just interpret the damn contract according to the environment! Is what he wanted to yell, but being that he'd pledged to Emilia to keep his promises, his heart had some reproaches about forcing that upon others.

Subaru: “Is it okay if I ask you about the details of that contract?”

Frederica: “It is not. A contract is shared between myself and Roswaal-sama, and so being that it exists, the information I may disclose is limited. —That is the only thing I am capable of speaking on this topic.”

Subaru: “That didn't increase the information load at all. Shit, that bastard pulled some fucking nonsense preparations on this. I'm serious the only thing I can think here's he's turning hostile.”

Subaru clicks his tongue and pulls himself together with a sip of tea. Just tastes like leaves as always, but with all this tea he's had passing through his throat, he has indeed become able to discern which leaves are expensive and which are not. —Tongue says: these are expensive.

Subaru: “Not the place to mention it. ...That you're from SANCTUARY, and are Garfiel's big sister, does line up with the facts, right? Or would this also be beyond your capabilities of answering?”

Frederica: “No, it would be no issue. The details... more accurately, I am not from SANCTUARY, but rather I was raised there. Although being that I was already living there when I first achieved self-awareness, it would most practically be truth to simply say you were correct.”

Subaru: “It's not your birthplace... right actually Lewes-san said that too. Something like how Roswaal brings half-bloods along from elsewhere and makes them live there.”

Subaru: “Half-bloods can't pass through the barrier, which means bringing half-bloods inside from elsewhere is the same as trapping them in. Why the hell is he... and, for being trapped, the people there are pretty...”

They all looked to live peacefully, without any especially great dissatisfaction.

Their lives appeared unrelated to the sense of entrapment resulting from being forcibly shut in, or the corresponding anger.

Meaning even the people who were brought there from elsewhere had apparently accepted their lives in SANCTUARY. —Was there some significance to it?

Frederica: “Would you be aware of the Demihuman War, Subaru-sama?”

Subaru: “...Demihuman War. Just going by the sound of it, feels like I've heard it somewhere before.”

If he seriously digs through his memory, he figures he's probably heard the term once or twice.

Frederica passes her fingers through her long, blonde hair, and quietly covers the fangs peeking out between her lips.

Frederica: “The meaning behind that SANCTUARY's existence, and Roswaal-sama's ideas. If you would like to investigate either, we would first have to discuss for a moment the DEMIHUMAN WAR.”

Standing up, Frederica heads deeper into the parlour. Subaru's gaze follows her as she picks up a box on a table at the back of the room—

Frederica: “There is no need to be so wary. They are merely confectioneries for the tea.”

Breaking into a slight smile, she returns and presents the box to Subaru. Inside are sweets characteristic of this world, which he can only eat here at Roswaal's mansion. Subaru looks between the sweets and Frederica's face, comparing them.

Frederica: "It seems liable to become a long, tedious story. Please do take your time in accommodating me."

CHAPTER 32: ¼

Sipping the steaming tea, Subaru listens to Frederica's words.

Frederica: “The Demihuman War—Firstly, would you know of the general content of this dispute?”

Subaru: “It's like I said before, I haven't stepped into it far enough to hear the details. But... It's not like I can't imagine something, going off the name and historical background.”

Frederica: “My, intriguing. May I ask in what manner you conceive it?”

Frederica hides her mouth, smiling. Seems like hiding her rows of fangs when she laughs is a deeply-ingrained habit of hers. Subaru keeps noticing her do it.

He also thinks: She smiles so much, but doesn't want others to see it.

Subaru closes his eyes and scratches his cheek.

Subaru: “Right,”

Subaru: “Dunno how long ago the war was, but I can at least imagine its start wasn't unrelated to the WITCH OF ENVY. There's how Emilia was treated in the palace like a tumour, and I know that lots of people hate half-elves.”

The WITCH OF ENVY, appearing in picture books, an unparalleled symbol of absolute evil. A silver-haired half-elf, from which point of resemblance alone Emilia received such unjust treatment. Subaru imagined off the wake of that, disputes arose from excessively trivial starting points.

Subaru: “A half-elf'd be a child born between a human and an elf, right? If half-elves are born into that loathing... then it wouldn't be weird for prejudice to arise towards half-bloods born between humans and other races.”

Frederica: “...Please do proceed.”

Subaru: “I'm just going off imagination, but the thought of rejecting half-elves ties into the thought of rejecting half-bloods. And if I'm gonna speak in extremes, the likely starting point for half-bloods—demihumans—are terrifying... is the junk I'm sure some guys started thinking.”

Far as Subaru's aware, the most numerous race in this world is indeed humans. He knew of the existence of elves and beastmen like the triplets, but going off time spent in the Capital, the various races of demihumans appeared to absolutely number fewer than humans.

Subaru: “I don't think everyone of everyone adopted that thinking, but I'm sure the loud and visible types're the same anywhere. And from that came hatred of demihumans... in honesty, maybe fear of demihumans. While that dissatisfaction was spilling out everywhere and all whatever else's when...”

Frederica: “Antagonism erupted between humans and the demihuman races. The smouldering coals at last caught aflame, spread vigorously, and ultimately had reached across the whole of Lugnica.”

Says Frederica, her tone gloomy.

Frederica: “Your conjecture gives so little purchase for objection that supplementations would be practically unnecessary. ... You sincerely have not heard a detailed account of the event before?”

Subaru: “Nope. If it really does practically all match up, then it's a victory for my imagination. Or for my reading experience... really common for there to be antagonism between races in light novels and stuff.”

Of course Subaru hadn't been truly conscious of this being a problem in reality. Discrimination existed between races of humans in the original world, but that was a matter for a world distant from Subaru, which was why he conceived it as not being greatly different from parallel world problems.

You are yourself, others are others—was the cold kind of thinking he had possessed, and although correct, in reality it should perhaps also be called 'averting his eyes.'

Subaru: “But even if my imagination caught up with the problem's outbreak, no way I can work my brain all the way to the conclusion. But since it's in past-perfect tense, the Demihuman War's at least been sorted out now, right?”

Frederica: “Yes, more or less. But the scars from the war run deep, and the sprouts of prejudice towards children born between demihumans and humans remain thickly ingrained.”

Perhaps due to being of a pedigree potentially subject to that prejudice, Frederica's words come paired with a weight unattainable for anyone who had merely heard the story from outside. *Can I ask what happened next?* Are the words Subaru feels hesitation about flinging at her, but Frederica seems to grasp his intention and sighs.

Frederica: “My apologies for having caused your concern. The story's continuation, would come next.”

Subaru: “You don't have to force yourself—is what I'd like to say, but this talk's directly connected to what I wanna ask so I can't say that. Please force yourself.”

Frederica: “My, my. You are certainly adept at bestowing others motivation.”

Giving Subaru's selfish words a positive interpretation, Frederica takes a sip from her teacup.

Frederica: “The Demihuman War began approximately 50 years ago. It consequently proceeded for approaching 10 years... its end is recording as having had been 40 years ago.”

Subaru: “10 years... man that's long. Though I think my hometown's history had a Hundred Years' War and a Thirty Years' War or something.”

Since Subaru didn't particularly have a deep relationship with history novels, his knowledge comes from glancing over names in textbooks. But being that those wars had those names, they had probably been ongoing for at least that much of a timespan.

Just thinking of hating someone and continuing a war for 30, 100 years was scary.

Subaru something somethings making a reference to what I think is some war simulator video game

Frederica: “Regardless, the war began between humanity and a settlement of demihumans. The conflict fundamentally should have been settled while confined only to that place... but because of the incident that followed, the blaze of war intensified. A horrific conflict began, washing the blood of every land with blood.”

Subaru: “The incident that followed?”

Frederica: “Following the start of the dispute, the then-King of Lugnica viewed the situation seriously and immediately sent his aide as an envoy to stage a peace conference. The chiefs of various demihuman races gathered to welcome the envoy and resolve the matter through diplomacy, is what was supposed to have happened, but...”

Subaru tilts his head, urging Frederica to continue. She closes her eyes.

Frederica: “Those who attended the conference—the envoy from the palace and the chiefs alike—were unanimously slaughtered.”

Subaru: “Slaughtered? By who, and for what purpose?”

Frederica: “The perpetrators are yet unknown.³ However, it appears that both humanity and demihumans of the time judged that IT WAS THE OTHER SIDE'S PLOT. Embers resultingly became an inferno, and incapable of halting the blaze, ten years.... would be what it became.”

Subaru: “The hell were they doing. Have a more proper discussion about it... would really be too idealistic?”

Considering the feelings of the people at the time, that would perhaps be a viewpoint coming quite from a god.

Dispatched from the palace was the King's aide. Taking his prestige into consideration, withdrawing from the matter while leaving the culprit unknown would be a slight on his name. The demihumans, too, had their chiefs slaughtered en-masse. Degrading it to a question of numbers was pretty terrible, but by pure comparison, the demihumans were more severely injured.

And adding to that, the relationship between the two races had the groundwork of being the origin of the WITCH OF ENVY.

To begin mending relations would be difficult, and while stepping into that issue, they would be slow to deal with the next arising problem—It wasn't hard to imagine that forstallments and forstallments invited tragedy.

Frederica: “Ultimately, the demihumans capitulated—would be how the Demihuman War was concluded. That having been said, the demihumans refused to acknowledge any compliance in the incident with the conference, and rather acknowledged the pointlessness in continuing the war any further.”

Subaru: “I personally think the first party to fold in a stalled argument's the smarter one, though. And on top of that this was a civil war kinda thing, right? The country's not getting anything out of this.”

Frederica: “You are precisely correct, Lugnica's national power declined heavily over the period of embroilment with the Demihuman War. It was fortunate that conditions in the neighbouring countries were not calm, otherwise Lugnica may have been overtaken by another nation.”

Call it fortune amid misfortune, the other three countries had their hands full as well at the time, and Lugnica managed to avoid being stabbed from behind.

Subaru: “But man, it's amazing that they decided to end a war that'd gone on so long. It must've taken some courage, and thinking of how the diehards'd resist it'd be pretty impossible.”

³ Unclear if perpetrators is singular or plural.

Frederica: "...It was because humanity had a presence among them overwhelming enough to shatter the diehards' hearts. Every demihuman race out there bowed their head before the adroit swordsmanship of the generation's Sword Saint, Theresia Van Astrea-sama... would something be the matter?"

Subaru: "No, just surprised at hearing a name I know. Small world."

The name of Wilhelm's wife should be that Theresia. She was the Sword Saint of that generation, meaning that'd probably place her as two generations before Reinhardt. Hearing that this woman alone engaged in enough activity to drop the curtain on a ten-years war indeed made it possible to comprehend the bullshit that was the Sword Saint.

Subaru: "Well, I've figured out how the Demihuman War went. And I can also generally imagine some problems that derived from it."

Frederica: "Your prior conjectures were almost entirely accurate, Subaru-sama. You appear a considerably quicker thinker than expected. It startles me how I have misjudged you."

Subaru: "Going along positively interpreting that as praise, the Demihuman War ended, but prejudice against demihumans wouldn't disappear so easily. Though 'course that kinda animosity wouldn't appear so blatantly in places with public gaze around."

Humans and demihumans lived lives passing right next to each other along lines of fruit stalls in the Capital. Subaru didn't know how much effort it had taken for such an ordinary scene to become ordinary, but contrary to places that had become like that, there would definitely be places where no matter how much time passed, that lifestyle couldn't be erected.

Subaru: "Like small-population, closed-off villages, beyond outsider's access... say there's guys living in that kinda place who sorta had a problem, and I feel it'd be a bath of concentrated fire."

Frederica: "It would be acceptable to say that my brother and I had been exactly in that environment."

Furrowing her brows with pain at recalling the past, Frederica refers to her brother—to Garfiel—earnestly as such for the first time, her gaze distant.

Frederica: "My brother and I are siblings born of different fathers. That is why our surnames are different... mine is my father's. My brother uses the surname of our mother."

Subaru: "Surname, yours was Frederica... Baumann?"

Frederica: "Indeed. And my brother should be using the name of Tinsel. Our mother had been, ah... a woman rather lacking savvy and very lacking luck."

Frederica's choosing her words but not choosing them fully. Not understanding what she's trying to say, Subaru's expression shows his lack of comprehension.

Frederica: "Although it is rather embarrassing to say..."

Frederica: "Just when it seemed our mother would be converted into a collateral payment, the brigade of demihuman thieves targeting the slave traders bound her... and that would be where she met my father."

Subaru: “What!? Hold on wait! I can't hear this without preparing my heart first!”

Frederica: “But she promptly parted with my father by death, and while bringing along my infant self and bewildered on where to proceed, a different band of demihumans captured her. This time was where she would meet Garfiel's father..”

Subaru: “Waitwaitwait, I'm sorry! I didn't think it was gonna get this heavy!”

Frederica: “Which is why I am keeping it relatively weightless and brief. Now, Garfiel was born, but indeed we could not stay with my brother's father and the three of us again proceeded lost, and just when the situation had turned hopeless, we were righted by the Mathers household.”

Exposing her heavy past, nostalgia rises in Frederica's eyes as she gives a sigh. She strokes the arm of her chair.

Frederica: “Back then, the head of the Mathers household had already been the Master... been Roswaal-sama in his early teenage years, so in the truest of meanings he is the benefactor to my brother and I. I consider my providing this service a privilege and an honour.”

Subaru: “And you were brought to SANCTUARY, and lived there... by the way, and this is kinda hard to ask but, what happened to your mother?”

Going off what Frederica has said, it seems like their mother was a pureblooded human. Meaning she could go in and out of SANCTUARY whenever she wanted. And further, Subaru hadn't spotted her once in either SANCTUARY or the mansion. Subaru's expectations are bad, but Frederica shakes her head.

Frederica: “I would surmise that I have worried you, but I do request for your calm. Our mother entrusted my brother and I to Roswaal-sama, after which she left the mansion by her own feet for places unknown. Her trail following that remains unseen. I do at least wish her health, though.”

Subaru goes silent. Subaru's bad expectations were that she'd died, but the reality is that she cruelly betrayed them. But that presents another question.

Subaru: “Then why's that Garfiel using the surname of a mother who left you like that? I mean you're using your father's.”

Frederica: “She left no records or anything else, and so to spread and hear more of our mother's memory... or such flakiness would not be it. My brother's usage of our mother's surname... is because he does not know our mother, and because although he acts worse than he is, he has some stubbornness to him.”

Subaru: “Stubbornness...”

Subaru goes over his impression of Garfiel.

He's quicker to put up dukes than think, speaks sharply and rudely, but does appreciate sense and practice. He judges himself as being dumb, but he is still thinking and he doesn't freeze up or act without thought. The impression's one of a punk taking inspiration from old-style, good-natured delinquents.

Appreciates sense and practice—would be the point where if you judged him, you couldn't deny him as a nice, moral, humane dude.

Frederica: “Subaru-sama. —Would you be aware of the manner in which SANCTUARY's barrier discriminates its targets?”

Says Frederica, suddenly flinging that one at a thoughtful Subaru. His reaction is slow. He looks back at Frederica dumbly.

Subaru: “Uhhh,”

Subaru: “Honestly, no. Since even saying the barrier's definitely right there, I can't feel it anyway. I kinda think it magically checks the people passing through, but...”

Frederica: “The barrier investigates the blood inside the bodies of creatures passing through it. For human blood and demihuman blood. It repels those upon whom it can distinctly register those two. That is the essence of the barrier.”

Subaru: “...What are you trying to say?”

Frederica: “Would you have come to understand why I have exited the barrier, and am outside of SANCTUARY?”

Subaru: “...No, honestly I don't. Hearing the conditions's probably made me not understand. I saw Lewes-san's physical condition break down when we neared the barrier on the road back, and those effects being genuine's something I saw when entering SANCTUARY too.”

Right before Garfiel's smashing introduction, Emilia broke down as she passed through the barrier. Thinking of that strength, doubting its existence was ridiculous—

Subaru: “—Wha, why.”

A flash goes through Subaru's mind.

He had felt unease when he parted with Lewes on the road here. Now he had the answer to that unease.

Subaru: “If the conditions're the same... how the hell was Garfiel so damn lively when he was that close to the barrier?”

Garfiel had attacked Subaru and the others on their arrival, tossing around both Patrasche and the carriage. He definitely wasn't putting his all into it, but Emilia had lost consciousness just by passing over the barrier, and Lewes' physical condition had collapsed just by getting near it. Garfiel's behaviour there differed from them way too much.

—It was almost as if the barrier was having no effect on his body.

Frederica: “He has the characteristic of Ancestral Return, so by a glance my brother's demihuman blood may seem thick, but in reality that is not the case. —Identical, to me.”

Subaru: “If the blood's thickness is the condition for how the barrier discriminates between half-bloods and non-half-bloods... a side of the blood can be thin enough to get around it?”

Frederica: “My and my brother's father had their various differences, but neither were pure-blooded demihumans. Both were half-bloods, and when mixed with our human mother, the births would be

halfway beings which would only inherit one fourth of demihuman blood.”

Subaru: “Quarter-bloods... and that's why you the barrier didn't catch you.”

The barrier rebounds half-bloods, so it doesn't rebound quarter-bloods. This explains why Lewes named Frederica as an exception, but gives rise to another question.

Subaru: “Wait. Then, that means Garfiel can leave SANCTUARY too? That if he feels like it, he can just do it regardless of the TRIAL's state?”

If true, that's surprising, but welcome.

If you lose the preamble of dealing with the barrier for pulling Garfiel out of SANCTUARY, then it's possible to bring him to the scene of Elsa's attack, where his strength is needed. Subaru had already basically given up on repelling Elsa this time, and had been thinking entirely of methods to get the people in the mansion outside, but—

Subaru: “If he can come outside, then...”

Frederica: “Indeed, my brother is equally as capable as I of leaving SANCTUARY. When I left SANCTUARY, I proposed we go together, him coming as far as the barrier's edge. However...”

Cutting off there, Frederica stares at Subaru, who feels he's found some bright prospects. The emotion in Frederica's eyes is deep, instantly cooling Subaru's zeal.

Frederica: “My brother remained in SANCTUARY. And I believe that so long as SANCTUARY remains unfreed, Garfiel will never go outside. He is a stubborn, kind boy.”

Subaru: “Stubborn... no way,”

Subaru's brows rise in surprise as he hits on an idea. Frederica nods as she hides her mouth with her sleeve.

Frederica: “He is not a boy who is capable of going outside, leaving the people of SANCTUARY who cannot go outside behind. For better or for worse, honest... and thus troublesome, is my brother.”

CHAPTER 33: A PATHWAY ESCAPED OF WIND

Eyes lowered, Frederica speaks of her brother.

The emotion packed in her gaze is complex, containing both something troubled and something loving. That might just be common thing to feel in response to a blood relative.

Subaru: “Even if he can physically break through the barrier, his mental problems mean he won't cross it... that's how you're thinking?”

Frederica: “He did not respond when I, his elder sister, called him to it. He came along to the verge of leaving the barrier, but ultimately elected to to stay inside and pass his time with grandmother rather than go with me.”

Subaru: “Grandmother... you mean Lewes-san?”

Frederica: “He may not speak kindly, but he truly does adore grandmother. It's unthinkable he would come outside if grandmother's utmost wish is not fulfilled.”

Though Garfiel's disrespectful attitude of going 'the granny the granny the granny' stood out, it was obvious Garfiel harboured familiar love which surpassed casual friendliness towards Lewes. Subaru had called him a tsundere before, and that might've been spot on in some respect.

Subaru: “In the end, this doesn't change anything about conquering the TRIAL and freeing SANCTUARY being essential conditions. Say it's disappointing and it's sorta disappointing.”

Frederica: “I apologize for my failure to answer to your expectations. ...If there is anything further you would like to ask...”

Subaru: “Within answerable range, yeah?”

Frederica: “I do apologize for that.”

Subaru: “Is asking about Roswaal's real intentions an okay topic?”

Frederica: “The Master supports Emilia-sama, and would intend to see her as Ruler of Lugnica. I will declare that no purchase exists for doubt on this matter.”

Subaru: “That you're prefacing your answer to 'his real intentions' with this means that you don't think Roswaal's actions right now're really following with that either, yeah?”

Frederica: “He has chosen oblique and roundabout methods, would be a notion neither Ram or I would deny.”

Frederica's expression as she answers is pained, as if she's accepting Subaru's doubt as being natural, but is prohibited to provide the key that will unravel said doubt. Meaning,

Subaru: “Can't say anything more about it without said Roswaal's permission.”

Frederica: “My apologies. But that much alone... the Master is your and Emilia-sama's ally, Subaru-sama. As long as you would possess a will to prevail in the Royal Selection, that much is assured.”

Subaru: “That wording is crazy bothering me, but... well, fine. Nevermind Roswaal, I've gotten this

feeling figuring it's probably okay to trust you, Frederica.” Something something hard making judgements if you're as nutso into Roswaal as Ram

Subaru likes Ram as an individual, that that didn't equate to absolute trust in her. It's a complicated relationship. Either way, so long as Roswaal's staying put as the absolute in her order of priorities, being that Subaru can't completely trust Roswaal right now, he has to put his judgement of Ram on hold.

Subaru: “If you can't talk about Roswaal's real intentions... what does SANCTUARY being a test site mean? Garfiel called it that.”

Frederica: “A test site—you say.”

Subaru: “Also called it a packing of shit for guys with no destinations. After that talk on demihumans we just had honestly I can imagine what 'no destination' means. And that Roswaal's demihuman fancy or whatever he calls it is making half-bloods without any destination live in SANCTUARY. But,”

Subaru: “Even if it's not the WITCH OF ENVY, if people knew his family's had custody of a witch-related facility for generations, I'd say it'd be a pretty big thing. I heard there's no documents left or blah blah whatever, but actually there's still a whole cemetery around.”

Frederica: “The meaning of the word 'witch' in itself has shifted to a negative one. I would doubtless say that people would not regard the Master's contract relation, the WITCH OF GREED, as something appropriate, either. I believe that concerns would be exactly in line with your thoughts, Subaru-sama.”

Subaru: “Glad there's consensus on SANCTUARY's existence being an issue. So, would it being a test site further overwrite that consensus for me?”

Frederica: “...This location by nature was a hidden village of half-bloods, that the WITCH OF GREED may conduct a certain experiment. It is unclear what negotiations passed between the witch and the plot's landlord, the Mathers household, but that contact would reason why the Mathers household has come to be managing and maintaining SANCTUARY for generations, or some such.”

Nodding to Frederica's faltering speech, Subaru sorts his information. Subaru'd basically put together this much from the indirect statements he'd been getting from the people in SANCTUARY. So the problem is,

Subaru: “What was the witch testing using half-bloods, and why is Roswaal still obeying the contract even after the witch's death... or so.”

Frederica: “The reason for the latter would be simple. The content of the contract is 'OVER THE PERIOD UNTIL SANCTUARY IS FREED, MAINTAIN SANCTUARY IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PLEDGE SHARED WITH THE WITCH.' Should people not enter the place at regular intervals, the environment known as SANCTUARY would fail to stand.”

Subaru: “And so half-bloods with circumstances are getting the hidden village treatment. Just hearing that, it's possible to think what Roswaal's doing is part of some philanthropy.”

Being that discrimination exists, places where half-bloods could be guaranteed safety were necessary. If Roswaal's the one fulfilling that role, then Subaru would have to re-evaluate his

judgement of him. However,

Subaru: "Doesn't seem like it's entirely people who wanna stay there, though. The guys following with Lewes-san and wishing for SANCTUARY's freedom are the majority, right?"

Frederica: "...The prejudiced view against demihumans has considerably thinned. That my brother and I entered SANCTUARY was more heavily due to simply lacking anywhere to go, rather than our blood. SANCTUARY will be freed one day. —Which is precisely why I..."

Shutting her eyes, Frederica cuts off her sentence. Subaru falls silent, and after leaving some time, hesitatingly broaches the topic.

Subaru: "This might just be me getting myself stuck on some idea, but... was it maybe because you were thinking about what would happen after SANCTUARY was freed, that you left?"

Frederica: "...Why would you believe such?"

Subaru: "You're saying why well, you're expression's so sad when you're talking about SANCTUARY. That you left your home despite that means it has to be either for your own sake, or for others' sake. And so..."

Scratching his cheek, the image of a blond, short-haired young man rises in Subaru's mind. He was exactly like this kindhearted woman before him, entirely words and not at all upfront.

Subaru: "If you share your little brother Garfiel's trait of hiding his true feelings, then it wouldn't be weird for your actions to have an underside so thoughtful it's embarrassing. Y'know you... left SANCTUARY to create a place for the people leaving a freed SANCTUARY to go, so things wouldn't turn problematic for them, right? You're working here because of course you have a debt to Roswaal, but that's not all of it. ...I mean is just kinda the sorta way I'm thinking."

Aware halfway through that he's making some incredible leaps in logic, Subaru bears the embarrassment as he glances at Frederica. If she laughs him off for a wrong guess, then all this was was Subaru getting too into it and embarrassing himself. But,

Frederica: "I desired that, when the new world one day opened... I would be to guide them into it."

Says Frederica, a smile rising on her face. It was not an expression of ill will towards a misaimed Subaru, but of reinspecting her own heart, and the following liberation of speaking sincerely with another.

Frederica: "I, raised there, want to craft an environment which'll foster the desire to leave there. If I'm even the slightest of help in crafting that environment, my... my perhaps-undesired birth would surely have meaning."

Subaru: "Undesired, that's..."

Frederica: "Consolations would be unnecessary. Particulars being particulars, it is unthinkable that my mother grew heavy with me while desiring so. She abandoned myself and my brother in SANCTUARY and left. With that answer... but, with merely that answer was not how I wished to allow the story to end, and so I am now here."

It's a problem Frederica's already reached the answer for.

Knowing only the surface circumstances, Subaru's sympathy effects her heart not. She had already embraced the answer she had come to herself, and chose not to end it on that answer alone.

—Strong, Subaru thought sincerely. Conviction so strong, as to be admirable.

Subaru: "...Does Garfiel know about your true feelings? If he knows, but still didn't come out..."

Frederica: "My brother is the only one to whom I have told everything I harbour. That he regardless did not accompany me... would have been his choice. Rather than leave to procure something difficult to obtain, he chose to be present to protect something simple to lose. That us siblings have split paths, would entirely be merely that."

Subaru: "Protect... protect, yeah. Didn't think he was the kinda character to pick that option, going off his looks. Well, not like people's hearts are something understandable from the outside."

Rubbing his chin, Subaru drinks the rest of his tea in a single sip, and holds back a burp. He wipes his mouth the back of his hand.

Subaru: "So,"

Subaru: "Feels like this's gonna get dodged so back to topic, what's going on with the term TEST SITE. Is the content of what those tests were doing something you can talk about? ...Or, do you know the content?"

Frederica: "Unfortunately, I would not know of the content nor purpose of this affair. The continuation of the testing became impossible once the WITCH OF GREED had passed away. Merely the facility remains, and the Mathers household maintains it, would be all the matter is."

Subaru: "Thinking like that this didn't go anywhere. I've got it sunk into me that keeping promises's important, but what the heck's the point of keeping a promise 400 years after the partner's died?"

Frederica: "Were it not for the Master's family preserving that promise, I doubt my brother and I's childhood would have been especially peaceful."

Subaru: "Ueg... Um, that's... I wasn't thinking. Sorry."

Frederica snickers at Subaru's sincere apology and empties her cup as well. She collects the two teacups, standing up.

Frederica: "We have gone speaking for some time. Allow us to take a pause. What shall you do now, Subaru-sama?"

Subaru: "I just came here alongside getting the Arlam villagers back to the village. After I get to ask what I wanna ask, I'll go straight back... but saying that, seems tight today so it'll probably be tomorrow morning."

Frederica: "I see. Petra will be in high spirits tonight and tomorrow morning. Although considering her concentration will be apt to faltering, it is difficult to say whether that is a good thing."

Subaru: "So long as her studies're vaguely going forward. Where's she now?"

Frederica: "I believe she will have returned to village, and be meeting with those who have

returned. I had advised her beforehand to do so.”

Sasuga Frederica for having had already considered Subaru's intentions before he even voiced them. Subaru stands from his chair too as Frederica carries off the cups, counting off on his fingers the things he has left to do.

What he's heard from Frederica is half of everything he wanted to hear about. But it gave him enough information to do some speculating. All that's left is to find the final person who seems to know the details of things.

Subaru: “Gonna take time, but for now let's try going one-by-one through the mansion...”

Subaru's shoulders droop at the imminent HEAVY LABOUR of OPENING DOORS. Glancing at his back as she leaves the room, Frederica says quietly,

Frederica: “I don't know the content or purpose... but, I do know the outcome alone of the test site. When they know, when it becomes known... now, just how will they think?”⁴

Her muttering doesn't reach Subaru.



Everyone in the mansion knows what a fucking pain Beatrice's GATE CROSSING is, but Subaru's true realization of it came after returning from the Capital.

His instinct for multiple-choice situations was one of the few things Subaru could have self-pride in. His trait of picking the correct answer for no real reason had at least helped him by contributing to his probabilities in encountering Beatrice. But ever since returning from the Capital, that instinct hasn't been working too well.

Subaru: “Sweird. This should've been the last door in the mansion...”

Closing the door to the bathroom, Subaru gives a disappointed sigh and tilts his head. This makes his score on the Beako Guessing Quiz since getting back from the Capital Wins: 1 Losses: inestimable. Considering that his accuracy had been almost 100%, this wasn't something to call a slump. Subaru has to accept it.

Subaru: “It's like she's seriously goddamn avoiding me.”

Ram had once said that there was no being which could beat Beatrice's GATE CROSSING when she's serious, but Subaru defied that magnificently. He developed a kind of superiority complex toward Beatrice, not so much because he beat her GATE CROSSING, but because he had an advantage against her that no one else in the mansion did.

Subaru: “Even with how that last parting went, there's no one who holes up with this much vigour. ...If she doesn't show herself, I can't argue, or apologize.”

Subaru has no idea what he said that made her reject him that hard. Had no idea, but if he remained separated by physical distance like this, then he would continue to have no idea about the things he

4 No subject specified for this sentence. She probably means Subaru but since it's foreshadowy I'll play it safe.

had no idea about. He hated that.

He had things he wanted to ask her, and even ignoring that last-ditch reasoning, Subaru wanted to see Beatrice and just talk with her.

He was fine with getting insulted. He didn't care if she mocked him. He had an everyday life he had lost. He couldn't bear losing another one. He knew that even that was a selfish idea.

Subaru: "Are Puck and Beatrice seriously not gonna talk at all at vital moments?"

Neither Puck or Beatrice are showing themselves when Emilia and Subaru are seeking them most. Blah blah Elsa's coming can't repel her so best choice is to evacuate those in the mansion.

Getting Rem and Petra out of the mansion won't be difficult. Frederica will probably come if Subaru appeals to her professional sense. The problem's just Beatrice.

In a loop cut from the anime, Subaru attempted to bring her out of the mansion and failed. That Subaru left her behind then was because he knew the attacking cultists weren't aiming for the mansion.

But now is different. Elsa will invade the mansion, and won't hesitate to brandish her blades.

Regardless of Emilia's absence, her knives'll only be thinking of slicing open the guts of everything inside the mansion.

Subaru doesn't actually know Beatrice's combat strength. He doesn't know, but he does know that Elsa's a monster strong enough to go tit-for-tat with Emilia plus Puck, and by Subaru's imagination might even be able to match Wilhelm.

Subaru can't envision Beatrice winning against her.

Subaru: "Maybe I'm just way too overconscious of Elsa being a problem. ...Kinda natural when she's killed you three times. —Oop."

Rubbing at the phantom pain in his stomach, Subaru stops in his advance down the hallway. His gaze fixes on a conspicuously gold-plated door, the gateway to the central room on the uppermost floor—Roswaal's office. Subaru knows that just going on in while the master's away is more than bad manners, but,

Subaru: "Right, there was something I wanted to check here."

Says Subaru as he pushes the door open without any particular enthusiasm and enters the room. There's been no changes here since he came round checking all the mansion's doors, so it's still exactly the same as when Subaru had Otto sorting the paperwork. Subaru glances around the room, heading for two bookshelves in the back of the room beside the ebony desk.

Subaru: "Hidden passage'll be behind these bookshelves."

Subaru's confirmed the existence of the hidden passage twice—it's probably some kind of escape route or something, but Subaru doesn't know how to activate its mechanism or where it leads.

Subaru: "It was open last time when Elsa attacked, and I think it's certain you can escape somewhere through this, but... when I went in before I froze to death partway through."

A memory where he had ended as an ice sculpture, alongside witch cultists who apparently pissed off Puck. It was a terrible memory, of his fingers snapping off and limbs shattering, but since it ended without pain and a lot of it was blurry, it wasn't enough to send him trembling. However, death was death. Subaru didn't have intention in the slightest to look down on that.

Subaru: "If I know where the escape route leads, I can make hypotheses for the worst-case scenario. Or, you follow the escape route and enter back into the mansion or something. ...Don't think that'll be it, though."

Being that ensuring safety is the highest priority, Subaru has to check the escape route. It probably leads somewhere in the mountains behind the mansion. If there's some kind of evacuation provisions prepared halfway through for emergencies and so on, then great.

Subaru: "And so to check, zip into the escape route... is what I was thinking, but..."

The escape route's gimmick is 'do something and it'll move' right?

Subaru tries out pushing on the bookshelf as hard as he can, but the jam-packed bookshelf does not yield an inch before Subaru's maximum arm power. Though there might be a chance of moving it if he takes the insides out and tries moving just the shelves, but,

Subaru: "You can't take it that leisurely in a fast evacuation situation, so there should be some kinda switch or something or whatever to make it move."

Subaru checks under the desk and through the bookshelves, but he doesn't find anything switchlike. Though he does discover a second bottom to the drawer and a bunch of gemstones packed inside, but he decides to file that little event away as a 'that didn't happen' among others.

Subaru: "Have to call it quits, huh... Might not even be inside this room..."

???: "What isn't inside this room?"

Subaru: "Well of course the hidden switch-ish something. I wanna take a peek in the hidden passage behind the bookshelves, but if I can't find that something then the story's stuck."

???: "Oh, the escape path. That's this statue."

Petra tugs Subaru's sleeve as he tilts his head. Subaru looks over to where she's tugging him, his gaze following her pointing finger.

Subaru: "Ohh,"

Subaru: "In the corner of the room was a sculpture... is this where the trick is?"

The sculpture is of a person seated in a chair, of size small enough to put on a desk. It possessed a weirdness about it, being in the sparsely-decorated office, but Petra approaches it without fear.

Petra: "Tyah,"

And with that little noise, the sculpture's neck twists. Twists so far it goes 180 degrees backwards. It looks like the thing's broken its neck, which makes Subaru's brows furrow, but

Subaru: "Oh, oh, ohhh..."

The noise of something heavy sliding sideways echoes through the room, the usual bookshelves breaking away from each other to the right and left before Subaru as he turns back. There appearing was a space large enough for a single person, an entrance into darkness. Seeing the appearance of

the evacuation passage, Subaru balls his hand into a fist and strikes a pose.

Subaru: "Hereherehere it is. I'd been looking for it, thanks."

Petra: "Huhuu, right? Big Sis Frederica taught me all about it. That this's an escape path for emergencies, so let's remember it."

Subaru: "Yup, thankyouthankyou. Now let's just dash... Petra, since when've you!?"

Petra: "You're asking now!?"

Petra had gotten involved in everything so smoothly that Subaru, in deep thought, was belated to notice her existence. Petra pouts.

Petra: "And when I rushed back, and even helped you... Subaru-sama, I do believe you rather mean."

Subaru: "No, I felt like I was alone but I still thought halfway through that I was talking with somebody. The delight of having my goal achieved overwrote that so I noticed late. Sorry-dorry."

The little girl averts her face in displeasure. Subaru gives her head a light pat as he apologizes, and again looks toward the passage.

Subaru: "By the way Petra, did Frederica tell you where this leads?"

Petra: "Yes. Big Sis Frederica said it leads to a small cabin in the mountains in the back. It has a different barrier than the barrier for the witchbeasts, which means from outside you cannot tell it is there."

Subaru: "Got it. Indeed it is a hidden passage. But I'm gonna check it with my own eyes too."

With it confirmed as exiting into the mountains, it could serve as an escape route or an invasion route. Subaru rolls up his sleeves, expression overflowing with motivation as he heads for the entrance. Petra's quiet footsteps follow behind him.

Subaru: "You're coming too, Petra?"

Petra: "I can't?"

Subaru: "It's not that you can't, but it's probably not gonna be anything interesting. I'm just going outta pure curiosity to see where it leads, then I'm coming back."

Petra: "Now would be my break hours, so I am also free. So it is okay if I come too, right?"

Petra grabs the hem of her clothes, looking up at Subaru with puppy-eyes. Distancing her when she's so attached would make it hard to breathe. Subaru gives a sigh and a wry smile.

Subaru: "It really is just going and coming back. You're a curious one, Petra."

Petra: "If I wasn't curious I wouldn't be here... I'm glad I'm a curious one."

Not really getting what she's trying to say, Subaru smooths it over with a smile, takes her offered

hand, and heads for the passage.

The dark, hidden passage becomes a spiralling staircase, while the walls themselves become sources of dim pale-blue light. They're probably not going to lose the sight of the stair below, but knowing this passes through the underground, Subaru glances back.

Subaru: "The staircase's a little long and dark, so be careful not to slip."

Petra: "If I slip will you save me?"

Subaru: "I'll hug you and we'll tumble down to the bottom's all that'll happen so please let me off on that... and if I can't stand back up afterwards it's gonna be too miserable to watch."

Petra: "If that happens, I will care for you your whole life, Subaru-sama."

Subaru: "I'm glad but getting there's terrifying!"

Having this exchange, Subaru takes the lead as they begin descending the staircase. A cool wind drifts up from below, prompting thoughts of a surely-not-there-Puck and sending shivers down Subaru's spine.

It's not that he's scared of an impending non-existent death from freezing, but,

Subaru: "Going down while saying nothing's boring, and you might be scared Petra so let's talk."

Petra: "Subaru-sama, do you realise that your palm is slightly sweaty?"

Subaru: "And you might be scared Petra so let's talk! How was everyone at the village?"

Petra looks at him with affectionate pity and goes along with the talk. Continuing the conversation to an extent that no silence falls, they proceed down the stairway for several minutes—when the staircase ends, and they reach a narrow passage.

A little further down the passage will be a door, and what is behind that door will be an unexperienced zone for Subaru.

Subaru: "Going off how it feels, we're still just in the mansion's underground. If this passage goes all the way to the back mountains, this's a pretty long tunnel."

Petra: "Escape route, escape path, tunnel, we can't decide what to call it."

Subaru: "Yeah. In a wind blows from Mexico meaning, let's call it Santana."

Petra: "Ah, don't trip, there's a bump there."

Petra beautifully ignores Subaru's bullshit. Subaru feels delight at her rise in Subaru Proficiency and also loneliness.

Continuing down the passage, they finally arrive at a somewhat wider space. A door rises dimly out of the darkness ahead, verifying that there is a room here. This spot had been cramped with frozen cultists last time, but naturally this time there are no traces of that. Subaru gives a relieved sigh.

Subaru: "Obvious but looks like this's settled without tripping my trauma switch. So anyway getting here would be about a third of the way to the cabin on the mountain?"

Petra: "The air's cold... maybe on the other side of the door."

Subaru: “Yeah,”

Subaru: “Last time I got a game over just after touching the door. What's ahead is somewhere completely unknown... well, we'll check it out as we follow the road.”

Subaru puts his hand to the door.

Pushes it open, and with his face bathed in the rush of cold wind pouring into the room—

Subaru: “—ah?”

—Subaru realises that something has struck his stomach.

He lowers his gaze to see his chest, stricken on the left side. Something like a skewer protrudes from his belly, the rear end quivering as if to prove it had only just struck him.

—Seeing the blood seeping into his clothes, Subaru's throat freezes.

Petra: “Aah—!?”

His throat blocked with shock, Petra shrieks in Subaru's place as she notices the wound. Her scream echoes far through the narrow passage, hammering on Subaru's eardrums.

In the instant before the pain hits, still not understanding what happened, Subaru forces himself to think with all his strength.

Petra's shriek leaves a wake. It echoes through through the passage, driving out noise, her voice the only thing audible. Subaru nevertheless hears something he supposedly should not.

Footsteps, the sound of a blade leaving its sheath, and—

???: “Now, let's fulfil our promise—”

—wetting their lips and trembling for the oncoming slaughter, the voice of a murderer.

CHAPTER 34: WORLD ENDING

Portents tell of the coming pain.

Although an unpleasant sort of intuition, Subaru's life since coming to this world has been one fraught with life-threatening injury. That intuition was speaking: These next few seconds win or lose this.

With Petra's shriek echoing through the cramped passage, Subaru reaches his hand for the two flechettes jutting from his left side, to extract them. He knows the instant he touches them will be the beginning. Thus before it can reach him, he forces himself to think at dizzying speed.

Two flechettes, wounds not fatal. A handful of seconds until the pain arrives. Petra is frozen unmoving. Where did the attack come from? Hand still touching the door. The echoing is shrill. Amidst it a voice dripping murder, creeping into his ears.

—Elsa.

He recognizes a silhouette squirming in the darkness before him. Her posture low, bent down to a crawl and poised to dash forth, he also recognizes Elsa.

The piercing strike to his abdomen came from beyond the passage. Had been thrown with almost detestably precise control, targeting the gut. He rather wanted to applaud.

Stupid thought, dumb idea. Why was Elsa here now? What happened to his leeway? Why was she lurking in a hidden passage, supposedly unknown to anyone? Why did she know? Put all of it off for later. Answering questions was secondary, now this instant focus solely on survival force all brain cells fire—

Subaru: “—SHAMAAAAAAAAAAAAAAC!”

No weapons, no means to counter, hideously unready and unprepared.

Faced with split-second conditions, Subaru had only one move—or otherwise had his heart set, uncaring of how it looked, on merely one single action for when he encountered Elsa.

Answering to Subaru's yell, his incomplete gate recomposes his internal mana to conform to the concord's needs. From the fingertips of his outstretched right hand billows a black smoke—cloaking the passage in darkness.

An umbra darker than light-given shadow consumes the cramped space, instantly dividing Subaru and the threat approached to before him. The expelled smoke possesses no effects to hinder movement. Plunge forward, and one would pierce through the haze without stopping. But,

Subaru: “Wall of confusion, if you're something scalable I'll scale y—gggaaaaaaugh!!”

The postponed torrent of pain assaults Subaru. A blaze originating from his right hip courses through his entirety, shrieking at the effective thrusts of heated metal flaring through his brain and stomach. The recompense for the imperfect concord further wrings Subaru's body of more mana than necessary. He falls to his knees with the exhaustion and fatigue of his body being parched dry. What stops him from succumbing to collapse is—

Petra: “Subaru!”

—The small and soft sensation of a hand gripping his. He looks to find Petra fretting over him, about to cry, her long eyelashes trembling.

Her eyes host terror at circumstances beyond her comprehension, and rejection of there being a ludicrous threat closing in before her. But stronger than either is the consideration for Subaru's safety.

The instant Subaru recognizes it, the pain from his shredded nerves and bereavement from his peeling soul promptly exit his mind. Before the effect can fade, he squeezes back on Petra's hand.

Subaru: "Anyway, upstairs!"

Unable to proceed further ahead, the pathway's only road is to return back the way they came. Not even Subaru knows how long Shamac would hold. That he did not consume enough mana to faint, perhaps a result of his body acclimatizing to it over multiple uses, was his only present achievement.

Regardless, without allowing the opportunity granted by the obfuscating black mist to escape—

Subaru: "Guigh... augahh!?"

The moment he steps forth to run, something sharp again gouges pain into his flesh. He looks toward the source of the pain, to find four flechettes jutting out from his right shoulder to the rear of his neck. The depth of the wounds is fortunately shallow, but the burrowing pain of those pinky-thick darts only intensifies in the looking.

Subaru: "She saw!?"

She can see though Shamac's smoke, was Subaru's split-second judgement, but he immediately realises that it is incorrect. He intuitively understands what Elsa did from beyond the smoke. Having judged the haze as a threat and diving into it as dangerous, Elsa flung her throwing weapons through the mist without any regard to aim.

The passage was narrow, enough so that three Subarus side-by-side would fill it. Should one possess the control to aim for the centre of the passage, the high probability of striking a fleeing opponent's back would result in a hit.

The instant he realises this, Subaru yanks Petra's arm forward and takes her against his chest in an embrace.

She shrieks. Just as she finishes getting out of the way, there comes the noise of those metal flechettes slicing past through the air.

Had Subaru not interfered, the line of flechettes would have reached to skewer Petra's head.

Subaru: "This's... bad!"

Spitting saliva and blood, Subaru looks back as he sprints down the passage for the mansion. He pulls along the arm of a lagging Petra, forcing her onward.

His vision strobos with pain. The world flickers in black and red. Dull blue lights arise in the dim passageway. They mingle with the red and black, the world indistinct.

One instant of action had entirely sapped Subaru of his energy and stamina.

Even should he reach the mansion in this condition, no plan for breaking through this predicament would come to him promptly. He was simply clinging onto the hope before him, biting down on his molars and continuing his dash.

The terror that courses up his neck in that instant, perceived exactly because he was Subaru and had scraped with demise on several occasions, may have been the sensation of impending death.

Bitter terror guides him to tilt his neck backwards. His dark eyes witness the tracks of death. Slicing the air—was far too light of a phrasing—butchering the air was the incoming blade. The most greatly owned and most wicked of Elsa's weapons—a kukri knife—rides its own weight as it rotates on the vertical, closing in on Subaru and Petra's backs at terrifying speed.

The speed makes reaction impossible. To parry or match this threat was unthinkable. That Subaru, faced with this, nevertheless managed to reach out his arm was what you would surely call a split-second miracle.

His fingers reach to catch the knife's edge, and indeed between his pointer and middle finger does the kukri slice—then continuing without any waning of its speed or ferocity, and away fly Subaru's middle, ring, and little fingers.

The knife proceeds its cut through Subaru's arm, bisecting it straight from the wrist to the elbow. Momentum forces the now-lowered arm to strike the wall—the resulting haze of blood painting the passageway, painting Subaru, with red. He screams. He shrieks. His voice invites speculation that his throat will break, burn, shred.

His vision turns to red and the force of his bite fractures his molars. He lifts his mangled arm. Red. Just red. He sees something white. Instantly turns red. Unthinkable this thing belongs to him anymore. Simply a pain-spawning profusion.

Cut it off. Get rid of it. What is the need for an organ of only pain. There is none. Get rid of it, send it flying, chop it off. Fuck this thing. Just die, die, die—a touch.

The touch of a hand gripping his. Opposite the limb of only pain there remains a warmth. The instant Subaru feels it, his shrieking stops. Throat busted. His pain-frazzled nerves transcend their permissible limit, bursting. He forgets the pain. But not the warmth.

He brings in his arm, steps out his foot. His voiceless throat trembles. Painting the passage with blood, Subaru runs. Heavy—his legs. Heavy—his arms. Is he pulling them, or are they pulling him? He did not even know. He did not know. Did not know. Did not want to know.

The passage ends. He made it to the staircase. Run up the spiral stairway and he will enter the mansion. Enter the mansion and then what. Someone who, someone there, someone to, save, Emilia, Rem?

Subaru: “aeheuiiiI, Iii!”

It will not be ended. It is not ended. It surely would not be ended.

He still had not seen anything. Not found anything. Had not grabbed, grasped anything. Like hell he could throw away everything here.

He looks up. The top of the staircase is far. His legs are unsteady. Tongue is numb. His life spills with the blood dripping from his arm. He picks up the exhausted, eroded warmth in his left hand. And—

???: “—baru-sama!!”

The yell of a beast. The sound of heavy impacts descending from above. Subaru climbs the stairs to see someone's large, broad back. An apron dress embellished in the lingering black smoke. Long, blonde hair swaying in the cold air, a figure squatting on the landing now standing up. A terrifying face looks back at him—its expression letting slip worry, its visage familiar.

Subaru: “Fuhreder...”

Frederica: “Don't speak! That wound... it's terrible.”

Frederica sees Subaru's wounds the instant he voices her name, her face paling. Her gaze as she looks at Subaru's disfigured arm is pained, and after following the blood slathering half his body—

Frederica: “a,...”

—She swallows her breath, her voice so quiet as to disappear. The ghastliness of Subaru's condition was probably that shocking. The Subaru in question had already lost feeling of the pain thanks to his brain's overflowing endogenous opioids. He could not stop the raggedness of his breathing, nor the dripping of drool from his lips. Spitting out the bath of bloody foam inside his mouth, Subaru attempts to speak to Frederica—

Subaru: “aauAhh—!”

Frederica: “—Shh!!”

From beyond the darkness again comes the assault of a kukri. The revolving deathblade aims for Frederica's head. Subaru speaks at sighting the shimmer of steel, to which Frederica draws something from her waist in a flash—sparks scatter the dark of the passage, a shrill tone sounds, and the crooked blade deflects. What achieved this was—

Frederica: “Appears we have an intruder.”

Furnishing Frederica's crossed arms are clawed cestus. Her mastery in readying them shows: these are well familiar game for her.

In a sense, they were a weapon so excessively and suitingly boorish as to exceed her suiting. She shreds the air as she readies her arms before her, glancing back at Subaru behind her.

Frederica: “To the mansion. Signal when at the top. I will follow.”

Subaru: “Bhu...”

Frederica: “With those wounds you'll be a burden regardless. —Take care of Petra.”

What pushed a stubborn Subaru forward were Frederica's final pleading words. Swallowing what he was about to say, Subaru pulls Petra's small body close. Cradling her now will be faster than pulling her along. Petra enters into his arms without resistance as Subaru takes one step away.

Subaru: “Dhon't die.”

Frederica: “Of course not. —I haven't finished yet.”

Although limping and reluctant, Subaru dashes up the stairway with his sights on the top floor. The noise of blade striking blade echoes up Subaru's ascent of the helix. The constrained space robs Elsa of her mobility, leaving this battle as a match of direct prowess. Frederica may even have chance of winning—or at least, such was the hope Subaru wished to cling to.

Spitting out his fractured molars, Subaru curses his furiously-revolving legs. Faster, sharper, every second spent conquering the stairs was a second closer to Frederica's fate. Hurry—hurry, to the top,

to the top, to the top—.

Subaru: “Ih'm... mahde it!”

Reaching the top, Subaru spits ragged breaths as he collapses to his knees on the carpet. He jabs his head back into the escape passage, calling his voice down the stairs.

Subaru: “Fuhre, dherhaa! Ihssaohkae!”

Sealing off the passage after Frederica's completed her ascent would sequester them from Elsa. Realising this as he speaks, Subaru tumbles himself toward the open-close gimmick sculpture. He takes its neck in his hand, waiting for Frederica's flight. However—,

Subaru: “—weh”

What slams on Subaru's ears is the cacophony of tremendous ballistics and collapse. The building's foundations break against each other in a quake, kicking up billows of smoke and assaulting the mansion with tremors.

What happened, thinks Subaru as he leaves the sculpture and returns to the path. He peers inside—and sees the spiral staircase now absent, leaving only rubble.

Subaru: “This... a,”

This was payback for shoddy architecture—was not the breed of this destruction. It was excessively clean and undamaging to the actual passage for an unanticipated collapse. Though some artifice, it operated by separating the stairway itself.

Perhaps it was intended to cover the tracks of a successful escape, or to counter against invader encroachments like the present. Subaru knew not which. What he did know was—

—Frederica could not be coming back up.

The instant he thinks so far, his forgotten wounds twinge and he pukes up blood. The flechettes bored into his neck and shoulders nibble away at his flesh. His fingers slip over to remove them—contact—they tremble in fear of the haemorrhage—stop.

Subaru: “Sisnt, timeto be doing this... I'm, idiot...”

He has no time for his legs, his mind to freeze. The hopelessness of Frederica's survival is surely yet dependant on Subaru's actions.

Bearing the pain, Subaru forces his knees to stand as he prepares for action. When he remembers about Petra. She had surely been in his arms until he reached the office, so where had she—

Subaru: “Pe, tra?”

Subaru discovers Petra on the opposite end of the room—nearby the sculpture. She lies on her side face-down and collapsed. Apparently, he had dropped her in the commotion.

Yet worrying about Frederica, Subaru must follow her words and ensure Petra remains protected. He taxes his trembling legs to stand. His feet lead him to the fallen Petra's side. And, he goes to pick her up—

—When there, buried from her head's rear to her nape, he spots the crooked knife.

Blood trickles from her mouth, brain lies spilt from her fractured skull. Fresh bloodshed seeps heavy into her soft chestnut hair. Her gentle, warm hands will no longer move. Subaru lifts his right arm. He sees a pathetic bundle of flesh missing three fingers and half a forearm. The kukri he had attempted to halt had torn straight through to strike Petra. Now presented with this, Subaru thus had protected not a single thing.

Subaru: “—aaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!”

Bloody does his ruined throat shriek.



Subaru limps across the mansion carpet, his expression haunted, headed for the eastern bloc. Settled in Subaru's arms is Petra's corpse. He has covered her in a white sheet, hidden, so no one will see her death.

Her frozen-still expression of surprise proves that her death was instantaneous, the only saving grace in this. Experiencing the same agonizing deaths Subaru had experienced would be excessively horrible. He couldn't save her. 'Saving'—like that was anywhere here.

Subaru: “ourReeau...”

Had he not come here wishing to save everyone in the mansion? Had he not resolved to devote himself to become capable of saving?

Again he caught Petra inside this spiral of death. This is the third time he's seen Petra's dead body—all of them ends that shouldn't have happened if Subaru had done something.

The witch cult had instigated the last series of loops, but this time had a decisively different component. Trying to settle it without getting Petra caught, Subaru could have objected to the decision to welcome her in as Frederica's undermaid. He was supposed to have known that being at Emilia's side, being at his own side, might invite danger.

Subaru: “Could've... should've... endless.”

If he's going to go on about coulds and shoulds after the game's already over, it'd go on forever. Subaru knew this. And being that he knew this, that he reflexively thinks he can't stay here is Subaru's weakness.

According with his fractured feelings, his limping gait is heavy. A trail of his yet-spilling blood marks the carpet with red, a rasping pain grinding at his nerves with every step. One step, another, the sound of his flesh and mind shaving away, pain. Even being able to receive this punishment was a grace. If Subaru had sinned, then he should also be the only one eligible to receive the punishment. If it would uphold this rule, then any amount of pain he received was fine. This girl in his arms, the woman who had stayed so he could escape, and—

Subaru: “Rehm...”

Please let no disaster reach her.

Subaru reaches the servant's quarters in the eastern bloc. He had chosen the shortest path from the office to get here, but he senses it took ages getting here pushing his wounded body. His destined room was opposite the stairs, room closest to the edge.

He even now doesn't think of what'll happen after he gets there. With getting there alone as his objective, with touching the girl present there his only objective, he already lacks the will to live.

He's lost too much blood, and his preparation and resolve have flowed out of his body with it. And most importantly, this time had far too many losses. He doesn't even seem capable of raising his head as he walks.

If it's ending, then at least let it be at her side.

At the side of the single girl in the world to whom Subaru could expose his weakness.

Leaving a trail of blood and half-leaning on the wall, his minuscule willpower turns to tenacity as Subaru arrives just before his destined room—Rem's bedroom.

He leans Petra against the wall and removes the sheet. Closes her eyes. Touches her cheek, traces his finger across her lips, hanging his head before the cooled girl's empty vessel.

Subaru: "Sorry... I'm sorry... I'm, stupid and useless and so..."

There had to have been some method, but since Subaru was an idiot he hadn't known it. Petra was a resulting sacrifice. His apologies reach her absent self not.

His tears fall onto Petra, he falls onto his knees. He pulls up the sheet and again covers her, stands up, turns around.

???: "—I think it's rather mean to be left behind."

At the end of the hallway, a foot stood on the stairway Subaru just descended, is a beautiful black-haired woman. She fiddles with the end of her long, braided hair, her other hand holding a bloodsoaked kukri.

Black bodysuit and black overcoat. Same outfit as when he saw her in the Capital. She was supposed to have fought with Frederica, but there's not a sign of that battle anywhere. That meaning both in wounds, and in fatigue.

Her appearing here now explains just what happened to Frederica. All Subaru can do about having more people his apologies won't reach is look up at the ceiling and curse his own incompetence.

Elsa: "I'm impressed you walked this far with those wounds. Very well done."

Subaru: "You gonna give me a payment for it? Your life'd work fine."

Elsa: "Can I read that as 'your lifetime is my desire', courting?"

Subaru: "Eh? you're ghood to get crushed immediately, hand eht ohver."

Subaru glares at Elsa, using the wall to somehow get himself up. Elsa looks his wounded body up to down.

Elsa: "The aroma of blood, the scent of anger, the fragrance of DEATH... ahh, you excel in every one. If your guts are to my liking too, I'll be too joyed to comment."

Subaru: "Freak... I got nno ideah what you're saying."

Hugging herself with an expression of ecstasy, Elsa looks at Subaru with a gaze not hiding its arousal. Even though she's beautiful she has the eyes of a debauchee, which gives Subaru only fear and disgust.

Subaru makes his expression one purely of rejection. Elsa's cheeks retain their sensual tone.

Elsa: "It's nice to talk with you, but... I'd rather not be told off for losing sight of my goal. Would the spirit and young half-witch lady I met in the Capital happen to be home?"

Subaru: "Woulda saved effort if you'd just gave us a phonecall before coming. Whe've given mercenharies ghreat treatment before."

Elsa: "You aren't going to answer. Then, it'd be best to ask your guts."

Her pink tongue sensually wets her red lips. She traces her tongue along the flat of her knife, smiling in ecstasy at the drips of blood she licks up. Brandishing her kukri, she dashes low at Subaru, posture spiderlike. She's fast. Can't think of any counter to it. But,

Subaru: "As goddam if I'm ghonna die at yhour hands!"

Says Subaru as he pushes open the door of Rem's bedroom.

Elsa's brows furrow at the action, unable to comprehend it. Subaru feels some satisfaction at that reaction.

Subaru's already half-resigned this one as being a failure. His wounds are deep, he can't stop his lifeblood from spilling everywhere, and the destiny for this loop is precarious. So at least he'll get one fuck over on Elsa, and stop things from going how she wants.

He'd rather not fall victim before those blades. If he's going to fall into her hands, he'd rather just throw his life away first. But before that, he wanted her to avoid being violated.

That meaning, a considerably selfish double-suicide.

But if it meant falling into Elsa's hands, like Petra, like Frederica...

That girl in this world that had already ended, would at least, by Subaru's hands—

Subaru: "And ihmmediately, me too..."

And instantaneously from there, he would join her. Subaru enters into Rem's bedroom with this resolve—

Subaru: "—huh?"

—The bookshelves of the Forbidden Archive welcome a Subaru prepared to end.

CHAPTER 35: THE GIRL'S GOSPEL

The room teems with the choking scent of old books.

Stepping through the doorway with jaw dropped speechless, Subaru puts together his sight and smell to realise a second too slow that he has tread upon the floor of a different room than he desired.

Subaru: “Forbidden Archive!?”

He's reached the place he couldn't find while searching around the mansion. The undesired timing and unforeseen opportunity creates a vacuum in Subaru's heart, robbing him of the time until the door slams shut behind him.

Subaru: “—!”

A sucking force drags Subaru's body into the archive. The door thunders shut, the resulting breeze tickling Subaru's nape. He glances back at the violent sound, realises that the hallway and room are now separated, and comprehends.

Comprehends what it means that the Forbidden Archive opened here, and then shut its door.

Subaru: “Ou-ohpen!!”

He reaches for the doorknob, notices that his right arm is already mangled past being an arm, but nevertheless somehow reaches out. His fingers slip with blood as he wrenches on the doorknob, but the rotated knob does not convey to the door his desire to open it. All that happens is Subaru turns it fruitlessly, vigorously, welling up with panic.

???: “—It's useless no matter how much you struggle to leave, in fact.”

A voice comes flying at Subaru from behind him as he scuffles frantically with the gateway. He jolts around, leaning his back against the door—to discover a girl in the back of the archive, her indifferent expression aimed at him.

Cream hair with long curls, an extravagant dress. Small body, her face adorable but peevish. Exactly the same girl Subaru knows.

Subaru: “Beatrice...”

Beatrice: “You're in quite the awful state, I suppose. You'll dirty the floor of the archive, so don't move around too much...”

Subaru: “Right nhow! Open the dhoor! Lhet me outsihde!!”

Yelling, Subaru ignores everything Beatrice is saying as she calmly gazes over his wounds. Not hearing the command to not splatter blood everywhere, he swings his yet-bleeding arm miserably.

Subaru: “Why, why do you show up nhow!? Why! Why is iht nhow!? Lhet me back! Huhrry! Nhow! Ihmedhiately!!”

Beatrice: “...What will happen if you do return, I suppose. Betty has not an idea what you could possibly do, returning with those unseemly wounds, in fact.”

Subaru: “I khnow best, thaht I cahn't do ahnythinhg! Buht, buht!!”

It's not that he wants to go back and face Elsa. He would enter the room he was supposed to be standing in, be at the sleeping girl's side, and—.

Subaru: "If I entered the archive, and GATE CROSSING activated... that murderer's, the room..."

If that happened, the madwoman would probably be tilting her head at Subaru's absconded self. But before searching around the mansion for a disappeared Subaru, she should have discovered the girl sleeping inside the room. How would that indiscriminate killer react to her, defenceless in sleep? It didn't even necessitate consideration.

Subaru: "Soh!"

Beatrice: "You're too late, in fact."

Mutters Beatrice with pained clarity. She looks down and shakes her head, Subaru going rigid. His brain ruminates over her words, his thoughts freezing.

—What did this girl just say?

Subaru: "Late... what do you... mean?"

Beatrice: "The reason you believe you want to return to that room, as of now, is gone, I suppose."

Subaru's throat catches, his eyes open to their limit, and before he can realise it he collapses to his knees. His shoulders slump, his head lowers, a terrible ringing echoes through his skull.

Pain, pain, the forgotten pain is resummoned, noise invading Subaru's consciousness. It would be fine for that cacophony to drown, drive away everything, and just disappear, Subaru thinks. He didn't want to comprehend anything. He didn't want to realise anything. But,

Beatrice: "Show me your wounds, I suppose. They're atrocious and I can't bear to look at them, in fact."

Having approached him, Beatrice bends down and looks at the injuries across a squatting Subaru's right arm, left flank and right shoulder with her face twisted in reproach. A dim light covers her hand, which first contacts the most serious damage, his right arm. —Something like an itch runs through his until-then entirely blazing arm, his muscles beginning to mend.

The bleeding stops, the open wound answers corresponding to the light as a membrane pulls over its surface, his cells spurred to encourage recovery. But,

Beatrice: "It'll take time for it to return to its original width, and your missing fingers aren't coming back, I suppose. ...Now your hip, and shoulder, too."

Subaru: "...What're, you doing."

An emotionless voice slips from Subaru's mouth. Focused on healing his wounds, Beatrice furrows her brows as she presents her palms to him.

Beatrice: "It's reluctantly, but there's no choice so I'm healing your wounds, in fact. Betty is the only one in this mansion who can heal wounds of this calibre, I suppose. You best be grateful, in fact."

Subaru: "Healing... the wounds? What, for?"

Beatrice: "These wounds would be life-threatening if left alone, I suppose. I don't particularly care whether you're to live or die, but I'd rather you not die here, in fact."

One eye closed, perhaps judging Subaru's words as delirium coming from his injury, Beatrice gives that curt reply and readies to go back to healing. But,

Beatrice: "Ah,"

Feeling the waves of healing burying his wounds, Subaru swings his injured arm, prompting a surprised little noise from Beatrice. He overexerts his trembling knees and tumbles onto his side, dirtying the floor of the Forbidden Archive as he takes distance from her. He shoots the girl a gruesome glare.

His actions dislodge the flechette in his hip, which clatters to the ground. There comes the sound of unplugged fluid. Blood pours out from the wound, down his thigh, washing the floor in a river. Beatrice's breath catches as she watches. Subaru bares his teeth.

Subaru: "I don't need healing! If my living or dying's unrelated to you... then why are you trying to help me!?"

Beatrice: "Because... you're unseemly and, I can't bear to look..."

Subaru: "Why... why me!? If you're going to act intending to help someone, why didn't you help Petra, help Frederica!? If we had your power, we wouldn't need to fight just run away... there's heaps of ways we could've taken!"

With GATE CROSSING, they should've been able to evade even the persistent Elsa. There was no power so specialised for escape if utilized. The faltering Petra, blockading Frederica, and sleeping Rem all—!

Subaru: "They should've been saved! The places my weakness and stupidity... meant I wasn't vigilant are the places you would've had been... so then, why..."

Beatrice: "Why does Betty... There is no reason for Betty to help these three you speak of, I suppose. It's not my business. That was not any of my business, in fact."

Subaru: "Then! There shouldn't be any fucking reason for you to help me!"

Subaru strikes the floor with his healing right arm.

Subaru: "Why did you help me!? Why did you save me!? Just whimsy? Then why am only I different from the other three! Rem's such a good girl, Frederica has something she wants to do... Petra was still so small... all of them, more than me! Had reasons to live... with far more merit!"

Beatrice: "Merit? Reasons? Why must Betty respect such appended self-satisfaction, I suppose. Your conceit is exorbitant in fact, human!"

Subaru: "Well then hell's going on with your inconsistency!? I went around searching that much and you don't show yourself, and then you fucking show up so easily only when things're

dangerous! If you can't see merit in me or in them...you should've just stayed holed up alone in this room!!"

Why did she reveal herself after everything was already too late?

She could've hidden herself so absolutely that Elsa wouldn't even realise she was there, but if Elsa guesses on what happened to Subaru, Beatrice's existence might be revealed. If that happens, even Beatrice's future might be one of butchery before those blades. Why did she invite a half-dead Subaru in, even to the point of risking notable danger?

Why did she think to save a Subaru who had given up on living, and desired death?

Subaru: "Whimsy or whatever else is fine... if there's an urge to save me in you... if you have even a shred of intention left to help me... please, right now, kill me."

Beatrice: "What... are you saying, I suppose..."

Subaru: "Kill! Me! Now! Before everything gets overwritten, before this miscarried present becomes definite! Kill me! Kill! Kill!"

Spitting, horking blood, Subaru claws at the floor as he shrieks his appeal.

Before his reason to live was entirely lost, before his prolonged inactivity invited an unrecoverable future.

I want this hopeless useless powerless brainless mass be made ended, he shrieks.

But Beatrice doesn't accept this shriek, this appeal from his soul. She shakes her head, displeasure and confusion rising on her expression.

Beatrice: "I don't understand. I don't understand, in fact. I don't understand this human you are, I suppose. How are... how do you say this now, when you have life, in fact?"

Subaru: "Saving just life isn't actually saving! Having life right now is agony to me! It shouldn't be there, I shouldn't be here... If you're saying you're not going to save me..."

Without any relying on others, here by his own hands would this wretched hour—

Seeing Subaru's breath catch with resolve, Beatrice voices a thin 'ah'. Subaru sticks his tongue out of his mouth without hesitation.

He chomps down best he can, going to bite it off, enacting a deed of suicide.

Pain. Pain in a completely different dimension from that of his arm, hip and shoulder. No matter how many times he savours it, developing resistance to pain would surely be impossible. All wounds borne from any place, all pain birthing from anywhere, were things different, things new, things agonising, things bitter, not things to come used to.

His mouth overflowing with blood, Subaru's eyes peel wide as he collapses on the spot. His vision revolves in circles, his limbs shudder as they begin to convulse. Pain, and halted breathing. His throat clogs with his shredded tongue as he descends into suffocation.

Beatrice: "—you doing!"

Not the type of injury to bring an instant death. Sharp and dull pains spear intermittently through

Subaru's brain, his limbs tremble ceaseless, tears of blood reach his cheeks. His half-severed tongue dangles caught on his lip, testament to the insufficiency of his 'best he can'.

This is the third time Subaru has chosen suicide in this parallel world.

The first time was during the loops in the mansion, a suicide made with resolve to repair something irreparable.

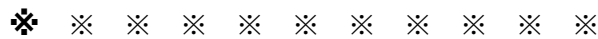
The second time was at the end of the loops in the Capital when he learned Rem's existence was gone, a suicide done in a stupor. Stabbed a knife through his throat, but nothing changed.

And now his third suicide—he had no guarantee to return, but to continue living spending time here was impossible for Subaru. Too heavy. Not happening. So, even if staking a handful of potentials, to retrieve what he had lost he would—

???: “...no. Don't, leave me behind...”

A trembling voice calls to Subaru from a world growing distant.

The voice grows further, further away, disappearing—



—The first thing to assault Subaru's nostrils when he wakes is the smell of dust.

Subaru: “Uu?”

Waiting for his consciousness to sober, Subaru shakes his head with his eyes still closed, understanding that he is awake. He's lying on his side on a floor. With his body savouring the cool touch of the ground, Subaru dimly considers the fact that his restart point was inside the tomb.

Uprighting himself, he opens his eyes and looks about the dimly-lit space. His vision's still unfocused and blurry with some tears after just waking up, unable to make out what he's seeking. But, he feels relief that it appears he managed to again RETURN BY DEATH. If the place he came back to is inside the tomb, then his restart point hasn't changed.

Chronologically speaking, this is just after Subaru returned from overcoming the first TRIAL. Emilia should be collapsed at his side, and should be starting from just before waking her up.

Subaru: “Head, hurts...”

Rubbing between his brows, Subaru gives a light shake of his head as he forces his brain to organise the situation. He already had countless things he had to think about, and the events of that previous loop had only increased that number. He can't come up with even a single proper means for a solution of what to do. Feels like the light he was supposed have seen was a bugzapper, inviting him into a new trap.

Like right after taking a detour around a pitfall of despair, he fell into a different pitfall.

Subaru makes a reference to some Japanese crane game and its bonus rounds about how malicious this is.

In the sense of lethality, his metaphor isn't incorrect.

TRIAL in SANCTUARY. Relationship with Garfiel. Mansion attack. The mystery of his missing

leeway time, and desire for revenge against Elsa—that establishing a method to save Rem and the others.

His head could boil over with the incessantly-piling problems, but being given a chance to deliberate over what to do about them in itself was already a grace.

Otherwise this just might be where it ends, was a resignedness present in his mind in these conditions.

Subaru: “Hurts to have to feign ignorance with Emilia again, but...”

Subaru recognizes that his hazy vision is clearing. Snorting at the lingering smell of the place, he first figures to look for Emilia.

Thinking that far, he puts his right hand to his brow like a visor, when he finally notices it.

—His right hand is missing three fingers.

Subaru: “Wha—!? Aa!?”

Seeing wounds that shouldn't be there, scars which shouldn't have carried over, Subaru's throat whines in shock. The reality that he had been witnessing a world rather too convenient for him slaps him as his trembling pupils bring the world into focus.

Cold floor, stone walls. Lingering smell of mould. The tomb that Subaru had desired. But before Subaru in reality are rows of packed bookshelves, inside a room suffused in the characteristic smell borne of leather and paper.

Subaru: “The Forbidden Archive... wh, y...”

Subaru cannot comprehend that his flesh is still in a location he was supposed to have bid farewell. Thinking of the worst, Subaru first checks over his own body.

The worst possibility—that the world may have been fixed to repeat from the point he stepped into the Forbidden Archive.

Unable to hide his shivering, Subaru stares at his right arm contacting his face. Three fingers gone, arm missing about a third of its width compared to his left. But the wound is healed, strange swellings of flesh and discolouration telling him that his body is midway through regeneration. His flechted hip and shoulder don't show any conspicuous external injury either, and the sensation of flesh being pulled taught and the occasional unpleasant twinging remain only residually. He's at least not in the instant directly after stepping into the Archive. That leaves only one possibility.

???: “—Finally awake, I suppose.”

It's the voice Subaru least wants to hear.

Spoken in a nonchalant tone, intonation as if bored of the world, but nevertheless unable to erase its concern, a soprano desiring connection.

Still seated on the floor, Subaru turns his head. Filled with a wish he can't discard, he desires to see an illusion of a silver-haired girl behind him. What he sees instead is a girl in a dress sitting on a wooden stepladder. Right there is Beatrice, holding a book in her hands as she looks down at Subaru.

A sigh uncorks itself from his mouth. Beatrice slams the book shut and slowly descends the

stepladder.

Beatrice: “Your stupid actions have truly caused me trouble, in fact. I healed your arm wounds, shoulder, hip, tongue, all of them together, I suppose. Should be no malcontent, in fact.”

Subaru goes silent.

Beatrice: “Nothing to say about having your life salvaged, I suppose. Well, if this taught you your lesson, then don't you do stupid things anymore...”

Subaru: “You... do you understand, what you've done?”

Beatrice: “Ha?”

Beatrice approaches a silenced Subaru as she speaks. Subaru answers back, his tone suppressed of emotion, and the moment her face scrunches up—

—Subaru stands and grips Beatrice's dress in his left hand. Her mouth opens in surprise as he yanks her close, bringing her face to his.

Subaru: “Who the hell asked for you to save them!?”

Beatrice: “—a,”

Subaru: “Do you understand what you've done!? Because of you, everything's ruined! Everything, everything, everything I was meant to be able to do something about is on a fresh slate because of you! Why didn't you just let me die!? I survived, and then what... and then fucking what! Then what!?”

By being lenient with his life, Subaru should have procured the right for a do-over. But because of this girl's interference, that wish was not granted. All that remained in Subaru's hands was an indescribable sense of loss, and unending anger toward Beatrice.

Subaru: “Save me on whim, heal my wounds... are you all satisfied now? You want my gratitude!? Well, thank you! Your brilliance has saved my life! Even if it means everything except life, that every single thing is lost, you have saved only my life!”

Beatrice: “B-Betty was only... only...”

Subaru: “Too late, I've got endless gratitude to voice! Now, like always, you just sit there with that nice nonchalant expression of yours and come look down on me as if that's all normal. You're good at that, right? You enjoy that, right? Looking down sneering at these lowly humans, that is——au,”

Packed to the limit with hate, cheeks twisted in an ugly grin, Subaru pours insults upon Beatrice. The ghastly behaviour is to bury the objection, disappointment, and loss filling his heart. But he abruptly aborts it.

Beatrice: “—hk,”

Subaru: “Ah...”

Aborts it, because he sees the fat tears spilling from the eyes of the girl directly before him.

The blood rushed to his head retreats the instant he sights them. The repulsive spite thick in what he just said is terrifying and becomes unbearable.

His slack fingers release Beatrice's body from the hatred. She backs off as if pushed, her back smacks against a bookshelf, she falls to her knees.

A furious nausea wells up in him. Becoming conscious of his words, he himself cannot bear the ugliness of what he just said.

Repulsive. Crooked. What to call it except lashing out? From the perspective of a Beatrice ignorant of RETURN BY DEATH, all she did was heal a dying Subaru's wounds. Of course a lifesaver deserved gratitude—there should not be any reason she be insulted.

Subaru understood this logically. But his emotions were not accepting it. Tossed around by those extremes of mentality squabbling inside him, he raises his head, needing to say something to the collapsed Beatrice.

Subaru: “No, I... S-sorry. I didn't mean to say... It isn't your fault at...”

If there is anyone at fault here, it is undoubtedly Subaru.

He knew what would happen, yet he still tread unwary into a tiger's den and stepped on the tail. Those around him are who received the payback, and with him boasting that he alone lacked reason for reproach, he had been crossing the line for pride.

Emotionally, he did possess a feeling to verbally condemn this uninformed girl. He did possess emotions he couldn't swallow down about how she had hidden from him, only to appear in that instant.

But that was no acquittal for him to yell criticisms at her.

Subaru: “I'm sorry. Thank you, for healing my wounds. But, now I...”

He would at least have to disappear from before her, and choose elsewhere to commit suicide.

Subaru had no reason for this world to continue. Too many losses. Subaru was not strong enough to live in a world where he had lost things he must not lose.

Thus Subaru reports to Beatrice succinct words of gratitude, and averts his gaze in preparation to leave the Forbidden Archive—

—When he notices the black tome at the fallen Beatrice's side.

Plain binding. Thick structure. Large as a dictionary, blatantly heavy enough to be awkward to carry around. Subaru can't tear his eyes away from the familiar thing.

Why, now, was that here?

Subaru: “The GOSPEL's in the carriage... it being in the archive shouldn't...”

The Witch Cult gospel that Betelgeuse owned had been collected by Subaru as gains of war and was now in his possession. But that didn't mean treating it like a book of the Archive, and rather simply meant some extremely cautious safekeeping of the thing, so it should not be in this place.

Shaking his head at the incomprehensible situation, Subaru reaches for the fallen gospel. To check its insides, and negate this unease he felt. But,

Beatrice: “—No!”

The gospel is snatched away before Subaru can touch it.

Subaru looks to find Beatrice, breathing ragged, holding the gospel to her chest with both hands as

she distances herself from Subaru. Her throat still stiff from her sobbing, she looks down at the gospel, and gives a relieved exhale as she strokes the cover. That loving gesture stirs up a bad premonition in Subaru like no other.

Subaru: “Why're you treating that thing like it's so important?”

Beatrice says nothing.

Subaru: “That's the book the Witch Cult have... isn't it? It isn't it? It looks crazy similar, but it's different, right? Since the appearance's so close and it could cause misunderstandings, you only took that distance on purpose, so I wouldn't think it was—right? Right, I mean it's my nature to jump to conclusions, my presumptions're intense, I'm mean and rude my eyes're nasty my personality's crooked too...”

Beatrice says nothing.

Subaru: “Hey—please, deny it.”

Beatrice slips a small sigh, and presents the book forward so Subaru can see it.

Beatrice: “It is exactly what you imagine, in fact. ...It's a gospel. The same as the witch cultists you speak of own, the guide to happiness. The foundations for living. The only single truth, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Wh-why... do you have that? Somewhere sells them? T-telling the future or whatever is super way too cheat item. A walkthrough for real life crazy breaks the game balance. ...So, come on.”

Beatrice: “...Betty is not instructed to answer your question, I suppose.”

Subaru asks with his voice trembling, Beatrice gives her cruel report as she flips smoothly through the pages. Subaru feels his tongue going numb, her gaze aimed down at the book's contents.

Subaru: “You don't do anything if it's not what the book says?”

Beatrice: “That question is not written in the book, in fact.”

Subaru: “What about you healing my wounds? And sheltering me in the Forbidden Archive when I was going to be killed?”

Beatrice: “Those questions are not written in the book, I suppose.”

Subaru: “What about right now, how you're talking with me? And, saving me when I tried to die?”

Beatrice: “—Not my business.”

Still gazing down at the book, Beatrice's replies are emotionless. A terror so strong as to most send his lungs into convulsions, and a vertigo so intense as to most make him forget how to breathe assault him as he raises his voice.

Subaru: “So you can't do goddamn anything if it's not what the book says!?”

Beatrice: “...I can't, I suppose. I can't, in fact. Any and all is in accordance with the gospel's guide.

The meaning of Betty's life is to do so, and for that purpose alone does Betty exist, in fact.”

Subaru: “Then.. you saved me like this because the book told you to!? And when you saved me when I was near-death in the forest of witchbeasts! And when you tried to save me when my heart was worn! And the time we spent pissing around, yelling at each other, enjoying ourselves like idiots... for all of it, your own will was nowhere in it... that's what you're going to say!?”

Beatrice: “I told you... that's exactly what I am saying, I suppose!!”

Yells Beatrice, her face red with anger. She steps forward, glares at Subaru.

Beatrice: “Everything Betty has done, has seen, has said, all of it had been written, I suppose. You... *you*, would never move Betty's heart, in fact. Put your conceit down and to rest, I suppose, human.”

Subaru goes silent.

Beatrice: “Betty will accomplish what was desired of her and fulfil the meaning of her being alive, in fact. I spend my life, my time, anything for that purpose—which for alone am I here, I suppose. ...And will I stand having that denied, by you, in fact!!”

Subaru: “Bea...”

Subaru tries to call out to her, but a pressure emitted from before him interrupts. Pushed back by as if by wind, Subaru notices that his body can't resist it and he's being pushed towards the door. — This continues, and he'll be flung outside.

Subaru: “Sto—Beatrice!”

Beatrice: “Betty's everything is for Mother! The bond between Betty and Mother alone is Betty's everything! I couldn't care about *you* less... couldn't care less...”

Subaru goes silent.

Beatrice: “Couldn't care less. Hate you. I hate you. —I hate you!”

Shaking her head, hiding her face overflowing with tears, her scream sends Subaru's body flying. Door's open. The room is trying to drive Subaru out of the Archive. Subaru's right hand catches on the doorframe. But he's three fingers short. He can just barely support his body on his index finger alone, but it only gives him a few seconds of time.

Raising his head, Subaru goes to call to the crying girl—

Subaru: “Beatri—!”

Beatrice: “...ather,”⁵

Drowned out by her quiet voice, Subaru's words do not reach Beatrice.

Wind blows. He is drowned out. Space twists, and Subaru's body is flung from a place that should be to a place that should not.

5 Line is 'う さ ま' (...u-sama). Riding entirely off 2ch speculation on this one. She could technically be saying anyone whose name ends in a 'u' and Beatrice would respect enough to put a -sama on. As an aside フルーゲル/Flugel also ends in a u and Beatrice is confirmed to know Shaula as of A4-C3. Yeak you can just ignore this comment.

The door slams shut. The wind stops as silence falls upon the Forbidden Archive. What remains there is a single girl. Her face still one of having held back sobs, she walks with a slow gait deeper into the room—tottering to sit upon the stepladder. Hugging her knees, her trembling fingers open the gospel. And,

Beatrice: “Why... for Betty, is nothing...”

Met with a wordless stark-blank page, her sobbing alone echoes through the silent room.

CHAPTER 36: AT THE END OF CONFUSION

—The moment he is forced out the door, Subaru feels a disorientation as if the earth and sky are flipped.

Subaru: “—Aguuah!?”

His back hits the hard ground, his throat struggling beneath the pain of air being wrung out of lungs. Momentum leads him to tumble across the floor, smack into a wall and finally stop. He shakes and raises his head, opening his eyes, disoriented in pain.

Subaru: “Beatrice...”

He puts to sound the name of the girl whose name he had not even managed to call, but it is too late for the girl in question to hear it. GATE CROSSING activated, leaving a blockade preventing them from seeing each other. Her rejection was great and deep, not something Subaru's voice would reach.

Subaru: “Why... can I never...”

Never realise his own mistakes until after he has failed, until after he has chosen the worst and most unfavourable options? All he wished for was to reel in the optimum method, the greatest future, yet why was he never enough? Weakness? Foolishness?

Subaru: “How come, you and a gospel... Just, what is with you!?”

The existence of the black tomb in her hand—the gospel, had decisively opened distance between Subaru and Beatrice.

Subaru had firmly believed that over this small period of time together, he had established a definite SOMETHING with Beatrice. Even if it was a relationship of reciprocal sniping, and mutually expressing displeasure upon seeing each other, there was something endless about it—was what only Subaru had believed.

Presumption. Conceit. The peak of misconception and misapprehension.

Subaru's obstinate beliefs had been the product of his self-satisfaction, while Beatrice had only harboured emotion for Subaru equivalent to what her words said. She had only associated with Subaru following the orders of the gospel, while in truth snubbing and hating him.

Subaru: “...Is that really true?”

Subaru: “Those times you smiled, scolded, tried to protect me... All of it was just a lie following the plot? ...Really?”

That's impossible, was how Subaru's weak heart yet wished to deny it. Beatrice's tearful voice in the last moment of their farewell invited obscurity to the veracity of her statements.

It was far too early for him to make conclusions about anything.

Subaru: “Who cares about the book, I remember that you saved me... that unchanging truth is a debt only I know about.”

Subaru had been rescued by Beatrice multiple times during the loops in the mansion.

He would linger in the Forbidden Archive to gather his thoughts after Returning by Death, and she

more literally rescued him by removing the witchbeasts' curses. Him having let Rem die, she had gone to protect a Subaru pursued by Ram and Roswaal to the point of overinterpreting their humbug contract.

Although, that great debt no longer existed in this world, outside of Subaru's chest.

Subaru: “Back then... I was happy.”

She had saved a Subaru who was under the belief he had lost all allies.

He considered Ram and Rem enemies, could not fully read Roswaal's intentions, and could not even fully trust Emilia with how worn he was. It was only Beatrice who saved him.

Just to what extent had that temporary, transient contract saved Subaru? It was a debt of inarticulate calibre toward her he could not fully repay.

Subaru: “I'll repay that debt. I don't even know if you gave it to me of your own volition, or if it was you respecting the book's 'will' or whatever... so, I'll confirm that.”

It is impossible for Subaru to question Beatrice now that she has so firmly rejected him. Subaru's resolve has no meaning in this world, and will be a carryover for the next.

Subaru lifts his right hand. Missing three fingers. Shoulder and hip twinging. Banged head. Tongue just a tiny bit shorter. All of it, pain he would not forget.

Beneath his closed eyelids is Rem. Petra, Frederica then arise, Beatrice turns her back to him, and finally comes Emilia.

—Everything that Subaru had miscarried, and not grasped in this world.

He had enacted what he could to take that back. That which Beatrice interrupted he would again do, once more leaping into the helix.

Sticking out his shortened tongue, Subaru again resolves to bite it off.

Thinking back on his failed suicide rebirths the anguish and prompts fear. Weakness comes, his legs tremble. Wordplay about “resolve” held not a scrap of worth when faced with the end.

Forcing down his unproductive, negative emotions, Subaru suppresses the worst of the lot, the sensation of gazing into death. As if praying to return to a time to re-do everything, Subaru goes to close his eyes for his final moment—

Subaru: “...Where am I?”

—When he finally notices the place he has reached through GATE CROSSING is nowhere that he knows.



This room is not one Subaru figures would be inside Roswaal's mansion.

Damp stone-paved floor, thick ivy creeping across the grimy walls. Desks stand arranged in disarray, with rusted metal tools scattered about—the visual information alone is enough to summon unease. But more than any of that,

Subaru: “Ueh!?”

So pungent a stench, that should one notice it even once, they would not get it out of their awareness.

Differing from the rot of organic waste, but indescribable as anything but rot, the stench fosters nausea. Subaru puts his hand to his mouth as his empty stomach wrings up its fluid.

Yellowish vomit spills onto the floor, Subaru taking ragged breaths as he glares around the surroundings. The more he looks, the more irregularities he finds.

The dim room is paved with stone and about twice as big as the Roswaal mansion parlour. Not large enough to be spacious, but still not a cramped space.

In the corner of the room are the disorderly desks and mystery tools, and opposite the desks—in a space occupying the majority of the room, is—

Subaru: “Destroyed desks and, crystals? Something crystallised, or pieces of magequartz? And this hole...”

Scattered about before his gaze are the debris of broken desks, and magequartz devoid of power. Beyond them is a gaping hole perhaps four meters in diameter. Even disregarding how meagre the room's lighting is, the hole is deep enough for the bottom to be invisible.

Subaru raises his head, to find that what is emitting this pale blue light from the walls is moss. This moss grows thickly in forests and glows, apparently absorbing mana from the atmosphere. Between the starlight and the glowmoss, the surroundings of Roswaal's mansion avoid the phenomenon known as 'pitch darkness'.

Keeping his attention on the mosslight as he crawls across the floor, still feeling an unpleasant wetness on his pants and film dirtying his palm, Subaru stares into the bottom of the hole.

A cool wind quietly rises from the bottom, carrying the nose-turning—no, nose-demolishing—stench with it.

Subaru: “Uegh... eubg. Not having courage to peek inside's probably the correct choice... what is this stink?”

Were the stench one characteristic of something harbouring life, Subaru's imagination might have assumed the worst of possibilities. However, the flowing stench is not of meat or fluid or rot—if forced to choose something, it was closest to the smell of chemicals.

The pain common to some strong chemical scents stings Subaru's nostrils. This smell transmitted from the bottom of the hole was that sort of non-biological scent.

Subaru: “—What else,”

Physically and mentally giving up on inspecting the bottom of the hole, Subaru wipes his nose, focuses on breathing, and looks around the room.

What stands out are the tumbled ruins of a desk and expended magequartz at his feet. The metal desk has eaten a ferocious blow, crushed, and the magequartz seems to have once been piled atop said desk. Flipping the warped desk over, Subaru notices a pattern engraved on the desk's top.

Subaru: “A magic circle... is what it looks like, but...”

Magic circles were a kind of guarantee in parallel world fantasies, but Subaru had no recollection of seeing any since arriving here. The magic of this world fundamentally passed through the bodies of living creatures to interfere with the outside world, and excepting cases like magic-lights and metia Subaru had yet to find any exceptions.

The discovery of a magic circle was surprising, but,

Subaru: “Does it actually do anything? If it does, why's it in a place like this... There's no reason to just leave a magic circle...”

Perhaps its magic could not be activated at this place directly, but rather functioned as a means to preform long-range magic. Otherwise it may function as a system to conduct algorithms continuously, without the presence of a practitioner, but,

Subaru: “Then I get why there's empty magequartz tumbled all around it, too.”

Emptying the magequartz which functioned as its fuel tanks, the magic circle consequently lost its power—was probably the most logical view. What Subaru did not understand reaching that conclusion was the true nature of the hole, and the destroyed desk. The possibility that a system had activated to blow up the room if the algorithm was interrupted could not be discarded.

Subaru: “In the end, still no answer to where I am.”

A hole with seemingly no end, a magic circle and magequartz seemingly used to enact some algorithm. Looking over the stinking room, Subaru sees a different desk tipped over in the corner of the room, and tools. He picks up one of rust-smothered implements.

It resembles pliers or nippers, the kind of utensil used when crafting plastic models. The same film dirtying the floor is smeared over this thing too, and most critically it appears enough time has passed to render it unusable, as it breaks down to scrap as soon as Subaru's hand touches it.

The desk is in the same condition, legs folded from deterioration over time, on the verge of turning to garbage from wind erosion. Its shape warps instant Subaru lightly sets his foot on it and it transforms to scrap metal.

This thing would not give him any information either. But if there were anything to be curious about,

Subaru: “The time and way this one was broken's seriously different from the desk by the hole...”

Different from this desk which had been brittle and broken over time, the desk by the hole had blatantly been distorted with a destructive force. Further, judging by the state of the ground beneath it, that desk's destruction had been extremely recent—estimable as being within the past few days.

Subaru: “A destroyed room... who and for what purpose...”

Voicing his question, Subaru abruptly realises his thoughts are stupid.

What was he going to do with this question? He doubted this was the type where thinking would give him an answer, and more importantly Subaru's arms were already full with more problems than he could hold.

He had to avoid things that, as if jamming accessories between the gaps in his burden, would accelerate his collapse. Further, directing his attention in another direction like this was simply stretching out the time of his pressing suicide, and intolerable.

But even recognizing this hard-opposed feeling of SHAME, the irregularity of this room grabs Subaru and does not let go. Right now, he was witnessing something outrageously important—

Subaru: “—”

Guided by his conviction that he would get no answer, Subaru turns his head about, looking for the exit. Being that GATE CROSSING was what flung Subaru here, it was impossible that he had been thrown into a room without any opening or closing gateways.

Ultimately, Subaru discovers the gate which spat him out in the middle of this room—installed in the upper portion of one of the walls, the opening-and-closing gateway of a tiny ventilation shaft.

Other than that, he finds no doors or gates which appear to be an entrance or exit to the room. The proper door may have been installed beyond the hole—on the opposite end of the room, which he could not reach.

The moment he swallows down this truth, Subaru abandons the notion of leaving this room using the most appropriate method. He wipes the sweat off his palms and mystery film off his pants, holding his breath for a moment before reaching up for the topical gate.

Placed at a height he finally reaches by stretching up, the gate's size is perhaps closest comparable to a garbage chute. Although not constrained enough to prevent a human passage, Subaru was not so dainty he could breezily pass on through it.

After much struggling due to crippled right hand, the rusted gate shrieks open, Subaru winches himself into the passage, and he begins manoeuvring operations. The place is as narrow as a ventilation shaft. Subaru considers the worst-case possibility of bugs and rats making it their nest, however the shaft is surprisingly clean—not, but that the dust-laden passage lacks any signs of living creatures is a grace.

Exiting the passage takes about three minutes. Becoming used to the crawling motions halfway though, it is just when his movements turn smooth that he arrives at his goal. Subaru hops down into the room connected here by the shaft, and glances over the surroundings. He pays utmost caution that there is not another hole here, but,

Subaru: “Different vibe from the other room. Comparing to what looked like a laboratory, this one's more of a waiting room.”

This room is a quarter as large as the previous. Perhaps prepared merely as a room to pass through, there are no particularly object-looking objects here except for two doors of the just-walk-through-them variety. More accurately, a waiting room-esque room.

With some chairs and magazines it'd be perfect, probably.

Subaru: “Directionally speaking from where I came, on the other side of this door'll be... yeah.”

He turns the squeaky doorknob and pushes the door open, to find a gaping hole directly before him. A slight sigh slipping from his lips at the deathtrap conditions, Subaru closes the practically-useless door out of consideration for his mental health. —Since the stench is now seeping into this room, and he mourns over his slowness of judgement.

He gives a light shake of his head and heads for the opposite door. Beyond this door would surely be a space unknown to Subaru—

The sweat he supposedly wiped off his palms, and cold perspiration running down his back become unbearable.

He did not know what would be beyond the door, but he needed to consider beforehand the worst of conditions—that someone or thing living would be there.

Subaru: “If this is... inside the mansion, then...”

It was not a room he knew, but it would not be strange if the second he exited the door, he would

find Elsa before him. Subaru lacked the confidence to say, should he hypothetically be faced with the murderer, he could maintain his calm.

You must die immediately, was the reprimand insisting his suicide, but having recollected the experience of shattering his molars, that reprimand transforms into hatred.

The very thought that the deviant whose blades killed Petra, Frederica—Rem—might be there, torments Subaru with a wrath so hot as to boil his brain.

He possesses a malediction desiring she be there, and a wretched craving for life that she is not. Wavering in the space between both extremes, Subaru's mouth twists into a wicked grin.

Whether she be there, or not be there, neither would betray this crazed emotion.

With that thought diverged from sanity having reached its conclusion, and before the world he faced with such—

—He witnesses a scenery which should not be, and in that moment, Subaru forgets himself.



—Subaru's brain had actually already reached the solution of where this unfamiliar room connected to.

There was already hardly any place in Roswaal's mansion that Subaru had not tread, and he even in a sense had free access to the Forbidden Archive. The potentials for places he did not know remained only as the door his hand had twice touched, but whose exit he had not seen—the door in the ESCAPE PASSAGE.

Although he had harboured distrust for wherever that purpose-unknown room connected, he had not doubted that place would be part of Roswaal's mansion.

Subaru: “Where—is... this?”

What expands before Subaru beyond the opened door is a dark underground passageway—or not, but rather the verdant green of trees and nature, and further peculiar was,

Subaru: “M-morning?”

Looking up at the sky peeking through gaps in the trees, Subaru sees the ascending sun. Judging by the height of the sunrays, and with his skin sensing that this wind belongs to morning, confusion further ransacks his mind.

Subaru had reached the mansion at evening, then had spoken with Petra and Frederica, and then considering the time passage with Elsa's attack, Subaru's wounding would have happened just before late night—meaning that now, almost half a day had passed.

Subaru: “Then, while I was unconscious!?”

After biting his tongue to commit suicide, Subaru had fallen unconscious, to later wake with his wounds healed. For just how long had he been unconscious inside the Forbidden Archive?

Subaru remembers Beatrice's bragging that the Archive was a PLACE DETACHED FROM THE PASSAGE OF TIME. Subaru does not know just how credible that statement is, but,

Subaru: “If the save point gets overwritten like this...!”

It's going to be something disastrous.

Before reality can be painted over with conditions realising multiple anxieties, Subaru immediately had to end his life. Had to, but another feeling was asserting its existence in a heatbutting match with that panic. And that feeling screamed.

—You have to confirm where this place is!

Subaru did not understand the purpose of doing so. Thinking back on all the particulars so far, and considering the maliciousness of RETURN BY DEATH, what he should do is kill himself immediately. But a horrifically calm part inside of Subaru was proposing that he do so, after gaining understanding of the circumstances he had been placed in.

Subaru: “—Fucking, fuck!”

Running, spit flying, Subaru heads into the forest before him. Dashing through the gaps between the trees, what arises in his mind is his conversation with Petra.

Beyond the escape passage was the mountains behind the mansion, where there was a cabin, with emergencies supplies to escape with.

If he could trust these words, he was presently at that mountain cabin, and place he was running through would be the backmountains he traversed well. However,

Subaru: “That was the cabin? Where was the supply bag? And... in a place that's been left there so long, just what rescue measures'd be installed!?”

What Subaru had seen in that place was an arcane room, and scattered evidence to support his bad premonitions about it. The points of convergence with Petra's description were excessively sparse. Most importantly, if Frederica or Rem were regularly touching it up, there was no explanation for the degraded tools. Subaru knew their workstyle as maids well enough to state such a thing with confidence.

Exiting the forest, a question arises wondering about the lack of a slope. The cabin is meant to be in the mountains, but was it built in a section without any sloping for 100 meters? Subaru loses sight of where he is, and up boils irritation that he had not perceived correctly in the first place.

The gaps between the trees opens and the environment becomes clear, Subaru sliding his momentum to a stop. Pavement, or what could be called such if a result of a hackdash job of it, proved the comings and goings of people, and most importantly the rows of houses visible from this distance displayed the fact that people lived here.

Sighting this, Subaru's thoughts in the truest of meanings are bound immobile by shock. Because this scenery was—

Subaru: “S-SANCTUARY!?”

—The place he had bid farewell to half a day prior, and calculated would take an entire day to return to.

He raises his right hand in accordance with his terror. Not enough fingers. Wounded. RETURN BY DEATH had not activated. So then why, was he standing in a place he should not be?

Subaru: “Why... here? Because, GATE CROSSING?”

It was the only answer.

Beatrice had ejected Subaru from the mansion's Archive, sending him to a section of SANCTUARY through GATE CROSSING. But then, how did that happen?

Subaru: "Range doesn't matter... does it? No, I mean I've been transported far as from the mansion to a barn in the village before, but..."

Thinking about that in terms of distance, that was a level of transportation regardable as inside allowable range. But considering the distance between SANCTUARY and the mansion, such a long-distance transportation was, plainly said, out of the range of imagination and common sense.

Subaru: "Anyway! If I'm in SANCTUARY, then... Roswaal!!"

Subaru would dash back to that clown's side, and make him spit up everything he's planning. Roswaal treated Beatrice cordially. That warlock would surely know her background, and why she possessed a gospel.

If he, knowing everything, tried to play around with an ignorant Subaru then that was fine. Subaru would bash in his face, burn him, shred him, bite out his throat and make him spit out everything.

Subaru in that instant, needing to kill himself, forgets his restrictions and runs. His thoughts colour with a pure red rage as he dashes to the village's edge. Sprints to the building where Roswaal sleeps. Transformed into an incarnation of wrath, Subaru runs fast and furious through SANCTUARY, his body forgetting any fatigue or pain, inviting himself as far as his destination. He kicks open the door, storms inside the house, bares his teeth,

Subaru: "Roswaal! Show yourself! Gotta whole lotta questions for you!"

He plunges forth with a threatening attitude liable to get him a scolding from the maid, speaking wildly and with venom. No reply comes from the room. Subaru approaches the bedroom, footsteps loud, and yanks open the final door,

Subaru: "No playing innocent and no lies. You'll spill everything you're hiding..."

for me now, was how Subaru was going to continue, when he stops.

Because the person he is aiming his condensed dissatisfaction towards is not in the room.

He's left, is the truth which only sends Subaru's brain seething with more rage. He slams the bed with a kick, the pain in his toenails further heightening his anger as he bounds out of the building. If he is here he will be at Lewes' house—maybe meeting with Emilia, otherwise with Lewes and Garfiel. Either way, getting active the second Subaru was out of the picture was some damn nerve. The timing was so good to provoke the suspicion of, *perhaps his wounds weren't that serious and he was faking*.

Start doubting and the spiral of negativity never ends. His mind propped on these emotions, Subaru glares over SANCTUARY with his gaze sharp—and again, too late, comprehension comes to him.

Subaru: "...huh?"

Early morning, as far as Subaru knows, is when the residents of SANCTUARY normally prepare their breakfasts and start their washing. The evacuees being gone means there is no need for the food rationing, but every household would still need to do their cooking. Should, but Subaru sees not a trace of this everyday activity. Or no, even before that,

Subaru: “It's not just Roswaal and Ram... where did everyone go?”

Look left, look right, but not a single person to be found.

Thinking back on it, ever since exiting the forest and returning to SANCTUARY, Subaru could not recollect running into anyone along his path, and had no memory of sighting anyone.

Even considering the fact that the populace of SANCTUARY is few in number, to dash straight through the middle of the village without seeing anyone was so improbable as to stand out.

Subaru: “Can't be...”

Shaking his head to shake away his bad premonition, Subaru knocks on the door of a nearby house. Knocks, but after confirming the lack of response opens the door, and peers inside. —Empty. Two beast-eared women, sisters, are supposed to live here.

Going as far as those he can remember, Subaru peers from house to house for the village's noticeable residents. Each time betrays his expectations and piles the growing despair further. Nobody is anywhere. All signs of people are gone from SANCTUARY.

Subaru: “Someone! Anyone here!? Where'd you go!?”

The bad premonitions compound.

He remembers this panic, this arcane bereavement.

In his memories is his standoff with the Witch Cult, where he returned entirely late and unprepared to Arlam Village, meeting a scene of slaughter—piled corpses, expressions twisted in agony and despair. Familiar people with their faces devoid of colour, and a broken Petra never to move again.

Subaru: “—Aaaah!”

Terror runs up Subaru's back, the endless unease pushing him forth to run. A sound like a shriek slips from his mouth as he dashes for one single location.

At the edge of the village, a notably good building. It demonstrated one of the few esteems owned by the head of SANCTUARY, presently being lent as one single girl's bed.

Subaru: “—Emilia!”

Diving inside, screaming the dear girl's name, Subaru looks about the room.

The silver-haired girl looks back at Subaru, her gaze sleepy, and after several blinks and an expression of surprise, “Good morning, Subaru,” she says, a smile lovely enough to pain the heart arising on her face—

—is what should happen, but the room is empty.

Subaru dashes to the beside, reaches out, touches the disorderly sheets. No warmth—whoever was sleeping here had already left some time ago.

Confirming this alone, Subaru bounds out of the house, rushing for his final support. For the place where this situation, this absurdity, may possibly be explained to him.

Subaru: “Hauh... hauh...”

Out of breath. He tastes blood in the back of his throat as he sprints again into SANCTUARY's depths,

to the tomb where the WITCH OF GREED Echidna sleeps.

He reaches the tomb without encountering en-route the obstacle of Garfiel. Was that a grace, or would having seen a familiar face—even if the one of an obstacle—been a blessing?

Subaru: “No... How could I dare...”

How could the person who failed to save his sister dare show his face?

The relief Subaru feels at his absence, despite his unbearable panic that he cannot find anyone, and his failure to reflect on this weakness is horrifically disgusting, sickening.

Discarding his sentimentality with a shake of his head, Subaru heads for the tomb before anything can interfere.

The TRIAL would not be active presently, but perhaps some action would come from the witch's side. Anticipating such, clinging to such, Subaru seeks the visage of the witch who might give answers to his questions—

Subaru: “—kka, hu,”

—The moment he steps inside, Subaru feels the sensation of something having passed through his body.

He slowly looks down. Beneath his breast, above his stomach, in the exact centre of his torso—gapes a wide, fist-sized hole.

Subaru: “Hhu... ee?”

Hand reaches out, contacts the hole. A rush of blood spills over. His palm immediately plugs it, but his pierced back also gapes open. Unable to stop both, his already anaemic body fails to maintain its posture, collapsing.

—No pain. No understanding. What happened.

Death. Dying. He was dying. Death, what he knew was here before him.

Why, how come, here? Elsa? Chased him this far? The distance between mansion and SANCTUARY.

Beatrice, not possibly? Gospel. She—why? Rem. Who would. Dying. Scared. Something.

Someone. Emilia. Witch. Witch. Wi—

Subaru: “——a,”

His vision hazes. The end approaches.

His anticipated death visits in an unanticipated form. Subaru feels no relief at finally dying. For now all it was, was he was scared of death.

Even saying he resolved to die, when death visits from a different path than prepared, this was the result. Heart in disarray, shrieking with wretched craving for life, rejecting the flaying of his soul from the world—DEATH regardless consumes Subaru slowly.

Subaru: “—so, weak,”

The powerlessness of his useless self washes down his cheeks, Subaru's heartbeat stopping.

His face twists in anguish and terror at acquiring his desired death in undesired format, and with the piteousness of this death unanimously unquestionable,

Crunch, and chew.

CHAPTER 37: FIRST URGE TO MURDER

He hears the torrent of a rushing stream.

A furious sound of water. Coursing up to down, following gravity and following current, jetting up spray was a cascade.

Reverberating at his ears, or perhaps inside his skull, the thunder rattles Subaru's brain as his consciousness is led from forfeit into sobriety.

He sees a light, and—

Subaru: “—a, hhu”

Feeling a jarring in his throat, Subaru's breathing loses its rhythm as the nausea hits.

In, out, the supposedly-regular intervals of his breathing turn fuzzy. His body lost of oxygen twitches and trembles, spit building in his mouth as Subaru opens his eyes.

Subaru: “Gheuh, agghhk!”

Toppled on the floor, in face-down posture. Pressing his arms against the ground in prostrate position, Subaru puts his hand to his chest while he takes repeated breaths to calm his lungs.

The pain alleviates, he spits out the congested saliva, his body settles down as oxygen spreads through his brain. He takes a breath. —And, recollects.

Subaru: “uaahhhh, ahhh!?”

Recollects a cavern opening in his chest, and the bereavement of his insides flowing out.

He rubs his torso, confirming the absence of cavern, the stiffness of his whole body for now disappearing. Experiencing the sensation of shock numbing his limbs, Subaru chafes his forehead against the ground to generate friction, the abrasive pain granting the existence of his flesh confirmatory legitimacy.

Subaru: “What, at... the end...”

Face-down on the ground with blood escaping his body, that end, and the feeling of his soul being sucked out of that same hole, was definitely there. But that was not the cause of the bereavement gnawing Subaru's flesh. The true terror was afterwards, having arrived at death, until guided into death, the dull ember of life present.

Even though his consciousness had been vague, his memories fuzzy, he still remembered this alone clearly.

—Something, some arcane something, had DEVoured him.

Subaru: “S-slashed, bludgeoned, frozen, fallen, I've died in lots of ways... b-but, being ea... eaten at the end, is a new... one.”

Conscious of what happened to his flesh at the end, terror rises.

His direct cause of death was blood loss from the hole, and he had no intention to make light of DEATH itself. But it was true he had experienced the fragment of possibility of DEATH not being the end.

So, the sensation of your flesh being devoured came accompanied with that strong a sense of loss? Subaru had lost his fingers and legs before, but—

Subaru: “Fingers!?”

Thinking that far, Subaru feels anger for the dullness of his own head. There was no doubt that RETURN BY DEATH had activated. That was fact, given the unsalvagable wounds he sustained and the DEATH he felt. There was no existence in this world as deeply learned in death as Natsuki Subaru. Died, returned, that much was assured. What was not assured was where on the timeline Subaru returned to.

Subaru: “Ah...”

Turning his bloodshot gaze to the surroundings, Subaru desperately attempts to confirm his time and location. But what holds Subaru back from desperation is the feeling of his fingertips from when he wiped his brow of sweat. —The three missing fingers of his right hand, were definitely present.

Subaru: “Fingers... are there, so...”

Subaru follows his gaze from his fingers down to the elbow of his raised right arm. No signs of wound or scarring. The white scars from the commotion with the witchbeasts yet remain, but those are a different story.

Confirming that his arm is unwounded, Subaru moves on to his shoulder and hip—each having been speared by Elsa's throwing weapons. There's no sensation of his skin being taut. Convinced of the truth that he has returned to before facing Elsa, he could about collapse with relief.

Subaru: “Any... anyway so, now...”

Fortune amid misfortune, matters have settled without any extra despairs varnishing his death. Relieved and drained, Subaru lowers his eyes, thanking his bad luck. Which is when he shifts his gaze aside and notices it.

—In a corner of the dark room, he notices a writhing Emilia.

Subaru: “Emili... a...”

Getting up to run over to her, Subaru notices that they are inside a mouldy stone room alone, and he has only one guess as to when he could be. Meaning,

Subaru: “The restart point hasn't changed!”

The tomb directly after conquering the TRIAL—that was where Subaru returned, and in exchange for not having procured anything yet, here was where nothing was lost for the re-do.



—There still had to be some method left to do something about everything.

The thought that passes through Subaru's brain is so positive it's most unthinkable it came from the same person who had just been trembling at their final moment.

It's presently two nights after their arrival in SANCTUARY. Thinking over the information from last

loop and the first loop, Subaru organizes the condition and event content while scrambling for an answer.

The content's gruesome enough to be called the usual, with the initial thought of being unable to start anywhere, and the agonizing over being so stuck it's hopeless both being entirely same as always.

Subaru: "But, usual method hasn't been working this time."

Subaru is incapable of grasping the full story this loop. Conditions are such that even against an easily-understood threat, he still can't find the begging to any effective countermeasures. Presently there's Elsa, a clear threat with combat power so strong it's unopposable. Being that the stairway gimmick didn't work on her, she might actually be more of a nuisance than Betelgeuse. Dealing with her being the most important condition still hasn't changed. However, it seems the problems don't end there.

Subaru: "The end of last time... Why was SANCTUARY empty?"

Having Beatrice dump him all the way in SANCTUARY was still incomprehensible, but the incomprehensibility of the absence of people in SANCTUARY overpowered that. All that running around and calling out, for zero reaction.

Then was the final disaster, which attacked a Subaru seeking answers in the tomb.

Subaru has absolutely no idea what gave him the wound that killed him. Remembering the still-vivid injury resurrects only pain and terror, and it seems unlikely he'll be figuring out the cause from that.

Just what on earth happened in SANCTUARY? What happened to Subaru himself? What were Beatrice's intentions? And Emilia—

Subaru: "...No way."

Thinking that far, Subaru's face stiffens in astonishment at the contradiction between his thoughts and behaviour.

This organizing of the situation was important. Figuring out his goals, and drafting plans to realise them, was also important. Gathering up and putting form to this scattered information, making it an aid for reaching the desired future, was the action that he should prioritize.

But did that mean he should be ignoring Emilia, fighting a nightmare right here before him?

Subaru: "I,"

Emilia is presently taking the TRIAL, and suffering. The weight of the cross she bears torments her body, her soul. That pain will continue long, ending without any reprieve.

Subaru knows. Knows how much taking this saddens her, wears her down, weakens her heart. He had even resolved to complete the TRIAL in her place because he couldn't bear watching. He had done everything he could to mow away all obstacles, and organize a road for her to pass.

So then why, while seeing her in pain, had he been relieved?

Thank goodness the point where I returned is this present where she is suffering. His knowing the conclusion being the cruelty of it, Subaru had prioritised his own thinking over her.

The instant he understands this, Subaru comprehends that he has degraded into something horrendously disgusting.

With his cherished before him, knowing that she was gasping in unbearable agony, he averted his gaze from her distress, persisting well in foolish egocentricity.

As far as Subaru was concerned, this was exactly what abhorrent, repulsive weakness was.

Subaru: “Anyway...”

He didn't have time to be tormented with guilt and his heart's contradictions. He had to wake up Emilia immediately, and leave this place. He could take time to gather his thoughts outside. There was no reason to elongate her suffering. And—

Subaru: “Things're this stuck, 'cause there's a guy around who's gotta start talking.”

Subaru's own leniency irritated him. There's this character related to the crux of the matter, and he's gotten away with it with excessive ambiguousness. Resulting was the tragedy at the mansion, and the incomprehensible death at SANCTUARY.

If the future to visit him should he remain small be that one, then—

Subaru: “I'll change what I did completely.”

Says Subaru as he reaches out to wake Emilia.

Not even Subaru himself realises that his expression is twisted with unrestrainable fury.



Subaru: “—How much do you know, Roswaal?”

Are Subaru's first words after opening the door. Lying in bed, Roswaal narrows his eyes. Seeing himself reflected in his heterochromatic eyes, Subaru stomps into the room, slamming the door shut behind him, broadcasting his emotions.

—After looking after Emilia returned from the TRIAL, Subaru left the tomb and headed to Lewes' house to put Emilia to bed. He left Emilia's care to Ram, declined to kill time until she woke up, and went to Roswaal's recovery hut.

Garfiel's silent glaring at Subaru all through his time at the house was a factor for concern, but fortunately he didn't pick any fights along the way and Subaru uneventfully reached Roswaal's.

Roswaal: “Hmmmmmmmmm.”

Looking up at an uncalm Subaru, Roswaal raises a finger, points it at Subaru, and waggles it.

Roswaal: “Yooooou've certainly become muuuuuuch angrier than you were a moment ago. Thaaaaaaaat's a good sign.”

Subaru: “Don't mess around. I don't have any room for pranks or jokes right now. I'm ready to use force, that's how I've prepared myself.”

Snarls Subaru at a cheery Roswaal. Subaru goes to stand right at the bedside, placing his hand on

the bed, looking down at the clown from extreme close range.

Subaru: "Just got back from taking the TRIAL. —Gotta load of questions."

Roswaal: "...Really, now. You and the TRIAL. I see. I see, Iiiiiiiii do seeeeeee."

In Subaru-time, his parting with his parents has already been several days ago. In actual time it happened less than an hour ago. This is now the third time Roswaal's given an incomprehensible reaction to discussing that TRIAL.

The first time was a flash of violent emotion so brief it almost seemed it hadn't happened. The second time he seemed to accept it rather calmly. But even so, some uncharacteristic melancholy did slip through.

This third time, what reaction would he give? Subaru personally wanted the indignation from the first attempt. He believed that even Roswaal would be prone to letting his mouth slip if enraged. But contrary to scheming Subaru's desires, Roswaal's mouth relaxes into a slight smile.

Roswaal: "Nooooow then, let's have me ask a question."

Subaru: "Huh? What're you saying? You? A question? ...Bastard, piss around too much and I'll seriously flip."

Roswaal: "I doooooooooo well understand that your anger is justified. I am asking from that understanding. If you align with my thoughts... there wouldn't be aaaaaaaany reason to be sparing with my cooperation, you seeeeeeee."

Subaru: "If I answer that question... no, actually wait."

Roswaal perhaps has something to propose to a Subaru stifling back his anger. For an instant Subaru goes to consider it, but immediately aborts. Because he notices that if this goes the same as the conversations with Roswaal thus far, he'll get washed away in the atmosphere Roswaal creates. By not resisting and going along with it, he's had all these awful experiences. If Subaru wishes to change developments somehow, first he would have to start changing from this juncture.

Subaru: "I'm not answering your questions. I'm the one who wants to talk. I talk first."

Roswaal: "...My, weeeeeeeell isn't that raaaaaaaather arrogant."

Subaru: "Not saying I won't answer questions, but I've got this crazy feeling that giving you first dibs'll make things go in a crap direction. Nipping that one in the bud."

Roswaal closes an eye and gives a small sigh. He presents his palms to Subaru, surrendering first dibs.

Roswaal: "Goooooo ahead."

Roswaal: "Question toooooooooo your liking. Indeed, that I must be the one driving the conversation —iiiiiiiiis not the case, after all."

Subaru: "Actually feels weird you're being reasonable, but... well, probing into it won't go anywhere so I'll take it. Question. —What kind of contract ties you and Beatrice?"

Roswaal falls into silence, proving this question was not one he expected. Although extremely faint, seeing the stiffness in Roswaal's cheeks convinces Subaru the question was a critical hit.

Subaru can't get his conversation with Beatrice upon parting out of his head, or the GOSPEL she owns. The question also relates to how he'll approach her from now on. This wasn't something he could let sit, and he had to decide from this knowledge.

—Decide, unavoidable in this series of loops, how to approach Beatrice.

Subaru: “Answer, Roswaal. No tedious 'you didn't answer my question so I won't answer yours' reply. Let's hear it.”

Getting impatient with the still-silent Roswaal, Subaru piles up demands for a reply. Subaru recognizes irritation asserting itself in his chest. It was the flipside of his wish that his bad premonition, bad expectations be overturned. Every second of silence feels a minute, ten minutes long. Roswaal finally, slowly opens his mouth.

Roswaal: “—You raising that question here, perhaps means you've remembered?”

Not only is it not the answer Subaru desired, Roswaal responds with his own question. The attitude annoys Subaru, who clicks his tongue, and waves his hand at Roswaal.

Subaru: “Shut up.”

Subaru: “Why're you replying with a question? Even if I concede and have to ask, you're answering my questions first. I'm not handing over my turn.”

Roswaal: “I see. Then let's proceed by taking alternating turns. Your question was about the CONTRACT BETWEEN MYSELF AND BEATRICE, cooooooorrect? Beatrice and I are not tied by contract. Over.”

Subaru: “Wha—!?”

Subaru goes speechless. Roswaal reaches his hand out.

Roswaal: “Nooooooooow,”

Roswaal: “This time it's your turn to answer myyyyyyyyy question. —Have you remembered?”

Subaru: “...Remembered what. Just saying, our relationship isn't deep enough to be finishing each other's sentences. You better not think I can put together what you're saying off sentences missing their subjects.”

Roswaal: “That reply told me your answer to my question. ...Unfortunate.”

Subaru had gone to outwit him as reprisal, but even his attempt at that was careless and Roswaal comes out on top. Roswaal's eyes lower with gloom.

Roswaal: “It seems I won't be reaching it.”

Subaru: “...What're?”

Roswaal: “Your turn to question. Ask a beeeeeetter, uuuuuuundodgable query this time.”

Roswaal interrupts Subaru, who cannot erase his irritation at Roswaal who is aware he is being evasive. Subaru takes a deep breath to calm his emotions, puts a finger to his temple, and forces himself to think.

Subaru: “You said there's no contract between you and Beatrice? Then, why's Beatrice in your mansion? I don't get the relationship between you two.”

Roswaal: “That turned into two questions, and you've been eeeeeeeeeentirely focused on Beatrice. Will Emilia-sama be aaaaaaaalright? Or do you have a taste for that juvenile-looking girl?”

Subaru: “Not into younger girls, and no plans to start her route in the romantic meaning in the slightest. Do think I have to do her route in a crushing-the-status-quo meaning though.”

Something does twinge in Subaru's heart when he thinks about Beatrice. But its origin is different from the twinge when he thinks of Emilia or Rem, and Subaru doesn't really understand what the emotion means.

But even after seeing Beatrice with a GOSPEL, Subaru thinks like this:

—He didn't want to accept that his relationship with Beatrice had been a forgery in accordance to the writings of an incomprehensible book.

Subaru: “And for that, I need to know her. And, the only one who seems deeply connected to her circumstances is you. So I have to ask you.”

Roswaal: “Try so energetically to pick up eeeeeeeeeverything that catches your eye, and it'll hinder you when choosing what's precious tooooooou you. I believe that naivety is nothing more than an impediment, when focusing on the true, genuine thing most important to yooooooooou.”

Subaru: “I know both my hands're occupied. So I'm gonna grab her in my mouth while I'm at it. Complaints?”

Roswaal: “Nooooooooot a one. I do think you wound up merely saying something smooth, but I'd saaaaaay that's fine. —The answer will be what happens when that time comes in reality.”

Mutters Roswaal at the end. Subaru's gaze sharpens.

Roswaal: “Nooooooooow,”

Roswaal: “The reason Beatrice is staying in the mansion, waaaaaas it. Her being in my mansion is from her acquaintance with the Mathers family. If I were to say, the family head from several generations ago instituted her by his goodwill to lord the mansion's Forbidden Archive. That arrangement has caaaaaaarried down to my generation.”

Subaru: “Hiring a lord. ...Then, this's something different from a contract?”

Roswaal: “That wasn't conforming to the question format... but, noooooo concern. My questions carry haaaaaaardly any meaning any more. You would already know that Beatrice is a spirit, cooooooorrect?”

Subaru nods. Roswaal raises a finger.

Roswaal: “For spirits, contracts with individuals possess incredible importance. The relationship between Emilia-sama and the Great Spirit would be eeeeeeeexactly such a case.”

Subaru: “...Yeah, Emilia's toiled with the having lots of annoying conditions thing, too. Though can't say that Great Spirit's been showing his face lately.”

Subaru still carries unease toward Puck due to being killed three times by him, and for his off-kilter assessment towards sleeping Rem. Since he's now disappeared before they could sort this out, Subaru's feelings toward the cat spirit are yet fixed as being complex.

Roswaal: “Leaving aside the Great Spirit's moodiness, Beatrice applies as no exception. She and I do have a cooperative relationship, hoooooowever that is incredibly a non-interference arrangement based on overlap of our mutual benefit. She is not aiding me iiiiiiiiiiin my goal, and vice versa.”

Subaru: “I get you and Beako getting along by being indifferent, but this's got nothing to do with the stuff about contract relationships.”

Roswaal: “Oop, excuse me. Contract relationships are yet again separate. Beatrice is a spirit and consequently she regards contracts seriously. If you were to speak of contracts with regard to her, that would yet another separate, raaaaaaather large problem. Beeeeeeeebecause that girl has already been bound in a contract foooooooor 400 years.”

Subaru leans closer to Roswaal at that vital information.

Subaru: “There!”

Subaru: “That contract from 400 years ago, its details are what I wanna know.”

Roswaal: “Not a spirit out there would let a contract's contents slip so eeeeeeeasily. The contractor of the time would surely not remain, and unless Beatrice should divulge it herself yooooooooou'll probably never know.”

Subaru: “Fuck, useless! If I just knew about this 400-years contract...”

Then he would he not know why that girl stayed holed in that room, alone and small?

Roswaal: “However, I can tell you this.”

Roswaal: “Beatrice has been bound in a contract for 400 years. That another, new contract be overlaid atop that one iiiiiiiiiiis inconceivable. If you wish to pull her out of that place, you would need to start with making thaaaaaaat contract break.”

Subaru: “Make... the contract break?”

Roswaal: “Or fulfil it to completion, woooooould also work. Considering the high possibility the target of the contract has been lost, I woooooould think it much wiser toooooooo break it?”

The miracle of Roswaal saying something constructive. Subaru's face is sceptical, but gradually turns to one of scales dropped from the eyes.

Subaru: “—Did I say a single word about wanting to take Beatrice outside?”

Subaru's voice is low, his gaze sharp and piercing through Roswaal. His hand still on the bed, Subaru raps his fingers on the sheets as if counting off time. Lowering his gaze to witness this, Roswaal closes one eye, and with Subaru reflected in his yellow pupil,

Roswaal: “You truly are—a man who ooooooonly notices what I'd rather you not.”

Subaru: “What do you...”

Roswaal: “Either way, thiiiiiiiis time is hollow to me. Should we be fiiiiiiiine to partition the conversation here?”

Subaru: “Don't—don't you fucking piss around!”

In a complete change from before, a shade of despair rises in Roswaal's eyes.

Roswaal: something something too late to move my heart but... “Shouldn't it be fine to just doooooo what you want?”

Subaru: “What the fuck is with your bullshit attitude!? It's an important... we're having an important conversation, and this's how you're gonna fucking be!? I still have questions I...”

Roswaal: “As I said, if you have questions wouldn't it be fine toooooo ask them? Although, whether I answer properly or not is already completely dependant ooooooon my mood.”

In contrast to a pissed Subaru, Roswaal steadily loses trace of emotion. Subaru's face reddening, Roswaal strokes his navy hair as he tilts his head.

Roswaal: “You haaaaaaave no questions?”

Subaru: “— I understand that she's, that Beatrice's in the mansion bound by contract. Enough on those circumstances. What I want to ask is different. That black book she has... Tell me what that is, now.”

Roswaal: “Ohhhhh, so you saw it. Your impressions? Just what did you thiiiiiiink of it?”

Subaru: “Don't answer with a question. —The books the witch cultists have, resemble it, I, think.”

Subaru's starty-stoppy speech displays his desire for it to be refuted. But Roswaal, with an expression as if holding back a yawn,

Roswaal: “The gospels possessed by witch cultists. Mediators for the Witch's will, grimoires describing the path to the owner's desired future. Weeeeell, should you ignore their specificity, they're what you'd call raaaaaather time-intensive prophecies.”

Subaru: “—! You know them?”

Roswaal: “Just curiosity, would not be the calibre ooooooof circumstances here. Cultists are everywhere, and this is a facility related to a witch differing from the one they worship. Myself, being landlord of SANCTUARY, has had skirmishes with them aaaaaat least once.”

Subaru: “Th-they seriously tell the future... do they?”

Knowing the future without dying would be something like the forward-compatible version of Subaru's RETURN BY DEATH. Although not envy, assuming possibly that every single witch cultist came equipped with these things, then that would be something. Roswaal shakes his head at the shivering Subaru.

Roswaal: “They are certainly not that convenient. The amount of directions differ by the cultist and are infrequent. Much of the content is vague, with multiple ways for interpretation. Most critically, only the gospel's owner can read it, and others will only see mystery writings which won't enter their heads. All it tells in an imperfect graph of the future.”

Subaru: “Imperfect...”

Subaru can't hide his relief. Besides, if the GOSPELS truly possessed the power to prophecise the future, Subaru's defeat of Betelgeuse should have been impossible. Thinking like that, then even the Cardinals' GOSPELS aren't at such a stage.

Subaru: “This and that are different stories. Um, that book Beatrice had...”

Roswaal: “If you are asking whether it's the same as the GOSPELS possessed by the Witch Cult, the answer is that it is, and that it isn't.”

Subaru: “Don't dodge! This is important!”

Roswaal: “I am certainly nooooooot dodging. What Beatrice possesses is a GOSPEL, but its roots differ from those of the cultists'. The Witch Cult's versions are imperfect, and the one Beatrice owns is a perfected GOSPEL.”

Subaru: “Perfect....?”

Roswaal: “Yes, it is something perfected. It differs from the defective works, dictated by their indefinite futures and unstable contents.”

Subaru's confused. But Roswaal's expression is rather sunny. It's almost like he's proud and bragging about something. Subaru loses his words at this weird transformation, but what truly makes him lose his speech is what comes directly after.

Subaru: “—!?”

Roswaal brings his right hand out from behind his back, to reveal a black tome. Seen at too close a range to mistake it for anything else, this is clearly a GOSPEL.

Roswaal: “The exclusive, only two perfected GOSPELS. Their owners are Beatrice and I alone... iiiiiiis what it would be.”

Roswaal waves the book around back and forth a little. No room exists in Subaru to pay attention to that.

Roswaal had the same book the witch cultists owed. This was indeed surprising to Subaru. And the affirming of what Beatrice was saying at their parting is yet another cause for Subaru's shock. —However, what fills Subaru's heart is not any of those things, but,

Subaru: “That's... a GOSPEL telling the future?”

Roswaal: “Preeeeeeecisely. This is a legitimate GOSPEL.”

Subaru: “You... know the future? That things would be like this, now, in that book...?”

Roswaal: “Is iiiiiiiindeed written. You wouldn't be able to read it though.”

Like that fucking mattered.

Whether or not Subaru could read it, in this moment, meant nothing. Only one single thing possessed meaning. One thing. He had to ask.

Subaru: “It writes... what will happen, next?”

Roswaal: “It doesn't write the entirety of the world, buuuuuuuut it does make the future oooooooof the owner clear.”

Subaru: “That, things would be how they are now... was something you knew?”

Roswaal: “Crafting conditions according to its writ took quiiiiiiiite the bit of labour. I would rather like some praise fooooooor my backstage effort.”

Subaru's voice will not stop shaking.

The root of the shaking is the budding of a vehement emotion. What this emotion was, and where it was directed, were immediately obvious to Subaru.

Subaru: “If you knew that things would be like this, then...”

Roswaal: “—Mhm.”

Subaru: “—You knowingly left Rem to die?”

Roswaal: “Nooooooow just whooooooo is Rem?”

Subaru: “—I'll kill you! ROSWAAAAAAAAAAAAALL!!”

An unbearable rage alone thrusts Subaru into motion.

He leaps onto the bed, grabs Roswaal's neck, squeezes. Previously unexhibited until now, Subaru's above-average arm strength wrests the thin neck, shades of agony carving onto the clown's pale face.

Subaru: “You knew everything, and you—!!”

If he knew, if he understood, if he could have averted the tragedy—if he could have ended it without Rem meeting that fate...

Subaru: “The reason I left Rem to die—was you!!”

Rage and regret morph into urge to murder the man before him. His actions forsake rationality, his emotions—his love—transforms into strength.

Yet unable to make a sound, Roswaal keeps silent, practically waiting for Subaru to just snap his neck—

???: “—SHAPESHIFT OR DISGUISE, AN ULGARM'S SMELL NEVER LIES!!”

—Impact.

Eating a hard, piercing blow from the side, Subaru goes flying as he savours the sensation of the right half of his face collapsing.

He slams against the wall, drops to the floor head-first. The blow turns his thinking dull, his body twitches not an inch.

Blood leaks from his ears, blackness cloaks the right of his vision. His eye, may have been crushed.

???: “—Ever since ya came outta th' tomb th' fuckin' stink on yer's been worse. Didn't believe it n' start pullin' watch duty on yer, and fuck if it ain't just what I thought!”

Footsteps. Subaru senses the sloppy gait closing it right to his side. His body will not permit him to crawl. Immobile front and back, something grips Subaru's head, lifting him up.

???: “Want me t'ask yer body what yer fuckin' witch-stinkin' self was thinkin' of doin'? This place needs that bastard. Don't you fuckin' pull shit.”

A blond young man. Garfiel. Stricken with a voice of rage and murder, Subaru's consciousness grows distant.

He cannot confirm it, but half his head seems to be crushed. Dying, potentially. This is where he dies, and it would truly be the lowest of ways to end.

But if he RETURNED BY DEATH while yet harbouring this squalid thing, would he truly maintain his capacity to hold this hope, desiring to save this place?

Subaru: “I don't, know... Rem.”

With those final words, Subaru's consciousness descends into darkness.

CHAPTER 38: CATERPILLAR

—What first pulls on Subaru's consciousness is the sound of dripping water.

The droplets fall into steady rhythm, every beat cast into the quiet room guiding Subaru's consciousness bit by bit into sobriety.

His slumbering brain restarts its function. His nerves complete their instant bootup, giving feeling to the blood circulating his body. He goes to twist, groan, upright himself—but can't.

His limbs listen not to his commands to push himself up. The only action available to him is to chafe his face against the cold ground. He attempts to rely on his returned senses to inspect the surroundings, to find his vision completely swallowed in darkness.

—Both eyes crushed!?

The answer comes quick, but before he can shiver at his conclusion, he notices the tight pressure binding his eyes and discards the theory. Immediately judging himself as apparently being blindfolded, he belatedly notices the oddness of these conditions.

Rather than both his eyes be crushed, both his eyes are covered. His inability to move is due to the same reason—his hands and feet are bound firm.

Feeling some kind of thin rope at his wrists and ankles, hands tied behind his back, even struggling to attempt to escape the constraints would be a considerable effort.

Subaru: “Wh-what ha...!?”

Fortunately he has not been gagged and his voice comes out normally. But with his hands and feet tied literally, all he can use is his mouth. Subaru doubted that whoever put him in this condition would be amicable enough for chatting alone to satisfy them.

Terror directs towards the incomprehensibility of this state, and the complete lack of information about the surroundings. Yet harbouring this jumble of feelings, Subaru quiets his breathing and forces himself to think.

Organise his current status. Eyes—covered. Limbs—bound, unlikely to escape. Can speak. Should he yell for help? Would only draw his captor. Anything nearby to escape the restraints? Crawling to search would be arduous. An ache in the right of his head, which pounds the second he focuses on it, bringing pain.

Subaru: “My head, hurts...”

By recognising the pain in his head, Subaru remembers what fate he met just before losing consciousness.

He RETURNED BY DEATH, left the tomb and went to Roswaal to press him with new facts and guesses, flew into a rage at the clown's unforgivable statement, and Garfiel who had been watching him bashed his lights out.

No, not even 'bashed his lights out' was phrasing sufficient enough to express the overwhelming power that had forced him down. One single restraining strike from Garfiel had crushed his head, Subaru thinking he would proceed to sink into death. However,

Subaru: “If I died, I'd be post-RETURN BY DEATH now, but...”

Were that true, that his restart point be in tomb after finishing the TRIAL would be correct. RETURN BY DEATH should have retraced the route back to the room he had left barely an hour ago, before he

had headed to Roswaal's bedroom.

Him being tumbled into abduction-and-confinement conditions like this, as far as Subaru's memory knew, was limited only to that time he flipped the coffee table while imitating an anime, seriously pissed off his father, and was flung into the storehouse as punishment.

That was a memory potentially from before he entered primary school, and Subaru quite doubted he had RETURNED BY DEATH that far. So, if the restart point had not changed, the theory becomes that Subaru had been bound directly after he RETURNED BY DEATH. But that should be impossible, so the only conclusion was—

Subaru: “I didn't die...”

Worked with his head pain, worked with his present circumstances.

He committed an act of unsurpassable violence toward Roswaal. Considering that point, that he be treated like this was morally correct. Although emotionally he did not agree with it.

???: “—'S long as yer quick gettin' grips'a the situation yer in.”

Subaru hears a voice from above. He raises his head, and although blinded turns toward the probable direction of the voice. Aware from the tone and vocals who it is,

Subaru: “Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “Nother one correct. Looks like yer noggin's workin' proper so there's a relief. Whacked ya just a smidge too hard you see, 'pologies 'pologies.”

His tone is not apologetic.

Garfiel: “Who'da thought,”

Garfiel: “Was just tryin' t'give ya'a little tap, didn't imagine yer'd get t'death's door that easy. Heard yer Emilia-sama's knight, so wound up overestimin' thinkin' you'd be somethin' more.”

Subaru: “Sorry for not matching your expectations. My character type's more brains than brawn, see. ...Where are we?”

Joking back at Garfiel's somewhat scornful line, Subaru enters the main topic. Garfiel gives a short exhale out his nose.

Garfiel: “Relax, yer still 'n SANCTUARY. But this ain't any a' th'cathedral, or th'tomb, or th'house we're lendin' t'visitors.”

Subaru: “You've got a prison room prepared? They do say best to be prepared, but if you've gotta facility like this set up... honestly, ew.”

Garfiel: “Got complaints 'bout the bad taste then tell'em t'who made it. Since in actual you can do yer bitchin' directly, yeh?”

Says Garfiel, dissatisfied are rather sincerely uncomfortable. Subaru scrunches his face, feeling something in Garfiel's words tugging at him.

Subaru: “Directly, meaning what exactly?”

Garfiel: “Don't play dumb when yer fuckin' reekin'a witchstink. Yer met inside th' tomb. 'F you didn't, how'd the stink on you suddenly go up?”

Subaru: “Met in the tomb?”

Something Garfiel's saying is tugging at him.

Tomb. TRIAL. Someone he met there. A vacuum. He parted with his parents at the TRIAL, and at the end he went to the empty school building, where—

Subaru: “The witch!”

—He had a rendezvous with Echidna, WITCH OF GREED.

Following along his unease and restoring this deficit, the Echidna's existence again returns to Subaru's brain. Since he had experienced this sensation last loop too, the point of peculiarity becomes why had he forgotten again.

Likely it was a result of one of the CONDITIONS or whatever she had conferred on him at their first meeting, but it shocks Subaru that not even RETURN BY DEATH can overcome it.

Although RETURN BY DEATH allowed him to carry over memories, it possessed no counter-measures toward direct interference with his memory. Meaning that every time Subaru RETURNED BY DEATH, he would forget about Echidna, and would have to start from prior to remembering her.

Subaru: “Then, could this be what Roswaal was saying I forgot...?”

It's a bit of a hasty conclusion. Although remembering Echidna, Subaru can't think of anything during his conversations with her that would help break the present deadlock.

This SOMETHING that Roswaal apparently wanted Subaru to remember, going by how he spoke, in itself could make Roswaal reveal his unreadable true feelings.

Although, this again only mattered if the perfect gospel he owns is correct.

Garfiel: “Yer shuttin' up means yer feelin' guilty or that ya got an idea.”

Subaru: “I'm not a highschool girl who dies if she's not talking so I do quietly mull over say, one or two things. 'One or two things'd kinda be too little thinking right now though.”

There are so many things to sort out, Subaru alone would not have enough brain cells for it.

There was Emilia. There was Rem. There was Beatrice. —Listing out women's names like this makes Subaru want to make a jab at these circumstances he's in but, there was SANCTUARY, there was Elsa, Roswaal's true intentions, the GOSPELS. And,

Subaru: “There's Garfiel.”

Garfiel's persuading and assistance is an indispensable, necessary piece in Subaru's mental blueprints for saving the mansion. Subaru likely cannot prepare any combat power greater than Garfiel for repelling Elsa. That Subaru is relying on Garfiel for the Elsa fight is because, both with his eyes and with his head, Subaru has gotten to appreciate Garfiel's strength.

Subaru: “...If I'm remembering right, I think I got punched and kicked and my head destroyed by you but, what happened there?”

Garfiel: “*Ha*. Took a bit a' talkin' for that topic t'finally fuckin' come up. Didn't go far as destroyin', jus' caved in 'sall. Yer'd die if we left you like that and that'd be a problem, so yer gotta bit'a goddamn healin'.”

Subaru: “Healing... from who?”

Garfiel: “Think there's anyone'n this place 'cept my amazin' self who couldda done it?”

Garfiel's tone carries some pride, and Subaru is stunned silent. He hadn't thought that rough and tumble Garfiel would have studied healing magic. Still tied up, Subaru twists about.

Subaru: “My head's still got its normal shape and isn't a cube or a pyramid, right?”

Garfiel: “Next time it's busted, I'll make a shape where you'll be proppin' it up with yer hands.”

Garfiel gives a floored sigh. Subaru at least confirms that he is out of near-death conditions.

Subaru: “Since you're the one who busted it it feels wrong to thank you for the healing, but... what exactly is your aim, doing this?”

Garfiel: “Well, what do yer think's my aim?”

Subaru: “Looking at conditions and from your perspective, knocking me out there was the proper decision so I won't complain about that. I completely flipped out and I'm glad you stopped me is not what I don't think is not what I'll not say is the kind of thing I have mountains of things of.”

Garfiel: “Ain't that mentality damn complicated. I get wantin' t'bash that asshole's smug face in, but doin' that's gonna be trouble for the granny 'n them.”

Seems Garfiel shares Subaru's feelings toward the clown. But both Garfiel and Subaru depend too much on him to be capable of cutting loose and riding off that emotion. For Subaru he is his patron, and for Garfiel he is a needed landlord.

But that Garfiel first mentioned Lewes and the other inhabitants of SANCTUARY feels incredibly unlike him. This seems to support Frederica's valuation of her little brother Garfiel. And after all, the reason he stayed inside SANCTUARY, rather than leave with her, was out of consideration for the residents' feelings.

Subaru: “Lewes-san and the others are important, and Roswaal's presence is indispensable to protect their livelihood. If this guy and his DEMIHUMAN FANCY aren't around, this SANCTUARY and its residents, unable to even go outside, can't maintain their lifestyle.”

Garfiel: “Stop linin' up embarassin' ideas with that smartass look. Who the hell'd be here 'cuzza that sentimental reason. My amazin' self's just here since I can't leave th' place, so...”

Subaru: “You can't leave, when your blood relative Frederica could, Garf?”

New information fresh from last loop. Punctuating his sentence with that 'Garf', Subaru means to peek into Garfiel's attitude. But Garfiel's reaction comes with a sternness that transcends Subaru's imagination.

The wind whistles, and the next instant an incredible boom thunders from beside Subaru's head. The

air-rending noise reverberates, and before Subaru's brain can realise that this was Garfiel stomping at blinding speed, the ground fractures and the room's shape shifts.

The ground warps upward, Subaru shrieking as the shockwave sends him flying. He tumbles across the hard floor, slamming into the wall and coming to a forced stop.

His brain jolts, the shock to his back wrings his lungs of air, his banged head issues with intense pain. Subaru coughs, drool trailing out the corners of his mouth.

Garfiel: "Who fuckin' told you that, piece of shit. Fuckin' Frederica spillin' things she... no, she wouldn't say this. We thoroughly severed the sibling link 'tween us at our goodbye."

Subaru: "You can't sever the blood in your body with a figure of spee..."

Garfiel: "'M sayin' it feels wrong that yer sayin' it now, this late. 'F you were gonna use that, there's lots of better places you could've."

Garfiel gets his disgustingly sharp intuition going. As if he's been stocking up on facts Subaru didn't know, while Subaru wasn't looking.

Garfiel's ideas are not wrong—in fact, they are exactly perfect, but the road of thought he used to get to them was excessively direct.

It was as if he possessed abnormally great perceptiveness, or otherwise some kind of LEAD FOR THOUGHT.

Subaru: "No way... you, too?"

—The instant Subaru thinks upon the possibility, he is unable to conceal his voice's shaking.

The reply is an eerie silence.

It was in truth probably only several seconds, but for Subaru it was equivalent to an eternity.

No reply. Why wasn't he talking. Subaru's question was considerably nonspecific. It would be better for him to say 'don't get it, don't get it' and send Subaru flying with a kick. Were there that kind of hasty reaction, Subaru could still cling. But,

Garfiel: "Me too... say."

Footsteps. The falls of Garfiel's shoes against the stone floor approach directly to Subaru's side, and Subaru can tell that Garfiel is squatted down beside him. Subaru raises his head, and most likely with his face drawn right next to Subaru's, baring his fangs,

Garfiel: "Why're you thinkin' that, huh?"

Subaru: "Stop speaking in a way that's driving up this bad hunch. I just said something that made no sense, right? You can nice and easily, please deny it... right?"

Garfiel: "You sound like yer gonna cry."

Says Garfiel, dumbstruck. The reply only panics Subaru further, his deepest thoughts already a jumbled mess.

He wanted Garfiel, with his excessively good guess, to deny it. But the replies Subaru is getting are meaningful, backing up the premonition in Subaru's heart.

He had found that Beatrice and Roswaal, people allied in his faction, possessed GOSPELS. As far as Subaru was concerned, a third character appearing with one would not be strange.

Subaru: “Then! So you know too!”

Garfiel: “—Ah, so that's what this's about. Wonder where you noticed.”

Subaru: “—!?”

Garfiel gives a listless sigh.

Garfiel: “Y'seem surprised, but it can't be that strange. My amazin' self's been a resident of SANCTUARY forever, so we've known each other for ages 'n ages. The chance'd come one or two times.”

Subaru: “B-but... you—you're supposed to hate the WITCH. So much you'd overreact like that... but...”

Garfiel: “Yeah, I do. I hate the WITCH, I don't trust yer witch-stinkin' self, half-witch Emilia-sama ain't a pleasure for the eyes either. But y'see, I don't think what that *thing* says's wrong. At least, 's true that it knew what my amazin' self wanted t'know.”

Subaru: “What you, wanted to know...”

Garfiel: “—I got no fuckin' reason t'tell you that. How 'bout you try askin' from yer end. Though, y'might not be gettin' another chance at it.”

Spits Garfiel, who stands up, takes range from Subaru, and places his hand on the exit to the prison room. The wooden door squeaks.

Subaru: “Hey!”

Subaru: “Wait! ...Wh-what'll happen with me. Or actually, what is happening with me?”

Garfiel: “Fer tryin' t'kill Roswaal, yer sure gettin' off soft. Well f'r now you're getting' the bound n' confined treatment 'till the results come out.”

Confinement—was a word he had just heard several days ago. And from Roswaal's mouth. That Subaru's violence toward him, who was supposed be in that confinement, had dropped him into the same circumstances was excessively ironic.

Garfiel snorts.

Garfiel: “You'll be gettin' meals at mornin' n' evenin'. Just don't pull anythin' funny. My amazin' self'll be chaperonin' the caretaker role perfect, see.”

Subaru: “That kinda worry... isn't what I have right now! Anyway, results? You said results? What're the results? What're you waiting...?”

Garfiel: “Ain't the results obvious?”

Garfiel: “—The results of Emilia-sama's TRIAL. When sh'hears what you pulled, and 'f atonement for that's her motive, she'll sure get enthusiastic for it.”



—Garfiel leaves the room, leaving Subaru to sink into his thoughts.

The words Garfiel left him with aren't leaving his head.

It seems like Emilia is stirring herself up, challenging the TRIAL to clear Subaru's name. The thought appears to be one of, 'if SANCTUARY is freed, the achievement will be capable of washing over the scandal Subaru committed.'

It's a very Emilia-esque way to think, and completely undoubting of Subaru.

Subaru: “But, back at that moment...”

Albeit enraged, Subaru was sincerely wringing Roswaal's neck.

His hands grasped tight on a human being's neck, his considerable grip obstructed their throat, all while using strength to snap their bones or sever their breathing.

Although his arms are bound behind his back, Subaru can tell his fingers are trembling.

If he were to forget his rage in that moment, all that remained in his hands was the wake of a dark heat, which had gone to threaten the life of another person. Nausea wells up from his empty stomach.

And considering the target of that murderous will was a familiar character, that only compounded it.

Subaru: “I just, don't know anymore...”

Who to trust, what to think, how to act, nothing.

What was Beatrice's position? The GOSPEL she owned? The days they spent?

What was Roswaal thinking? His perfected GOSPEL was? What was he wishing for Subaru to remember? The true meaning behind his overinexplicable position?

What to do to make Emilia conquer the TRIAL? No, was making her face the TRIAL correct in the first place? He did not even know the beginning any more.

Garfiel's intentions, and did he possess a GOSPEL? Without his cooperation beating Elsa was impossible. Their relationship worsening with every RETURN BY DEATH, what action would manage to bring him to the mansion?

What to do about Elsa's attack, repel or evacuate? Why had the timing of the attack changed between the first and second loops? Why did that murderer know about an escape route that she should not? Elsa's employer was? What was necessary to repel her? He could never forgive her.

Then was the purpose and origin of SANCTUARY. The gist of the remaining TRIALS, and why did the TRIALS exist? Echidna's goals, and what to do to meet her again? What happened last loop in the depopulated Sanctuary?

In that final instant, what was it that had killed and devoured Subaru?

Subaru: “I don't have... a single, answer.”

Round and round and round in his head they go, endless problems without solutions.

His eyelids painfully bound and vision sealed, any person unable to register the world around them would find nowhere to ask their questions except for inside themselves.

Being that Subaru's insides were packed only with mysteries and doubts, he was in deadlock.

What tormented Subaru was not his unanswered doubts, but impatience at the slowly-moving hours that he spent submerged with his thoughts.

His covered eyes meant this was not definite, but Subaru senses that it would be highly likely if a day had already passed since the night he strangled Roswaal. Subaru supposes that he has been jailed in a hidden building in the forest. Even taking consideration the lack of light source, the chilliness of the place stands out.

He inevitably had to think that, compared to the midday temperatures he had experienced until now, this place was especially cold. Although, more than useful of thinking like that, was the thought that it was night and after sunset. If he thus presumed it was presently night, then it meant at least an entire day had passed.

Natsuki Subaru had sustained multiple wounds cuts and bruises ever since being summoned to this parallel world. His body yet remembered from experience the healing accordant to the severity of the wounds.

By Subaru's judging, having half of his head crushed, or otherwise said halved, was plainly a lethal wound. That his life was saved without Felis could honestly only be called a miracle. Garfiel was extremely skilled, most likely.

This world was fundamentally one that, if the patient was not dead, most wounds could be healed depending on the proficiency of the healing practitioner. Naturally, the heavier the wounds were, the more burden it would take to mend them.

The stamina needed to cure wounds and fatigue. Taking these points into consideration, Subaru's wounds on this occasion were not ones feeling realistically to have been healed within several hours, or rather said within the same night.

More than likely, evening had passed. But what supported this speculation more than anything was,

Subaru: "I'm hungry..."

The grumbling of his stomach, gone the entire time without receiving anything, asserting its existence.



The passing of time, hours indistinct, wears at Subaru's mind.

Restrained without any change, as yet left endlessly in the prison room, time passes.

Subaru had tested charting time by counting the seconds of the frequent vacuums, but his count begins to err over even the span of an hour, and he finally succumbs to resignation.

What would happen this late even if he knew the time? Besides,

Subaru: "It's probably too late..."

Meals had already been brought to Subaru six times. With the regular morning-evening twice-a-day schedule, that meant three days had already passed. Three days since Subaru woke up—meaning a time later than the fifth day since his arrival in SANCTUARY.

Departing SANCTUARY this morning to arrive at the mansion would be pushing it on the presuming timing of Elsa's attack. The moment that he passed this juncture, he will have missed the deadline.

Subaru had bungled from the very first point of this loop.

No matter how much he regrets his leaping at Roswaal, the regret does not end. If he had not ridden off his emotions that far, he would have gained more confidence in matters from Roswaal, and most importantly would not have worsened relations with Garfiel and been imprisoned.

The result of leaving himself to the seething heat of emotion was this caterpillar state.

Unable to accomplish a single one of the things he should do, never seeing the faces of those he thought to protect, exposing his unsightliness and terrified of the approaching time.

Subaru had already given up on this TRY.

Subaru: “—I sure, fucked this up.”

Due to Subaru's error, he had lost means to prevent the tragedy at the mansion. That meaning, the survival of the four inside the mansion was looking hopeless.

Rem, Petra, Frederica, Beatrice—Subaru would knowingly leave them to die. After screaming, denouncing Roswaal for the exact same thing.

Subaru: “...I'm shit. Just fucking die.”

He wanted to just fucking die. If there was no change to the restart point and he could re-do, Subaru could return to that night, and challenge again. That would not change that he was stumbling blind without any clue of where to start, but it was infinitely preferable to this abysmal disgrace. Infinitely preferable, was how he should have been able to do things. He had to do it.

Subaru: “If I don't, then for what purpose...”

Had he, biting open his lip and accepting giving up, resolved to see the end through?

Saving the mansion was impossible. Judging this time's DEATH as unavoidable, Subaru immediately commits suicide and RETURNS BY DEATH—is not what happens.

Indeed the situation is the worst, and continuing to live was for Subaru equivalent to waiting for an empty, meaningless future. He should bet on RETURN BY DEATH, rewind the world, and endeavour to gain the victory of the optimum future. But,

Subaru: “I return without knowing anything, and I'm just back where I started again.”

At the very least, what happened in SANCTUARY while Subaru was gone?

What would happen in Sanctuary past the sixth day? That alone he needed to confirm. It was for that purpose Subaru had shouted his throat hoarse, bitten his molars to crack, swallowed down his regrets toward the mansion, and given up on this try.

If now was the fifth day, something should happen tomorrow.

Over this three-day period, only Garfiel and a caretaker had visited the prison room. Subaru did not comprehend the caretaker's disposition, completely silent as they entirely followed Garfiel's instructions. But from how they wiped an immobile Subaru's body and fed him, he supposed it may be a woman.

In an environment with his every move watched, Subaru received no further time for investigation. Thus, Subaru did not know the background of the person aiding Garfiel.

However, this was a place that Emilia, roused to help Subaru, could not find.

It was probably a secret location for Garfiel and his helper, a place difficult to discover, and difficult for Subaru to send an SOS from.

Regardless, being that Garfiel and Roswaal had decided between them that Subaru be confined, sneaking out would be pointless anyway.

Subaru: “If Emilia can conquer the TRIAL for the sake of helping me, that's more than excellent, but...”

If the situation were reversed, Subaru could likely say with confidence that he would overcome the TRIAL for Emilia's sake. But no vision arises of Emilia surpassing the TRIAL for Subaru's sake. He doubted his existence granted her that much motivation—was the thinking of an excessively self-undervaluing Subaru.

Though in reality, that no fortuitous news had come in likely meant that, identical to the loops so far, Emilia was unable to overcome her PAST no matter how much she challenged it.

Meaning, the situation at the mansion, with SANCTUARY, with Subaru and with Emilia, were all stuck in a deadlocked clotting of shit. The same report Garfiel had once roared at Subaru—that very thing.

Subaru: “Yeah, I...”

—Have to do something.

Emilia, the mansion, SANCTUARY, every single problem that came up. With this method, with the only single weapon this body had been granted, he would overcome it all.

A quiet determination. His poorness at giving up, was the only thing that kept Subaru going. Conclusions he had reached repeatedly over this long, long period of thought. Giving a nod to this heart of his which he had already discovered more times than his fingers could count, Subaru waits.

—It was after he felt the sensation of his sleeping body being shaken, that the situation moves.

Subaru: “—nnnm”

His shoulder grasped by someone and his body uprighted, Subaru returns from shallow sleep into reality.

Signs of drool on his mouth. He cannot use his hands, so he wipes with his shoulder—is a rather strenuous action, but he has started becoming used to it. Wiping his wetted mouth,

Subaru: “Who... is this?”

His hoarse voice is the result of waking up and of having screamed his throat raw.

Yelling any more is guaranteed to break his throat. That he has become capable of half-ignoring the blood-spitting pain is not something he is happy for.

The person who awoke Subaru gives a short sigh. And,

???: “Sorry for this in the middle of your nap, but can you move, Natsuki-san?”

Subaru: “Auh?”

The voice that answers is not one Subaru had anticipated. He cannot help making a stupid sound in

response.

Perhaps mistaking Subaru's surprise for drowsiness, the other quietly says, "Ah, dear," lightly tapping Subaru's cheek with his palm.

???: "I also crossed a dangerous bridge coming here to help you, please liven up. I'm sure neither of us would like to end here."

They say, cutting through Subaru's hand and feet restraints with a blade. Confirming the feeling of his freed hands and feet, Subaru violently pulls off the blindfold,

???: "Wauhh, your hands, feet, even your eyes look sore."

In the centre of Subaru's somewhat crooked vision, his expression disquieted, is the hazy visage of a man.

A character here for no discernible reason, this is the unforeseen on-stage of Otto Swein.

CHAPTER 39: FHREND

Otto: “What is that, that witnessing-something-inconceivable, the-workings-of-my-brain-are-unbelievable, the-utmost-of-apparition-is-before-me expression of pure delirium you've got.”

Subaru: “...That ridiculous statement of yours needs no corrections with how close it is to my mental state.”

Hands on his hips, Otto sighs. Subaru rotates his hands about to check his freed wrists, sitting on the floor as he looks up at Otto.

Bound for over three days, just moving his body is enough to bring creaking and pain. Since even rolling over in his sleep was tough with that posture, he'd been regularly flipped over at meal times, but it's not just a problem of his blood circulation. He's discovering lots of new defects. Especially,

Subaru: “Otto, this might only be because I just took off the blindfold, but... the vision in my right eye's bad. Or actually I can't see. What happened?”

Otto: “What happened, is what I hear and I'm rather hesitant to reply, but... would you like a refined glossing over, or a direct telling of the facts?”

Subaru: “Refined so I don't get any shock, with frank content so I accept reality.”

Otto: “Certainly greedy. ...Um, Natsuki-san, upon the physiognomical starboard of your perception there is mantled a cloaking of umbra, beyond which no illumination may transcend.”

Subaru: “Ah, I didn't ask for it in chuuni but yes that is enough.”

Subaru holds out his hand, vetoing Otto's explanation halfway through. He then puts his hand to his right eye, timidly feeling around to confirm.

—The vision from his right eye feels as if it's been severed. Feeling around, Subaru figures out why this organ is slacking on its job. Or rather than slacking, seems like its packed up its bags and gone home. All that exists in his right eye's position is an empty socket.

Subaru: “I was healed... is what was supposed to have happened.”

Otto: “The bleeding stopped, and your broken bones are mended. However, even healing magic chooses the practitioner, and it's not an infallible power. ...Deceased segments, would indeed be...”

Otto gives Subaru a pained look. Subaru's lips loosen without strength.

Subaru: “No helping it,”

Subaru: “My head got crushed and I almost died. Should accept my right eye dying off. ...though if both my eyes died off, I'd probably lose will to live.”

Otto: “Would you like to be more positive, or rather not fall into desperation? Please. Without you, Natsuki-san, things aren't going stand.”

Although having lost an important organ known as 'an eyeball', Subaru's emotions are calm enough to surprise himself. Perhaps because the truth hasn't hit him yet, and because this isn't a gory wound with blood spilling everywhere like what happened to his right arm after Elsa.

Garfiel spoke both lie and truth. His bleeding's stopped, his wounds have closed, he doesn't hurt. Subaru just had far too high hopes for perfect, omnipotent healing magics, and Garfiel healed only what he said he had—restoration from life threatening injury.

Subaru: “Call that honest, or something. He's another guy I just don't get.”

He had struck down a Subaru attacking Roswaal, but then healed him. Or so he thought but then he also confines Subaru until the TRIAL is over, and uses him as a bargaining chip to pressure Emilia's cooperation.

Heals Subaru so he won't die, and follows through with it even to being his caretaker. He loathes the WITCH'S STENCH wafting from Subaru's body, but doesn't stop coming back to him. And though he doesn't stop coming, he never asks the crux point Subaru anything.

It's almost as if he knows Subaru won't say anything, and doesn't have the information he should discuss, and so has no interest in what Subaru has to say.

Subaru: “If he does know, then that's also because of a GOSPEL? Just damn everybody's... or since this's a witch's test site, is that actually meant to be natural?”

If all the important figures own books which told the future, and they acted in accordance with them, could the world not progress in a manner simpler for Subaru?

Everybody focused together toward one goal, working in union for a happy end. Couldn't he get a single straight simple easy route for once?

Shouldn't it be more of a grace for Subaru, who possessed means to know the future, but had to repeatedly start over, fumbling from square one with every re-do?

Subaru: “...Complaining's not gonna move things forward, but no one's gonna help me. Fuck.”

Otto: “Well you're certainly having a sulk. That's unavoidable considering what conditions you've been in. ...But, hearing 'no one's gonna help me' does sting. What is it you think I came here doing?”

Otto hears Subaru's muttering, gives empathetic comments, and denies Subaru's words at the end. Seeing Otto's close-range smug, Subaru's expression goes puzzledly blank.

Subaru: “Ah, right actually about that, why you? No I mean seriously, over these last three or four days I've had what felt like infinite things to think about and infinite time to do it, but I can say without any exaggeration you're the only thing that didn't cross my mind once.”

Otto: “He's incredible, this man! That you're capable of saying this, even I find refreshing!”

Subaru: “Actually though, what's refreshing's how much your existence vanished from my head. I could look at your face, and it'd still take a sec before I'd figure out whether you're Otto or the old appa salesman.”

Otto: “Who is this, this old appa salesman!”

Subaru: “A starting spot for me. Could also call him Mr. Save Point.”

Subaru: “Anyway, putting aside jokes etcetera there... I've got lots of things I wanna ask.”

Otto: “Well, I'm sure you would. I'm interested too, in what you did to get yourself captured out here.”

Subaru: something something ??? its not on Roswaal's instructions this happened to me?

From what Garfiel said, Subaru's confinement should have been from Roswaal. And from there, he would make Emilia face the TRIAL. But,

Otto: "I wouldn't know how deeply the Margrave is involved, but I do at least know that presently, SANCTUARY is in the middle of an awful divide."

Subaru: "A divide? What do you mean?"

Otto: "Only what I said. Lewes-sama's faction, which believes yourself and the evacuated villagers should be released, have been endeavouring against an arising opposing faction. Although, being that you were under Garfiel's charge, Natsuki-san, you would've been separated from the debate."

Reports Otto, his expression exhausted. Just as Subaru feared, friction between the evacuees and the residents of SANCTUARY had deepened, dissatisfaction had boiled over and skirmishes popped up. It appears that with those minuscule cracks as the origin of it, the SANCTUARY side had split into factions, and SANCTUARY was presently in a divide. Subaru swallows his breath.

Subaru: "But,"

Subaru: "Why'd this suddenly happen again? From what I've seen... I mean, anticipated."

The first loop went five days without any of this divide happening. Just as Subaru proposed, the promise to release the evacuees went fine and was realised on the sixth morning. The worsening of conditions here was overly fast, Subaru judges. Otto shakes his head and raises a finger.

Otto: "Well, now see,"

Otto: "There shouldn't be any 'why suddenly' in it. You're one of the causes for it, Natsuki-san. If this is what you're thinking, it sincerely is a worry."

Subaru: "One of the causes?"

Otto: "I don't know what relationship you've had with the people of Arlam Village, Natsuki-san... but it is certainly a favourable one. The moment that Garfiel assaulted you and you disappeared, the atmosphere in SANCTUARY plummeted."

Subaru goes silent.

Otto: "Ram and the Margrave are in a position where the people of the village would hesitate to address them, and your friendliness would be ideal as a contact to the superiors. Although, I doubt that explains it exclusively, seeing how furious everyone is."

Subaru's jaw drops.

Yes, when considering the points of change between last loop and this loop, Subaru's wellness would be one of them. Would be, but Subaru hadn't imagined in the least that his presence would effect the Arlam villagers' feelings to this extent, much less act as a trigger for SANCTUARY's divide. Trying to discern whether he's joking or exaggerating, Subaru's left-eyed gaze looks doubtfully at Otto. But Otto just furrows his brows, showing no particular or notable reaction. Meaning, he was being serious. The remaining point of contention is if Otto has the faculties to interpret matters

properly, but,

Subaru: "Wanna pile up arguments getting an answer to that one."

Otto: "I feel like I'm being treated improperly again but, it's probably fine. Anyway, Natsuki-san, the reason I came here is related to that divide."

Subaru: "Related to the divide... right, things getting noisy 'cause I'm gone means things might manage to settle down if I come back? No I mean, that's kinda sorta expecting way too much of me or I guess putting way too much pressure on me or I guess or..."

With his nature to pile underestimations upon underestimations, Subaru is unable to accept Otto's words sincerely. Even should Subaru have a strong influence on the calm of the villagers' hearts, now that everything's already exploded, he doubts he can do anything. Actually, him showing up with a missing right eye will probably just be pouring oil onto the fire. Subaru shakes his head, expression complex, but Otto refutes his refutation with a "no no"

Otto: "I surely wouldn't think you have that much power, Natsuki-san. That would be far too conceited, that would."

Subaru: "We agree so I can't make a jab at you but, you really do say too much. ...Then, why'd you get me out?"

Otto: "A large-scale clash is what the evacuees and the people of SANCTUARY would both like to avoid. So, I've been wondering if you'd be willing to play a part in escaping from SANCTUARY."

Subaru: "A part in escaping?"

Narrowing his eye at the dangerousness of that word, Subaru thinks it over. He abruptly gets an idea of what Otto is thinking.

Subaru: "No way,"

Subaru: "While SANCTUARY's side is chaotic and uncontrolled, you want to have the villagers escape in the confusion. And you're having me help out in the escape, is seriously what you're doing?"

Otto: "Excellent, I'm glad the conversation's moving quickly. Time is pressing in, and I'd appreciate if you could possibly assist without any conditions attached..."

Subaru: "...Let me confirm where this's going first. Not even I'm gonna just agree if you're trying without any plan. If it feels there's a chance then sure, but if the opposition questions it there won't be any excuse."

If, at worst, they stir up the faction opposing SANCTUARY's freedom, it will hinder Emilia and Roswaal's safety. Roswaal's really a who gives a shit but Subaru wants to avoid Emilia, Ram, and Patrasche getting hurt.

Otto: "I would like it if my name could be added to that list of persons you wouldn't want injured."

Subaru: "Men meeting painful experiences in the gambling hall's natural. That's the type of antiqued thinking I have. A man making money stays out of the house."

Otto: "That's the first time I'm hearing that, but probably, that's not how you're meant to use it."

Subaru makes a face at Otto's correct jab. He clears his throat, putting the conversation back on topic.

Subaru: "Saying it's not some haphazard mess thrown together in desperation, tell me your plan. From there I'll decide whether to assist or betray you."

Otto: "It's terrifying that the option of betrayal exists, but... the plan is simple. I've already spoken with the moderate faction of SANCTUARY, and thus while the extremists are being held back, we ride in dragon carriages to break through the barrier. And that's goodbye."

Subaru: "Don't think that's super reckless? And this collaborator..."

Otto: "Is something to discuss should you say that you'll assist. What I'd like to leave to you, Natsuki-san, would be persuading the villagers and dealing with unreadable Garfiel. Since I'm sure he'll bite onto you if you and the villagers are together."

Subaru: "You're saying my body makes good bait, well I can't deny that."

Just as Otto predicts, Garfiel will definitely come flying in if Subaru and the evacuees are together. But,

Subaru: "I've got no idea what Garfiel's standing is anymore. He's like an insider to Lewes-san so he should be moderate, but..."

Otto: "It seems like he originally desired to be part of that count, but considering how he's approached yourself and Emilia-sama, it's become difficult to make judgements. Although while not perceiving him as a proactive enemy, treat him as a passive enemy, would be where our opinions overlap."

Subaru: "They've sure been paying some damn attention, this collaborator. ...Count me in. Also what would happen if I didn't agree to help?"

Otto: "Then we would announce that we freed you, thinking to remove even just Garfiel and his powerful latent enemy potential from the list of obstacles."

Subaru: "Just perfect, god damn it. Yeah, the moment my hands and feet were freed I definitely went against Garfiel's will. Have to go along, fuck."

Subaru has to accept the reality that he's in the palm of Otto and the collaborator's hands. The moment this became the situation, Subaru's only remaining option became to dance to their plans. Although, Subaru didn't feel as much animosity to these conditions as he was saying.

Because if Subaru joins in with Otto's plan of escaping of the evacuees from SANCTUARY, he might find the answer behind the unpopulated SANCTUARY he had seen.

If this plan succeeds, the evacuees will disappear from SANCTUARY without Subaru's interference. However, the unsolved mystery remained problematic.

Subaru: "That doesn't explain why I couldn't find the residents of SANCTUARY, who can't leave..."

Subaru could manage to agree with the theory that the people who could leave did leave. But that doesn't answer why people who supposedly can't leave went unseen. Either way, he had to leave here to observe the change of conditions.

Seeing this loop off to the end, following along with Otto's plan, was not impossible.

Subaru: "Oh yeah and this's super late but, impressed you found me. This place feels like it's probably a hidden room inside SANCTUARY."

Having managed between Garfiel's statements and excessive free time to put together the internal design of the room, Subaru looks around the place, clicking his neck.

The only lighting of the dim room are its dim crystalights, lacking even a window to let sunlight inside. The structure is wooden, with shabby construction and signs of rain damage here and there. The source of the dripping that grated on blindfolded Subaru's nerves was probably from those leaks.

Otto: "Well, I'm sure it would be difficult to find this place using an honest method. Although I'd say it feels more like a secret base than a hidden room."

Subaru: "Looking round this room again, I'm getting that impression too. Don't think with this kinda DIY that this's a pro's work. There's hints around that some rookie with too much brawn forced the building together off intuition and feeling."

This scruffy little nook is far diverged from Subaru's original impressions of the place. It's just your everyday tiny, cramped little shed.

Otto: "Leaving that as that,"

Otto: "The achievement of finding you does belong to me. I believe this would be an appropriate scene for receiving honest praise, and Natsuki-san your reaction is?"

Subaru: "I'm honestly impressed, and you really helped me. How'd you find me?"

Otto: "Hmhmhm! You want to know? You'd like to know, he wants to know."

Subaru: "Yeah, I wanna know. Probably used your BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY and came here gathering info from forest bugs and lizards and plants or something though."

Otto: "Yes but could you please give me back my feelings of superiority!?"

Otto laments being destroyed. Having what he intended to be a joke affirmed, Subaru can't conceal his internal astonishment.

Astonishment, at the power of Otto's excessively practical BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY.

Subaru had previously acted off that blessing to direct Patrasche and save Emilia from danger. Otto had listened to the bugs and foliage then, rapidly taking shortcuts one after another to successfully close the distance between them.

Subaru: "Really is handy, your blessing."

Otto: "...It truly isn't that great of a thing."

Subaru sighs, but Otto's response is abruptly low-spirited. Subaru furrows his brows at this reaction. Otto clenches his fist, not following up on it.

Otto: “Anyway,”

Otto: “Emilia-sama's TRIAL will begin soon. Garfiel will be at the tomb over that time, so he'll have to distance himself from here. That meaning, the chance is now.”

Subaru: “Prep time 'till enacting the plan's way too short.” something something didn't find me asses catching fire schedule going crazy shikatane

Whining about Otto pushing him along, Subaru turns his body about, checking his physical condition. Although not exactly satisfactory, he had been presented meals, and his excretions had been dealt with without fail. Thinking on it now, that he did not know who had been doing it was a situation to provoke extreme embarrassment, but he thinks back on the time he was hospitalised for breaking his leg.

Either way, outside of some creakiness there are no apparent issues with his body. Otto, watching Subaru, gives a nod and goes to step forward, announcing they get moving—

Subaru: “Oh, can I ask one last thing?”

Otto: “...What is it now, gosh. Please truly make this one the last thing, yes? If too much time passes, the plan will move to its next stage and we'll just look like idiots.”

Subaru: “Sorry, sorry. ...Why did you take such a risk to help me?”

Otto's expression vanishes.

Subaru figured that this was the question he should have asked at the start. Preventing the evacuees and those of SANCTUARY from clashing was beneficial for both parties. It was desirable for Subaru too, and would also support Emilia and Roswaal. However,

Subaru: “I don't see any benefits for you in this anywhere. Might be my stupidity stopping me from getting it, but... not knowing just makes me feel sick.”

He was not doubting Otto, but there was a part of this that would not click. For Otto, his involvement with the problems in SANCTUARY were due to circumstance. Neither the complications here nor the link to the Royal Selection had anything to do with him.

The moment he thought entanglement in these conditions a bother, Otto could discard his involvement and leave by himself. He did desire a tie to the Margrave, but even considering goal-consciousness, the present conditions would likely be TOO POOR TO EVEN BET ON.

Although not as intensely as Subaru, Otto surely saw no light to break the deadlock of this situation. Subaru did not understand why Otto had braved danger and allied with him to this extent. Subaru had, just as stated, truly forgotten about his existence during his three days spent in rumination. He had found no factors in Otto that gave doubt or presented issue. In a certain sense, that could be called trusting him.

With the situation stacked this poor, there would surely be no SOMETHING in even Otto to necessitate suspicion—was the escapist breed of that trust.

Subaru thus wanted to know, liable to overturn that trust, Otto's his true feelings.

If for assumption even Otto possessed an underside Subaru could not trust in, then that would—

Subaru: “Please answer, Otto. Why are you risking yourself like this?”

He asks quietly. This was small, but certain watershed.

Breathing stopped, Subaru waits for Otto's answer. Taking in Subaru's question, Otto returns Subaru's stare, choosing his words.

Otto: "I wonder just what kind of person you think I am, Natsuki-san."

Subaru: "A guy who goes to pick up the pennies right in front of him, holding his bag in his other hand with the insides spilling out everywhere... that kinda dopey character's how I imagine you."

Otto: "Well wasn't that thought terrible! And it's irritating me that you could almost tell that I've done that before!!"

That was Subaru's idea of Otto exactly—or, the idea of Otto that Subaru wished to be correct.

Otto: "I swear,"

Otto gives a tired shake of his head.

Otto: "You know, Natsuki-san,"

Subaru: "...Yeah?"

Otto: "—Is it truly so strange to help a friend?"

—For an instant, not comprehending what he heard, time inside Subaru stops.

Several seconds pass before time starts again. But even so, Subaru does not really understand the meaning of those words. What did Otto just say?

Fhrend? What was this fhrend, again? There was a person like that around here?

Otto: "Wh-why is his face frozen in surprise, this man."

Subaru: "No, the name of some guy I don't know suddenly came up and I can't follow the conversation. So, this Mr. Fhrend, he was, uhh?"

Otto: "I don't know what conclusion you just reached, but it is completely wrong! Not fhrend, friend! A pal!"

Subaru: "Pals!? Who and who are!?"

Otto: "Me! And you are!"

Subaru's eyes open in disbelief as Otto screams, out of breath. He steps forward, gives a wave of his hand.

Otto: "Are you listening?"

Otto: “When the Witch Cult captured me and my life was in danger, your group saved me, Natsuki-san. And afterwards, well there were various transactions and words said that helped. I came here to make acquaintance with the Margrave, and by that meaning perhaps the relationship between me and you could have been a matter of standing.”

Subaru: “—”

Otto: “But if you cast aside that troublesome issue, I do think of you as a friend, Natsuki-san. There are some things I'd like to say about my usual treatment, but conversations of 'moron' and 'no way' have that kind of closeness too, so—er,”

Perhaps becoming embarrassed halfway through, Otto scratches his nose as he averts his gaze. Subaru remains silent. Having reached the end of his piece, Otto stares quizzically at Subaru's lack of reaction.

His expression carries some unease, likely because Subaru had said nothing to affirm what he just said. Pressuring a sale of friendship, perhaps could be a way to conceive it.

Imagining that as Otto's present thoughts, an emotion swells up in Subaru's heart. The reaction brought about by that emotion was—

Subaru: “—Pfff”

Otto: “Pardon?”

Subaru: “Hahahahaahaha! F-friends? Friends! Ahh, right right. Otto, you wanted to be my friend!?”

Otto: “Wha!?”

Unable to hold back his laughter, Subaru gives a red-faced Otto's shoulders a rowdy slap. Yet laughing, Subaru keeps clutching his stomach, stomps the floor.

Subaru: “Pffhahaah, friends. Ahh, shit. Otto, you bastard, you.”

Otto: “Ow! What are you doing! Fine, I was stupid for saying it! I at least knew that you wouldn't think that way. But even so I'm sure it wasn't something to laugh so much about!”

Subaru: “Nononono, I have to laugh. You're not the weird one here. ...My own idiocy is so horrific, all I can do is laugh.”

Wiping away the tears accompanying his peals of laughter, Subaru manages to right his posture. He looks at Otto before him.

He looks to be regretting saying the word 'friend'. But what visits Subaru's heart is inexpressible gratitude.

—What were Otto's plans? There might be some underside. I don't know what to believe in.

Otto called Subaru his friend, and came to help him out of concern. First doubting him rather than trusting him was Subaru's foolishness.

That he decided there had to be something there, and that SOMETHING was filled with malice, was Subaru's vulgarity.

Being played by the situation, losing sight of the feelings of those around him, believing only in malice and forgetting unconditional goodwill, was all ungrateful.

—Did Natsuki Subaru know so much about the world that he could give up and throw it away?

Had he been intending to achieve some enlightenment, merely by spanning these several deaths and do-overs of the world? Without even noticing the dutifulness of this friend nearby?

Unaware of Subaru's self-deprecation and self-admonishment, further confusion rises on Otto's face. Subaru crafts a smile, taking in a somehow cheery breath.

Subaru: “Sorry. You are my friend, Otto. —Thank you, for saving me.”



The confinement building is in the middle of the forest, separated from the village where the residents of SANCTUARY live. It sits in the middle of a path so complex that, were Otto not here to guide, Subaru would get lost and be incapable of escaping.

Subaru: “Thinking like that, if we didn't have your blessing yeah this'd be hopeless.”

Otto: “Keep from speaking too much. I don't remember the path either, I'm relying on the flowers and the frogs and the lizards. If we displease them, they'll trick us and guide us off a cliff.”

Subaru: “Nature's scary!”

Otto strains his ears as he carefully chooses the path. Subaru follows behind, missing half his vision, running rather perilously between the gaps in the trees. Losing his depth perception and half his visual field hurts. The genuine feeling of loss will likely hit afterwards, but for now it's fulfilling well its task of hindering his activities.

Mysteriously, he lacks any grudge against Garfiel, who gave him these injuries. Something something Subaru's aware getting bashed up for what he did is natural, and there's Garfiel's incomprehensible inconsistencies. If he just had some more room for his imagination to spread its wings, he could probably come up with an actual notion of Garfiel.

Subaru: “I need more information, including about the unconfirmed GOSPEL.”

He has to bench the matter for now.

Annoyed, Subaru makes a small noise at the pain of a branch grazing his right ear, labouring to step over the roots. And,

Otto: “I see it. We'll be exiting near the village soon.”

Hearing this, Subaru forces his poor sight to focus ahead. Between the gaps in the trees, he sees the lights of the village.

They exit the forest, the light of the stars and moon shines down, Subaru's dark vision clears somewhat.

Taking a breath, Subaru looks around the surroundings, confirming that he and Otto have returned to the village in Sanctuary. Being that the moon is out and it is night, Emilia has probably started with the TRIAL in the tomb.

A feeling rushes up to run there and be at her side. Subaru pushing the emotion down and turns back to Otto.

Subaru: “If now's in the middle of the TRIAL, this's the timing to escape. What's the arrangement, where are we meeting with the collaborator?”

Otto: “Well, the collaborator—”

Otto goes to point toward the village, the motion is interrupted partway through. By a voice.

???: “—There is no need to worry, I'm already here.”

Cutting into their conversation, somebody walks forth.

A black maid outfit. The white apron shines under the starlight, adorning the youthful girl with a wondrous aura.

???: “First, for your safe return I will... yes, for the present I will give you my congratulations, Barusu.”

Her pink hair swaying, spitting venom, Ram—Otto's collaborator—welcomes Subaru with her face composed.

CHAPTER 40: COLLABORATOR

Various words skim through Subaru's mind at this sudden abrupt unforeseen meeting, but—

Subaru: “‘Safe’ while looking at this eye’s sure something, huh!”

Pointing at his right eye—at the destroyed organ—Subaru enters tsukkomi mode on Ram. Presently, the area of Subaru's right eye is bandaged with cloth torn from his sleeve, achieving an outfit that tickles his chuuni heart. If this Date Masamune look were just for fashion it'd be a story to laugh about later, but being that Ram should know what awful state Subaru's in, she should not regard it as such.

Ram gives a light tilt of her head, brushing down her pink hair as it sways with the motion.

Ram: “Sorry, I don't usually pay you very proper attention and can't tell the difference.”

Subaru: “Thank you for that pretty devastating statement, but say did you know? Humanoid lifeforms fundamentally come with two eyes, ears, and nostrils, yeah?”

Ram: “Meaning, Barusu, you are currently not a humanoid lifeform, but a lifeform of unknown bearing?”

Subaru: “By syllogism!?”

Having his back-and-forth with Ram, Subaru glances over the surroundings with his left-handed gaze. He checks that no one is lurking here except Ram, seeking a path that could work as an escape route. Needed to buy time and determine where to run.

Subaru: “Otto, on onetwothree we scatter and run for it. You're on yelling-drawing-the-chaser duty. I'm on silently-getting-away duty. Objections?”

Otto: “Yes many, but firstly why have you gotten so wary, Natsuki-san?”

Subaru: “Idiot. Look at that Ram's eyes. She wants to kill us. No mistake. I see those eyes daily at the mansion, trust me.”

Otto: “What is there to trust about a man who is watched daily with bloodlust!?”

Subaru whispers his plans to get away, but apparently Otto is incapable of grasping this and the conversation falls apart. Subaru considers leaving Otto to get killed and escaping alone, but remembering their talk about friendship, hesitates.

Subaru: “Fuck, the second I think I'm outta my handcuffs, the hobbles of friendship get me in their bondage. Whatcha wanna do to me!”

Otto: “You're who should be speaking, if you don't express more clearly what you want to do, the conversation won't come to be! Also the potential for misunderstandings here is incredible, I'd like to do something like that, I really would.”

Ram: “If you would like to finish this sketch here, may we proceed with matters? Or rather, matters are proceeding. There is no time for your date. This is a waste of hours, otherwise put a waste of life.”

Ram steps forth, cutting into the main topic. That said, Subaru's statements weren't entirely jokes. He had seriously been attempting to draw out the conversation with jokes while looking for opportunities to escape. Because,

Subaru: "Honestly, I thought the moment you saw my face you'd try to kill me no questions asked."

Ram: "If we had met directly after you practised your violence upon Roswaal-sama, I may have. The passing of time has tempered my anger somewhat. ...Be grateful for Garf."

Subaru: "It's thanks to Garfiel that I'm not dead here, but I can't change my opinion of someone who did this to my face so easily."

Wariness still present, Subaru scratches his neck as he responds to Ram. But Ram's gait is relaxed, with not any sign of hostility. Seems that at very least she's not going to literally attack him no questions asked. But with that, what next pulls on Subaru's mind is,

Subaru: "Otto said we're meant to rendezvous with someone here, but..."

Ram: "Yes, I am aware."

Otto: "Natsuki-san. I know it's difficult to believe, but what you see is the truth."

Having Ram nod affirmation to his indirect question, Subaru glances to Otto who gives an identical answer. Subaru crosses his arms, frowning.

Subaru: "Hrmmm"

Subaru: "If I accept things as I see them, then you who appeared here are Otto's collaborator... meaning that makes you the collaborator on helping the Arlam villagers escape SANCTUARY?"

Ram: "No mistake there. Garf, Lewes-sama, and Emilia-sama are all in the middle of Emilia-sama's TRIAL. The important figures have gathered at the tomb. Now is the only chance."

Says Ram, pressuring the point of the lack of time. Subaru's unease doesn't alleviate. He holds his palm at her to stop her, she silently glares back. Steeling himself so as not to crumble beneath the sharpness of her gaze,

Subaru: "Tell me,"

Subaru: "Why're you helping with the villagers' escape? Even if you folded to your goodwill and're dashing off that, getting me involved makes no sense. Or, are you really the type of person where cooling off from anger is enough to stop you from getting recompense out of me? The doubts don't end."

Ram: "You certainly ask piling questions. Verbosity does not make men popular, Barusu."

Subaru: "That's not persuasive at all when you've gotta crush on a man chattier than me. ...Answer, Ram. I can only think this reality where you're unfazedly doing collab work with me is impossible. If you're still participating regardless then that's..."

His breath catching, Subaru gives himself fear of continuing his sentence. If matters are exactly as

Subaru imagines, then his actions here—

Closing his eyes firm, his biting down on his teeth keeps him from uttering any pathetic noise. Don't fear. Don't terror. Don't show weakness. Turn heart to iron, never to waver.
—For now, if he became emotion-impervious, unshakable iron, then good.

Subaru: "...off Roswaal's instruction, is the reason easiest to agree with. And then why, after I pulled that violence him, would he help me? ...You might know more about that one than me."

Ram goes silent.

What arises in Subaru's mind is Roswaal and his GOSPEL. If those prophecies had been his possession the whole time, then confidant, purveyor of absolute adoration, pledger of loyalty Ram would almost surely know about it.

Though she would almost certainly not know the details. If for assumption she did know the detailed content of the GOSPEL, that would mean she permitted the future where Rem was left to die.

Subaru: "—"

It is entirely an impossible assumption. Subaru knows assumption is all it amounts to. When Ram lost Rem, when Ram was not in special circumstances of having forgotten Rem's existence, Subaru knew what reaction the elder oni sibling displayed bereft of her little sister.

On this alone, Subaru had faith that Ram had not known about any prophecies wherein Rem would have been to be left to die.

But then, how involved was she in Roswaal's plans? Roswaal still had yet to reveal the whole of his plots. Then his confidant Ram, how much did she—

Subaru: "Answer, Ram. Why are you helping us? If you're following Roswaal's plot, then sorry but from now on me and Otto'll do it ourselves. We don't need you."

Otto: "Wh—Natsuki-san!?"

Subaru: "Shut up, Otto. There's no time to explain the details, and I can't guarantee your safety if you knew so I'm not telling, but because of this time I am pissed furious. Or at least enough that I can't approach things with Roswaal's name on them peacefully!"

Touching the bandage over his throbbing right eye, Subaru yells at interrupting Otto as he stomps the ground.

The feeling of flying at Roswaal, strangling his slender throat remains in Subaru's palms. The sensation of harbouring urge to murder another, and acting upon that urge, remains present and tactile.

It came accompanied by a vividness, depraved and graphic. Now that he had regained composure, recalling the event filled him with nausea, sending stinging through his skull and ringing through his ears, a memory of a nightmare.

Subaru possessed no desire at all to repeat that scene again. But,

Subaru: "I do think I was wrong, but whether I regret it's another story. He wounded an unforgivable part of mine. So he met pain."

Ram: "...By that logic, I doubt you could protest should I conduct acts of revenge upon you, Barusu?"

Subaru: “That's why I'm saying I was ready to turn ass and run the second I saw you. Ended in failure though cause Otto's a dunce.”

Otto: “That is needless defamation, but I will say that if I sincerely turned ass, the speed I'd disappear at would guarantee you no hope to have an ass, Natsuki-san.”

Subaru: “Ass ass ass shut up, are dirty jokes the only humour you have, wordbound.”

Otto: “I don't know what that means but it feels like incredible defamation! Does feel it!”

Ram interrupts their usual dialogue by clearing her throat. Subaru again narrows her eyes and glares at her, Ram giving a sigh.

Ram: “...Do relax. This action, at the least, is unconcerned with Roswaal-sama's noble will.”

Subaru: “Unconcerned... with Roswaal? No wait, but that means...”

Subaru cannot hide his shock. This means that Ram is independently choosing to help with the evacuation. And that is not the only problem.

Subaru: “If Roswaal's unrelated, then this isn't written in the GOSPEL, either... is it? Wait a second. If we start considering this stuff, then just how much does the GOSPEL write in the first place?”

Because Subaru flew into an instantaneous rage when Roswaal revealed his GOSPEL in that conversation, Subaru had not gotten to broach the topic of the book itself. However, if this so-called perfected GOSPEL truly was an omnipotent, prophetic text capable of writing the entirety of the future—

Subaru: “With how detailed the text'd be, the thing'd be enormous...”

If it was the entirety of the world, and the entirety of what would next happen that was written, then the information load surely would not fit inside one book. The human mind was far too small to comprehend every single event to occur in the world.

Thus, Subaru had judged that the information inside the GOSPEL would pick-and-choose its content about the future. This would also be within an information range understandable for the owner.

Subaru: “The incomplete GOSPEL Betes owned had contents that'd be appended on one after another... it seems. Haven't seen it increase so I don't really know.”⁶

It appears that the GOSPEL the fanatic owned, which had half its pages blank, would have text appended onto the blank pages every time a new prophecy came.

At least, it was definite that its number of pages was different between the time Subaru first acquired it, and the time of Betelgeuse's defeat. He had later attempted to investigate it further but been incapable of reading the words, and although intending to start inquiring it after speaking with Roswaal, doing so does not seem very possible in the present situation.

With too little information to sample from, Subaru's theory remains just a theory. But that Subaru harboured doubts for trustability and precision of the completed works was truth.

Ram puts her hand to her mouth, in thought.

6 Subaru calls Betelgeuse ベテ公 which is essentially 'Betel-etc' because Betelgeuse is ungainly as shit to pronounce in Japanese. The tone is meant to be somewhat derisory. This is the best I could come up with.

Ram: "...I have not been authorised to speak on this matter. Although my presence here may be unrelated to Roswaal-sama's will, that I have devoted my heart to him remains the same."

Subaru: "That's more than head over heels get a room, fuck."

Ram: "However..."

Curses Subaru, lamenting his route of gathering information being shut off. But Ram cuts in. She watches Subaru raise his face in surprise, and in a quiet voice,

Ram: "It is assured that these conditions were not writ. Although, it is exactly because they were not writ that I am able to be here."

Subaru: "...I don't get it. In the end, how're you gonna conciliate? By helping? If you're going to help, is that on your volition?"

Ram: "I'm helping the evacuation. That is by my will. I doubt Roswaal-sama will attempt to stop it, now that the situation is like this."

Subaru: "Now that it's like this?"

Her statement tugs at Subaru, but she shows no signs of answering. Meaning the answer would be filed as one of those things that couldn't be spoken from her mouth.

Ultimately, Subaru fails to get onto the topic of the accuracy of Roswaal's GOSPEL and its precise content. All that remains is the doubt, that perhaps not even that perfected GOSPEL could divine the whole of the future.

Subaru: "Well, even just knowing that might give me some advantage next time I interrogate Roswaal."

Shelving the question for now, Subaru crafts words to force himself to agree with this. He does not even think what his statement actually implies.

Subaru: "There's still room for debate on whether or not I believe Ram from the bottom of my heart, but I'm putting that off for now and want to check our arrangements. What's actually happened?"

Ram: "Since the day following your machinations of idiocy, Barusu, we have been getting today secured as the timing and prepared for the evacuation. The citizens whinged refusing to move without first confirming your safety, so I wound up having to waste time searching for you and your ambiguous survival."

Subaru: "Sorry for not dying in obvious black-and-white, or actually 'idiocy'? Anyway, from the day after I got violent..."

Something about the date tugs at Subaru. Unable to put that tug into proper words, Ram and Otto give Subaru a rough explanation of the escape plan. Put simply,

Subaru: "Ram's gotten the moderates to open up an escape route, we blend into the night and disappear fast as we can on carriages. Otto leads, my job's as mascot to get the villagers to leave SANCTUARY without gloom—is about it?"

Otto: "I wouldn't know what this 'mahskott' is, but we can't evacuate until everyone has confirmed

that you're safe, Natsuki-san. Well, putting in simply Ram and I couldn't acquire their trust to act as leaders for the evacuation, would be what it is.”

Subaru: “Achievements from the commotion with the witchbeasts's coming round to help here, huh. Never know where or how people'll repay you, gotta make sure to set up places ahead of time where you risked your life.”

Otto: “As far as I know, you have had lots of rigamaroles such as with the White Whale and the Witch Cult where you've risked your life, Natsuki-san, but wouldn't those all have been exceedingly close calls?”

Mutters Otto in utter bafflement. Subaru shakes his head back and forth.

Subaru: “Nowaitwait,”

Subaru: “I've got no idea either why I get so many chances for the world to show off its malice. By the way I've also skirted death from a killer merc lady who loves cutting people's stomachs open throwing entrail parties.”

Otto: “There are people who boast about their painful experiences, but when someone who has passed through so many painful and terrifying scenes speaks, the valorous tales from the former group just become laughable.”

Subaru shoots Otto a thumbs up. A powerless smile rises on Otto's face as he gives a thumbs up back.

Subaru: “Well, time to do the plan. How much leeway time do you think we have?”

Ram: “Should it not change from ordinary, it will be approximately two hours before Emilia-sama gives up and leaves the tomb. She's likely only just entered the TRIAL, so conservatively an hour and a half. Even if we take thirty minutes until departure, we'll have one hour free.”

Subaru: “So one hour. We have that, and we can get out of SANCTUARY's barrier at least.”

If they can just get through the barrier, they will escape obstacles coming from SANCTUARY's side. It will also get them out of reach of the extremists. But there was one problem about the barrier that couldn't be overlooked.

Subaru raises his head, hand on his chin.

Subaru: “Ram,”

Subaru: “So about the barrier, there's kinda a problem. We pass through and the extremists or whoever won't follow us, but...”

Ram: “Garf, yes?”

Subaru: “...you knew?”

Ram: “He's Frederica's little brother, and the length we've known him is different. Although reluctantly, he's been an old friend of mine since Roswaal-sama took me into his charge, seven years ago.”

A piece of the information Subaru acquired at the mansion last loop, just put out there right like that. Although completely thrown, Subaru feels internal relief at the verification from a second opinion.

Subaru: "What do we do?"

Subaru: "When he finds out I escaped confinement, Garfiel is absolutely going to chase us. It's a rowdy escape coming right after he figures my actions're suspicious. I don't think we'll have time to say if he'll be pulling his punches. Whether or not he crosses the barrier's also up to his feelings."

Ram: "On what basis do you say Garf will follow us? He should respect Lewes-sama's will, so he would be part of the moderates. ...Although since he imprisoned you, by circumstance that would make his support one where he is unaffiliated to either."

Subaru: "The reason he'll aim for me... um..."

The reason Garfiel harboured a hostility near to loathing for Subaru.

Unquestionably, it was because of the WITCH's lingering scent emitted from Subaru's body.

Since Garfiel can perceive that stench which compounds with every RETURN BY DEATH, he regards Subaru with incredible caution and hostility. The result of that hostility bearing its fangs and being put into action was this loop. That Garfiel nevertheless healed and kept a dying Subaru alive displayed both his simpleness and his rationality.

Having reached this deduction, Subaru hesitates on whether to tell it.

The first person to broach the topic of the Witch's stench on Subaru was Rem. From that fragment of Rem's speech, Subaru more or less figured she harboured strong hatred for the Witch Cult, and that Ram would be relevant to that.

Meaning, the Witch Cult was not something unrelated to Ram. It was to the point that just hearing the words 'Witch Cult' made Rem lose her composure. What meaning would this truth hold for Ram?

Ram: "—Barusu?"

Subaru: "Uh, uh-huh."

Ram: "You went quiet, what happened? Your face is torpid and unlookable at best of times, but after adding oafishness and incompetence to it there truly is not a single part left worth witnessing."

Subaru: "That ruthlessness and lack of forgiveness just makes you refreshing. Right, so the reason Garfiel'll aim for me... well, it's because I was violent with Roswaal."

Subaru averts his gaze, avoiding the topic of the witch's scent.

Subaru: "If something happens to Roswaal, it puts burden on SANCTUARY's functioning. It's unthinkable he'd let me, who tried to do something that dangerous, get away."

Ram: "...Plainly said that is an overwhelmingly tedious evasion, but I'll regard it as fine. Being that I'm not speaking about the matters I can't voice, albeit impertinent of you it would be unfair should I force you to speak your thoughts."

Subaru: "You just can't talk to me without putting that bullying in, huh? Right, Otto?"

Otto: “Er, I incredibly feel that I can't agree with you asking me for validation.”

Says Subaru seeing agreement, but Otto returns with his gaze reproachful. Not getting it, Subaru responds with a shrug. With the couple's exchange at her back, Ram looks up at the sky, her eyes narrowed in the moonlight.

Ram: “—A moon pale, a moon crazed. That night, too, was moonlit like this.”

She murmurs, quiet as to be inaudible.



—Things proceed swiftly once the action starts.

Plans had already been made for the evacuation without Subaru, and the final stage of the plan is merely needing Subaru to be there as the start trigger.

The villagers speedily board their carriages. The drivers have smooth coordination with who is boarding where, and the thirty minute estimated pre-departure time gets settled in fifteen minutes. Subaru had to give an astonished sigh at that.

Subaru: “It was fifteen minutes, but it could've been even shorter. Five minutes-ish...”

Indeed it probably could have. What rained on the parade of course wound up being Subaru.

Subaru had met up with the Arlam villagers and gone to get the evacuation preparations started immediately, but everyone had instantly discovered the loss of his right eye.

The villagers looked about to yell seeking revenge for Subaru's stolen eye, but Subaru managed to soothe them with a lie that the eye wasn't gone only healing—which they somehow accepted, and the evacuation was ready.

Subaru: “Doesn't feel bad to be worried about, though.”

Even though having seen it for himself Subaru couldn't believe there were many people who would be shocked if he was wounded.

And when he'd previously convinced himself that the human called Natsuki Subaru was isolated, complete in himself, a worthless existence for anyone, incapable of having any impact on other's emotions. Just when did he gain so many people who would be angry for him?

It was from the achievement during the witchbeast commotion, was how he had bragged before, but in reality Subaru hadn't done anything that big.

Rem was the one who saved the children in the forest, and Rem was also the one who hunted down most of the witchbeasts afterwards. Roswaal was the one who exterminated them. There shouldn't be a single instant where Subaru's achievements stood out.

Subaru: “...Ah, so that's what it is.”

Thinking that far, Subaru perceives the truth he had bottled thus far.

Rem, whose existence and memories were eaten from the world by GLUTTONY's power. The only place she remained anymore was inside Subaru, only her empty vessel remaining in the world.

The vestiges of her, the evidence of her, the memories of her were vanished and vanishing.

So what happened to events that occurred because of her actions?

—Most likely, everything she had done would be credited to other people, revising peoples' consciousness to make each scene into its most reasonable form.

Subaru: “The people saved by Rem's actions are aiming their gratitude for her at me.”

Thinking about it, that Petra was so unconditionally attached to Subaru was likely because the existence who had risked their life pulling her out of a forest of witchbeasts, had been retroactively made to be him.

If not, then how could she have so much faith in a stranger of suspicious appearance and origin, who she had only interacted with a short while?

Meaning that although unconsciously, Subaru again had been resting on Rem's laurels as if it were natural.

Subaru: “...Makes me wanna puke. At the absurdity and sleaze.”

Spitting, Subaru becomes aware that all these blessings he has been given are the sleeping girl's achievements.

Even still leaving something warm in his chest was the lovely blue-haired girl. Forgotten by the world, yet perhaps even now her devotion to Subaru persisted.

Although, that might just be a sentimental, convenient delusion of his.

Patrasche: “—”

Subaru: “Mn, ah, don't worry. I'm okay. ...You're another good girl who's wasted on me.”

Patrasche glances back, concerned. The movement is unlikely to disturb her mounted master's thoughts, and incredibly smooth even regardless of it following her speed. That she's running with that high sense of awareness is apparent, even ignoring the presence of her WINDBREAKER Blessing.

She isn't pulling a carriage, making this the first time in a week—after the White Whale and Witch Cult affairs—Subaru's ridden solo straddled over Patrasche.

Perhaps having some dissatisfaction at pulling heaving things, Patrasche's gait is rather light while carrying only Subaru. She had, worried upon first seeing a one-eyed Subaru, licked his face consolingly with her solid, rough tongue.

Thinking back on his tryst with Patrasche, Subaru glances behind him.

A secret evacuation on six carriages. Although being that the carriages' squeaking and the noise of their flight is unconcealable, the situation is far from secret. Regardless they're going slow as they can, readied to ward off discovery.

Most of the drivers are people who were hired to evacuate the villagers from the Witch Cult, and had done so on the incentive of payment. They're people who fundamentally had no need getting mixed up in this mess. Subaru worries that there might be considerable dissatisfaction among them, but after seeing them as they tensely grip the reins, Subaru figures that fear was needless.

At the very least, they're not people to cause problems during a monumental game due to emotion.

???: “Natsuki-san, Natsuki-san.”

After thinking that far, Subaru suddenly hears a voice calling him from the leading carriage. He glances back to see Otto leading the line of carriages, directed his beloved dragon Frufoo while

gesturing Subaru over.

Subaru: “What. The evacuation’s going good, I think.”

Otto: “Yes, currently it's going so good it's nearly too good. But a problem's arisen.”

Lowering his voice, Otto leans toward Subaru, who has come into step beside the carriage. Hand to his mouth, so the other carriages won't see,

Otto: “Natsuki-san, please listen carefully.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Otto: “—The forest is chattering, astir. Something OUTRAGEOUS is coming.”

Subaru can only furrow his brows at the overly vague phrasing. But Otto's expression is awfully serious, and no atmosphere exists that this can just be laughed away.

Subaru swallows his breath, joining Otto in looking behind them.

Subaru: “Is that something OUTRAGEOUS, coming right now?”

Otto: “A lot of what the trees are saying is inexact, so it isn't certain, but... it's possible we'll collide at our current speed. At least, accelerating a little would be...”

Suggests Otto, cold sweat rising on his brow. Sensing his ghastly expression as something definite, Subaru judges to have the group accelerate. If they sprinted at full speed until the barrier, then afterwards would—

???: “—Hey. Pretty cold, gettin' left outta this group late-night stroll yer got.”

A voice shreds through the quiet of the forest, reverberating on Subaru's eardrums.

Patrasche gouges the ground as she skids to a stop, lowering her head and baring her fangs, directing identical hostility at her previous foe before her, growling.

Seeing the dragon readied for battle, the blond young man's mouth twists into an amused smile.

Man: “*Ha*. Yer had that mucha 'a painful experience and yer still ain't afraid, really are a good girl, you are. FINGERS CLUTCH TIGHTER THE MORE THE STONE SPARKLES.”

His white canines shining, the watchman of SANCTUARY obstructs the path.

While simultaneously hinting the threat of that something OUTRAGEOUS.

CHAPTER 41: TIGER

Undefended posture. Garfiel stands with his arms dangling loosely at his sides, relaxed. Seeing him blocking the path ahead, Subaru immediately glances cautiously around the surroundings. Something other than Garfiel may also be lying in wait. Although, Subaru had essentially judged the moment he saw it was Garfiel that this caution was pointless. —If it is Garfiel coming, he is almost assuredly coming alone.

As expected, Subaru finds no one else around inside his perceptible range. Confirming his fear was indeed needless, Subaru gives a sigh, stroking the neck of a yet-battle ready Patrasche.

Subaru: “Thought we'd left without foreshadowing it, but really rather you didn't immediately flirt with people's partners.”

Garfiel: “Ain't the type to flatter or lie. What I'm thinkin' comes straight honest outta my mouth. Got a lotta scoldin's from the granny and Ram 'cuzza it.”

Garfiel clicks his fangs, all traces of a smile disappearing as he looks up at Subaru. Meeting that glint of Garfiel's with his one-eyed gaze, Subaru raises a finger.

Subaru: “Your being here's unnatural that so this's inevitable but, would you like to explain this?”

Garfiel: “Ain't nothin' big. My amazin' self's the fangs a' SANCTUARY, and you couldn't escape from the eyes a' SANCTUARY. Thass all's to it. Eh, callit a' booby prize.”

Garfiel gives a light wave of his hand. Subaru's brows furrow. If, as Subaru imagined, these things Garfiel called EYES were a meaningful code term similar to KEK, then EYES likely connotated a sentinel. However,

Subaru: “Ram hasn't told me anything about there being someone like that in SANCTUARY...”

Garfiel: “Ya really think a lot from outside SANCTUARY know everythin' 'bout the place? There's mountains a' things that asshole Roswaal don't know. This's just one'a those, yeh? ...Dunno 'f you'd all know, though.”

Garfiel snorts at a silenced Subaru, turning his gaze to the line of carriages behind him.

Garfiel: “...That all'a the evacuees?”

Subaru: “Uh, uh-huh. Yeah. You know, Garfiel. It was bad of us to go and silently leave, but could you please just overlook this one? It's not a bad deal for you either, right?”

Garfiel: “Hmm?”

Garfiel's glare is sharp as a blade, but Subaru unconcernedly gestures to the carriages behind him.

Subaru: “We're having the ex-hostages leave SANCTUARY to avert the possibility of further fighting arising inside. I heard some scuffles've already been happening. The point of this's as a measure before that escalates to full.”

Garfiel goes silent.

Subaru: "You're standing's on the same side as Lewes-san, wanting SANCTUARY's freedom, yeah? Leaving embers to smoulder inside shouldn't be ideal for you. There's merit in overlooking us."

Speaking quietly, Subaru attempts persuading Garfiel. His words are not simply a stopgap. Going from Garfiel's stance, there truly are many benefits in the evacuation. So long as you exclude the part where it was done behind-the-scenes.

Subaru: "Leaving aside whether by personality you're capable of permitting that, if you could just accept for this scene alone..."

Garfiel: "Oi, y'know you, 's looks yer misunderstandin'."

Subaru: "Misunderstanding?"

Garfiel: "Yer stuck on the idea I came here entirely ter get in yer way. 'S like you say, my amazin' self's got no reason t' interfere with this evacuation. I'm tellin' you none a' those 'xcuses er wheedlin' got any point."

Garfiel gives a mocking snort at Subaru's presumption. Subaru shuts his mouth. He had run ahead in the conversation off his bad premonitions, but thinking rationally Garfiel was correct.

Subaru: "Then what the heck are you doing here..."

Garfiel: "'S just seein' yer off. If yer wanna leave that's on you, but f nobody from SANCTUARY sees it though then 's still just you skippin' town. I can say my amazin' self saw all yer disappear, and I can shut the others up."

Subaru: "...You've really been thinking more than I imagined."

Half surprised that Garfiel possesses the thinking and brainpower to logically convince him, Subaru agrees with Garfiel's argument. Garfiel crosses his arms and nods at Subaru's rather rude statement.

Garfiel: "Well s' obvious. My amazin' self ain't just strong n' muscle, got lotsa things I consider... my amazin' self, really is amazin'."

Subaru: "Well, that reply's settled me down a little. And while I'm relieved let's have that. I'll let you off without making any special mention about the thing with my right eye."

Garfiel: "Eh? Eh, right. Yer wound up takin' he blindfold of n' noticin', huh. 'S guys 'round here doin' things that ain't goddamn needed."

Subaru points at his eye, Garfiel mentioning its loss and taking a stab at Otto. Otto draws his head in, attempting to conceal himself from Garfiel's sharp gaze. Garfiel clicks his neck at the timidity.

Garfiel: "Now anyway,"

Garfiel: "Aren't you just pretty fuckin' calm fer missin' an eye. Y'know, my amazin' self was prepared to get some complainin' or revenge done t' me."

Subaru: "I start complaining and I've got enough things to say to last the whole night, but there's no time. And even if I wanted revenge the punchline is you punch me and I lose my left eye too. Let's go without that stale joke."

Garfiel: “Hell's that. —Don't like it a bit.”

Garfiel is unsatisfied with Subaru's reply. Subaru judges going further on this exchange unnecessary, lightly patting his right eye.

Subaru: “You won't mind if we keep ignoring you and return everyone to the village, yeah?”

Garfiel: “S just gettin' ridda the poor form of gettin' escaped on. Do what yer want.”

Subaru: “Well then, we'll be obliging...”

Garfiel: “—However,”

Before Subaru can raise his voice to order the line of carriages to depart, Garfiel slouches forward. He glares up at Subaru, mounted on Patrasche.

Garfiel: “Not you, yer stayin'. Hostages go through. Noisy guy goes through. Ram... well, I'll let her go through. But not you.”

Subaru: “...Your motive?”

Garfiel: “There's you bein' a motivator for Emilia-sama doin' the TRIAL, but biggest problem's yer existence. A bastard stinkin' this much'a witch surely ain't gonna be gettin' outside so damn easily.”

Subaru: “Again with this thing...”

Pinching his nose, the blond young man threatens Subaru. About fed up with this irk of Garfiel's, Subaru gives a nod to this condition.

Subaru: “Condition is I stay behind in SANCTUARY. No objections there?”

Garfiel: “Good yer get it upfront. Make th' story go too long with me, and with my amazin' self's brains I won't remember er understand all'a it.”

Subaru: “You really are a frank guy. ...Got it. I'll go tell everyone behind me, just wait here a minute.”

The bargaining ends the second they enter the main topic. Although the conversation could hardly be called bargaining. Subaru simply accepts Garfiel's words, going back to relay the deal with Otto and Ram.

Subaru: “And so the plan's if I stay behind, everyone gets to pass through safely. Whinging about it wouldn't get anywhere, so I'm sorta thinking to just nicely go along with it.”

Otto: “That's an excellent condition if it lets us though, is what I would like to say, but will those behind us agree with it? These were the people stubborn enough that they resisted escaping if you weren't there, Natsuki-san.”

Subaru: “Ah, right persuading them's gonna be an effort. ...No, but we've got the migration going this far already, and everyone's anticipating they'll get to back to the village. If the accident's just me dropping out partway through, I think their anticipation'll win and they'll accept it.”

Ponders Subaru, hand on chin. The evacuees' desire to return home should beat out anything. Subaru was glad they put his safety on the same scale as that desire, but being that matters had proceeded this far, saying whether they remained balanced was a difficult call.

Otto: "Natsuki-san..."

Subaru: "Well, thinking like that, doubt persuading them'll be too hard. But yeah this'll definitely be bad if I'm not doing the talking. I'll be right back, so get everyone prepared for the carriages to start..."

Ram: "I don't like this."

Ram's interruption coupled with Otto's concerned takes the enthusiasm out of Subaru's start. He looks at Ram, scratching his head.

Subaru: "Y'know,"

Subaru: "Garfiel just told me that too, but if you keep saying things that whittle away people's willpower like that, that's..."

Ram: "Have you not realised, Barusu? What it is you are saying."

Subaru: "What?"

Subaru tilts his head, considering it but unable to figure out what Ram is saying. His brow furrows in confusion. Ram gives a disappointed sigh.

Ram: "If you don't understand, fine." Being as what Roswaal-sama stated is also clear. "If that is the case, perhaps all my actions will become worthless."

Subaru: "Hold on no, what the hell've *you* been saying. So you goddamn do know something, too. You've known, and here you're..."

Ram: "It's something pointless to you now. A waste of time."

Subaru: "You..."

Subaru grinds his teeth at Ram, her looking down at him with a know-it-all expression. Otto cuts into the dangerous atmosphere between the two.

Otto: "Now now now!"

Otto: "Let's have this quarrelling end. It is exactly as Ram-san said, a waste of time. A waste of time, meaning a waste of a chance to make money. Let's defer to my position here and settle everything down. Alright here we go, yes concluded!"

Subaru: "Tch. Anyway, explain it."

Ram: "Tch. There is no longer anything I wish to say."

Otto: "Could you two please not click your tongues at me while you speak!?"

Otto drips dissatisfaction at his usual treatment, but since this is his role it is inevitable. Their group somehow remaining unfractured thanks to Otto, Subaru goes over to each of the carriages, explaining the situation.

All the villagers' face turn sour at hearing the condition is for Subaru to stay behind, but between the fact that he himself accepts it and his noting that turning back would prolong the evacuee lifestyle, they reluctantly accept it.

Grateful for their feelings, Subaru finishes with persuading everyone. He returns to Ram and Otto to report, mounts Patrasche, and now faces Garfiel.

Subaru: "Our talks're all done. We're going on your condition. Let everyone through."

Garfiel: "Everyone 'cept you, 's. Get them goin' now. 'S that dragon stayin'?"

Subaru: "Walking back'd be tight on my stamina. This'll sorta be dragging out an uncomfortable time for Patrasche, though."

Subaru puts his hand on the back of his partner forced to associate with Garfiel. Trembling Patrasche averts her head practically saying "it's nothing to worry abouttt, geeeee."

Interpreting her movements as that, Subaru falls in line beside Garfiel as he sees the carriages ride off, down the road out of SANCTUARY. He gives a wry smile and waves at the villagers, talking and looking down at Subaru through their carriage windows.

Subaru: "Otto, when you're back at village don't go to the mansion. If you can just come back immediately."

Otto: "...? I don't quite understand that instruction, what? I personally think reporting this to Frederica-san would be essential..."

Subaru: "It's nothing. You'll probably arrive back at the village tomorrow morning... just for caution's sake, worst case do not go there until afternoon."

Unable to give a confused Otto a clear answer, Subaru gestures with his chin for him to leave. Tonight is the fated fifth night—the final deadline for Elsa's attack on the mansion. If events are the same as the first loop, temporally speaking something has already happened.

Even considering how indiscriminate Elsa is, it is unlikely she will go all the way to the village to massacre everyone. So long as he does not enter the mansion, Otto should avoid danger.

Though naturally this means abandoning those in the mansion—Frederica and Petra. Beatrice, Rem.

Subaru: "...This time, I'll allocate all my points into figuring out what happens at SANCTUARY. That should be definite." If being greedy won't get me anything, I don't know what the purpose is in overlooking it.

Guilt for overlooking the worst of conditions rises in Subaru's chest. He forces it down with his feelings of duty and obligation, urging the cruelty of his own heart.

Iron. Heart to iron. To grasp the optimum future, he would use every plan he could get. He would weather his heart, permitting and accepting the sacrifices along the way.

Subaru: "If there can be smiling at the end, it's my... it's our win."

So if he suppressed his wavering heart before there were sacrifices, good. He could not hesitate to lay the groundwork for everything he could eventually take back. There should not be a single thing for him to regret here.

Subaru: “—”

Subaru sighs, watching all the carriages disappear into the forest. Now, the only ones remaining in SANCTUARY were its residents and people related to Roswaal's mansion. It was probably safe to think that if he waited for tomorrow morning and figured out what would happen in SANCTUARY, this loop would have completed its purpose.

Subaru: “Standing here forever's just gonna make the bugbites terrible, let's go back. Getting monitored by you's not a great feeling, either.”

Garfiel: “Stop givin' me instructions. ...Thinkin' bout it, you ain't goddamn asked how Emilia-sama's TRIAL was tonight.”

Subaru: “That you're here's the answer to that, is how I interpreted it. Also if I said I didn't think this time'd be pretty rough, it'd be a lie.”

Like the hostages, using Subaru's welfare as motivation was not going to work. For Emilia to beat the TRIAL required a more fundamental change. Otherwise was the possibility that, in these rushed conditions, solving the problem of SANCTUARY was hopeless.

Subaru: “And it's to figure that one out, too. Can't consider whether we can wait for Emilia to conquer the TRIAL without confirming what happens next.”

The maximum number of times Subaru has died in a loop series is four. If he is aiming to break through the situation on the fifth loop, he can only die one more time.

Subaru: “There's a mountain of things I wanna confirm, though...”

—He was already considering his own DEATH only as a foothold to get that breakthrough. Subaru doesn't notice how warped his own statement is. Mounted, Subaru begins instructing Patrasche to return to Sanctuary, Garfiel looking up at him.

Garfiel: “...Fuckin' talkin' like you understand goddamn everythin'. Just how much of anythin' could you fuckin' know.”

Subaru: “Garfiel?”

Not hearing the muttering clearly, Subaru turns back while atop Patrasche. Events come abruptly.

Garfiel has already jumped aiming for the mounted Subaru, his hand readied to swing down a chop at his neck.

Fingers shredding through air and closing in before him, Subaru's voice dies in astonishment at the sudden, unreal, imminent death.

He had not misplaced the possibility of Garfiel attacking him, but he had not thought in the least that direct injury would come to him here.

Air whistling, the pain of flesh tearing and its accordant bloodshed assaults Subaru. Putting his hand

to his shrieking throat tells him that fingertips have gouged a light cut beneath his adam's apple. Feeling blood dripping through his fingers, Subaru swiftly grips the reins, sending Patrasche orders,

Subaru: "Garfiel! What're..."

Garfiel: "Yer really fuckin' gonna get n' the way? The fuck's yer motive, huh?"

Landing back on the ground, Garfiel yells swinging his bloodstained fingers not at Subaru, but a different direction.

Grimacing in pain, Subaru looks to discover standing there a girl holding a small wand—with her pink hair swaying, her stern glare fixed on Garfiel, is Ram.

Subaru: "Ram!?"

Ram: "I stayed behind due to a bad premonition, and if it isn't just what I expected. Barusu, you best thank me that your neck and torso are presently connected."

Garfiel: "'F the wind hadn't screwed th' aim, his head woulda been popped off."

Speechless at their exchange, the pain of his wound fevers his thoughts.

Subaru: "What're you, doing, Garfiel! You wanted to kill me!?"

Garfiel: "Messed it up, though. 'F yer gonna go n' ask what I wanted t' do, then sayin' it was that kinda thing's th' only answer I got."

Garfiel casually affirms his own desire to murder. Subaru's eye opens wide, lips trembling at Garfiel's incomprehensible actions.

Subaru: "But then, you could've killed me anytime. When I was captive, no even before that, if you didn't heal me and just left me I would've died then!"

Garfiel: "Hostages'd more'n likely explode. Them bein' gone means fer the first time, my amazin' self's got the itinerary fer killin' yer ass sorted."

Subaru: "That's..."

Feeling his thoughts turning red, Garfiel's words pummel Subaru.

If Garfiel had been seeking an opportunity to kill Subaru that would not provoke any problems, him seeing the carriages off here cohered. However, unnatural things remained.

Subaru: "You kill me here, and what happens to Emilia's TRIAL. Pivot of her motivation I am, I can say without any narcissism that if I die the TRIAL'll never end."

For Lewes' faction, which desired SANCTUARY's freedom, there should be no situation worse.

Even if hypothetically Subaru's witch stench spurred a suspicion of him, the reason would have to be huge enough as to be impossible to overlook.

He lost himself to rage, would be a reason feeling appropriate for Garfiel, but seeing him having a conversation like this, his composure is plainly in tact.

Meaning Garfiel's attack on Subaru was a composed and calculated action. Just what did it mean—

Garfiel: “I...”

Ram: “Listening is worthless, and attempting persuasion is pointless, Barusu.”

Ram cuts in between the two, interrupting Garfiel with her harsh statement. Garfiel clicks his tongue as Ram points the tip of her wand at him.

Ram: “Cease hiding your feelings with tenable logic, Garf. It isn't like you.”

Subaru: “H-hey, Ram,”

Ram: “Step down, I will speak. —As regardless, it appears Garf would like to kill you.”

Ram approaches Subaru with her vigilant glare yet fixed on Garfiel, tracing along the underside of Patrasche's neck with a finger.

Ram: “Good girl. Do what it is that should be. Your Master upon you is incredibly dull both to himself and to others, you see.”

Patrasche: “—”

Patrasche responds wordlessly to Ram's calm, rather gentle words. She licks Ram's presented fingers, her head held low as she ignores Subaru's orders and slowly heads for the trees.

Subaru: “Wh-wait. You two, what're you...”

Ram: “Do not release the reins. If you abide that alone, I am sure the dragon will protect you with her all, Barusu. No greater happiness in being born male.”

Subaru: “Listen! No, tell me! What do you know you two doing this!”

Ram: “Time is none and explaining is pointless. Do as said, Barusu. —I will buy you one minute. Run as most you can in that opening. If I can achieve that alone, it will be my single resistance.”

Ram is vague to the end, but this time Subaru truly has no room to question back. Before he can finish hearing Ram's statement, Patrasche starts running with a bray. Feeling the WINDBREAKER BLESSING activate while jostled atop her back, she dashes into the clusters of trees, foliage scraping onto Subaru's back.

Subaru: “Ram!”

He yells. But there is no answer.

The forest of trees obstructing his vision, biting his lip at this unnegotiated migration, all he can do is be taken along.



Subaru and Patrasche gone into the forest, two people remain.

Her wand readied still and not flinching an inch, Garfiel stares at Ram as he points to the forest

where Subaru disappeared.

Garfiel: “Y’said things not fuckin’ needed. Gonna be a damn pain chasin’ ‘em now.”

Ram: “You think I will let you leave?”

Garfiel: “You think y’can stop me? ‘F you think th’power balance ‘tween us ain’t changed since then, yer dead wrong. Bein’ in love n’ bein’ beaten down ain’t the same thing.”

Garfiel clicks his knuckles, threatening. But he knows this girl is no coward. Ram stands without any change in her complexion. Garfiel rigorously scratches at his short, blond hair.

Garfiel: “Th’hell’re yer thinkin’, Ram? What’ll happen ‘f you do this? My amazin’ self ain’t heard anythin’ bout it. You doin’ this means it’s on Roswaal’s orders?”

Ram: “...Inaccurate, Garf. My presence here is by my will, unrelated to Roswaal-sama’s noble orders. For presently at least, there is no need respect his directions.”

Ram speaks resolutely. Garfiel’s doubt is the same as Subaru’s was, and his reaction of confusedly furrowing his brows is also identical to Subaru’s. His expression turns ever more bitter.

Garfiel: “I don’t get it, Ram. Even moreso ‘f this ain’t you followin’ Roswaal’s orders, can’t think’a single reason why yer did that.”

Ram: “Truly?”

Garfiel: “Eh?”

Ram: “Truly, do you... not understand why I am doing this, Garf?”

Ram asks quietly, her expression and tone no different from usual. But Garfiel, recipient of her gaze and words, has a great change.

Confusion. Doubt. Shock. And wrath.

Garfiel: “You...”

Taken a step forward, Garfiel drives his heel into the ground. Clicking his fangs in unbearable rage, his eyes narrow as he glares at Ram.

Garfiel: “I don’t goddamn believe it. You doin’ this kinda fuckin’ thing is...”

Ram: “—For Frederica, and for you.”

Garfiel: “Don’t your mouth say the name of that traitor!!”

Roaring, the ground caves in beneath the swing of Garfiel’s foot, earth shattering.

Smoke rises in billows, the force enough to bend the nearby trees. The forest fears, the air silencing itself in terror of his rage.

Faced with that pure wrath, Ram’s expression remains nonchalant.

Ram: “Do you believe everyone will follow you if you give these obstinate and childish displays of strength? Garf, how long in this constrained forest will you be running circles?”

Garfiel: “Don't talk like you know! You.. You, and Frederica, all you who threw away SANCTUARY, just how much could you know!?”

Ram's chiding words do not reach an enraged Garfiel. He stomps the ground, this time without the accompanying force.

Garfiel: “Fer my amazin' self? It's fer my amazin' self? You... I got no room t'believe *that* at all. How fuckin' dare you say that to me, after so long...”

Ram: “Garf...”

Garfiel: “My amazin' self never asked for compassion or pity. How fuckin' high n' mighty're you gonna be. Not me, n'not granny n' the others, ever wished t' be pitied!”

Covering his face with his hands, breathing ragged, Garfiel squeezes the statement out. His sad figure gives the illusion of him being even smaller than he is.

Taking deep breath after deep breath, Garfiel removes his hands from his face.

Garfiel: “This's enough. I dun wanna hear anythin'. You go straight back to SANCTUARY, now. Do that n' I'll overlook this one. My amazin' self, 's still gonna chase after that asshole.”

Ram: “I refuse, Garf. If anyone will concede, it is not me but you. After I return the approaching ruin is unavoidable. I'm sure you would understand this?”

Garfiel: “Just go back. Won't say it again. Go back, and wait 'till the TRIAL's cleaned up.”

Ram: “No, I will not return or wait. There is no gain in standing still. What remains in your hands as you stagnate in this place are only the vestiges of what you believed you obtained. For such a weak, vague thing, why...”

Garfiel: “But still! It's so much better than havin' nothing left!”

Interrupting Ram's words with his scream, Garfiel raises his head. Etched onto his expression are anger, jealousy, and sorrow.

Garfiel: “Ruin? How's that gonna happen. My amazin' self, 's gonna do somethin' fer everythin'. This time fer sure, everything, and everything...”

Ram: “Garf, haven't I always been telling you? —That is merely compensatory behaviour.”

Ram replies calmly as Garfiel's emotions detonate.

Their stances run at parallel lines, both in direct opposition of opinion and neither willing to concede. No compromise is coming.

Perhaps sensing this, Garfiel lowers his gaze, closes his eyes.

Garfiel: “Go back, Ram. This's, my final request. With all the feelings I've ever said for you, my request. So...”

Ram: “Then, Garf. —Would you abandon all except me?”

The question is brief, but carries overwhelming pressure.

Garfiel's expression stiffens. His lips tremble.
Ram lightly lowers her gaze.

Ram: “Out of every single thing in this world choose me, look only at me, love only me, devote only to me, be loved only by me, pardoned only by me, sacrifice your everything only to me—are you capable?”

Garfiel: “I-I...”

Ram: “I am.”

Hand to her chest, Ram speaks firm.
A quiet, but unwavering will. It alone fills her words as she raises her head.

Ram: “—I am.”

This was Ram's ultimatum to Garfiel.

And he must have known it. The ambition vanishes from Garfiel's expression for an instant. Just what expression arose in that moment, only Ram would ever know.
He immediately shakes his head, stifling the slip of weakness and bearing his fangs.

Garfiel: “Known it fer ages, but yer a stubborn one.”

Ram: “As are you. —If you will not make me a truly important thing to you, I will not bend to you, Garf. I will not belong to anyone.”

Garfiel: “Really.”

Their gazes meet.
Stances argued, neither surrendering. Both speak quietly,

Ram: “Farewell, Garf.”

Garfiel: “Goodbye, Ram.”

These final words platonically were their expression of love.

—The forest shakes.
The roar echoes.



Subaru: “Patrasche! Stop! I told you stop!!”

Yanking back on the reins, Subaru yells desperately at Patrasche as they dart through the forest.
But the dragon pays his words no heed, whole-heartedly dashing along the rugged road, putting

distance between them and the high-stakes scene.

Stories exist of steeds driven into panic and fear, no longer obeying the commands of their rider, but that would not describe Patrasche.

In an identical state as always, rationality present as always, she was consciously ignoring Subaru's directions.

This evidenced that she had not recognized Subaru as an existence worthy for her to respect his commands.

Subaru: “Was you listening to everything I've said until now just favours!?”

Patrasche: “—”

Paying no mind to his words, Patrasche throws off her displeased master not. Every inch of her behaviour overflows with consideration for Subaru, him jostled on her back and perhaps about to cry tears of gratitude and shame.

He did not know how to ride his dragon—or such cute stories were not the circumstances here. It was him feeling disgusted at his stupidity, for not noticing that even the dragon was worried about him.

This included in the present-continuous tense despairs Subaru was experiencing, another was—

Subaru: “Ram's in trouble! I don't wanna think Garfiel'd do anything violent to her.. but now's!”

Garfiel's thoughts were turned in a direction where he had attempted to kill Subaru. That Ram blocked his path was his miscalculation, and with what plan would he rectify that miscalculation? Merely thinking it was terrifying.

Subaru had more-or-less accepted that those in the mansion would be sacrifices this loop. But not Ram. Infringe on territory he had not decided to permit, and Subaru's insufficient resolve sliced his heart to bits, repulsive.

Subaru: “I... hate getting hurt, but I'll recover. So...!”

He pleads, voice teary. No leeway gives Patrasche.

The dragon-become-wind loosens not her speed, giving no attention to Subaru's cry. Ram and Garfiel grow distant. A tragedy unfolding where he cannot reach.

Thinking such again batters Subaru's heart. Why was his heart so weak, and could it never be strong?

—And although constantly making blunders by focusing only on his internal issues, yet again Subaru commits the same error.

Subaru: “—Huh?”

The wild expansion of his vision comes as a result of Patrasche breaking through the last rows of trees. Subaru, having clung to Patrasche through the field of obstacles, has his jaw drop at the scene before him.

Otto: “Wh-what's the matter, Natsuki-san? So quickly...”

Says Otto, his expression just as surprised as Subaru's.

Supposedly having advanced is the evacuation group. Subaru and Patrasche had caught up to the

row of carriages from the side. For a Subaru who had assumed her running in the forest lacked any fixed objective, Patrasche's actions far exceeded expectations.

Otto: "But you're not meant to pass though? What happened to Garfiel?"

Subaru: "I-I don't really get it either... Ram and Patrasche..."

Getting his ragged breath in order as he speaks to Otto, Subaru wipes his sweaty brow with the back of his hand.

—The horrific bellow shaking the forest, came the next second.

Subaru: "Wha—!?"

Otto: "Huiih!?"

Eyes opening wide at the surprise blocking his throat, Subaru turns back toward the sound at the same time as Otto.

The thunderous roar shook the atmosphere and men's hearts, exerting pressure enough to provoke signs of terror even in the dragons.

Were there any person or thing in this place not wavering, it would likely only be Subaru-mounted Patrasche.

Thus, she was the fastest of anyone present to make her judgement.

Otto: "Ah, Natsuki-san!?"

Subaru: "Aguh, Patrasche!"

Immediately directing her head toward the end of the line of carriages, Patrasche breaks into a run. She heads for the frontmost carriage—and in fact further, toward the end of the road, sprinting for SANCTUARY's exit with no hesitation.

Leaving Otto's call behind, Subaru atop Patrasche's back again receives her Blessing. He understands her actions not. Just when he attempts to raise his voice to stop her,

???: "——㗎!!"

A shock shakes the ground. Subaru hears the screams behind him.

Unconsciously swallowing his breath as he tilts his head back, he looks in Otto and the others' direction.

In his left-handed vision, the sight of the dark forest arising faintly, Subaru sees it.

Carriages gone flying. The dragons and boarded evacuees concurrently caught in the furious impact scatter through the air, shrieks and blood painting the forest sky red.

Subaru: "—au,"

Witnessing the tragedy unfold, there beneath the floating ruins of carriages, Subaru sees a beast.

—Its body cloaked in golden-blond fur, Subaru sees an enormous tiger.

CHAPTER 42: VALUE OF A LIFE

—Its posture stooped low, the great, gold tiger glowers over the surroundings.

A giant tiger perhaps four meters in length. Viewing it as a four-legged beast, it boasted a body over twice the mass of the lions and tigers Subaru knew.

Its forelegs and hindlegs are thick, its closed mouth unable to contain all its lengthy fangs, swinging its head to and fro in a display of those bloodslicked daggers.

Subaru: “Wh, at...”

is that—but before he finishes the question, the flying carriages crash to the ground. The clatter echoes, the wood chips scatter, the shrieks resound.

The riders of the stricken carriages hurtle to the ground, those conscious wailing in pain. Those unconscious settle in their puddling blood, unmoving.

—The immediate thought in Subaru's mind was, *I need to help the wounded.*

But before he can act so, a furious manoeuvre carries Subaru along.

Pivoting, ignoring Subaru as he yelps in shock, Patrasche dashes away from the beast in an effort to escape the forest.

Subaru: “Wai—! Hey, Patrasche!?”

Subaru calls out at her ignoring of her rider, but identical to her actions along the route arriving here, Patrasche shows no sign of abiding his will.

Leaving behind Otto and those in the carriages—all stunned motionless, Patrasche accelerates. But,

???: “——㗎!!”

A bellow slices through the forest, pressing in on Subaru's back.

The torrent of bestial rage and hostility spears down the road, enough for even Patrasche's instincts to freeze her still.

Something mighty and wielding life-threatening power, directing at them its enmity.

Comprehending this sensation savoured more than several times prior, terror and dread run up Subaru's spine. Exactly because he was Subaru, and knew this sensation well, no desire boils up to berate Patrasche for stopping at this eleventh hour. None boils up, but the result remains clear.

Subaru: “—a,”

Glancing back, origin of terror entering his vision, Subaru sees carnage.

Battered by a swing of a forepaw, carriages tumble like toyboxes as their contents scatter and strike the forest trees. Amplify the sound of snapping chopsticks by a hundred, and apparently the resulting noise is that of wood and human bone fracturing to bits.

Before a literal behemoth, even knowing that inaction meant merely waiting for death, nobody moves.

Motion potentially stimulating the monster, they fear becoming target of its claws, its fangs.

Even though they instinctively knew that all their stillness changed was the order.

Subaru: “Is that thing... why SANCTUARY was empty?”

Upon the paralysed dragon, his teeth chattering, a Subaru prepared for death burns the beast into his eyes.

Coated in beautiful golden fur, its face simultaneously possessed a tyrannical bent and a fearless dignity. Its piercing eyes blazed with rage and enmity, its rattling fangs too sharp for blades to be a suitable metaphor. —This assumedly could be the something that attacked SANCTUARY.

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Having strained his eyes so as not to miss a single gesture, move, action, Subaru notices something out of place about the approaching tiger. Eye narrowed seeking what was awry, Subaru notices the cause.

—Something was jutting out of the great tiger's back.

Considering its immense frame and inexhaustible stamina, this injury must have been trifling for it. Its displays no consciousness of the wound as it prowls, leaving it only estimable as perhaps a graze.

But for Subaru it possessed great meaning. Not the wound itself. Rather, the object that inflicted it.

—Ram's wand.

Ram utilized that small stave when casting magic concords. Subaru had never observed her use any other intermediary for her magic, at least. He had seen her with it just before when facing Garfiel, and most surely should not mistake it.

Surely should not mistake it, but then why was it jutting out of the tiger's flesh? The answer—

Subaru: “Ancestral, return...”

An old scene plays though Subaru's mind.

Garfiel discussing with Subaru a fragment of his lineage, on the day he demonstrated the peculiarity of his body. Back then Garfiel transformed only his arm into that of animal's, displaying his origin as a mix between man and beastman. But,

Subaru: “If he's a war tiger, then...”

That would make this wicked beast a fully-transformed Garfiel.

This hypothetically explained why Ram, who had remained behind to stop him, had her wand driven into the tiger's body. But this also possessed converse significance.

—Her wand lost, Ram had failed to stop tiger-morphed Garfiel.

Subaru: “Garfiel, you... what did you do to Ram?”

Garfiel: “—”

Subaru: “Answer! What did you do to Ram! Garfiel!!”

The beast scrunches its jowls in lieu of any answer.

But it swings its head in irritation at Subaru's call, rocking its forelimbs up to down, displaying its claws. Upon their tip is caught a scrap of far too familiar black fabric, this alone informing Subaru of the pink-haired girl's fate.

Subaru: “GARFIIIIIIIIIIIEEEEL!!”

Screaming leaving himself to rage, Subaru releases the reins and springs off Patrasche. His botched landing leads him to tumble across the ground, rolling into quadrupedal posture and glaring ahead. Mutually quadrupedal, the man and beast open distance as they face each other. Their strength gap is obvious, his chances of winning null, possibility of holding conversation most likely non-existent.

Subaru: “You, despised me that much?”

Garfiel: “——”

Subaru: “You... hated me that much?”

Garfiel: “——”

Subaru: “If you wanted! To kill me! That much! All you had to fucking target was me!!”

Garfiel: “——㗎!!”

In answer to Subaru's furious scream, the beast raises a roar to the sky. The atmosphere rings, the forest leaves shake in terror, shivers and dread spread though all creatures present. But Subaru pushes it aside, baring his fangs.

Subaru: “You even laid hands on the girl you loved, what about you is the fangs of SANCTUARY, don't make me fucking laugh!!”

Garfiel: “——㗎!”

Subaru jeers. The tiger charges.

Wreckage of carriages between it and Subaru pitch into the air, blood and splinters scattering the air around the oncoming, golden beast.

Speed furious, mass huge. A direct hit equates to collision with a semi-truck, an instant death leaving no time for even swallowing breath.

DEATH presses in before him. Sensing near that inescapable fact, Subaru's brain thinks faster than ever before. His neurons burn, connect directly to rage, emotions detonating.

Something dingy squirms about his heart, riding his bloodflow to rush through the whole of him. That hot, black, dark, dim, vacuous, polluted, immaterial, repugnant something—grasped.

Eye snapping open, the sensation of something pulled and grabbed in Subaru's own interior comes tactile.

He looks ahead. Distance little enough to feel its breath, in press the jaws of the beast. Before the red gullet of the open maw, the entryway to death, Subaru reacts transcending the limits of flesh. That is, he raises his arm, and thrusts it between the fangs and the chest.

Garfiel: “——!?”

Instantaneously, a wind whorls the giant tiger away and vanishes it from before Subaru.

No, vanished was incorrect. Spinning through the air with its head as the pivot is the enormous tiger. It slams to the ground back-first, howling in pain and confusion as its incredible mass ricochets off the earth, generating impact and hurtling away.

Subaru: “Wha!?”

Glancing back, Subaru stares at the form of the giant tiger as it tumbles somersaults. He was half-convicted that his life was just about to be forfeit there, but?

Identical surprise visits the beast, its face expressing inability to comprehend what happened to it as it lands sideways upon the ground. It shakes its head and attempts to stand, but its will does not reach its otoliths and again it falters.

Neither understanding what happened, both flap their mouths in utter confusion. But, a sudden fatigue brings Subaru to collapse, while the tiger shakes its head annoyed and stands up. Who had the advantage after that bout was plainer than flame. Although, Subaru still did not understand what just happened, but—

Subaru: “Following along after taunts... is almost definitely Garfiel.”

Ordering his trembling arms to right himself, Subaru bites open his lip tying him to consciousness. The great tiger stands opposite him, rocking left and right in loose but guarded posture. Probably trying to figure out what happened in that instant.

The sensation was incomprehensible, and even if commanded to do it again, surely there should be no way he could.

Got one over on him—was a sense he keenly felt, but even this did not understand.

The opponent's caution was also laughable, but unsure of what the basis for snickering at it was, again left Subaru only a clown.

The slowly approaching beast had appeared dubious of Subaru's inaction, but it abruptly stops, and —

Garfiel: “——ㄎ!!”

Subaru: “a,”

Booming.

Covering his face at the seeming gale, Subaru startles into shrinking himself up. Cutting through that opening borne of petrification is the noise of feet boring earth.

The ground ruptures, the beast's form dancing through the air, leaping for Subaru.

Mass, claws, neither avoidable. This time definitely, the sensation from before has slipped from his fingertips and will not be rising up. Ending. The end was approaching. And—

Darting in from aside, Patrasche rams her head into the great beast's torso. Wailing, the tiger bends, blacking out in pain. Patrasche whips her tail, striking off the toppled tiger's face and robbing its vision.

She immediately zips away, riding the wind to again collect Subaru and escape—

Subaru: “Pahtra...”

The sound of tearing meat interrupts him.

Patrasche had grabbed Subaru by the hip with her mouth, but she instantly swings and flings him away to the ground. Subaru looks to find the beast's jaws snapped down on Patrasche's tail, and a creature with a body weight easily surpassing 400 kilograms throttled about like paper.

Patrasche shrieks. Flesh tears, blood scatters, and the instant her tail severs from the root, blood spouts down to dye Subaru's body half in red.

Patrasche goes flying, tumbling. The atrocity sticking in his eyes, Subaru glares at the approaching, heavy-breathing tiger.

Loathing in his eye, directed at one he perhaps could have called a friend,

Subaru: “Ghhar... fhiiiiieEEEELLLLLLL!”

He screams, the enmity endless.

No reply. Perhaps persons transformed into beasts lacked speech organs, for the tiger with its looming forepaw produces no hostility or murder or words from its throat.

It only displays behaviour by instinct.

—Will it be neck broken? Or head devoured?

Regardless which pain, whatever end it is, he will swallow down DEATH.

Swallow everything dry, make it his feed, make it reason to prevail for the correct future.

Subaru: “And do you really think you can be in that future?”

Watching the claws close in before him, Subaru announces his final intentions in hateful meter. He closes his eye. Darkness blocks his vision.

With his only regret being Patrasche's devotion, and how he couldn't save her, he—

Subaru: “—?”

Although readied for the coming end, that arriving thing does not come at all. Furrowing his brows in puzzlement, irritation rises in Subaru's chest at the timing of his DEATH going astray. And, slowly opening his eye,

Subaru: “Au?”

The claws to shred Subaru apart now distanced from him, the master of the claws the beast has its face before him. That Subaru made a dumbfounded noise was because this beast, who should be glaring at Subaru with eyes overflowing murder, is looking in a completely different direction.

The beast takes its gaze off Subaru and points it in Subaru's left. Going to follow its line of sight, Subaru sees something fly from that direction, strike the beast's body, and tumble onto the ground.

—A rock.

Completely ordinary, size enough to fit in the hand, a rock. Subaru follows back the parabola of its throw to find the silhouette a person standing at the forest's edge.

Short hair, puckery cheeks with lanky limbs. Not anyone with any eyecatching traits or peculiarities, but Subaru knew him.

He was a villager from Arlam, a member of the village's young men's brigade, an evacuee who had evacuated to SANCTUARY, a person who would have been riding in the tumbled carriages, and an individual staggering with blood flowing down his forehead.

He sluggishly stoops down, picks up a nearby rock, weakly raises it overhead, and throws it at the beast. A hit. The force is equal to nothing. But,

Man: “Ge-get away, from Subaru-sama. You, monster...”

Wringing out his voice, moaning in pain, he yet displays his will. The second his words strike him, a tremble runs through Subaru's whole body. The quivering transmits to his fingertips as he loses his voice, lost of what to say, merely watching.

Subaru: “—”

One after another come rocks, boards, branches, shoes, thrown at the monster from all around. Subaru looks to find that this is, kept down until now by the immense pressure radiating from the beast, the far-too flickering, shoddy, weak resistance of the people.

Subaru: “he, y...”

What are they doing? thinks Subaru dumbly.

Was there any purpose in doing that. Did they could do something about the beast, doing this. Pierce its skin and threaten the flesh below. That would be surely impossible. It was merely a futile resistance, leaving not a single graze.

Subaru: “Sto...”

Everyone covering their heads and running would be the most correct, the wisest action. They should all board an undestroyed carriage and immediately escape. It didn't matter whether they ran to SANCTUARY or cut through the forest. They should take an action with even a slight chance of survival. But even yet, why were they—

Subaru: “What are you all doing!? Hurry, run away—”

Villager: “Subaru-sama! There is nothing persuasive in that!”

The one who interrupts Subaru is an old man with arms like twigs, one raised above his head with all his might, tossing a branch which strikes the breast in the snout. His breathing ragged, he looks at Subaru.

Villager: “We flee for life abandoning our benefactor, then how could we ever show our faces to our sons and daughters? And that is without mentioning you came to this for the sake of saving us.”

Subaru: “That, 's...”

Villager: “If you should die, we too shall die here. This was the minimum condition we placed for leaving here, and everyone has agreed upon it.”

Stunned, Subaru's face stiffens.

Seeing Subaru's shock, a gentle smile rises on the man's face. Incredibly out of place, the sunny thing gives entirely the impression he had forgotten the threat before him.

The attack resumes. Everyone throws stones at the vile beast—at Garfiel. The threat of those, as always, does not cause him flinching or even itching.

Sluggishly raising his massive body, Garfiel moves. Ignoring Subaru ready for laceration before him, he heads for the forest—for the wounded young man who had initiated the throwing.

Man: “—”

Beast and man face-to-face. The man loses his speech at the pressure and threat before him, but nevertheless slacks not in his actions, drawing a knife from his hip.

Man: “Then, eat this—”

He thrusts out the dagger, driving it between Garfiel's brows—immediately following, the blade snaps in two.

Perhaps the golden fur possessed considerable stiffness, for the crudely-made knife passes not through.

In response to the man's final resistance, a raised forepaw hurtles down—

Subaru: “Stop!!”

Subaru shrieks. Even this is nothing more than pointless noise.

The sound comes of crushed meat, the slender man's frame flattened from head to toe, transformed into gore. Fountains of blood spout from between Garfiel's digits, the only thing remaining beneath the position of his withdrawn paw a smudge of dark offal.

Subaru: “—”

This time for sure, his throat rises a scream of wrath.

Subaru claws the ground to upright himself, leaping at the beast's back. A flick of its left leg smacks Subaru across the torso, him blacking out. His body follows the momentum only for the tail to strike him, and Subaru goes flying through the air like a ball of rubber. His back slams against a tree trunk—his entire body creaks, bones cracking.

Subaru: “Gha, aaah!?”

Writhing on the ground, pain and blood spill from his mouth. His body does not listen to him. His right arm bends from his shoulder at a strange angle. His spine, too, retains not a proper shape. Weak, frail, impossible to change.

Garfiel: “—!!”

???: “**ꐃꐃꐃ**—!!”

The beast howls. Bounds, bears its fangs, its claws at the surrounding evacuees. Blood dances, shrieks resound, Subaru knows the lives are snuffing out where he cannot see.

Someone screams. A bestial scream. Bestial, but the scream of a man. Confusion runs through the beast. Whose scream was that? What was that roar? Subaru, managing his own internal errors, did not know.

???: “—Natsuki-san! Please live!”

Calling his name. The voice of someone he knew, but pain blocks the mental path to determine who. His thoughts strobe, the world hazes, his emotions muddy, dream and reality blur, then hatred and pain diffuse all of these.

This was no time to be sleeping. He had to stand. Stand, *stand*—if there's deaths, then before anyone else—you die.

Subaru: “Don't any, one die... only me having, to die is... plenty enough!”

Wringing blood and wails out his throat, Subaru frantically uprights himself. Right arm useless, use left only. A red curtain coats his only left eye, a cut down his forehead leaking blood. Wiping his eyelid with his shoulder, he grits his teeth hard enough to crack his molars as he raises his head.

Subaru: “—”

The massacre expanded.

Every swing of the beast's arm brought people flying, blood scattering, flames of life burning out. Anyone and everyone possesses bravery, all prepared to die, stabbing the beast with resistance unthinkable to work. The only blood coating its pelt is that of the villagers, their deaths entirely meaningless.

They merely defied, to be blown out little by little. Entirely meaningless.

Since, if there was any here whose likewise DEATH would have meaning, it was Subaru alone.

Subaru: “Stop, stop, stopstopstop... please, stop!”

If you're going to kill, before anyone else kill me.

He was supposed to be aiming for Subaru in the first place. His reason for wounding, stealing the lives of these brave and kind people, existed nowhere.

Or otherwise this result of them losing their lives was an outcome invited from Subaru's idiocy. If so then that was—

Subaru: “—ueh, ah!”

His teeth clenched and face lowered, something picks Subaru up.

What pulls this clumsily-uprighted Subaru from behind is, a stream of blood running from her whole body, Patrasche. Although Garfiel's blow brought her halfway to death, she frantically crawled back to arrive here.

Subaru fails to hold back that welling up in the back of his eye, it spilling.

Subaru: “That's, enough. ...That's enough. You've done enough now, Patrasche...”

Subaru reaches out for Patrasche's bloodsoaked jaw. But she shakes her head, conclusively stating “This certainly is not enough now.” She slips her head beneath Subaru's stomach, sliding him onto her back without any resistance.

Subaru yelps in surprise. Him upon her back, Patrasche breaks into a run. Her gait provokes question where she had that energy left, with how strong it is.

Perhaps it was the result of working herself to the bone literally.

Subaru: “—”

But even spending her remaining vitality, working herself to the bone, her speed landed a far cry from her optimum. Escape from the beast's fangs, too, was thus distant.

Fangs snap onto Patrasche's hindleg. Shrieking, again she flings Subaru away. He floats through space, and just when he thinks himself again destined to slam the ground, Patrasche reaches out her neck to catch him in her jaw.

She bends down her head with all her strength, using everything she has to toss Subaru deep into the forest.

Subaru: “—!”

Subaru understands that this was Patrasche's attempt to distance him from a fatal threat. He simultaneously realises. Why after parting with Ram, Patrasche had sprinted to reunite with the evacuees.

—Patrasche had noticed the existence of the beast.

Noticed, and to raise Subaru's chances of survival by even a little, dashed to a location with more prey. Everything, to protect Subaru.

Hitting the ground, Subaru's body bounces once, twice. After wailing on the third bounce—a sensation of floating dominates Subaru's body.

Subaru: “—au,”

Sharp slanting ground opens a gorge, Subaru's body tumbling, falling down. Lacking room to even cry out, gravel and branches scrape his skin as he bounces and bounces and bounces down and down and down,

Subaru: “—”

Orientation faltering, vision gyrating, Subaru manages to grasp what is above him. He witnesses a sight he wished not to see.

Subaru: “—pihtrassch,”

Caught between the tiger's jaws, an incredible force crushes down on her body. Fangs shred her apart, blood splashing in pools as she splits into two.

Unable to even wail her death agony, the loyal dragon devoted to Subaru her all until the end.

Subaru: “—”

His throat burns. His throat tears. Rage boils his brain, his blood feeling to catch fire. Bouncing, tumbling, sliding, falling, scraping, Subaru falls.

—A strong ricochet, and again floating.

He slams down, his consciousness swallowed.

His body rolls unstopping. His consciousness regardless separates from his flesh.

—Only an unvanishing voice of umbrage had continued to churn in his heart.

CHAPTER 43: AND THEN EVERYONE WAS—

—What wakes him is the dripping of water upon his face.

The steady rhythm of the cool water on his cheek pulls his consciousness along and up. Alongside his awakening, the keen sense of being alive slowly permeates through Subaru's body. Put more plainly, what permeates through Subaru's body is pain.

Subaru: "...dghaugg"

Agonizing pain comes to welcome Subaru's waking with its hug. Receiving the first shock leaves no method to evade the successive others. His ripped forehead, broken right arm, and jarred spine all shriek. But what eclipses all of them is,

Subaru: "Thhihs's, crap..."

Directing his gaze to the source of the oversharpest pain, Subaru discovers a branch thick as two fingers stabbed into the region by his right clavicle, point dripping with blood. Although Subaru prepares for the pain and attempts to dislodge it, it doesn't give an inch. That said though since it is fortunately broken, so long as Subaru ignores it visually, it won't impede his activities.

Subaru: "Way too... avant-garde, this..."

Somehow managing to wrangle his body into uprighting itself, Subaru leans against the nearby rock-face to take a breather. He looks around the surroundings to find himself in the entrance of a small cave. Morning dewdrops drip from the top of the cave mouth, apparently being what wet his cheek. —Morning dewdrops.

Subaru: "Morning!?"

Recognizing the apathetic passing of time, Subaru stirs only for a shock of pain to run through his body. The back of his eye feels to stain red, and needles feel to pierce his whole body. A tear rises to his eye as his thoughts slowly catch up with what happened to him before he fell unconscious. Recalling it,

Subaru: "—au,"

Recalling it, Subaru remembers just what a pointless slaughter his own existence had bought. He timidly looks upwards to see daylight spilling through the gaps in the forest canopy. Under the light, just what spectacle awaited beyond the slope Subaru fell?

Subaru: "—nn,"

Swallowing his breath and tormented by remorseful desire to die immediately, Subaru crawls at a caterpillar's pace, aiming for the opposite of the slope.

His movements restricted by the jutting stick, time slowly, but steadily looms down.

Were he past-Subaru, just envisioning the scene waiting ahead would terrify him entirely, and he would likely run away refusing to look. But present-Subaru would not permit that.

He had to see it through, swallow it down, make it his feed.

Because this was the duty of Natsuki Subaru, who had failed to die at the timing he should.

Subaru: “Haa... haaa...”

He inches bit by bit up the slope with only his upper body righted. Sweat wettens the dried cut on his forehead, blood again seeping out. He rigorously wipes it with his sleeve, his face dirtied with blood and mud as he crawls.

Passing by a segment of a ruined carriage, detouring around a great toppled tree, Subaru's fingers grasp onto his destined elevation—returning back to the spot Patrasche's devotion had thrown him from.

Subaru: “—”

There's a second of hesitation.

If he raises his head and stretches his neck to peek over, he will face an inescapable reality. He won't be able to escape into his imagination that some miracle occurred after he was driven away, and the majority of the evacuees managed to flee.

Subaru: “Am I stupid? ...No, I am stupid.”

This one-eyed vision of Subaru's had certainly witnessed the instant of Patrasche's demise. Having abandoning everything for Subaru's sake, he even now had the scene of the loyal dragon's end burnt into his eyelids. To call that a dream or to escape into convenient fantasy was to insult her.

The flame of tenacity alit in his heart, Subaru musters what will he has left and opens his eyes. He pulls himself up, crossing over the thick branches blocking his vision, and beyond the forest in the scene of the disaster is—

Subaru: “—wuh?”

Nothing.

There was nothing.

Subaru: “Uh... au, er?”

Face warped from envisioning the massacre site, Subaru's eye darts around, unable to accept the scene before him.

There are scattered remains of carriages and several upturned trees. Clawmarks remained gouged into the ground, destruction and the vestiges of rebellion jumbled about.

But the outcome likely to further break Subaru's heart is not there.

The outcome of slaughter. The corpses of the villagers who had in the truest of meanings given their lives to Subaru's escape. The corpse of the dragon, ripped in two.

He saw not a sign of either.

The littered remains of carriages and those other signs proved the conflict with the beast had been no dream or illusion. Only the outcome of atrocity was missing.

Subaru uses a nearby tree as a support to unsteadily stand himself up. Fortunately the wounds to his legs are limited only to scrapes and bruises. He stands, holding his right arm steady in his left to stop it from hurting with every motion, and looks about the surroundings.

Subaru: “Wh, y? Patrasche... everyo... Otto?”

Of course he did not want to see their corpses.

Honestly, if everyone survived then there would be nothing more joyous. But Subaru's body knows better than any other than these conditions were not going to have any fairytale dreams-come-true. Besides, he'd already seen lives lost to the beast's claws before he lost consciousness.

He saw the lanky man put in his all, and regardless be crushed without inflicting a single wound. He saw the woman who lost her life when the carriages went flying, plummeted out. He saw the old man snapped like a twig with one swing of a paw, leaving a dreadful cadaver.

With every recollection of the deaths, pain and regret shave away at Subaru's heart. But nonetheless, those deaths supposedly witnessed at this scene have been stolen from here.

Subaru: “Patrasche... Patrasche...?”

Thinking of the lost lives, Subaru frantically and feebly calls the name of his partner.

Subaru had assuredly heard, seen the instant of her bifurcation and the accompanying death wail.

Thus, he harboured no flickering hopes that her life remained.

But the only one who could find her soul-parted remains, convey words of guilt, and mourn for her was Subaru.

He walks slowly, his stamina most entirely expended. His searching is laboured, weak, and he spends over two hours just on exploring this nearby area.

But even spending this much time, what Subaru finds in this region is,

Subaru: “Luggage mixed in the wreckage, scraps of clothes, and...”

Innumerable bloodstains.

Backing up the near-conviction breed of imaginationed events he has, scattered around this site carved by beast's claws is a tremendous amount of blood. The choking stench of bloodshed likely wafts about the scene, but the blood clotting his nose renders Subaru's olfactory senses inoperable, and he cannot smell it.

He has already lined up irrefutable evidence. The only thing he can't find is the conclusive piece, and the question as to how it went missing leaves many mysteries.

Most importantly, while searching around the surroundings, a questions burns extremely belatedly into Subaru's mind. That is—

Subaru: “Why wasn't I killed?”

Subaru had not been finished off—while it was not especially believable that such a wounded

Subaru would have survived, not checking for corpses regardless was far too weak of a finish. And Garfiel was supposed to have been aiming for Subaru in the first place.

Why he turned his claws even upon the villagers was unclear, but perhaps it was meant as a lesson for Subaru.

But if he were to run with this assumption, then Subaru understood even less why the corpses disappeared.

Subaru: “Even saying hypothetically, he carried them away...”

There were forty evacuees in total. Even were they all corpses, carrying them all away felt

unrealistic. Patrasche and the other dragons could also be added to that.

Subaru: “But on the other hand...”

He didn't want to imagine it, but were they settled in the beast's belly—again ran into the same problem of numbers and felt unrealistic. Subaru could understand carrying the bodies away, but not a single idea arose why Garfiel would expend that much effort hiding the corpses from Subaru. And besides before suspecting the tiger of something so roundabout, there was the problem of why did he disappear without finishing off a wounded Subaru?

Subaru abruptly notices that these conditions are rather similar to the depopulated SANCTUARY. The conditions leading up were different from last time, but the results have many points in common. The destruction littered around the place resulted from the raging tiger, unrelated to the evacuees' and the tiger's disappearance. Ignoring this eye-catching aspect, the part where there was not a single person in sight was horrifically similar.

Meaning,

Subaru: “S-SANCTUARY's also, in the same condition as last time... maybe?”

Reaching that conclusion with his breath ragged, Subaru again utilises all his strength to stand up. Looking at his own position and the flow of the road, Subaru makes an estimation as to SANCTUARY's direction.

—This is morning of the sixth day.

Last night was likely the deadline for the mansion. He had no definitive proof, but assuming Elsa's attack occurred, there would already be a massacre unfolded.

Simultaneously in SANCTUARY, something happened that stopped tiger-morphed Garfiel from finishing off Subaru. That something most probably explained what caused all signs of existence to disappear from this place. Why it didn't apply to Subaru was a complete unknown, though.

He spends only a second hesitating on which path to proceed down.

A twinge of warmth runs through his heart. That was his unseverable feelings of guilt and attachment towards those left inside the likely-attacked mansion, and the sleeping girl there. Gritting his teeth, Subaru shakes off the feelings, and heads for SANCTUARY.

Slowly, steps sluggish and confirmatory, Subaru proceeds toward Sanctuary.

Subaru did intend to spend his life in seeing what laid ahead—burning that of corresponding value to the lives lost into his memories, to redeem. But what he sought was even the slightest of chance of obtaining a cue from which to prevail.



—Along the road to SANCTUARY, Subaru passes through what was likely the site of Ram and Garfiel's fight.

Slashes from blades of wind remain gouged into tree trunks, familiar and ferocious clawmarks gorged into the earth and crags. Subaru spends a slight time looking around the area, but expectedly Ram's visage—otherwise her corpse, is nowhere to be found.

Assuming the speculation that Garfiel was the tiger was correct, Ram was a long-term crush for

Garfiel. If that love ran deep, then Subaru believed it possible.

Subaru: “Things proceeded to a mutual deathmatch, and there it was love yours or some other thing... I've read too many light novels.”

Neither would surrender to the other, and it escalated to a deathmatch.

Just how much of a deterrent would the love or affections between them be to counter that? If that truly was going to stop any violence, they should have stopped before anything started. The instant that it didn't and events began, it became no reason for them to end.

Subaru: “...I'm sorry.”

Out of sight, but nevertheless Subaru reports his apology to the one who spent herself for him. Her fight also purposeless, Subaru renders her sentiments wasted as he continues returning to SANCTUARY. Ahead on this path, there was something necessary to a Subaru intending to die.

The regrets compounding, Subaru doggedly walks on for Sanctuary. This road, which he began walking before afternoon, was of a length that only took a few tens-of-minutes to travel when mounted on Patrasche. For a Subaru defying his wounds and continuing along at a caterpillar's pace, it takes until what is perhaps already evening before he reaches the region immediately near SANCTUARY.

Subaru: “Half a day... fin, ally...”

He managed to return this far.

About ready to collapse on the spot in relief, Subaru feels not a scrap of accomplishment. Rather, what bubbles up hot in Subaru's interior is a feeling of powerlessness and anger toward himself. What eclipses his self-hatred is a dingy, glimmering,

Subaru: “You fucking come back, Garfiel?”

Instructing his heart *don't think this, don't think this*, violent hatred and wrath toward that blond piece of shit.

There were three big reasons he returned to SANCTUARY.

The first was because he wanted to ascertain the true nature of the empty SANCTUARY phenomenon.

This was an essential factor for the future wherein he wished to grasp some piece of the cause.

The second was to confirm that Emilia, who had remained in SANCTUARY, was safe. Should the depopulation occur, she would be no exception.

The third was—incomparable to the first two combined—because of the furious fire burning in the depths of Subaru's heart.

He wanted to rip that fucking tiger apart.

Subaru takes the step into SANCTUARY. Two pillars overgrown with moss substitute as the entrance. Passing them through and entering Sanctuary, Subaru breathes low and quiet as he looks about the surroundings.

The silent SANCTUARY feels, as Subaru expected, devoid of people. Even before this, Subaru hadn't heard a single insect during his whole walk through the forest to get here.

It didn't just stop with the residents of SANCTUARY disappearing, it's as if the whole of living

creatures in region have had their activities suspended, in this silence.

Feeling even his own breathing as cacophonous in the quiet, Subaru pushes his throat painfully to the limit as he seeks stealth. Taking breath after short breath, Subaru limps to the depths of SANCTUARY—aiming for the building Emilia should be in.

—In these hours before evening, Emilia would spend her time balled up hugging her knees until the TRIAL. It became especially striking after about the third day, and in this loop she lacked Subaru's support entirely. More than likely, isolation and panic had weathered her heart worse than in any loop previous.

Subaru: “Not here, huh...”

Pushing the door open and peeking inside, Subaru looks about the empty room. Emilia is absent, but the sheets of her unpopulated bed are disorderly, and a chair remains collapsed there on the floor. Subaru couldn't tell whether this was the result of resisting whatever caused the depopulation, or an act done by a cornered Emilia. But, indeed on the path here, Subaru encountered nobody.

Subaru: “Should I try going to Roswaal's place?”

Accepting Emilia's absence here, and considering what to do next, Subaru's heart is horrifically calm.

Going along with what he stated was a necessary action in the sense of nipping buds, but a part of Subaru had already resigned that going there would likely be a wasted effort.

Just as feared, SANCTUARY lacked anyone. The instant he lost Emilia, Subaru's attachment was no longer for this place. The Emilia he was supposedly attached to had disappeared. Even this, Subaru noticed, had made his heart barely tremble at all.

Had he acquired an unshakable, tenacious, dazzling heart of iron?

Nah, he thinks, immediately shaking his head.

The heart of iron Subaru strived for was rather different from this current emotion-bereft mental state. After excessive rage, at the end of confusion, coming off his complete erosion, his heart had simply punctured.

It wasn't unshakeable. Just emptied.

—He was losing will to live.

Well of course he was.

Subaru wasn't presently living while consciously attempting to. He had merely failed to die at the timing he should have, and had to remunerate his reason for surviving, before he could die.

Actually, his attention was focusing not on will to live, but will to die.

How could he live in a world like this.

Emilia wasn't here. Rem was also gone. Patrasche was lost, Ram and Petra were probably dead too. Otto's potentials of survival didn't even bear thinking.

No one was here. Now, now one was here. Subaru's brains were lacking, Subaru's power was lacking, Subaru's effort was lacking, Subaru's wishes were lacking, and so he wasn't capable of saving anybody. Even though this was something, only he could do.

Subaru: “So... to...”

Take everything back. Make everything complete. Set everything on the correct path—was his responsibility.

Only Subaru could do it. And Subaru needed to do it.

The sacrifices thereupon made—must inside him persist.

The everything thereupon lost—must in his mind dwell.

The compensation thereupon spent—must he expend.

Pay the compensation. Pile the sacrifices. And, regain everything.

Subaru: “—”

His upper body swaying loosely, Subaru leaves the building.

His course heads not for Roswaal's treatment house, but to the deepest of SANCTUARY—to the tomb. Last time in this place, Subaru had been wounded and killed there by SOMETHING. Again, his feet head for this spot.

Why? To be killed, of course.

If conditions are identical to last time, Subaru should die there in the same manner. He judges that he could at least dodge one fatal blow, if he knew it was coming. Thus, even should the second blow kill him, if he could just grasp the opponent's identity then he didn't care.

Prepared into DEATH, Subaru approaches his destination steadily, step by step.

The place his abdomen was speared from behind—he didn't remember the exact placement, but it was definitely just outside the tomb's entrance.

Sighting the crown of the tomb from a distance, Subaru's pulse turns frantic, blood running through him hot and cool. Was he heating or cooling? Even that he didn't know.

His body is hot, his limbs are numb. But his fingers feel stiff and jammed with lead, his head cool enough to objectively view the situation.

It was heading to his death, knowing it would die. A foolish being.

Wager his life to gain results—was supposed to be his heart's ironclad pledge—but his expression speaks a far cry from resolute strength. His eyes are weak, he bites his lip, his limbs tremble unsuppressably.

His pretences peel off at the eleventh hour, and Subaru loathes himself for displaying the weakness beneath. Pushing the feeling aside, Subaru nevertheless continues without slowing.

Even if he couldn't change that he was weak, frail, and foolish—he wanted to be having the courage to proceed forward from that self, to be being the self he constantly desired.

Running off a crooked equation of weakness to weakness, minus to minus, Subaru treads along the path toward the tomb otherwise the path toward death.

The tomb is near. His pulse throbs hard, the noise of blood rushing inside his skull vividly audible.

Acid from his empty stomach burns his throat. His trembling legs could fall at any moment, his left-handed vision losing clarity from his sweat.

He raises his arm, wipes his eye, again heads forth. And, notices.

Subaru: “—a?”

Just after lifting his foot to proceed for the tomb, Subaru witnesses the change before him. Gone without hearing even the chirping of insects, the only noise to reach Subaru's ears is the rustling of leaves on leaves in the wind. What cuts into that soundscape is a quiet, chittery cry.

Subaru initially thinks it, blown in by the wind, a tiny, white, fluffball.

But the fluffball stops several paces forward of Subaru, where it begins trembling. Subaru's brows furrow in puzzlement as its two long ears arise.

Subaru: “A, rabbit?”

Possessing two long ears and fluffy white fur is this little creature. It sports two round, characteristic red eyes, its mouth jittering as it fretfully looks about the surrounds. It tilts its little head upon sighting Subaru, and cries.

A small—small—rabbit. About as large as Subaru's clenched fist, by a glance about as big as a hamster. But being that its ears are of identical size to the entire rest of it, the term 'size to fit in the hand' would perhaps be inaccurate.

Not hide nor hair of insects, people, dragons, or anything else—then suddenly a rabbit. Although perhaps one of the creatures living in the forest, for a Subaru who had not encountered a single other living being the entire way here, its appearance was exceedingly strange.

Subaru: “Why is there a rabbit... it, is a rabbit, right?”

Questions endless, Subaru glances bewildered around the surroundings, searching for any other creatures that perhaps might have flowed into SANCTUARY. With no particular intention he reaches for the rabbit, going to stroke its fur—

When his left hand is lopped off.

Blood spouts from the ragged, sloppy wound, veins dangling from his wrist. Were those thin white things tendons or nerves? Regardless the sight of a destroyed human body was something grotesque, so—and those were his few seconds of escape from reality.

Pain of another dimension thrashes Subaru about the brain as he collapses to the ground in agony. The branch piercing his clavicle snaps at the impact—pain. Pain, pain, pain.

Subaru: “Gaha!? Aauh, aughhgaaaa! Ouuu, aaughghhggaaaaa!!!”

His mind solders white.

It hurts, is the emotion that suffuses his whole it hurts body already lacking any means to register it hurts reality why was it he had it hurts to suffer like this it hurts where did it come it hurts from what happened it hurts where was it hurts he how come this it hurts happened to him what it hurts happened what on earth it hurts happened why it hurts it hurts ithurts it hurtsithurtsithurts—

His left wrist gushes blood as he paws the ground, unconsciously biting into the earth, chewing the dirt in an act of unclear meaning. The bitter and asphyxiating soil brings his mind back minutely, and searching about his vision in seek of comprehending what happened, he discovers at his feet the white fluffball—its snowy fur speckled unclean with blood, its mouth diligently working away. Beneath its black nose are its bulging, quivering cheeks. Subaru sights, sticking out of its mouth, the fingers of his own hand.

Understood. Got it. He knew what happened. Eaten. Eaten. He was eaten.

Subaru: “Ghohu, aghuffuuaAAaa!”

Screaming almost insane in pain and understanding, Subaru tumbles himself toward the rabbit. His broken right arm is immobile and his left arm from the wrist down exists in the rabbit's stomach. There's nothing he can do, but if he at least confirms its true nature—

His calf burns. A sharp rasping shaves into his meat and bone, stinging to shoot his eye fully open, foam gushing from the back of his throat. To lay his head and faint would be great, but the ferocious throes of agony seem unwilling to release him.

Spilling bloody froth out his lips, Subaru convulses like a fish on land. That his ears still function is both the miracle and joke of a cruel god.

The pitter-patter of countless footsteps reaches Subaru's eardrums.

Hopping motions. Tiny light bodies. The vast number of overlapping cries gives him absolutely no urge to, presuming his sight could sight them, even attempt to count their total. In that instant he was sincerely glad the only thing working were his ears.

Savouring the sensation of teeth biting all across his body at once, Subaru was now keenly experiencing the pain of over one hundred creatures ingesting him simultaneously.

He shrieks. Rolled onto his back and looking to the sky, his throat trembles. A fuzzy little creature instantly encroaches inside his opened mouth. It shreds apart his tongue, sharp teeth piercing the back of his throat, gnashing down his oesophagus to his stomach.

It internally collides with another which invaded from his rectum, their competition displacing his slivered organs to and fro, turning Natsuki Subaru to mince.

The keen feeling of being alive, with living creatures inside him mangling him to pieces.

Fear was already gone away. No pain felt any more. No clue how his consciousness was still here. Eaten. Eaten to bits. Eye eaten. No more ears. Organs devoured completely, presently his face being skinned. A hole opens in his skull, brain unveiled for the spelunking fangs to swill—

—.

——.

————.

————.

————a—.

CHAPTER 44: VERBOTEN

—His body reconstructs on him.

His devoured flesh, peeled skin, gnawed bones, ingested nerves, slurped blood, soul ravaged by the peak of cravings—returns to its original form.

Sensation transmits to his fingertips, they being the starting point for the shuddery convulsions that rock his whole body.

Groaning and writhing on the hard, cold, dusty ground, white froth bubbles from Subaru's lips.

No pain. No loss. Four limbs connected to his torso. Neither his head nor its insides bear any physical damage. His thoughts are still fuzzy in the midst of waking, but that's assured to clear in merely a few seconds.

Nevertheless, Subaru's flesh and mind approved not of resuscitating into this reality he returned.

The happenings prior that return were just that horrific.

Could anyone say they had experienced encroachment into their body through their mouth, and all their guts being shredded from inside? A competition to strip off their skin, bloody muscle exposed beneath, rough tongues shaving away at their pinkish fats?

His brain had rejected the pain of feeling, disengaging to the point he could objectively recognize his BEING EATEN as if it were happening to someone else, a waking nightmare.

Subaru: “Bbh, bhbb, bbbbbb...”

The nausea rushes up, but all that spews from his dry stomach is yellow acid. Sourness mixes with the overflowing froth, Subaru still on his side and convulsing yet.

Like a man having a seizure or a fish caught on land, Subaru's rejection of reality comes not from a selection by his will, but by his soul.

Who could accede to their being eaten apart? Who could fault Subaru, comprehending the truth of his eating and returning as such, for his abnormality here?

By what karma, by whose plot, did he have to had met that fate?

Subaru: “—”

His consciousness strobesc.

Where his eyes open or not? No control of his body was returning to him.

His soul was rejecting living in reality. Far from his soul allowing him to pick consciousness, it wasn't even presenting him the choice.

—Why.

Were there any definite words in Subaru's mind, it would be merely that one.

—Why?

What happened? What occurred? Why did that happen? Why did that have to happen? What was happening to him now? Why did something have to be happening to him now? What should he do now?

—Why, why, why, why, why?

Presented with a problem lacking answer, the question itself unsteady, his soul merely shrieks.

—Why! Why! Why!

Continuously throwing out a question lacking answer, a form unsightly in how poor it was at surrender.

Drowning in reality, tormented by nightmare, the way to living lost, a form inquiring WHY.

That was precisely—

???: <You've again acquired the qualifications.>

A voice whispers at the ear of the trembling Subaru. A voice high, and upbeat. A voice that even if Subaru hear presently, he will not decode the meaning. But regardless the voice reverberates even to Subaru's interior, as—

???: <You are invited—to the witch's tea party.>

Subaru's just-returned consciousness again forfeits from reality.



A fresh wind reminiscent of summer blows across a hillock of verdant green grass.

The breeze tousles Subaru's bangs, sways the tall green grass, passes over the hill, through the field, and into the blue sky where white clouds dance.

Touching his fingers to his tickled bangs, Subaru squints at the dazzling sunlight, slowly lowering his gaze to look ahead of him.

Before he knows it, he's seated in something similar to an easy chair. Sitting across the little white table from him, legs crossed with hair white and dress sable, is a girl—or no, that phrase might not quite be proper.

Subaru: “Since she's a Mighty Witch gone four-fucking-hundred years static.”

Witch: “Well isn't that just something to be saying to a girl. Though with my case, I died when I was nineteen, so my looks should be of a young girl matching to you.”

Subaru: “Died when I was nineteen's seriously sobering. Also don't come to sit next to me off some weird ideas. Matching to me. I'm gonna snort laughing how stupid that is.”

Witch: “Oop, well my gosh... Have I been dumped?”

Subaru: “No, I'm saying you're not that cheap. I know I'm the lowest class of bastard you can get. Terms like 'matching' or 'balanced' aren't the other person coming down, they're pulling me up. I haven't acquired anything suitable for that yet.”

Clenching and unclenching his fists on his knees, Subaru looks up at the sky, expression malcontent. The witch—Echidna—rests her elbow on the table and her cheek in her hand, surveying Subaru up to down with her gaze.

Echidna: “You sure don't think very highly of yourself.”

Subaru: “When the people around you are big you get a habit of bending your head back while talking. Thought the ungainliness of not even noticing I was looking up was something I'd gotten past, but.”

Subaru clenches his fist, knuckles clicking. He takes a long, deep breath.

Subaru: “So... what's the occasion for the tea party invite?”

Echidna: “Nothing complicated. I'm WITCH OF GREED and thirst for knowledge incarnate. Desiring, wanting hearts are things of pleasure to me, and should there be wants to know or lamenting inquiries of 'why,' then perfect.”

Echidna brings one of the white cups on the table to her mouth. She drinks down the contents, smiling.

Echidna: “If made to say, your actions of wishing such while somewhere easily communicable with my castle'd be the cause, is how I'd like you to see it.”

Subaru: “Stop being convoluted.” ...something seomthing well anyway for now at least I won't complain about being called here. “More importantly, there's something I want to ask.”

Subaru leans forward.

Subaru: “What happened to me?”

Echidna: “You don't understand that yourself?”

Subaru: “Understanding and comprehending are different. I think I get objectively what the situation was, but that understanding isn't connecting to my current condition.”

Echidna: “Meaning?”

Subaru: “I was insane drowning on land spouting bubbles, and now here I'm presentable and my head's working enough to at least hold a conversation. It's natural to think you had some hand in this.”

Subaru thinks like nuts to understand the present situation. It's fact that being invited to Echidna's tea party-aka-dream world has birthed enough reserves in his heart to let him think. And exactly because he can think now, Subaru knows his body before he got summoned here was in dangerous condition. He's left behind his body which experienced some symptoms of shock, feeling some unease about only his mind being here.

Subaru: “Last time when I woke up from participating in your tea party I was in bed, so I don't really know, but what's happening with the passage of time? Or, in the first place is the world outside...”

Thinking that far, Subaru realises this isn't the time to be calmed down drinking some tea.

—Convulsing-from-shock Subaru hadn't confirmed when his RETURN BY DEATH had returned him to.

Heck he hadn't even confirmed where he'd returned to. The chair clatters as he stand up.

Subaru: "Echidna! Let me out of here right now!"

Echidna: "Leaving a witch's tea party without taking a single sip really is something incredible. You know, you best stop and consider just what exactly it is that's sitting here in front of—"

Subaru: "I don't have time to talk with you! Let me outside now! While we're doing this the outside's..."

Echidna: "You failed before by taking nothing, and now you're going to leave here empty-handed again... do you maybe want to repeat the same loss and pain?"

Subaru raises his voice at Echidna. Almost as if cooling him with water, Echidna asks her question in a voice with emotions frozen.

Subaru: "...au,"

Echidna: "Making challenges to procure results, is an action I commend. I believe that there's beauty in the method of producing results, be they desired or undesired, through trial and error. And I feel that doing that challenging without losing heart is something of great value and esteem. However,"

Echidna raises a finger at the silenced Subaru, her eyes narrowing.

Echidna: "Following the same path without reflecting on the previous results, to arrive at those same results... that sort of blasphemy on the accumulation of knowledge, and that sort of blasphemous, would be someone I'd scorn and want to divorce."

Subaru: "You..."

Echidna: "Incidentally, to answer your question... the present time outside is just after you overcame the tomb's first TRIAL. Fortunately, the flow of time outside differs from in here. I'm sure you won't be losing so much time just in having a cup of tea with me."

Echidna checks off the things Subaru wanted to know and could cause him concern one by one. The respawn point hasn't changed, which means currently he should be beside Emilia midway through her TRIAL. It's not that he's gulping down Echidna's saying wholesale, but having a third party tell him this does relieve his panic.

Subaru: "Echidna... How much do you know?"

Echidna: "If you mean knowing, then only as much as I know. If you mean want to know, then well I'd say I want to know everything in this world."

Subaru: "Stop pissing around, this is important. Like... right, you just said this is right after the first TRIAL, but..."

The first TRIAL—certainly feels distant. He parted with his parents, found Echidna in the empty school building, had a short QA session, and returned to reality. Too much stuff to even describe happened between then and now, but,

Subaru: “Ignoring that, that means this reunion's happening immediately after we parted...”

Echidna: “Yup. It's a given in real time, but even in unbalanced personal time, the length since our parting was short. It only took us a couple minutes before seeing each other again.”

Just how much are you yearning for me? Is the kind of joke in Echidna's statement as she laughs. The joke washes off Subaru, expressionless. Echidna gives a disappointed shrug.

Echidna: “Seems you won't give me the reactions I want. Not getting what I expect has some frustration, some happiness too, a complex feeling to it.”

Subaru: “I'll give your complicated feminine heart a good lazy date when I have the time for it. Anyway...”

Echidna: “I do want to congratulate our quick reunion, and I think my mouth's gotten better at slipping. Well, maybe it was inevitable my feelings went off somewhere unexpected. After all,”

Echidna cuts off. Taking a quick spell, her black eyes glance sidelong at Subaru. For one instant, Subaru fails to grasp just what emotion was in that glimpse. But, Echidna welcomes Subaru's confusion with a beautiful, lovely smile.

Echidna: “Unlike me who parted a couple minutes ago with you, from your perspective this reunion comes with hours—no, days—inbetween.”



Repeating Echidna's words in his head, Subaru can come to only one conclusion.

Between her speaking, her meaningful look and smile, there is no way he could be wrong. She—the witch knew. She knew the leftovers of futures, supposedly left over nowhere in the world, that Subaru's soul had accumulated.

Subaru: “How!?”

Echidna: “Here's how I'll answer that question. Because this is my castle, and I'm the WITCH OF GREED. I suppose I haven't shown you it yet.”

Echidna tilts her head and sticks out her right hand. Light gathers above her palm, eventually taking form—producing a single, pure-white tome. It has no title or anything else written on it, and is about as big as a dictionary. Ignoring that it's white enough to pain the eyes, the thing brings back nothing but bad memories for Subaru.

Subaru: “That couldn't... isn't a GOSPEL, right?”

Echidna: “Oop, I wouldn't have to rely on this book, with how much your expression's telling me what you're thinking. It's an expression of 'YOU TOO, HUH?'. You could probably make several guesses on what experiences you've had outside on that alone, but...”

Echidna opens the book and gives it a read, nodding along as she follows the text.

Echidna: “Mmhmhm,”

Echidna: “I see, I understand the gist. There's some parts I can't follow completely, but it'll be fine compensating those by reading you. ...Mm, incredibly fine. There's this sensation of filling in the missing pieces, and indescribable anticipation of approaching the answer. Exactly because this exists, is there indeed meaning in living!”

Subaru: “...you're dead though.”

Says Subaru, making a jab at a fired-up Echidna. Echidna fiddles with her hair, sulking.

Echidna: “Even when it's true, raining on parades like that does kill motivation. Anyway, let's ease your worries. ...This book is different from the GOSPELS or whatsits in your memory. What it writes isn't the future or the optimum solution. Only truth.”

Subaru: “Truth?”

Echidna: “If you could consider the GOSPELS an assembling of prophecies, then maybe you should call this one I have a history text. Not limited to the shape of a book, vast in its vagueness and ambiguity, not any book at all, indeed in all a book, of any book potential to be, of any book potentially being... this whose white pages write merely the truth was 400 years ago called the BOOK OF WISDOM. But, here's what I call it.”

Subaru goes silent.

Echidna: “—the Memories of the World.”

If this incredible appellation is accurate, any reader of this book could figure out any thing about any topic, so long as the event described occurred in the past. For purposes of gathering information indeed this is a stupid fucking crazy cheat.

Echidna: “Though, I don't really like relying on it. After all, the information burns directly into the reader's memory. This grimorie flies past the process of WILL KNOW, overwriting it as HAVE KNOWN. —As far as my inquisitive self is concerned, judging the value of a book which flies past the process of knowing is certainly difficult.”

Subaru: “You can always give it to me if you don't need it. There's plenty of ways I could use it. Actually, if I had that then finding starts to solving problems'd...”

Echidna: “You better stop there unless you want to be a cripple.”

Echidna sticks the MEMORIES OF THE WORLD in Subaru's face.

Echidna: “Even if it looks harmless, it's still a witch's tool. The load of information it burns into the reader's brain is too much for an ordinary person to compute. Not reading it is safe.”

Subaru: “Then don't shove it in people's faces, that's horrifying!”

Subaru shoves the grimorie away, Echidna gives another wave of her hand and it transforms into particles of light. Knowing about this thing, Subaru comprehends Echidna's information load. With this grimorie, you can indeed decrease the number of THINGS YOU DON'T KNOW down to the absolute minimum. That Echidna doesn't choose to do this might just be due to thinking particular

to witches.

Subaru: “But, knowing about that does make things quick. Echidna. My circumstances... where I Re...”

RETURN BY DEATH, is what he's about to say, when his throat freezes.

But this isn't due to the penalty that occurs when he attempts to say the forbidden words. Echidna waits quietly, hair swaying in the wind, for Subaru to continue.

The more he feels that behaviour isn't very witchly, and is rather considerate, the quicker his pulse pounds and more leaden his tongue gets.

What's freezing Subaru's voice is one of the primal emotions—terror.

Subaru: “Haaa... haa...”

Subaru has had several opportunities to speak the verboten words before.

Dwelling in Subaru was the authority RETURN BY DEATH.

Although difficult to judge whether calling that an authority was acceptable, Subaru's attempts to tell others about its circumstances would be forcibly hindered. By way of unwithstandable pain directly to the heart. And its fangs had once struck not upon Subaru, but Emilia.

Subaru would never forget the bereavement and grief from back then.

There were very few occasions he had wanted to die and disappear as much as then.

It's not that he's scared of the pain to his heart. Though of course pain is scary. But if that was a necessary damage for the sake of reeling in the desired future, he would talk his throat hoarse and bear it.

What's Subaru's scared of is that those black fingers will aim not at him, but perhaps at someone else.

It won't, thinks Subaru, shaking his head.

During the fight with the White Whale, and during the fight with Betelgeuse, Subaru had voiced the forbidden words while other people were around. He had been dragged into absurdity, his attempt to reveal the truth interrupted, and then been tossed out of the time-stopped world. So he had never been asked about it.

The black witch's hands had never made a sacrifice of anyone who sought the continuation of those words.

—Except Emilia.

The memory comes back of the silver-haired girl in his arms, considerably lighter.

If he was going to experience that feeling of loss again, it would this time for sure be unbearable.

He was impressed he hadn't gone insane. Not going insane after killing Emilia and walking around holding her corpse was quite the impressive thing.

That's how sinful it was. That's how terrifying it was.

Thus terror grips Subaru, and makes him hesitate to speak.

Before him is the witch, Echidna. Compared to Emilia, his relationship with her is ludicrously shallow. Were Echidna's heart crushed, Subaru would likely not experience as much despair or

bereavement as he had back then—was his horrifically mercenary prediction.

That Subaru regardless doesn't move is due to the conditions this time being excessively different, and his unease for the unpredictable result is strong.

When speaking to people ignorant of RETURN BY DEATH, the forbidden words inflicted pain on Subaru's heart.

When he attempted to reveal the truth of RETURN BY DEATH to someone important to him, the forbidden words crushed the heart of said precious someone.

So what would happen if Subaru attempted to reveal the truth to somebody who had figured out RETURN BY DEATH by different means?

Would the suffering end only with Subaru, or would the witch's hand aim for the being before him as well?

Echidna: “You should try it.”

Subaru: “—!?”

Echidna: “Action is priceless for procuring the desired result. I'm not going to change from that stance. It's exactly in those actions and proceeds that I believe there's value in living.”

The result of Subaru's indecision. Otherwise she isn't aware the damage could target her. —No, she definitely did.

The witch had most likely seen through what Subaru was worrying about. And she also knew that the outcome of trying was unclear. That she nevertheless voiced those words was because she believed what she said entirely.

Subaru: “You might not get time to regret it.”

Echidna: “I'll expect you to break down crying beside my corpse for me.”

Says Echidna cheerily. Probably, her attitude is her consideration to stop any superfluous circumstances from getting in the way of Subaru's decision.

Subaru figures her sincerity's more for gaining results through the decision, than for compassion toward Subaru himself.

She wasn't expecting of him and wasn't asking of him. She pushes Subaru's back along while only desiring simple possibility—the possibility of an answer.

She lives in a way that possesses not a scrap a doubt for her raison d'etre. He knows it's not possible to live on that, but he regardless feels saved by that strength.

Subaru: “Echidna. I've RETURNED BY DEATH—”

He voices the forbidden words—

And that instant, the world—

CHAPTER 45: CONDITION FOR THE TEA PARTY

Subaru: “—before.”

Eyes closed firm, Subaru grits his teeth in anticipation of the coming fingers of pain. But,

Subaru: “...huh?”

Nothing happens.

Subaru: “...hrm.”

Subaru raises his head, stroking his chest to confirm there's nothing strange going on there. Echidna sits opposite him with her legs crossed as she has been, her brows knitting slightly. Subaru hurriedly peers over at her, but there's no obvious changes in her, either. Her breathing, mannerisms, are all normal. Predicting the worst of possibilities, Subaru focuses on her chest region.

Echidna: “I don't know if I can answer to your expectations, but personally I'm not that confident in my chest size. If I were more like Sekhmet or Minerva, I could surely experience the bodily fault so known as back pain. ...Speaking inquisitively, on that factor it's a disappointment.”

Subaru: “...That's not why I'm ogling. No, I mean nevermind that.”

Subaru replies to Echidna's natural flow with his thinking still stopped. He puts his palm to his mouth, frantically getting the emotion out of his near-trembling voice.

Subaru: “I... When I die, I go back in time, and re-do the world. I've RETURNED BY DEATH.”

Echidna: “I heard. And before that I read. I see, they're definitely rare circumstances.”

Says Echidna casually, nodding. But her demeanour in itself is shockingly irregular to Subaru. The pain of the hands, inflicted upon either Subaru himself or upon another, had bound him with unshakable trauma. Thus, attempting to 'TEST' with it was something impossible for him. If Echidna hadn't pushed him along, he probably would've hesitated and not gone through with it. That's how huge this was. But then it so easily just—

Subaru: “Why won't the hand come?”

Echidna: “It almost sounds as if you're disappointed it won't. If so, then it's like you're frustrated you missed the opportunity to kill me, ouch.”

Subaru: “You should at least know that's not what I...!”

Echidna: “Yes, I know. Your heart has so little leeway that you're this cornered?”

Echidna's casual attitude doesn't falter as she ignores the emotions of a Subaru wavering in shock. Unable to suppress his irritation for her, Subaru clicks his tongue and sharpens his gaze further.

Subaru: “Answer clearly. You—no matter how many times I say 'I've RETURNED BY DEATH', that hand... the Witch's hand won't come? I can think that?”

Echidna: “Then you understand it's the Witch's hand. ...Yes, you can. This is my dream, my castle.

My fantasy during my death. Nobody can trespass without my permission.”

Subaru: “Can you assure that?”

Echidna: “Certainly cautious. —I do assure it. The witches capable of existing here are GREED, GLUTTONY, LUST, PRIDE, WRATH, and SLOTH only. There's no room for ENVY to cut in.”

Subaru holds his breath, and after a short period, strength leaves him. His shoulders fall, he lowers his face, and gives a long, long sigh.

Subaru: “Right... right, ri... right...”

Covering his face with his hands, Subaru repeats the word over and over. In confirmation, grasping, clinging. After all, this was the first time he had ever been freed from the witch's fingers, and able to speak about the taboo.

Echidna: “You sure make some pretty emotional expressions.”

Says Echidna as she watches endless waves of emotion toss Subaru about. She passes her finger through her hair.

Echidna: “That's just how much it's been tormenting you, would be the situation. With a love that intractable pointed at you, that's also kinda inevitable.”

Subaru: “Sorry, I'm just a little overwhelmed. I'll calm down. ...Okay. Calmed down. Calmed down, and now there's some things I want to talk about. Piles of things I want to talk about.”

The restraints on talking about RETURN BY DEATH aren't in operation. It comes with a feeling of liberation—of a ray of hope cutting into this constrained stalemate. HOWEVER

Echidna: “There's something you're misunderstanding.”

Subaru: “—?”

Echidna: “Indeed the witch-hand binding you can't intervene in this castle of mine. So I do understand your heart's jubilation at getting to disclose secrets you couldn't reveal to others. But you know... whether I lend you an ear, or say conveniently assist you, or offer you advice on these circumstances of yours, would be a completely separate problem?”

Subaru: “wh...”

Subaru shuts his mouth, Echidna looking as if what she said was completely normal. Subaru can't hide his confusion and discouragement at her unexpected reaction. His gaze putters about as unintelligible little mutters slips from his mouth. The light he saw, the liberation he anticipated, had escaped from his side. What should he do? He didn't know.

Echidna: “Seeing you looking like an abandoned child does trouble me. I didn't mean to make that tricky of a demand.”

Expression troubled, Echidna tilts her head as she taps her finger on the table thrice. Subaru's gaze follows the path of her settled finger—to the untouched cup set before him.

Echidna: “You were invited to a witch's tea party. If you're planning to have a lively conversation over tea, shouldn't you first prove you accepted the invitation?”

Subaru: “...underst—anding is hard with you, you know.”

Echidna: “I thought I pointed this out extraordinarily clearly right at the beginning, though.”

Thinking back on it Echidna did voice some dissatisfaction at Subaru getting all excited and not reading the tea party mood. Although you could call her revenge for that just a little bit too mean.

Subaru: “Understood, fuck!”

Subaru snatches the cup off the table and downs the amber bodily fluids in one go. Although time was supposed to have passed since the cup was laid out, the insides are still a good temperature—truly, befitting of a witch's tea party.

He gulps it down faster than he can taste it. He wipes away the droplets at his lips.

Subaru: “There, drank it all. Now're you interested in accepting me as a member of the tea party?”

Echidna: “Drink my body fluids so vigorously, and... yup, I'm flushed.”

Subaru: “EeuGHhh I forgot—!”

Subaru again trips the Chidna Tea Trap which caught him before. He puts his hand to his mouth trying to bear the nausea as Echidna looks at him cheerily. She smiles.

Echidna: “You're accepted.”

Echidna: “With your inquiry of 'why' as the qualifier, you have opened the door to the tea party. And in drinking tea presented by a witch, you are an outstanding participant. As head of the tea party, it is my obligation to welcome you. —Now, please do ask.”

Echidna gives a small clap, curiosity blazing in her eyes.

Echidna: “Since addling brains to produce an answer, as far as I'm concerned, is rapture.”



—The tea party, or perhaps better said the QA session, begins.

Subaru: “The agent for my RETURN BY DEATH... would be the Witch of ENVY, right?”

Echidna: “That understanding's more or less correct. Though, since I haven't observed you die, I wouldn't know the mechanism behind RETURN BY DEATH. And since you can't lose your life in this castle of mine, that condition's not being fulfilled.”

Subaru: “There's no dying here?”

Echidna: “This is a fleeting dream, a temporary perch for the mind alone. Do you think that when you die in nightmares you also die in reality?”

Subaru: “Do sorta feel if the dream's really horrific you could die of shock...”

Lots of fictional works have premises where you if you die in a dream you die in real life. Taking them as precedents, Subaru figures it wouldn't be too weird for deaths in a witch's mental realm to connect back to the flesh, but.

Subaru: “Well, it's weird to insist that you should die after being told you won't. Anyway, I can be an idiot here without worrying about dying.”

Echidna: “If your mind is shredded apart before returning to your body, you still might end up as an invalid.”

Subaru: “Being a living corpse's the same as being dead... but the part where there's no RETURNING BY DEATH makes that condition the worse!”

Subaru had once come to the verge of mental breakdown during the loops in the Capital. Was he running on self-preservation instinct, or just pretending his ego had broken? Even now he wasn't entirely sure which, but either way, he regained himself out of rage. That said Subaru senses that if his mind breaks here, it won't be something shock therapy can cure.

Subaru: “Really have to decline a condition where you can't willingly choose the timing of your death. ...Though of course what's really best is not to die.”

Echidna: “The ability to consider DEATH as a tool for procuring your conditions to victory is something even I'm uncertain of my stance towards. Not even I have observed my own DEATH, and I can't amass it in my store of knowledge.”

Subaru: “...? But you're dead and a ghost, wouldn't you remember your death?”

Echidna: “Not quite. My body, the vessel for my soul, is indeed dead and gone. But, my soul was sealed by Volcanica before it could meet death.”

Subaru: “...Basically, your body died but your soul didn't. Since your substance has never died, it's a little different from actually experiencing DEATH?”

Echidna: “That'd be it. And while this is probably an inconsiderate thought, I'm jealous of your situation. The ability to observe my own death—and not even just once, given multiple times to savour it—surely wouldn't be permitted to me.”

Subaru: “...depending how you hear it that line was some crazy masochism. You know, I have never been able to feel good while welcoming death even once.”

Subaru's actions have ended in DEATH before, and far as he's concerned all those ends amounted to was proof he had failed to achieve his goal. His aversive feelings toward DEATH weren't weakening, and hadn't changed since even before he'd experienced it. Although he wouldn't deny that he'd gotten somewhat accustomed to, and was capable of, facing it.

Echidna: “Your DEATH allows you to re-do. Well, this power forbidding you the peace of DEATH is almost unmistakably a thing of ENVY. When did you notice?”

Subaru: “I've had lots of people thoroughly tell me things implying there was a connection. I

sincerely have no memory of meeting face-to-face with the Mighty Green-Eyed Witch before... But when the name's coming up just everywhere, I can at least imagine that maybe that's the HAND MODEL who keeps showing up.”

Two arms, and the faint outline of a body Subaru had come to see in the form of a black shadow. Although inflicting pain on Subaru when he spoke the forbidden words, it also acted lovingly toward him. Pain, love, it was sadistic spuriousness that Subaru was not grateful for in the slightest.

Subaru: “I've got no clue why she's so bothered like that about someone she's never met. ...Do you know?”

Echidna: “Now, just who could say. It wouldn't just be me, I doubt there's anyone out there who could comprehend her mindset. Even if I hypothetically could, I'd decline.”

Subaru: “For someone who wants to know everything in this world, you're pretty unsparing toward the Witch of ENVY. Er, or if you consider the damage she did maybe that's normal.”

Even the knowledgeable and transcended Witch of GREED can't escape from her feelings. Subaru can't help feeling sort of hopeless about that.

Echidna: “Looks like you're overestimating me. I might be a witch, but I started as a human. I can't escape from my emotions, or my likes and dislikes, or from the strengths and weaknesses of who I interact with. Though, I'll brag that my permissible range is pretty big compared to the other witches.”

Subaru: “Well you say you have endless interest in others, and if you're fussy about people's preferences you won't get to peacefully satisfy your curiosity.”

Echidna: “That's right. So I'm capable of pardoning most beings. No matter how unsightly and vulgar the being is, there's reason for me to endeavour to understand its mindset. That is, to satisfy my want to know everything. But.”

Echidna cuts herself off, her expression changing as she lowers her head slightly. For the first time her mouth twists in clear displeasure—and anger.

Echidna: “That Witch of ENVY's the exception. I'm not pardoning her, or endeavouring for her. I have never, between the time I was alive, time I've been dead, and my glimpses of the MEMORIES OF THE WORLD, seen a being so unforgivable.”

Subaru: “...That's not just coming from being killed. With that anger.”

Echidna: “Death doesn't hold that much significance to me. When you consider that I'm here like this. Just, she did something I consider more unbearable than that. I believe every action out there is an effort taken to procure results, but... even so, I will absolutely never accept it.”

She says gloomily, closing her eyes and shaking her head. Just by that, all omens of rage vanish from her face, and up bubbles her usual observing smile.

Echidna: “Let's not talk about the witch. I have conjectures regarding the principles of your RETURN BY DEATH, but nothing definite.” something something and that's a problem that won't influence your death at all. “Do you maybe have questions on anything except its origins?”

Subaru: “Except its origins...”

Having the root of RETURN BY DEATH so easily affirmed actually makes Subaru wind up deliberating. Putting the machinations of its originator aside, Subaru was aware he was helpfully using the power of this authority housed in him, or otherwise being used. Loathe to say it, but without this power, there were multiple outcomes Subaru wouldn't have procured. And he'd most likely have to rely on it again in the future. Thus,

Subaru: “—Do you think my power RETURN BY DEATH has limited uses?”

Echidna: “Hrm... I see. That's a natural question to reach, knowing you can re-do by DEATH.”

As far as Subaru can remember off-hand, he's already died 16 times in this world.

All of them were agonizing and filled with loss, but in having them, Subaru returned and redid the world. That said, even after having acquired desired results, DEATH always came with the terror that this one might really be the last time.

Exactly because it was a world he couldn't get through without this power, losing it would give him a feeling of powerlessness. Until the instant that RETURN BY DEATH hit, Subaru wouldn't know whether he would end or not.

Echidna: “This is incredibly nothing more than my speculation, is how I'll preface this. I have some broad predictions on the principles of your RETURN BY DEATH. I'd first like your permission to talk going off those estimations.”

Subaru: “...Sure, please tell me.”

Echidna: “Your RETURN BY DEATH. We'll assume that it's under a fixed limitation, but the limit on tries is—”

Subaru swallows his breath.

The few seconds between that last word and the next feel like an eternity.

Echidna: “—most likely, none.”

Subaru goes silent.

Echidna: “There is no end for you in DEATH. You're permitted to die how many times you want, decay as many times you want, your soul going back in time to re-do events until you defeat the fate that brought about the DEATH. No matter how brutally killed, or how broken your mind and body are, too.”

Hearing Echidna's theory, Subaru's head fills with complete blankness. If that blankness was a baptism, then the next thing to begin filling his emptied head was—

Subaru: “—I, see.”

A quiet acceptance of reality, and a frantic attempt to control his body's trembling.

He puts his hand to his mouth, lowers his head, and closes his eyes. He's not out of sorts, but there's no visible relief at finding out RETURN BY DEATH is unlimited, either. Echidna's brows furrow.

Echidna: “You don't look nearly as surprised as I thought.”

Subaru says nothing.

Echidna: “As far as I'm concerned... no, as anyone is concerned, the ability to overturn the finality of DEATH should be something exceedingly huge. And that's without touching on your powerlessness, while the obstacles in your way are overly severe. I kinda thought you'd react more.”

Subaru: “Sorry for the bad reaction, and not answering your expectations... but...”

Infinite retries OK—was one of the optimistic theories Subaru had already made about RETURN BY DEATH. Thus having someone else affirm it doesn't absolutely surprise him. Doesn't, but,

Subaru: “I'm not going to be a complete moron immediately swallowing that down going I CAN DIE AS MUCH AS I WANT!? THIS LIFE IN A PARALLEL WORLD IS EASYMODE!”

Echidna: “You already figured my speculation and saw ahead. Surprisingly, seems you're a quicker thinker than I thought. We'll leave aside whether that's a good or bad thing.”

Subaru: “Every time I RETURN BY DEATH... or saying more, every time I try to reveal the truth and feel the Witch's presence near me, I can tell that black shadow is coming closer.”

The first shadow Subaru saw when he voiced the forbidden words was a single arm touching his heart. But every time he repeated that action, the visible parts of the shadow steadily became more and more distinct, and now he could faintly see its entire body.

What would happen from now on, if the shadow's form became even clearer?

Subaru: “My limit on RETURN BY DEATH is hit once it takes definite form. Once that shadow becomes real, I don't think I'll be able to reject it.”

Echidna: “Hrm, and your basis for this?”

Subaru: “Gut.”

Echidna's eyes snap open wide.

Subaru rests his elbow on the table, hand on chin, looking up at Echidna.

Subaru: “It's really a feeling only people who've met the shadow can understand. If there was anyone except me who understood it...”

It'd probably just be Betelgeuse.

Subaru's chest gives an emotional twinge. Echidna narrows her eyes as if peering into Subaru, but immediately gives a shrug.

Echidna: “That I can't understand this feeling of yours is bothering me, but that does generally accord with my speculation. Your RETURN BY DEATH has no limit. However, that is set under fixed conditions.”

Subaru: “Fixed, conditions?”

Echidna: “What causes you to RETURN BY DEATH is a witch's spurious delusions. So long as the root of those delusions remains unsundered, meeting the end is forbidden to you.”

Subaru: “Root of delusions... meaning?”

Echidna: “Killing the witch who's so attached to you, or the witch's love for you running dry... Though from what I've seen, you could call either one the ultimate in difficulty.”

Slaying the Witch of ENVY—the 400-year wish of the world that not even the Dragon, Sage, and Sword Saint's cooperation had managed to grant.

This Witch of ENVY, who coated half the world in shadow, was not completely killed and instead sealed. What Echidna's saying means surpassing this laudable achievement.

Subaru: “Feels like going for love running out'd be so much easier..”

Echidna: “Can't you just kinda tell that that is absolutely not going to happen?”

Subaru goes silent.

Echidna: “There's that feeling that only you understand, having met the witch's shadow. But me, knowing what that thing used to be like, inevitably has to think so.”

Echidna's expression is disgusted. Seems this antagonism toward the Witch of ENVY is so deep-rooted that it intensified over these 400 years, rather than lessened.

Unable to completely deny what Echidna's saying, Subaru gives a sigh out his nose and leans back on the chair. Just like Echidna said, Subaru sees no hope of the Witch of ENVY letting him go.

He had also never thought he'd be loved this blindly by a person whose face he didn't know and who he had never really met. And by someone who literally destroyed half the world.

Echidna: “You sure accept things easily.”

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Echidna: “Saying this's something, but all we've been talking about is a bundle of my speculation. I can't show basis for it, and I figured this'd be far too little material for you to just believe it.”

Echidna closes an eye, apparently perplexed that Subaru swallowed down her opinions so easily. *Well, yes,* agrees Subaru.

Subaru's only known her a short while, and more importantly she's a WITCH. Considering that point alone, it would be no exaggeration to say there is not a single thing about her to inspire trust. But,

Subaru: “That's also my gut.”

Echidna: “...Gut.”

Subaru is aware that there is a part of him vaguely thinking that if Echidna says something, it's probably believable. Maybe because she was someone who inspired belief that she paid respect to knowledge. Although Subaru'd also noticed many times the defect where her thirst for knowledge

went too far and got into tastelessness or gossip.

Subaru: “Ignoring that, you're probably not lying—is how I'm thinking.”

Echidna: “...Is that also your gut?”

Subaru: “Yeah. Gut. Though, it's the gut of a guy who's died sixteen times, so the argument'd end by just calling it unreliable.”

Scratching his head, Subaru eases the atmosphere with a self-deprecating joke. Echidna holds her breath, then reaches for a cup on the table, brings it to her lip, wets her tongue.

Echidna: “You might just have a talent for flirting with witches.”

For the first time, the smile she gives looks something earnest.

CHAPTER 46: LOCUSTS

Faced with that smile, for the first time, Subaru sincerely thinks: *Man, Echidna is cute.*

There's no cynicism or calculating nature to it, it's purely a thing born from goodwill towards Subaru.

Having an individual as undeniably attractive as Echidna interact so warmly toward any man would be enough to open their heart. Though of course, for a Subaru whose heart was already harbouring two girls, it's not enough to push aside his feelings.

Subaru: "But still, there really was some heartflutter there..."

Echidna: "What was that you said?"

Subaru: "That it's gonna be problematic for me even if I do have witch-flirting talents. And having someone I don't remember flirting with getting attached to me... Ah, but I mean I'd be glad if you're saying you six witches'll help me outside without making any mischief."

Averting his face and piling up bullshit, Subaru spouts that overly convenient idea. He's seen a fragment of Typhon and Minerva's power, but that's enough to gather that they're more than likely strong as fuck in the domains of offence and healing.

Echidna: "Unfortunately, while during my lifetime would be one thing, my posthumous self can't interfere with reality. Inviting you to a dream world like this truly is an exception."

Subaru: "Igottit. Just saying it for the sake of trying. Honestly, just having you listen to me is way more than enough of a lifesaver."

Or at least by cutting loose on what he'd been holding, he'd distanced himself from mental breakdown. He also managed to clear away some suspicions he had about the Witch of ENVY. He'd just not think about the part where they didn't solve the mystery for now.

Subaru: "Can I ask another question about RETURN BY DEATH?"

Echidna: "These are incredibly questions that my knowledge can only give speculation about. If you're fine with that, sure."

Says Echidna as a preface, putting on some big-shot airs. But perhaps fundamentally excited to be answering questions, or unable to wait for Subaru to speak, her feet tap the ground in a quick rhythm as she fiddles with her hair.

Subaru: "When I RETURN BY DEATH, it happens that the point where I revive from DEATH shifts. It's been... six places, now? I've revived in different places at their respective different times. I want to know the conditions for that save point changing."

Echidna: "Sayhv poiynt... alteration in site of revival, then?"

Subaru: "Fundamentally, once I've gone past one, I can't go back to the previous point. If two days ago was the save point, and I go past it on yesterday, I can't return to the save point from two days ago any more. Do you know what the mechanism is here?"

Subaru faces this problem with the same, or even more, seriousness that he had about RETURN BY

DEATH's limitation on tries. Save point modifications—a complete unknown with no visible conditions or consistencies.

Subaru: “I can return after dying. I don't intend to impose on that and think I can die as much as I want. I don't intend to, but... when it's all I can rely on, I'll rely on it without hesitation. But.”

What should Subaru do after getting into a situation he can't recover by dying?

Skirting through his mind is the image, unconscious and sleeping in the mansion, of Rem. Subaru's RETURN BY DEATH couldn't bring her back. He would never forget the time that he stabbed himself through the throat at her bedside.

Even now Subaru couldn't believe he had the will to commit suicide that hastily. Or no, it was exactly because he had lost will that he had committed suicide.

Blood pouring from his throat, in a state of pain and suffocation, Subaru had lost his life.

And then he had opened his eyes to find himself returned only a handful of minutes prior to his stabbing himself. He had never loathed a save point change as much as then.

If it would mean settling things without losing Rem, Subaru would challenge the White Whale and the madman as many times it took.

Echidna: “Can you tell me in detail the circumstances of those sayhv poiynt changes?”

Subaru: “Uh, uh-huh... right. Well, so the first save point...”

Subaru gets into recollecting and explaining the place and timing of the save points, and the chronology of the RETURNS BY DEATH between them. That is to say, he explains the majority of his experiences during his life in a parallel world thus far. Even though abridging it, getting through this overly-dense two months eats up what feels like an hour.

Subaru: “And now's inside the tomb... just after overcoming the first TRIAL is where's the save point's fixed. Going off what you said before, this time should be there too.”

Echidna says nothing.

Subaru: “You got anything? I had a silly theory going for a while about old guys being the save point, but...”

For some reason the fruit salesman in the Capital has been chosen as Subaru's save point twice. Though Subaru revival point's also been in front of Rem twice, so maybe that could count too.

Subaru: “It doesn't feel to me like it changes on people, or things, or time, or that kind of condition. If it's on time then the spans of days're inconsistent, and even if it is on people or events I can't see any points in common. The conditions aren't clear in the slightest.”

Echidna: “Indeed, even from my perspective I can't see any consistency off what you've said. Meaning, perhaps what's necessary is for us to change our thinking.”

Subaru: “Change our thinking?”

Echidna: “There's some reason why you return to a place... is a sort of thinking that isn't giving us

an answer. Then, let's try with first reaching a reason we can overcome, and surmounting that.”

Subaru: “Reaching a reason we can overcome?”

Echidna: “Depending how you consider it, this sayhv poiynt is less of a SITE OF RETURN and more a BLOCKADE RETURNED TO. A blockade that, until overcome, pulls you back to it through DEATH. You could also call it a pit.”

Subaru knits his brows, thinking over the meaning of what she's saying.

A blockade, otherwise a pit. By returning to save points through RETURN BY DEATH, Subaru had changed several situations he otherwise couldn't defeat. Or rather, situations that would have ended unsurmounted were it not for RETURN BY DEATH.

With each change in situation, the save point for RETURN BY DEATH had changed.

Subaru: “Every time the situation I can't change changes, RETURN BY DEATH shifts?”

Echidna: “In this situation, RETURN BY DEATH is nothing more than a means. If we question what motives that mean carries, the answer would be in the thinking of the being causing it.”

Subaru: “The being causing it, is...”

Echidna nods at a Subaru lost for words, giving a peeved frown.

Echidna: “The Witch of ENVY. The witch causing you to RETURN BY DEATH desires that situations you can't surmount without meeting DEATH change. And every time you overcome those situations, the sayhv poiynt alters.”

Subaru: “B-but... then, there's something I can't... agree. I mean, that's... what about Rem. I can't save her. If RETURN BY DEATH is a power to change situations, then why to a time where I can't rescue...”

It was RETURN BY DEATH that overwrote his save point and made Subaru lose the chance to save Rem.

Exactly because that happened has Subaru been so finicky about save point changes.

Echidna: “Unfortunately,”

Echidna: “Maybe the Witch of ENVY just hasn't considered this Rem you speak of.”

Subaru goes silent.

Echidna: “What the Witch of ENVY desires is incredibly your escape from cornered, dead-end fates. RETURN BY DEATH is a means for that, and the damages done to those except you don't factor in. Using the power to save people is entirely your desire. It's got nothing to do with the witch.”

Subaru: “au...”

Echidna: “I'll state it clearly.”

Subaru looks up at Echidna, a weak light in her pupils. She closes her eyes once, as if bearing pain, then pierces through Subaru with her gaze.

Echidna: “Until you conquer the problem in your way and change your future of death, your soul will assuredly return to my tomb. But hypothetically, if you permit many sacrifices, and from that grounding the future changes...”

Subaru: “—The chance to take back those sacrifices won't be coming.”

Echidna: “...That's what it'd be.”

The only one the Witch of ENVY is really taking into consideration is Subaru. Everything is trifling to her outside of Subaru overcoming a fate of DEATH. No matter how stalemated he is, she believes that infinite retries will eventually uncover a path for him alone to survive. Or no, even if it's hopeless Subaru wouldn't be allowed to give up.

Because all the conditions for RETURN BY DEATH are in the Witch of ENVY's hands.

Subaru: “Right then... if your favouritism's only for me, my mind's made up.”

Echidna goes silent.

Subaru: “I'm gonna abuse the crap out of this gift you gave me, RETURN BY DEATH. And on the tail of that, I'll get to where you are without losing a single thing. I've decided. It's decided. That's what I'll do. I'm the best there is at making other's plans go wrong.”

If RETURN BY DEATH is by the will of the Witch, its usage is determined by the will of Subaru. So he'll pile it up, overcome, grab everything and get out the other side.

If the Witch's love would only save Subaru, then Subaru would save everything else. He achieves this, and for the first time, Natsuki Subaru will have one over on the Witch.

Subaru: “Changes in situation... meaning, breaking through the problem in SANCTUARY and the problem in the mansion. If those are cleared, then the point for RETURN BY DEATH will change no matter how many casualties there were. So if there's going to be a situation clear, overcoming the problems while preserving everything is an absolute condition.”

Echidna: “Me saying this is pretty something, but don't you think that's rather tough? Though, you certainly did accept it easily.”

Subaru: “Just putting in writing something I thought was pretty vague. Doesn't break my spirit, in fact here's firing up my motivation. This rebellious heart of mine is flaring.”

Echidna is speechless.

Taking some satisfaction in her stupefaction, Subaru clicks his neck.

Subaru: “This's all I'm gonna get on RETURN BY DEATH. Either way, that did help, thanks.”

Echidna: “...Since I also had a valuable conversation and sated my curiosity. There really isn't any give and take to be had on that. Because this was more me just stating speculation than flaunting my knowledge.”

Subaru: “Then, this time I'll be relying right on that knowledge of yours.”

Subaru: “I just RETURNED BY DEATH... do you know how I died this time?”

Echidna: “I haven't looked over that part, so I haven't seen it. I'm incredibly interested in your tellings of these multiple deaths you've had... but doesn't look like you're in the mood for that right now.”

Subaru: “Talking tales 'bout wounds and deaths's impossible without being boozed. And the only thing around here's Chinda Tea so that hope's not happening.”

Echidna: “Shame. ...Looking at the condition of your body outside, it seems considerable mental and physical anguish came along with this death... with this end.”

Her laying off on the term 'death' might be her form of being considerate. Subaru's cheeks loosen slightly at the consideration, but he immediately stiffens his expression and nods.

Subaru: “Yeah,”

Subaru: “Just remembering it gives me shakes, but... this time, I was eaten.”

Echidna goes silent.

Subaru: “And by these stupid, tiny little hand-size rabbits. Apparently omnivores, and apparently hungry. They gnawed my whole body with not a part to spare.”

His phrasing softens it, but there really is no describing that atrocity. The memories of teeth biting him, his flesh and bones and blood being violated, still now asserts its existence in a deep part of Subaru's mind. He forces it back down, managing to keep his calm. Echidna puts the back of her hand to her lips.

Echidna: “...Encountered the Sizeable Hare, is what happened.”

Subaru: “Sizeable hares?”

Echidna: “Not in size, in quantity. A sizeable number of hares also said the Sizeable Hare. A part of the Witch of GLUTTONY Daphne's unpropitious legacy—one of the three.”

Subaru: “The Sizeable Hare is...”

The name of one of the three witchbeasts Echidna, and also Julius, had mentioned before. White Whale, Blacksnake, and the Sizeable Hare. All of them being witchbeasts terrorizing the world for 400 years, and all subordinate to the Witch of GLUTTONY Daphne.

Subaru: “Just when I think the White Whale's down, instantly here's the Sizeable Hare please don't...”

Echidna: “If the Sizeable Hare's your enemy, your enemy is beyond terrible.”

Echidna's expression is dark, giving Subaru a bad feeling.

Subaru: “There was this anxiety with the White Whale, too, but... which one's worse?”

Echidna: “Comparing purely by combat strength, almost definitely the White Whale. But if we're talking about which is harder to destroy, undoubtedly it's the Sizeable Hare.”

Subaru: “Hard to destroy...”

Echidna: “Listening?”

Echidna raises a finger.

Echidna: “You may be thinking that it's the same as a normal witchbeast, an opponent that's just a little more troublesome than usual.”

Subaru: “No, I've at least figured out they don't match up with their loveable appearance...”

Echidna: “The Sizeable Hare, more accurately, would be a natural disaster. Always moving in a drove, a bundle of instincts operating only off insatiable hunger. Every creature there out there is its food, and there is not a single thing it does but consume. Once the Sizeable Hare has passed, all that remains is an unpopulated field. The crops and fruits suffer not a speck of damage. All it will eat is the living.”

Subaru swallows his breath. Echidna's expression is hard, and Subaru already knows what she's saying isn't exaggeration.

The depopulated SANCTUARY, and his body being eaten by a drove of tiny rabbits. If that was the Sizeable Hare, then the empty SANCTUARY was undoubtedly because everyone had been devoured by the witchbeast.

Emilia, Ram, Lewes, Roswaal, even tiger-form Garfiel—none would be exceptions.

Locusts—is the word that skims though Subaru's mind.

The result of grasshoppers undergone transformation, groups in huge numbers ravaging fields, considered crop-destroying famine-bringing natural disasters.

The Sizeable Hare behaved in a similar way.

Although, the hares consumed living creatures, and their inexhaustible hunger brought a far more directly life-threatening danger than a plague of locusts.

Subaru: “Do you know if it's possible to defeat them?”

Echidna: “Individually their strength isn't anything serious, but you best pay mind that that *thing* moves in a drove. There's no purpose in it no matter how many of them you repel, and if they spot prey even once, they won't stop until it's eaten or they're dead. They're HUNGER itself.”

Subaru: “Waitwaitwait. I mean, is there anything... like, if the Sizeable Hare moves in a drove, there should be some kind of boss leading the drove. Can you defeat the boss and the whole drove collapses?”

The rules of the human world state that if you eliminate the head, the group will fracture to nothing. Though considering the rules of the animal kingdom, maybe it just means the second-in-command would become the head.

That said, Subaru doesn't know the lifestyle of witchbeasts too well. All he can do is cling onto Echidna's knowledge. But she shakes her head.

Echidna: “You seem a little mistaken. The Sizeable Hare is a drove, but it knows no concept of boss. All that thing is is truly the instinct of HUNGER. It eats other creatures to sate its starvation, lacking any other mechanism to it. It multiplies by dividing, staving off hunger though cannibalism

when no prey is around. They don't even have a sense of fellowship.”

Subaru: “Cannibalism... wh-just why the fuck were these monsters made!?”

Echidna: “Now, that's something only the person who made them would know. Though at least Daphne herself doesn't have quite as much of an appetite as the Sizeable Hare.”

Subaru shivers at the hares' horrifying lifestyle.

Following instinct to eat other living beings and remain alive was a true principle for all creatures. Humans, animals, and even witchbeasts all seemed identical on that front.

But the Sizeable Hare, multiplying by its bodies dividing and propagating no young, wasn't even that. Far from it—leaving its numbers high after multiplying, the individuals would eat each other to stave off hunger, diverging far from the ordinary course. A monster.

Subaru: “Hypothetically... yeah, hypothetically if I were to destroy the Sizeable Hare, what do you think I should do?”

Echidna: “Honestly, I think that's a 'what should I do to evaporate all the droplets in a rainstorm?' kind of question.”

Subaru puts his hand to his forehead, dizzied at the height of this hurdle for defeating the Sizeable Hare.

Subaru: “The Sizeable Hare's still defeatable, if you kill all of them.”

Echidna: “That'd be pretty reckless. As far as I know, the only ones who could probably do it would be Reid Astrea and Sekhmet. Reid's overwhelming swordplay would kill them all with none remaining. Sekhmet... there's an affinity problem, but she'd destroy them in one second.”

Subaru: “Heard about these two before, but they really are monsters...”

Sekhmet arises in Subaru's mind. Subaru's impression of her being someone who considers every single action a fucking bother isn't going away, leaving her an entirely suitable witch for the title of SLOTH.

Subaru: “Hold on.”

Recalling his interaction with Sekhmet, a light appears inside Subaru.

A dim, flickering light, but it's more than enough to illuminate this dark dead-end, and it's something he absolutely needs Echidna's help for.

Subaru: “Echidna.”

Echidna: “What's that serious expression for? ...No, we can't. You're living and I'm dead. This fated intercourse of ours is merely temporary illusion, a transient dream. No matter how heated a gaze you pour upon me, I...”

Subaru: “Uh no, sorry for this while you're getting worked up but that's completely wrong. Seriously, completely wrong.”

Dumbfounded at a somewhat dejected Echidna, Subaru again enters the main topic.

Subaru: “Echidna, I want to meet the Witch of GLUTTONY—to meet Daphne.”

Echidna goes silent.

Subaru: “You let me meet the witches of PRIDE, WRATH, and SLOTH at this tea party before. You said back then that you were managing the other five witches or something like that.”

Echidna: “...Gathered, it was. Traces of who they were before death indeed are within me. If I were to disembark them from the vessel I am, yes it would be possible for them to manifest. Possible, but...”

Echidna's brows furrow, troubled. Her gaze putters about, eventually coming to look at Subaru, having trouble speaking.

Echidna: “I really think you better not meet Daphne.”

Subaru: “Why. I think I've already experienced over this period that witches are finicky, but I'm prepared. No matter what comes out, I won't regret it.”

Echidna: “Before we get to regretting, by my opinion, you and Daphne would have terrible affinity. Or you could even call it horrid. Even if you met her, a useful conversation wouldn't...”

Subaru: “Don't know until you try. It's trial and error—words you're apparently fond of.”

Taking action to procure results is something I approve, Echidna said.
Echidna gives a 'guh,' her expression looking as if jabbed in a sore spot.

Subaru: “And also,”

Subaru: “You're the one certifying I don't have to worry about my life in this place. Not saying I'm being optimistic, but if I at least don't have to worry about losing my life, there's no loss in trying.”

Echidna: “You realise I can't deny the possibly that your spirit will break and you'll be a cripple?”

Subaru: “I'm trusting you to pull me out before that happens. Come on, Echidna. When it comes to depending on others, I'm the best in the damn world.”

Subaru gives a thumbs up. Seeing his incredibly frivolous attitude, Echidna's eyes progressively lose their will to resist.

Echidna: “...All right. I'll let you meet Daphne.”

Subaru: “Yess, thanks.”

Echidna: “But let me just say this. Absolutely do not unfasten her restraints. And you're banned from touching her. Also I'd like you to try to avoid eye contact.”

Subaru: something seomthing following all those makes me mega creepo but okay!!!

Besides, Echidna's statement had some incredible words mixed in there.

Subaru goes to inquire about them—but Echidna finishes preparations before he can.

Same as last time, there is absolutely nothing foreshadowing it when Echidna prepares to present a witch. Subaru blinks, and in the space where Echidna was, is now a completely different person.

That's also the same as last time.

But,

Subaru: “Hold up... this, is...”

What appears before Subaru's eyes makes his cheeks stiffen.

There, in front of Subaru, is the Witch of GLUTTONY—Daphne.

—Inside a coffin, her entire body bound immobile in restraints, her eyes sealed behind a thick, black blindfold, is the witch-girl.

CHAPTER 47: PARTNER OF POOR AFFINITY

Subaru: “Poor affinity with me, but does anyone with good affinity here even exist!?”

Tsukommis Subaru at the completely restrained girl.

The Witch of GLUTTONY—or so purported—has appeared here before him.

The girl settled inside the slantways-standing coffin looks about 150 centimetres in height. Her shoulder-length grey hair is tied in pigtails. Pale and dainty, with a small chest—or really she still looks like a 13, 14 year old child.

Subaru: “Held stuck in restraints, and both eyes covered... agewise is a surprise, too...”

Anyone in her age group would yearn to have SUPERNATURAL ABILITIES BEYOND REACH OF THE ORDINARY MAN or DANGEROUS LATENT POWERS ORIGINATING FROM AN OUTSIDER, MY OWN WILL SEALED AWAY.

Thinking back on it, Subaru had also admired concealed-weapons users he'd read about in manga and put sewing needles in his school uniform, back in his middle-school years.

Subaru: “Well, after that time I fell over and got stabbed by needles everywhere I cried and stopped.”

Looking back on that episode of his dark history, wherein he had lacked anyone to even show his chuuni off to, Subaru has trouble deciding how to approach this witch. All the witches Subaru's met so far got their nutso first attacks off before Subaru could do anything, anyway.

But the witch in the coffin just sits there silent, not showing any reaction.

The start is critical, is the weight of the silence pressing down on a Subaru hesitating on how to cut the ice. If he at least knew whether she was friendly or unfriendly, he could choose whether to go for being buddy-buddy or go for being a trolly bitch.

Both waiting for the other to move, the quiet dominates the hilltop tea party.

Further eating away at Subaru is the overwhelming pressure radiating from the witch before him. Despite being immobilized and blinded, that this petite girl nonetheless exerts threat is perhaps truly fitting of a witch.

Echidna happily got him involved with the witches of PRIDE, WRATH, and SLOTH, but hesitated on this one.

Just how definitively different from the others was the Witch of GLUTTONY, Daphne?

Daphne: “...mn,”

Subaru: “—!?”

Brow sweaty from the stress, Subaru wipes his forehead to keep it out of his eyes—when Daphne moves, and Subaru shudders.

The neck of the coffin-bound girl stirs, her respiration reaching Subaru. Wondering what she'll do next, Subaru goes on full caution. And,

Daphne: “...zzzmnuh, mmn”

Subaru: “—You were sleeping!?!?”

Daphne: “—hnawhuh!?”

Subaru enters tsukkomi mode the instant he hears what sounds like sleeper's breathing. The grass gives a good crunch as he jumps up, the witch in the coffin startling awake at the sound and his voice. She shakes her head left and right, eyes yet sealed.

Daphne: “Wh-wha-at is it? There are peo-ple-who-are, slee-ping here...”

It's unclear if her floaty-toaty speech is due to her waking up, or if it's just a thing she does—but either way, the overwhelming pressure disappears.

Just me getting the wrong impression? Wonders Subaru, unable to hide his fatigue.

Subaru: “Y-yeah, my bad. I got kinda heated up. I didn't mean to yell.”

Daphne: “Umm, but getting startled like that, is ki-n-da a problem for me...”

Subaru: “Ghuh... I apologize. So please feel better. No getting mad.”

Daphne: “Uhm, but I'm not mad? Being mad means I'm go-ing-to-be, hung-ri-er. But an-y-way, just who are you?”

Daphne rejects his apology and immediately gets to casually asking her questions. The conversation's barely been two, three lines long, but the rhythm's already getting chaotic. Subaru gets the meaning of what Echidna said.

—This witch's pace for conversation doesn't match with Subaru's at all.

Sighing, Subaru gives a light shake of his head and expels his displeased expression, giving her the utmost in friendly smiles.

Subaru: “My name is Natsuki Subaru. Invited to the witch's tea party by Echidna for reasons, a... well, a tea-drinking friend. Yeah, something like that.”

Daphne: “Wow, so Idna-Idna has friends. Subaruun too, don't you think it's bet-ter-to choose your friends? If they hear-you're-friends, with-a-witch, your real friends and family, might, hate youu...”

Daphne starts running out of breath at the end, her shoulders heaving up and down inside the coffin, blatantly exhausted.

Subaru: “Hey,”

Subaru: “Why're you so tired out? Does that coffin drain the life out of whoever's inside, or something?”

Daphne: “Not really, no? I just get ti-red, ea-si-ly, or when my stomach's rumbling I have no strength, or... is there, some food, around, any, where... haa, haa...”

Subaru: “Panting just from having a conversation's like the peak of sickly children here... The table only has 'Chidna Tea and some cookies on it for food.”

They're more like cookie-ish mystery sweets. Considering the tea is Echidna's bodily fluids, the possibility exists that these cookies are also made of 'Chidna. Subaru had purposefully not gone for

them, but Daphne's reaction is extremely clear,

Daphne: “Cookies!?”

Daphne: “Y-ye, ye, yes, that's good. Good so, into my, stick-it in-my mouth, please. Hurry, now, hurrry...”

Subaru: “If you ignore where we are, that has incredible potential for misunderstandings so could you please be a little more careful!? Well, but I'm not enough of a sadist to make someone who wants it so much wait.”

Subaru picks up the plate of sweets, approaches Daphne's coffin, about to bring the cookies to her mouth. But, before he can—

Daphne: “Ah, but but but, Subaruun can you, wait for a mo-ment?”

Subaru: “Hrn? What. Just saying, the flavour's probably one of a kind. Doesn't look like there's chocolate in it so it's plain. If you're gonna say that's no good, all I can tell you is” nintama rantarou reference you must eat all the eggs.

Daphne: “That's not it... I know it's weird, to-say-this, when you're fee-ding me, but please don't get too close to me, Subaruun.”

Subaru: “That is a pretty damn tricky request when I'm feeding you, that!”

Daphne rights her posture inside the coffin somewhat.

Daphne: “Please don't mis-un-der-stand though, Subaruun, I don't think you're gross or hate you or find you just unbearable.”

Subaru: “Those assurances just made you less credible! The reason! Please tell me the reason!”

Daphne: “If you get too close to me, with your smell, that's kinda poison.”

Subaru: “My BO's poison now!?”

Subaru frantically raises his arms and gives himself a sniff. He doesn't smell anything nose-turning, but then again humans are just bad at smelling their own scent. He looks himself up to down.

Subaru: “Smell? I smell? You do know I have been bathing while in SANCTUARY? While yes for some proper soap I'd have to go back to the mansion, but considering I'm with Emilia at least the minimum presentability's... no, this is a mental world anyway, do unpleasant surface things like that even carry over?”

Daphne: “Nooo, that's not what I mean. Come onn, ummm, you-just-don't, un-der-stand, you Subaruun.”

Subaru: “No I don't understand! Stop talking like you're bullying me! Now in a way I can understand it: say!”

Daphne: “If I smell you, Subaruun, and start thinking I want to eat you more than the cookie, it'll be a problem I think.”

Subaru: "...Huh? I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understood what you said?"

Daphne: "I like meats more, than vege-ta-bles, or I like soft things more, than hard things, that kinda thing..."

A chill runs up Subaru's spine.

He holds his breath and stares at Daphne. Her situation is still exactly the same as it was at the start—still in the coffin, restrained so that she can't move, her eyes blindfolded.

Daphne: "From what I can smell, your meat is muscled, and-sin-ew-y, your bones, are-thick-too, and I really, reeeeaally... think you're to my taste. Your smell's so nice that if you come close, I'll want to eat you..."

Subaru: "E-eat me... like, eat out raw?"

Daphne: "Like, eat raw..."

Subaru swallows his breath, quickly getting the hell away from her, and grabbing one of the cookies from the plate.

Subaru: "I-I'll be throwing aiming at you, but sorry if I miss your mouth, okay?"

Daphne: "It's okay, Subaruun. Just kind of lazily hurl it, to hit-the-co-ffin. I'll grab it myself."

Subaru: "That sounds amazingly disconcerting, but... okay, here goes!"

Subaru lobs the cookie with a light overhand throw. It flies through the air in a parabola, landing neatly in Daphne's mouth with unexpected accuracy. The result of absolute concentration and never-before-seen control. She catches the cookie on her tongue, swallowing it up.

Daphne: "Mnmnmm... mmm, yummy. Idna-Idna's flavour."

Subaru: "I can't tell if that means she hand-baked it, or that it really was some kind of black-magic cookie with her body parts in it, but... next one's coming."

Daphne: "Yess, I can't wait. More... come on, gimme more..."

Subaru: "You're throwing off my aim so could you please be quiet?!"

Ignoring Daphne's sexually-scented pestering, Subaru throws the next cookie. Playing around with food would probably earn a scolding, but with Subaru's seriousness in this, he would not be applicable for reprimand.

Daphne has to move her head around a bit, but the cookie lands well in her mouth. Subaru relaxes in relief that they can probably clear the whole plate like this, when—

Subaru: "—Ah,"

A strong wind blows over the hilltop, throwing off the light cookie's trajectory. Its aim shifts, now headed over the table and for the side of the hill. At this rate it'll fall and be food for the ants—is what Subaru thinks, when,

Daphne: “Nooo... that's a waste.”

Daphne's abnormal sense of smell detects that the cookie went off-aim. She follows the cookie's demise with her sightless vision, and the next instant, Subaru sees it.

Subaru: “—!?”

Sharp claws gouge into the earth, bringing destruction, making a terrible noise. Up rises a cloud of dust, the horrid noises sounding out in succession to arrive at the spot of the falling cookie.

Daphne: “Ah, mmn.”

Daphne stretches out her neck, catching the cookie between her red lips and happily slipping it into her mouth. She chews with inaudible quiet. Once the snack's settled in her stomach, her pink tongue wets her lips and she gives a sensual 'hohh'.

Subaru is speechless.
Noticing his silence, Daphne gives a small sniff.

Daphne: “Subaruun... you know there's-still, two-left? Don't be mean...”

Her cheeks red and lips trembling like a songbird, Daphne definitely looks a loveable girl. Were the irregularity of the blindfolded eyes, full-body restraints, black coffin—

Subaru: “...No, being unfazed here's impossible.”

—And crab-legs sprouted from the coffin to cart her around absent, that is.



Subaru: “What... is that, am I okay to ask?”

Not recovered from the shock, Subaru continues with the cookie-throwing. His trembling fingers throw off the aim, but thanks to the coffin's speedy footwork, they all land safely in Daphne's mouth. Enjoying the sweetness to her heart's content, Daphne gets all 'mmmnnmmm,' but somehow manages to notices Subaru's strangled question.

Daphne: “What is 'that'? I can't see, so I don't know.”

Subaru: “That... incredible, exquisitely glimmering mobile coffin there. By my narrow, shallow knowledge, coffins don't have legs, and they don't really zip around in insectoid motions...”

The coffin, with Daphne still settled inside, clatters back to reach her original position. The base of the coffin flumps to the ground and the crab-legs retract like a turtle withdrawing its arms. Apparently comprehending what Subaru's getting at, Daphne smiles.

Daphne: “Ahh,”

Daphne: “You mean the cen, ti-pede co-ffin? It was inconvenient not being able to move, so I made

him. He's always so quiet. He's a really good boy.”

Subaru: “Made... that's, a living creature... is it?”

Even if it makes organic movements and has organs, Subaru isn't convinced this thing applies as a living thing. Though that said it's clearly not a machine.

Daphne: “He doesn't eat or, drink a-ny-thing, but the centipede coffin does suck up mana to live. He has no empty stomach, makes me so jealous.”

Subaru: “It eats mana... Or no, probably don't need to probe into that. Anyway, you said that you made it? You can make living things?”

Daphne: “Li-ving things, or really, witchbeasts... It's kinda like, when my will, or my mood, or stuff like that, is all woozy, I just make them.”

Daphne squirms in the coffin, spouting words that give no concrete image of what this entails. But Subaru can sense off the vague feeling of them that what she does is outrageous.

—Creating living creatures is surely the work of gods.

Humans in the original world had been getting into forbidden sciences of eugenics and cloning, but creating something from nothing was absolutely the work of gods.

Though, whether that should be considered a blasphemy on life or attainment of arcane secrets depended on the person.

Subaru: “No, way... Daphne's unpropitious legacy... and creating witchbeasts, meant exactly what it implied?”

Daphne: “Hnnn?”

Subaru: “The White Whale, Blacksnake, Sizeable Hare... are they all like that crab-coffin, things you created?”

Daphne: “Mmmhuu... Those are all, nos-tal-gic names. Yes, they are. The wha-le, and the snake, and the hare, are all children I made.”

Subaru: “Why!?!?”

Subaru closes the distance between them, baring his teeth, spit flying. His face goes red with anger as he jabs his finger at Daphne.

Subaru: “Why the fuck did you make those monsters!?! In the outside world, four hundred years after you died! Do you know just how much damage they've done!?! How many people, tens of people, hundreds of people've met terrible fates...”

Subaru thinks back on the fight with the White Whale.

Wilhelm's screams and tenacity, and the cries of rage from the knights in the battle—all originating from the White Whale, a disaster borne from the witch who birthed the whale.

Then was the Sizeable Hare attacking SANCTUARY, too. If Subaru's efforts fail to bear fruit, Emilia and all the people in SANCTUARY will be devoured.

Subaru: “What for!?! Say it! Why did you create the cause so many people've suffered, create those horrible monsters!?!?”

Daphne: "...? But is-n't-it, more fill-ing, to eat something big?"

Subaru: "—au, uh, wha?"

Daphne answers confused. Subaru comes to a halt at her unexpected answer, making dumb noises quicker than his tongue can catch up to speak. Daphne looks mystified.

Daphne: "The White Whale, was rea-lly-big, wasn't he? Don't you think if he was eaten, lots of people would fill their stomachs?"

Subaru: "What, are you..."

Daphne: "And the Size-a-ble Hare, can keep mul-ti-ply-ing. He'll multiply even if you just leave him alone, and so with him, you'll never have to worry, a-bout food a-gain."

Subaru: "Multi... hwa?"

Subaru's hearing what she's saying, but the meaning isn't getting into his brain. And supposing hypothetically that these words she's lining up mean exactly what they imply, Subaru doesn't understand what this witch here is saying. Truly, from the bottom of his heart, what is she saying? The meaning—

Subaru: "Th, en... what? You mean you created the witchbeasts to solve food supply problems? You made the White Whale and the Sizeable Hare to save people suffering from starvation? Even though how thanks to your thoughtfulness, so many people have died to those things!?"

Daphne: "...? Don't you think it's kinda su-per sel-fish, to eat something, without considering you could be eaten yourself?"

Subaru goes silent.

Daphne: "And, if you add up humans and demihumans, I kind of won-der, if there aren't just, way too many people in the world. I think if they can lower that count a little and order things, that'd probably be good."

Subaru: "Th-then the White Whale spitting existence-erasing fog, and the Sizeable Hare ravaging villages as much as it wants, are...?"

Daphne: "I don't care so far, as their hun-ting me-thods. How they grew up, and how much they eat, and where they eat... even if I cared, it wouldn't fill my stomach."

Seeing Daphne smile as she speaks, Subaru finally understands what Echidna meant.

Subaru and Daphne have poor affinity, said Echidna.

Subaru had judged that meant Daphne's exceptionally slow and casual nature clashing with his own impatient one, but that thought was probably overly optimistic and misdirected.

—Subaru and Daphne's sense of values didn't align.

Or no, this wasn't just limited to Subaru. Nobody would fit with Daphne's value system. She considered things from a viewpoint in a different dimension from humans and demihumans.

She wouldn't even support the witchbeasts she herself had created. Survival of the fittest—this was the only point of consideration for her. She treated all thoughts as trifling except for acknowledging, propagating, and eating food.

Subaru has no words. His mental makeup fundamentally differs from hers. Meeting the witches he had so far, Subaru had mis-thought that they all had their problems, but were capable of conversion. But she was a witch. They were witches. The only seven in the world, real-deal witches.

Daphne: “You do this too, Subaruun, but... don't you think, ev-er-y-one, looks far too lightly at GLUTTONY?”

Subaru goes silent.

Daphne: “The desire to eat, since you're living, is the most important desire there is. I mean, if you don't sate it, you just can't live.”

Subaru says nothing.

Daphne: “Even if they know no peace, even if they are unloved—even if they can't main-tain their ego, even if they can't vent their emo-tions—even if they can't get what they want, even if they aspire for nothing, a person won't die. But...”

Subaru says nothing.

Daphne: “People will die, if they can't eat.”

Of the seven deadly sins, only GLUTTONY held a direct relation to life. The correct meaning of GLUTTONY is desire for food more than what is needed. But in this situation, Daphne's pointing out the necessity of desiring to eat to stay alive. Subaru can't deny it. Yes, what's she's saying has truth to it as a principle of living. But believing that this comprises everything is mistaken.

Subaru: “What you're saying's partly correct... but, that kind of thinking's...”

Daphne: “Maybe you should try being starved your limit too, Subaruun? If you do... then I'm sure you'll understand the mea-n-ing, of what I'm sa-y-ing.”

It's an exceedingly witchly proposition.

Daphne leans herself up from the coffin. Alongside the sound of ripping paper, the belts restraining her easily unfasten. Pushing the restraints aside with her arm, Daphne lands barefoot to stand upon the field.

She shakes her arms and legs, checking the condition of her stiffened body.

Daphne: “I hate walking with my own feet, it makes me, just hun-gry, it really, does...”

Those little warm-up exercises are enough to get her out of breath.

But Subaru doesn't move a single step. Even his breathing is sealed off.

The immense pressure radiating from this little witch grabs Subaru and doesn't let go. It's as if he's gripped in the palm of a giant.

Daphne: “It'd be nice to go on and eat you, Subaruun, but I think Idna-Idna, and Met-Met would get

Subaru: “A, au, aauah... hur, ts...”

Famished, with his thoughts in such disarray to almost dispel his consciousness, Subaru loses cognizance of reality.

He pants and writhes in agony as he rolls on the ground to and fro. The action merely fosters the hunger. Before long, he settles atop the plain, trembling like an insect.

Starvation to drive a man crazed. He hungers. Life-threatening. An open hole, in his stomach. Dying and apt to die, no food right now and he will die. He will die. He was dying.

Daphne: “You still have-n't, no-ticed yet?”

Daphne looks down at a suffering, anguishing Subaru—although in reality her eyes reflect him not, between his voice and her sense of smell she appears to have grasped his condition.

Subaru didn't understand what she meant. Who gave a crap about noticing, he was starving enough to near drive him insane. Although he comprehended that this was a result of her doings, the starvation beats out resentment. He needed to satisfy this hunger. That he was barely holding onto consciousness was thanks to this thing he'd been chewing for a—

Subaru: “—”

What, was Subaru, eating, right now?

Daphne: “You noticed? That's what GLUTTONY is.”

Hearing her words, Subaru notices his right hand—missing the little and ring finger.

Where'd the missing fingers go? No point searching. Right now, in his mouth, his teeth just crushed his pinky to bits.

Blood flows from his severed nubs, painting the green field with crimson.

Watching the droplets fall, Subaru's mind goes blank.

With the passing of seconds, something comes to fill the blankness. A feeling. Of,

—Ahh, what a waste of blood.

Spurred from simple starvation and thirsting to wet his throat, only disappointment.

7 Author's Note from Tappei

<<Danger Level of The Witches From the Perspective of an Ordinary Joe>>
Envy > Gluttony >> Lust > Pride >>> Greed > Sloth >>>>>>>> Wrath

8 Shout out and thank you to all anons who gave me suggestions, second opinions, and advice for dealing with Daphne's speaking quirk.

CHAPTER 48: COMPENSATION FOR THE TEA PARTY

He hears a roar.

His tongue outstretched to catch the droplets of blood falling from his right hand, Subaru hears the roar in the distance. Rage. It was enraged. Furious. Someone was angry. Someone was fuming. Someone was mad beyond reason about something.

—That didn't matter. For now all he wanted, was to sate this hunger.

Chew, chew, chew, but it isn't enough.

What the fuck are two fingers going to sate? Just how could this spilling blood quench this thirst? Not enough. Not enough. Not enough in the slightest.

He could devour his right hand, devour his left hand, devour his whole body, and it wouldn't be enough. The hunger had no limit. He simply craved the things he craved. And for that—

???: “—Ghhraahh!!”

Subaru: “——Donald!?”

Stricken with a devastating blow to the crown of his head, shockwaves rise from Subaru's body as he is squashed into the ground. The excessive force warps the earth, leaving a crater on the hill with Subaru in the centre.

The perpetrator of the attack, fist still contacting the rear of Subaru's head, takes a ragged breath.

???: “Just no more, why does everyone fight? Violence is the worst... the worst... hk,”

A voice half-sobbing calls down from above as Subaru verifies the taste of the dirt, his consciousness returning to reality. A droplet of water lands on the back of his head, guiding him to look up.

The silhouette of the blonde girl is indistinct, in tears, and in the middle of disappearing.

—What just happened to me? Wonders Subaru as he goes to push himself up, when he notices that his right hand is all healthy.

He immediately says to the disappearing girl,

Subaru: “Th-thank you for healing me!”

Girl: “...Hmpf.”

The witch looks away, her expression sulky as she disappears. All while failing to conceal the redness of her face, and cheerfulness in her cheeks.

The blonde girl—The Witch of WRATH—vanishes, there again appearing in her place an unsightly coffin.

Daphne: “Ner-Ner is really such a me-dd-ler. So did this teach you anything, did it, Subaruun?”

Says Daphne from inside the coffin as if nothing big just happened. Subaru jumps to his feet, instantly hopping out and back from the crater, his expression toward Daphne blatantly cautious.

Daphne gives a sniff.

Daphne: “Good good, being that wary's a must. I mean after all, the only re-lat-ion-ships, in this world are, ones of eat or be eaten.”

Subaru: “I don't wanna think it's such a bloodthirsty place! What was that!? It was only for a while... but I was actually insane.”

Daphne: “Starvation to drive someone mad. Ultimate star-va-tion turns people into less than a-ni-mals. But if you saw my right eye too, you know, it would've been even more interesting?”

Subaru: “...Stop fucking around.”

Subaru determines that she has wicked magical eyes of some form or another. Ram's clairvoyance also falls under 'eye powers' but is completely devoid of offensive power, while Daphne's is excessively fiendish.

The moment Subaru made eye-contact with her left eye, he unconsciously ate the fingers of his right hand out of starvation. So famished that he forsook pain, he perceived everything in his sight as food to sate the insatiable hunger. Otherwise said—

Subaru: “That's how the Sizeable Hare sees the world...?”

Daphne: “Those little ones were born, ta-king a-f-ter my stomach being e-spe-cia-lly starving. So they really un-der-stand the urge to eat each other up.”

Subaru: “Fuck are you saying sounding so nonchalant. ...It doesn't pain your heart to make these creatures? And when that pompous lecture you gave me was about you saying you know that hunger. Making your children... yeah, children, experience...”

Daphne: “—? The Sizeable Hare might be hun-gr-y, but that does-n't rea-lly mean that I am.”

Subaru: “...I was an idiot for asking.”

Parallel lines. Subaru just can't come to an understanding with this witch.

Even her own children the witchbeasts amount to nothing more than a means to alleviate some of her hunger. Birthing them from her own body for herself to eat, the peak in self-sufficiency.

Subaru: “If you could've just plunged into another dimension where you weren't bothering anybody and been self-sufficient there, it wouldn't've been a damn problem for anybody.”

Daphne: “What did you a-ct-ua-lly want to ask me, Subaruun? If you just want to snub me, then all being awake will do, is make me hun-gr-i-er, so I'd kinda like to have my rest...”

Daphne looks away from Subaru, her body losing its tension and entering sleeping posture.

Subaru finally understands why she's in a mobile coffin with her entire body restrained. Rather than being caged in to keep the outside world safe, it's to prevent her from losing calories from moving her limbs.

The coverings on her eyes might not be the same thing, but it's still highly likely that using her magical eyes does drain her stamina, and the blindfold is to avoid that.

This girl's existence is completed entirely in herself.

A jumble comprised only of the desire to eat—call her the Witch of GLUTTONY and yes, what a

good fit.

Subaru: “Honestly, I think asking this'll be useless, but... what should I do to destroy the Sizeable Hare?”

Daphne: “Hrnn, you want to destroy the Sizeable Hare? But he's so weak, and easily eaten, and he mul-ti-plies, a mas-ter-piece among my best works.”

Subaru: “If you can okay the thought of eat or be eaten, then consider the idea of killing an opponent to live. Kinda want you to approve a survival instinct that isn't just coming from appetite.”

Honestly, Subaru's half given up on getting information from Daphne. It doesn't look like he's going to get a useful conversation out of her, and in the first place there's no signs of her reciprocating for a proper talk anyway.

At a glance it might appear they could play conversation catch, but really Daphne just eats up the balls Subaru's throwing, and then pleads for him to throw another without ever throwing one herself. But,

Daphne: “Eating is to live, so you also have to a-cccept kill-ing, in order to live... hrrrrn, that's, well, yes, that is, yes.”

Subaru: “—wha, it got through?”

Daphne: “If I think it's co-rrect, then of course I'll accept it. You Subaruun, just what is it, you think of me?”

The supreme in witches so far as I've seen, was his sincere opinion, but mentioning that track would probably end up going on forever so he stays quiet.

Pouting, Daphne lets the silence roll off with an arbitrary “hhrnnn,”

Daphne: “For de-stroy-ing the Hare, Met-Met or Idna-Idna, or Milla-Milla, could do it easy.”

Subaru: “Hold on, it's hard to tell who's who with these nicknames. Idna-Idna... is Echidna, yeah? Met-Met... Sekhmet-san? And Milla-Milla...”

Daphne: “Camilla... she's LUST. But it does-n't seem, she wants to meet you, Subaruun.”

Subaru: “It's kinda depressing the head of something sexy like LUST dislikes me but, your idea's not gonna work. You witches can't leave the tomb. You can't help me there.”

Daphne: “...Hrmm, it wouldn't?”

For a Subaru who gets by on strategies utilizing helpers, Daphne's proposal is heaven-sent. That is, so long as the witches came outside and pulled their shenanigans on the Sizeable Hare and Elsa only.

Subaru: “Saying you could come outside... Would you be satisfied with destroying, or I guess eating, only the Sizeable Hare and then going home?”

Daphne: “My stomach's never been sa-tis-fied once in my en-ti-re life...”

Subaru: “Which's why even if you could come outside I wouldn't bring you out, what with you

guys.”

Sticking out his tongue at Daphne's entirely expected reply, he declines her offer.

Daphne: “Mnnn,”

Daphne: “If that won't work, then I think all that's left is to have lots of people working hard, and eat them all up, without leaving any. Even those little ones can't multiply from zero... haa, haa...”

Subaru: “Nevermind eating, so it's a complete purge, then... But, they'll recover if even one's left remaining. They move in a drove, but are they always all together?”

Daphne: “They are. They have numbers, but their consciousness is single. The whole group shares the same single consciousness. They don't have the wits to split up.”

Subaru: “I... see. Then they'll multiply again from whatever's left after the extermination... sort of panic horror punchline isn't happening here.”

It's a guarantee in monster panics that even after repelling the monsters, their numbers will compound again underground or somewhere from the outliers, ending on a punchline of THE PREDICAMENT IS NOT OVER!

The Sizeable Hare at least seems to lack the intelligence for pulling a stunt like this off.

Subaru: “Also and by the way, what's the average number of hares in the Sizeable Hare? I mean I think their cannibalism turns into kind of population control system for them, but.”

Daphne: “...Who really knows? Subaruun, are you some-one, who can count the number of droplets in a screen of fog?”

Subaru: “Seriously that level? ...No, I know you're not reliable. I'll check it with my own eyes.”

Thinking of the number that swarmed Subaru, that scene alone had over 100 hares. Considering that the whole of SANCTUARY was devoured, it's highly likely the numbers there were near 10,000.

While Subaru mulls over how to eliminate all the hares, Daphne gives a big yawn and looks absolutely bored, making little chewing motions at Subaru.

Daphne: “Subaruun, if you're busy puzzling, can I be disappearing soon? I get hungrier when I exist.”

Subaru: “It makes me hungry so I don't wanna exist is an amazing comment. Yeah, nevermind how we got here but this did help. Thank you. —And,”

Daphne looks mystified. Subaru says, in a voice as displeased as he can muster,

Subaru: “I am destroying the Sizeable Hare. I've already killed the White Whale. Better not have any complaints, Mom.”

Daphne goes silent.

Subaru: “Four hundred years—is how long these guys you made outta your good intentions or whatever the hell reason've run wild. Enough is enough. —I'm erasing them, leaving nothing.”

Daphne: "Grandiose, you humans."

Daphne's reaction to Subaru's announcement of war is different to all she's shown thus far. Her mouth splits into a great, wide grin, an expression other than hunger for the first time arising on her face,

Daphne: "If you-can do-it, do-try it."

Her red tongue extended and teeth far too sharp, the Witch of GLUTTONY smiles.



A strong wind blows over the hill, Subaru unwittingly raising his arm and blocking off his own vision. Blah blah leaves scatter past and shit, Subaru's gazes follow them, he looks back ahead and

Subaru: "Sorry for the big ask, Echidna."

Echidna: "I kinda knew it would end up like that, which is why I stopped you."

Subaru: shikatanee "She undid the restraints and took off the blindfold herself. Want some praise on not touching her."

Echidna: "Right. Things wouldn't have ended just there if you'd touched her. She isn't so much of a threat with only her left eye. The real horror of Daphne is her right eye, and after being EATEN."

Subaru can only lean the fuck away at these terrifying statements. This NOT SO MUCH OF A THREAT was, as far as Subaru as concerned, already more than enough abnormality to experience.

Subaru: "...You don't have to pull up the status screen for an opponent I'm already done battling. Though I should probably hear it just in case I get plans to fight a monster like her sometime."

Echidna: "Monster, is she."

Mutters Echidna. Subaru realises his mistake.

Daphne is a friend to Echidna. That Echidna can be friends with a thing like Daphne really drives in the impression of her being a 'witch', but that's that and this's this. Treating a witch like a monster while in front of another witch was,

Subaru: "Ah, yeah I really wasn't thinking at all. I'm sorry. Got kinda worked up. I have no comment on that friend of yours. That's all I'll say."

Echidna: "Huhuhu, you don't need to be so considerate toward witches. Words of ostracism are familiar for us."

Subaru: "...I won't use cheaper words on Daphne, but I don't think you're a monster. That much I'll have correct and in words."

Echidna's eyes widen, amazed. Subaru averts his gaze, sick of how mercenary his own thinking is.

That statement of his was blatant bootlicking. While of course half of it was sincere, it also came with the dimension of not wanting to make a bad impression on a helpful witch. That said, with this calibre, Echidna more than likely saw through it.

Echidna: “No, it won't work. These words of yours won't be throwing me off, no matter how nice it is to hear them. Do you need new tea and cookies?”

Subaru: “With how damn cheery you are that's not convincing at all! The hell's with your route being so easy.” this is sad lonely girl tier.

Echidna goes along with the obvious flattery. Worries are to be had for her future. Although he already knows this isn't what it is—Subaru's chest gives a throb.

Subaru: “I'll be declining your bodily fluids and mystery something-in-there cookies.”

Echidna: “I didn't put my hair or anything in them.”

Subaru: “I can't just trust what you say!”

Subaru resolves never to eat or drink anything here gain. Echidna smiles wryly at his suspicious gaze, then stares at Subaru, observing. Occasionally, those eyes of hers are just somehow uncomfortable.

Subaru: “Not fond of that look, where it's like you're seeing through to my insides.”

Echidna: “If looking was enough to see everything of a person, I could gaze at you until you scorch aflame. ...But anyway, are you aware, or not?”

Subaru: “Of what?”

Echidna: “This is just going off my narrow and feeble imagination, but your condition a moment ago should have been a pretty devastating predicament for a human. Being defeated by hunger, and eating your own body, surely isn't anything particularly common.”

Subaru again recognizes how hideous that situation was. That his right hand has all five fingers is thanks to Minerva's drive-by healing. Subaru thinks to thank her for it, Echidna closing an eye.

Echidna: “Though, the thing with Minerva was just her ignoring my calls and jumping out. If she catches sight of a wound, she flies out regardless of how she appears. ...Her nature wasn't one to let her live long. And actually, she was the first of us to die, too.”

Subaru: “The end of the witches... huh. I heard you were all eaten by the Witch of ENVY. But is it okay for me to ask about that topic?”

Echidna: “Asking the dead how they died, is something difficult to assess whether to doubt as insensitive or not. There aren't many precedents for it. My personal opinion... yes, right. I don't really think I'll discuss everything. It ties into the honour of the other five.”

Echidna's not talking about how she died, which Subaru understand and agrees with as inevitable. Subaru's already died many times, but happily chatting about the cause of those deaths is impossible. That's just how deep and HEAVY death is.

Subaru: “Thinking like that, it makes you guys some of the few people who can share this feeling with me.”

Echidna: “...Well, I'm not really so sure. While we have died once, I don't know if it's possible for us to think in the same way that you do.”

Subaru wants to object to Echidna's curtness, but her grave expression makes the desire dissipate. She's looking at Subaru, her brows furrowed as if pained.

Echidna: “This relates to that thing about awareness, too, but... have you noticed that your state right now is awry?”

Subaru: “Awry?”

Echidna: “Your special circumstances of RETURN BY DEATH unmistakably apply as such. So, me knowing the causes behind that, the only thing I can think is how grievous it is to watch. And even moreso, if you're not aware of it.”

Subaru: “Sure not getting to the point. I mean, where're you going with...”

Echidna: “Do you think it's normal, to be capable of speaking with someone who made you eat your own fingers, after being healed, as if it's obvious?”

For an instant, Subaru's breathing freezes.
Echidna carefully observes a stock-still Subaru.

Echidna: “You weren't aware—seems isn't the case.”

Subaru: “...It's a problem of how I observe things. I'm aware that my thinking right now is seriously abnormal. It feels like for the sake of the most important thing, I'm whittling other things off.”

Echidna: “Other things, being?”

Subaru: “My biggest goal right now is breaking through these standstills. There's the mansion, and there's SANCTUARY, and there's Emilia as the biggest of those. I've got all doors closed as always and dunno where to begin, but...”

Breathing in through his nose, Subaru gazes up at the sky.

Subaru: “I've already decided to use the crap out of what I can.”

Echidna: “...Do you affirm RETURN BY DEATH?”

Subaru: “I'm not affirming it. Just, I don't have many tools to use, and this's about my only merit. ...Don't get the wrong idea, I don't want to be doing it.”

Subaru: “If spending my life'll let me reach the desired future, I'll do it. I've gotten assurance that the limit on Return by Death is, for now, as long as I can preserve my sanity. All that's left is to muster up the willpower I lack to its limit.”

Echidna: “Accumulating deaths to ensure your fingertips reach. —Not a resolve an ordinary person would be capable of.”

Subaru: "It's 'cause I've died too much. ...I've probably started going some kind of crazy."

Subaru isn't making light of DEATH. Actually, these piled experiences of death have hardened his conviction that it's something unrecoverable and terrifying. Absolutely. His terror toward DEATH is only increasing.

That Subaru regardless intends to utilize his own DEATH is simple.

Having seen the ends of worlds wherein he died, Subaru can less bear the DEATH of those he knows than his own.

If it saved them from inescapable fates of DEATH, he'd spend this recoverable OWN LIFE of his or whatever indefinitely.

He'll swallow down pain, and suffering, and terror, and everything, die then live then survive. —This was the basis of Natsuki Subaru's purportedly-awry resolve.

Subaru: "If I can get through with the only sacrifice paid being my exertion, that's how I'll do it. Look at RETURN BY DEATH and aha, isn't it just the perfect power for my powerless brainless dependant self."

Echidna goes silent.

Subaru: "Don't degrade yourself like that—esque kind of consolation's what I was expecting?"

Echidna: "It's impossible to say that so lightly, considering the obstacles in your path. If you wish to do something about this situation, the road to use that is open to you. Though personally I'd be nothing but displeased about having to rely on ENVY."

Echidna's not the type to voice easy comforts, understanding the situation. It's not heartening, but Subaru's grateful to have someone who'll give him a good kick like this.

Subaru: "Guess all that's there's to go over my options while pulling repeats of RETURN BY DEATH. It's terrifying how many awful experiences I'm gonna have."

Echidna says nothing.

Subaru: "One of the mysteries I gotta solve's what tests you were doing in the test site, SANCTUARY... but you're not in any mood to tell me, yeah?"

Echidna: "...Nope, I'm not. I did say. I wouldn't want you to scorn me."

Shaking her head, Echidna denies Subaru's attempt. Subaru clicks his neck.

Subaru: "No choice then,"

Subaru: "If you're not gonna tell me, there's no choice then. I'll run around on my own, uncovering your preferably-hidden secrets on my own. Not gonna get in the way of that, yeah?"

Echidna: "...There's nothing I can do if they get uncovered. If you're going to entangle with the secrets of mine you'd hate, force them down prone to the ground, and expose it all in bare daylight, my only option is to silently accept it."

Subaru: "This's making it sound like I'm doing something awful so could you please change your wording!?"

Her cheeks somewhat coloured, Echidna averts her gaze from Subaru.
Subaru can't tell if that was intentional and she's teasing, or if she's just kind of an airhead. From what he's seen at these tea parties, she's seriously that naive and sort of immature. Subaru goes to mention it, when,

Subaru: "Nm—"

Still seated in his chair, a dizziness hits him. A feeling reminiscent of standing up too fast rocks Subaru's consciousness in succession. It's,

Echidna: "Looks like your body's close to waking up."

Subaru: "The end of this tea party, then... say it's useful and I'd say it was useful."

Echidna: "Since last time was a surprise case of having nothing to ask. Now, I wonder if I managed to live up to my reputation as the Witch of GREED?"

All the discussing and teaching and chatting must've made this time's tea party a great satisfaction for her. Subaru's somewhat reluctant to go, seeing her joy alongside her regret for his leaving peeking out, but he shakes his head and severs the sentimentality.
It's mysterious how much she pulls the heartstrings, but it's no good getting too much of her support. She's a witch, and to make it worse, dead. Though that said it's not clear whether the 'witch' or the 'dead' part is where the 'worse' applies here.

Subaru: "What should I do when I want to come here?"

Echidna: "You mean the requirement for the tea party? Ah goodness no, we can't. You're getting to depend completely on me. I understand how forlorn you are, having no one to reveal the truth of RETURN BY DEATH to outside, and having only me to expose your heart to, but I am incredibly dead, and you're living, and... we just can't, gosh."

Subaru: "There's nothing persuasive when you're being so weirdly happy and meandering with it!"

How to best judge this incredible upturn in good vibes from Echidna?
Hand on her chin as she glimpses at him, Subaru can't decide on how to approach her attitude. She hides her mouth, smiling.

Echidna: "Huhhhuhu,"

Echidna: "Don't look so troubled. I am a girl, after all, and sometimes I do want do have some cheery conversations in this vein. That's all there's to it. I am considering properly the trench between witches and humans."

Subaru: "...Echinda."

Echidna: "So the requirement for the tea party is to scream from your heart of hearts the desire of I WANT TO KNOW, while in the tomb. The first time was a no-questions-asked invitation, but the second time onwards won't be so simple. The third time... I think it'll be pretty tricky. A superficial scream won't reach me."

This aligns with what happened when Subaru was invited this time. But this means that next time he wants to come here, he will have to be in straits as or more dire than when he was writhing in rabbit trauma.

Subaru: "Yeah, I'd really rather not..."

Echidna: "Right? So this might be the last time we see each other. Although, if you challenge the TRIAL, it won't be limited to this."

Seems like identical to the first TRIAL, Subaru can meet Echidna at the second and third TRIALS too. If Subaru challenges the TRIAL in Emilia's place, his reunion with Echidna is likely assured. Meaning,

Subaru: "See you again at the TRIAL, then. Guess there won't be any tea there."

Echidna: "If you're so craving to drink, I'd have no reluctance to make some for you at the scene..."

Subaru: "Um seeing the manufacture process's only gonna make me have less urge to drink it so no that is fine thank you."

Echidna gives her most dejected expression yet.

Subaru has no clue why she's so insistent on pushing her bodily fluids on him. Maybe she gets off on having pieces of her become pieces of another person. Sinful.

Subaru: "I guess I'll be disappearing soon... then, thanks for the talk, Echidna. When we see each other again..."

Echidna: "Before that, would you mind?"

Feeling his body getting indistinct, Subaru goes to give his goodbye. But Echidna stops him. She stands from her seat, dress swaying as she walks over to Subaru.

Echidna: "You participated in the tea party, and I've given you a piece of my knowledge... but are you maybe forgetting something?"

Subaru: "I forgot my stuff?"

Echidna: "My compensation."

Narrowing her eyes, Echidna pokes out her tongue at Subaru as he tilts his head. Subaru's eyes open wide.

Subaru: "Compensation..."

He mutters.

Echidna: "Yes, compensation."

She nods.

Echidna: "I'm sure I charged last time, too, but compensation comes attached with dealings with

witches. Leaving last time's compensation as last time's, what will I be getting as compensation for this time?"

Subaru: "Well'll paying my respects not work out? I don't really have much cash on-hand, and these levies or payments've kinda gotten tough for me."

Echidna: "Your conversation skills for negotiating with witches might be a little lacking."

Subaru backs away still in the chair, Echidna presses in on him, a sadistic glint rising on her cute face. She gazes Subaru up to down, wondering just what to take.

Echidna: "Alright, I've got it."

Bracing himself for what'll happen, Echidna bends down, bringing her face close. Subaru trembles at the closeness of her lips—when Echidna bends down further, proceeding to Subaru's chest. Her white hair splayed out and floaty, fiddling around right next to him and lightly scented of flowers, Subaru's lack of immunization to hot girls gets him flustered. Ignoring Subaru's mental problems, Echidna touches his breast.

Echidna: "I'll take this."

Subaru: "...oe, eu?"

What Echidna retrieves from Subaru's chest—grasped in her fingers, fluttering in the wind, is a handkerchief.

White fabric with a gold border, and the great grey spirit embroidered in the lining.

Subaru: "The handkerchief Petra gave me before coming to SANCTUARY...?"

Echidna: "You really better thank whoever gave this to you. It's packed in with pure feelings of concern for your wellbeing. In each stroke of the thread and needle is magic which used that as an intermediary. The power housed in an object like this is overwhelmingly fascinating."

Subaru: "...Petra did."

Echidna: "She has feelings for you. Sorry to the girl who sent you those feelings, but I'll be taking this."

Her cheeks relaxing at the embroidered Puck, Echidna stows the handkerchief in her pocket. She backs off from Subaru.

Echidna: "The compensation for the tea party has been collected. From my heart I shall be awaiting your repeated participation."

Joking around, she grips her dress and gives a refined curtsy. The consideration for the jokey send-off isn't like her. Subaru stands from his chair,

Subaru: "Just, thanks for your time. And everything. —Bid you farewell."

Subaru grasps his clothes in the same manner, giving a bow and making Echidna smile wryly. A white light envelops the scenery—and Subaru exits the tea party.



—What Subaru feels once returned from the tea party is the abrupt coolness and hardness of the ground, and the taste of dusty shit in his mouth.

Subaru: “Uuhgge! Gehhphh! Is this, the default every time...!?”

Spitting out the shit, Subaru uprights himself and shakes his head, urging his consciousness into sobriety. Checking over his body's condition, he reflects on the happening prior his awakening. He returned from being eaten dead by the Sizeable Hare, then was immediately invited to Echidna's tea party. He had a horrible experience thanks to Daphne, firmed his resolve, and returned saved by Petra's young love.

None are gone from his memories. Relieved, Subaru,

Subaru: “Echidna kept her promise. The tea party's not gone from my memory this time.”

The memory of Echidna is also fresh and in there.

She's a bit flawed in a witchy way, but being that she keeps these promises, and interacts in a familiar way, it's probably okay to consider her one of his few allies. Though, it was a shame it didn't seem there'd be many chances for him to possibly rely on her.

Subaru: “And the most important crop from this time... 's saying that really okay, but it was there.”

Touching his chest, Subaru recollects on confessing about RETURN BY DEATH, biting down tight on the feeling of salvation.

Although it's restricted to Echidna and the other witches, being able to reveal the truth to someone without worrying was the greatest crop of all.

Hearing the ideas on RETURN BY DEATH from someone more knowledgeable about this parallel world also counted under this.

Even if that ultimately meant he wound up coming back with the post of the Witch of ENVY being the cause of it all, and that he'd eventually have to face it.

Subaru: “With that feeling now refreshed, this's the rebirth of Natsuki Subaru. I'm gonna be helping myself to relying on that witch's power. I'll use up my life any number of times.”

Subaru: “My sense of time's off thanks to the tea party, but this's just after the TRIAL, right.”

Echidna said that he RETURNED BY DEATH to the tomb, and turning his head about to check the surrounding confirms that this is indeed the tomb. Recognizing Echidna as correct, Subaru goes to start lugging Emilia out of this place, and proceeds searching for her.

Subaru: “Considering this's right after RETURN BY DEATH, and the third time, gotta think of how to interact with Garfiel. ...Don't think he'll suddenly try to kill me, but...”

Garfiel's a hasty person. He can't read ahead.

Recollecting on Garfiel leads Subaru to think of his own DEATH to the Sizeable Hare, and prior to that the massacre of the villagers. A dark feeling boils up in Subaru without his intention.

Repelling the Hare, repelling Elsa, the puzzle of Sanctuary, and getting payback on Garfiel.

Be it a happening in a nonexistent world, Subaru regardless can't forgive it. He had to get Garfiel to pay up somehow.

Subaru's negative feelings toward Garfiel peak as he mulls this over, but his thoughts abruptly come to a stop. Because,

Subaru: "...Where's Emilia?"

—Emilia isn't anywhere.

Subaru furrows his brows in unease, straining his eyes in the poorly-lit tomb. But no matter how he gazes over the relatively narrow space, he can't find Emilia.

This is not regular.

Subaru: "If I'm right after the TRIAL, Emilia should still be doing hers..."

Unable to conquer her first TRIAL, Emilia should be suffering with her past, at Subaru's side. However she's nowhere inside the tomb. But, Subaru unmistakably did return to just after his TRIAL.

Subaru: "..."

His premonition was bad.

Emilia being absent was different from conditions so far.

A change which shouldn't have happened occurred because Subaru's actions changed the future. But what could an unconscious Subaru's actions do to have such an influence?

Stirred by unease, Subaru dashes out of the Trial room, toward the hallway. His footsteps peel out as he exits the corridor, leaves the tomb for the outside.

Beneath the moonlight, outside the tomb, what Subaru sees is—

CHAPTER 49: LOVELOVELOVELOVELOVEYOUUUUUU

—The peal of footsteps pounds on his eardrums. A sense of unease settles on his skin.

A stickiness accompanies the refreshing air of the tomb. The ground feels to cling to Subaru's feet as he dashes, sapping his energy with every step.

The sharp sensation stimulating his exposed skin strikes his whole body, as if protuberances have sprouted from the air itself. In all, feelings to provoke hesitation for continuing forward.

—Subaru already knew a feeling very reminiscent of this.

His bad premonition yet urging him on, Subaru consciously shakes away the discomfort coiling about his body as he heads for the tomb entrance.

Moonlight spills faintly into the hallway as he runs. He rushes out of the ivy-grown entrance, feeling to break through a membrane of air as he exits the tomb.

And, he sees it.

Subaru: "...No way."

Subaru's feet gouge the earth as he skids himself to a stop.

Awkward and most about to topple forward with momentum, the sight which arises in Subaru's view belongs to some breed of the enigmatic.

That is how completely diverged from reality the scene before him is.

Subaru: "A... shadow."

That single mutter expresses it all.

A shadow—indeed, only that could describe the scene before him.

The sights of SANCTUARY, supposedly visible from the tomb entrance, are not anywhere in view. Although the tomb is separated from the residents' dwellings, spotting not a single building from this position, to Subaru's knowledge, was exceedingly improbable.

The circular moon drifts high overhead, pouring down its glow—but the world before Subaru abounds in shade. Almost as if fallen into darkness.

Subaru: "—"

Swallowing his breath and hardening his will, Subaru steps out from the tomb's entryway and toward the duskened SANCTUARY. He leaves stonework floor for earth and grass—supposedly. His feet do feel the sensation of treading on foliage, but visually discerning it from the darkness underfoot is impossible. The stickiness on his skin, too, remains unchanged.

Subaru: "E-Emilia—!"

Unable to bear the world's inconceivable lack of landmarks, Subaru calls the name to rise in his thoughts. His thinking consequently gets in motion, names and faces passing through his mind.

Subaru: "Ram! Lewes-san! Also Otto! You're here, right!? Please come out!"

If this is directly after Subaru took the TRIAL, Ram and the others should have been waiting here for Emilia's results. The flow of events there proceeded with Subaru shrugging off their attempts to stop him, diving in, and also challenging the TRIAL.

When Subaru brought Emilia out afterwards, the usual lineup would be there to welcome the two back. There should have been no great discrepancy this time.

Subaru: “Not here... is way understating it. What's with this dingy atmosphere? Darkness of a paddy road out in the country doesn't compare.”

An unlit road at night in the countryside, with starlight as its an unreliable sun, was a genuine state of darkness.

But the situation in SANCTUARY differed from that instantaneous darkness. Here, the glow of the moon overhead reaches down at least to hit Subaru's body.

However, the light disperses before reaching the ground, creating a night which is vague and unstable. —The sensation of monopolizing a spotlight, was perhaps a fitting descriptor.

The only visible thing in this darkness is himself. Glancing back, Subaru discovers that even tomb entrance he just exited is swallowed in darkness and invisible.

The memory of walking through the White Whale's fog comes back.

Lost sight of people to orient from, thrown from the carriage, unsure whether the whale's jaws were closing in, both his course and reason to live vague as he walked on.

He ultimately exited the fog, where Otto's favourite dragon Frufoo found and aided him.

Perhaps walking through the darkness here would lead to his rescue again.

Subaru: “Am I an idiot? ...No, I am an idiot. What's this dejected, poor loser thinking. Not knowing what happened means not knowing what will happen. I don't even know what happened to everyone and I'm worrying about myself, idiot.”

Had he not just steeled his resolve at Echidna's tea party?

No matter what occurs, no matter what hardship assaults him, if Subaru can pay it settled using only his own life, then that was actually a bargain.

Compared to a future where someone important was wounded and suffered irreparable injury, just how blessed was a situation that spending his life could re-do?

Trembling in fear at the incomprehensible situation, and losing his life without any proper grasp of the conditions, was not what Subaru needed to do.

It was to face the incomprehensible situation boldly, and even should he fail to reach the solution, grasp some foothold and welcoming a meaningful death.

Subaru: “Anyway, what I have to confirm now is...”

Where Emilia, Ram, and everyone else went.

For one instant, upon seeing Emilia missing from the tomb, Subaru wondered whether she had conquered the TRIAL, awoken, and left by herself. But he immediately rejected the thought. Even if Emilia hypothetically could conquer the TRIAL and wake safely, she would have no reason to leave Subaru sleeping.

Subaru knew from his experiences with Emilia that being touched while undergoing the TRIAL would interrupt it.

Although since Subaru's consciousness was in Echidna's tea party rather than the TRIAL, perhaps that precedent wouldn't apply.

Subaru: “But still, just leaving me there and exiting doesn't sound anything like Emilia.”

A more Emilia-esque reaction would be to bring the unconscious Subaru outside, or at least rest him against the wall. That she left without doing either was almost inconceivable.

And call it a somewhat unneeded view, but—Subaru didn't think Emilia could conquer the first TRIAL on her first attempt.

Knowing how Emilia had struggled with the TRIAL, the theory of her clearing it on her own and leaving was fishy from the start.

Subaru thus thought it likely that Emilia's disappearance was not due to her own will. Either someone pulled her out, or—

Subaru: “She returned from the TRIAL completely out of it, had too few mental reserves left to notice me and left the tomb... isn't an entirely impossible idea.”

But that didn't explain why the world outside was submerged in darkness.

As for the absence of those waiting outside, Subaru's heart shudders with the thought of the ferocious white hares. But Subaru rejects the hasty idea with a shake of his head.

The Sizeable Hare's attack would come on the night of the sixth day—meaning, five days from now. He preferred to think that no matter how much the attack was accelerated, it wouldn't come on the night of the first TRIAL.

—He intentionally averts his eyes from the mystery of the timing of Elsa's attack on the mansion changing.

That puzzle was another of these unsolved enigmas for Subaru. But if the Sizeable Hare's attack was identical to Elsa's, and the date could change off random chance, that means Subaru couldn't influence it.

All Subaru could do was trust that conditions unavoidable even with rampant use of RETURN BY DEATH did not exist.

Subaru: “What I can probably do now... is call while searching for Emilia and the others, and head to the cathedral to check the Arlam villagers are safe, I guess?”

Straining his eyes, Subaru worries over the lack of feasibility in his plan. While more or less had an internal map of SANCTUARY figured, his recollections weren't so polished that he could navigate the place with his eyes closed.

That was the level of memory power was necessary to venture about in these conditions.

Safely reaching his destination in this situation would be near impossible for Subaru. However, even the plan of calling out while searching for the others was difficult to accept unconditionally.

Subaru: “If this pitch darkness's someone's doing... it's seriously likely they're not gonna be friendly.”

With impatience scorching at him, Subaru puzzles over what action would be optimal.

If he wants to reunite quickly, calling out is advisable. That is the optimum for investigating into the safety of Emilia and the others. But Subaru already knew multiple times over that acting blindly was foolish. How many times had recklessness cost him his life?

Subaru: “...Fuck. If I don't at least figure out what went on, even if something terrible happens to me my work won't be done.”

Subaru opts for a cautious strategy at the end of his deliberating.
He quiets his voice and breathing, straining his eyes in the darkness, following his mental map as best he can to where the residents should be gathered.
The only guides in this world are the certainty of the ground beneath his feet, and the existence of tomb he exited. Darkness had fallen, but the land before him should be the same SANCTUARY as ever—

Subaru: “—ue?”

Subaru takes each step slowly, carefully. But he stops within several paces of starting.
Because of the wind.

Subaru: “—?”

He looks up and, although knowing the action is basically fruitless, casts his gaze about. His attention directs on the destination of the awry breeze.

He felt it. There, on that wind, he had felt that characteristic sensation.
Not the fresh air of the hillock, or the dusty air of the tomb, or an air scented with blood and atrocity—rather, an air carrying the characteristic scent of having touched something living.

Subaru: “Wha—”

Unsure of where the wind blew in from, Subaru glances back in search of an answer.
The tomb should be directly behind him, but even these few steps forward had rendered its silhouette invisible.
—Or no, the tomb being imperceptible was not due the darkness.

Subaru: “——a?”

???: “—”

There, standing before him, close enough to feel their breath, in this pitch-black world, is someone.
That he could not sight the tomb was because this someone was obstructing his view.

They were so close, but how had he not noticed them? They had approached him, but why had they not called? A storm of questions flurries through his brain in the space of an instant.
But even that tempest of doubts dissipates with the immediate presentation of an exact answer.

Nothing could be more easily comprehended.

???: “—I love you.”

Says the shadow to Subaru, affection most enough to bewitch.



Its voice was muffled.
It spoke with such indistinct intonation that it wasn't clear whether the speaker was a woman or a man.

Shadow: “—IloveyouIloveyouIloveyou,”

The voice echoes in spirals through his head.

His thoughts turn dumb, unable to recognize what this thing before him is. Was he standing? Sitting? Breathing? Conscious? Living? Dying? He didn't know. Didn't know. Getting not to know.

Its fingers reach for him.

The surrounding shadows rise, spreading with intention to envelop the whole of Subaru's body. He has no will to oppose. He has no reason to oppose. Oppose, unoppose, swallowed, and what will come next? But what a nuisance thinking was, and—

Shadow: “IloveyouIloveyouIloveyou—”

???: “No fuckin' none'a yer fuckin' around, hraaAAH—!!”

—The next instant, destruction from overhead tears through the space between Subaru and the shadow.

The shock tears up the imperceptible ground, crashes into the shadow, envelops it—while Subaru receives the shockwave from point-blank range and goes plummeting backwards.

Subaru: “Uaoeuu—!?”

Tumbling, battered over and over by hard things, most his whole body soaked in shadow, Subaru somehow manages to halt the momentum. He shakes his head, his stiff body and thoughts both loosening free.

The flood of white noise clears from his mind to an extent, and although his head still feels stuffed with sand, the dullness is now somewhat less awful.

Spitting the dirt from his mouth, Subaru looks up and toward the direction he tumbled from—and his eyes shoot open in surprise.

???: “Situation ain't got no way'a bein' worse, oi. C'n yer move?”

There stands a someone, facing the shadow, his back to Subaru.

Rather small for a man. Short blond hair, with a coarse and blunt intonation in his speech. His combat-ready posture is low, his leg drawn back and fangs bared with full caution.

Subaru: “Why, did you... me, Garfiel...”

Garfiel: “Eh? Don't fuckin' joke 'round, you fuckin' seen what things are?”

Subaru speaks with his voice trembling in shock, Garfiel answers somewhat annoyed. Still paying utmost caution, Garfiel edges bit by bit closer to Subaru.

Garfiel: “M grabbin' yer collar'n jumpin'. Might break yer neck but, grin'n bear it.”

Subaru: “I don't have some mystery constitution where grinning makes my neck any stronge—!?”

Garfiel darts backwards halfway through Subaru's protesting, literally snatching him away. Exactly as stated, Garfiel grabs the back of Subaru's collar, yanking him up, and prompting Subaru to give a strangled “gghuek!”. But before Subaru can make any complaints about it—

Shadow: “—!”

—The ground swells, and the shadow explodes.

A wave rolls out of the detonated shadow, surging to crush Subaru and Garfiel. Immediately, the surrounding darkness too transforms into the same shadow. Garfiel clicks his tongue, his feet sinking into the dark bog.

Garfiel: “Arrh, fuckin' bullshit! EARTHSOUL BLESSING ain't workin' when the ground's like this—!”

Subaru: “Say Garfiel, my ground's sinking in too!”

Garfiel: “Th' whole area's th' same! WICKED DEEDS BRING THE WITCH 's, fuck, ain't it just that fuckin' exactly!!”

Yet being dragged along, shadow starts swallowing what parts of Subaru's limbs have contact with the earth. The sensations differs from sinking into water, or sinking into swamp or marsh, considerably irregular.

The shadow was attempting to entwine with him, bind with him, as if to envelop him in smooth dough, warm and soft. During a state of peace, perhaps it might be nice for that touch to embrace him wholly.

But being that the situation was horrendous, that idea would have to go declined.

Garfiel: “—Hr, don't yer bite yer tounge!!”

Yells Garfiel, giving a snort and glancing over the surroundings.

He bends his knees, and although sinking successfully leaps. His distance only manages a few meters with the shadow tripping him up—but the instant he contacts the ground, he again leaps, leaps, leaps and repeats,

Garfiel: “Hup, hah, hhraah—!”

Although an impermeable night conceals the world, Garfiel beautifully arrives at a spot with buildings. He gouges his toenails into one of their walls, using it as footing to again leap. He soars to the building's roof, throwing dragged-along Subaru down to platform and giving a sigh. Subaru grabs onto a handhold so as not to slip off the roof, glaring up at a panting Garfiel, his face dimly present in the darkness.

Subaru: “Th-thank you for saving me...!”

Garfiel: “Nnwhat? That ain't the face of a guy givin' a thanks, oi, yer got a problem?”

Subaru: “Have some grievances. ...Since I seriously didn't think for even a moment that you'd be saving me.”

Garfiel: “Well ain't that just damn treatin' me like'm heartless. 'F yer hate that my amazin' self saved yer that much, yer fine t'jump int'th'shadow soon 's yer want.”

Subaru: “No thank you.”

Subaru sighs.

Garfiel sets his sights away from Subaru, who peers at him from behind, his heart in the ultimate of complex feelings.

There was the incomprehensibility of the present situation, but the biggest reason for the complication was that Garfiel had saved him. Until this instant right here, Garfiel had been the biggest obstacle for Subaru in SANCTUARY, and a character competing with Roswaal as a target for his wrath.

Although aware that the change in behaviour is due to the change in the situation, having Garfiel act so completely different makes Subaru wind up hesitating on how to respond.

Ignoring Subaru's internal confusion, Garfiel glares down from the roof with his expression bitter. He clicks his canines, muttering,

Garfiel: "S's real bad,"

Garfiel: "'S goes without sayin', but don't look 's n' any mood ter let us go."

Sliding over to Garfiel's side, Subaru timidly peeks down off the roof. The sight he sees makes him groan. SANCTUARY exists as little more than a sea of shadow, the majority of the place swallowed in a deep murk, giving no proper sense of height or perspective.

But even so in the middle of the black there writhes an even darker sable, the shadows churning around it, inching closer and closer at a sluggish pace.

It had just attempted to swallow Subaru and Garfiel in shadow, the one who filled SANCTUARY in a sea of shade. And their identity was—

Subaru: "Garfiel. Do you know what that thing is?"

Garfiel: "Gott'n idea sayin' 's some bad shit how it looks, gott'n theory f'r a possibility th's fuckin' unbelievable, n' gott'n optimistic belief sayin' that ain't possible. Which one ya wanna go with?"

Subaru: "Like 'which one' even damn matters, I'd say they're all hardly incorrect. You're being way more calm in front of this thing than I th..."

Subaru stops.

While he was dealing with some strong and complex feelings about being rescued by Garfiel, he was also calming starting on mentally organizing the situation.

One point for sorting was that Garfiel—the guy who expressed so much displeasure with the Witch's lingering scent, who flipped that incredibly hostile just by sensing the scent on Subaru's body, that Garfiel—was mysteriously not losing his cool at the thing which acted as the smell's foundation.

Which was why Subaru had spoken—but seeing Garfiel's expression stops him.

Garfiel: "What'd y'jus' say?"

Says Garfiel, his bloodshot eyes gazing downward, his fangs starting to elongate.

Anger. Rage. Wrath. Fury. His pupils turned to slits, whirling with pure-red emotion. See that, and who could possibly call him calm?

Simultaneously, Subaru remembers a question he needs to ask.

Subaru: "—Garfiel. They... Ram and the others, what happened to them?"

Garfiel goes silent.

Subaru: "SANCTUARY was already submerged in shadow when I left the tomb. You're here and lively, but the others...?"

Garfiel: "...In the shadow."

Subaru seeks a denial, but what he gets is a cruel answer. Subaru swallows his breath, Garfiel giving a rueful hum.

Garfiel: "We only noticed somethin' was off th'second after the ground turned int'er shadow. 'F Ram hadn't blown me away with 'er wind, my amazin' self woulda been swallowed too."

Subaru: "...And, Ram was swallowed? And Lewes-san, Otto?"

Garfiel: "Yeh, th'were. Granny n' th' noisy guy, all'n one go."

Looking down at the waves of writhing shadow, Subaru's thoughts run in the pessimistic direction of wondering just how good the chances of survival are in a word like 'swallowed'.

If being eaten meant being trapped in some alternate dimension, there was still hope. But considering the sensation from when he touched it himself, that possibility was being far too optimistic.

Subaru: "Wh-just what is this, seriously, it... why is this, suddenly...!"

Elsa, The Sizeable Hare, Garfiel.

Subaru had just steeled his resolve to challenge all these threats boldly. This incomprehensible thing washed that resolve away.

Just why on earth had this suddenly welled up now?

Subaru: "Garfiel... what happened to Emilia?"

Garfiel says nothing.

Subaru: "Emilia wasn't in the tomb. ...Was she, swallowed, too?"

Garfiel says nothing.

Emilia woke up noticing the irregularity, and bounded out of the tomb.

It was Emilia. She wouldn't just stand back and watch as SANCTUARY got submerged in shadow. She would leap in to save people, without any concern for herself, and—

Subaru: "By the shadow... then, that...!"

Garfiel: "After eatin' Ram 'n the others, th' shadow went into Sanctuary's middle 'n fuckin' drank up everything. My amazin' self chased after it'n beat it attackin' it, but fuckin' thing wouldn't give. Then it fuckin' all sudden pulls back so I hurry followin' it n' there's there."

And that's when the scene from before happened, is apparently what he's saying.

Leaving SANCTUARY behind as hostage, the shadow sensed that Subaru had left the tomb and immediately retreated. Meaning the shadow's goal yes is in fact Subaru.

A shadow consuming all. Whisperings of love. And overwhelming power. No need even mentioning its identity. But,

Subaru: “Why the fuck is the Witch of ENVY here!!”

Garfiel: “Ain't th' time t'be askin' that.”

A battle-hungry smile rises on Garfiel's face as he stands up on the roof. Subaru takes care not to lose balance as he stands too, looking down at the same thing as Garfiel, teeth gritted.

The vast mass of whirling shadow has surrounded the building Subaru and Garfiel are using as their foothold.

The whirlpool catches the building in its girth, stripping away the ground and structure both, pulling the building into its swirling orbit.

Subaru: “Uau, aaoau!”

Feels like a tidal wave, or a grand-scale flood, washing away the whole house.

Experiencing the oddness of a supposedly massless shadow managing this feat, Subaru endures so as not to be flung off of the rocking roof.

Endures, but enduring isn't going to be any solution.

Garfiel: “M jumpin' again, grab on!”

Subaru: “—!”

Hurriedly clinging onto a crouching Garfiel, Subaru retreats from the drifting roof alongside Garfiel's leap. The two shoot off like a bullet, plunging into a forest of trees, slamming into thick tree-trunk while snapping many branches on the way.

Garfiel: “Hhauhh—!”

Garfiel spears his arm into the trunk, successfully stopping himself and avoiding dropping into the shadow. Subaru, clinging to Garfiel's clothes, also manages to reach out for a branch and shift himself over, keeping his posture steady.

Meanwhile resounds the thunderous noise of wood snapping, breaking to bits.

Subaru hurriedly glances back to find the building they were on now sucked into the heart of the vortex, being smashed into tiny, tiny little pieces.

Destroying the structure of the building, the swirling shadows wash the thing to the true body of the shade—the centre of the writhing shadow—increasing its mass.

Subaru and Garfiel, watching the destruction, have no words.

The contour of the shadow dims in the slight period of silence. —And the next instant, Subaru gains conviction that he, and this shadow blurry even from a panoramic view, meet gazes.

Shadow: “—I love you.”

Subaru: “ou, au...”

Shadow: “IloveyouIloveyouIloveyouIloveyouIloveyou”

Subaru: “—”

Shadow:

Subaru's heart is entirely repulsion and discomfort, both unbearable.

That thing was what let him RETURN BY DEATH, and in some sense his benefactor.

But no. He wouldn't accept it. His soul rejected it viscerally.

If it was between the shadow's embrace and jumping into the White Whale's mouth, he'd prefer the whale.

Subaru: "Garfiel, what do we do!"

Garfiel: "Backing off's all we got! Even Roswaal ain't dependable here. And Ram and granny... and everyone else, there's no thinkin' they could've resisted that shadow."

Garfiel clicks his fangs, speaking ruefully.

Unlike Subaru, Garfiel had directly witnessed the shadow swallow up Ram, Lewes, and his other close relations. Subaru couldn't possibly imagine how deeply the killings impacted Garfiel.

Although, being that he harboured loathsome memories of Garfiel, seeing him in grief was a far too complex situation for Subaru.

Subaru: "—!"

Presuming the writhing shadow a giant hand, its fingers abruptly reach out for Subaru and Garfiel.

Garfiel evades at the last second, still holding Subaru, with a backstep. He treads onto ground

barely invaded by shadow—if they open distance between themselves and the silhouette standing in the eye, they'll apparently avoid immediate submersion in the bottomless bog.

Subaru: "We can back off but things'll still be getting worse... what happened to your attacks?"

Garfiel: "Can't break through the shadow dress. Different story 'f I get a full-power hit in, but I ain't able t'make a chance for doin' it."

One leap backwards sends them shooting between the gaps among the trees as they have this

exchange. Their speed is enough to leave the shadow behind on the other side of the forest, but they can't shake off this shadow which is supposed to be pursuing them slowly.

Perhaps this unsuppressable closeness was the shadow's authority or something. And the abnormalities were not over yet.

Garfiel: "...Shit."

Garfiel spits, growling in irritation.

His shoulders sway with ragged breathing. Great loads of sweat rise on his brow, his state uncomfortably different from normal.

Fatigue from carrying Subaru's weight—was not the issue.

Subaru furrows his brows at Garfiel's situation. Seeing Subaru's reaction, Garfiel clicks his tongue.

Garfiel: "Body's heavy. —Shadow's fuckin' stealin' life from what's around."

Subaru: "The shadow under us is!?"

Panicked at Garfiel's response, his feet not touching the floor as he sways in Garfiel's grip, Subaru looks down—and shivers at the endless range the shaded ground encompasses.

And excessively belated, Subaru truly realises the threat the shadow presents.

Subaru: “No way—”

—The forest was shrinking.

The trees of the forest surrounding Sanctuary were tall, boasting a canopy thick enough to conceal the moon and stars. That forest sky, right now, was plainly visible.

It wasn't that the trees were felled, or the leaves burned away. The foliage stands properly and as usual, the leaves rustling in the wind.

—The forest was low enough that, if Subaru jumped, his head would likely emerge from the treetops.

Subaru: “The forest's sinking!?”

Garfiel: “S what'll happen 'f yer ain't keepin' moving. 'Said, 's gettin' stronger more it eats, too!”

The threat of a shadow engulfing all of SANCTUARY compounds, the blackness beginning on swallowing the entire forest.

Front back left right, no matter where Subaru looks there isn't anywhere untouched by shadow. They could cross the barrier, leave the forest, and it still seemed there'd be no end to it.

The unforeseen development, and the sudden appearance of the Witch of ENVY. With those two matters robbing his attention, Subaru had misread the threat this opponent presented.

This was the Witch of ENVY—the one who swallowed half the world, whose aftermarks of terror still gouged thick, the utmost of calamities.

Subaru: “There's no way this could actually escalate into covering half the world tier, right...?”

Garfiel: “Story's around that it swallowed a whole country. 'F yer gonna laugh the thing off, ya haveta not know that first.”

Garfiel laughs in agreement with Subaru's imaginings.

The deep weariness in Garfiel's expression results from the negative influence the witch's shadow fostered, the acceleration of the shade's consumption, and the intensifying feeling of sinking into the ground.

His feet submerge on every step of the sprint, each footfall rapidly requiring more energy than the last. Although, speaking plainly, if he was alone, Garfiel could probably escape.

Subaru: “Garfiel, I'm who it's aiming for. So...”

Garfiel: “If yer gonna fuckin' say 'drop me', my fangs're gonna be bitin' off yer fingers digit by digit.”

Subaru's speechless. But he immediately shakes off the feeling and glares at Garfiel's sweat-soaked face.

Subaru: “This isn't the time to be saying that! We're both going to be eaten like this! If I face it, I should manage to buy even just a little time. In that opening...”

Garfiel: “I run? Or call goddamn Roswaal over? Y'know the first thing th' shadow went for was the village centre. ...Th'villagers and the evacuees, and Roswaal... they're all eaten.”

Subaru: “—. Y-you're positive on that?”

Garfiel: “More th'n what you seen, th' shadow's eaten all of SANCTUARY. 'Less everyone just happened 't be out n' the woods fer some stargazin', it's positive.”

Garfiel speaks with no emotion, the divergence from his usually-overemotional attitude supporting his words as truth.

If it wasn't just the evacuees and citizens, but even Roswaal who got eaten, the situation is nothing but dire.

Being that Garfiel's primary means of attack is close-range brawling, his combat affinity against the long-range attacker Witch of ENVY is horrid.

Although if Roswaal or Ram, the long-distance attackers on their side, had been around, they probably could've utilized both near and far attacks to get hits in.

Subaru: “Which means without you there's even less ways to oppose it...”

Garfiel: “And granny! And Ram! And everyone else, all of them eaten!”

Subaru: “—!”

Garfiel: “And you're gonna tell me to abandon even you to it too and shame myself? ...Never, ever, ever. PURARAGURARA SCARS STAY UNFADING 's sayin', 'm never going to be satisfied 'less I bash that thing up!!”

Howls Garfiel, baring his fangs. His expression hosts unending rage aimed at the shadow—and that there perhaps seemed something more there, was probably just a mistaken impression of Subaru's. His precious ones stolen from him, yet his heart howling in more than just fury—if Garfiel was such a person, then—

Subaru: “Then why's it that with everyone, you...”

Why was it that with everyone, you killed them?

Garfiel as well knew the pain of pillaging and the anguish of loss. Entirely emotions of empathy. But so why had he committed to such a cruel deed?

Garfiel couldn't have understood what Subaru's strangled question meant. He wordlessly tightens his grip on Subaru, signalling his lack of intent to leave him behind. The shadow's pace of consumption having accelerated, Garfiel puts more force in his steps to escape, leaping forward, forward, flying out of the forest.

Subaru, unsure of how to behave toward the encroaching threat and toward Garfiel, raises his head in surprise at the sudden opening of his visual field. They've shot out of the sinking forest, into a clearing. The density of shadows here remains low—with naked earth and short grass, though the biggest shock for Subaru is—

Subaru: “—Wha!?”

Garfiel tosses Subaru onto the turf the same moment Subaru spots it.

Tumbling across the ground, Subaru scrapples his fingers into the earth to kill momentum, coming to a stop and shaking his head. His urge to mention the thing he saw beats out his urge to state his

displeasure about being thrown. The seen thing in question being,

Subaru: “Why is Lewes-san...?”

Standing in front of Subaru is a pink-haired girl—or so she appears, but her insides are that of the aged. Indeed, it is Lewes.

Seeing her standing there with her blank gaze in the back of the clearing makes Subaru tremble. After all, Garfiel had just told him Lewes had been swallowed.

This is not coinciding.

If considering which information to believe, it would have to be the reality what exists before him. Meaning, all of the conversation they just had was perhaps a lie.

Subaru: “Garfiel, what is the...”

Garfiel: “...Don't jump't conclusions. I know yer got things you wanna say 'n ask, but there ain't any time.” something something this is how deep in we're getting

Cutting off Subaru's questioning with a swing of his arm, Garfiel directs his gaze about the surroundings. He lifts back his chin, faces the sky, takes in a deep breath,

Garfiel: “—σσσσσ!!”

and he howls, not at a volume to spear through the forest, yet mysteriously quiet in a way that does spear absolutely through the forest.

Hearing it prompts Subaru to have the situation-inappropriate thought of 'guy can do some animal mannerisms', but the thing that really stupefies him is seeing the howl's outcome.

Subaru: “—!?”

Silhouettes come shuffling through the foliage, arriving one after another at the clearing.

All of them are short, with hair long enough to nearly drag along the ground. Pink hair, pale skin, emotionless, round eyes. They wear robes unfitting to their sizes, the sleeves overlong and dangling. Apparently wearing little beneath the robe, for their legs are bare as they peek through the unclosing slits.

The silhouettes total something close to 20 in number.

Taking up half the space in the clearing as they stand there, all the girls wear the same face. Not the same expression. —The same face.

Subaru: “What kind of, joke is...”

Garfiel: “Didn't want t' show yer if I could help it.”

Garfiel's pained mutter doesn't reach a jolted Subaru's ears. Or no, it does reach them, but the meaning doesn't settle in his brain.

The scene of these same-faced girls—these people exactly identical to Lewes—standing there together makes Subaru feel as if he's dreaming.

And actually Subaru had had nightmares like this many times. The urge strikes him to file this one away as another one of those. But,

Subaru: “The scratches from the branches hurt, and my heart too... It's reality.”

Checking the blood oozing from his arms, and the sharp, rapid pulsations in his chest, Subaru takes a deep breath. Steadying the resolve to accept the scene before him, he again observes the girls.

The Lewes-faced girls not only shared exactly the same facial features, but perfectly identical expressions. That is, an emotionless, unmoved, doll-like expression.

The Lewes that Subaru knew wasn't exactly someone overflowing with activity, but she was abundant in emotion, and her actions breathed with the feeling of a living human being.

Subaru: “—”

Subaru can't sense the characteristic feeling of a living person in these girls.

Doll-like, was an expression more than appropriate. Could even just call them dolls.

They breathed, and carried the rhythms of life, but were merely moving dolls—that was the abnormality of these twenty same-faces, all lined up.

Subaru: “Clones... or, this world isn't gonna have that technology. Offshoots, or magic to create multiple bodies...? But then why are they all Lewes...”

With the words 'somatic cell cloning' drifting through his mind, Subaru realises something.

That is, why Echidna had been vague with her words about SANCTUARY being a test site, and why Garfiel had repeatedly and repeatedly cursed the place as deadlocked.

Subaru: “Is this the result from SANCTUARY's tests...? Doubles of Lewes-san. No but, what's even the point of...”

Garfiel: “Sorry f'r this while yer in th' middle of ponderin', but looks like now's 'bout time.”

Having approached to the side of a Subaru engaging in high-speed thinking, Garfiel's arms swell up. The bulging of his golden-furred arms rips through the sleeves of his clothes, arms now three times their usual size in thickness.

Ancestral Return—assuming Garfiel's true form was a tiger, this partial transformation would be the first step in asserting his trump card.

Garfiel: “Surround n' conquer. 'S simple, but with everythin' else eaten that's all's left.”

Subaru: “...I more or less get what your ace move is, but, erm, the girls...”

Garfiel: “Dunworry 'bout 'em. They ain't like granny, their insides're empty. But they c'n still manage movin' accordin' to my instructions. 'F they can make an openin', 's a profit.”

Subaru has an overwhelming number of things to ask about this fight strategy and about these Lewes double. But no time remains for brining it up, or for peaceful conversation.

Garfiel uses his great arms to push Subaru further back into the clearing. Pitching forward as he follows the rough instruction, the Leweses come to stand in front before him protectively.

Garfiel now stands in the middle of the clearing. Behind him are the Leweses, and at the very back is Subaru. And swallowing up the forest of trees Garfiel is glaring at is,

Envy:

“IloveyouIloveyouIloveyouIloveyouIloveyouIloveyouIloveyouIloveyouIloveyouIloveyouI

Blood sprays from the tiger's entangled limbs, shadow practically announcing intent to twist off the beast's legs as it constricts them. Arms as thick as Subaru's waist begin shredding apart with the noise of ripping flesh.

Subaru cannot tear his eyes away from the shrieking, immobilized tiger. The shadow proceeds in its assault, plucking away its limbs, guts and bloods spilling to the ground—

Subaru: “—ah,”

—is not what happens.

Before the dazed onlooker what was Subaru, two of the Lewes doubles bound into the conflict between the tiger and the Witch.

The little girls dash with their mouths open, pointlessly flapping their gabs. They fly out of the shadow with surprising speed, land well on the ground, darting for the witch who gazes up at the restrained tiger.

Subaru: “ue,”

Leweses: “—”

Arms spread, the girls leap at the witch as if to hug her. But the witch notices before the two complete the approach, piercing and sticking them both in place with shadow.

The shadow strikes with the pointedness of a spear and flexibility of a whip, slicing the two Leweses' legs, proceeding to skewer them through their torsos, and then dangling them up to the yet-shrieking Garfiel's side in display.

An abominable scene, but that laxness was the Witch's mistake.

Garfiel: “—σσσσ!!”

Although his throat trembles in agony, Garfiel sights the two doubles so atrociously wounded, and roars in an irregular manner which prompts Subaru's brows to furrow.

Confused as to the meaning of the changed tone, Subaru witnesses the hanging Leweses flash with abounding pale light—

Subaru: “—!?”

Leweses: “—”

The next instant, the two Lewes explode into light.

It came with none of the unsightly blood and guts of an exploded animal. Their flesh turns to particles of light, dispersing both themselves and the shadow about the surroundings, returning life to the world for only a second. Detonate and disperse—but in a manner different from a gory bombing.

Subaru aggressively rubs at his seared eyes. His vision swiftly returns, allowing him to witness the protective wall of Leweses rushing for the shadow just as the first two had.

The 18 Leweses scatter in all directions, coordinating the variations in their speeds, surrounding the Witch. As if lacking any other means for attack, as if intending to cling to the shadow as the first two attempted, they spread their arms as they dart into the circumference of the shade.

But the doubles move with speed classifiable under the header of 'human being', and their opponent

is the utmost of calamities, the Witch of ENVY.

Although the surrounding Leweses had separated, the skyward-surgings shadow splits at the tip into eighteen shades. Them transforming into sable knives, the 18 Leweses take their respective evasive manoeuvres in counter. But the spears proceed with mocking accuracy to pierce, rend, ravage the Leweses' craniums, torsos, abdomens.

Despite spacing their assaults, all the Leweses fall—and after a single beat, every Lewes explodes into light. The shadow is repelled temporarily, the vortex of shade around the witch vanishing.

Garfiel: “—RRRRRRUUUUGHHHAAAAAAAARRR!”

The torn-ragged tiger would never miss that opening.

Freed from his restraints over the Leweses' sudden rush, the great beast bends its legs, roaring, leaping for the shadow's head in the instant following the 18 doubles' dispersion.

The witch erects a wall of shadow to counter the oncoming tiger. But, the tiger strikes the barricade with the silhouette caught in its clawtips—with the concealed Lewes double, blasts the wall apart, rides over the pale light, and sinks its fangs and claws into the shadow.

—*He's done it*, was how the perfection of it prompted Subaru's conviction.

It was an inhuman deed unrepentantly costing 21 Lewes doubles.

Being a direct strike from tiger-form Garfiel's claws, for even a witch survival wouldn't possibly—

Envy: “—I love you.”

And Subaru's pleading conviction,

Envy: “—Subaru-kun.”

With an affectionate call and the burst-open corpse of Garfiel, shatters into dust.

Nevertheless, the sticking passion packed in its intonation communicates with irritating clarity.

She had entirely consumed the people of SANCTUARY, slaughtered Garfiel, and yet she still poured her interest, her concern, her love, wholeheartedly onto Subaru.

The incredible crookedness of it is eerie, sickening to the chest, as it fosters nausea among others in Subaru.

It felt that just facing the witch was whittling at his sanity. A feeling close to frenzy boils up in his chest, hatred and loathing jumbling around in his heart.

Envy: “IloveyouloveyouloveyoudarlingIloveyouloveyouloveyou”

Motionless, standing stock still, the witch continues muttering her curse of love for Subaru.

Spoken with near-enchanted passion. Her inappropriateness to context and inability to read mood is worse than Subaru's.

Despite the target of the love so blatantly expressing their discomfort facially, the pushy and self-serving love keeps coming.

This love was entirely repulsive.

And more than anything, what enraged Subaru was—

Envy: “Iloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyou”

Subaru: “...”

Envy: “Iloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyou—Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “—Don't, call me that!!”

Subaru responds to the saccharine call with his fury provoked.

That doting voice, behaviour, address, all of it infuriated Subaru.

Subaru: “Who the hell permitted you to call me that. Don't fuck around. Don't you fuck around. Don't you fucking, fuck around!!”

The closeness of being at his side.

The affection in their calls to him.

The sweetness of standing within distance to touch.

The act of using that address for their interactions.

Subaru permitted these of only one person in the world.

—And that was assuredly not the witch standing here.

Subaru: “Don't even fucking joke you grubby fucking witch. There's only one person that belongs to. I'm not handing it over to anyone else. Or, nope! Like I'm going to permit fucking anything to you. Do you think I'm going to waste even one strand of hair, one single cell, the grime under my fingernails in giving them to you—!?”

Envy: “—”

Enraged, leaving himself to anger, Subaru spits out the emotions churning inside him.

His shoulders heaving with his ragged breathing, Subaru glares at the witch standing opposite him.

There was surely no way to beat this opponent.

This was the monster which drank half the world. She had made entirely no problem of Garfiel, her strength making her stand out as a witch among witches.

Submerging every life in shadow, paying not a scrap of interest, this utmost of calamities continued murmuring its obstinate whispers of love for only one person alone.

That Subaru was capable of glaring this monster straight-on was a mystery.

All he can figure is that he's gotten desperate and lost all self-control.

If the witch felt like it, she could drag Subaru into the bog of shade in the space of an instant.

Otherwise skewer him through the chest with shadow, turn him into a gory firework like Garfiel, and transform him into fertilizer for the forest.

Knowing that, how was it he could face her without losing heart? It had to be because Subaru unconsciously harboured a certain confidence about the witch.

Envy: “—”

Subaru: “...not moving?”

His emotions ranted out and now somewhat calm, Subaru feels a suspiciousness at the witch's lack of action.

Before Subaru could even notice, the shadow's curselike murmurings of love—the statements of affection which had persisted with even through Garfiel's shredding—had stopped. Had suspended.

Subaru looks to find the shadows encroaching over the ground to have lagged—no, halted.

Distancing himself from the unpleasant sensation transmitted from the shadow underfoot, Subaru picks an uncorrupted spot in the clearing and transports himself over.

He keeps his attention fixed on the witch during this migration, but she doesn't react.

The witch stands perfectly upright with her arms dangling loosely, mantled as always in a shadow thick enough to warp the light, her expression invisible.

She's so covered in openings that punching her right now might even work to defeat her.

Subaru: “Why're you so suddenly... no way, my words did that?”

Impossible, Subaru thinks, while he grimaces at his own inability to deny it.

It was difficult to conceive that Subaru's statements carried that much influence, but considering the timing where the witch's speech and movements stopped, there was no other decent possibility.

That said, this possibility did provoke in Subaru feelings that were near-unbearable.

Subaru: “If just being rejected by me's enough to throw your actions off this much...”

If he had spoken sooner, then this could've been settled without Garfiel and everyone else dying.

This present where Emilia, Ram, Lewes, Otto, and Garfiel who protected him, had their lives spent before the shadow, was not a world Subaru had any will to live in.

Echidna had just assured him that RETURN BY DEATH lacked a limit on tries. Although he hadn't been aware of it himself, perhaps it had inspired him to take concessions with living.

After all, hadn't he immediately withdrawn his proposal to act as bait, just by Garfiel rejecting it?

Even though, with the witch plainly attached to Subaru, taking action from his side could've achieved something prompting this reaction and something presenting possibility?

Subaru: “Can't tell how she'd act, but... then'd my presence be the Witch of ENVY's weak point...?”

Being that her attachment remained stuck on Subaru, and that the situation was what it was, it was a highly likely possibility. The problem was, even should he have considered it, whether or not the opportunity to utilize it would have come.

Besides, the circumstances for the loop series in SANCTUARY had changed here. It was a disaster Subaru had been pursuing means to cope with, and hadn't found even the first hints for a solution toward—but the changes on this loop were dreadnought tier.

Just dealing with Elsa, Garfiel, and the Sizeable Hare was nigh unmanageable, but append the Witch of ENVY to that and it was nigh impossible. Even his will to discern the pattern of her appearance, as he would with the former three, was wilting.

That was how overwhelming the threat of the witch—the repulsiveness of this being—was. Formulating plans to resist her was pointlessly stupid. In the sense of crushing will to fight before the fight had even started, the petite witch was more terrifying than the massive White Whale.

Subaru: “—”

Although his opponent is a motionless witch, Subaru can feel his heart flagging with fatigue. The witch takes no action either. She gives no heed as Subaru forces himself to think. She simply immerses herself in her own interior.

Time passes with Subaru still unsure of what he should do.

His breathing, his irritatingly loud pulse, and the lukewarm sweat on his brow inform him of the time's passing.

No result will come of this no-longer-a glaring match. And, just when Subaru swallows his breath and goes to take a move, it hits him.

The flash of inspiration arrives that instant.

Subaru: “—It couldnt've been Echidna's tea party?”

Envy: “—”

Subaru: “I disclosed forbidden information while inside her castle. I thought the penalty didn't come because speaking was allowed there, but...”

—But what if it wasn't?

What if the witch had still granted Subaru no permission to reveal RETURN BY DEATH to others?
What if she had attempted to attempted to stop time and punish him for his loose lips as always?
What if, unable to manifest at Subaru's side at the tea party, the witch had regardless attempted to punish him?

—What if that was the truth behind this disaster in SANCTUARY?

Subaru: “You... just goddamn egotistic...”

Was this mass slaughter her retaliation for being unable to exercise punishment on Subaru?

Did she believe herself qualified to do this? With this display of her power, what and to whom was she trying to show?

Envy: “—I love you.”

Subaru's thoughts must've touched on some point of the truth.
The witch restarts with her repulsive activities. She points what is apparently her head toward Subaru, the curse again spilling from her mouth.

The whispers of love verify the shadow's progression, shade again beginning to spread over the ground. Feeling a bottomless bog consuming his feet, Subaru runs from the spot.

Subaru: "The heck... you sure get lively the second I say the name of another girl, hell!"

Envy: "Iloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyou"

Subaru: "No matter how many loves you whisper, I'm not gonna love you! The #1 and #2 places in my heart're already long settled and staying there. There's no room for witches!"

Tit for tat—although all the witch voices is a listing off of love, intonation unchanged.
But, discovering a definite display of emotion, Subaru's will to agitate her opens full throttle as his cheeks twist into a wicked grin. Pissing off others was a mighty forte of his, and now was time to test whether it worked on witches.

Subaru: "Don't just line up the I love yous, makes them kitsch."

Envy: "Iloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyou"

Subaru: "Y'know, the first I LOVE YOU I seriously got in this world... was something powerful enough to make a hopeless piece of garbage aspire to be a hero."

Enough to make that broken, twisted, ready-to-flee garbage believe he could challenge one more time, endless more times, a future he had almost abandoned.
Such was the strength, nobility, and greatness of real love.

Subaru: "Your loves aren't gonna be reaching my ears. Specially with you pulling atrocities out of some jealous fit, not a single likeable thing about you."

Envy: "Iloveyouloveyouloveyou"

Subaru: "If I had to love a witch like you..."

Envy: "Iloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyou—"

What should he say, what would he best say, what would piss this witch off the most? Subaru, frontrunner in annoying others, knew exactly what.
Subaru's smile thus is cruel, and his gaze disdainful.

Subaru: "They're witches too, but Echidna and the others are more loveable—"

Envy: "—"

The witch's curse instantly stops.
And—

Subaru: "—ou,"

Subaru's vision—the world—is consumed in shadow.



The shadows rush in with astounding force, mass, as Subaru helplessly watches on.

The shade extending from beneath the witch horrifically resembles Betelgeuse's UNSEEN HAND. The differences would be that only Subaru could see UNSEEN HAND, and compared to UNSEEN HAND which was avoidable if you could perceive it, this shadow attacks at a velocity rendering evasion arduous.

Thus the shadow coiling around his body, lifting him high above the treetops, pulling him down faster than freefall, and bringing him directly before the witch, were all visible events to him. The entirety of it assaults him faster than his conscious perception can keep up, churning his burdened guts, prompting vomit to spew from his lips.

His vision rotates round and around, Subaru unable keep a straight hold on his awareness. His feet don't touch the ground. Something soft, clothlike, tenderly binds his whole body. The restraints are assuredly not hard, but they perfectly seal his movements, and he can't find where to apply force to break out.

He struggles and writhes. Only his fingers and toes move. The only area that responds to Subaru's will is from his neck up, every other part of him cloaked entirely in shadow. His blurry vision finally clears, throat freezing as he notices the vast cluster of shadows before him.

—Right in front of him, really right in front of him, the witch stands so close as to almost feel her breath.

She observes the caught Subaru from extremely near distance, her gaze never breaking from him, staring into his eyes with intensity to most burn open holes. His neck fixed in place, Subaru can't escape from the gaze. Closing his eyes would allow him to flee from the mutual staring, but somehow incapable of managing the action as if barred, Subaru winds up having the unfortunate experience of a close-range face-to-face with the Witch of ENVY.

Envy: “I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Syllable by punctuated syllable, the witch continues to state her love. The instant Subaru hears those words, his rebellious spirit catches aflame. Putting strength into his immobilized body, Subaru opens his eyes wide as he glares at the witch. He opens his mouth to shower stinging insults upon her again and,

Subaru: “Distance isn't the problem. It's not resounding in my heart's what—”

Envy: “I love you. I love you. —Now you love.”

This time, it's the witch who interrupts. Subaru's brows furrows as he blinks, wondering if he misheard. The witch languidly raises her head.

Envy: “Now you love. Now you love. Now you love. Now you love.”

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wyoulovenowyoulovenowyoulovenowyoulovenowyoulovenowyoulove—now you love.”⁹

What Subaru feels, this time, is genuine terror.

Using rebellion, stubbornness, and rage, Subaru had successfully obfuscated his real feelings—
which, faced with the change in the witch's call, come bare.

No matter what she said, no matter what she did, his heart wouldn't falter and he would raise his
head high.

For that alone, for that stubbornness alone, had Subaru intended to find meaning in his
confrontation with the Witch of ENVY.

That minuscule bravery, that rash logic, now splinters into dust.

Aberration. Abnormal. Enthralled. Insane. Malefactor. Malevolent. Witch.

She understood that her continued whisperings could not gain her love. And so this time, she
desired love in a forceful format, her attitude shallow and rapacious.
And he understood.

The witch desired Natsuki Subaru, but did not see Natsuki Subaru.

What the witch saw was not Subaru, but the vessel known as Natsuki Subaru. She desired the
superficial Subaru, and wished to be loved by the superficial Subaru. Whether his feelings were
sincere or not was of no concern to her.

Loving Natsuki Subaru, and being loved by Natsuki Subaru.

That was the Witch of ENVY's entirety, the meaning of destroying the world.

—He didn't get it.

Understanding this, the questions in Subaru's heart wind up returning back to the beginning.
That being: why was the witch so attached to him?

They'd never met, never talked, and this was the first time they'd really seen each other.

Why was someone like this so insanely in love with Subaru?

He didn't understand anything. Not a single thing about it was logical. It's easy to call love
something beyond the scope of normal reason, but the witch's love took that to another dimension.

Envy: “—Nowyoulovenowyoulovenowyoulovenowyoulovenowyoulove”

The witch wishes to be able to mistake a superficial love for a true one.

More than likely, if Subaru gave a reply answering to her love, she would release him from the
restraints.

Were this the usual Subaru, considering matters in mercenary terms, conducting himself with
shrewdness, he might have reciprocated to her demand with overdone flattery.

But,

Subaru: “—I hate you.”

9 I would really rather translate this as 'love me', but due to Reasons can't. Pretend it's simultaneously 'love me'.

Envy: “—”

Subaru: “I am never, going to love you.”

His soul still rejecting her, Subaru refuses the Witch of ENVY's demand.

Envy: “—”

Again the witch goes silent.

Surely people who could deject the Witch of ENVY two, three times were not so common. Subaru feels a pointless pride in this. Which is when his elevation slowly begins to drop.

Still wrapped in the robe of shadow, Subaru is lowered to the ground. But that doesn't mean he is released. Still restrained, he slips closer and closer to the witch—into the middle of the now-churning vortex of consuming shade.

Seeing that she couldn't acquire Subaru's heart, it appears the witch decided to claim Subaru. An entirely hasty and excessively pragmatic idea.

His legs swallowed up to the shins, having been terrified at the progressive loss of sensation, Subaru abruptly has a doubt.

If consumed by the shadow, Subaru would almost unmistakably die.

Meaning, in a sense, there was worth in giving up. Welcoming DEATH would be resistance against the witch. And so his shins are swallowed.

However,

—If it was the witch's power allowing him to re-do his DEATHS, would he really be capable of a re-do when the witch was killing him personally?

Subaru: “—!”

The instant he realises it, Subaru acts in far-too belated opposition. With his lower body already consumed by shadow, the idea of opposition in itself was excessively infantile. But he couldn't go without doing it.

Thinking deeper, before getting to the question of whether he could re-do, he didn't even know if getting swallowed by the shadow would actually kill him. Worst case scenario, he could be drawn into the shadows and assimilated with the witch, made to pass eternity while forbidden to die.

Over that long, long timespan, where his present resolve and determination would get worn and whittled down, would he or would he not eventually fold to the witch? He wouldn't—was not a statement Subaru was confident enough to make. So he could not be consumed here.

At worst, even if biting off his tongue, before he could fall into the witch's hands—

Subaru: “—ue, ou?”

—is a decision prematurely aborted by the heat in his chest.

A blaze near hot enough to burn springs up from the left side of his chest, Subaru lowering his gaze to look. And he finds that the heat is generating light, bright enough to spill outside of the shadow enveloping Subaru.

The surprising part is that from the point of the light's origin outwards, the witch's shade binding Subaru steadily melts away to nothing.

Subaru: “Then...!”

Before he can question the nature of the suddenly overflowing light, Subaru squirms about to sever the robe of shadows with its power. His range of movement widens as the shade slices apart, and after confirming his arm is free, he immediately reaches for the source of the light.

What his fingers retrieve from his pocket, fluttering in the wind in his grasp, is a handkerchief—embroidered with a grey cat, Petra's handkerchief.

Subaru: “Why is... nevermind!”

Putting off thinking about it for later, Subaru strikes with the handkerchief. Although supposedly a thing of soft fabric, it follows Subaru's will as its solidity compounds and its sharpness grows to that of a knife, severing the shadows connecting to the witch and the ground.

Envy: “—”

Subaru: “Woah! With this... I can do it!”

Subaru stabs the handkerchief into the shadow which swallowed his lower body.

The glowing handkerchief's point digs into the shadow, the shades displaying a split-second attempt to gather in counter to the light, but they instantly and silently burst and disperse.

All that remains after the shadows vanish is Subaru, his legs left ejected on the ground.

Subaru immediately tumbles backwards, confirming the healthiness of his legs. He readies the handkerchief at his hip as he glances over the glowing thing.

The handkerchief Petra sewed. It was unthinkable that her feelings for Subaru could have summoned this much of a miracle. The thought then arises in Subaru's mind of someone who may have conducted this work on the handkerchief.

Subaru: “That Echidna... did she goddamn know that this'd happen?”

Subaru had given the handkerchief to Echidna in the dream world, and lacked the free time to consider how it could interfere with reality—but if the interference was just some little trick like this, perhaps transferring from dream to reality was possible.

Either way,

Subaru: “If she's readied me with a way to fight the witch, I'll go thank her.”

Envy: “—”

Faced with the reality of her shadows being destroyed, the witch simply stands there stupefied. Subaru takes a short breath, twisting around to stab the witch during this opening.

Subaru: “Negligence is The Enemy!”

Subaru thrusts the handkerchief up to stick the witch from aside. She doesn't move. But shade bursts up from beneath her feet in self-defence, the Garfiel-dubbed shadow dress engaging in protective action.

Subaru: “—Rrruaaaaah!”

But even the dress fails to guard against the handkerchief's light.
The knife-sharp handkerchief tears through the shadow dress as easily as a cobweb, plunging straight through to stab the face of the witch—and strikes true.

Subaru: “Got her—!”

Crying out in joy, Subaru swiftly uses the momentum to pivot for a backswing. He spins, the blade moving to again strike the witch—

Subaru: “—wha?”

—When what he sees makes him stop the motion.
The witch stands stock still, looking at Subaru. The light assuredly reached her face in that hit, her previously vague and indistinct features now separated from the mask of shadow, exposed.

A familiar silver-haired girl, her eyes frozen of emotion, stares at Subaru.

Subaru: “Emilia...?”

She doesn't respond to the call. But everything else takes massive action.
The robe of shadow returns. Although supposedly dead, it again grips Subaru from below, grappling him. This time it constricts without any leniency, causing him to shriek.

With his right hip as the origin point, the robe of shadow restrains him tight across the left side of his body. All he can move is his handkerchief-wielding right arm, barely, but even that has its operable range restricted and can't move properly.
The shade beings to pull the immobilized Subaru to the bottom of the sea of shadow, progressively and without hesitation, blatantly speedier than last time.

His lower body submerges, sinking up to his left shoulder. Only his right side from his breast upwards, his neck, and his head remain outside.
He frantically raises his head, half-sunken and resisting,

Subaru: “Emilia! Emilia!?! Wh, why are, why!?”

Seeing her missing from the tomb, and the shadow consuming SANCTUARY, Subaru had thought Emilia had sunken into the sea of shade at the hands of the witch.
And now this, when his efforts resisting the Witch of ENVY thus far had quite considerably been a battle of revenge.

—Why was she cloaked in shadow, attacking SANCTUARY?

He can't collect his thoughts. She isn't answering or seeing Subaru. The cold gleam in her amethyst eyes is one Subaru has never seen before, making him doubt whether she is conscious in there.
He doesn't have time to check his doubt's veracity.

Subaru: “Ghu, uw, au...”

His body is being dragged deeper and deeper into the shadow.
He feels no sensation from his swallowed body parts. Or rather 'no sensation' would be one thing, but losing the sense of the parts even existing, Subaru again realises the risk of being swallowed here.

Recognizing the handkerchief in his left hand, and his mobility which narrowly remains there, Subaru hardens his resolve.

The image of the white-haired witch passes through his mind.

He would rather like to amend his previous words, and give her a complaint.

Subaru: “Did fucking Echidna actually seriously think it'd go like this...?”

If so, he could shed tears at her scrupulous consideration.

Tears, but those being tears of blood.

—He closes his eyes, and the instant he snaps them back open, Subaru plunges the handkerchief into his neck.

The sharp tip tears through his flesh, boring a hole through a fatal region of his throat. Blood washes into his windpipe, running down into his lungs, his consciousness beginning to drown.

Suicide. The Witch of GREED had prepared Subaru an opportunity for such.

It was not a means to counter the Witch of ENVY. Echidna had most likely perceived that their talk in the castle had infuriated ENVY. Here, he would pay the compensation.

Envy: “—!”

Seeing Subaru's suicide, for the first time, an emotion other than love detonates in the Witch of ENVY.

But Subaru, drowning in his own blood and already losing consciousness, can't tell.

Though, seeing the girl's familiar face twisted in sorrow—regardless of what happened to her insides—and witnessing her anguished expression, the pain to his chest remains the same.

Overflowing blood runs into his throat, and although unable to muster any proper speech, Subaru regardless to her—and not to the counterfeit filling the vessel, to her—reports.

Subaru: “I, no matter what—“

—Will save you.

Natsuki Subaru lost his life the next instant.