

## RE: ZERO DETAILED SUMMARY PHASE 3

Yet again my laptop creaks beneath the weight of a something-hundred page document, and so here I am with another arbitrary cutting point. This document begins approximately 1/3rd of the way through arc 4, at chapter 52, and is not recommended for those who have not read up to chapter 51. Unless reading stories by starting partway through is your hobby, in which case, please enjoy.

Otherwise, the same advisories go as always:

☺ ☹ ☺ **THIS IS A STUPID-DETAILED SUMMARY RATHER THAN A TRANSLATION** ☺ ☹ ☺

I will skim or summarize random lines or passages for reasons including: caprice, vagary, whim, fancy, miscellaneous. My word choices are incredibly dictated by personal appeal. There is effectively zero proof reading and absolutely zero editing. You must brace yourself.

☹ ☺ ☹ **MY JAPANESE IS NOT SO STELLAR** ☹ ☺ ☹

I am not at a level of japanese proficiency where I should be attempting to translate anything. Mistranslations will be inevitable but hopefully not egregious. I request you regard these summaries as something a friend slipped to you in private rather than something openly available to the public at mega.nz.

☺ ☹ ☺ **THESE SUMMARIES ARE AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC AT MEGA.NZ** ☺ ☹ ☺

If you are interested in following along with updates, I recommend bookmarking this link <https://mega.nz/#F!VNdzDYYK!nK9fNU3LeprlZSbRAnlsRg> and checking it at semi-regular intervals, perhaps once a week. My schedule for uploading new chapters to this folder is 'the second I'm done with them' and consequently not consistent.

☹ ☺ ☹ **ALSO I HAVE AN EMAIL** ☹ ☺ ☹

[ankaa.burner@gmail.com](mailto:ankaa.burner@gmail.com)

Get your grain, or teaspoon, or pitcher of salt at the ready, and on we go to start phase three.

# ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT

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## CHAPTER 52: SLIGHT CHANGES

The first thing Subaru confirms upon waking is: is this reality or not?

He's had lots of passings through the threshold between dream and reality, and during that period the boundaries between them tend to get fuzzy. Especially when talking about directly after having his consciousness returned by RETURN BY DEATH, when his brain is often still asleep, and he gets dropped into a state most identical to awakening.

Subaru: “—uegh, geh”

The first thing Subaru feels as his consciousness returns is the taste of dusty shit in his mouth.

He spits out the shit, uprights himself, and looks around—dark room, cold air, unsettling silence. It's the tomb.

Subaru: “I was able to come back...”

Mutters Subaru as he balls and unballs his fists before him, confirming the sensation of his body.

Subaru: “Didn't know what'd happen back when the shadow was swallowing me... but, guess suicide paid off.”

Recollecting on the sensation of a pointy handkerchief boring through his throat, Subaru touches his now-unwounded Adam's apple, letting slip a sigh of relief. Blood clogging his windpipe, running into his lungs, the pain of drowning. Despite all the DEATHS he's experienced, the feeling of loss remains vivid as ever, DEATH always imparting Subaru with some fresh new brand of suffering. But even so,

Subaru: “It's so much better than some... can't-come-back, unrecoverable state.”

Feeling some satisfaction about being able to return and about unhesitatingly choosing DEATH back there, Subaru decides to shelve further consideration about RETURN BY DEATH for now.

Subaru: “This isn't the time to get emotional about coming back. Anyway, now to sort out the things to do, do what I should do, then...”

Then question his own resolve.

Closing his eyes, Subaru takes a deep breath. His eyes host no more hesitation once he opens them again. He simply gazes ahead at the things he should do.

He stands up, bushing the dust off himself as he looks about the room, and sees the girl collapsed on her side nearby. It's Emilia. In the middle of her TRIAL, her expression right now will likely be one of agony as she faces her past.

Subaru walks over, reaching out to wake her up. His thoughts are to take her outside, meet up with Ram and the others, and then he had a general idea for what'd come afterwards.

Thinking that far, his hand stretched out to touch Emilia, Subaru notices that his fingers are shaking.

Subaru: “...What?”

His eyes widen at his trembling fingers, bringing his hand to his face in confusion. Subaru's brain sends orders commanding the shaking to stop, but his fingers ignore the missive and go right on trembling. Then, Subaru belatedly notices: His teeth are chattering.

Subaru: “Hands and teeth are shaking... what's with this...”

Although surprised at the irregularities in his physical condition, Subaru does understand the meaning of it. The cause for the trembling is the sight that passed through his mind the second he went to touch Emilia.

—Emilia's face, dead of emotion, as she stared down at a dying Subaru.

Subaru believed the Witch of ENVY herself had descended upon SANCTUARY. For some reason she cloaked Emilia's body in shadow, which Subaru unfortunately witnessed in his final moment.

Most likely, the witch had possessed Emilia's body which was sleeping in the tomb. For a Subaru who knew of Betelgeux, a being wielding the power to possess the bodies of others, he easily accepts the possibility.

The reason the witch targeted Emilia's body was simple.

Subaru was a tattle-tale about RETURN BY DEATH during the tea party. The witch manifested to punish Subaru, but couldn't intrude into the party. What instead caught her eye was Emilia, sleeping at Subaru's side.

The witch stole Emilia's body, filled SANCTUARY with shadow, killed Garfiel and attempted to swallow Subaru—would be the series of events.

Subaru: “Knowing that much... but my body's, still shaking...”

Although possessing enough composure to coolheadedly look back on events, his weak heart is incapable of forgetting the terror of being faced with that aberration.

If Subaru's speculation is correct, the origin for the disaster was him being invited to the tea party. Meaning, being that he hadn't participated in the tea party this time, he hasn't stepped on that land mine.

—It's over 90% assured that the witch is not presently dwelling in Emilia.

The terrified rejection that his body is showing is simply cowardice. That he can't completely discard the worst of possibilities, is all it is.

That being—Would the Witch of ENVY really stop pursuing Subaru with just a RETURN BY DEATH dividing them?

Subaru: “—”

What allowed Subaru to RETURN BY DEATH was the WITCH OF ENVY.

That was Subaru's view on it, and Echidna had affirmed his opinion. Considering the pattern of the witch's appearances up until now, and the end of last loop, that view was more than likely correct. For some reason, the witch didn't desire for Subaru to end with DEATH. He could be grateful for that

much. And only that much.

The question is whether that nutso-persistent Witch of ENVY, if that ludicrously powerful witch, if that witch so completely delusional enough to butt in on reality, would have given up on Subaru.

Subaru: “—”

Saying that the witch hypothetically had the power to go back in time, the concept of her using the power on Subaru, but being unable to use it on herself, was entirely just optimism.

Why would the witch not go back in time, like how Subaru's DEATH rewound the world, to pursue him?

His frightened heart, and an unanswered question—with the answer lying right there, in front of him.

If he touches Emilia and wakes her from the TRIAL, he will know everything.

If she wakes up and her silver-bell voice calls Subaru's name like always, Subaru can be released from the terror.

But what if that's not what happens?

Subaru: “...It'll be the end, then.”

There's nothing he can do if the witch manifests before him every time he returns. Not a single vision arises in Subaru's mind of his side's present combat power proving a match against the absolute strength—the strength to cover SANCTUARY in shadow—that the Witch of ENVY possessed.

Faced with a nightmare which so easily put even Garfiel to the grave, what countermeasures were there?

In short, this was a watershed.

Subaru: “If it's not certain I died and was able to come back... then it's uncertain whether the Emilia here is really Emilia, huh. What... I'm an idiot.”

Grasping the situation, Subaru gives a gentle sigh. Before he knows it, the shaking in his fingers and chattering of his teeth have disappeared. He gained awareness, and finally realised.

Everything is vague, uncertain and unfixed.

Subaru: “That's just ordinary, happens to everyone.”

Not knowing the future, and having unease for the seconds ahead, was ordinary.

Even if he had the potential to know some of the events ahead, what was there to be afraid of?

This pointless dread equivalent to fearing living—

Emilia: “...h, no...”

—was such a worthless, puny kind of hesitation compared to the taxed and loveable girl before him.

Subaru: “—Emilia.”

Calling her name, Subaru's stilled fingers brush against Emilia's cheek. Pale cheeks. Skin warm and smooth to the touch. Downcast eyes, with her eyelashes trembling, a weak light in her amethyst pupils peeking out from underneath.

Emilia is returned to reality. She blinks and blinks, noticing Subaru directly before her,

Emilia: “...Subah, rhu?”

That voice, those eyes, that manner, is exactly the Emilia that Subaru knows.

Subaru: “—Yeah, it's me.”

The shadows of unease binding heavy on Subaru's body all simultaneously fade into nothing. Giving a long sigh and propping Emilia up as she uprights herself, Subaru feels himself draining of tenseness.

In contrast to Subaru, an uprighted Emilia glances around, fidgety. Her head perhaps a little heavy, she puts her hand to her forehead.

Emilia: “Umm...”

Emilia: “This is... I, was just...”

Addled by achy pain, Emilia closes her eyes and trawls her memory to events before she slept—and so remembers what happened during her sleep.

Emilia's eyes shoot open, Subaru witnessing as her pink lips start to tremble.

A wave of emotion rocks her amethyst eyes. Her head is most absolutely jumbled up because of her past. Subaru knew that an Emilia awoken from the TRIAL would be out of sorts. And so he's able to silently watch on.

He'll tenderly hold the shaking girl, choosing his words so as not to hurt, calm her and soothe her, telling her everything's okay—

Emilia: “...Subaru?”

—And Emilia reacts in a manner completely deviating from Subaru's imaginings.

Her upsetted eyes reclaim their cool, her strengthened emotions hold still her once-trembling lips. She reaches her raised hand out to Subaru,

Emilia: “How come you look like you're about to cry?”

Subaru: “...wh?”

Emilia's fingers stroke against Subaru's cheek, from there gliding toward his shock-wide eyes. Her pale fingertips skim the corner of his eye, tracing over the welling tears, and Subaru realises that he is this close to crying.

*Why?* Is not a question he has time to ask of himself.

Subaru: “a, ue, e?”

The shakes come abruptly.

Shakes on a separate dimension from those before, wholly unbearable shuddering.

These are shakes to bring trembling about the whole body, stealing away strength. Standing on his knees as he faces Emilia, Subaru is unable to resist them, capable only of curling up small and hugging his trembling body.

Subaru understood.

If, before touching Emilia, he had feared that the witch may have taken her over—

Emilia: “It's okay, Subaru. It's alright, everything's okay. I'm here—”

Says Emilia as she softly takes Subaru's trembling body in a hug.

Her thin clothes allow them to feel each other's warmth. The quiet beating of her pulse, transmitted through to him, fills his heart with more fullness than does the heat of her body.

—After dreading that the witch may have taken over Emilia, and then learning that she hadn't, Subaru's relief had rendered him motionless.

He had truly intended to proceed with things seriously, but his body didn't reflect that intention in the slightest. Both a heart of iron, and a stern flesh suitable to guard that heart, were yet distant from Subaru.

Feeling Emilia's warmth, her pulse, her tenderness, Subaru grits his teeth at how pathetic he is—but still inevitably feels relief.

Quietly, and quietly, and quietly, in the middle of the tomb, the two maintain the embrace.



Emilia: “Calmed down?”

Subaru: “Uh, uh-huh... um, I'm sorry. For causing trouble in this, weird way.”

The hold lasts until Subaru's shakes settle.

Red-faced at how pathetic he is, Subaru apologizes in response to Emilia's question. Emilia shakes her head,

Emilia: “No,”

Emilia: “It's fine. I feel like I've been entirely depending on you lately, Subaru. Having you show me you being weak once in a while... is kind of a relief.”

Subaru: “That line's a killer. ...Not that I really want to show those aspects of me to you if I can help it, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Why not?”

Subaru: “Because I want you to always see me acting strong and trying to be cool. I don't want you to know I'm really some hopeless, weak, pathetic loser.”

Emilia: “I'm not going to think of you like that, just by seeing you being a little weak.”

This problem has nothing to do with whether Emilia's personality is one like that, or whether showing his weakness will earn him disappointment. It's entirely a simple issue resultant from Subaru's—from a man's circumstances.

Subaru: “Showing your weakness without hiding any of it, and wanting them to know the real you... kinda scene's something I'm pretty fond of for tearjerkers, though.”

Emilia: “Tearjerk... what?”

Subaru: “Talking to myself. I wanna show you me being strong, Emilia-tan. It's a man's pride, this is.”

Washing away the awkwardness with some pointless shit conversation like always, Subaru smiles wryly at Emilia as she tilts her head. His expression then tightens.

Subaru: “So, now I kinda wanna ask about the TRIAL...”

Emilia: “—Right.”

Emilia answers Subaru's timid question after a beat, giving a nod.

For an instant, a short bolt of surprise visits Subaru. Because her reaction to hearing the word TRIAL is rather different than it has been.

Emilia wakes up and then is made to face reality while still harbouring the shock from failing the TRIAL—was the unintended flow of Subaru's pathetic sketch.

The time spent in the embrace had given Emilia space to, although slight, calm down from the shock of failing the TRIAL. That would be part of why she was keeping her cool now.

Subaru: “Guess even my weakness can be helpful...”

Emilia: “Subaru, why are you here? The only one who can enter here should be...”

Subaru: “Nope, I...”

Subaru cuts himself off just as he goes to answer sincerely.  
And he thinks. What is the best answer to give here?



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Reporting that he gained the qualifications and overcame the TRIAL would be easy. But Subaru suspected that by choosing that response, Emilia would feel guilt about failing her own TRIAL, and develop a sense of inferiority compared to Subaru.

The sense of inferiority will lead to panicky impatience, with Emilia suffering in the threshold between self-loathing and responsibility. If this scenario happens, Emilia preserving her cool right here as she is now becomes meaningless.

There remains possibility for Emilia to face the TRIAL in a different context than she has been. Subaru most likely should respect that potentiality.

Leaving aside whether or not that would yield change in the fundamental segment of, 'is Emilia able to face and overcome her PAST?'

—There's worth in trying it, thinks Subaru.

Subaru: “You weren't coming outside Emilia-tan so I got worried and this just happened. I managed to keep from falling unconscious for a while... but once I reached here, yup looks like things turned out like last afternoon.”

Emilia: “Then, right... I'm sorry, I worried you.”

Subaru: “Nah, I wound up prostrate in here too, if there's anyone worried it's the group hanging around outside in the present-perfect-progressive.”

The people outside should be worrying about the lack of reaction ever since Subaru leapt in. Realising this, Emilia raises her head.

Emilia: “Ah,”

Emilia: “A-anyway, we need to go back to everyone... And they'll be worried about you too, Subaru.”

Subaru: “My living and dying's irrelevant at worst, it's only if we don't report you're safe that things're gonna get bad, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “...Talking like that isn't any good.”

Emilia gives Subaru a criticising gaze.

Subaru: “Sorry.”

Subaru shrugs up his shoulders slightly, and the two get on their way heading for the tomb's exit.

Subaru: “By the way,”

Subaru: “Can I ask? About the TRIAL.”

Emilia: “...I'm sorry. I think I failed it.”

Subaru: “That's... yeah, kinda figured that from your reaction.”

Emilia apologetically averts her gaze. Looking away from her, Subaru pretends to have perhaps only learned that fact now. Although feeling guilty about acting this way, Subaru suppresses his hesitation with a shake of his head.

Subaru: “So everything's over now... is what it's wound up being?”

Emilia: “It doesn't seem like that. ...I can challenge as many times as I try to challenge. It's really a mystery but, I do know that. Though,”

Echidna's already told Subaru about this aspect of the TRIAL, but seems like Emilia's been made unconsciously aware of the information as well. After some hesitation from Emilia,

Emilia: “No, nevermind. Today looks like it was no good, but I'll try again tomorrow.”

Subaru: “Will you be okay? If it's too intense we could leave a gap of a few days... and, you'll be more likely to win when challenging after planning out your approach and countermeasures.”

Emilia: “Thank you. ...But I can tell it's a problem where those things wouldn't do anything about it. I can tell.”

Subaru: “...Talking might make it easier, 's the kinda know-it-all line I'll be trying here.”

Says Subaru as he looks at Emilia, Emilia returning the gaze with her lips trembling. The tangled emotions in her heart look about to well over, but she closes her eyes to stop them before they can.

Emilia: “—Sorry. I don't want to show these feelings to you, Subaru.”

Subaru: “But no matter what I see of you, Emilia-tan, I'm absolutely never going to hate you or anything.”

Emilia: “It's not that I'm scared of what you'll think of me, Subaru. Well no, that is part of it... but, it's that there's something even scarier.”

Emilia goes quiet on that note. Seeing the unshaken strength of will in her amethyst eyes, Subaru confirms that kindling her up has been a success.

If Subaru displays an attitude backing her up like this, Emilia will accede to that and expose her weakness, perhaps even clinging to him completely—is not what he should be thinking.

That he's jangling Emilia's heart around in the palm of his hand is disgusting and makes Subaru want to puke. —Even though it'd be fine if he explained it off as something necessary.

???: “—Emilia-sama!”

Gritting his teeth in self-loathing, the dazzling moonlight and call for Emilia snap him back to reality.

The pale light of the moon illuminates the tomb's entrance, a refreshing wind welcoming the two as

they step outside. Subaru looks down to find those assembled outside waiting for Emilia with relief arising on their faces.

Seems like Ram was the one who called. Having confirmed Emilia's good health, Ram pats her own chest in a rare display of relief, going on to look at Subaru.

Ram: "You did excellent work, Barusu."

Subaru: "Woah... Didn't think you'd be praising me, serious shock. What's with that admirable attitude, not like you at all."

Ram: "If you happen to achieve a good deed properly, I will give my appreciation. I'll at least acknowledge well that you brought Emilia-sama back safely. Roswaal-sama will be overjoyed, too."

Seems like most of her relief is coming from being able to report it to Roswaal, but getting an honest thanks is a fresh new joy for Subaru. Giving a stupidass grin, he feigns nonchalance in his gaze as he spots the blond young man beside Ram.

Garfiel, who had been leaning against a tree, uncrosses his arms as he approaches with a lumbering kind of gait. There's nothing to suspect in his mannerisms or behaviour, but since he can close this distance in an instant that's meaningless.

Subaru's left the tomb, having RETURNED BY DEATH immediately after RETURNING BY DEATH. Just thinking of what his current stench must be like is terrifying, and Subaru pays Garfiel maximum caution.

And after arriving at a fully-tense Subaru's side the first thing Garfiel says is,

Garfiel: "'S wonderin' what'd happen after ya rushed right inside all damn reckless. I'm relieved yer back safe. Was thinkin' a' WIND FELS NOT THE GAFGARON NUT, but 't still got me goin' on edge."

Subaru: "Ow! Hey, au, that hurts!"

Says Garfiel smiling as he rigorously and repeatedly slaps Subaru's shoulders.

The force is enough to most numb him to the bones, making Subaru suspect for an instant that *This is Garfiel feigning nonchalance as he assassinates me!?*, but he senses no ill will from Garfiel and his giant smile.

It really is as if he's welcoming their safe return. Again hit with a reaction contrary to his expectations, Subaru is unable to conceal his feelings of being absolutely fucking thrown,

Subaru: "That's... all?"

Garfiel: "Eh? What. Yer sayin' y'want me t'pat yer head 's reward fer puttin' in work?"

Subaru: "If it were Emilia it'd be one thing, but what's the point when it's from you. That's not what I meant..."

Subaru goes to mention his feelings of being absolutely fucking thrown, but reconsiders after figuring that there's no need to purposefully bring himself more trouble. Whatever Garfiel's true

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feelings are, it's fortunate that he's not in the mood to attack immediately. Regardless, Subaru's making progress on noting down the conditions for Garfiel to bare his fangs. If he can now discard the worst condition of 'it happens no questions asked', that's something to welcome.

Subaru: “The problem of how I should interact with you is puzzling my brain.”

Garfiel: “Yer sayin' things that don't make sense, oi.”

Subaru: “Talking to myself again. Anyway, let's all settle things down for the detailed story. First I wanna let Emilia take a rest. Our schedule for afterwards'll be on that too.”

Nobody opposes Subaru's proposition.

Emilia apologizes to everyone with a 'I'm sorry', after which Ram takes her by the hand and leads the group back toward SANCTUARY—again choosing Lewes' house as where to settle down.

Emilia wasn't out of sorts. Garfiel's incredibly friendly attitude toward a RETURNED BY DEATH Subaru didn't collapse.

Faced with these different conditions from before, Subaru scrambles for which actions hereonout would be optimum, which way to welcome DEATH would be optimum?

There are far too many things he has to know, and has to test.

How many sacrifices would he wind up having to make to grasp the optimum future?

Still neglecting to put his own life into the equation, Subaru fails to notice his own mercenary, calculating self.

Lwes: “—”

Neither does he notice Lewes, staring fixedly at him from behind.

Couldn't notice, same as he never could.

## CHAPTER 53: OVERLAPPING INQUIRIES

The scene shifts from outside the tomb to Lewes' house, where the squad has their post-TRIAL chat. The flow of the conversation is effectively the same as previous loops, with Emilia stating she failed the TRIAL but has no intention of giving up.

Emilia zipped her lip when it got to discussing the details of the TRIAL, where Ram then intervened and dissolved the meeting, giving Emilia's physical condition as the reason. Garfiel, Lewes, and Otto left, leaving only Emilia, Subaru, and Ram in the house.

Ram: "Now, I would like to wait upon Emilia-sama as she goes to rest. Barusu, does your unrequired self need to be told of it to realise such?"

Subaru: "Thanks for that not-indirect indirect statement. Considering Emilia's state, I definitely would like to let you do your job, but... I want some time. Could you leave me and Emilia alone for a bit?"

Ram: "Filthy."

Subaru: "For immediately coming up with that you're the filthy one!"

Repulsion arises in Ram's eyes, blocking her ears at Subaru's yelling with an expression of feigned ignorance. She glances at Emilia, who is sitting on the bed.

Ram: "How would you like to proceed, Emilia-sama? If you would prefer not to parley with Barusu, I would be willing to make him retreat."

Subaru: "What's your deal? Kindhearted and compassionate Emilia-tan couldn't possibly reject me. Right?"

Emilia: "I'm sooo exhausted tonight, so if it's one of our usual natters I kinda might want to say no..."

Subaru: "Who says natters anymore? ...And that's not what I want to do right now. Me flirting with you's gonna be on a different opportunity, Emilia-tan. Right now I just wanna talk a little about the tomb."

Emilia's expression is poor even through their usual little dialogue, but once Subaru alludes to the TRIAL, Emilia shuts her eyes before urging Ram out of the room with a glance and a 'sorry'. Ram silently obeys, giving a curtsy and heading for the room's exit. As she passes by Subaru, she whispers,

Ram: "Refrain from talks that would burden her too much."

Ram clicks the door shut after that stern order, leaving Subaru and Emilia behind in the room. Emilia looks earnestly up at Subaru from her seat on the bed, Subaru gives a light shrug.

Subaru: "We could only do a brief check back inside the tomb, but are you really feeling all normal?"

Considering how weird a place it is, yeah I'm gonna be worried.”

Emilia: “That's, all okay. Mm, thank you. I really don't think there was any strange meddling to my head or body. And if we're going to be worried about this, shouldn't we be more worried about you?”

Subaru: “Meening?”

Emilia: “No 'meening's. Subaru, I'm glad you went inside the tomb because I wasn't coming out, but something must've happened to you while you were in there. It took almost thirty minutes from when you went in to when you came out with me, Ram said.”

Subaru internally pokes out his tongue at Emilia's criticising gaze. Back in the tomb he had bullshitted this away off the momentum, but seems like Ram's unneeded declarations have made Emilia notice the oddness. Her face stiffens as she imagines what could have happened over the missing time.

Back in the first loop, the thought that Subaru might have known the content of her TRIAL terribly put her out of sorts. It's easy to imagine that, if she reaches the same conclusion here, she'll lose her present composure.

Emilia: “Subaru, did you maybe... inside, with the TRIAL too...”

Subaru: “No, didn't. If it just flung you into the TRIAL no matter whatever pow pow pow that'd be way too indiscriminate. What ate time was me waking you up, Emilia.”

Emilia: “Waking me?”

Subaru: “Yes. It looked like a nightmare so I frantically tried to wake you, but it was almost like you were tied into the dream with how stubbornly you were sleeping. I thought about just bringing you out like that, but the bad feeling I got was crazy.”

Emilia has no methods to verify whether Subaru's charade, accompanied by charades, is true or not.

Emilia: “Then... right. I'm sorry, for that weird doubt.”

Subaru: “It's all fine. If I could've taken the TRIAL too, I mighta gotten the whole story together with you Emilia-tan assisted and given it the one-two until clear.”

Emilia: “...I don't know. We might not necessarily have seen the same thing...”

Her sentence ending is weak, but doesn't look like she's probing into Subaru's lies.

Emilia doesn't want people to know that she saw her past, and was unable to conquer it. If Subaru stresses that he doesn't know the content of the TRIAL, her mental state may lead her to want to believe it.

Emilia: “Anyway, what is the talk about? That couldn't have been the main topic, right?”

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Subaru: “Right. That's not the main topic. So there's something I wanna ask.”

Emilia: “You want to ask?”

Emilia tilts her head.

Subaru: “Yeah, wanna ask.”

Subaru: “Puck hasn't been showing up for a while... is he still not responding?”

Emilia: “Ri, ght... no. Puck still isn't responding. I've kept calling him, but it's like he's sleeping in the crystal.”

Emilia lowers her eyes, and reaches for the beautiful green crystal at her breast. Its glimmer appears to be lost.

Subaru: “No ideas on what the cause is?”

Emilia: “There's been some times like this where my voice wouldn't reach him, but he'd always come back in two or three days. It's already been almost a week this time... I'm a little worried.”

When the Sizeable Hare attacks SANCTUARY, what likely happens is it consumes all the residents with none to spare. The victims would include Garfiel and Ram, and probably Roswaal too. Emilia would naturally be part of the count.

The sensation of being shredded, devoured, pieces of yourself transforming into chunks of meat settled inside another creature's stomach—just imagining that Emilia and the others experienced this feeling makes Subaru's guts seethe with rage and sorrow.

Putting aside the fury for now, what Subaru considers here is the useless spirit which didn't show up even when Emilia was being harmed.

Last loop when the witch took over her body was the same case. Once again the Great and Mighty Spirit offered absolutely zero help.

All words no action, lip service, entirely talk, peaking here.

Subaru: “His only big contributions've been the Elsa fight and the Sapporo Snow Festival ft. me. Unreliable... 'd be the safe way to think.”

Putting his hand to his chin, Subaru says mean things about Puck while he forces himself to think. The calamity coming for SANCTUARY was synonymous with Emilia being in imminent danger. Garfiel and Roswaal can't counter it alone, so Subaru had thought to add some suitable combat strength, but doesn't seem like Puck's going to be it.

Subaru: “Guess there's no ideas on how to call back Puck. If he could come back lots of things'd make progress.”

Emilia: “—. I don't, really have any ideas, I guess.”

Emilia gives the expected reply, but the second of hesitation tugs at Subaru. Though, before he can ask about it,

Emilia: “What do you want to talk about with Puck?”

Subaru: “Hm? Ah, right, so that's a witch's tomb, and it's been there for 400 years. I'm wondering if talking to a guy who knows stuff about that time might give us a bit of a breakthrough.”

Subaru gives his readied-beforehand reply, to which Emilia agrees and nods. She earnestly considers Subaru's suggestion.

Emilia: “Right, yes. Puck just, might know something... Mm, got it. I'll try calling him lots more than usual.”

Subaru: “Okey. I've got my expectations for you on that, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia's willing to do the TRIAL, and doesn't think Subaru's taken it. There should be no drops in her motivation here.

Seems unlikely Puck will be having his time in the limelight this loop. Considering that he hasn't lent any help to mediate the difficulty level for Subaru, and the bad impression left from their last conversation, Subaru's feelings about Puck have entirely worsened.

Subaru: “So, no good in staying too long, and Ram's getting weird suspicions which I think'll give her more reasons to bully me and so I'll be leaving. Though, if you wanna sleep together Emilia-tan...”

Emilia: “But I don't want to sleep together?”

Subaru: “Hit with such a sincere comeback, and even I... can only say 'wooahh'.”

Giving a wry smile to a mystified Emilia, Subaru heads for the door.

Either way, this conversation was probably the one he ought to lay down in advance. There aren't many ways Subaru could approach the problem of Emilia herself.

What Subaru can do is craft an environment where Emilia's devoted to the TRIAL, while he breaks through the bad circumstances surrounding it.

Emilia challenges the tomb, and Subaru challenges SANCTUARY.

Subaru can't let Emilia sense the trouble going on on Subaru's end. It would increase the burden on her.

Subaru: “Well, goodnight, Emilia-tan. If you have scary dreams, you're always welcome to come fleeing to my side.”

Emilia: “If I'm intruding all the way to your side, I'm going to shock all the villagers. ...You know, Subaru,”

Subaru: “Hm?”



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Just before Subaru leaves, Emilia stops him with a call of his name. He turns back, his hand on the door, to see Emilia's lips trembling and hesitation in her eyes.

Emilia: "No, nevermind. Have a good night. Take care."

Subaru: "That last part's really not a joke. 'Night."

Waving, Subaru burns Emilia's smile into his memory as he leaves the room. He closes the door behind him and raises his head, to find Ram seated in the lounge adjacent the bedroom, having a steaming cup of tea.

The landlord Lewes had vacated the house out of consideration, and here was this maid arrogant as ever. Subaru smiles wryly.

Subaru: "Sorry for making you wait... is what I thought I was gonna say, but seeing you bumming out makes me not want to say it."

Ram: "I would like some proper acknowledgement of my modesty in not touching the teacakes. — You suffered Emilia-sama no impoliteness, correct?"

Subaru: "What an idiotic thing to ask me, who's always thinking of Emilia first. How about *you* don't give Emilia any weird things to worry about. ...Though, I do trust you there."

How Ram acts toward Subaru ≠ how Ram behaves toward Emilia.

Ram might have somewhat vicious ways of doing things, but it's essentially exactly because of how refreshingly clear-cut her solutions are that Subaru can trust her.

Ram smiles at Subaru's mutter, empties her cup, and stands from her chair. She goes to pass Subaru by and enter the bedroom when,

Subaru: "Actually, can I have a minute with you too?"

Ram: "Filthy."

Subaru: "Is the me inside you really such an indiscriminate beast?"

Ram hugs herself as she takes distance from Subaru. Of course she's not being serious, but it still hurts to have the fairer sex react like that.

Subaru: "Saying this's something, but my perspective in viewing you's basically never been filthy."

Ram: "Basically, is the opening where your bestiality slips out and damages your credibility. And I've been feeling something strange in your gaze ever since you arrived in SANCTUARY."

Subaru: "Hell is that. That is a false accusation outside my recollections, sure you're not just being overly self-conscious?"

Ram: "Then it's unconscious. You surely have had a strange, distant gaze while looking at me before. Although I don't know who it is you're looking at through me."

—That was a blow to Subaru's thoughts from a completely unattended angle.

Experiencing the false sensation of getting a good whack, Subaru is aware his thoughts have frozen. His expression stiffens, his eyes water. Resenting that he reacted this way, he gives a shrug in an attempt at an immediate recovery.

Subaru: “Wh-what you could perhaps be referring to would not be any such thing I may have any estimation of in the slightest.”

Ram: “Noticing it after being informed truly makes it abnormal. Although since it wasn't an unpleasant gaze, I hadn't mentioned it.”

Ram gives a little sigh at Subaru's discomposure.

That she isn't mocking Subaru like always conversely makes it painful.

Their appearances are nearly identical but their insides are completely different. Subaru was supposed to have recognized that, but wound up being gentle with Ram, coinciding her with the sleeping girl.

Ram's statement is correct. Subaru has been seeing the visage of a girl nearly her double through Ram. He couldn't help it.

And Ram is who made him realise it.

Ram: “...So, is there anything you want to ask me?”

Subaru: “Weuh?”

Ram: “It wasn't particularly my intent to depress you, Barusu. Or rather, depressing you is extraordinarily far down my list of priorities. I am going to wait upon Emilia-sama and return to Roswaal-sama. I wouldn't mind if you continued ignoring me.”

Subaru: “Can't have that. ...Right, yeah. I sorta wanted to ask about Garfiel.”

Obliging off Ram's rare and prolonged thoughtfulness, Subaru squeezes out his question. Ram's eyebrows rise in surprise, breaking her apathetic expression.

Ram: “Did something happen with Garf?”

Subaru: “Nothing right now, but might not be that way later. I'm gonna have lots of chances to interact with him at SANCTUARY, and feels like you've known him a while so figured I'd try asking.”

Ram: “I see. ...I'll choose to leave it merely as that.”

Says Ram as if she's seen through to Subaru's real intentions. She puts her hand to her chin.

Ram: “So, what about Garf do you want to ask?”

Subaru: “I already know he's stupid crazy strong, but, right... what do you think'd be necessary to get Garfiel to leave SANCTUARY?”

Ram: "...That is certainly a strange subject you've chosen."

Subaru: "Figured there'd be no point being roundabout. I'll leave your finding it strange as something taken into consideration."

Unlike Emilia who he wants to hide the underside circumstances from, Subaru doesn't mind if Ram senses some level of Subaru's secret activities. Actually if you consider that the release and exit of the Arlam hostages has to happen, having Ram know early on that Subaru's taking action is more convenient.

Ram: "My interest and care in what you're plotting is thin, but if you're attempting to make Garf leave SANCTUARY... Yes, it's not entirely impossible if I implored him."

Subaru: "Love's the weak point, huh. I had that idea too so I can't say anything."

Having Ram persuade Garfiel instead of Subaru would unmistakably produce effect more easily. But Subaru remembers how Garfiel went as far as transforming into a tiger to chase Subaru and keep him from leaving.

Garfiel's claws had stricken even his supposed love Ram, and he still pursued Subaru. Considering it in ultimates, Garfiel placed protecting SANCTUARY as higher priority than Ram.

Subaru: "But, Ram. That's probably..."

Ram: "Right. Likely useless."

Subaru agonizes over how to say it without sounding like he knows it, when Ram casually cuts in and agrees with him. Ram pats her hair before the surprised Subaru.

Ram: "While Garf certainly is enraptured with me, his priorities are already firmly decided. Much as how Roswaal-sama is to me."

Subaru: "Garfiel's number one is something else, too...? Do you?"

Ram: "I do know. But I won't tell you."

Ram averts her gaze. Subaru stares at her to press for an answer, but Ram just sighs.

Ram: "It is certainly conceited to one-sidedly attempt to surmise the heart of another. Garfiel's heart belongs to Garfiel. If you wish to know, ask him directly."

Subaru: "Who's the one of us here being a near-synonym for conceited. You know about Roswaal's book?"

Ram: "...Where did you hear about that?"

Although convinced by Ram's logic, Subaru's rebellious spirit permits him to object. Ram's reaction is stern as she narrows her eyes, gaze piercing through Subaru.

Ram: “Depending on the course and circumstances, I may soon give you a painful experience.”

Subaru: “You do that and it's deviating from Roswaal's plans, yeah? Knock it off, Ram. You shouldn't be capable of doing that.”

Ram had at least never harmed Subaru in SANCTUARY. Far from it, she'd even once aided Subaru while stating it as her own will, rather than Roswaal's instruction.

Subaru stirs her up with that experience as the basis, anticipating that she won't react physically. Her expression sharpens, but,

Ram: “Your eyes have come to be sickening, Barusu.”

Subaru: “Oh?”

Ram: “I don't know what you saw in the tomb, but it was surely nothing good. So much so that I wouldn't want to continue speaking with your present self.”

Subaru: “...What I saw in the tomb was a kind of hope for me. Don't label it as nothing good.”

Recollecting on his encounter with the white-haired witch Echidna, Subaru feels their meeting implicitly being rejected and pouts.

The chat with Echidna invited last loop's tragedy, but it also brought Subaru a return comparable to those overthrown drawbacks. The preciousness of having someone to tell the truth and discuss RETURN BY DEATH with alone raked in the change.

Ram and Subaru lock eyes.

Her pupils waver slightly, perhaps harbouring something in their depths, which Subaru strains his attention to divine. But before the image comes clear, she averts her gaze and it disperses.

Ram: “Do leave now. I could not bear to make Emilia-sama wait for any longer.”

Subaru: “...Sorry for holding you up. I do know what you're saying isn't wrong.”

Subaru ends it by apologizing for his mouth-before-brain meanness. Ram doesn't respond, instead turning her back to him and heading for the bedroom.

Subaru watches her disappear behind the door, gives a deep, deep sigh, and exits Lewes' house.

The outside breeze of SANCTUARY caresses Subaru's bangs, tickling his forehead. Smelling the scent of grass on the night wind, Subaru walks through the well-darkened SANCTUARY, his destination being his bed the cathedral.

Grass crunching beneath his feet as he continues down the road off the moonlight, Subaru's heart scrambles on how to use his time this loop.

Having assurance that RETURN BY DEATH lacks a limit on tries, Subaru is capable of a technique previously unavailable to him—that is, throwaway loops for the purposes of information-gathering. If he can determine to throw away his life, then there is simply no other way to so efficiently capitalise on RETURN BY DEATH's characteristics.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Subaru: “If I can take a different approach each time, I'll probably one-by-one get ideas for plans dealing with the obstacles I have to overcome...”

Then would be tying those plans together, and carrying them all out within one loop.  
Topple all the obstacles in his way, and beautifully grasp the future, everyone present, for a perfect victory.  
Although, just who would be in that perfect victory was a question which addled Subaru.

Subaru: “—”

Subaru's feet stop.  
Because he smells something on the wind other than the scent of trodden grass.

He looks up. Bathed in starlight, a young man stands imposingly further up the road.  
His arms crossed, spiky blond hair tousled in the wind, clicking his fangs. Garfiel.

Subaru: “Man you're a pretty timely bastard.”

Garfiel: “Yer sure don't look surprised.” something something well strange flustered attempts to run away make the conversation progress easily.

Subaru scratches his cheek at the appearance of the just-mentioned Garfiel, impressed. Garfiel jerks his chin, giving Subaru some kind of signal.

Garfiel turns and starts walking ahead, stomping off the path and toward the forest.  
Watching his small back leap over the knee-high grass and enter the forest, Subaru lightly stretches up on tiptoe, then heads for the cathedral—

Garfiel: “That frickin' obviously meant 'follow me', oi!”

Having rushed back, Garfiel yells curses at a Subaru about to leave. Subaru raises his hands, shrugging,

Subaru: “Just a cheeky joke. Not like I didn't see it, relax.”

Garfiel: “‘M sayin' that pisses me off. Just come on, gonna eat yer.”

Subaru: “Wouldn't you usually say 'I won't eat you' to make me relax here?”

Garfiel starts stomping off again, not responding to Subaru. Getting a bad feeling about not being denied where he wants to be denied, Subaru this time properly follows along.

They leave the path, enter the forest, and after proceeding a ways in Garfiel gives a snort. They've come to a tiny little clearing between the trees. The space is about enough for four or five people to completely encircle it. Garfiel glances back at Subaru.

Garfiel: “Now... The fuck'd you see in the tomb?”

Subaru: "...You too with that."

Continuing off from Emilia and Ram, here is the third questioner.

Although it's an essential requirement that he be careful with his responses to Garfiel, this continued questioning is making Subaru get sick and tired of it.

Garfiel: "Me too, huh?"

Garfiel spits, clicking his fangs, his golden pupils narrowing.

Garfiel: "Ain't givin' a crap who n' what you were speakin' with, but my amazin' self ain't just gonna let that one slip. 'S a THE SUSPECT VELVE REFLECTS THEIR SIRES."

Subaru: "Sorry, but all that happened in the tomb was that waking Emilia up took a while. Saying I saw something's complete speculation."

Garfiel: "False n' blatantly so. You think yer can completely fool people, when yer whole body's reekin' 'a witch?"

Subaru goes silent.

Garfiel scrunches up his nose, clearly displaying hostility. Subaru gets stuck for words as he senses something awry.

The reason Garfiel viewed Subaru with hostility—the Witch's lingering scent.

That had been the case up until now, and from Garfiel's statement here it's again identical. But the problem is that on this loop, his timing for stating such is strange.

After leaving the tomb, Subaru's entire body had tensed up, knowing it wouldn't be odd for Garfiel to immediately attack.

It was just after he'd Returned by Death, and his cause of death was the cause. A lingering witch scent as thick as it must be now surely wouldn't be anything common.

But Garfiel didn't attack. Far from it, he appeared rather sincerely relieved at his and Emilia's safe return.

This was the befuddling attitude Subaru had seen of Garfiel all through the chat at Lewes' house, up until Subaru watched him leave.

Garfiel had been completely normal until their parting, and now had suddenly made an about face several minutes later. Subaru didn't understand why.

It couldn't have been the stench was so bad it fucked his nose, and it's taken a passage of time for it to get to a thickness where he could smell it? Probably not.

Subaru lifts his arm and gives himself a sniff, but all he gets is the smell of a day's work. Deciding to wash himself off afterwards, Subaru cuts into Garfiel.

Subaru: "I sure get plenty of people pointing out that witch's lingering scent thing."

Garfiel: "...Do yer now. Everyone up 'till now's been pretty fuckin' lenient, oi. Crap's twistin' my nose this bad, why the hell'd they do it?"

Subaru: "Because they nevermind my odour and judge me by my actions. It'd be a big help if you could do the same. I mean, you overlooked it for me after I left the tomb."

Garfiel goes silent.

Subaru: "I don't have any intentions to harm Emilia of course, or you, or SANCTUARY. That much alone I want you to believe. And if you could, it'd help if you could keep watching over me as you have been."

Although finding them excessively convenient words, Subaru judges that since a fist isn't coming for his face, Garfiel's still being rational. There may be a way to settle things peacefully through conversation.

Hesitation runs through Garfiel's eyes as he watches Subaru. Everything said, thinking to remove Subaru just because of the Witch's lingering scent is not how hasty Garfiel is. It's when the stench overlaps with some other condition that Garfiel takes action.

Subaru hasn't hit that trigger yet this loop. He needs to ascertain what the trigger is.

Garfiel: "...Yer didn't answer my first question."

Subaru: "Hm?"

Garfiel: "You saw somethin' inside the tomb. Whether or not my amazin' self overlooks you, 's dependant on that answer."

The energy whittling away from his voice, Garfiel glares at Subaru as he piles up the questions. There's two ways Subaru can answer—truthfully, or falsely. He needed to confirm which choice was correct here, but,

Subaru: "Then, first let me ask you a question."

Garfiel: "Don't get our standin's mixed up. I'm top, yer bottom. Yer want my fangs t' rip yer t' shreds?"

Subaru: "No getting mad. Let your shoulders untense, and answer completely at ease."

Garfiel bares his fangs. Subaru gives a light shake of his shoulders and takes a breath. His question buried in the back of the throat, Subaru gazes at Garfiel who glares back.

—Now, here's a do-or-die moment.

Is how Subaru encourages himself, saying,

Subaru: "—I saw a girl who looks exactly like Lewes-san, would you know anything about that?"

## CHAPTER 54: HELL I DO KNOW

In asking a question at the crux of the matter, Subaru comprehends his position.

Garfiel's eardrums indeed tremble to the query—and the blond young man's expression shifts. Witnessing it births a moment of whiteness in Subaru's consciousness.

Garfiel. Always wary of Subaru, with a sharp gaze and virile features. Continually preserves his robust bearing, never once letting show weakness. That Garfiel's expression, right now, was warped.

It almost looked the expression of a child, an important secret of theirs revealed, about to cry at any moment.

Garfiel: “You... Fuck'd you just say?”

But that fleeting, transient expression disappears within an instant. Garfiel shuts his eyes firm, clicks his teeth to drown out the weakness, and with a near-dreadful pressure emitting from his whole body, glares at Subaru.

The calm atmosphere flowing through the forest flips to opposite. A tingle of goosebumps creeps up Subaru's skin. This was undoubtedly Subaru's body taking initiative, expressing the danger it perceived.

That excessive reaction of Garfiel's—

Subaru: “That sure fucking got you livid.”

—Provided Subaru more than enough means to instil him the conviction: Touching on THAT is inconvenient for Garfiel.

The ghastliness of Garfiel's gaze compounds in response to Subaru's mutter. Not a fragment of that momentary weakness shows through. The glare fixed on Subaru exudes the razorblade sharpness of witnessing something beloathed.

The danger signals shrill all through Subaru's body. But Subaru consciously ignores them, and without losing his untouchable demeanour,

Subaru: “Don't make me repeat it. I saw a girl who looks exactly like Lewes-san wandering around SANCTUARY. But I'm at least certain it wasn't Lewes-san.”

Garfiel: “...Don't get th'point of what yer sayin'. So yer saw the granny while she's out havin' a walk. 'S a different kind 'a problem if she's out prowlin' at midnight, but this n' that're—”

Subaru: “—Two of them.”

Garfiel: “Eh?”

Subaru raises two fingers of his outstretched hand.



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Subaru: “What I saw was two intenticals to Lewes-san walking around at the same time. Even saying one was Lewes-san, the other... just who could she've been—”

—The moment he finishes his statement, Subaru loses sight of where is down and up.

Subaru: “—Ghhau!”

His back slams into something hard, oxygen and a shriek strangling out from his lungs. At his back is a rugged, bumpy texture—the trunk of a tree, which he is being pinned against with rather considerable force. Suspended and unable to run, Subaru's body no longer touches the ground.

The hand digging into his stomach works as the axle to keep Subaru stopped in space. Garfiel, who possesses the sense of balance and arm strength to achieve this feat, glares Subaru straight in the eyes.

Garfiel: “—Where did you see that?”

Subaru: “Where's not a question... I said, in the forest...”

Garfiel: “No, that ain't possible. We've been payin' so much fuckin' care t' make sure that wouldn't happen. 'F we didn't, wouldn't be able t'give th'verbal run-round t'assholes like you stickin' their noses where they shouldn't.”

Garfiel's palm presses down harder. Drool dribbles from Subaru's lips at the stomach-churning force. He struggles and kicks, but Garfiel's hold doesn't give an inch. It's like he's an insect pinned and pierced for display. He shudders at the mental image.

Garfiel: “This goes on, 'n yer back n' belly 're gonna wind up squelched t'gether flat. How bout yer start tellin' the truth, 'fore that happens.”

His mouth twisting into a sadistic grin, Garfiel applies further pressure on Subaru's stomach. The first sense of his creaking in his bones and guts comes, almost suggesting that Garfiel's proposed ending won't simply be a joke. Subaru gasps, pained breaths slipping from his throat,

Subaru: “Th... at'll, be dependant on your attitude...”

Garfiel: “Ain't that fuckin' funny. You tryin' t'fuckin' be on equal status 's my amazin' self 'n this situation? Thought I taught yer good n' well that that's entirely yer conceit.”

Subaru: “You can... end me here hearing nothing, but it won't solve anything.”

Garfiel goes silent.

Subaru notices as Garfiel begins to listen.

—As far as Subaru was concerned, Garfiel's fierce reaction had gone half exactly as anticipated, half not anticipated at all.

The only time Subaru's sighted the Lewes doubles—the LEWES CLONES—in this loop series has been at the end of the previous loop, in the witch battle.

Outside of that event, there hasn't been anything to suggest that the clones even existed. Although, trawling back through his memories and approaching with the assumption the clones existed, there were several scenes where he had let hints toward their existence slip away.

Regardless, that was how well the clones were hidden inside SANCTUARY.

It was hard to think that Garfiel alone had been hiding the at-least-21 individual girls. More than likely, their existence was common knowledge among SANCTUARY's populace.

If there were anyone on Subaru's side who would know about them, it would probably be Roswaal, and more tentatively Ram.

Either way, Subaru had figured that mentioning the subject would piss Garfiel off. Confirming it had so far gone half exactly as anticipated.

The half that he hadn't anticipated was—

Garfiel: "...Yer cracked."

Spits Garfiel, releasing Subaru from the hold. Subaru gracelessly drops to the ground, crying out in surprise, enjoying the taste of grass and dirt in his mouth as he tumbles. He spits out the crap as he stands up, glaring at Garfiel.

Subaru: "D-don't just suddenly let go, startles people."

Garfiel: "Shut it, headcase. Don't fuckin' joke. Were you fuckin' testin' my amazin' self?"

Subaru: "Testinnngg?"

Subaru tilts his head, playing dumb. Garfiel clicks his tongue, annoyed as he glares up at Subaru.

Garfiel: "You were talkin', thinkin' I might kill you."

Subaru goes silent.

—What Subaru hadn't anticipated was that Garfiel neglected to immediately kill him.

It was that he'd been given a chance for conversation, after pissing him off.

Meaning, Subaru had made his statement while having considered the potentiality of dying, which Garfiel perceived. Garfiel kicks at the ground.

Garfiel: "Don't fuckin' joke. Fuck'm I gonna call someone who stakes thr'lfe, doin' it with an expression like it's fuckin' ordinary, 'cept insane. Fuckin' creepy."

Subaru: "Say so much and it does hurt. ...And, it's not like I'm doing this unperturbed."

Subaru smiles weakly to Garfiel's statement as he scratches his head. In doing so, he can feel the shaking in his fingers.

Garfiel's stopped inflicting pain on Subaru, but his near-animosity toward him hasn't slacked at all. Subaru's body continues to scream in primal terror, and his guts continue to churn with a

constricting kind of pain.

It's natural. He'd purposefully enraged Garfiel, and was now standing directly opposite him. Meaning he'd more or less accepted confronting the giant, golden tiger that had slaughtered the villagers.

Envisioning those fangs, claws, that dread all ravaging him causes both his heart and body to freeze. But, nonetheless,

Subaru: "If my life alone is enough, then that balances to the results."

If this can be settled with the only sacrifice paid being the abrading of Subaru's heart, it's an excellent bargain.

To acquire a happy ending at such a cheap price was nothing commonplace.

Although Subaru's resolve could near break at any moment—that firm, hard-set basis provides his meagre resolution support to an excessively thorough degree.

Garfiel must have known it as well. He scrunches his nose, expression disgusted.

Garfiel: "My amazin' self don't have anythin' good t'think about'n bastard who makes those fuckin' eyes. Honestly, what I wanna do's crush 'm right this second, but..."

Subaru: "That'd be problematic, and if possible I'd like you to charitably overlook it. That'd go for our conversation just now, too... so."

Garfiel says nothing.

Subaru: "Do you maybe feel like answering my question?"

Asks Subaru as he dusts the dirt off himself. Garfiel's face sours at this topic getting brought back after its violent and supposed stop. Subaru's gaze doesn't separate from Garfiel, while Garfiel conversely averts his eyes.

Garfiel: "Dunwanna."

Subaru: "Really now. Oh well, nothing going then."

Hearing a reply on par with a stubborn child, Subaru shrugs and easily lets it drop. Garfiel's expression turns completely fucking stunned in response.

Garfiel: "Yer... you wanted t'know, th..."

Subaru: "You don't wanna talk, right? And I'm not strong or persuasive enough to force the answer out of you. I guess I could try clinging for it, but I doubt that matches to the risk so time to postpone it."

Garfiel: "...What're,"

Subaru: “Don't look so mystified, Garfiel. No matter how frantically you try to cover it up, I will uncover it assuredly. It's necessary, you see.”

Garfiel's head springs back up, Subaru returning his stare head-on.  
The locking of gazes this time isn't so overwhelming. Garfiel's eyes are weaker, and Subaru has firmly made up his mind.

Subaru: “Garfiel. What you... what you're all hiding in SANCTUARY, I am assuredly going to uncover. I know I have to do this, and so that is an absolute.”

Garfiel: “...Shut up. 'F I plug yer mouth right here, yer not gettin' any damn ASSUREDLY or ABSOLUTE.”

Subaru: “Sorry, but that's exactly why it's ASSUREDLY and ABSOLUTE. So long as I haven't given up, the secrets I know of aren't secrets anymore. If you're going to resent anything, resent your own haste.”

Not understanding Subaru's words, Garfiel's eyes waver with confusion.  
There was naturally no way Garfiel could comprehend what HASTE meant. Because it referred to a mistake that Garfiel hadn't yet made.

Subaru: “...Probably no point talking any further.”

Garfiel's caution is peaked at its maximum and he's gotten stubborn. Subaru probably won't be opening Garfiel's heart now, or perhaps even for the rest of this loop.  
Subaru hadn't anticipated for this loop to be a success in the first place, but it now being perfectly a dud is hard to bear.

Subaru: “But, well,”

—Nevertheless, he needed to endure it.

So long as he's decided to stake his life in this challenge, he would have to rendezvous with this feeling of loss times upon times upon times.

He doubted he would ever acclimatize to or forget the pain.

At the juncture where Subaru completely acclimatized to the repeated DEATHS, and could no longer sincerely desire the future ahead, his heart would surely be swallowed by shadow, never to return.  
That was the feeling he had.

Subaru: “Do you still feel like stopping me, Garfiel?”

Garfiel says nothing.

Subaru: “If you do then all it creates is a detour. It'd help if you didn't.”

Even if Garfiel kills Subaru here, his return point is inside the tomb a handful of hours earlier.  
The events following would probably be a snap, but even if Garfiel tried to drag Subaru away as he

had this time, Subaru could probably get through it safely.  
Although naturally the optimum outcome would be to avoid RETURNING BY DEATH.

Garfiel doesn't respond to Subaru's question.

Subaru turns his back to Garfiel, intending to leave the forest and return to SANCTUARY's centre. He has to figure out his schedule of activities for tomorrow, and exactly what things he needs to confirm.

Even saying that opportunities came in proportion to Subaru's willpower, that didn't mean he should waste them.

Garfiel: "You..."

Says Garfiel, his voice suppressed of emotion. Subaru stops but doesn't turn back.

Garfiel: "What do you... what th'hell do you wanna do to SANCTUARY, to this place? What th'fuck're you tryin' to do with us?"

Subaru: "I'm sure I stated my goal. It's to save Emilia. I'm not intending to harm SANCTUARY in any way. ...I'm not intending to try to do anything with you, either."

He knew of the disaster coming for SANCTUARY.

He wanted to save Lewes and the residents from the disaster, and did have intention to act for that purpose. Garfiel would be included in that count too, of course.

But that would be a final result.

Subaru: "I'm sure I'll cause you lots of unpleasant times until I get there. I'll apologize for those in advance. ...Sorry."

Garfiel: "...I got no idea what you're goddamn sayin'. Yer fuckin' exactly, entirely like them."

Says Garfiel, as if interacting with something eerie and incomprehensible. Subaru, somewhat resigned, figures that inevitable.

Subaru did want to be understood. But he doubted he could be receiving that understanding.

Subaru: "I'm not trying to get in a jealousy match with you. From tomorrow on, just be like normal... or well it's fine if you can't, but don't get involved with me. Tonight just keep yourself warm and go to bed early. Forget your daily routine and sleep in through tomorrow morning. The occasional wake-up-go-back-to-sleep wouldn't—"

Subaru stops halfway through his parting speech. Something about what he just said tugs at him, and as he connects it to an incredible conclusion—

Subaru: "Might be worth it."

Garfiel: "...Eh?"

Subaru: "Anyway, this's the end for tonight, Garfiel. I'll definitely be doing something about your troubles and anxieties. So be patient now and wait for it."

Garfiel: “—! You...!”

From beginning to end, Subaru's statements consider the FUTURE rather than the PRESENT. Garfiel raises his head, face red with rage as he spits, fangs bared.

Garfiel: “Cond'scending fuck, linin' up egotistic crap! Who, who asked for you t'do goddamn anything for them? Don't you do any meddlin' here! Not about this place, or about the grannies... y,... nothing! And when you know fucking nothing!”

Subaru: “Not knowing it means it's to learn. Think that's why I'm doing this.”

Garfiel: “Knowin' only th'superficial, only th'surface, how could you understand anything! Smilin' like'n idiot, prattlin' crap outta dreams, fudgin' things with nice-soundin' bullshit, you fucking con!”

Subaru: “—”

Garfiel: “Y'dunn'ven know how pain er suffering feel! End yer know-it-all talk!!”

Shrieks Garfiel.

The jeers disappear into the forest sky, swallowed into nothing.

Condescending, speaking as if he knew anything, meddling despite his complete ignorance. —Indeed, that was all exactly correct, with not any purchase left for refutation.

However.

Subaru: “...I do know.”

Garfiel: “—”

Subaru: “I know HELL. —I've seen it, so many, times.”

Were there a hell in this universe, it would be in the worlds that Subaru had seen.

At the end of these multiple worlds, the sight of hell had burned into Subaru's memory, into his awareness, so many, many, times.

And so,

Subaru: “I'm the only one who has to know hell. I'm here, for that.”

—Those were his thoughts.



After having Garfiel's wailing claw at his heart, Subaru heads back to his bed the cathedral—not. What he really needed to do was go to bed, and take his time in figuring out his plan for the near

future. And that was what he'd been intending to do.  
But he had a reason to quit that.

Subaru: "...Think it was somewhere around here."

Mutters Subaru, nudging away the thick ivy as he continues down the unmarked path. The canopy hides the moonlight, making visibility poor, and the knee-high grass offers no help. The ground lacks anything resembling a trail or any constancy in elevation, forcing Subaru to slow his pace to keep himself from tumbling.

Subaru: "I'm pretty confident about my sense of direction, but yeah my memory's hazy. There wasn't any time to calmly look around the place, so kinda no helping it."

Is Subaru's lame excuse as he fumbles around for a path.  
He's inside the forest separated from SANCTUARY—but not in the same area where he spoke with Garfiel. He had returned to SANCTUARY and then re-entered the forest.  
Because,

Subaru: "I'm pretty sure this is where Garfiel showed up back then."

Before the beginning of the loop series—that is, all the way back before the first TRIAL. On the morning of the day of the TRIAL, Subaru had gone with Otto to check that he had acquired the qualifications. That all went fine. Garfiel then appeared from the forest during Otto and Subaru's banter, explaining that he'd been doing his daily patrol of SANCTUARY.

Subaru: "His good timing and his showing up from that direction's bothering me."

The problem was the almost-planned timing of Garfiel's appearance, and the placement of where he appeared.  
Thinking back on how Garfiel emerged from the bush aside the tomb, and trawling through his memories, Subaru realises something:

—The mystery facility in SANCTUARY that Beatrice had transported him to.

When Subaru had returned from that facility to SANCTUARY, he had a feeling that his emergence point was close to where Garfiel had appeared back then.  
And so Subaru's searching for the facility at night through the forest.

Subaru: "A trodden-down path... means,"

Seeing the thickets open into flatter land, Subaru judges that someone has been walking through here regularly. He follows the path deeper into the forest, leaving himself to his jumped-up feelings and running—when his vision eventually brightens.

Subaru: "...Found it."

A dilapidated stone building. On the verge of collapse and deep in the forest, it's plain that the facility is constructed with its back against a crag.

Subaru approaches the building, giving its exterior a confirmatory glance and tilting his head.

Subaru: “Huh. Last time I was here, I felt it was a little more destroyed...”

The thing's still on its last legs, but Subaru senses the damage to the facility is less than what he remembers. What Subaru had seen was a ruin, but this thing before him is still barely managing to be considerable as a building.

Subaru: “Saying my memory's not wrong, sometime between now and six days later, something'll happen to make this place more broken-down... I think?”

It's all he can figure.

If his speculation is correct, then just as Subaru expected, this place is not unrelated to the vague somethings happening here in SANCTUARY.

Holding his breath and taking care to keep his presence low, Subaru turns the doorknob. The door opens with surprising silence. A rotted stench welcomes Subaru as he treads inside the building.

As always, the barren entryway lacks anything to do with furnishings or repairs. Passing through the waiting room-slash-reception area, Subaru heads for the main room.

He reaches the door at the end of the hallway—directly beyond which will be the giant hole. Paying the pit heed, Subaru slowly pushes open the door, poking his head inside to check the room.

Subaru: “...Hey.”

Subaru's voice unconsciously slips out at the scene before him.

The pale, reflective light shines upon his face. His eyes narrow at the brightness as Subaru clearly witnesses—it.

There at the very back of the facility, was—

Subaru: “Lewes-san?”

—Emitting dim blue light from its gigantic mass, with a small woman sealed inside it, was a crystal.



## CHAPTER 55: GIRL IN THE CRYSTAL

—Seeing the girl sealed inside the crystal, Subaru is so transfixed he forgets to breathe.

That was the terrifying beauty of this heart-jolting scene.

Inside the transparent, faintly blue crystal, there is sealed a girl with her legs folded in seated position.

Frozen—would be a close descriptor, but unlike ice for which melting offered freedom, the crystal would remain eternal unless shattered.

And shattering this crystal would unmistakably mean shattering the sealed girl also.

Subaru: “Why... did this,”

The words slip from Subaru's mouth with faint anger.

He felt a silent, but definite rage.

Nothing could safely free the sealed girl from the crystal. Subaru didn't know what the person who perpetrated this was planning, or what relation they had to the girl. Didn't know, but it still tore at his heart horribly.

Subaru: “Lewes-san... or isn't she?”

Subaru enters the room proper. —Unlike last time, the gaping hole in the floor is missing, and the crystal rests where the pit once was.

The tall crystal sits upon a metal base, which is potentially the only implement in the near-ruined facility not slacking on repairs, as it glitters with the shine of a tool in brand-new condition.

Several desks stand lined up opposite the crystal. Subaru successfully realises that these, too, are objects which were destroyed and scattered all about the room last time.

The room lacks light fixtures just as before. The moss growing over the wall still provides a faint glow, giving the room some level of visibility.

Tools—somewhat resemblant of medical equipment—are spread alongside the wall and in healthy condition.

Subaru: “In six days from now this place'll be destroyed, and it won't be apparent what the SOMETHING practised here was.”

This place becoming known was inconvenient for somebody.

Sometime in the days before the Sizeable Hare attack, that somebody would attempt to destroy the important parts of the facility, and bury the waste in darkness.

This time, Subaru had managed to arrive prior to this.

Subaru: “Most likely candidate... is yeah, Garfiel.”

What spurred Subaru to search for the facility had been the unease he felt toward Garfiel's strange activities.

Garfiel willed to protect SANCTUARY, and had a familial love for Lewes which he couldn't completely conceal. It was conceivable that he would destroy the facility for some reason unknown

to Subaru.

There was also the factor that if the somebody wasn't at least as strong as Garfiel, destroying the facility would be an incredible effort.

The only problem left was—

Subaru: “No clue at all what this facility was for.”

Subaru inspects the fortunately-undestroyed room, to no obvious result. Other than learning that the crystal is secured and fixed in place inside the room, nothing particularly stands out to catch Subaru's attention.

Subaru looks at the back wall, beyond the desks, to discover the ventilation shaft he had crawled through before. Passing through it should lead him back to the waiting room.

Subaru: “...Pretty late to point this out, but isn't the houseplan here strange? Saying it's just this big room and a waiting room is pretty...”

The estimable size of the facility from outside did not align with the room layout inside. Tracing over his mental map of the facility and its outside facade, Subaru feels a faint awriness. — Enough space remains to conceal an entire extra room.

Subaru cuts across the room to stand before the wall with the ventilation shaft, and taps at the wall. The moss covering its face feels less like grass and more like animal fur.

Being that no echo comes from his tapping, it appears the moss serves more purposes than simply illumination. If there were any mystery room, position-wise, it would be beyond this wall.

Subaru: “Considering the distance I crawled, there should be a room half the size of this one. Though doesn't feel you could get there from this room, unless there's some mechanism to rotate the wall...”

Which leaves the waiting room.

Subaru's heart hadn't had leeway to thoroughly inspect the rooms last time. He would have clearly lacked the energy to search for traces of a hidden room in the narrow waiting room.

Although worried about the girl in the crystal, Subaru nonetheless reasons he must investigate the waiting room—and turns around.

When he immediately comes eye-to-eye with somebody else who has entered the room.

Subaru: “...au?”

???: “—”

Meeting gazes with the emotionless eyes, Subaru lets slip a noise.

Their round pupils stare up at Subaru—and their pink hair reaches down long, only a baggy white cloth covering this young girl.

She looks identical to Lewes, but the feeling she gives off is different. Or no, rather she gives off no feeling at all.

It's almost as if she is air, simply existing. Meaning,

Subaru: “Oh, a Lewes-san...”

*Clone*, is the word which passes through Subaru's mind, but he hesitates to apply to the girl. The term clone was a moniker used only in Subaru's imaginings. Being that her exact background is unknown, Subaru's heart has qualms about designating her as such.

Subaru: “But that said...”

Having nothing else to call the girl, Subaru winds up stuck. The little girl simply stands there quietly, in Subaru's view. Her expression remains motionless. She is a thing of silence, of whom even breathing is suspect.

Subaru hesitates to address her. The doll waits to be addressed.  
—Perceiving the still girl in this fashion, Subaru steels himself and opens his mouth.

Subaru: “Can you understand what I'm saying?”

Girl: “—”

Subaru: “Your name? Can I ask what you're here to do? And actually, what is this place?”

Girl: “—”

Subaru: “...SANCTUARY, Garfiel, Lewes. Are any of these words familiar?”

Girl: “—”

The questions for three silences.  
Subaru thought asking questions might prompt her expression to shift, but her face remains perfectly still to every query. As if her facial muscles simply didn't function.

A wasted effort. Subaru is stuck.  
Subaru scratches his head, sighing, when the girl moves.

Subaru: “...?”

Her shift to action was sudden, but her gait as she walks is lax.  
The girl treads in from the waiting room door, just as Subaru had, and strolls to the centre of the room—to the crystal.

The girl sealed inside the jewel looks expectedly identical to the girl approaching it.  
Before the girl amid a wakeless sleep, the free girl bends over and reaches for the lower section of the crystal's supporting base.

A part of the base clicks open. Subaru's eyes widen. Apparently the lower section of the base has a door, with the insides hollow and acting as a storage chamber.  
The girl squats down as she gets to work, blocking Subaru's view of the insides as he stretches his neck. Shifting his position to see inside, Subaru steps forward—

Subaru: “—Uegh!”

When an incredible stench pierces his nostrils, making Subaru recoil.

The stinging odour invades his nose, the sensation closer to pain than stimulation. His eyes water as the nausea strikes, the intensity enough churn the contents of his stomach as he trembles.

This stench is unmistakably the same rancid odour which pervaded the room last time Subaru was here. The kind of stink suggesting a slaptrap jumbling of chemicals, and suspect as being pregnant with substances harmful to the human body.

Subaru had thought it to waft up from the underground of the destroyed room, but,

Subaru: “It's actually from inside that base... or basically, the area around the crystal.”

Hand to his nose and eyes still watery, Subaru changes his placement.

Amid a stench most stinging at his eyes, Subaru internally shudders at the girl who unfazedly continues her work. He then peeks down from beside her, and his eyes shoot open.

—Inside the base the girl is fiddling around with is an internal segment engraved with incomprehensible patterns, with magequartz installed all around it.

The quartzes dimly glow as they expel their internally stored mana, but one of them has used up its stores and lost its light. The girl carefully extracts that quartz, and is replacing it with a new one from the base's store.

Subaru recalls seeing the complex pattern before.

A magic circle—an art practically guaranteed in parallel world fantasies, but completely absent in this world as far as Subaru had seen.

Subaru: “Seeing it connected here with the quartzes... it feels like machinery or a circuit, something like that. You consider the circle as the mechanism part, with the quartzes as batteries giving the energy, and...”

Hitting on this mental image, he can no longer envision it as anything else.

The art of magic science, or otherwise said magiscience.

Subaru tilts his head as the girl appears to finish her work. She takes the emptied quartz in hand and closes the shutter.

After a space of a few seconds, Subaru notices a tingling sensation on his skin.

—The atmosphere, minutely and minimally, is vibrating.

Subaru: “This's... when using magic.”

The use of large-scale magic—a sensation resembling what he felt during the White Whale fight, and when Julius used Nect during the Betelgeux fight.

Most likely, some interference was occurring to the mana in the atmosphere, and his body was perceiving the corresponding shifts in mana.

In this case, it is rather obvious what the mana is reacting to.

Subaru witnesses the dim glow of the crystal steadily intensify. As the crystal's brightness compounds, the form of the girl sealed inside becomes more distinct. The magic circle inside the base also activates on the upper segment which supports the crystal, illuminating the room in a brilliant pale glow.

Subaru: "...A save point."

Who from the present-day world could possibly blame Subaru for that unconscious mutter? A crystal installed atop a magic circle. This luminating, shining-blue jewel was exactly the familiar sight of a video game save point.

Regardless of the vivid display it gave for the eyes, the soundlessness of it further enhanced the crystal's mystique, leaving Subaru swallowing his breath and incapable of voicing his thoughts.

The girl, done with swapping out the quartzes, easily ignores the struck-still Subaru as she gets moving to leave the room. The extinguished quartz goes tossed and dumped into a crude disposal spot.

Noticing her quiet attempt at departure, Subaru hurriedly reaches out for her shoulder.

Subaru: "Hey, hold on a mo... ah, touched her."

Girl: "—"

With the seeming feebleness of her life and presence, Subaru had expected for his hand to simply pass through, but his fingers fortunately grasp her shoulder firm and he succeeds in halting her. Abruptly recalling that the girls who exploded after being touched while facing the Witch of ENVY were of the same breed as this one, Subaru's wariness rears its head, but—

Girl: "—"

The girl, silently staring back at Subaru, shows no signs of exploding. Relieved, Subaru returns her gaze straight-on.

Subaru: "Sorry for interrupting your work, but the questions're still going. This time, if you can, please don't ignore them. I haven't got much room to work with here, either."

Girl: "—"

Subaru: "What did you just do here? Why are you lighting up the crystal? Do you know about the girl who's inside?"

Girl: "—"

Wasted effort electric boogaloo.

No matter how many times Subaru asks, the girl responds with her silent gaze only. Not refusing his questions, as if the option to do so doesn't even exist for her.

Subaru: “If she could at least manage yes-no response communication, I could do something here...”

But that's not happening.

Keeping ahold of the girl, who seems ready to leave him behind if he lets her go, Subaru turns his head to look at the crystal.

No changes have occurred in the girl inside the dazzling, luminous jewel, but there is something Subaru can clearly perceive now that the crystal is brighter.

She has no respiration, pulse, or bloodflow.

—The essential functions of life have stopped for the girl trapped in the crystal.

Subaru: “...Thanatosis, would probably be way too optimistic here.”

This wasn't anything so easy as warming up frozen flesh to return the person to life. This girl's body has crystallised.

Freeing her is a dream upon a dream.

Subaru: “Again, powerless...”

Stricken with an unbearable feeling of powerlessness, Subaru brushes his fingers against the face of the crystal.

Feeling the coldness at his fingertips, Subaru can't tell whether to be angry or relieved that the girl cannot feel this chill constantly eating away at her.

And just when that sentiment passes through his chest—

Subaru: “—wha?”

The coolness at his fingers flashes into heat, travelling up Subaru's arm, circulating rapidly through his whole.

Subaru: “—Oa, au, agha!?”

It starts as a warmth—but instantly combusts into blaze scorching his entirety.

Fingers of flame trace along the insides of his body as Subaru groans in pain, writhing on the spot.

The heat suffocates him. His screams echo through the room.

Lacking the composure to care about the filthiness of the ground, Subaru lets his limbs give way as he topples to the floor. He convulses, his vision strobes—and,

Subaru: “—heuh, u?”

The announcement ending the endless hell comes abruptly.

The furious heat tempers away, freeing Subaru's body from the storm of agony.

Subaru: “...Wh-what the hell, was...”

Mutters Subaru at he uprights himself, checking the condition of his arms and legs.  
The sudden agony and its abrupt end. Subaru wouldn't know its processes or outcomes without knowing its cause, leaving behind only questions and a painful memory.

Subaru: “There's, nothing. But, if there's nothing then why on earth...”

The cause of the pain was most likely the crystal's magiscientific apparatus. Subaru may have run into a situation similar to receiving an electric shock.  
Thinking that far, a Subaru entirely occupied with his own hurt remembers about the Lewes girl who had completely fallen out of his consciousness.

Subaru: “Ah, cra...”

Girl: “—”

Subaru hurriedly goes to stand up—but seeing the girl standing still standing before him, he untenses, relieved. When,

Girl: “—”

—The girl reverently kneels before him, bowing her head.



Head lowered and knee to the ground, her posture perplexes Subaru.  
If he isn't reading this wrong, then those mannerisms, that stance, could only be display of respect and submission toward him.

Subaru: “What're you planning, all of a sudden?”

Subaru's wariness beats out his surprise for the previously-unheeding girl's complete change.  
The trench between Subaru and the girl runs deep. Neither know anything of the other's identity.  
Who could possibly not find this situation suspicious?

Girl: “—”

The girl stands from her kneeling before the wary Subaru.  
She looks up, her gaze aimed beyond Subaru's head. It baits him to look over, but he finds nothing in the area her gaze is pointed.  
It seems like she's staring up into space for the purpose of thinking things over. Subaru turns his head back to her, and,

Subaru: “Uauh!?”

Girl: “—”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Discovering the girl standing right in his face, within breathing range, Subaru recoils. But the girl's outstretched hand takes a flinched-back Subaru's arm,

Subaru: "...? You mean, follow me?"

Girl: "—"

The girl wordlessly tugs at Subaru's sleeve, apparently trying to take him somewhere. She nods in response to his question. Subaru's expression is fretful.

That she's so stubbornly refused to speak might be because she's unable to. But regardless, it seems she comprehends Subaru's question. So basically, her attempt to take Subaru somewhere should probably be considered some kind of response in her discussion with Subaru.

Subaru: "Nothing ventured nothing gained, I guess."

Girl: "—"

Subaru: "Talking to myself. —Alright, lead me along. I'll follow."

Subaru nods back. The girl continues pulling his sleeve as she starts walking. Following behind her footsteps, Subaru glances one last time back at the crystal.  
—As always, inside the glimmering glow, the girl remains asleep.

Dragged outside by the sleeve, Subaru leaves the main room, passes through the corridor, and enters the waiting room. The girl proceeds to attempt to guide Subaru outside of the facility.

Subaru: "So it's not inside. I'm okay with going out, but..."

If they wind up going all the way to SANCTUARY, it's going to spill the beans that Subaru snuck into the facility. Subaru could of course rationalize it away by explaining he hadn't done anything reproachable, but considering his relationship status with Garfiel, he would much rather avoid it this loop.

Subaru worries over what to do if the girl's course starts heading for SANCTUARY, when,

???: "—That ers sure a complercated look yer have on, Lil' Su."

Subaru: "...Are you kidding me with this timing?"

Just after stepping out of the facility and into the open air, a voice addresses Subaru. He looks toward the voice's source, his mouth slackening at who he discovers there. Though, he can't tell whether that resulted from relief, or from some other basis.

???: "I'm sure yer've got lotser things yer wanner talk about, but ferst how says we change the location?"

Subaru: "Yeah, let's. I've seriously, got way too many subjects piled up."



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Subaru shrugs in agreement.

And just how did she perceive that Subaru?

—That Subaru standing alongside a girl most identical to herself, her back to the moonlight, just how on earth did the original Lewes perceive him?

## CHAPTER 56: THE REASON FOR SANCTUARY'S EXISTENCE

Lewes leads Subaru back to the isolated house where they had chatted over tea before.

Lewes: “Just seat yerself on the bed there. I'll make drinks fer us.”

Subaru: “If it's just tea how about I do it? Ram's trained it into me so I should be a little better.”

Lewes: “I'd be more'en happy if yer could, but doesn't lerk like yer able at the moment.”

Says Lewes mirthfully as she points out the Lewes lookalike girl—who is holding on tight to Subaru's sleeve as he sits on the bed, showing no signs of letting go.

Still lost on how to refer to this Lewes copy(?), Subaru winds up with,

Subaru: “No matter how much time passes, Pico's kind of not letting me go.”

Lewes: “I'm dubious abert that name Pico yer have going there, but being how things are, I'll resign ter accept it. This'll be what happens when yer brashly touch strange, unfemilier things.”

Subaru: “Well, you could say that, I suppose...”

Lewes gives her frank opinion, but scolding a groping-for-leads Subaru as brash was being way too unreasonable. Subaru indicates his disapproval with a dejected expression. Lewes boils up some tea and returns to Subaru, tray in hand.

Lewes: “Here now, it's hot so let it cool befer drinking.”

Subaru: “I'm not a kid, I'm not gonna drink it in a rush and burn myself.”

Lewes: “I gotter someone 'round me who can never settle down and steruggles with hot food. Giving these warnings's gotten ter be a habit.”

The most likely contender as to who Lewes means is Garfiel. There's a joke here about how 'struggles with hot food' is expressed as having 'cat tongue' in Japanese and Garfiel transforms into a tiger with an actual cat tongue. That he's also poor at learning by observation goes along with Subaru's preconceptions about him too.

Subaru puts the indeed rather hot tea to his mouth, wets his parched tongue, and takes a breath. Thinking back on it, this is the first time he's drank anything since RETURNING BY DEATH, otherwise said since waking up in the tomb.

Subaru: “I can really taste the attempt to draw out the leaf flavour in this.”

Lewes: “I gotter feeling I been passed with a judgement that's sure nothing fair.”

Subaru: “Just your feeling, just your feeling.”

Subaru drinks down the tea and returns his cup to the tray with a clink. He fixes his posture to face

Lewes, who has dragged a chair over to the bed and sits comfortably as she watches Subaru.

Subaru: “Now that we're calmed down, can we be alright to start the talk?”

Lewes: “Mm. I've got loster things I needer talk about from my side, too.”

Subaru feels keenly his relief at Lewes' upfront responding to have this chat. He's had multiple opportunities to speak face-to-face with the big players like this before. That Subaru has nevertheless failed to ascertain the truth of matters is partly because they're intentionally hiding information, but there's also a preliminary problem. That being—

Subaru: “I still haven't figured out the true issue that I need to ask about.”

—Subaru hadn't figured out the question that would bind all the answers into one thread. And so he couldn't notice that he was being dodged, and that his questions were misdirected. Asking the thing he needs to know of someone who knows them. Even that was considerably distant from Subaru.

Subaru: “That building... that facility from before. Just what on earth is it?”

Lewes: “Hrm. ...That's the question yer starting with.”

The inquiry which pops into Subaru's mind is an inoffensive one, made for the purpose of determining how upfront Lewes will be in this conversation. Lewes traces her fingers over her chin in a very geriatric non-loli gesture.

Lewes: “If yer were to ask what that facility is, then I'd answer that in a sense, it's SANCTUARY's nexus. If I were ter speak further, it's one of the reasons SANCTUARY exists.”

Subaru: “The reason SANCTUARY exists!?”

Lewes: “Originally speaking, Lil' Su. Lil' Su, just who do yer think had necessity ter create SANCTUARY?”

Subaru: “Roswaal is...”

Starting to speak off a conditioned kind of reflex, Subaru understands what he's saying is incorrect. While indeed the Roswaals have owned and managed SANCTUARY to the present day, the question of who created the place presents a different story.

Subaru: “Who made this place is the Witch of GREED... it'd be Echidna.”

Lewes: “Cerrect. It was Echidna, the witch, who made this place. SANCTUARY wers made because it was a necessary thing for the witch. If I were ter speak in extremes, that's all there's ter the place.”

Subaru: “That's surely going too extreme. And skimping way too much on the inbetween. ...At least, if you could give a little more detail...”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Lewes: “Lil' Su, don't yer already have a success of the experiment right in fronter yer?”

Lewes smiles. Subaru's breathing freezes for an instant.  
He understands what Lewes means, and what she's trying to say.

Subaru: “The outcome of this place is... you, Lewes-san, and this girl.”

Lewes: “Yer really a kind boy, Lil' Su. Ertherwise soft. —Yer can just say experimental results.”

Of course Subaru hesitates to say that term in front of Lewes.

Lewes: “There wers a girl who lerks exactly like me, sealed inside the crystal, yes?”

Subaru: “...Yeah. A lookalike. And then's you, and this girl. Is it safe for me to consider you as triplets, or something?”

Lewes: “If yer gonner treat beings with highly similar appearances ers a family, then calling ers triplets might be jerst a smidgen too few in number.”

Subaru: “Just a smidgen.”

Lewes: “Jerst a smidgen.”

Lewes' 'smidgen' probably means there's a tens column.  
Being that Subaru's already seen 21 Lewes copies, he inevitably thinks so.

He sighs, erasing his idle thoughts.  
Lewes hasn't been attempting to dodge Subaru's questions so far. Now's probably about time to cool down on feeling her out, and get into it.

Subaru: “—What relation do you have to the girl in the crystal?”

Lewes' expression remains calm. She fiddles with the ends of her pink hair, aiming a meaningful gaze at Subaru—no, at the silent girl beside him.

Lewes: “It ersn't jerst about me. This girl here's in my persition too.”

Subaru: “And the girl in the crystal, too.”

Lewes: “No, just her is different. Becerrs the girl in the crystal is legitimate.”

Unable for an instant to comprehend what Lewes is saying, Subaru furrows his brows. But, putting it together, the stands up from the bed.

Subaru: “Legitimate, would mean what...”

Lewes: “Dern't get hurried now. Trawling through memories ers necessary werk fer yer elders when talking. Yer gotter wait there calm n' ready fer it.”

Subaru: “Don't start playing on the non-speech elderly appeal now. I can at least tell from how bland and flavourless this girl here is that that's nothing but seasoning.”

Lewes: “Hrm, that ers a saddening misernderstanding. By my perspective, everything that constertutes who I am now, ers important, in what yer'd call acquired individuality.”

Subaru: “Acquired, individuality?”

Lewes nods.

Lewes: “Yes.”

Lewes: “Just as yer serspect, Lil' Su, I wers originally identical ter this girl, bern as an unfilled vessel. The years passed, and so I've been living ter this day while filling up my empty insides.”

Subaru: “Wait, waitwaitwait, the story's moving a bit too fast. Born? Empty? What exactly is this? This's kinda obvious, but it's related to the crystal's insides being LEGITIMATE, right?”

Lewes: “The inside erv that crystal is the legitimate, first Lewes Meyer. All other Leweses, including me, er then replicas of Lewes Meyer.”

Lewes easily reveals her own origins. Or no, should he even be calling her Lewes? Subaru is lost. What Lewes has just said is exactly the vague hypothesis Subaru has had ever since sighting the multiple Lewes doubles. Although half-suspecting as much, what prevented him from reaching confidence about it was entirely THE UNPLEASANTNESS OF THERE BEING CLONES OF MY ACQUAINTANCE.

Even that was a narrow view resulting from his hardened perspectives of normalcy.

Lewes: “Does hearing the word replica change how yer see me?”

Subaru: “...I don't know. It doesn't, is what I want to assert. I want to, I do, but... If you asked whether I could say so while in front of you yourself...”

—He couldn't.

Being that this is a parallel world, Subaru can't strictly call the Lewes a clone. Her method of being born likely differs from the vague image in Subaru's head.

Doubtlessly, she is a life born from magical rather than scientific means.

Subaru: “I lack confidence I could say it coolly, without change to my expression. So I won't say it hasn't changed.”

Lewes: “I'll revise what I said. Lil' Su, yer got kind and soft ter yer, but... more'en that, looks like yer roots're far too completely honest.”

They're definitely not joyous words, but Lewes responds to Subaru's reply with a satisfied nod. Biting down on his feelings, Subaru looks at the girl sitting beside him—at Pico, who is in the same position as Lewes.

—Pico wordlessly keeps her grasp on Subaru's sleeve, staring blankly across the room. Her eyes surely witness the same scene as Subaru, but since her irises lack any visible emotion, they're conceivable as glass balls simply reflecting the scenery. Her expression remains unchanged, and she hasn't said a single word. But,

Subaru: "She's empty, is what..."

Lewes: "She was born very recently, a double only just given her role. She knows enough to follow simple instructions, but otherwise she's the same as a baby. That she doesn't cry and doesn't need food means she's less of a handful, I suppose."

Subaru: "She doesn't need food?"

Lewes: "Replicating a body isn't anything achieved so simply. Can you think of on what principle we and her are here?"

Subaru, desiring an immediate answer, holds himself back. He can't be a child, entirely making desires, only ever receiving. That's not what Lewes wants from Subaru. Pressured by the seriousness in Lewes' gaze, he scrutinizes her words, and what he hits on is,

Subaru: "Is it mana... maybe?"

What comes to his mind is the impetus for Puck's existence. Puck's body is constructed using mana as an intermediary when he materializes. By applying that, you could probably also create human-shaped bodies. Lewes' brows raise and she gives a little clap.

Lewes: "Beautiful. That you reached that answer is truly impressive. And it isn't as though anyone told you, either."

Subaru: "But you guided me along to properly reach the answer. It's just because I happen to know a nearby spirit that I thought of it. ...So, was it correct?"

Lewes: "Almost correct. Making a body solely with mana as an intermediary inevitably means a poor consumption rate. The Witch of GREED forcibly circumvented that problem with a specialized algorithm arrangement."

Subaru: "Forcible algorithms, means?"

Lewes: "The algorithm constructs an organ to produce mock-od, and so long as a set quantity of mana is stored, you can materialise a body. Meaning that while the body is made of mana, you can create lifeforms resembling NORMAL, od-existent creatures."

Od—unlike the mana in the atmosphere, od comes inset in every living creature from the outset, an energy which preforms the same operations as mana. However, od cannot be harvested from the outside as mana can, and the complete amount a creature

possesses is decided at birth. Using od meant shortening one's life span, and exhaustion of od = death.

Consider it as casting magic with HP when lacking the required MP. Although that said the HP is unrecoverable.

Subaru: “You said it so easily, but... isn't that something amazing? Even if it's 'mock', replicating od basically means creating life.”

Lewes: “Naturally, yer have ter follow some pretty particular conditions befer the phenomenon's posserble. My noggin ersn't clever enough ter understand the details. —But yer can safely think it truth that the witch succeeded in creating life.”

Subaru: “Incredible... man, she was actually amazing.”

The image of the white-haired witch smugly looking down at Subaru flashes through his mind. But then he immediately thinks,

Subaru: “No but, Daphne also said she created witchbeasts, so is the difficulty level for creating life just surprisingly low for witches? Lower rarity than I thought.”

The image of the white-haired witch saying “W-well but it wasn't as if I did it wanting any praise” flashes through his mind.

Lewes: “Yer expression's saying yer imagining something very heartwarming.”

Subaru: “Mysteriously, it feels like our exchanges've completely melted my sense of caution toward her. Anyway, I understand your origins, Lewes-san. Echidna created duplicates here of this girl Lewes Meyer. I got that.”

Subaru successfully comprehends the principle behind the Lewes' doubles' existence, and that Lewes herself has accepted this truth.

Subaru: “The next problem is, why was Echidna doing that?”

Lewes: “Hrm...”

Subaru: “For me, a layman in magic and the related algorithms, I only understand from the appearances just how amazing the thing Echidna did was. But even at that appearances level, I understand it was something gargantuan.”

Says Subaru to Lewes, who has her arms crossed in listening posture.

Subaru: “Where'd the motivation come from to do something that huge? What's her incentive? Why was it necessary for Echidna to create doubles of Lewes Meyer?”

The position of this girl Lewes Meyer in SANCTUARY is unclear.

The Lewes Subaru is chatting with right now serves as a representative-slash-body double in present-day SANCTUARY. So, what standing did the original Lewes Meyer have in the structure of

SANCTUARY?

Or otherwise, if she herself was the impetus for creating SANCTUARY,

Subaru: "I've hit on a thought for a possibility."

Lewes: "Oh?"

Subaru: "This kinda story's a guaranteed winner. It's the possibility of her intentionally creating substitutes for Lewes Meyer, who for some reason lost her life."

In media such as manga and novels, it's common to have characters searching for means to bring back a lost life. Creating clones of the deceased, crafting beings of the same DNA to substitute them, was a popular theme. Although those often end as failures due to THEIR BODIES ARE THE SAME, BUT THEIR SOULS WERE DIFFERENT.

Subaru: "Going by what you've said, Lewes-san, and seeing Pico, it looks likely the experiment in SANCTUARY got set back for the same reason. Even if you can make the appearance identical, you can't copy the essence, is the feeling."

If they were regardless continuing to create doubles, not giving up, you could probably call that insanity. If they persisted, still seeking the possibility that the soul would lodge in the body even after over twenty failures, that was—

Subaru: "Delusion, isn't how I wanna dismiss it, but..."

You couldn't call it wrong to want to bring back someone's life to that extent. Subaru, at least, was absolutely incapable of lambasting it.

Subaru right now in the present-perfect-continuous was working for the sake of seeing a future with everything saved.

Using only different methods and process, just how dissimilar was that from the witch's experiment?

The question of what the resulting Leweses thought of it could only be answered by asking them directly.

His theory now concluded, Subaru falters on what to say. Lewes sighs.

Lewes: "Lil' Su, yer a quicker thinker than I figured."

Subaru: something something with the arrangements I've been given it's excessively slow. It's a result of you being made to say things you didn't want to say, too.

Subaru's thinking is so slow it makes him want to click his tongue. He feels keenly his regret. But Lewes gives Subaru a slow shake of the head. However, it's not a gesture to comfort him. A light smile arises on her face, hosting a sense of melancholy,

Lewes: "But, it seems yer overthink. Could also call yer a dreamer."

Subaru: "A dreamer... I don't think that opinion's too off-base, but..."



Lewes: “Yer a dreamer. This's what yer thinking, isn't it, Lil' Su? —She went through these strenuous efforts attempting to restart that life. The girl Lewes Meyer was someone the Witch of GREED cherished, and for her possessed such a merit. Cerrect?”

Hit with a bullseye, Subaru goes silent.

That was exactly what he had been thinking. Inventing new algorithms and going through tiresome processes to continue someone's existence—if Echidna was going so far to do this, then you would likely reason that the witch considered this person someone special.

Lewes smiles as she rejects Subaru's reasoning. A dry, pained smile.

Lewes: “Lewes Meyer wers just a village girl. She weren't anyone especially close ter the Witch of GREED. They naturally had no blood, er matrimonially resultant ties. The witch and Lewes Meyer were most entirely strangers, having exchanged only the abserlute scantest of words.”

Subaru: “That's... no, hold on.”

Says Lewes as if she's seen this, Subaru interrupting her talk by holding out his palm. He puts his free hand to his forehead.

Subaru: “Isn't this weird? Lewes-san, you said this before. That you're like Pico, born with your insides empty. Why do you know about the Lewes Meyer in the crystal? It doesn't make sense.”

Lewes: “That's the result erv another test undergone in this SANCTUARY.”

Lewes softly receives Subaru's objection, putting her hand to her chest.

If what she's said is true, she most likely feels no heartbeat in doing so. But then where does the warmth he touched come from, wonders Subaru needlessly. Lewes closes her eyes.

Lewes: “Lewes Meyer and the witch were not close. But, she sacrificed herself ter the test. The witch utilised Lewes Meyer's body, sealed her in the crystal, and granted her time eternal. From there she formulated the algorithm, leaving behind a mechanism which generates mock-od every time a certain quantity erv mana is amassed, creating Lewes Meyer doubles.”

Subaru: “...For what purpose?”

Lewes: “If yer discount knowledge such as language and a bare minimum sense erv common mores, Lewes Meyer doubles err born in a state identical ter a baby. But that itself is already perculier. If it's identical ter a baby, it's cerrect fer it to just cry, ignorant and pure. So then why der they have knowledge allowing them ter follow the most basic instructions?”

Subaru: “That's... no way.”

Hitting on the worst of possibilities, Subaru loses his words.

Lewes seems to understand it simply by seeing his expression. She nods.

Lewes: “Picking and choosing on knowledge, the witch formulated means ter confer that ter the doubles. From there she granted only the minimum in knowledge, birthing them empty of anything

else.”

Subaru: “Then, them being born knowing nothing is exactly as she anticipated? But, then exactly there is where the purpose doesn't...”

It's turned into a ritual of creating order-following dolls. That said, it's not unthinkable for that to have been an intentional aspect of it. Isn't, but it's also very diverged from the disposition of Witch of GREED Echidna.

It's unthinkable that white-haired girl would pull something so roundabout just to create beings she could operate like her very own limbs.

Subaru: “Dunno if she could do this, but it'd save heaps of time and effort to brainwash or something people kidnapped from wherever. That's not it, there's some reason that's...”

Empty, new existences, something from nothing, creation—

Subaru: “—ah,”

A possibility flicks through his mind.

But it's preposterous, and Subaru immediately shakes his head to forget about it. However, in thinking it once, the thought won't let Subaru go.

If for assumption that this idea were true—

Echidna: <I wouldn't want you to scorn me.>

—Then it cohered with her concealing the truth of her deeds from Subaru.

And also cohered with the Lewes before him inheriting considerable memories from Lewes Meyer.

Subaru: “When you can pick and choose knowledge, why would you nonetheless create empty doubles?”

Lewes says nothing.

Subaru: “You prepare an empty vessel, and then what? Why do you put a vessel empty of content on the table?”

Lewes says nothing.

Subaru: “—To fill it, of course.”

Assuming that knowledge and memories could be poured into these doubles, with the empty vessels prepared.

Inside the crystal was the original, never to be lost. Assuming that it could create countless doubles, and you could append countless memories and knowledge into them.

That was—

Subaru: “You repeatedly burn your own memories and knowledge into the body of Lewes Meyer. If that is just maybe possible, then it's...”

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Lewes: “—A kind of immortality.”

—That was the true nature of the experiment preformed in SANCTUARY.

## CHAPTER 57: THE IMMORTALITY EXPERIMENT

—Immortality.

A concept arisen in every tale out there, past and present east and west, an ideal that all those with life would consider.

Never ageing, never deteriorating, never reincarnating, eternally persisting in being as YOURSELF. This concept enraptured many, despite them knowing it a contradiction to the principles of life, consisting the pinnacle of existence for an individual.

Subaru: “Immortality...”

Repeating back the word, Subaru winds up almost laughing at the unreality of it. But his cheeks stiffen, and he fails to craft any proper smile.

While desiring to laugh it off as ridiculous, his heart simultaneously, knowing that the witch's experiment was certainly no fabrication, can't conceal its shivering.

Subaru: “Then surprisingly even witches make goals of worldly things. Immortality's image's more like... the goal of some nobody fixated on their own teensy life.”

Lewes: “I'd say it's up ter personal opinion whether valuing yer life's the thought erv a nobody, but the Witch of GREED ert least viewed her life from no philosophical perrsperspective. She naturally feared death and devised means ter overcome that. ...Most'er the time lack a erv ability 'n lack erv power'd make it end ers a simple fanterisy.”

Subaru: “But inconveniently, Echidna had plenty of power. She might've even thought of several methods for it. This's what her clever brains came up with, then.”

Looking down at Pico sitting beside him, Subaru bites his lip.

Pico displays no reaction to Subaru's gaze. She proceeds in standby mode, quiet, as if waiting for someone to address her. Subaru gives a kind of breathy exhale.

Subaru: “Right. Having no insides... 'd mean there's no personality.”

Lewes: “Her state's like that erv a marionette. Erkzactly the state erv a newly-prepared vessel. All that's left ter grant the wish is ter pile in what yer desire.”

Subaru: “But is this something that really goes so smoothly? I don't know the theory of it, but I've got a rough image of what doing it'd be.”

Downloading your own memories and knowledge into an empty vessel.

Were the process one involving data, Subaru likely would not show so much exception with it. But the topic being discussed here is personality of an individual person. A person whose appearance and substance Subaru knew.

Subaru: “Extract your memories, and insert them in the empty body. Say it succeeds and you can repeat the process every time the body starts degrading, then that's definitely a kind of immortality. But...”

Passing down personalities and memories was indeed close to conquering death. If you preserved your personality in a similar way to data, then even if by some mistake the body was destroyed, it could still be installed into a new vessel, making recovery possible.

Duplicable personalities, and duplicable bodies. —That was the theoretical groundings of Echidna's immortality.

—But, then,

Subaru: “It's the idea where people panic when they run into parallel universe versions of themselves, and get struck with a sense of obligation that they absolutely must remove the other.”

Lewes says nothing.

Subaru: “That's how unbearable it must feel to have you who aren't you existing. The future I see just in imagining it makes me feel sick. Hey, Lewes-san.”

Lewes: “What?”

Subaru: “So being able to make multiple... Lewes Meyer bodies like this means, you can fling your personality into every one of the bodies. Basically, you're not just limited to perpetuating yourself temporally, you can also make multiples of yourself.”

This should be possible by the theory previously discussed.

Considering the THEORY in play, the more backups and spares you have to preserve YOURSELF, the better.

It's unthinkable that Echidna hadn't thought of something that Subaru had.

Subaru: “Wonder what it feels like. Being able to prepare others of yourself. Where even if you fail, there's a sort of ASSURANCE. Can you understand it, Lewes-san?”

Lewes: “...I doubt I'll ever be able to understand that. The technique of extracting personalities isn't anything I'm fussed about. When this individual body is lost, the individual I am will vanish. By that meaning, there's no difference between me and you, Lil' Su, in us lacking bodies capable of a do-over.”

Subaru: “Really. Yeah. ...Yeah, well of course.”

Subaru can't keep from giving a chagrined smile. Lewes furrows her brows, but will likely never understand what Subaru's reaction meant.

Subaru: “So that's what it is. Yeah, got it. Now I understand why you were being so forward, too.”

Says Subaru to the white-haired witch passing through his mind.

She planned to prepare herself duplicates, transferring her personality there, living long, achieving immortality. Such a thing was assuredly having an ASSURANCE of life.

Subaru: “And just how different is that from me?”

Subaru couldn't possibly harbour disgust for it.

In fact, feelings of closeness instead boil up. This excessively questionable emotion being called closeness might've been the dark joy of having found someone of the same breed.

Although it was using her own kind of methods, Echidna achieved a piece of immortality. Still being tossed around by the Witch, Subaru was repeating DEATH to achieve his goal.

Both in positions which mutinied against the supposedly singular thing known as LIFE. *What if*, thinks Subaru.

—What if, Echidna is the only one who can understand me.  
Or at least, understand that mentality.

Lewes: “Lil' Su?”

Subaru: “...I understand your position, Lewes-san. And what Echidna was trying to do. So then there's something I sorta wanna ask... did Echidna's aims succeed?”

Lewes: “Aims...”

Subaru: “Even I can see she finished in preparing empty vessels. All that's left is to overwrite her personality into them. Did she succeed in that overwriting? Or no, putting it more simply...”

—Is Echidna alive somewhere in this world right now?

Subaru's question goes unvoiced.

Understanding the implication, Lewes closes her eyes, shaking her head in response to Subaru's pleading gaze.

Lewes: “No, unferternately... the witch couldn't succeed in her plans. There is no Lewes Meyer body which inherited the witch's personality, tying her to life.”

Subaru: “Wh-why not? The personality download, sucking out the mental stuff, didn't succeed?”

Lewes: “Dunno what this dhownerd is, but the technique fer extracting personalities itself wers errlmost definitely completed. The failure came from a different cause.”

Subaru: “A different, cause being?”

Lewes: “It's simple. If yer pour too much water inter a vessel, it'll fail ter all settle inside n' overflow. If some part flows over, yer can't call that the original being, it's something different.”

At the word 'vessel', Subaru looks at Lewes, and Pico.

Subaru: “Vessel... wouldn't be a problem of bodily size, yeah?”

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Lewes: “Yer maybe oughter call it a problem in soul size. There exists in people a receptacle ter fit their soul. With the girl Lewes Meyer as vessel, it wersen't big enough ter receive the witch Echidna's soul.”

Subaru: “That... how did she confirm that?”

Lewes: “Pouring her knowledge inter the first double failed, and she first encountered the problem erv soul and vessel sizes. But in saying, Lewes Meyer's body wers already inside the crystal by then, and the mechernism ter create doubles was complete... so erlthrough unable ter fufill their intended purpose, vessels continued ter be born one after another.”

*Done with surprisingly little foresight,* thinks Subaru.

This kind of mistake was incredibly improbable coming from Echidna. That there were no means to deal with the multiplying Leweses afterwards also feels much unlike her.

Subaru: “What happened to that first double? Even though not all of it got in, it still would've inherited some of the witch's memories, yeah? It might be fragmentary, but you could still call that a copy of the witch.”

Lewes: “When water flows outter a vessel, noburdy can choose which portion ers spilled. Ert's one thing if yer spill quibbling memories, bits which won't impede daily life, but if yer spill a part which brings about big problems, the personality's changed.”

Subaru thinks upon the dud first Lewes = Echidna. Basically, Echidna wound up creating SOMETHING incredibly different from what she expected.

Lewes: “Story goes that the first double born wers completely bonkers, and since it inherited a fragment erv the Witch of GREED's power, a real nuisance. Terk her quite'er bit'er trouble disposing it, apparently.”

Subaru: “Disposed... I, see.”

Lewes: “But er course the witch wersen't a good enough quitter er without enough responsibiliy ter throw everything away after one failure. After disposing erv the first double, she apparently toiled wondering if she had ter alter the mass erv her soul, so she could transfer it into the next double.”

Subaru: somethingsoemthing That her soul came up with this is amazing.

Echidna's idea was unmistakably to compress the size of the data so it could be transferred to different medium. Otherwise to cut off unneeded parts so it would fit inside the receiver.

Subaru had some familiarity with computers and understood the general concept of data, so he had reached this idea. But Echidna's thoughts, conceiving this while ignorant of computers and data, and especially when talking about compressing SOULS of all things, were incredible.

Hearing that the first double was lost dejected Subaru. But knowing that Echidna immediately attempted another approach gave him hope.

However,

Lewes: “But,”

Lewes: “Though she searched fer a new method, the witch wers unable ter test it.”

Subaru: “Wh-well why not? It's sure something saying this, but the preparations were all there for testing it. And multiple copies of Lewes Meyer...”

Lewes: “Befer the experiment in SANCTUARY could proceed, the Witch of ENVY started acting.”

Subaru goes silent.

Lewes: “The Witch of ENVY consumed half the werld, and in doing devoured aller six witches outside herself. The Witch of GREED wers no exception. The witch's plans ter persist in life immortal wers assuredly aborted by the witch's hands.”

That Echidna, although not achieving immortality, still exists mentally in the world could perhaps be called her final bout of stubbornness.

Subaru: “...What happened to SANCTUARY after the witch was gone?”

Lewes: “Lil' Roz's family the Mathers have been in charg'er managing this land from the beginning. I don't know just what contract the Mathers family and the witch shared, though. That charge continued uninterrupted, and now Lil' Roz is maintaining and managing SANCTUARY. That said, all he's really doing is circulating goods through here so the place doesn't go ter ruin, and occasionally bringing along kids in circumstances appropriate fer SANCTUARY as new residents.”

Subaru: “And he's left everything else to you, Lewes-san. Earlier you said the individual things you acquired are your individuality, but...”

Lewes: “If I'm speaking limiting myself as an individual double, I'm the third double from the beginning. I wers born with a sorter personality implanted beforehand, to inherit the role erv managing the multiplying vessels and erv Lewes Meyer. Even now I'm following that duty.”

Subaru: “Implanted personality... you can seriously do that?”

Implanting a mock-personality into an empty vessel so that it can fulfil a role.

Installing robots with mock-AI so they could preform human behaviours—was still a far cry from being reality in the world Subaru's from.

Lewes nods.

Lewes: “Though erv course it wersn't anything easy. Ert was possible exactly because I wers a soulless, empty vessel. And even then, I cerld only do truly simple things at the experimental stage.”

*The beginning was certainly tough,* says Lewes' smile, peeking through.

Lewes: “Being givern a role but having no memories is sure a mysterious feeling. The days passed slowly, but with increrdible momentum. It took a very long time befer I began thinking that wers mysterious, too.”



Subaru: "...What happened with the multiplying doubles? I sorta haven't seen any in SANCTUARY except for you and Pico, Lewes-san."

Lewes: "The Leweses except fer the four filling the role of Lewes are scattered around SANCTUARY. They're made ter act ers eyes against invaders, er as relays. Interestingly, doubles can relay thoughts between each other."

Garfiel has mentioned the term 'eyes of SANCTUARY' before. If he was referring to the doubles, and they're scattered around SANCTUARY's outskirts keeping watch, then yes it makes sense Garfiel found out about the villagers' evacuation so easily. And, thinking that far,

Subaru: "Wa—wait hold on, you said something I can't overlook. The four filling the role of Lewes, what."

Lewes: "Hrm, that. It's simple. Continually reproducing the entire structure erv a person's body with mana puts on an incredible load. If the mana runs out, my body disappears. But ernlike spirits, if I disperse I probably won't be able ter reform. Er maybe there is a way ter do it, but I don't know it."

Disappearing and reforming, with memories persisting, makes Subaru recollect on spirits. Although since spirits have places to RETURN to after vanishing like Puck's jewel thingamajig, strictly speaking they don't actually disappear. But this isn't the case with the Leweses. A death from complete mana depletion means the death of that individual for them.

Lewes: "We can't keep active alone fer very long. It takes abert three days fer us ter replenish our mana after hitting the point where our bodies operate so little that we're overtaxing them. We need ter avoid the inconvenient things that'd happen with Lewes Meyer being absent from SANCTUARY over that time."

Subaru: "And so, four Lewes-sans."

Lewes: "The role erv Lewes Meyer cycles ter be once a day, every four days. Outside those times, I'm the same ers the other vessels. ...Wearing just the facade erv Lewes Meyer, an empty vessel. That might be how ter say it."

Says Lewes somewhat cynically. Subaru doesn't know what to say on the spot. Anything he says will be conceivable as vapid, know-it-all cajolery. Although he knows that shutting up here in itself just affirms Lewes' cynicism, Subaru's mouth fails to say anything.

Lewes: "Don't feel down, Lil' Su. Me and the other doubles are consentingly confirming ter our role. Same as the first Lewes Meyer."

Subaru: "First... Right, I wanted to ask this too."

Lewes: "Mm?"

Subaru: "I understand why you Lewes-sans, why you duplicates of Lewes Meyer Lewes-sans, are following the witch's words and protecting SANCTUARY. But why did the girl Lewes Meyer help the

witch?”

From the conversation so far, it doesn't seem there was any testing to fill an empty vessel with Lewes Meyer herself. Meaning that Lewes Meyer sacrificed her body to the experiment, her soul having nowhere to go, choosing an end forever sealed in crystal.  
In exchange for creating bodies eternally, she ended her own soul there in a decision akin to suicide.

Why was that young girl able to make that decision?  
Otherwise, perhaps Echidna selected her as a lab rat at random without her consent.  
While wishing for it not to be the latter, Subaru asks,

Subaru: “What was Lewes Meyer thinking in participating in the experiment?”

Lewes: “...I herred Lewes Meyer presented the witch with a proposition. The witch accepted the terms, and that's why she participated in the experiment. No need ter worry, she wasn't forced.”

Subaru: “Proposition... can I ask what it was about?”

Lewes: “I doubt yer could understand it even if yer did ask, Lil' Su.”

Subaru wordlessly stares at Lewes. Faced with a gaze similar to that of a stubborn child, Lewes frowns, sighing.

Lewes: “The cerndition Lewes Meyer presented the witch with was SANCTUARY's continued existence.”

Subaru: “Sanctuary's... continued existence?”

Lewes: “Lewes Meyer wished fer the place that the witch prepared as a laboratory bench, fer the test site SANCTUARY, fer this environment ter continue being maintained. The witch, having necessity fer SANCTUARY ter remain fer continuing her experiments, of course consented. And even now after the witch's passing, her promise ter Lewes Meyer remains kept, with us preserving the contract between the two by our own hands.”

Subaru: “No but that... the arrangement's backwards.”

Echidna was the one who needed SANCTUARY's experiment, and Lewes Meyer would've been someone assembled in SANCTUARY for the sake of that experiment. The lab rat girl wished the witch for SANCTUARY's continued existence. Their proposer-reciever arrangement makes no sense.

Lewes: “Hyperthetically, even saying it wers a laboratory bench... SANCTUARY wers a much more comfortable place than the areas where she wers persecuted. How ders that thought sound ter yer?”

Subaru: “...That is overwhelmingly beyond help.”

Lewes: “Here ers where help is. And so Lewes Meyer sacrificed herself ter the experiment. Whether er not that achieved anything is something I can only have yer judge by seeing myself and this girl.”

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Lewes takes a sip of her thoroughly cold tea. Subaru has nothing he can say. A conversation about herself essentially just ended, but Pico's shown no reaction. Merely sat there quietly gripping Subaru's sleeve.

Subaru: "Why is she so attached to me? She's empty, and at first she was treating me like I didn't even exist."

Lewes: "It's 'causer *that*. Yer touched Lewes Meyer's crystal, Lil' Su. The command right got converted and overwritten to yer."

Subaru: "Command right?"

Subaru furrows his brows, puzzled. Lewes nods and raises a finger.

Lewes: "As er test, try giving her an order. Oop, but nothing indecent now. She looks erkzactly like me, after all."

Subaru: "No need to say that, I'm not into lolis, okay? I, healthily, like girls around my own age. ...Pico, rub my shoulders a little."

Hearing Subaru's order, Pico raises her head and gives a faint nod, affirming the command. She climbs up onto the bed, circling around to Subaru's back.

Subaru: "o, ohh, it's good it's good... huh? Um, Pico-san? This is pretty forceful? Scale it back scale it back... au, crap, Pico-san, scaleitbaaaaaack!!"

Lewes: "Rubbing shoulders, ers something she knows of, but the strength ter put into it ers an unknown. Slack on teaching her those things, and she'll make these blunders."

Subaru: "Y-you were knowingly testing me!?"

Shaking himself free from a Pico even now attempting to give him shoulder rubs, Subaru orders her back to her spot and rotates his creaky shoulders. Shivering at Pico's near bone-shattering grip strength, he tilts his head.

Subaru: "Having the command right transfer just by touching it is kinda crazy low security, yeah? What'd you do if it'd been some malicious lolicon?"

Lewes: "It's unlikely yer'd enter that place by coincerdence, and more impertently the command right dersen't transfer easily. Yer'd have ter be accepted as an apostle erv GREED."

Subaru: "...Hn?"

Lewes sips her tea. Subaru crosses his arms, and timidly,

Subaru: "Ummm,"

Subaru: "Excuse me. I'm afraid I have no idea what this apostle of GREED thing is."

Lewes: “Something recognized by Echidna, with that being a qualifier befitting an apostle. Did yer accept anything like that inside the tomb? Be given anything, conferred anything, put anything in yer body.”

Subaru: “Inside the tomb...”

Subaru thinks back on his meetings with Echidna inside her dream-castle, figuring there must have been some impressive conferment somewhere like what Lewes is talking about. But he can't come up with anything.

If there was anything Echidna had given Subaru in that place, it was some knowledge, relief, and a rather terrifying experience. And also,

Subaru: “...It couldn't've been the Chidna tea?”

Lewes: “Hrm, Chidna tea?”

Subaru: “Echidna said it was her bodily fluids, and she cleverly presented me this stuff resembling tea, and I've kinda drunken it twice...”

Lewes: “Nert even jesting, it wers probably that.”

Subaru: “Asshole, seriously what did she fucking make me drink!!”

Subaru unwittingly stands up out of anger. Lewes chides him with a 'now now', but Subaru shows no signs of not being cranky.

Lewes: “Yer can say that, but it's erkzactly because of it that we have this situation. It surely wasern't anything entirely bad?”

Subaru: “It pisses me off that she put this in me without me knowing! The fuck is she doing to people's bodies. Apostle of GREED, relations with witches make things damn complicated as it is, don't you pile more on that. Witches are just all so fucking...”

You've got the Witch of ENVY settling some RETURN BY DEATH agreement without his knowledge, you've got the Witch of GREED just going off making him her apostle, are witches all just fucking like that?

Lewes: “Anyway, cause'er that you've gotten command right of the Lewes Meyer doubles in SANCTUARY, Lil' Su. Yer can make even me obey yer.”

Subaru: “This thing even works on you, Lewes-san?”

Lewes: “She hasn't gotter will and I can resist more'en her, but ultimately I can't defy it. Must be a happy thing fer a healthy young man?”

Subaru: “I said I'm not a lolicon...”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

She can give him a seductive gaze, but he doesn't react an inch.  
Glancing aside at Lewes as she laughs delightedly, Subaru thinks back on the mystery of SANCTUARY.

A facility hidden deep in the place's depths. Lewes Meyer sealed there, and the double-producing system. Destruction coming in six days, and the problem associated with that.

Having discussed the facility's existence, what was indispensable was—

Subaru: “Lewes-san, I'm sorry for this being sudden, but... please help me out.”

Lewes: “What, if it's something dirty go for the purer lot, not me.”

Subaru: “Enough on that already.”

Subaru stands up, stretching as he looks up at the ceiling.

Subaru: “There has to be at least one other person than me with the command right.”

Lewes goes silent.

Subaru: “I do wanna talk to him, but there's another thing that's been bothering me.”

Two people arise in Subaru's mind.

The first gave orders to over 20 Lewes doubles, tiger and protector of SANCTUARY, Garfiel Tinsel.  
And the other—

Subaru: “Why did Gate Crossing throw me into that facility? I'd say now's about time to find out...”

—A cream-haired girl, who Subaru determines to now question thoroughly.

## CHAPTER 58: NANNA

Alongside Lewes and Pico, Subaru exits the house to see light creeping over the eastern sky, and first notices his own sleepiness.

Subaru: “Wuah, daybreak... was a pretty content-heavy night.”

This doesn't tie in with Subaru's personal sense of time, but the night started with Emilia's TRIAL, then Subaru's TRIAL, RETURNING BY DEATH back to reality, and his spat with Garfiel. Then he uncovered the facility's location, and learned its secrets from Lewes.

Since it was all so dense he hadn't recognized the speed of it, but in contrast to his consciousness, his body can't conceal its fatigue. Although pretty late to be mentioning it, this imbalance between mind and body could also be called a fault of RETURN BY DEATH.

Subaru: “What I really wanna do's go back to the cathedral and sleep till noon, but...”

Lewes: “Yer could and it werldn't bother me. Since I'm about ter swap out with the next Lewes and have myself a good rest.”

Subaru: “Leaving aside your enviable work schedule, there's no time. I can't do it.”

Six days left—or no, since a day has already past, there are now five days remaining. Considering that getting to the mansion and back costs a day in itself, Subaru has a three-day limit for where he can actually act.

He can't waste a precious half-day here, and although having seen and knowing a future where the witch attacks, he hesitates to reveal the situation to Lewes.

Subaru: “Can't rashly pull anything that'd probably make the Witch of ENVY show up...”

Sweat arises on Subaru's forehead.

Subaru's faintly realised that his loose fucking lips during his chat with Echidna was the cause for the disaster that loop. Witch's restraints weren't doing their job, pissed her off good, blah blah blah. Which meant that it was probably safe to think that, if Subaru had been in the real world where the witch's hand could reach him directly, it would've attacked Subaru only. But,

Subaru: “Seriously rather not risk others' lives to confirm that.”

Mutters Subaru weakly as he looks down at Pico, holding his hand. She receives Subaru's gaze, her eyes widening even further in anticipation of his orders.

It appears she's firmly recognized that the command right shifted, now that Subaru's commanded her once. She's obedient as a duckling tottering after its mother.

Lewes: “So, whatter yer planning ter do now, Lil' Su?”

Subaru: “For the moment, return to the mansion. There's someone there I need to talk to, and... I wanna see Frederica too. Lots of things I want supplemented.”

Lewes: “Frederica, hrm...”

Lewes furrows her brows as she meaningfully says the maid's name. Not a reaction very like Lewes.

Subaru: “What, you happen to have some thoughts? About Frederica.”

Lewes: “...It's nerthing so important.”

Subaru: “Lewes-san. I don't wanna use the command right if I can help it. Forcing you to follow orders's honestly a rather not.”

Shrugging, Subaru wafts about some signs of this being a supplication. But contrary to his statement, his sharpened sanpaku gaze loudly asserts, *I'll use it if I have to*. Lewes sighs.

Lewes: “Thinking on it, feels like after Frederica left, bit by bit SANCTUARY's cogs started slipping outter place.”

Subaru: “Cogs started slipping?”

Lewes: “The place's foundations being what they are, there'd be some dubiousness in calling things back then sound. But still... Mhrm, none'er the residents, er Lewes Meyer doubles, er Lil' Gar were as unsteady then as they are now.”

Subaru goes quiet.

Lewes: “I got expectations fer yer, Lil' Su.”

Expectations, is a word Subaru knows graunches horribly in his heart. The feelings shouldered on him from the word 'expectations' were, for Subaru—

Lewes: “Clumsy ties ter mislaid duties, continually preserved, have narrowly kept SANCTUARY alive fer a long time. That irrationality, now, creates fraying and tears. I got expectations fer yer, Lil' Su.”

Subaru: “What're you, of me...”

Lewes: “That yer'll bring end ter the witch's delusional convictions, bring end ter the reason fer SANCTUARY's continuance, bring end ter Lewes Meyer's wish, in a way desirable ter everyone.”

It's an incredibly heavy expectation.

Subaru immediately goes to respond with a 'Not happening'. But faced with the seriousness of Lewes' gaze—

Subaru: “—”

—his mouth doesn't move for him.

Lewes: “That's fine fer now. Fer now, that's still fine.”

Lewes nods, as if she understands all of Subaru's hesitation and indecision.

In this instant alone, Subaru understands that regardless of her appearance being juvenile, her sense of values aligns properly to the age that she has lived.

Lewes: "It's about the end er my time, now."

With that somewhat rue-inspiring line, a dull light begins to emanate from Lewes' body.

It reminds Subaru of spirits on the verge of disappearing, and he unwittingly reaches out for her. But,

Lewes: "Relax. I'm not relapsing ter mana. Just entering hibernation fer a tidge'er a while, to restock my spent mana. Another Lewes will come right erway."

Subaru: "T-their looks and speech'll be the same, but they'll be a different person, right?"

Lewes: "That's right. Appearance en speech en even personality, 'er all consciously resemblant, but... it's someone else. Which means that I'm the only me whos's been speaking ter yer, Lil' Su. Lonely?"

Subaru: "Lonely isn't the problem here. Lewes-san, you... Lewes-san, don't you find it hard? Don't you ever think, that you dislike you four pretending to be one Lewes Meyer? Or ever wondered, where your own life comes into..."

Subaru understands that what he's asking is cruel.

Even supposing that Lewes did think something about this, that sincerely she felt pain or sorrow about her situation, what could Subaru do knowing that?

What was the purpose of someone unlearned in principles of magic, details of mana, or even the basics of algorithms, continually reaching out for regrets they would never grasp?

Lewes must have understood Subaru's troubles. She gives a light smile, her pink hair cloaked in morning hues, swaying in the wind.

Lewes: "Lil' Su, what're yer thoughts?"

Subaru: "—Huh?"

Lewes: "I'm leaving the answer ter that question, as one of the things I'm expecting of yer."

Lewes' body fades like mist, melting slowly into the dawn.

Even knowing it's different from vanishing, Subaru nevertheless can't believe it as he watches the fantastical sight. Someone had melded into the sunlight, and disappeared.

That they hadn't been extinguished was unbelievable.

But the next instant, a new silhouette appears in the spot where Lewes vanished. From their stature to their everything, they are exactly identical to the disappeared Lewes.

She gives a shake of her head, and looks up at Subaru.

Lewes: "Doubt I need ter introduce myself, Lil' Su. I'm all done matching up what yer and the



previous ME were talking abert.”

The new Lewes promptly fixes the gap between her and Subaru's perspectives, erasing his points of doubt. That done, Lewes tilts her head.

Lewes: “Now then, Lil' Su... how der we move?”

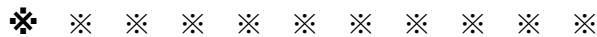
Subaru: “Right, yeah...”

Subaru looks up at the sky.

Watching the dawn slowly spill across the night, he lets his attention slip into the break between his time spent and time remaining.

Lowering his gaze, he looks to Lewes and Pico.

Subaru: “First, I wanna escape SANCTUARY. I'll be getting your help for that, Lewes-sans.”



The dawn passed, Subaru stands outside a dragon carriage shed.

He opens the squeaky door as quietly as he can, searching for his partner. A jet-black figure melds into the darkness as she waits in the back for her master's summons.

Subaru: “Sorry for just leaving you here, Patrasche.”

Patrasche responds by stretching her neck out, rubbing her snout against Subaru. The gesture contains both affection, and sulkiness at being left aside, inspiring a tickly kind of feeling in Subaru.

Subaru: “Sorry for this suddenly when you're still waking up, but have a job. Can you ferry me back to the mansion again?”

Subaru pats her snout. Patrasche makes a noise in a 'You're just hopeless, Subaru-kun...' kind of 'no choice but to do it' way. Subaru sighs in relief at getting her agreement and unlatches her gate, readying to lead her outside.

When she's not dragging any burdens along, Patrasche should be able to clear the half-a-day trip in a shorter timespan. If they depart right now at early morning, they'll probably reach the mansion before evening.

Subaru: “But man, it's a sloppy plan presupposing a re-do...”

This loop, Subaru has no intentions of bringing along the Arlam village evacuees in his trip to the mansion. Speaking frankly, he has the idea of re-doing it on his mind, and he's sweeping away all unneeded, indefinite elements for his hardcore information gathering.

In this present where he's heard the story of Lewes Meyer and formed a rather friendly bond with Lewes, that is a regret. But,

Subaru: “Relations with Garfiel're terrible, and I've bitten into something that's gonna make them

even worse.”

Transference of the command right—If Garfiel was the one who originally had it, and Subaru is who it switched over to, it's easy to imagine him searching with eyes bloodshot for the new rightholder.

He would likely reach Subaru soon. Lewes wasn't sworn to secrecy. Subaru had informed her beforehand to answer nicely if Garfiel asked.

All of that was done with an idea in mind.

Subaru: “—That I still left Emilia a goodbye note's just weak of me.”

If you consider this as a world that's going to re-done and disappeared, then there's no logical reason for Subaru to toil re: Emilia this loop.

Because whatever her suffering, sorrow, or perhaps even resultant joy is, it's getting left behind in this disappearing world. But even though Subaru's brain understands this,

Subaru: “Cause it's not logical, so.”

Even knowing that it's a world being left behind, Subaru doesn't want Emilia's expression to be sad. Subaru's inability to shut up would definitely confer Emilia some acute feeling. Without something to cling to, she may lose sight of her own footing. While happy that she was leaning on him that much, Subaru simultaneously finds it pitifully painful.

Praying for that not to happen, and for it not to persist if it does, Subaru left Emilia a note.

That said, the content was inoffensive stuff, listings of common phrases to inspire relief. Being that he can't convey the truth, all Subaru can do is smooth it over with superficial comforts.

Subaru: “Better than nothing... Or, guess it's an 'if Emilia weren't so dependant on me' thing.”

With Puck absent, Emilia's dependency on Subaru has been pretty intense.

He knew this idea of his was just a temporary relief, and not even likely to go well.

Nevertheless, Subaru was leaving Emilia behind and exiting SANCTUARY. He reasoned it a necessary sacrifice to overwrite a hopeless present with a hopeful future, his heart devilish as an oni.

Subaru: “Now, to get outta here quick before anyone finds m... hm?”

As part of getting Patrasche out of the shed, Subaru goes to retrieve her saddle from the carriage. Just after giving it a light dust-down with his hand and readying to mantle it on Patrasche's back, something skirts through the corner of Subaru's vision. It's,

Subaru: “Betelgeux's gospel, huh...”

A thick, black-bound tome near-hidden in the corner of the carriage.

It's Betelgeux's thing, and honestly Subaru would rather dispose of it immediately, but it'd be trouble if negligent treatment meant it got into somebody's hands. Most importantly, Subaru'd been holding onto it hoping it may give some clues as to the goals and secrets of the Witch Cult.

Subaru: “Actually, that chat with Roswaal's changed my perspective on this thing a lot.”

Subaru puts the saddle on the seat, picking up the gospel with no particular intention. Feeling its considerable weight, the image of the bloodstained madman rises in Subaru's mind.

Betelgeux had harboured excessive attachment to the gospel, fully believing it proof of allegiance to the Witch. That its contents were imprecise instructions of what actions its owner Betelgeux should take was rather something cynical.

Subaru: “Roswaal, Beatrice, even Betelgeux... does goddamn everyone just happen to have books only they ca—?”

Subaru smoothly flips through the pages as he grumbles. That his fingers stop, and a strange noise escapes from his throat, is because of surprise.

Subaru: “I, can read it?”

The letters written on the gospel's white pages are properly perceptible to Subaru. It's in messy writing akin to a child's scrawl, but right there are lines of meaningful vocabulary. And written in I-GLYPHS, which even Subaru can read.

Subaru: “What... no way, the book accepted me as its owner? But I didn't do...”

*anything special*, thinks Subaru, when he realises he does have an idea. Last time, when Subaru couldn't read the gospel, had been before he came to SANCTUARY. At the Capital, and in Roswaal's mansion after returning from the Capital. He hadn't any chances to open the gospel since then so he couldn't be sure, but it was unthinkable that this was unrelated to the happenings in SANCTUARY.

Or more precisely, not the happenings in SANCTUARY, but a more direct cause.

Subaru: “Did that fucking Echidna do something to me?”

It was likely that Echidna enacted some kind of meddling on Subaru's body so that he could take the tomb's TRIAL. Subaru inevitably suspected it had something to do with the tea. Echidna joked around calling it bodily fluids, but perhaps it'd been something else?

Something to drastically change Subaru's body from before.

Subaru: “Dunno if that was the reason, but last loop's changes were bigger than ever too.”

Perhaps the cause for the WITCH OF ENVY's rampage was more than just revealing RETURN BY DEATH to Echidna.

That Subaru lacks the time to immediately question her is a thing of regret for him.

Subaru: “...But, maybe I'm not necessarily the owner.”

Being accepted by a Witch Cult gospel was a fucking grossout of a predicament, but as Subaru

glances over the pages, he judges that the messages are not directed at him, but rather just information conveyed to Betelgeux that he can now read.

There aren't any dates, so Subaru can't tell when the events written on the first page happened. But the writings do span a good number of pages, the image arising in Subaru's mind of Betelgeux blasting through the contents one by one.

They fundamentally boil down to where to go and what to do, giving no information as to how it all connects to any single, specific result. Betelgeux most likely had assumed, regardless of the result's presence or absence, that all the deeds were ones headed somewhere favourable for the Witch Cult.

Subaru continues skimming through the gospel, coming to reach the end of the writ.

All the pages beyond this point are blank. On the last page of text sits the rusty-red word **END**, written by Subaru in blood and big letters.

Before that, the last proper writ of the gospel states:

Subaru: "In Mathers' domain, Trial on silver-haired half-witch... huh. Don't understand it."

Being that Subaru doesn't know the details of the TRIAL, the only information this writ presents is that Betelgeux attempted to attack Emilia.

All it does is give Subaru conviction that the wicked deeds Betelgeux committed were spurred by the writ of the gospel.

Subaru: "...Right, my bad my bad. We'll get going right away."

An impatient Patrasche bumps Subaru with her snout as he leans against the carriage. He smiles wryly at the gesture, returning the gospel to its original spot.

With what he just saw still lodging in his memories, Subaru shifts his attention to another problem. That being, escaping SANCTUARY and returning to mansion.

Subaru: "Let's get outta SANCTUARY making as little racket as possible. Quietly, silent secret manoeuvring please"

Patrasche: "——㊤!!"

Subaru mounts himself on a saddled Patrasche as he pleads, Patrasche responding with a bold and wondrous roar, stating: Leave it to me!

While nonetheless sensing the reliability of his completely not-understanding partner, Subaru calms an excited Patrasche and sets their course toward SANCTUARY's exit.

The rising sun glitters distant in the eastern sky, its first light spilling over the forest treetops. The earlybird residents will wake up and make this nightflight harder if Subaru and Patrasche don't hurry.

Rushing Patrasche along, Subaru savours the initial jolt of momentum as Patrasche accelerates into a run. Her body instantly enters the effects of her WINDBREAKER BLESSING, the effects of wind and jolting no long reaching Subaru's body.

They speed out of SANCTUARY and enter the forest. Patrasche sprints along the shoddy trails, unhesitatingly darting in the mansion's direction. From previous events, Subaru knows his grip on

the reigns has no bearing on it, Patrasche will by her own volition select the path optimum for him. There's a sadness to it, but leaving it to Patrasche is the best he can do. He holds the reins in appearance only, gripping down firm on her tough hide, Subaru and Patrasche becoming a single body as they rush through the forest. They'll exit the woods and succeed in escaping SANCTUARY in under an hour, provided there's no interruptions.

???: “Hw... yer wait right there, hrrraaAAH!!”

The heel swinging down from the sky overhead bores into the road, the earth exploding. Billowing dustclouds and splinters of trees urge Patrasche brake immediately, her feet gouging the dirt as she skids to a stop. Her divinely-touched consideration keeps Subaru's balance steady to prevent him from falling as she glares ahead. Subaru, sustaining and enduring the shock, looks at the same thing Patrasche has set her glare on.

???: “You... What fuckin' plottin' fuckin' ideas fuckin' intentions're ya got, huh, oi!”

Absolutely pissed, Garfiel kicks the ground. His nose scrunched up, irritation and displeasure on full display, Garfiel bares his fangs at a Subaru looking down from atop Patrasche.

Garfiel: “Don't yer look down, dismount. This's a talk happenin' on even eye level. We're startin' from there. I'll beat yer in, y'fuck...”

Subaru: “Somehow I figured you'd be getting in the way, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “Well my amazin' self sure fuckin' didn't figure an inch yer'd be pullin' this fucked bullshit! Yer curlin' in yer tail n' tryin' ter run now? Don't yer fuckin' piss th's shit around! You! 'N SANCTUARY! N' the half-witch n' Roswaal! Everyone! We're all 'n th'same fuckin' boat! Until the TRIAL's over, we ain't ever leavin'...”

Subaru: “That's your facade, right?”

Garfiel: “—”

Subaru's short question prompts Garfiel's enraged expression to shift. The blazing needlepoint fury in his eyes tempers, the only noise being the sound of his breathing and quiet clicks of his teeth.

Subaru: “Garfiel, you're keeping us trapped in SANCTUARY like this, acting as if you want us to clear the TRIAL... but that's not what you're really looking for, is it?”

Garfiel: “What're yer mean with that, oi.”

Subaru: “There's no damn 'what do I mean'. If you truly wish for SANCTUARY's freedom, you ought to overlook my actions. The instant you're not doing that, that you can't do that, it means there's some annoying ulterior motive involved. Correct?”

Garfiel: “Ha, don't talk idiocy. My amazin' self simply ain't fuckin' pleased with pricks like you

who're shittin' out their diarrhoea witch stink, fuckin' sneakin' 'round the place..."

Subaru: "Do you actually sense the witch's smell from me?"

Subaru's question again leads Garfiel to lose his words.

His eyes water, his lips quiver. Just seeing that reaction is enough for a bitter smile to near well up inside Subaru.

Subaru: "What tipped me off was last night after leaving the tomb. Honestly, there was nowhere I was more on guard thinking you might kill me than that instant."

Garfiel: "...Eh? Fuck're you saying?"

Subaru: "You don't understand what I mean, and so I'm thinking your proclamations of having a functioning nose are a lie."

Directly after RETURNING BY DEATH, with the reason for death being interaction with the Witch. Garfiel interacted with a Subaru supposedly emanating a correspondingly pungent scent of witch in a demeanour identical to always. After parting, he summoned Subaru as if he'd just remembered it, and then was last night's exchange. —Crossing the line for unnatural.

Subaru: "I did think you might've been pretending not to notice there, to keep from aggravating the conversation... but considering your impulsiveness, I decided that wasn't it."

Garfiel: "Yer sure fuckin' sayin' whatever the shit yer like. My amazin' self's lyin' that I can smell witch on yer? *Ha*, stupid n' useless! What point is there in lyin' 'bout that, eh? What goddamn point..."

Subaru: "But there is a point. If you're telling me this, drawing my wariness towards you... it distracts my caution from the fundamental PERSON WHO DOES HAVE A WORKING NOSE."

Garfiel: "—"

Subaru's statement, more than likely, hits to the heart of Garfiel's intentions.

The instant Garfiel hears it, his expression shifts in the truest of senses.

From an attitude of settling matters through conversation, to something simplistic and permitting of settlement through violence.

Garfiel's arms bloat in mass. Golden fur starts covering his exposed skin, his slouch worsening, his posture edging closer to quadrupedal than hunched over.

Garfiel: "I ain't listenin' ter anythin' yer have ter say anymore. Looks like yer found outter bout somethin' you shouldn't. Yer can't be left alive."

Subaru: "Don't say that, Garfiel. You best listen to me for a little longer. Don't, and you won't know where your secrets slipped from, right?"

Garfiel: "My secrets...?"

Asks Garfiel, glowering.

Mounted atop Patrasche, Subaru aims his arm to the heavens to dispel Garfiel's distrust, and clicks his fingers.

Garfiel: “Au, ah?”

Garfiel's gaze freezes on the sight before him.

Appearing in sequence to surround Patrasche, assembled according to Subaru's instruction, are doubles of Lewes Meyer—numbering to 21.

Having this time recreated the familiar scene by his own hands, Subaru jabs his finger at Garfiel.

Subaru: “Seeing this, you do understand my position now, yeah?”

Garfiel: “Why... how'd you, that place!”

Subaru: “Regret and agony as sacrifices, summoned has been the truth. And my turn's not over yet.”

Facing his palm above, Subaru looks down at a panicked Garfiel from atop his mount.

Garfiel's throat chokes in receiving that gaze. Drunk on exhibiting uncovered truths, Subaru,

Subaru: “The command right's transferred to me. I ordered them to obey and preform your commands as usual over the night, so that you wouldn't notice.”

Garfiel: “—a,”

Subaru: “That ruse ends now. Hear this, Garfiel? I am leaving SANCTUARY and returning to the mansion. I've got things I ought to do. So, I can't have you getting in my way.”

Sensing what Subaru is going to order, Garfiel's expression collapses.

The hardened determination melts away from his face, confusion showing through, his frail expression that of a young and lost child.

His transformation halts, his enlarged stature returning to its usual petite state.

Subaru: “Don't follow me, Garfiel. There's piles of things I wanna ask you, but for this try those're being postponed. I've got way too many things I gotta ask about, including the command right.”

Garfiel: “Do... don't fuck with me. Do yer think this's gonna make my amazin' self give...”

Subaru: “Oh you'll stop. Fundamentally, you're a softy.”

Garfiel leaps, howling at Subaru's rather provocative statement. He bears his fangs, closing in to crush Subaru and Patrasche both. But, a small silhouette cuts in before him.

A double. Garfiel swings his arm up, going to swat it away. But as he plunges his arm down, right before landing the strike—

???: “—Lil' Gar.”

Garfiel: “—!?”

Addressed by his nickname, Garfiel's expression instantly shifts. His readied arm instead slices through the air. And, suspended in space, the hands of the doubles grab him from behind, forcing and holding him to the ground.

The doubles' arms span all across Garfiel's body, restraining him. Spearheading them, and looking down at Garfiel with their expression sorrowful is,

???: “This should be enough fer the job erv keeping him put, Lil' Su.”

Subaru: “Yeah, this helped. Figured Garfiel would never think of this idea.”

During the fight with the Witch of ENVY, Garfiel unsparingly used the doubles like pawns. But the one Lewes Meyer possessing a will was absent from that event. There was the fact that she'd probably been consumed by the shadow already, but Subaru suspected there was another reason. With a calculation deemable as cruelty beyond cruel,

Subaru: “You can't treat the Lewes-san you consider as family the same as the other doubles. If there's any difference between us in how we use the command right, that's why.”

Garfiel: “You, fucker!”

Subaru: “But even neverminding that, you're not capable of destroying the Lewes Meyer doubles with your own hands, right? Just behave, and overlook me. It won't turn anything bad.”

Garfiel: “How could things get fucking worse'n this. Don't fuck with me. Don't fuckin' fuck with me!”

Subaru hears his howling, but consciously ignores it as he taps Patrasche's back. She senses Subaru's intentions, giving a small growl as she turns her back to the restrained Garfiel and faces toward the forest exit.

Before taking off, Subaru glances back at Lewes.

Subaru: “I'm sorry for making you do this.”

Lewes: “I'm sure yer've judged it necessary. I couldn't resist even if I wanted ter. There's no need ter aim yer concern at me.”

Subaru: “But still, I'm sorry.”

Lewes looks down at Garfiel with her gaze sympathetic. Subaru leaves his apology as his goodbye, urging Patrasche to run.

Again, WINDBREAKER BLESSING abandons sounds, abandons wind.

Garfiel: “Wait! Wait up! You, don't fuckin' joke 'round, oi!!”

A voice pursues Subaru, growing distant.

Leaving it behind, accelerating, Subaru exits the forest—exits SANCTUARY.



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Garfiel: “Let me go! He can't be let outside... why, why why why!? Are you really on his side more'n mine, y'granny? Wh-why, why...”

Lewes: “—”

Garfiel: “Nanna—!!”

The forest echoes with a cry of grief, betraying his love.  
Choosing to leave it all behind, Subaru runs straight through the woods.

Necessary sacrifices, necessary sorrows, all cornerstones for the future.  
Biting open his lip, feeling the blood pool, Subaru judges Garfiel's sorrow in this instant as a sacrifice made for the finale.

## CHAPTER 59: SWEET PASTRY, SWEETLESS STORY

Frederica: "...Your return certainly came quickly."

Mutters Frederica, her sharp eyes open wide, as she welcomes Subaru at the mansion's gates.

Subaru: "Got into a situation where I kinda have to pull a here-and-back. It's been two... no, three days? I know it's an early reunion without any notice, but please accept me."

Replies Subaru, fatigued from a half-day of travel and mounted on a panting Patrasche's back. Frederica looks up at him, and seeing his rather poor condition, puts her hand to her mouth to conceal her fangs.

Frederica: "Regardless the time or the guest, a failure to provide impeccable hospitality would dishonour me as my Master's servant. I shall be returning your dragon to the stables, Subaru-sama, so please see yourself to the mansion. Petra will tend to you."

Subaru: "That much care's really not nee... oh, actually, please do that."

Says Subaru as he dismounts Patrasche, his knees almost buckling as he touches down on the ground. His grip on the reins keeps him from suffering any damages, but apparently his body's more tried out than he thought.

It's natural—He dashed from SANCTUARY to the Mansion without any rest or pit-stops, and his body had just pulled an all-nighter.

Even with Patrasche's WINDBREAKER BLESSING and quiet considerations not to burden her rider, the over-six-hours spent on the road has placed a large toll on Subaru's body.

Noticing his own exhaustion, Subaru nicely accepts Frederica's proposition. He hands Frederica the reins, stroking a concerned Patrasche's back.

Subaru: "It's okay, it's all okay. Gotta thank you for going along with my inclinations. When I visit the stables afterwards, I'll reward you with a brushing-down."

Ground dragons lack the rich hair of horses and so on, but they do like their rough hide getting a rub-down. Patrasche is no exception. Excited by his promise, she butts Subaru with her snout, him sustaining a nose donk and flinching back with a 'guh'.

Frederica: "My, how energetic she is. Now then, let's be off, Patrasche-chan. I would offer to re-lay her straw and prepare her bedding."

Subaru: "Yeah, please do that. —Right, Frederica."

Frederica: "Yes?"

Reins in hand, Frederica starts leading Patrasche to the stables. But Subaru stops her with his call, and she glances back. Subaru clicks his neck.

Subaru: "—Are you planning to go to the mountain cabin today?"

Frederica: "...? I am not. Would there be something the matter?"

Subaru asks with his voice low. Frederica replies mystified. Paying mind to her style of answer, expression, and gaze, Subaru shakes his head.

Subaru: "Nevermind,"

Subaru: "It's fine if you're not. And when you're done with Patrasche, I'm sorry but could you immediately come back to the mansion? There's some things I wanna talk about, including SANCTUARY."

Frederica: "Understood. I will return at once."

Frederica gives a polite curtsy, this time definitively leaving the scene with Patrasche. Subaru watches them exit the mansion's front garden until they're out of sight, then stretching and peering up at the mansion. —Extravagant as always, here was the Roswaal mansion on the night of the second day.

His most belated visit had been night of the sixth day, with an earlier return on the night of the fourth.

Both times, demise came bearing the guise of a knife.  
Before that—

Subaru: "Before the end can come, I have to find a way to put an end to the end."

The sacrifices he had made for that purpose this loop were too many.  
His acquisition of recompense for even these sadnessess abandoned to a disappearing world is a necessity.

For Garfiel's grief. For Emilia's unseen sorrow.  
Because Natsuki Subaru had been given the resolve to, while averting his eyes to pain, keep fighting.



Petra: "Woah! You certainly returned quick!"

Is Petra's first statement as she welcomes Subaru, her expression sparkling and loaded with sweetness.

Although her welcome shares the same content and word choice as Frederica's, Petra's comes with love and connection, making it a good and clearly understood example case.

Petra: "You seem weary, are you okay? I mean, are you well? I can prepare the bath at once, and if you'd like to soak before... what's wrong?"

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Subaru: "Nah, was just seriously thinking that looking at you's healing. Thinking back, you're the only one I can interact with this time without considering outsides or undersides or that tricky stuff or anything."

Jumbling her polite and casual speech, Petra bounds and bustles circles around Subaru. Subaru sticks his hand in her chestnut hair, patting her head. The way she hums and happily draws closer is truly adorable. Indeed, healing.

What simultaneously passes through Subaru's mind is the events at the mansion prior, and Petra's gruesome demise.

Subaru: "Petra, this's sudden, but... can I ask you for a favour?"

Petra: "...? Sure. I mean, yes. When it's your request, Subaru-sama, I'll answer to anything."

Subaru: "Tahaha, that anything's reassuring. Right. We're gonna have a bit of an important talk. Frederica'll be coming back real soon, so I wanna have the talk in the lounge. Can you make some tea for us?"

Petra: "Big Sis Frederica will be there as well?"

Subaru: "Yeah. This talk could determine how things go afterwards, and you're not uninvolved in it Petra, in fact you're very involved. I want you to be there."

Petra: "Not, uninvolved..."

Putting her hand to her mouth, Petra enters a thinking posture. Her head springs up as if remembering something, and with a slight blush across her cheeks,

Petra: "Then, this is an important talk for me and you, Subaru-sama?"

Subaru: "Hrnn, you could say that? It's definitely an important talk for you, and for me. Either way we can't finish it all up just between ourselves."

Petra: "But, for that, the feelings of those involved are very important."

Subaru: "Feelings? Their feelings? Feelings're... well, I guess important? It's true if it doesn't line up with their will they won't want to do it, that's definitely not mista... ken, am I?"

Subaru tilts his head at Petra and answers in a general positive. Her face beams as she does a spin on the spot, practically dancing as she runs to the mansion's centre.

Petra: "At once! I will return at once! Don't you run away!"

Subaru: "I'm not running anywhere, but Petra if you go too fast you'll trip."

Petra soars off, headed for the maid's rooms on the second floor, when Subaru remembers something and calls,

Subaru: “Petra!”

Subaru: “Petra, thanks for the handkerchief. It probably wasn't in a way you intended, but it really helped.”

Petra: “Really? Subaru, I helped you?”

Subaru: “Yup, saved my life... or well no, but something like that.”

The handkerchief becoming a weapon was irrefutably due to Echidna's designs, but the beginning of it all was Petra's feelings for him.

Thinking about it, it might be that so long as Echidna's will is in play, the handkerchief could still act as a weapon even now. If the trigger's identical to last time, it'd be Subaru's life being endangered, or perhaps filling it with mana by using magic. That said the latter possibility is far too difficult and impossible for Subaru.

Subaru: “Either way, it's thanks to you, Petra. Gotta show my gratitude for it somehow.”

Petra: “Then, a dayt! One dayt!”

Subaru: “Er, did you hear about those from Emilia?”

Subaru's reward for the witchbeast kerfluffle was his first date with Emilia, in Arlam village. The tactful villagers and village children left Subaru and Emilia to themselves, and it looks like Petra remembers the whole affair.

Subaru: “Got it. Allow me to escort you. Though that said me being your partner for your first date's a pretty big luxury and privilege, too.”

Petra: “It's a promise!”

Subaru: “Oui oui.”

Raising her hand cheerfully, Petra smiles like a flower in bloom as she heads for the hallway. Seeing her off, Subaru directs his thoughts to Petra's future. Even now her future is something to look forward to, with her lovable appearance. In five years—No in just three, when she grows taller, she will unmistakably mature into a beautiful young woman.

Subaru suspected that her yearnings for him would disappear by then, but that she chose Subaru as her partner for her first date would surely impart him a sinful sense of satisfaction. And so,

Subaru: “We'll definitely make that promise again, Petra.”

A promise shared in a vanishing world would not remain inside Petra.  
But Subaru would remember the promise's passing.

Once he had chosen the correct future, he would make that same promise again.  
Recollecting Petra's smile, and thinking such, Subaru enters the lounge.



Seated on the living room sofa with Petra sitting on another opposite him, Subaru smiles wryly as she puffs out her red face in dissatisfaction.

Kicking her feet as they hang down from the sofa, Petra hides not a scrap of her displeasure following their conversation. Subaru finds her childishness charming, but the attitude apparently does not appeal to the elder maid sitting beside her.

Frederica: “What would that face be, Petra. Do you not find that discourteous when in Subaru-sama's presence?”

Petra: “But, Big Sis Frederica...”

Frederica: “No buts. Your behaviour must be proper, even with those with which you have a close relationship. If you neglect to pay this mind in the everyday moments, how will you manage it during the essential junctures? You may be quick to learn, but in this respect you are as yet lacking.”

Petra: “Uuw...”

Petra bites her lip, looking down, and a little frustrated.

This girl, hit with some considerably sound logic, becomes quite the pitiful thing. Subaru goes to calm her down with a “Well but it's not so...”, which earns him a glare, him shutting up.

Frederica has returned from the stables and reunited with Petra, who readied some tea, and the three of them are having their drinks in the lounge, engaging in a vital conversation.

That conversation had started recently, with a subject that displeased Petra. The contents being,

Petra: “Why must I leave the mansion? And I've only been working here for a week and a bit...”

Entreats Petra, near crying. Guilt ravages Subaru. But considering the events that will occur in this mansion, succumbing to the guilt and spoiling Petra would be no good at all.

His heart an oni, Subaru shakes his head.

Subaru: “I'm not saying for you to get outta here forever. It isn't your dismissal, it's that I want you to go to Arlam village... or actually, go back to your house for a week or so.”

Frederica: “And you cannot discuss why, can you now?”

Subaru: “...Not the details. But it's true that there's danger pressing in on the mansion. Frederica, I told you about how the Witch Cult targeted this place recently, yeah?”

At the words Witch Cult, Frederica's expression shifts.

She hadn't been around for it, but the Betelgeux-led cultists' attack on the mansion was about two weeks ago now.

A Frederica raised in SANCTUARY would surely understand what rigamaroles heresies, including Emilia's lineage, would invite.

Just as Subaru planned, Frederica nods, her expression complicated.

Frederica: “Should this be true, then I believe even Subaru-sama's judgement as proper. You do not yet possess means to protect yourself, Petra.”

Petra: “I'll be fine! Subaru'll protect me!”

Subaru: “What I wanna do's be manly and say 'leave it to me!', but when it comes to my inadequacies or I guess lack of ability, or stuff in that vein, I'm too self-aware to just be saying that.”

Petra stands up as she refutes Frederica, but her efforts are interrupted by Subaru himself. Petra's shoulders slump in dejection as Frederica consolingly pats her head.

Frederica: “You mustn't be downcast, Petra. You are surely not so foolish as to fail to understand how it frustrates Subaru-sama to voice the insufficiency of his own abilities, yes?”

Petra: “...Yes, Big Sis Frederica.”

Frederica: “All are the same in lamenting their inadequacy. That remains true of Subaru-sama, and of yourself. Subaru-sama has recognized such, and has proceeded to search for what he may ably do. What is it that you will do, Petra?”

Petra: “Uuw...”

Petra forces down her frustrations, almost crying. Her teary eyes snap onto Subaru.

Petra: “Wh-what I may ably do... would not be, at the mansion?”

Subaru: “...Mn, I'm sorry. This time, Petra, there's nothing you can do at the mansion. My deficiency means I don't have the room to be vigilant for you as well. I'm sorry for that.”

Subaru bows his head. Petra closes her eyes firm, rubbing at her eyelids with her sleeve. No tears remain when she raises her head again. Only the redness around her eyes, as she politely grips the hem of her skirt and curtsies.

Petra: “I humbly comply, Subaru-sama. From this night onwards, I will partake in a period of retirement. I request I be called back instantly once the problem is safely resolved.”

Subaru: “Right, I will be doing that. When the problem's all resolved...”

If the people of the mansion, and if possible the SANCTUARY bigwigs, can all be smiling then—perfect.

Petra accepts Subaru's proposition, getting this talk through the first stage.

—Petra, tasked with cleaning up the emptied teacups and organizing everyone's stuff, leaves the living room. Frederica and Subaru are thus left behind to occupy the room.

Watching her go as the door clicks shut, hearing her footfalls down the hall grow distant, Subaru

reaches for a tea-accompaniment pastry, savouring the sweetness on his tongue.

Subaru: “Am I fine to ask, Frederica?”

Frederica: “That would depend upon the subject in question, Subaru-sama.”

Subaru smiles wryly at the rather deserved reply. Frederica waits, her expression composed, for Subaru to get things started.

He takes a deep breath as he puzzles over what to say first. But, if there were anything Subaru wanted to ask Frederica face-to-face, it would be,

Subaru: “What do you think Garfiel wants to do with SANCTUARY?”

Frederica: “—Has something occurred between yourself and my foolish younger brother?”

Subaru: “We’ve had lots of chances to bash into each other. What I wanna figure out's whether those bashings'll result in something we absolutely can't come to mutual understanding about, or if they're something where you'll understand it if you talk about it.”

Subaru's actions from hereon would shift direction depending on which it was.  
Was Garfiel an enemy to defeat, or a friend whose allegiance would be valuable?

Frederica: “Your lack of surprise would mean that my brother has told you of the relationship between he and I.”

Subaru: “Lewes-san didn't deny it either. You know Lewes-san, yeah?”

Frederica: “Of course I would. She is the parent who raised myself and my brother, us lacking relatives, in SANCTUARY... although with consideration to her years, she should more likely be called a grandmother than a mother.”

Subaru: “You got Garfiel fucking calling her granny the granny the granny, too.”

Subaru can't get that grieving scream of NANNA out of his head.  
That might have been what Garfiel used to call Lewes. Presently he acted bad and used a rude form of address, but were that Nanna sincere, then,

Subaru: “Is Garfiel just maybe a bit of a nan's boy?”

Frederica: “If you would mean in his stance towards grandmother... then indeed, he is. Being that my brother in fact possesses a deeply emotional disposition, I believe his affection for grandmother to be quite intense. He may be attempting to hide it, however.”

Again, from his sister's perspective, Garfiel's familial love for Lewes seems to stick out.  
Subaru can't tell how some messup somewhere in that connects to him protecting SANCTUARY, and then results in his acts of barbarity.

Subaru: “His behaviour pattern is a different story from the question of whether or not I forgive



that.”

Frederica: “Subaru-sama?”

Subaru: “It's nothing. Just some remembered hostility boiling up. Though the mindset I need to have is one of making my decisions on everything without having any preconceptions.”

Subaru still didn't understand the fundamental question of what Garfiel was thinking in dragging the villagers into the slaughter.

That said, it's certain that he possessed the command right for Lewes Meyer, and was the one taking care of the facility.

Why would he destroy the facility? Or, why did he even have the command right? There were so many things Subaru didn't understand, but—

Subaru: “Frederica. I know that you used to live in SANCTUARY. And I know that, you being a quarter-blood, you can leave the place without triggering the barrier.”

Frederica: “To already know this much...”

Subaru: “And that Garfiel shares your position, and can actually go outside, but stayed in. Y'know, Frederica. You... do you know for what goal SANCTUARY was made?”

Only four days have passed on this timeline since Subaru set off for SANCTUARY. His rather impossible information load surprises Frederica, but it's his last question that makes her eyes widen further.

Frederica: “No, I would not be aware of the particulars. Although, I do comprehend that SANCTUARY was created for the purposes of the former Witch of GREED's experiments...”

Subaru: “You don't know? Really? Not changing that answer?”

Frederica: “I would not know what it is you are finding dubious, but I shall not be altering my answer. SANCTUARY is the testing site of a witch, of which now only the witch-placed barrier remains, which will not come undone absent the surmounting of the TRIAL. That is the entirety of what I know.”

Frederica ends her piece with a slow shake of the head. There's no way to divine her statement's veracity, but Subaru at least doesn't perceive her as having lied.

Meaning, Frederica doesn't know about the truth of the immortality experiment. That also implied a scant understanding of the creations produced from the experiment.

Subaru: “Hold on. Then, Frederica... you don't know anything about the command right for the duplicates?”

Frederica: “Dyuplicates... is it? No, I have never heard of such a thing.”

Her denial carries the same nuance that everything has.

Subaru is speechless at her reply. Devoid of strength, he leans his weight back against the sofa.

Frederica: “I offer my deepest apologies. It appears I have provided an answer contrary to what was expected.”

Subaru: “No, it's fine. You're not in the wrong on anything here. ...How long ago was it you left SANCTUARY? Have I asked that before?”

Frederica: “My departure from SANCTUARY and gracious entrance into the mansion would have now been seven years prior. Ram's arrival soon followed, which would make me the longest serving.”

Subaru sighs at Frederica's lack of mentioning Rem, and at the lack of change in Frederica's information load re: SANCTUARY since last loop.

This makes Frederica's probabilities of meaningfully hiding information from Subaru practically zero. Stepping into the same subject from a different perspective, and receiving an identical answer as before, indicated that truth.

Frederica didn't know about the immortality experiment, and most likely not about the Lewes doubles. Either the Leweses played their daily swap-outs considerably well, or young Frederica had some deficiencies to her.

Subaru: “But then with that, what I don't get's Garfiel. For just how fucking long's he known the truth of SANCTUARY?”

Possessing the duplicates' command right meant Garfiel knew about the facility. Even without that, the one to destroy the facility was most likely him.

Garfiel knew the experiment which used Lewes Meyer. Him knowing a truth that his sister didn't then meant it something after Frederica left SANCTUARY. Otherwise it was precisely because Garfiel knew it that he stayed behind in SANCTUARY.

Subaru: “—Ah,”

Mulling this over, Subaru notices that he's overlooked something very important. So much so that the moment he notices it, his idiocy truly astonishes him.

Subaru: “Him having the duplicates' command right mean he's cleared the same condition as me. Meaning basically he's got the something or other status of being an apostle of greed, and so...”

That surely made proof that Garfiel had met the WITCH OF GREED Echidna before.

*Why didn't I notice it*, stresses Subaru. If Garfiel's met Echidna before, then that explained his ownership of the command right. As well as his somewhat narrow views toward the TRIAL, and his sympathy for an Emilia broken from challenging the TRIAL.

Subaru: “Frederica. —Garfiel's challenged the TRIAL before, yeah?”

Frederica: “—! Why do you—”

Subaru: “After putting together some conditions and thinking about it, that's what it all connected to. Of course, I think he failed, but... how'd it all go, in detail?”

Subaru pumps his fist, having grasped a piece of the truth. Frederica sighs as she closes her eyes, trawling back through the past.

Frederica: "...I would not be the only one who desired for SANCTUARY's release. My brother, too, had a time wherein he was eager to show grandmother and the others the outside world. My yet-young brother crept into the tomb, and challenged the TRIAL. I do remember envying that rashness."

Subaru: "You've never gone in?"

Frederica: "I lacked the courage to. I knew that I could free SANCTUARY if I overcame the TRIAL conducted inside, but I lacked. I had always been told not to enter the place. I envied my brother, capable of leaping straight in."

Subaru can definitely imagine it.

Make his current reckless personality even more intense, and young Garfiel likely challenged the tomb's TRIAL with full enthusiasm. Wholehearted and entirely honest with his desire to show his beloved family the outside.

However,

Frederica: "He was not coming out of the tomb, and I regretted my neglect to stop him, then calling for grandmother... grandmother also did hesitate, but she firmed her resolve at once and entered. Some time passed, and she returned to me as I prayed, my brother in her company. However,"

—Never enter the tomb again. Forget about today, and never speak of it to anyone.

Was what Lewes apparently told Frederica.

Following this conversation, Subaru recollects on the contradictions in Lewes' former statements. Lewes stating she had entered the tomb before, and Lewes asserting she had never entered.

Subaru knew there were several Leweses, and that they were bound not to lie, which he can now comprehend. The presence of a Lewes who had experienced it and a Lewes who had not now cleared up the contradiction.

So what Subaru's learned from this talk is,

Subaru: "Garfiel's taken the TRIAL once. And there he should've met the Witch of GREED. And then finally, things're lining up."

The emotions Garfiel harboured toward the TRIAL. Why he possessed the command right.

The questions are, what did he see in past? Why did he reject a Subaru attempting to free SANCTUARY? And why had Echidna never mentioned anything about Garfiel to Subaru? All of the answers laid inside the tomb.

Subaru: "I absolutely need to see Echidna at least one more time."

To excavate everything hidden, from the witch who knew everything.

Frederica silently looks up at Subaru, firm in his quiet resolve. Noticing her gaze, Subaru scratches his cheek.

Subaru: “Sorry,”

Subaru: “For everything. I think I asked things you didn't want asking.”

Frederica: “No, it was essential that you did so. I have further been ordered by the Master. If our talk will aid in Emilia-sama's... and additionally SANCTUARY's freedom, I would find not any issue in it.”

Subaru: “I am freeing SANCTUARY. There's a reason I have to, so I'll use any means I can, and free it. But, how much I can let Garfiel's wishes manifest there's, honestly, secondary.”

Frederica goes quiet.

Subaru: “I don't have the slightest clue what Garfiel's thinking. If worst case, no matter what he thinks he aligns against my intended actions, I'll force my ideas though even if it means crushing him. I'm choosing the highest number of happinesses. Sorry though.”

The Mansion and SANCTUARY, both facing oncoming calamity. If Garfiel's going to hinder a Subaru acting to avoid those disasters, he best prepare to be sent flying. Subaru's reply prompts Frederica to blink, firm, once.

Frederica: “I bid you may care well for my foolish younger brother.”

—She says, head bowed.

## CHAPTER 60: TALE OF THE END OF THE END

His talk with Frederica now over, Subaru stands in a hallway of the mansion's main wing on the floor where Roswaal's office is.

The heaviness in his head perhaps results from his compounded fatigue, otherwise perhaps from his cluelessness as to how to deal with the oncoming tribulation.

Subaru: "And it's gonna be me going improv again..."

Scratching his neck, Subaru's face sours as he considers the sparseness of his playable cards.

He possesses far more information than he did last loop. But a quick glance over that information doesn't tell him whether it directly connects to the oncoming problem.

He has to put together the pieces, fumbling with the assembled image as his guide, without ever seeing the puzzle. The blind unease swathes Subaru's heart.

Frederica: "Subaru-sama, what shall you now do?"

Asks Frederica quietly from beside a standing-still Subaru. Frederica came to accompany Subaru after their conversation in the lounge ended. He gives a vague nod.

Subaru: "Right,"

Subaru: "Frederica, you haven't seen Beatrice even once since you came back... yeah?"

Frederica: "Indeed not. I have made her presence on only a very few instances, originally considered, however on this occasion it is not even a single time I have found her. I am truly shamed."

Subaru: "Well, this time she's probably going over the top with some full-throttle hide-and-seek. Nothing doing that you can't find her."

If you're going to find a Beatrice who has truly, earnestly disappeared beyond GATE CROSSING, the only option is brute force every door which could connect to the Archive. It would be one thing if a sweep through just the mansions doors would finish the chore, but considering that Subaru has been kicked out to Arlam Village and SANCTUARY once before,

Subaru: "Range's too big and it's slightly extremely impossible. Pretty mean, but this's the kind of puzzle where you'll absolutely never find the right answer."

Frederica: "And so, what shall you do now? You would have something to discuss with Beatrice-sama."

Subaru: "If she's seriously hiding, nobody'll find the right door. That's fact."

Frederica furrows her brows at Subaru's repetition. Subaru clicks his neck, raising a finger,

Subaru: "Here's the important part. If she's seriously hiding, no one's gonna find her. But if she's not seriously hiding, it's another story."

Frederica: “Not hiding seriously?”

Subaru: “Nobody playing hide-and-seek doesn't wanna be found. Everyone plays hide-and-seek hiding, while wanting someone to eventually find them.” And so the thought that their wanted finder the It might be there's really the tricky something something people's hearts.

Says Subaru, taking a few steps and a sharp pivot to the left. His 90-degree turn halts him beside Roswaal's office—at his document room. The room is small and cramped with paperwork, this being the one Otto edged on crazy sorting.

Subaru puts his hand to the door. Through the doorknob, he feels the reaction of CORRECT.

Subaru: “Mysteriously, the moment I open... no, the instant I think to open a door, I can tell whether it's the correct one. Right now, I'm thinking I mighta just got it.”

Frederica: “Subaru-sama...”

Subaru: “And so, the unveiling.”

Frederica's concerned voice at his back, Subaru swings the door open. He feels space warping beyond the record-room door—and the scent particular only to old, well-aged books wafts out from the room.

This was the thick aroma of ink and paper that no droll, to-be-disposed paperwork could ever achieve.

Subaru: “I'll be trying to be back before long, but if it looks it's getting too dark then please don't forget to sent Petra off to the village.”

His hand still on the doorknob, Subaru addresses a surprised Frederica. She blinks several times, grips the hem of her skirt, curtsies,

Frederica: “For your return shall I await. Graciously I wish you well.”

Subaru: “Nice. Might even mistake myself for someone with rank.”

With Frederica's maidly sendoff, Subaru passes through the doorway to enter the room. Clicking the door shut with his back, he senses the sound of an impossible breeze alongside the twisting of space. The connection to the outside vanishes, the Archive again isolated.

???: “You finally came, I suppose.”

Says a voice, welcoming Subaru in a completely unwelcoming tone. Subaru doesn't resist as his facial muscles naturally pull into a wry smile. He raises his hand.

Subaru: “Hey, Beako. Haven't seen you in ages, but you're still tiny as ever.”

Beatrice: “Your blither is annoying enough that a lifetime without it would still be plenty of it, in fact. It's hopeless... truly.”

Beatrice sits on the wooden stepladder, holding a black-bound book to her chest. *She's always sitting there*, thinks Subaru. The Forbidden Archive does have desks and chairs. And yet she's still always in that spot. An acid stings strangely at his heart, him gritting his teeth.

Beatrice: “That torpid face of yours is becoming even more unpresentable, I suppose. Your hurts and confusions are your liberty, but your expressing them around Betty is unpleasant so stop it this instant, in fact.”

Subaru: “Bossy. Sorry, but I've got no reason to follow through with your request. Have to confirm whether the relationship between us is really sound enough for me doing that to be sound.”

Subaru implicitly communicates that he knows of Beatrice's circumstances, which he learned last loop. A sharpness rises on Beatrice's nonplussed expression.

Beatrice: “So that's what it is, I suppose,”

She mutters to herself.

Beatrice: “Fine, in fact. It seems safe to believe we both have our cards to play in-hand now, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Pretty questionable whether my hand's gonna be anything effective, though. You better bet I'll be filling things in with my imagination while we have our talk.”

Beatrice: “Do what you will, in fact. Since either way...”

Beatrice's stiff expression suddenly unravels. Her stubborn look peels away, and peeking out from underneath is a calm smile and a fleeting flicker in her eyes—unwittingly, Subaru's throat jams silent.

Beatrice: “The term of this long, long, long contract is ending. —In making end the end of the end, Betty will for certain this time be freed from stagnation, I suppose.”

She says, a touch lonesome.



Subaru: “Make end the end of the end... right. That's sure pretty poetic.”

Faced with a Beatrice already fully prepared, Subaru shrugs as he pulls the conversation onto a more favourable track. He glances at the black book she holds—should Roswaal's words be correct, that would be one of the only two PERFECTED GOSPELS in the world.

Disseminating information about the future and possessing a prophetic bent, Subaru also sensed they held an instructive kind of 'THIS IS HOW THE FUTURE SHOULD BE' nuance.

Witch Cultist Betelgeux acted in line with the writ of his imperfect gospel, with an eagerness

suggesting that exact conduct carried a significance.<sup>1</sup> That said, since the incomplete gospel lacked any writ of the future's conclusion, the madman was slain at Subaru's hands.

Subaru: "Is you having that know-it-all expression also thanks to that book?"

Beatrice: "...It's *you* who should be speaking. How much do you know about this book, I suppose?"

Subaru: "Roswaal blabbered some stuff for me. I'm pretty sure I get the synopsis. It's got similar properties to the Witch Cult gospels, an improved version. There're only two left in the world, which're split between you and Roswaal."

Beatrice: "Roswaal is a loose-lipped man, in fact. With that goal, I can imagine him prattling merrily on about it, I suppose."

Spits Beatrice. Subaru furrows his brows.

Beatrice's opinion of Roswaal has always been pretty ruthless. But until now, there's been a very familiar kind of relaxedness to it. Subaru senses not a speck of it in that statement.

Beatrice, just now, spoke while absolutely harbouring disgust for Roswaal.

Subaru: "I don't really get your relationship with Roswaal. Even though you've got the only damn two of these books split between you, and blood and contractual ties binding you to where he's letting you live in his house."

Beatrice: "State what you're trying to say clearly, in fact."

Subaru: "Here I go stating it clearly then, your position here is ridiculously unclear."

Beatrice narrows her eyes. The pressure she exerts, imbalanced with her lovable looks, feels almost to Subaru like a tangible wind.

By cutting into the main topic, the atmosphere Beatrice dons changes radically.

Subaru: "I pretty much understand Roswaal's position now. His family's contracted to the Witch of GREED, and they've always been inheriting that. Him managing SANCTUARY also comes from that,

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<sup>1</sup> Taking a moment for a prolonged TL note.

I'm pulling a retcon right here on Betelgeuse's name, so any Betelgeuses you've seen throughout these summaries were in fact Betelgeux. This is happening because I have goldfish memory and lapsed completely about an Arc 5 Thing, then kept stubborn about it until I finally reread the Thing, or otherwise for Reasons.

The Witch Cult Arch/Bishop/Cardinal of Sloth Mr. Romanee-Conti has his name written as ペテルギウス (Peterugiusu, more pronouncably Petelgeuse) in Japanese, which I very vaguely understand as a present but irregular (or perhaps old? Behold my in-depth and trustworthy research parts [1](#) and [2](#)) alternate (mis-)spelling for Betelgeuse as in the name of that star in Orion. This bit me in the ass since that irregularity wound up mattering (In retrospect well duh?). So more accurately, the Betelgeux should be Petelgeuse. HOWEVER.

I cannot describe how little I can stand the sound produced by the arrangement of the letters 'Petelgeuse'. And then I was five seconds away from cementing an unwanted Tim Burton reference in this pass, when I happened upon some guy named Sir Patrick Moore. He wrote a shitton of books on astronomy, apparently had some prestige for it, and happily repeatedly used the term Betelgeux in an [irregular but apparently present](#) alternate English (mis-)spelling of the name of that star in Orion. Thank you Sir Patrick Moore for saving me from Tim Burton. Anyway so Betelgeux. This decision is entirely my caprice in character name mangling. Please let me get away with it.



though it's still unclear why he's trying to make Emilia win the Royal Selection.”

Beatrice goes silent.

Subaru: “But I can't see how you come into it at all. Roswaal's contracted to the Witch of GREED. Call him an apostle of GREED.”

From how Roswaal's insistently been calling her Echidna rather than the Witch of GREED, Subaru can more or less sense that he harbours an inordinate attachment to Echidna. Albeit an unaccomplished one, he might share with Subaru the same standing as an apostle of GREED. Although being that Echidna just went off and made Subaru an apostle, it's conceivable that Roswaal inherited the status in a similar way in a hereditary fashion.

Subaru: “The gospels... the Witch Cult ones. I can't tell if they have the same roots as the perfected editions you and Roswaal have. My imagination says their makers were probably different. So, I've got no clue who made the cult gospels, but I can imagine someone for the perfected two.”

Beatrice: “...Who, I suppose?”

Subaru: “—It's Echidna.”

Subaru sees Beatrice's breath catch the instant he says that name. He also sees that for Beatrice, that name is assuredly not a small thing.

Inside Echidna's dream castle, Subaru had witnessed the effectively omniscient BOOK OF WISDOM, an artefact in Echidna's possession.

The Book of Wisdom's properties differed from the gospels', but its bindings and status as a grimoire transcending human comprehension did cohere. Then tie together the possessor of that artefact and all the people related to her in SANCTUARY, and the answer practically presents itself.

Subaru: “The gospels you and Roswaal own were made by Echidna. Roswaal's was probably inherited down the Mathers family line. So, how did you get ahold of your gospel?”

Beatrice says nothing.

Subaru: “Now, I have a question. About your Gate Crossing.”

Raising his finger, Subaru kills off his previous momentum as he switches to a different topic. Beatrice blinks at Subaru's conversational technique, bracing herself for what he's going to say. And Subaru asks.

Subaru: “—The area of effect on your Gate Crossing. What's the range like for choosing applicable targets?”

Beatrice: “...I don't know what would happen should you hear the response, in fact.”

Subaru: “I hear the response and say it's in line with my imaginings, then it'll be affirming my guess.”

Beatrice crosses her arms. Subaru puffs out his chest.  
Her lips quirk as she hesitates, closing her eyes in resignation.

Beatrice: “Betty's Gate Crossing connects its space to the interior of a single building. Otherwise to the place most recently known to me. It can't connect over especially large distances, I suppose.”

Subaru: “There aren't any other conditions to it?”

Beatrice: “Do you think Betty has any reason to so nicely tell you, I suppose?”

Subaru: “Well then I'll guess. —Even if it's long range, if you have a deep tie to the place, Gate Crossing can connect to it. How'd I do?”

Swallowing her breath, eyes wide open, Beatrice falls silent.  
The reaction supports Subaru's conceptions.

Subaru: “If your concentration's thrown off, but you still activate Gate Crossing, what method dictates where it connects to?”

Beatrice: “...op,”

Subaru: “Done on the instant, everyone pulls out the actions, the words most familiar to them. When it's something like Gate Crossing, wouldn't be strange for it to be somewhere you'd have a strong emotional attachment to.”

Beatrice: “...on't I suppose.”

Subaru: “You, who received a gospel made by Echidna, through Gate Crossing connect the Archive to this place in SANCTUARY. —Meaning,”

Beatrice: “—I want you to stop already, in fact!”

The stepladder sways as Beatrice stands up, looking at Subaru with her expression pleading. She bites her lip, eyes watering.

Subaru believes firmly that, just then, he jammed his dirty hands into a subject she didn't want touched.

A wretched pang running through his heart, Subaru shakes his head.

Subaru: “No,”

Subaru: “I won't stop. I know Gate Crossing connects this place to a somewhere in SANCTUARY. And as to why that is, your frantic denials have just answered.”

Beatrice says nothing.

Subaru: “Beatrice. You're related to SANCTUARY as well, right? What's your relationship with Echidna?”

Knowing that he's intruding on her heart, Subaru stifles his hesitation, and crushes Beatrice with his questions.

Gate Crossing had flung Subaru into the facility for SANCTUARY's immortality experiment. That a space opened in split-second conditions connected there suggested that the place held strong emotional significance to Beatrice.

The spirit girl remembered vividly the facility for producing Lewes Meyer doubles. And then considering the fact that Echidna had given her a gospel—

Subaru: “Beatrice... You are a spirit in contract with who?”

Beatrice: “—!”

Subaru: “I've heard about it from Puck before. About the principles of spirit contracts. Abridging the details here, but the point is equal conditions are made between the spirit and contractor. You've said that you're bound by contract to protect the Forbidden Archive. Who are you contracted to?”

Beatrice: “...a,”

Subaru: “I've just been thinking this whole time that it was a contract with Roswaal. You're in this mansion and managing the archive inside, so it's a pretty reasonable thought, but... right now, I'm really wondering.”

A weak sigh spills from Beatrice's trembling lips.

Her small form grows ever smaller as she embraces harder the gospel, arms seeking something to rely on. Like she's bearing something unbearable, her attitude rather quite fickle.

Even with his eyes on this, despite having his eyes on this, Subaru says it.

Subaru: “—Are you a spirit in contract with Echidna?”

—That was the beginning of the end of the end.



The instant he asks the question, Beatrice collapses like a puppet with strings cut.

Subaru: “Bea—!?”

She falls to her knees on the floor. Thunk. Paper flitting, and the insides of Beatrice's dropped gospel scatter loose.

Seems that the constant walking with it, opening and closing it, stroking it, and repeating this whole process has long pushed the book past its endurable limit. The impact of the fall separates the binding from the pages, a white paper carpet spread across the floor.

Subaru: “The gospel's... huh?”

Subaru sees several pages fly to his feet, him unwittingly squatting down and picking them up. What flits through his mind is Betelgeux's gospel. Minute writings crammed its pages full, and Subaru almost felt that the owner's madness had infected the text with how the letters squirmed. Subaru had expected the same of the page he retrieved, but—seeing the paper before him blasts that image away. After all,

Subaru: “Wha... huh? Blank...?”

On neither the front nor back of the page is there anything written. Subaru hurriedly picks up another paper sheet and looks, but again is nothing written. He wonders if perhaps, by coincidence, they were pages from the yet-blank latter half of the book, but,

Subaru: “No, that ridiculous...”

Still squatting, Subaru looks over to those scattered around Beatrice, and he notices. That absolutely every single page around her is devoid of even a single word. What really were the possibilities that over one hundred pages had all had flipped over to their blank undersides?

Subaru: “It's a gospel... but, nothing's written?”

Rather than believing a miracle that all pages were showing their blank side, it was more logical to conclude that pure stark whiteness consumed every writing-deficient page. According with that logical thought hits upon an illogical truth.

Subaru: “Why aren't the two perfects telling the future? Is it a gimmick where only the owner can read them? Betelgeux's wasn't a reliable reference?”

Talking about perfects and imperfects, the gospel Subaru's referencing off is imperfect. Its writings were visible to others than its owner, with Subaru currently keeping the thing. Fortunately, following Betelgeux's death its text has had so far no additions. So Subaru had fully been thinking that regardless who the owner was, anyone could see the contents of a gospel.

Beatrice: “It's been... so long, in fact.”

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Beatrice: “Since that gospel stopped indicating Betty any future, already, years...”

Still on the floor, head lowered, Beatrice's speech falters. *What do you mean*, is the question Subaru manages to keep himself from asking as he instead waits for Beatrice to speak. Beatrice's hands press down on the scattered pagers, scrunches them, ruins them. Her fingers shake, her voice in tears.

Beatrice: “The role given to Betty was to maintain the archive of knowledge. To keep guarding this

place until the eventual reunion... I suppose.”

Subaru: “Archive of knowledge... you mean, this place?”

Standing up, Subaru passes his gaze over the hordes of bookshelves filling the room. These books of the archive, of which even Subaru had reached for several presented to him, had by Subaru's assumption always been belongings of the Mathers family. But,

Subaru: “Are all of these books Echidna's?”

Beatrice: “She was someone... who liked gathering knowledge, in fact.”

Subaru: “When it's escalated and she's introducing herself as a witch, I'm sure you're right.”

She's introducing herself as thirst for knowledge incarnate. With her extravagant attitude of wanting to know everything in the world, yes indeed Subaru thought her greedy. This great mass of books nested in their bookshelves ought to be called the fruits of Echidna's knowledge gathering. Beatrice was the librarian entrusted with Echidna's stockhold of knowledge.

Beatrice: “By your wording... it seems you've entered the tomb, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I have. Had terrible experiences, and painful times, but... I'm glad I entered. Echidna's kinda a double-edged sword as a counsellor though.”

She's precious as someone to be upfront with RETURN BY DEATH about, but capitalizing on that would prompt the summoning of the Witch of ENVY. That's a pattern where his death becomes essential, and he sincerely would like to avoid it. But if necessary, he'll repeat it.

Subaru: “...So you kinda said the gospel hasn't been telling you the future for years.”

Beatrice: “It's the truth, in fact.”

Subaru: “I'm not doubting you. Or no, yeah I am. I mean, right? If I don't, then you... and when there's nothing in the gospel.”

—Then, it meant on multiple occasions, she had saved Subaru.

Separation came between Subaru and Beatrice in the loop before last. That was where Subaru first learned about the gospel Beatrice owned, giving Subaru definitely more than a little shock.

Subaru had been made to think that Beatrice's actions, thoughts, everything, had been resultant from the gospel's writ, without any purchase for Beatrice's own ideas or feelings to be in it. Consequently, even when faced with this distressed girl, Subaru clearly perceives his sincere relief.

Subaru feels comfort in knowing that Beatrice's actions had reflected her own mind. He doesn't know why it relieves him so.

Even without knowing the fundamental reason, this is what Subaru thinks:

*I want Beatrice to be friendly to me, even without reason for it.* He doesn't know what is that makes

think like this about Beatrice.

Subaru: “You... why did you help me? It wasn't written in the gospel, yeah? You said you washed your hands of me.”

Subaru knows it's an indirect, disgusting way to say it.

He understand what it is he wants as he leaves the answer to Beatrice. Understands, but his cowardice in choosing this phrasing is loathsome.

What Subaru truly wanted to ask Beatrice was simply,

—Are you on my side?

Beatrice: “That Betty... with you... gave you... assistance, was...”

Subaru: “Yeah. You've helped me lots of times. There was that time with the ulgarm's curses, and healing me when I was dying. And then telling me, who should've died from the curse, the truth.”

Beatrice has further saved Subaru on more occasions than that.

Through the loops at the mansion and killed by Rem, the only saving graces for a Subaru incapable of trusting anyone there were Beatrice and Emilia.

Subaru doesn't forget Beatrice's protecting him then. No longer remaining in this world, present only inside Subaru, was this certain and unforgettable bond.

So,

Subaru: “With no relation to the gospel, you...”

Beatrice: “—at the end I was told, in fact.”

Would Beatrice not cast away every single question, and ally with Subaru?

Someone he could entrust all his faith in—Having lost Rem, and unable to show his weakness to Emilia, perhaps that someone for Subaru would be Beatrice.

In a sense, his wish is excessively selfish.

And,

Beatrice: “That one day, THEY would visit Betty's archive. For me to guard the archive until then.”

Subaru: “...They?”

Beatrice: “I was told, I suppose. That until THEY come, Betty's role is to guard this Forbidden Archive assigned to her. Betty can't tell whether you are THEY or not, in fact.”

A zeal in his eyes as he first looks at Beatrice, her gloomy speech prompts Subaru to lose that fire.

He furrows his brows at the turbulent portents.

Subaru did not know what Beatrice was trying to talk about. Didn't know. He did not know—but he felt he must not let her say what came next.

Beatrice: “Betty can't tell. Whether you are THEY or not. ...But.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Subaru: “Wait, Beatrice. You're getting a little way too hasty. Now just calm down...”

Beatrice: “Whether you are THEY, or are not THEY... it doesn't matter, I suppose.”

Beatrice raises her head.

Her hair sways with the motion—puttering, lost, reflecting her heart, reflecting Subaru's heart.  
A bad premonition clenches him tight in the chest. Unable to clear the feeling away,

Beatrice: “You might not be THEY, but I already don't care any more, in fact. And so.”

Subaru: “Bea—”

Beatrice: “I want you to kill Betty, and make end this contract, I suppose. I want you to make end the end of the end, and give Betty relief, in fact.”

Her eyes watering, a weak smile arises on Beatrice's face.

Beatrice: “You, be THEY.”

## CHAPTER 61: SCREAM FROM FOUR HUNDRED YEARS PAST

Her melancholy eyes grab Subaru, not letting go.  
A desire to laugh away Beatrice's statements surges up in Subaru's chest.

—Um, what did you just say?

He just had to take those inexplicable words he heard, and throw them back at Beatrice.  
He just had to twist his mouth into a smile, and joke around with her like usual.  
All it was was things were going just a little—yes, just a little undesirable.  
After all, if it weren't that,

Subaru: “—”

Then he wouldn't be able to counter the desperate girl's JOKE.

Subaru: “What, did... you just say?”

A moment of hesitation, a brief gap of time, and Subaru gives his prepared line.  
He just had to smile and give a shrug, and it'd be perfect.  
However,

Subaru: “...a,”

Subaru's cheeks stiffen, not even his merely shoulders, but his fingertips also too rigid to move.  
It was almost as if the Natsuki Subaru reflected in Beatrice's eyes were fixed in place, stuck in exactly the position she saw him.

Beatrice: “As you wish, I'll say it again, I suppose.”

Subaru: “W-wait...”

Beatrice: “—Betty wants, by your hands, to be made ended, in fact.”

Subaru: “Stop!!”

Raising his voice, Subaru yells over Beatrice's speech.  
It's a complete reversal of their previous positions and by some metric, a funny exchange.

Ploughing forward with his theory, Subaru had made a Beatrice who rejected what she not wished to hear shriek.

And so, if Beatrice does the same then Subaru has no right to criticise her. No right, and he knows it, but,

Subaru: “What the fuck do you think you're saying right now...”

Beatrice: “Do *you* comprehend what *you're* being told right now, I suppose?”



Subaru: “What?”

Beatrice: “I am attempting to make you the finish of I, the Spirit Beatrice, in fact. I'm letting you be THEY, end of this over four-hundred-years gone contract, I suppose.”

*You best think it a privilege, in fact,* says Beatrice's unfitting and cynical smile.  
The smile of a chagrined girl—seeing it, gnarled fingers gouge their claws into Subaru's chest.  
Unbearable, Subaru puts his hand to his heart.

Subaru: “I don't understand... You really saying you wanna die?”

Beatrice: “Want to die, is strictly speaking incorrect, I suppose. Betty wants to have the contract be made ended. I just want to be freed, forever my binding, from this eternal contract, in fact.”

Subaru: “If that's done by taking your life, then how the fuck is that any different from wanting to die!!”

Roars Subaru, throat trembling, stomping his foot.  
His heel grinds down on the scattered gospel pages underfoot, but that isn't something to care about.  
Jabbing his finger out at her, Subaru glares at Beatrice.

Subaru: “Don't say this fucked, stupid shit about wanting to die! Wanting to die's... no matter who else you're saying it to, when it's around... saying that around me, to me isn't something I'll forgive!”

Someone dies, and their life isn't coming back.  
Only Natsuki Subaru can do-over after dying. So only Subaru, noting the benefit in forsaking his life to challenge again, can present an agreeable reasoning for suicide.  
But not Beatrice. Not anybody else.

They lose their lives, and they won't get them back.  
Knowing that, and still saying it in Subaru's presence, was,

Subaru: “The hell do you want ended! Don't just say this crap! Acting for an end... acting entirely to just goddamn die—no matter who else allows it, do you really think I will?!”

Beatrice: “Certainly a selfish complaint, I suppose. —What would *you* know about Betty, in fact?”

Beatrice's response is cold, hard, as she brushes at her skirt and stands. Her fingers fiddle with the tip of her pigtail.

Beatrice: “It's been four hundred years since Betty became caretaker of the Forbidden Archive, guard of knowledge. Four hundred years... that is how long Betty has simply obeyed the contract, and waited, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Four, hundred years...”

*That phrase again,* thinks Subaru as he scrunches his face, wanting to click his tongue.  
Four hundred years. The age most plagued by the witch menace, of which every long-lived relation

of Subaru's had some connection to, an inauspicious age  
Beatrice too had been born in this age, and lived on to this day.

Beatrice: "I contracted with the witch, came into the similarly-posed Mathers family's care, and in the beginning followed the gospel's writ—simply, silently waiting through the days for the time to come, in fact."

Subaru goes silent.

Beatrice: "But, while I was waiting, time in the outside world ticked on, I suppose. He who had been in the same position as Betty, the Mathers family head, passed away of old age as the generations proceeded down, in fact. Though aware of the shifting of the heads, Betty's time still remained unchanged and passing, I suppose."

And how painful a time was this for Beatrice?

Her dispassionate tone almost reflects the abrasion that the uncaring flow of time has been inflicting on her heart, giving even the listener, Subaru, chills.

Beatrice: "That promised day and its eventual coming—Betty knew not at all when it would arrive or who the visiting *THEY* would be, all through those days, in fact."

*But still*, says the shake of Beatrice's head,

Beatrice: "I wasn't worried, I suppose. After all, in Betty's hands was a gospel. I just had to believe in the prophetic book, waiting ably for its white pages to report about that coming day. If I could wait, then that time would assuredly come... is what I had persistently believed, in fact."

Subaru: "But..."

Looking down at the pages twisted beneath his heel, Subaru comprehends the cruelty of their endless whiteness. Sensing the meaning of Subaru's gaze, Beatrice nods.  
The gospel, the supposed hope for her, had—

Beatrice: "Every day, times upon times, I wondered whether the writ had changed... and it was suffering to check."

Subaru says nothing.

Beatrice: "I've dreamed so many times of new letters appearing on the page after the last writ, I suppose. I've imagined so many, many times the day the unknown *THEY* comes to visit Betty, and I can fulfil the role given to me, in fact."

Subaru: "...Beatrice."

Beatrice: "The Mathers family isn't so devoid of visitors, I suppose. There have been many humans who visited Betty's Forbidden Archive. Many whose hands touched the Archive's door... and Betty's heart was betrayed every time, in fact."

By those who pushed open the door not being THEY.  
So many times the disappointment surely repeated. So many times the discouragement surely reiterated. The continuing betrayal of her expectations progressively abraded her heart, and her eyes steadily permeated with resignation.

Beatrice's expectations were betrayed again and again, and she progressively ceased to even have expectations. Once kept elevated by the hope that she might perhaps get through it, Beatrice's heart was battered, unable to endure the splitting pain.  
Of course a heart which had endured so much would have begun to fracture.

Beatrice: "During the period I did that, I realised, in fact. ...No, I had already realised, I suppose."

Subaru: "Realised what?"

Beatrice: "That Betty would never see the gospel's next writ, in fact."

Beatrice bends over, picking up the gospel's binding fallen at her feet. With its pages shed and only the cover remaining, the thing drifts with a morose air.  
She traces her finger over the binding.

Beatrice: "Did you know, I suppose?"

Beatrice: "Gospels write the future of their owner." The detail of their writ is so clear that their possessor has barely any deviation from the world's memories, in fact.<sup>2</sup>

Subaru: "World's memories?"

Beatrice: "The Memories of The World, I suppose. —The world doesn't just know the present and past, it also knows what will happen in the future, in fact. The Book of Wisdom is a forbidden text which draws its needed information from there. You'd say the gospel has inherited only a piece of that functionality, I suppose."

Echidna was the one who termed the Book of Wisdom as The Memories of The World.  
It's indeed definite that Echidna and Beatrice had a close relationship. Beatrice presents the black binding so Subaru can see it.

Beatrice: "The principles of the imitation Witch Cult gospels are practically the same, I suppose. Their algorithms reference off this, with their accuracy the only departure, in fact."

Subaru: "...How did that technique get out after Echidna's death? Only you and Roswaal're supposed to have inherited these two gospels."

Beatrice: "Now that I don't know or care about, I suppose. Whoever is producing these fakes, and who they intend to distribute them to, has not any single thing to do with Betty, in fact."

Subaru: "So why'd you bring up the Witch Cult then?"

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<sup>2</sup> Shaky about this line and unfortunately it's an important one.

Beatrice: Because I had to talk about cult gospels, I suppose. You were just jumping to conclusions, in fact.

Beatrice doesn't follow along with Subaru's challenging words, preserving her calm.

Beatrice: "You have a cult gospel, I suppose?"

Subaru nods.

Subaru: "Not on hand. I brought it into SANCTUARY, and right now it's in safekeeping there. We wound up giving all the ones we collected from the other cultists over to someone more capable."

The only gospel Subaru presently owns is the one Betelgeux had possessed.

The gospels that the other cultists—Betelgeux's fingers—had owned were destroyed by the still-conscious cultists before their deaths. The several tomes they managed to recover were entrusted to Crusch's faction for them to deal with.

What Subaru had wanted to do in the first place was speedily bring Roswaal back from SANCTUARY, and go discuss the successes of the White Whale and Betelgeux subjugations with Crusch and Anastasia's factions.

Beatrice: "Have you looked over that book's text, I suppose?"

Subaru: "Suddenly I can read it now, so yeah sorta. It's written in this curly-worm handwriting and barely legible, but basically it's itemized information. Though, my personal impression... I see it less as prophecies of the future, and more as instructions from the future."

Subaru recollects on the gospel that Echidna's influence had most likely rendered readable.

Lots of the text in Betelgeux's gospel followed a pattern saying where Betelgeux would go, and what happenings he would cause. Considering that the gospel omitted a lot on how that written result was reached, you could say the gospel left the actions to realise those outcomes up to its owner's judgement.

So rather than being an omnipotent prophetic text, it was a guide of the future—is how Subaru felt it ought to be considered.

Subaru: "If it perfectly predicted the future, then that sounds like I shouldn't've had any way to stop it. Do agree an imperfect edition'd probably be just that kinda thing, though."

Beatrice: "I'm not so interested in the contents, in fact. The essential thing is whether or not the owner's final passing was writ, I suppose."

Subaru: "—Final passing, isn't what I'd call it."

The final page of Betelgeux's gospel.

Different from the END written in Subaru's blood, the final sentence writ in accord with gospel's true purpose. It was, shortly—

<In Mathers domain, Trial on silver-haired half-witch>

—that rather sloppy sentence, which gave no indication even to Betelgeux of what would happen before or after.

Indeed, if this is the entire par of information the gospel brought, the inspecificity would make beating out Subaru in terms of future intelligence surely impossible.

Beatrice: “—That's what I thought, in fact.”

Beatrice nods, as if she's agreeing with something. She warps, bends the binding in her hands.

Beatrice: “Has the gospel appended with any more writing after that, I suppose?”

Subaru: “...No, I don't think so. Far as I've checked at least, its last writ is the final activity of its owner. And appending anything after just wouldn't happen. I mean.”

Going to proceed with his speech, Subaru realises what it is he's saying, and his throat freezes. This clarifies the intention of Beatrice's question.

He raises his head. Beatrice is smiling faintly.

Shown multiple times in this brief meeting was this hollow smile, which inspired only emptiness in those who saw it.

Beatrice: “—The gospel writing nothing further, means that is where owner's future ends, in fact.”

Subaru: “Y-you and him aren't anything alike...”

Beatrice: “It's the same, I suppose. In the sense of the gospels not writing the future, the only difference is whether we still exist or do not, in fact. —Can you say I am wrong, I suppose?”

Subaru: “You're wro—!”

The unimpressed look in Beatrice's interrupts Subaru's knee-jerk denial. Superficial consolations aren't what she's looking for. This question was one Beatrice had already answered herself.

Gritting his teeth so hard they might crack, with blood oozing from the tip of his tongue, Subaru,

Subaru: “Why, 're you... doing that!”

Beatrice says nothing.

Subaru: “Coming up with the conclusions by yourself!! Everyone! When they deliberate over things anxious and alone, their thoughts're gonna plummet straight in a bad direction! When you're stuck thinking this's all that's left for you now... you'll wind up thinking this awfulness you see's the reality!”

Subaru has often collided with hardship, each time lamenting his impotence, and so he understands. Repeated malice, unfading obstacles, the world's barricade and its assault—which practically asserted that surmounting it was impossible.

They all demanded that the challenger keep fighting alone, but shackled that person's heart petrified with their dark fingers.

So,

Subaru: “If you think it's painful, that you want something done about it! Then a sentence is enough. What you should've done was called out to someone so they'd know. If you'd just said you wanted help, that you're unhappy... I would've!”

When cornered in the hopeless dead-end of fate, when submerged in a despair inescapable alone, they best merely try looking to those around the self they believe isolated.  
There would one first notice the hands reaching out for them.  
When they take that hand, when a strong pull comes to the body they thought immobile, they'll finally notice.

—There is no need to give up yet.

Subaru: “So many times, on you, I... and so this time, I'll...!”

Beatrice: “...I want, something done about it.”

Subaru: “Yes... just like that, call out.”

Beatrice: “I want help...”

Subaru: “Yes! Yes, yesyesyes! Now if you just reach out...”

Beatrice: “I'm sad, I'm suffering... Betty, wants to be saved from this darkness.”

Subaru: “Right, leave it all to me—”

Small, trembling fingers reach out toward Subaru.  
Spurred on by an incomprehensible strength flooding out from inside him, Subaru reaches for Beatrice's hand.

Subaru had completely forgotten why he had come here.  
He had actually come to Beatrice seeking her strength, to break through his dead-end situation. He expected that of anyone, she would help him.  
But now that he knew Beatrice's suffering, the darkness of her heart, such a thing was unthinkable. All that prompted Subaru's actions was a sense of duty, wanting to save a small girl agonized by her isolation.  
If he takes that hand, Subaru will be adding yet another unabandonable load on his shoulders. Despite already carrying more baggage than he conceivably could, Natsuki Subaru was again intending to hold more.  
But he didn't mind. After all,

Beatrice: “—”

—How could he abandon a little girl, looking at him with such wavering eyes?

Beatrice was trying to depend on him.  
Which summons for Subaru an unbearable, unassailable feeling. He doesn't know what. The

meaning doesn't even matter. Simply, his soul is screaming.  
Help her! Save her! To you, that girl is—and so.

Subaru: “I, no matter what—”

Beatrice: “And so...”

Subaru's fingers reach the fingers reaching for him.

Gripping the faltering fingertips firm, he pulls her in, entwining together their digits and meeting her palm to his.

He looks Beatrice straight on. Her watery eyes reflect Subaru. With fat tears falling from those eyes, Beatrice,

Beatrice: “—Betty wants you to kill her, in fact.”

—*I'm not seeking any simple aid*, is how she shakes Subaru's hand away.



Subaru sucks in the breath to voice the question of *Why*?

Looking at his rejected hand, looking at his empty unoccupied fingers, looking at the perpetrator Beatrice, Subaru means to ask why.

Subaru: “—”

That he nonetheless fails to do so is because Beatrice's eyes, as they watch Subaru, are too far, much too far, far too much too far—irreparably too late for saving.

Beatrice: “I've been alone... constantly, for four hundred years, I suppose.”

Subaru: “B-beaththri....”

Beatrice: “This surely-coming THEY surely didn't come, and I spent four hundred years constantly alone, in fact.”

He can't pull his gaze from Beatrice's eyes.

Call her name. But even in that, Subaru now hesitates.

Beatrice: “I don't know how many times I've thought to abandon it all. I don't know how many times I've wished to simply forget everything. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, a hundred million and more, but it still isn't enough...”

Beatrice spent a very long time in this cramped, dark room alone.

Hugging her knees, waiting on that stepladder for that someone of unknown face and name to come. A sea of books as far as the eye can see—even finishing complete perusal of that whole ocean, she went on with that person she awaited never coming, and even her future-announcing book

announced nothing.

Just how many times had that solitude killed this girl's heart?

Beatrice: "I want help? I want something done about it?"

Subaru: "—a,"

Beatrice: "How many times, tens of times, hundreds of times... do you think Betty has thought that? Did you think I had never considered it, and simply given up, I suppose?"

Her speech starts breaking up, steadily coming cloaked with zeal.

Subaru winds up overwhelmed instead. His throat cramps. The passion welling from his body's core, scorching his soul, wholly flips to utter freezing, his limbs heavy as if crammed with lead. So much so that he cannot act for the sake of this girl, or act to run away.

Beatrice: "If I reach out, you will pull Betty out of this impenetrable darkness? You will teach me the solution for this unending dead end, I suppose?"

Subaru says nothing.

Beatrice: "If you... are doing that for me, then... why is it... why, is it..."

Head hung, her sobs lace her statements.

Her face now obstructed, an arcane darkness dominates Subaru's heart. With the ground beneath him shaky and unstable, he might almost lose sight of the road to reach the Beatrice standing within arm's reach of him.

He dreaded, and hesitated. In that period, Beatrice raises her head.

She glares. Mouth open, baring her teeth,

Beatrice: "—You left Betty alone for four hundred years!?"

Subaru: "—hk"

Beatrice: "I was alone! Always! Always always always, Betty was alone, passing time aimlessly in this room! I was lonely! I was scared! I was thrown away, couldn't fulfil my given role, couldn't get chance to keep my promise, couldn't waste away alongside the passage of time... I had to think I would spend eternity alone, in fact!"

Tears spill from the girl's big eyes.

They strike her cheeks, droplets falling from her chin to the ground. With each drip that hits the floor, a ferocious shock smacks Subaru about the heart.

Beatrice: "You'll help me!? You'll save me!? Why couldn't you have come sooner, I suppose!? Why did you just leave me here!? If you're going to speak kindness to me this late, why didn't you hold onto me from the start!? Why did you pull your hand away!? How come!? Why!? You will leave Betty alone!?"

Her words are blades, are fire, are steel, each tearing into Subaru's heart. In every shape and every



meaning they are every agony, torturing Subaru.

Beatrice's complaints are very absurd, from Subaru's perspective.

Four hundred years—the majority of the time she spent in isolation is nothing Subaru could have had involvement in. Beatrice and Subaru have only known each other for two months, and according to her, the only question is of early or late within this timeframe. There was surely no way he could have saved her. If he's going to respond with logic, he could respond with that.

But who exactly would that utterly pointless rebuttal help?

Not Beatrice, not Subaru, and not anyone.

Subaru realises now that he has been considerably disdainful toward the time this girl Beatrice has spent.

Four hundred years. —Four hundred years.

Looking just at those words, perhaps the number would not feel like anything big.

In niche works, four hundred years is no big number. Stories out there give more ridiculous ranges of time, some even spanning the world's chronology. Compared to the impact of those, four hundred years is nothing.

Stupid. Was he stupid? Just how hopelessly foolish was he?

By those simple three words, how could he perceive this girl who truly spent four hundred years in isolation, given only an impenetrable riddle as her reason for living? Understand her? Feel her? Just to what extent could Subaru's shallow words heal her four hundred years of solitude?

Beatrice: “The very word help... and the grace of wanting something be done... are both wishes long withered dead by these four hundred years, I suppose...”

Subaru says nothing.

Beatrice: “Do you think there was not any human like you who tried to bring Betty out? Betty is a superior spirit, I suppose. The humans who sought that power and laboured to bring Betty out were more than a few, in fact.”

News to him. There were people in the past who tried to bring Beatrice out of the Forbidden Archive like Subaru. Her presence here clearly announced the results.

Beatrice's gaze even weaker as she looks at him, Subaru shakes his head.

Subaru: “D-don't—don't lump me in with those people! All I want to do is...”

Beatrice: “Those like you who disregarded Betty's power, and simply wished to save the person before them... those softies may have been among them, I suppose.”

Subaru goes silent.

Beatrice: “But they were incapable of bringing Betty out, in fact. Of course they'd be, I suppose.”

*After all*, she sighs, her smile again fleeting,

Beatrice: “The contract binding Betty to this place is nothing that half-hearted resolve can overcome, I suppose. A contract having bound Betty to this role for four hundred years... no lowly human will so easily destroy it.”

Subaru: “What, should I...”

Beatrice: “—Make Betty your number one.”

Her words are quiet, but sharp.

The shock feels to Subaru like needles piercing his eardrums.

Subaru: “Wha, t?”

Beatrice: “Make Betty, your number one. Think of me first. Choose me first. Overwrite the contract. Override the contract. Overwhelm the contract. Take me out. Pull me close. Hold me tight.”

Subaru: “—”

Beatrice: “This is impossible for you, in fact.”

Pleads Beatrice, fervently, eagerly, heart-crushingly.

This was the absolute in heavy requests, to which any light nod of the head was unforgivable.

Beatrice: “You've already had your number one long decided, I suppose. That silver girl, or the blue-haired maid... either which way, it's impossible for you to push them aside and make Betty your number one. You can not do it, in fact.”

Subaru: “Emilia... Rem...”

Beatrice: “Contracts, are absolute. Absolute, I suppose. If you are to rewrite a contract by methods other than its fulfilment, it will require fitting recompense, in fact. Betty no longer believes the promise can be fulfilled, is unable to believe it, I suppose. Which means there is only one possibility other than its fulfilment for my freedom, in fact...!”

Those two girls spurred Subaru's heart to thump strong.

When he thought of them his heart pulsed, throbbed, heated. That was the unconditionally unchangeable answer chiselled into his soul.

Beatrice: “And so, I want you to break Betty's contract... to, destroy this ultimately useless body, having passed its time in pointlessness...”

Subaru: “The contract... is really that serious? If you don't like it, can't your will do anything about it...?”

He can't find a response. He does not know how to respond to Beatrice.

Thus Subaru's response is a cowardly one, asking elsewhere of the topic.

That instant, disappointment flashes through Beatrice's eyes. Subaru apparently made a fatal mistake.

Beatrice: "That's... Betty's reason for living, in fact."

Subaru: "The contract, is?"

Beatrice: "Betty was born for this contract, and lives for this contract. The role I was first ordered at birth, which since birth I have not fulfilled once, this contract... you mean to say I... selfishly, break it, I suppose?"

Subaru: "There's nothing selfish in it! You've worked so hard for four hundred years! You've kept your promise for that long, and how could anyone torment you for it! You are being tormented! Plenty enough, already...!"

Beatrice: "I can't even fulfil this single role! I throw away my meaning for birth, reason for living, and how can I live then!? No one will torment me! I will torment me! Betty will never forgive it, I suppose! That underhanded life is nothing the Spirit Beatrice will forgive!!"

Stomping with his trembling legs, Subaru grabs the small girl's shoulders. But the girl thrusts back at him with a voice even louder than his, pushing hard at his torso and again taking distance. It's the strength of a frail girl, and Subaru is still pushed back.  
Strength won't enter his body Not even his mind can recall what he had seen.

Beatrice: "Contracts are absolute for spirits! Nothing is weightier than the contract with the contractor! It's the same for Bubby! That is why Bubby prioritises that silver girl more than anyone, I suppose! She is his most important! She is his most loved! If it were between the girl and Betty, he would absolutely take the girl's side! Not even Bubby will put Betty in first!"

Being a spirit just like her, Beatrice is more attached to Puck than anyone.  
That may have been a manifestation of a clinging sort of bond towards a being which she could share the human-unassailable timespan of four hundred years with.  
What did Beatrice feel toward Puck? What did Puck think of Beatrice? Subaru didn't know.  
But what Subaru didn't know, Beatrice had already come to her conclusion about.

Toiled, and took plenty of time to get it, but Beatrice had her answer.

Her breathing ragged, shoulders heaving, even her prim pigtails have come frayed. Fat tears float up in her big, round eyes, her shaking lips still yet hinting her weakness and entreaty.  
*She is an incredibly small, little girl*, could Subaru think of it.  
How had everyone just left such a small little girl alone here?

Beatrice: "I know... that you're not the contract's *THEY*, I suppose..."

Subaru: "—"

Beatrice: "But, can you please be *THEY*? Or otherwise not *THEY*, but something different, and save Betty, I suppose?"

Subaru: "—"

The words aren't coming.

By surely no way could he either simply nod, or impulsively deny her.

In just this short time, Subaru managed to learn a fragment of the insecurity Beatrice harboured that he had not even attempted to learn.

But if he's to truly understand her isolation, Subaru would have to actually spend four hundred years in solitude.

To do so was absolutely impossible for a human. Her worries, solitude, and sorrow, were nothing Subaru's hands would grasp.

Beatrice: "Betty is the one who knows best that it's hopeless, in fact."

Subaru: "Beatrice..."

Beatrice: "So, kill Betty. By your hands. Suicide defies the contract, so spirits are absolutely incapable of it. I can't even die alone, in fact."

Subaru: "Why, me...?"

Pleads Beatrice, both arms reaching out.

Scared of accepting those hesitation-apt outstretched arms with frailty, Subaru buries his face in his hands.

Subaru: "Why are you trying, to entrust your last moment, the end of four hundred years, to me..."

Beatrice: "Why... I suppose."

Sobbing, whining, evading, Subaru's words are eligible for any such insult—But Beatrice chooses none of them.

She tilts her head, as if even she herself does not know the reason why.

After a short moment, she slowly nods.

Beatrice: "—Yes, I've got it, in fact."

Subaru says nothing.

Beatrice: "Betty entrusting her end to you, is surely... surely..."

He hears that answer, and he can't escape any more.

That was the conviction he had. He raises his head. Without covering his ears so that he can finish this without hearing her answer. Without making her close her mouth.

He is slow to decide. He is slow to notice. Now, he is too late to do anything.

Beatrice is announcing her answer.

It's coming. And that instant—

???: "I'm sorry for this in the middle of your chat."

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

A voice he should not be hearing calls out. Still urged into haste by his chills, Subaru glances behind him.

He sees it.

???: “—Would it be alright if I became your THEY?”

Their kukri soaked in blood, a murderer stands in the doorway.

## CHAPTER 62: SLAUGHTER AT ROSWAAL MANSION

Seeing that woman in the doorway, a shiver dashes down Subaru's whole body. Even for Subaru, who had undergone many predicaments since being summoned into this parallel world, and had occasionally even lost his life, she encourages in him a very irregular kind of dread.

Donning her black cloak, her ebony outfit clings snug over her voluptuous body. Her rare black hair, same as Subaru's, stretches down in a long braid, with a rather salacious smile arisen on her gentle face.

Were it not for the knife dripping blood casually held in her hand, she would be the very picture of a beauty—this murderer, and as far Subaru cared, this worst of calamities. His first killer. The GUTHUNTER, Elsa Granhiert.

Subaru: “W-hy... 're you here!?”

Elsa: “—My, I thought I had smelled this scent somewhere before, and it was you? I wonder how your body is faring. Have you been caring after your guts for me?”

Elsa's brows rise as she tilts her head, as if only just noticing Subaru's presence.

She replies to his question, but it is already too late for any conversation to emerge here. To care after your internal organs is an incomprehensible deed, which no ordinary person could possibly accomplish. Meaning, this lady who sought such as thing as if it were a normal desire, was unmistakably a madman.

One distinctly different from Betelgeux Romanée-Conti, a madman on another vector.

His entire body stiff and tense, Subaru pays ultimate attention to Elsa's every move.

This madwoman's combat prowess was enough that the Sword Saint Reinhardt had failed to kill her—extradimensional. Subaru could sharpen his attention, but he would not be catching even the first signs of her motions.

Beatrice: “—Who gave you permission to be here, I suppose?”

Asks Beatrice, unimpressed, from behind Subaru. She stands as she had been during her confrontation with Subaru, her expression vanished of tears.

Elsa lightly sweeps her long hair aside.

Elsa: “It didn't look as though it were locked, so all I did was open it and come inside? The next time you're having an important conversation, you would best not forget to lock the door.”

Beatrice: “That wasn't what I meant, in fact. Entering Betty's Forbidden Archive without permission is... for other than this man, not so commonly possible, I suppose. How did you?”

Elsa: “Oh, then that's easy.”

Beatrice glances at Gate Crossing Exception Case Subaru. Elsa nods as if finally understanding what Beatrice is asking. She gestures at the yet-open door.

Elsa: “Your magic to isolate spaces... uses doors an intermediary, yes? The magic connects a closed

room to a closed room, through doors.”

Beatrice: “That's right, in fact. Without Betty's permission, it shouldn't be possible to reach this Forbidden Archive connected to some door of the mansion. So how could...”

Elsa: “I did say it's easy. It uses closed doors as an intermediary... so if you leave all the doors open, wouldn't that start eliminating the alternative options?”

Beatrice: “—!”

Elsa points out an extremely easy way to overcome Beatrice's Gate Crossing. Her statement is indeed correct. Gate Crossing is magic which switches the rooms between identically closed doors. Meaning, it can't connect to opened rooms. If the magic is restricted to doors in the mansion, and you left every door in the mansion open, the last remaining door would obviously be the one connecting to the Archive. But, to do that,

Subaru: “You'd need to open every door in the mansion... someone would've, had to have had disrupted you with th...”

As he speaks, Subaru truly realises the extent of his own idiocy. Possibly this was the outcome of him averting his gaze from a reality he did not want to see.

Subaru: “Your, knife... is wet, with whose blood?”

Blood sticks, clinging down the blade of Elsa's kukri. The drips falling from its point, as if it had only just slashed open its prey, make Subaru far more than capable of imaging the worst. Subaru's lips pallid and trembling, Elsa traces her finger down the side of her blade. She licks up the blood dirtying her pale finger.

Elsa: “Whose do you think?”

Subaru: “You goddamn...”

Elsa: “A hint. They were wearing a maid outfit.”

Three persons remain in the mansion. They were all wearing maid outfits. Or no, the sleeping Rem was in negligee. Discount her. Two left.

Elsa: “A second hint. Their hair was not long.”

Petra with hers shoulder-length, Frederica with hers grown long.  
—Subaru's throat sucks in the air needed to scream.

Elsa: “A third hint. As they died crying, they sobbed Subaru, Subaru!”

Subaru: “ELSAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

Baring his fangs, ducking down low, Subaru dashes directly for Elsa.

Elsa loosely stretches out her slender limbs in counter, readying to meet the tip of her steadied knife with the oncoming Subaru's head—

Elsa: “—Huh?”

Subaru: “Who the hell would rush straight-on into a monster like you!”

Posture low, Subaru sweeps his arms from the floor to the air. Following that trajectory, up fly the scattered gospel pages.

For an instant, some tens of pages block the line of vision between Subaru and Elsa.

Instantaneously, taking in a breath, Subaru centres power into the core of his gut, straining his mana, and,

Subaru: “—Shamac!!”

Spouting out black fog, the distance between Subaru and Elsa drowns in tumult.

Shamac did not work so well on Julius, but from a previous loop it is confirmed that it does work somewhat on Elsa. Unlike last time where he wound up fully expelling his internal mana, the experience this time ends only with a strange feeling of fatigue, indicating increased proficiency in handling mana.

Subaru: “Beatrice!”

Twisting back, Subaru grabs the arm of an onlooking Beatrice. For an instant her tense arm moves to reject Subaru's hand, but there is no escaping from Subaru's firm grip.

He yanks her light frame close, embraces the small girl in his arms, and hesitates not a second before launching himself into the Shamac.

—Confusion. He sees nothing, hears nothing, feelings nothing, there being darkness only.

The sensation beneath Subaru's footfalls alone comprise his everything, the world's everything. In the space between his right foot leaving the ground and his left foot making contact, he is completely sequestered from the world. Right foot hits ground. Contact with the world. Left foot rises. Isolated. Right foot hits. Contact. Isolation. Contact. Isolation. In his arms, something struggles. Not letting go. Not permitting isolation. Contact. Contact. Contact.

Subaru: “—Phaa!”

With the suddenness akin to breaking his face up through a surface of water, the darkness clears. His vision opened, where Subaru now stands is in a mansion hallway. Him being in this red-carpet corridor was unmistakably because he had just bounded out the Forbidden Archive door. He had avoided Elsa standing in the doorway, and successfully dashed out the room.

Subaru: “Knew, that'd do it—!”

If Shamac appeared right in front of her, Subaru figured with this being a combat-learned Elsa that she would skirt around the curtain of dark, her aim set on Subaru and Beatrice who would be on the opposite side. Taking an unexpected move, Subaru purposefully dashed straight into the darkness



and passed right through the doorway Elsa had graciously opened for them.

Subaru: “Wanna say I goddamn nailed it, but...”

He would be given no time to brag.

Shamac's upkeep time is an unknown—but should Elsa discover that Subaru and Beatrice are not on the opposite side, she would immediately snap back around to pursue them.

Subaru slams the door shut with a kick, cutting off Gate Crossing. It depended on Beatrice, but now he should no longer know if his immediate surroundings connected to the Archive.

Subaru: “Beatrice! Connect that door to some different door—”

Beatrice: “No need telling me, that is what I'm doing, I suppose. Anyway you, going around closing the open doors will buy us time, in fact.”

Subaru: “Fuck, right!”

Answering the complaints of the girl in his arms, Subaru slams shut the door neighbouring and the door neighbouring that. He glances inside before shutting the doors, but finds no obvious remains. That being said, he did not know how trustworthy Elsa's statement is, but—

Subaru: “What do I do, what do I do what do I do whatdoIdowhatdoIdowhaddaIdo—”

The questions go unending.

Why was Elsa right now right here? This was the soonest Subaru had returned to the mansion in this loop series. On the sixth day, the fourth day, and now on the second day—every time, Elsa's attack on the mansion comes on the day of Subaru's return.

Subaru for a while now had harboured a suspicion as to why this was. Between this attack and Elsa's statements in the archive, that suspicion is shifting into conviction.

But, if that was it then even moreso why—,

Subaru: “Why couldn't one more day... no, she didn't even give us a handful of hours!”

Petra was promised to return to the village, were it night.

Elsa's surprise attack was a more or less pre-supposed disaster. The image of Petra, her life lost in the vortex of a loop prior, has seared and sticks unvanishing in Subaru's mind. And so this time he had acted to distance her from the disaster. But still did insidiousness sprint to overtake his management plans, preventing the little girl from escaping fate.

Subaru: “Nothing's over. There's no need to give up. Of course there's a chance she was bullshitting. Course there is. Like I could stand abandoning hope...!”

Beatrice: “That isn't hope, it's not letting go, I suppose...”

Subaru: “Be quiet! Now you just shut up and have me carry you! She's full and ready to kill you too, y'know. Since she's a weirdo who gets off on knifing people's stomachs open and looking at the insides!”

Beatrice: “Wanting to see a spirit's guts is crossing the line for poor taste, in fact.”

*Agreed*, mutters Subaru to himself. He slips Beatrice smoothly out of his arms as she disembarks down to the hallway. She pats at the skirt portion of her dress.

Beatrice: “What are you planning to do now, I suppose?”

Subaru: “That's not a damn question. Petra's safety and checking Rem are top priority. Afterwards.... well anyway, I'm taking you along too and escaping the mansion. Or, do you really think you can fight her?”

Beatrice: “...If that thing came here to kill Betty, should I not resist then my wish will likely be granted, in fact.”

Subaru: “Thought you'd say that which's why I dragged you along. If you're still gonna be thinking like that, then I'm gonna be hauling you out slung over my shoulder. And you?”

Looking down at the shorter Beatrice, Subaru presses her for a decision. Or actually, he is not giving her any options here at all. If she's thinking to be stubborn and stay here, then he's planning to drag her out with brute force.

Subaru's thoughts must have communicated. Beatrice sighs.

Beatrice: “Though I might not be able to choose where I die, I would say I'd at least like to choose who I die to, I suppose.”

Subaru: “We'll have that conversation after we properly have a change of setting and get ourselves calmed down. Let's go!”

Holding hands with Beatrice, Subaru pulls her along as he breaks into a run. Subaru dashing, Beatrice follows behind with her tiny tottering gait and cumbersome dress. It takes only ten meters of this before Subaru,

Subaru: “Fuck it! Just come here!”

He pulls her arm, and again settles Beatrice snug in his arms.

Beatrice is lighter than she looks. That said Subaru can't tell whether that is because she is a spirit, or because her growth is stunted.

Beatrice: “...Let me go, I suppose.”

Subaru: “If I match to your pace she's immediately gonna catch up to us! It'd be even faster if I ran with you slung over my shoulders! And—”

Beatrice, held to his chest, voices her rejection. But her fingers cling reliant to the chest region of Subaru's jacket. Subaru's eyes freeze on the sight, his words aborted as he makes neither reference nor denial nor affirmation of it.

*This is okay*, is what Subaru presently thinks.

Subaru: “Anyway, before Elsa shows up... we have to find Petra and Rem!”

Beatrice: “My belief was this mansion had another maid in it, in fact.”

Subaru: “Frederica's... it's best we don't meet her right now. I think.”

Subaru thinks of the blonde maid as he shakes his head. Beatrice scrunches her brows at this, but says nothing.

Right now, he wanted to avoid meeting Frederica. If it were after confirming the other two's safety, then fine. Meeting her, having a talk, would tentatively be fine after that.

Were Subaru's imaginings correct, he surely knew what it would be.



—Petra was atop the dining table, set alongside the tableware.

The white tablecloth seeps with a red stain, the body of a collapsed Petra at its centre. Time has already passed, with the shade of shed blood shifting soon to dark rust, the scene intensifying in its morose air.

Subaru: “Peh, trra...”

Faltering, unsteady steps lead Subaru to the table.

Petra lies face-up in the middle. Frozen firm on her loveable face is an expression of agony, tears and dread, her eyes wide open in despair of what she last saw. Blood leaks from the corners of her open mouth, the lethal blow of course being the slash of the deep knife wound splitting her belly. That maid outfit she had sweetly, fairylike with skirt billowing, shown to Subaru—from beneath its breast to its gut there rips a straight slice, the spilled blood and guts further lightening the body of the little girl.

Subaru: “—ue,”

Something wells up from the back of his throat. Not vomit, but a sob.

A heat burns in the back of his eyes, Subaru promptly reaching out to Petra's face before that can flow over. Her face yet remains in terror twisted. Subaru at least closes her eyes, sheds his jacket as he had before and lays it over her body.

How many times now had he given this superficial compensation to an unsaved Petra?

How many times, knowing this would happen, but still not averting it, had Subaru let this girl die? How many times, purely because of her involvement with Subaru, would this girl have to suffer?

Subaru: “I'm so sorry... I'm sorry, I'm so sorry... Petra...”

The apologies from his mouth reverberate only hollow.

Unable to rely on anyone, Petra had encountered here a terrifying murderer, and called for Subaru

as she was cruelly killed.

The sorrow could crush his heart. The loathing blazes hot enough to burn him whole.

If hatred enabled him to murder, Subaru could kill Elsa a thousand times over and it still would not be enough.

That was the depth of the sin she had committed. Someday and no matter what, he would make her realise it.

Subaru: “And for that as well, I can't let this try just end like this...”

Beatrice: “This try?”

Subaru: “Talking to myself. I don't wanna just leave Petra like this, but... I can't do anything now. Rem's place is up ahead. I'll take Rem, and we'll leave the mansion. Can we use Gate Crossing?”

Beatrice: “We would need to go through the Forbidden Archive, in fact. And probably, the door's been left open, I suppose.”

Subaru: “—So that's how it is.”

Although simple, that alone was enough to seal off Gate Crossing.

For every mansion door left open, the applicable targets for Gate Crossing dropped. And if the door to the Archive itself was left open, the only access point available anymore would be through that open doorway.

If even one stick was left to hold the door open, not even Beatrice could summon the Forbidden Archive.

Subaru: “Do you know where the Forbidden Archive is connected to right now?”

Beatrice: “Naturally, in fact. —It's currently in the western wing, on a guest room on the third floor, I suppose.”

A guest room in the western wing meant it was distant from the dining room in the central block. Though, that door being open meant that Elsa had at least left the Archive.

With that murderer's sense of smell, it would not be long before she found Subaru and Beatrice. Their time was none.

Subaru: “Don't have the spare time to be panic. Anyway, we're hurrying to Rem—.”

Wiping the tears seeping from his eyes with the back of his hand, Subaru jerks his head in the direction of his destination. Rem is sleeping in one of the servant's rooms in the eastern wing. If Elsa's start was in the western wing, Subaru could judge that she had not reached Rem yet.

However, this was all limited just to Elsa.

Subaru: “Frederica, likely'll be there...”

Being that Frederica knows how Subaru cares about Rem's well being, it would probably occur to her that following his evasion of Elsa's attack Subaru would be aiming for that room. So, there was more than enough possibility that she had gotten there before them.

Hand to his chin in thought, Beatrice narrows her eyes at Subaru.

Beatrice: "This has been bothering me, in fact. ...Are you doubting that big maid, I suppose?"

Subaru: "...Not that I wanted to, though."

Subaru affirms Beatrice's question with a powerless nod.

Elsa's attack on Roswaal Mansion—Subaru was mostly convinced that it was likely due to Frederica's betrayal.

This was the third time Subaru had faced Elsa at Roswaal's mansion.

His previous encounters were on the sixth and fourth day, both of them occurring after the passage of comparatively more time. However, this loop was a return two days after arriving at SANCTUARY. Every time, Elsa appears as if she is almost lying in wait for Subaru's homecoming. Were there any trick to pulling this off, it would lie in the suspected existence of a betrayer.

Subaru: "The day I return to the mansion, Elsa gets guided inside. I was sure that going to the mountain cabin'd be part of all that, but..."

Subaru's first suspicion was that Frederica had beckoned in an Elsa who was lying in wait in the mountain cabin. This was why Subaru had asked Frederica whether she was going there this loop, prepared for her to go on guard about him.

He had found not a speck of strangeness or pretence in her reply and attitude then. So he had attempted to temporarily agree that it had only been a needless fear.

Subaru: "Not like that's the only method to take... and not like I could see all the way through her. Don't know if I got tricked."

Subaru couldn't tell whether she had proficiently kept a poker face. Conversely, she perceived that Subaru was on guard about her, and he may have wound up prompting her to act more carefully. It was Subaru's mistake, resulting in him once again knowingly let a little girl lose her life. Subaru, who had knowingly failed to secure her escape, was responsible for Petra's harm. Subaru was who killed Petra.

Subaru: "And when Petra was so goddamn attached to you!"

Subaru is forced to envision Petra, idolizing her elder maid Big Sis Frederica.

Did allowing that adoring Petra to fall into the hands of a murderer not pain Frederica's heart? What the hell was she thinking, assisting in this?

Subaru: "The clincher is her method for breaking Beatrice's Gate Crossing. Honestly, I'm surprised it's something breakable with this child-jape kind of method."

Beatrice: "...Betty hadn't conceived that this method would break it either, in fact. It's not a method you'd think of so easily, I suppose."

Subaru: "I think I would've thought of it if I had the time to... but, that time's the problem. It's a method that wouldn't come to mind unless they knew about your existence and Gate Crossing's

gimmick beforehand. It's nothing so nice and convenient as Elsa just coming up with the idea on the spot. It's another thing that most likely got passed to her in secret.”

Beatrice: “It seems that that crazy woman is an acquaintance of yours. Where did you meet her, I suppose?”

Subaru: “She kinda sliced the belly open on things with me in the Capital. ...Right, she's the assailant whose wounds you healed on the very first time you treated me.”

Thinking back on it, Subaru getting brought to Roswaal's mansion did also involve Elsa. Beatrice gives a comprehending nod.

Subaru: “Anyway, now is getting to Rem. If Frederica's there... am I okay to count on you?”

Beatrice: “Are you lacking in the backbone to at least protect the girls you love on your own, I suppose? Just imagining being thought of in first by a man like that is horrifying, in fact.”

Subaru: “If feelings could topple whales I'd go ahead and topple them, but the world just isn't that mild.”

Even this banter was likely a Beatrice-esque form of consideration for Subaru. She was attempting to even slightly distance his thoughts from Petra's death.

Unlike Subaru, who had never noticed Beatrice's sorrow and even now could not present any method for resolving it, Beatrice was far too excessively smart. And so he wound up relying on her.

Subaru: “Let's go.”

Beatrice: “Mm, right, I suppose.”

Subaru reaches out to her with a natural motion, Beatrice taking his presented hand and slipping into his arms without any objection. He lifts the light girl up, breaking into a run with the same arrangement they had previously been using.

Although knowing that doing this is pointless, Subaru endeavours to mute his footsteps as they head to the eastern wing. They see no signs of Elsa having beaten them there as they dart up the staircase, reaching the second, reaching the third floor. He timidly pokes out his head to peek down the hallway, trying to verify the absence of anyone else being around—

Subaru: “—”

Spotting somebody in front of his destined room, Subaru withdraws his head.

Beatrice in his arms wordlessly look up at him, him responding with a nod. He jerks his chin and again carefully checks—and outside the room is someone tall, leaning against the door.

He is witnessing this from a distance, but with that long blonde hair and that maid outfit, mistaking her would be impossible.

It's Frederica. Just as Subaru had predicted she was standing outside Rem's sleeping room, waiting vigilantly for Subaru.

Subaru: “What do we do? Pretend we haven't noticed, and nonchalantly call out to her? If she hasn't

met up with Elsa, if she hasn't noticed that we're suspecting her yet..."

Beatrice: "If your earlier predictions are correct, then that maid stopped having any reason to mind our attitudes the second she invited in the enemy, in fact. And the last time you parted with that maid was when you entered the Forbidden Archive, I suppose. You had no excuses left the moment that you exited, in fact."

Subaru: "And so all there is now is busting straight though."

Frederica's favoured weapon—as far as Subaru had seen and remember, they were clawed cestus to be worn over the back of her hands. You had her agility, you had her position as Garfiel's elder sister, and although he had not clearly verified her combat strength, she was unmistakably much stronger than Subaru. Would facing her head on really leave him any chance of winning?

Subaru: "It's not totally impossible if I start by casting Shamac, and if the surprise attack works then Beatrice goes for ranged magic, maybe...? We don't have to incapacitate her, we just need her to retreat..."

Beatrice: "A soft reception for a traitor, I suppose. It's ridiculous to face an enemy coming with intent to kill you without yourself possessing that same resolve, in fact."

Although knowing that Beatrice's cool statement is very sound, Subaru hesitates to act as she says. He knows his opponent is a betrayer, but she was someone he had familiar interactions with. So long as Subaru could still remember those times, he was incapable of so easily delineating the issue. Even if, hypothetically, Frederica was deeply involved in Petra's death.

Subaru: "Beatrice. I'm blocking things off with Shamac, counting on you to throw a light shot of something."

Beatrice: "—That softness will give you a terrible experience soon, I suppose."

Subaru: "It's cause I have things I wanna ask her. Please don't think it anything more or less than that."

*This late?* Is the look on Beatrice's face, but giving a small sigh out her nose at a Subaru bowing his head, she says nothing.

Warning himself not to impose on her, Subaru takes a deep breath, clenching and unclenching his hands. A mild fatigue still remains, but with only one more Shamac—

Subaru: "Endure it, body of mine. —Shamac!"

He bounds out into the hallway. The black fog from Subaru's outstretched hand interrupts before Frederica can turn to face him.

Subaru's aim does not falter as the mist drowns out the space between Subaru and Frederica, crafting the same situation as in the Archive. His head grows heavy with his expulsion of unnecessary mana, Subaru falling to his knees and stance crumbling greatly.

Walking up from beside him, Beatrice advances with her arms readied in front of her. She mutters. The atmosphere before Beatrice warps, opening a hole in space, from which appear spears bathed in

dim purple flame.

The amethyst stakes float in the air, their fiery points causing the atmosphere to tremble. —Subaru cries out at the blatantly life-threatening magic, but Beatrice pays him not a glance as she readies to shoot the spears through the darkness—

Beatrice: “...Something's strange, in fact.”

Beatrice tilts her head.

Her reaction confuses Subaru. With her spears still floating Beatrice reaches out her right hand, raising a finger and promptly flicking it right to left.

Just by that, the darkness of Subaru's Shamac is dispelled from the corridor. This was the result of interference from Beatrice, one far more advanced in yin magic than Subaru.

So easily robbed of his efforts which fatigued his body, Subaru is dumbfounded. But his emotionality for that immediately vanishes.

Because even Subaru understands why Beatrice cancelled the attack.

Subaru: “—”

He advances straight down the cleared corridor, headed for Frederica.

Dragging along his mana-starved, burdensome body, Subaru proceeds to her at the pace of a turtle.

There is no need for caution. She gives no reaction. None.

—And never would she give any reaction again.

Subaru: “...Why?”

Frederica had been standing outside Rem's bedroom.

The kukri stabbed through her abdomen skewers her to the door. Her arms hang limp and with cestus. Having apparently fought, her clothing is spotted with disorder, informing that the fight was a vicious one.

Frederica's body is already cold, her soul long absent from her expression. Her stiffened face carries the repentance of tiding back regrets, forcing even Subaru to sense that she had likely died here risking her life to protect this door.

Meaning, Frederica had frantically brawled, so that the attacker would not enter this room.

There was no reason for the one who had invited the attacker inside to do this.

Subaru: “Doubted her utterly... and for this.”

Face buried in his hands, Subaru accepts the difficultly-accepted reality.

Body fraught with slashes and dead was Frederica. Faced with this, how could he possibly think she was a double-crosser, a betrayer?

At the end of broken relationships came this? Subaru's need to so fervently set up Frederica as a villain was his own complacent desires to lessen his guilt.

He has to accept it.

Subaru: “—I was wrong.”

Frederica was no traitor.



She risked her life fighting to protect Rem, to conclusion. Going from the coldness of her body, she had even possibly died earlier than Petra.

She had no time in the least to guide Elsa to the Forbidden Archive.

Subaru: "...Rem."

His thoughts stay in disarray, a blank vacuum in his skull.

When he manages to order his scrambled thoughts, the first thing Subaru thinks of is that inside the room Frederica had protected, that lovely and sleeping girl.

Frederica's stiffening body is heavy, and with the knife pierced through to the door, unloading her comprises an incredible effort. Careful attention is required so as not to damage her body further.

But nevertheless his fingers, his heart, get hasty.

However, in betrayal of Subaru's focus,

???: "—Finally found you."

A dark figure slips into view at the end of the hallway.

Elsa stoops low, her hand to the floor, eyes overflowing with rapaciousness and murder as she watches Subaru and Beatrice. The gazes catches Subaru's body, freezing him still. Not letting that opening escape, Elsa's form darts instantly down the hallway.

A soundless advance. This was unmistakably the approach of DEATH.

Beatrice: "If you think you'll get us so easily, you best think again, in fact."

But there was someone there to block Elsa's advance.

Beatrice flicks up her arm, the waiting purple spears fixing their sights onto Elsa.

These spears once aborted of their firing, finding a new target for their power, ring in exultation.

Elsa: "So small, but you certainly play with dangerous toys."

Beatrice: "We'll test on you whether these are any children's toy, in fact."

Faced with the wicked magic, Elsa smiles. Scorn overwrites that smile as the purple spears launch from Beatrice's hands.

The speed of the fired spears transcends that of Emilia's shots with ice projectiles. They shoot one-by-one, looming in on the zooming Elsa on a trajectory to spear her straight-on—but, ducking down so far that her chest touches the floor, Elsa's low posture permits her to dodge every shot.

Elsa: "Very unfortunate. Their speed and aim are too lax to hit the target."

Mutters Elsa as the weapons graze past the back of her head, her utterly fearless, kukri grasped in underhand grip and aim fixed on Beatrice.

The blade's dull gleam presses in on Beatrice's body, and to cleave that small figure in two she—

Beatrice: "The one who has failed to think is you in fact, human."

—Beatrice clenches her open palm closed. Immediately, the amethyst spears swell. Having missed

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

their target and shot on towards disappearance at the end of the hallway, the spears bulge, bursting behind a stopped Elsa like ruptured balloons.

Beatrice: “—This!”

The burst spears fracture into splinters, surrounding Elsa from every direction.

Although splinters, their size rivals that of Subaru's index finger. They flood the air in innumerable number, all of their points aimed at Elsa.

Beatrice: “Is your punishment for disturbing Betty's Forbidden Archive, I suppose. —You are to be mutilated, and to end, in fact.”

Her cruel announcement as the trigger, Beatrice fires the amethyst spears.

## CHAPTER 63: EMPATHIC DEATH

Amethyst stakes squelch into flesh, squelch into flesh, the scintillations of shattered purple crystals drowning the hallway in light.

Countless spears aim for Elsa's slender body from every angle, now surely perforated full.

Victory seems absolute. Subaru swallows his breath in response to Beatrice's overwhelming magical prowess. But even while witnessing the power of this girl before him dismissing the murderer, Subaru cannot completely suppress the foreboding feeling expanding explosively through his chest.

—There was something, something he felt he was forgetting. Which he must not lapse on, something.

Many feelings obstruct his thoughts before he can draw what that something was from his memory. What was Elsa's goal in coming to the mansion? Having seen the death of the Frederica he doubted, his heart roils both with shame and at the circumstances of said death. Petra still remains in his thoughts. His deepest emotions scream commands to confirm Rem's safety. What to do about Beatrice, and what must he talk with her about?

Subaru reaches not a single answer for any of the questions confounding his heart.

Subaru: “—”

And so Subaru misses an opportunity which should not have come, and regrets.

Subaru: “—Dghuh, au?”

Shooting through the scintillations, something spears deep into Subaru's right shoulder.

Looking down at the source of the pain, seeing the seeping blood, Subaru's thoughts blaze red. A serrated scream rushes up his throat. He presses down on the wound, flinching back as he falls on his behind to the hallway floor.

Beatrice: “Why!? But I got a direct hit, I suppose!?”

Yells Beatrice, seeing a wounded Subaru.

His thoughts scorched with pain, it is in hearing Beatrice's yell that Subaru realises it. He realises. She was wrong. Or no. She did get a direct hit. That was definite. But,

Subaru: “ELSAAAAA!!”

???: “I can hear you, no need to yell for me with such fire.”

The seething pain stimulating his hatred, shrieks and fury spill from Subaru's mouth. The response comes from across the hallway of dancing lights—spoken in calm voice, and not suggesting any life-or-death situation with its lusciousness.

Beatrice: “Uninjured is inconceivable, in fact.”

Elsa: “If I had been naked, I probably would've died to that.”

Beatrice shakes her head. Elsa answers with her long braid swaying. Not a trace of Beatrice's magic assault besmirches Elsa's form. Her appearance is exactly the same as before. Or no, there was one point of difference. She had shed her black cloak, and now donned only her dark outfit beneath.

Subaru: “Her magic nullifying coat!”

Elsa: “This would be the second time you've seen it. Considering that, you were certainly slow to tell that girl about it.”

Subaru: “Fuck!”

With a blunder by the term 'I forgot' unforgivable, Subaru pushes back his pain as his rage boils up. Elsa's cloak rendered magic impotent only once. —Subaru was supposed to have witnessed that back during the confrontation with her in the Capital.

This unforeseen attack, even considering his failure to coordinate with Beatrice, was the kind of blunder which should not have happened.

Beatrice: “Once you know the trick, it isn't anything shocking, in fact.”

Elsa: “—Good. Very, very good. You're strong, you're sweet. I'll be enjoying a warmth unlike that of any simple simpering girl.”

Beatrice again readies her magic. Elsa smiles, flipping her kukri about in her hands. Her smile of blood and those words out her mouth—realising who that SIMPLE SIMPERING GIRL refers to, Subaru seethes.

Subaru: “You don't have any fucking right to mock Petra!!”

A small throwing knife jutting from his right shoulder—with a hooked point, which hinders its removal. Gritting his teeth at this thing biting into his flesh, Subaru unhesitatingly yanks it out. Violent pain dyes his vision stark red. He senses fatal damage to the whole of his right arm's functioning. But he ignores all the injury, pitching the removed throwing knife with Elsa as the target.

He throws with his full power, but he lacks any training and the toss is sloppy. That it still soars straight fixed on Elsa is essentially a miracle. As is its speed. But when faced with a murderer possessing skill transcending human reason, Subaru's throw will come to not any effect.

Elsa: “Good spirit, but this won't—”

Subaru: “I'll wring out everything I've got! SHAMAC!!”

Elsa: “—!?”

In counter to an Elsa readied to defend, Subaru stresses his throat for his third Shamac. Scraping together his internal mana, already exhausted from the first and second casts, Subaru expels both his life force and his magic out his untrained gates.

Blood shoots through his eyes, trails from his nose. The scream of his soul succeeds.

Darkness spreads across the centre of the corridor, covering the space between Subaru and Elsa. The knife Subaru threw plummets into the dark. Flown into the dusk of confusion, piercing through its middle, the knife rushes for Elsa—its trajectory invisible to her.

Subaru: “Now hit her—!”

Elsa: “I’m rather surprised. But, you only have to stay low to avoid it.”

Says Elsa as she ducks down, sliding aside.

This evasive action could occur because Subaru’s Shamac had not reached far enough to encompass Elsa.

The knife flies out of the curtain of black, stabbing into its owner’s flesh not at all and proceeding to vanish down the hallway. Subaru’s attack so ends uselessly—or so it seems, when—

Subaru: “Beako!!”

Beatrice: “Don’t spontaneously call me that, I suppose—!”

Were Subaru the only one present, the attack likely would have ended in failure.

But here Elsa faces two opponents—one being a girl who, in the short period of time Subaru had bought, had prepared her next canto.

Beatrice: “Here I will show you, in fact. —What true yin magic is.”

???: “What’re—”

*You about to do?* Was the statement then voiced maybe by Subaru, maybe by Elsa.

Beatrice’s next action would make determining even that impossible.

Meeting her small hands before her chest and with her glare fixed on Elsa, Beatrice quirks her lips. She says only two words—and they paint the world over.

Beatrice: “—Ul Shamac.”

—In a magnitude unlike Subaru’s knock-off yin magic, the mansion shrouds with genuine DARK.



When Subaru comes to, he finds himself in darkness.

Subaru: “—?”

Or rather no, in this dark he could not even judge whether or not he was conscious.

Where was he? Was he standing? Sitting? He could not determine anything.

Left down, up right, front back, all vague. Was he breathing in? Breathing out? His blood flowing?

Pulse thumping? Alive? Dead?

He could not determine a single thing. He had not a single answer for any question. With Subaru's Shamac, he could at least feel the sensation of his feet on the ground, and the fluctuations inside his own body. He could not comprehend any external factors, but conversely his attention sharpened in on his interior.

But in this darkness he could not even manage that.

Like melting into the shadows, he could not even tell where he was.

He could not tell whether he still retained human shape. He could not judge how to move his arms, and so he could not feel his own body for confirmation. For attempts to confirm his location, equally he could not judge how to move his feet, and so he could not walk. And what exactly was walking? What exactly was confirming?

—And in the first place, just who on earth was he?

The boundary between himself and others was fading.

The boundary between himself and the world was fading.

His ability to think was melting. Dissipating. Disappearing.

And just like this, just like this, just like this—

Ending was he.

Ending was.

Ending.



???: "...Enough, now wake up, I suppose."

A slap peals out against Subaru's stiffened cheek, dragging his consciousness back.

He blinks. A sound close to a groan slips from his mouth as his vision suddenly fills with brilliant light. Hearing it, the pain which woke Subaru up now pummels his cheek again. Twice, from left and right.

Subaru: "S-stop punching me!"

Beatrice: "I was only thinking to get you definitely conscious, in fact. And the second one just somehow happened reflexively, I suppose."

Glaring at Beatrice's cool face, Subaru belatedly notices that he is collapsed on the hallway floor. He uprights himself and checks that his body is lacking in serious deficiency. A pain stings on his right shoulder. He unwittingly looks over to find a fresh wound oozing blood, asserting itself.

Subaru: "Aauh, ow... Um, can you do like a targeted Shamac?"

Beatrice: "It isn't that I can't, but doing it would only make you forget about the wound, not remove it, in fact. You putter around without any healing, and you'll just die of blood loss, I suppose."

Is Beatrice's horrifying diagram of the future. Plugging the wound shut with his hand, Subaru narrows his eyes in recollection.

Subaru: "Anyway..."

Subaru: "What happened to Elsa? You're leisurely, so that means she retreated?"

Beatrice: "What on earth are you saying, I suppose?"

Subaru: "Like there's any damn what. If she's still around then this isn't the time to be doing this. I mean yeah my Shamac doesn't compare to your one, but with just that..."

Beatrice: "That your powers of perception are this poor is pretty pitiful, in fact."

Subaru furrows his brows in irritation at a stunned Beatrice.

Beatrice looks to be very optimistic about things, but that's because she doesn't know how persistent or frightening Elsa is. If she knew how abnormal that murderer was, she would likely make to understand Subaru's caution.

Subaru's internal thoughts present uninterrupted on his face. Beatrice this time gives a completely stunned sigh.

He doesn't understand her reaction. Beatrice, from her place in front of Subaru, slowly steps aside.

Beatrice: "If you don't understand it, then look clearly with your own eyes, I suppose."

Subaru: "—ue, oe,"

Beatrice gets out of the way, and the scene she had been blocking now enters Subaru's vision. A groan escapes his mouth in seeing it.

Beatrice: "You ask what happened to the terrifying opponent, in fact?"

Subaru has no response to Beatrice's bragging.

Behind Beatrice—with purple spears skewering her limbs to the hallway wall, staked through the heart like a slain vampire, dangles Elsa's corpse.

Corpse—yes, no mistake, that had to be a corpse.

Subaru: "She's dead... right?"

Beatrice: "If it's still alive after having its chest bored open and being this riddled in wounds... then that isn't a human anymore, it's something else, in fact."

Subaru stands up, fatigued and shaking his head.

A terrible dizziness assaults him the moment he stands, his upper body swaying. A hand promptly comes from aside to support him.

Subaru: “S-sorry...”

Beatrice: “It's fine...”

Beatrice averts her gaze and avoids looking at him. Subaru leans some of his weight on her palm as he drags his feet over to Elsa.

Her head hangs limp and a spear has half-severed her long braid. Skewers to her knees and elbows pin her firm to the wall. The painful severity of it makes Subaru want to look away—but he nevertheless approaches close enough to be in breathing range, checking that the murderer is truly devoid of breath.

No respiration here. He reaches out, touches her motionless body. Still warm—but she gives no reaction particular to the living. He touches her neck. No pulse.

And most importantly even with Subaru's utterly undefended behaviour, no surprise attack comes.

Subaru: “S-she's really dead...?”

Beatrice: “That's what I've been telling you, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Being someone who knows her strength, couldn't just agree so easy. ...Can hardly believe, seriously, this is possible...”

Subaru winds up dumbfounded at the unreal victory.

He had thought her an enemy he needed to defeat, but hadn't anticipated that Beatrice would solo her this easily. That said none of the outcomes he had anticipated allowed for any victory without Garfiel.

Subaru: “Puck and Emilia took her on together and still couldn't finish her off, this chick.”

Beatrice: “...If Bubby were serious, then this shouldn't have been any match for him, in fact. And Betty too, perfect as I am now, wouldn't lose so easily as humans do, I suppose.”

Puck being serious—most likely, that meant his form as an enormous lion-beast. Indeed considering that he freezes the world simply by existing in that form, Subaru doubted that even Elsa could stand any chance. Beatrice would also be a spirit possessing corresponding power, then.

Four hundred years—an overly huge discrepancy in time lived in apprenticeship.

Subaru: “Ri, ght. Rem!”

After a period following his confirmation of Elsa's death, Subaru jerks around to face the room. Frederica's grisly cadaver remains leaned against the door.

Somehow managing to get her stiffened body out of the way, Subaru puts his hand to the blood-slaked door. He takes a breath, readies himself, peers in. And,

Subaru: “—Rem.”

He calls. She doesn't answer.

But, Rem lies there on the bed in her sleep with her breathing even, and Subaru finds not single hint



of the massacre outside having reached this room.

Elsa had not entered here.

This proved that Frederica's earnestness as she died protecting this door had excelled the abhorrence of the murderer.

Subaru: "...I am so sorry for doubting you, Frederica."

As he strokes the forehead of the lovely, sleeping girl, Subaru again apologizes to the woman put to rest in the corridor.

No longer did her soul exist anywhere in this world. Subaru's words would never reach her.

Beatrice: "What will you do now, I suppose?"

Subaru: "We can't leave Rem here. Frederica, and Petra... I'm thinking of leaving her to the villagers in Arlam, and having them look after her."

Beatrice: "You're fine to do that, in fact. She would be delighted too, I suppose."

Subaru: "If I were in a situation where I could care for Rem then that's all I'd want to be doing. But I can't. I... need to be taking you to SANCTUARY."

He glances back, still touching Rem, his gaze meeting with Beatrice's as she watches him from the doorway. She snorts.

Beatrice: "How nice of you to decide that, in fact. Our talk was simply interrupted before and is yet proceeding, I suppose."

Subaru: "Well I know. This's my answer to that. —I am never going to kill you, I'm dragging you out of this mansion, and I'm taking you to SANCTUARY. Itinerary planned."

Beatrice: "Selfishness in the extreme, in fact. You ignore Betty's objection, and try to force your opinion through. —How do you dare, and who do you believe yourself, that you can speak this garbage, I suppose?"

Subaru: "If your objections were what you really felt then I would give them some thought."

Beatrice: "—What do you mean, in fact?"

Says Beatrice, her voice low, exerting a pressure near to threatening. Feeling something close to goosebumps run across his skin, Subaru nevertheless gives his head a small shake.

Subaru: "It's not like I clearly understand the minute details, either. Just, I'm thinking there's still more needed to dig out the true fundamental part of you."

Beatrice: "—Don't, I suppose."

Subaru: "The relationship between you and SANCTUARY's still hanging out in the air there. Your

relationship with the test site Echidna made. ...Honestly, I don't have a very good hunch."

Beatrice: "Stop, probing in fact."

Subaru: "Declined. ...If it's not me, who's going to bust in and figure you out? All you ever do is hole up in that damn room."

Beatrice falls speechless.

Seeing that, Subaru turns back to the bed and picks up Rem. He would take her to Arlam village, entrust her to the villagers, and head to SANCTUARY with Beatrice.

If they had Gate Crossing's assistance things would move quick, but he wouldn't ask the impossible. Returning to SANCTUARY while riding Patrasche would likely end up taking half a day.

Subaru: "You can be unwilling to go to SANCTUARY, but I'll still be asking Roswaal and the Lewesans about you. And if I can, ask someone more fundamentally involved, too."

When Subaru truly craved with the WANT TO KNOW, the Witch of GREED would answer.

It was Now. He had more information in-hand than previously, and the accordant hypotheses. If he went Now with all these new mysteries, he felt he could likely be invited again to the castle in a dream.

He also felt that then, he could likely unveil the secrets of SANCTUARY, and truths behind its notable cast that everyone had held their tongues about.

Subaru: "Whether it happens before long or after long is the only difference. Though I get your feelings of not wanting to purposefully speed things up of your own accord."

Beatrice: "How far do you intend to go in making idiots of people, I suppose...!"

Subaru: "Idiots? That wasn't what I was tr..."

Beatrice: "You merrily intrude into places where people want no intrusion, dishevel and disturb them, put them in disarray, and then you spew this drivel, in fact? Put an end to your ridicule, I suppose. And so easily, you abandon the dead two."

Subaru: "—"

The last of Beatrice's words strikes Subaru with a scathing pain. He grimaces.

An instant of hesitation appears in Beatrice's expression, perhaps wondering whether she went too far. But, she immediately conceals it beneath a cool facade.

Subaru: "Petra and Frederica're... after I hand Rem to the village, I'll lay them to rest. With Petra there, I mean I can't just say nothing."

Noticing that what he's saying smells of excuses, Subaru starts walking, his face hopefully out of Beatrice's view.

Her statement had skewered Subaru through the chest.

While he had received a shock from Petra and Frederica's DEATHS, Subaru had already determined

to reset this world. Repelling Elsa was one of his benchmarks and he had succeeded in it, but the sacrifices paid to achieve it had been too large. Too many painful things were present in this world for it to continue.

Being the person who had barked “Don't die!” at Beatrice, he certainly feels a shamelessness. I can, you can't—the pinnacle in selfish logic.

Subaru: “Well whatever's happening with our going to SANCTUARY, anyway it'll have to be after we sort out the mansion. Our talk'll be after that.”

Subaru passes by the Beatrice standing in the doorway, continuing to walk to the corridor. Beatrice says nothing, but seems willing to silently join Subaru.

Being that she was not permitted to suicide, Beatrice had to rely on another's help if she was to meet the END. She couldn't independently act to encourage it. Whatever her thoughts may be, she had to stay within Subaru's reach.

The guilt is enough for Subaru's self deprecation to boil up—Knowing her situation and still acting like this? A cruel man indeed.

Subaru: “—oe?”

Subaru, sick of how grungy his thoughts are, abruptly cries out.

Because of a light impact. The touch of a hand pushes at his back, and with Rem still in his arms he unwittingly pitches forward.

He sloppily catches himself, and glances back to discover the perpetrator Beatrice behind him.

Subaru's brows furrow, wondering whether this was revenge for his previous statements, and he opens his mouth to complain—

Beatrice: “—a,”

—When he notices the dull gleam stabbing out from the girl's chest.

Subaru: “—Wh,”

The blade piercing through Beatrice's back and out her chest slowly drags from up to down—from her breast, on descent to her belly.

Beatrice's small body shudders with the movement of the blade.

All Subaru does is watch on, dumbstruck.

Beatrice: “...Now,”

She mutters.

Subaru stands still and stupid at the sight. Beatrice raises her head to look at him.

Her expression, her eyes, tell of the great breadth of her emotion.

Beatrice: “Finally...”

Subaru: “Wai...”

Beatrice: “—u,”

Not even Subaru knows what he was going to say.  
But, before that unknown feeling can take form, Beatrice slips a ragged breath.  
With that sound as the end, Beatrice's body morphs into a concentration of dim light, within a single blink turning to yellow light particles and dispersing to nothing.

Her little frame, curly cream pigtails, charming peevish face, extravagant and cumbersome and well-suited dress, all of everything, fading away—

???: “—My, a shame. I try cutting open the belly of my first spirit, and it disappears.”

There, at the spot where the vanished Beatrice had been. Half a step back there stands a woman holding the weapon which had stabbed her.  
Subaru had immediately deduced her identity the moment he heard her voice and saw her blade. Immediately deduced it, however the reason he had not immediately deduced it was because his brain rejected this as possible. But even his stunned consciousness recovers after a handful of seconds, and Subaru grits his teeth.  
His molars crack. Tasting blood, he glares ahead, screams.

Subaru: “—ELSAAAAAAAAA!!”

Elsa: “There's nothing you can do now, is there?”

The pommel of the kukri bashes the side of his face.  
His head cracks at the hard impact, his body unable to counter the force as he is slammed against the wall. The only resistance Subaru manages is to keep ahold of the Rem in his arms.  
Blood spills from his split head, his vision dimming to black with the intensity of the blow, his will to fight failing to reach his limbs. Nevertheless, Subaru catches Elsa in his strobing vision, her nimbly juggling the kukri in her hands, him spitting hatred.

Subaru: “Wh-y... the fuck're you alive. I was pretty damn sure I confirmed you dead...!”

Elsa: “Why, you're right. I did die. If you'd gone on to burn me to ashes, then I probably wouldn't be here now.”

Subaru shivers.  
The speared Elsa assuredly had ceased of biological function. She had died. Unmistakably. So, what was this Elsa before him? Was he having a nightmare where shockingly Elsa had duplicates like Lewes?

But blood yet drips from this Elsa's limbs, her cloak shredded and re-purposed into a covering for her destroyed chest.  
The vestiges of battle thick upon her designated this as undoubtedly the same person. The only issue here was her being alive.

Subaru: “No way... you don't mean, your body's immortal...”

Elsa: “That is definitely a no way. My life is just a little more devious than that of a person. Now

nevermind that, that girl certainly did quite a number on me. I can count on my fingers how many times my body has been this ravaged.”

Subaru: “...What a coincidence. I can count on my fingers how many times I've been tortured to death on your par, too.”

Subaru's statement is sardonic, but not a joke. But Elsa seems to take it as a jape, her smile deepening as she pivots around. Her finger holds down her half-severed braid as she silently looks down at Subaru.

Elsa: “I hadn't heard about her.”

Subaru: “...Then would you like to pretend you hadn't seen her and overlook this?”

Subaru doesn't think Elsa will accept his proposal, but he still needs more time before his limbs will start listening to him. He must buy time with this ridiculous conversation.

Elsa: “This was a surprise for me as well, so I wouldn't particularly mind, but... The spirit girl, and the big maid. The little maid was added later.”

Three targets. Beatrice, Frederica, and additionally Petra.

Even with his consciousness soldering white, Subaru strains his ears to focus on the essential part. Rem's absence on the target list was probably because Elsa's employer had forgotten about Rem's existence. He had entirely thought that that had been Frederica, but her death debunked that speculation.

Subaru: “Yeah, you fucking liar.”

Elsa: “Liar?”

Subaru: “I mean Frederica. —In the Forbidden Archive you talked like you'd only killed Petra, but look at that.”

Subaru brings attention to Frederica, laying aside the hall. Elsa looks over at her, gives a comprehending nod, and looks back to Subaru.

Elsa: “It wasn't a beautiful end.”

Is all she says.

There is no way Subaru could understanding the aesthetic sense of a murderer. It's a stolen life, and this is the crap she comes up with? Fury wells up inside him, but faced with Elsa and her readied kukri, even that vanishes.

He wants to get one over on her, but his body had not recovered enough to be capable of possibly attacking Elsa.

Falling before Elsa's knives, just like this, was pretty much standard practice.

—So here was where this try would end.

As he recognizes the impending DEATH, what skirts through Subaru's mind is the information he acquired this loop, those new incomprehensible mysteries. His exchange with Beatrice, and that final look he saw on her face.

Why had the girl going I WANT TO DIE PLEASE KILL ME I WANT TO DIE PLEASE KILL ME ultimately shoved Subaru out of the way? Her promptly noticing Elsa's survival and pushing Subaru out of danger meant what, exactly? Subaru didn't want to be enough of an imbecile to not understand it.

Elsa: "Those aren't eyes I'm fond of."

Subaru: "Huh? —Ghbha!?"

The kukri's pommel again smacks his face.

His left cheekbone shatters, several cracked teeth falling to the floor. He crumples—when another strike hits him across the opposite side. Seething pain races through his right eye, and with a flash of her knife his left ear cleaves away.

The blade and pommel proceed to switch turns in shredding, breaking, tormenting Subaru's body. She fails to grant the imminent DEATH he had anticipated, gifting him only pain and pain and pain and pain as he writhes, spitting blood and wails.

Elsa: "Struggle to the last moment that you still retain life. Don't, and what is the meaning in living?"

Subaru: "...I don't wanna hear any lectures on life and death from you."

Smack. His forehead splits open, the insides of his skull almost feeling to spill out as he collapses. His consciousness grows distant with the hard impact. Subaru can tell his body is being dragged into a steadily cooling world.

This is probably where he dies.

Even if it's just a loss of consciousness, what happens when you fall unconscious around the GUTHUNTER? Subaru can figure the answer.

This was the end. This loop stops here.

Next time, no blunders. Next time, definitely.

That expression, he saw last, he could not forget, so he, no matter what.

Subaru: "—Beatrice."

In the final moment of the girl who had asked for her death were her eyes, wet with tears.

With that sight still seared in his mind, Subaru's consciousness—slowly—swallowed into darkness—vanished.

## CHAPTER 64: WORLD CRUMBLING

The first thing Subaru registers when he wakes is the horrendous pain racking his body.

From his neck upwards sports a particularly awful ache. Left cheek, around his right eye, molars incisors, left ear—bring up the topic and the enumerations would never end, strewn with all these injuries.

Using his tongue to probe about his mouth, Subaru discovers his two missing molars, one missing incisor, and one missing canine. With this done he opens his eyes to survey his surroundings, where he now also comprehends that his right eye is swollen and blocked.

Subaru: “Thh, hies...”

Some sloppy noise spills from Subaru's bleeding, tooth-deficient mouth.

A coldness scrapes over his oral nerves with every breath, and though he'd prefer to breathe through his nose, his dried nosebleed clots that route shut. Gasping, spitting the blood from his mouth,

Subaru: “No way... I, didn't die?”

Dragging along his over-damaged body, Subaru's abhorrent physical condition informs him that he has inadvertently survived.

He gazes about with his halved vision to find himself collapsed in a dim hallway. No signs of people around. He recollects on the exchange he had before losing consciousness.

Subaru: “Elsa, 's...”

Gone.

Or at least, she is nowhere that Subaru can see her.

She is a woman who operates in the shadows. She may possess a skill to make herself imperceptible to others even when they are looking straight at her—but she would have no reason to use it.

Elsa is gone. She disappeared. Without killing Subaru.

Subaru: “Why, would... no, more importantly...”

His mouth bleeds with every motion. Annoyed Subaru spits the blood out as he shakes his head. He moves all points of his body about, attempting to discern which areas hurt and which areas are non-functional, when he notices.

—Notices that in his arms, there is something warm and taking faint, repeated breaths.

Subaru: “—Rem.”

The lovely blue-haired girl. The sleeping girl, who inspired him.

Rem's pulse quietly thumps in Subaru's arms to its beat. Her shallow breaths, definite bloodflow, red-touched skin—the rhythms of life remain present in her.

Subaru: “—”

Emotional, Subaru unwittingly puts more strength into his hold.

Taking advantage of her lack of reaction, he hugs her small body close as he relishes in her warmth. As if meaning to perceive through his skin the proof of her being alive.

Subaru: “Why, did she leave... without killing me or Rem...?”

Killed Petra, killed Frederica, extinguished Beatrice, and regardless the murderer left without taking the lives of the present Subaru and Rem.

Were his memory correct, before Subaru lost consciousness he had been begging for Rem's life. Elsa had given a reply which could be interpretable as acceptance, but could she shockingly have kept her word?

Subaru did not think himself capable of understanding the mind of the lunatic GUTHUNTER, but perhaps Rem's saving had ultimately resulted from that.

Subaru: “But then... why me...?”

He'd be killed—was what he thought.

Elsa had at least flourished her knife while harbouring clear malevolence toward Subaru. His fractured bones and cut flesh clearly communicated him that truth by way of pain.

So then even moreso, why on earth had Elsa allowed Subaru to live?

Subaru: “Anyway, for now...”

There's no way he could know. With a shake of his head, Subaru strains his aching body as he lifts Rem up.

Taking Rem's light body in his arms, the side of the hallway—where Frederica's corpse yet remains—is where he looks. He determines what it is he needed to do.

—First, he must put Frederica and Petra to rest.

Subaru: “But rationalize it as an ending world, and there's no point...”

*That action is sentimental, irrational, and wretched,* is the self-deprecation in his mutter.

Subaru had already determined to reset this world by his DEATH.

Far too many things had been lost. There were things he had gained, but those gains protected not a single one of the things he had wished to protect. In the same degree as he had been, or perhaps greater, Subaru had lost. And Subaru lacked the courage to live in a world with too many losses. If paying with his life would bring them back, then he would hesitate not at all.

This world was a world ending.

Petra's death, Frederica's death, Beatrice's death, everything was within his ability to redo.

His promise to Petra, his apologies for doubting Frederica, his definite answer to Beatrice's grief, would all carry to the next world.

Should he rationalize matters like that, then mourning their deaths truly carried no meaning.

Because if Subaru alone could endure, then the sentimentality left to a disappearing world would not be anything to remain in anyone's memory.



—Were he able to rationalize this far, Natsuki Subaru would surely be capable of more swiftly surmounting this loop series—but, well.

Subaru: “Resolve, ability, determination... it's always that I'm lacking in everything. Why am I just so weak? Huh, Rem?”

The girl in his arms gives no answer.

For Subaru as now, the only place he could voice his weakness, display his weakness, was with her.



—Subaru discovered it not many quarter-hours after determining to lay Petra and Frederica to rest.

Subaru: “Hell, what?”

Says Subaru stupidly as he witnesses the object occupying the space before him.

But, surely no one could fault him. The object before Subaru was just that strange, arcane, with no hint as to its bearing.

It was a pink-toned wad of meat—would perhaps be a close description.

Its shape was that of a globe of dirt packed together by a child, distorted, this spherical wad of meat. That explanation alone likely conveyed the oddity of it, but there was more reason than that for Subaru's bewilderment.

Subaru: “Huge—”

The meat wad was gigantic.

It was big enough that Subaru was looking upwards at it, its fillings packed together tight enough to communicate a heavy sense of mass. Its shade and texture resembled the fresh pork or poultry sold in a processed meats aisle. That said, Subaru lacked the courage to touch it and verify.

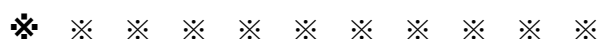
As far as Subaru could see, the meat wads numbered to about twelve. All shared the same size, scattered about the place and visible.

Subaru: “Hell is this...?”

Still confused and without any answers, Subaru repeats the same question yet again. His head slowly turns to look over the area.

Subaru: “Where did all the villagers go?”

Standing in the middle of the depopulated Arlam Village and surrounded by meat, Subaru mutters in stupefaction.



—Subaru's venture to Arlam Village was undertaken first to find helpers in preforming funeral rites for Petra and Frederica, but mostly to inform Petra's family of her death.

He was ready to be punched, and to be sworn at.

It was the same sentimentality he had in the mansion. But nevertheless Subaru could avoid this pain. He could hide the truth of Petra's death, and reset the world without the villagers ever knowing.

If he hid away in his heart his responsibility for having let Petra die, and could proceed with dreading only his guilt, it would probably be a grace.

But then he considered whether he would forgive himself for doing that, and couldn't.

Subaru: "Ultimately though it's probably just my self-satisfaction."

He had devised to inform Petra's family, then bury the two.

Subaru did not know what he should do to preform funerary rites for Beatrice. Spirits left no corpses. Their nigh refreshing manner of disappearing conversely robbed Subaru of feeling any truthiness to Beatrice's death.

—*Then just maybe*, was the breed of stubborn thought he wound up thinking.

It was in that neither proactive nor pessimistic mindstate that Subaru came to Arlam Village.

He brought Rem with him, intending to request someone look after her while the burials were happening.

Subaru reached the village where he searched for sight of the villagers, walking around the place, and there were the wads of meat.

Subaru: "—Everyone's, gone."

Subaru temporarily deposits the Rem in his arms against one of the village houses, proceeding to run all through the village.

The congealed blood on his sweaty brow moistens, painting his face in red, his state atrocious.

Should the villagers witness Subaru now, the proper reaction would be to greet him with a horrified shriek.

But not finding anybody who will shriek at his appearance, Subaru returns to sit beside the sleeping Rem, utterly lost.

—When he saw Elsa had disappeared from the mansion, Subaru had had a thought of, *it couldn't be*.

This was Elsa, who during the rigamarole in the Royal Capital, had instantly decided to murder everyone involved. Perhaps unsatisfied with only the mansion residents, she had proceeded to brandish her knives in Arlam Village.

He mulled over various reasons for her disappearance as he ventured to Arlam Village, with this thought comprising a segment of his unease. But what welcomed Subaru was a situation far beyond his expectations.

Wads of meat, and missing villagers.

—A bad vision rises up in his heart, but Subaru unconsciously ignores it.

Subaru: “No one's here so, nothing to do here. ...Have to, bury them quick.”

Subaru picks up Rem and leaves the village.

The enormous, motionless wads of meat remain as they are. Subaru feels not any castigation in leaving them undisturbed. He would prefer they not remain in even a crevice of his memory. God, his head could burst.



Petra and Frederica's burials ended with unanticipated simplicity.

He arranged their appearances for their interment, wiping their bloodied skin and faces clean with a cloth. He changed them into new sets of clothes with shame. And of course, no indecent feelings welled up.

When he took their cold, stiff bodies to pass their arms through the sleeves of their clothes, he wanted to cry. But his eyes would only grow drier, his heart imprisoned by an incomprehensible emotion.

Subaru: “...At least, have peace.”

Above their graves he prays for their repose.

While of course Subaru does not know the etiquette for prayers in this world, neither does he know the methods for seeing off the dead in the old world. All of his relatives were in good health, he had never attended anyone's funeral, and the protocols of Japanese secular practices had never been in his interest.

He regretted that now.

—That he does not know either the words or the etiquette for interring them frustrates him greatly.

Subaru: “And I caused you problems, too. Thank you, for helping me.”

Subaru reaches out, and the black ground dragon draws its snout to his fingers.

Her legs dirtied with upturned mud as she concernedly approaches Subaru is Patrasche.

Subaru had found Patrasche in the stables, where she so escaped the massacre, and acquired her help for burying Petra and Frederica. The clever girl had immediately understood Subaru's urging for her to dig, and beside him as he shovelled the dirt with a spade-resemblant tool, with her feet she dug a grave for the larger Frederica.

With powerful kicks and her legs slaked in mud, the black dragon yet remained a thing of dignity and beauty. Subaru again feels intense gratitude for her presence.

Subaru dug Petra's grave. She was small, but without desire for her to be cramped, the unfamiliar tool ultimately tore the skin of his palms numerous times.

Blanketing with dirt, watching Petra's form disappear from view, abruptly tears fall to his cheeks. He does not wipe them dry.

He gives Frederica an identical farewell, crafts simple grave-markers for them, and deems the burial over.

That was the finishing of one task, but rather than lightening, the weight on his shoulders only compounds.

Subaru: "...There's no point being here anymore."

The irreparable slaughter at the mansion has already ended.

He carves the events into his memory. His regret in having bid the two farewell, too, carves it deep and strong and unforgettable.

This remorse engraved in his soul would he assuredly, at his next chance, sweep clean.

Once he achieves that, Subaru will for the first time be able to take responsibility for these DEATHS.

Subaru: "Once we've checked what we should, let's return to SANCTUARY. —Rem, can't be left behind she's coming too."

The sun slowly begins its descent.

This duskening world was, if Subaru's knowledge was correct, now welcoming the night of the third day. They check what they should and leave the mansion tomorrow morning, and they should reach SANCTUARY before the fourth night.

He had a day and a half of free time until the fated sixth day.

What changes would have occurred in SANCTUARY during Subaru's time absent?

Matters could conceivably follow a similar route as when Garfiel attacked and imprisoned Subaru. In that case, Otto and Ram should start acting on the fifth night to evacuate the villagers.

Subaru: "Before that happens... yeah."

Garfiel was another concern.

Subaru had utilized a forceful method to block his pursuit by using Lewes as a shield. His imagination surely couldn't conceive just how much he had infuriated him.

He also had to inform Garfiel of his sister Frederica's death. Doubting her as a betrayer, and taking no advance measures to save her was Subaru's failure.

Likely he would have to resign to Garfiel's rage, taking every hit.

Subaru: "Let's go back to SANCTUARY. —I miss Emilia."

Thinking of these incidents which beleaguered his mind, Subaru's sincere desires idly slip out. It could have been some breed of whimpering.

But now, what he honestly wanted was to see her again.

He wanted to see Emilia's face. To touch her.

He wanted to keenly feel her presence, and for his heart near moments from breaking to be healed. These thoughts were the magnitude of Subaru's exhaustion.



—It is when he enters into the region of the forest nearby SANCTUARY that Subaru notices the abnormality.

He rides mounted on Patrasche with sleeping Rem hugged to his chest. Patrasche had looked ready to collapse with this arrangement, but fortunately being that Rem twitches not an inch, Patrasche perfectly compensates for her master's incompetence and they proceed along the road without problems.

She fails to achieve the full sprint she done had while travelling to the mansion, and with the time to traverse the path back amounting to seventeen hours, their arrival date winds up as the fourth night. His planned allotment of time inside SANCTUARY thus shrinks from a day and a half to a day.

It's a necessary use of his time. He naturally has no urge to blame Patrasche.  
But what Subaru had miscalculated on was,

Subaru: "Seriously don't do this... what the fuck is going on!?"

The road to SANCTUARY, in the forest with the barrier—partway along the route, a stinging chill starts to encase the world.

Trees of green have their leaves coated with frost and their trunks frozen with thin sheets of white. Puddles freeze to ice, wintry patches dotted and perfect along the road.

An abnormal drop in temperature—with the cold being even worse than in midwinder, Subaru holds Rem tighter, letting out a white puff of breath and looking around the surroundings.

As always the woods are relatively devoid of critters, but even the trees are losing their vitality in this cold. That the forest lacked any preparations for this extreme chill itself provided best proof that this cold was absolutely not a natural phenomenon.

Subaru: "So cold that everything in front of you's white... only, bad premonitions here. Patrasche."

Patrasche: "—"

Subaru: "Hey, Patrasche?"

Spurred on by the foreboding rising in his heart, Subaru attempts to hasten Patrasche—but said Patrasche gives no response.

Subaru's brows furrow as he looks down at his black dragon—to find her feet stopped, and her breathing terribly ragged.

Subaru: "Patrasche!"

Subaru panickedly tugs the reins as he calls Patrasche to a stop, dismounting and reaching his fingers out for her neck. The scaly texture of her skin feels the same as usual, but is horrifically cold. Subaru figures it out.

Subaru: "You don't mean, ground dragons have trouble with the cold? They look reptilian, and winter" toka ha doushiteru mon nanda.

Many reptiles like lizards and snakes hibernate to get through the winter. Patrasche, who shares lots of visual resemblances, might have the same constitution as reptiles.

If so, then having Patrasche march into this cold was suicide.

Should Subaru's imaginings be correct, the cold will only grow harsher the closer they travel to SANCTUARY's centre.

Subaru: "It'll be tough for you to come along... right. Got a feeling that the dragons left in SANCTUARY're gonna be in danger at this rate."

He strokes a shivering Patrasche. It's likely nothing more than an empty comfort for her, but she does draw closer as if clinging to the touch.

Proceeding on toward SANCTUARY without Patrasche is going to take even more time—but even if he did continue travel alongside her, she would just collapse partway through the journey.

Subaru: "Patrasche. I'm sorry but could you leave the for... no, return all the way to the mansion?"

Patrasche gives a sad snort.

But the smart girl comprehends Subaru's thinking, her physical condition, and the state of the forest ahead. Subaru piles her with some soothing words, and eventually she gives up on resisting as she bows her head to Subaru.

He gives that head a good pat, retrieves some clothes and foodstuffs from her luggage, and puts the extra clothes on to counter the cold. He identically dresses Rem in a jacket, ties the luggage to her and picks her up.

Subaru: "The road to SANCTUARY's dead ahead... yeah?"

Patrasche: "—"

Subaru: "Now don't you look so worried. I'm the one here worried about you. It must've been painful, and I'm sorry for not noticing sooner. Wasn't thoughtful at all, I am seriously sorry."

Subaru bows his head. *You don't need to do that*, says Patrasche's little growl. She starts walking to exit the forest, Subaru watching her go until she disappears from view.

She doesn't look back once. Simultaneously she possesses a dignity which thinks not highly of displaying rue, and a kindness to prevent Subaru from feeling responsibility.

She is entirely too good for him, thinks Subaru.

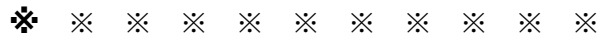
Subaru: "Patrasche'll safely get out. ...She was worrying about me infinitely more than herself, just, fuck."

He fixes his hold on Rem, the frost crunching underfoot as he walks onward.

Breath white and amidst a cold threatening to send his teeth chattering, he walks further on, further on, his destination SANCTUARY.

Subaru: "What happened here, Emilia..."

—And calls the name of the girl who is surely in the heart of this cold.



Forcing his numb feet forward he inhales, exhales, inhales, exhales shallow through his shiver-gone lips. He strongarms his eyes somewhat open despite his sticking eyelashes, managing to preserve his hazy, white vision as he proceeds through the forest.

—The frigidity enveloping SANCTUARY far exceeded Subaru's slipshod imaginings.

He feels that his body temperature may be dropping with every step taken in deeper. His skin has long lost any feeling, his body now supported by a ghostly sense of duty, the will to move forward, and—

???: “—”

In his arms, her vital signs pumping away so steadily as to give no hint whether this environment is affecting her, Rem's presence.

He walks straight ahead, aiming entirely for SANCTUARY—supposedly. He cannot tell by his sight whether he is travelling in the right direction. All he can do is trust on this intensifying glacial cool that he is proceeding correctly.

The snow amasses up to his shins, the atmosphere of the forest having completely switched to winter. A power influential enough to transmogrify the world. Subaru did know of such.

Subaru: “—”

He forces his mouth open, panting, seeking air. His skin peels from his sticking lips, pain prickling, blood oozing. The tip of his tongue catches the faint warmth of it, and he recognizes that his core still has yet to be wholly frozen.

He can keep going. He can do more. There is nothing he has verified yet. Here, he stops here, and what were all the sacrifices for?

Subaru: “—au,”

Noticing something cut across his stark white field of vision, Subaru stops still. He rubs his near-closed eyes open, straining to see the irregularity. Its contour gradually focuses to take the form of a person, and in fact one Subaru knows.

Subaru: “Lewes, -san?”

Lewes: “—”

The girl wordlessly responds with only a gaze.

Seeing that, Subaru instantly deduces that this is not LEWES, but a LEWES MEYER double. Simultaneously, he deduces that if she is a Lewes double, then Subaru would possess the command right for her.

Subaru: “Perf, ect timin... Please guide, me to SANCTUARY.”

???: “She ain't gonna be obeyin' 'yer request.”

Breathing out faltering puffs of white air, Subaru addresses the Lewes double. But, their exchange is interrupted.

Subaru raises his head. Instantaneously, somebody drops down into the snow beside her, lands.

Submerging into the snow with a crunch is this young man.

His hair is blond and his eyes are sharp, and he exerts a hostility liable to slaughter Subaru at any moment.

Subaru: “Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “‘Sup, how dare you come back. Pretty fuckin' impressed yer did. Well thy'do say THE BOW OF A LYIN' BETOON IS SPLENDID.”

His incomprehensible sayings in healthy condition, the person clicking their fangs at Subaru is Garfiel.

He looks down, pissed, at the panting Subaru—when he spots Rem in his arms, and his eyes snap open with shock.

Garfiel: “Eh? Hell's Ram doin' with... no, that ain't Ram. Eh? What's goin' on here? Who's she?”

Subaru: “I'll explain, dubious whether it'll communicate. ...She's Rem. Ram's, legitimate younger sister.”

Garfiel: “I ain't ever heard anythin' 'bout Ram havin' a sister... but 's slightly impossible t'be dismissin' this as a lie, oi.”

Since Garfiel hasn't immediately attempted to kill him, Subaru judges that he is still being rational and puts off his deciding on whether to turn tail and flee for later. He looks at the Lewes double standing quietly beside Garfiel.

Subaru: “What do you mean she isn't going to listen to me?”

Garfiel: “...’S pretty fuckin' simple. After yer left SANCTUARY, my amazin' self immediately went t'th'test site. N'so, all I did's overwrite th'command right n' get it back. Had another unpleasant time 'cuzza it.”

Subaru: “The command right transfers that easily?”

Garfiel: “Th'point 's ya just touch it. S'the same damn thing 's what you musta did.”

'It' would be the crystal sealing the original Lewes Meyer. If touching the crystal is the requirement



for transferring the command right, then of course Garfiel went and got it back. Either way.

Subaru: “It was really considerate of you to go out of your way to welcome me.”

Garfiel: “I ain't plannin' t'chat 'round with yer bullshit. Take a look at the place and yer should figure out that any room fer happy conversation came n' went ages ago, yeh?”

Subaru: “Okay, yeah. ...So, kinda asking point-blank here.”

Subaru nods at Garfiel, gives a small shake of the head, breathes in, and—

Subaru: “—Is Emilia doing this?”

Garfiel: “Ain't got any clue. 'Cause after all, she ain't comin' outta th'tomb.”

Subaru: “She isn't coming out of the tomb?”

Subaru furrows his brows at the unexpected reply. Garfiel clicks his tongue in annoyance, and gives the snow underfoot a magnificent kick.

Garfiel: “Th' half-witch turned fuckin' weird th'day you disappeared. Think she's calm, and then sh'shuts herself up 'n th'tomb. And b'fore y'know it, SANCTUARY's covered'n more ice thn' what's ever gonna be fixed. —Exactly, like Elier Forest.”

Subaru: “You know about Emilia's...!”

Garfiel: “Y'think I ain't ever heard about it? Roswaal's a disgustin' prick, but if th'question's a needed one he'll answer it. And so my amazin' self ain't trustin' any fuckin' Emilia-sama.”

Spits Garfiel. Subaru's expression sharpens. Garfiel instantly draws near to Subaru, who neither has any capacity to react or ability to do anything about the Garfiel standing before him.

Garfiel: “That expression 's fucking pathetic.”

Subaru: “Wha—!?”

Garfiel's hand shoves Subaru's chest, and he gracelessly proceeds to topple to the ground.. He panickedly attempts to protect the Rem in his arms, but his arms only catch air. Because,

Subaru: “Y—Rem!”

Garfiel: “Y'mean, give 'er back? Hey now, there's some pretty heavy attachment y'got. What happened t'th'girl yer love bein' Emilia-sama?”

Garfiel snorts, hitting Subaru right in a sore spot.

In Garfiel's arms is the stolen body of Rem.

Frantically getting his numbed body into motion, Subaru attempts to cling onto Garfiel—who hops

backwards to open range, giving Subaru no means of catching up.

Subaru: “What're you, gonna... to Rem!”

Garfiel: “Ain't like I'm gonna have anythin' bad happen t'her. That'd be what yer'd call bein' unreasonable. And my amazin' self's a reasonable guy. Things that ain't got any proper sense to 'em make me sick.”

Garfiel's eyes as he looks down at Rem indeed host no hostility.

At very least, Garfiel's character is not so twisted as to injure a girl whose face is identical to his sweetheart's.

*Then why*, are the words Subaru almost gets out, when Garfiel speaks first.

Garfiel: “You get in the tomb. —And then, you pull the half-witch out.”

## CHAPTER 65: PASSION IN THE SNOW

Dragged along to the tomb, and in vicinity of its entryway Subaru is hurled to the ground. Perhaps call it snow, perhaps call it frost, Subaru spits out the sherbety crap having entered his mouth. Mistaking the pain of his exposed skin for numbness, he looks back behind him.

Subaru: “You've sure got.. some rough treatment going here.”

Garfiel: “I ain't clever enough t'be considerate. Y'sh'd be happy still that yer gettin' th's rough treatment. 'Less yer sayin yer want this girl t'be gettin' it?”

As he looks down at the collapsed Subaru and breathes with white puffs, Garfiel presents the Rem in his arms for show.

A hostage—may not be how Garfiel conceives it, but regardless he has unmistakably acquired resources for coercing Subaru.

Subaru: “Don't you do anything funny... with Rem.”

Garfiel: “So long's yer thinkin' t'follow my demands, I won't.”

Says Subaru quietly as he touches his hand to the ground and its blanketing of falling snow. He strains his numb arms to somehow push himself up to his feet. Standing right beside and looking vacantly at him is the Lewes double, who had carried him here.

She looks scruffy as always in her garb of rags. In this cold Subaru feels it far too shabby a cover.

Subaru: “Can we do something about their clothes? ...She looks so cold, I can't keep watching.”

Garfiel: “Y'know what th'y are, yeh? They don't come with any sense'a cold in 'em in th'first place. If yer gonna be buyin' time, we got no reason t'talk.”

Subaru: “Stop with the skepticism. I don't think any time-buying is going to make this situation turn better, either.”

With his vision stuck in a near-blizzard and Garfiel's warning at his back, Subaru turns to face the tomb.

The ancient stone structure dimly rises from the world of white. Even amid with this raging phenomenon of nature Echidna's tomb remains calm, eerily waiting with its mouth open wide for its next challenger.

Emilia, supposedly, is inside.

Subaru: “How long has it been since Emilia went in?”

Garfiel: “‘Since night 'a day before last, so comin' up t'two days now. Though talkin' honest, so long as she ain't dead I couldn't give a crap.”

Subaru: “From your position, I'm sure that's right. ...You couldn't go in and pull her out yourself?”

Garfiel: "I can't go in th'tomb. There's a contract."<sup>3</sup>

That convincing line expressed the entirety of Garfiel's position.

Subaru couldn't tell how much about this the residents of SANCTUARY knew, but Garfiel had indeed ventured inside the tomb before. There he met Echidna, acquired the right to be Apostle of Greed, and gained qualification over the Lewes doubles' command right.

That said Subaru didn't know why Garfiel was hiding this, and hindering SANCTUARY's release.

Subaru: "If I go in and ask Echidna... might find out."

Garfiel: "Stop it with yer mumblin'. I told you t'get in there. Pull the half-witch out, and get her to end this snow. Don't, and I'll be havin' t'do somethin' my amazin' self ain't wantin' ter."

Garfiel easily hoists Rem up as his cheeks pitch upwards. The smile doesn't suit him, but Subaru knows he is fully capable of actualizing his threat. Regardless what his sincere views on it are, if it's to protect SANCTUARY, he will likely have no difficulty in turning his claws on one, two girls who look like his crush.

Subaru: "Don't do anything to Rem. —That's my condition."

Garfiel: "...Just go."

Subaru begins his course for the tomb, Garfiel staring intently at him from behind.

He doesn't know Garfiel's real motive. Which is when Subaru remembers that he has forgotten to convey something.

Subaru had lapsed on telling Frederica's younger brother, Garfiel, of her death.

All he could figure was that the cold, the anger, had driven his head funny.

Was he sane right now? If he was sane, then how?

Petra died, the Frederica he doubted was innocent, he returns to SANCTUARY and to find this. His relations with Garfiel were at their worst, and he had no means of knowing whether the other players in SANCTUARY were safe.

In circumstances this prolonged and horrid, how could he be sane?

He musn't stop thinking. He musn't give up. He had to look forward, look upward, and to grasp the future worthy of grasping, pile up more and more of what could be piled up.

If he didn't, then why, did Subaru—

Subaru: "—"

Subaru's footsteps peal in faltering rhythm off the dry floor of the tomb.

Unlike the outside, the tomb's interior suffers barely any effect from the raging cold. Complete liberation from the chill—would be a mistake of description—but realistically its effect in this place on Subaru is slim.

By Subaru stepping into the tomb, its functions to welcome the qualified activate, the dim lamps of the then-dark structure catching alight.

---

3 Double meaning. Simultaneously, 'I've made an agreement not to.'

The hazy lights lined along the walls invite Subaru into the depths. In accordance to them, and with the clunky gait of his blood near freezing, Subaru works his limbs to conquer the tomb. At the end of this prolonged corridor is a single, open room.

The site of the first trial—the TRIAL which faced one with their past.  
Having reached this location,

???: “—Subaru?”

The silver bell he longed for welcomes Subaru tenderly.



In the darkness, Subaru fixes his gaze on the silhouette before him.  
His vision start adapting to the dusky tomb, and once that long silver hair and those enrapturing amethyst eyes burst into his sight, Subaru cannot prevent himself from calling her name.

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “Yes. You're right, Subaru. ...It's me.”

Putting those short four syllables to sound, and then getting a reply, Subaru could about collapse. *Exaggerating it*, he thinks—but the unassailable emotions are there.

Dolor, languor, fatigue.

Etcetera. The feelings slamming Subaru had been many, but by making Emilia's presence, the sentiments he had pulled taut and kept from consciousness now lead his knees to falter.

Subaru pitches forward near falling—when the outstretched arms catch him.  
Soft, warm. Immediately in his view as he looks up is a beautiful ivory visage, looking back at him.  
Subaru forgets the entire situation as his breathing catches in shock.  
Emilia, just now, had caught him gently in her hold.

Subaru: “Ss, war, sorr... lost, my strength...”

Emilia: “It's ok. It's not like I'd think you were purposefully trying for it. And even if you were trying, I would've probably anyway caught you like this.”

Speaking over Subaru's explanation, Emilia blocks his route of escape.  
Since she gives not any chastisement but in fact a kind assist, Subaru gives a deep sigh of relief—and immediately notices that Emilia's condition is off.

Emilia is being no different from usual.

Kind, gentle, a dash of airheadedness, overflowing with compassion, cute, even her somewhat childish aspects another point of allure—no different from usual, at all.

The ordinary for this Emilia was the same ordinary as when she leisurely passes her time in Roswaal's mansion.

This was not the ordinary for an Emilia who had failed to conquer the TRIAL and been cornered by her feelings of duty.

Subaru: “E-Emilia... when I was away, um...”

—Was there something that happened to change your mood?

Intending to ask that question, Subaru chooses his words.  
But before they can come from his mouth,

Emilia: “—I was lonely.”

Subaru: “...Huh?”

Not catching Emilia's murmur clearly, Subaru furrows his brows.  
Should he raise his head, he would find that silver countenance directly at his side. Her eyes stare at him from range close enough to feel her breath, Subaru straining his attention to assuredly catch every single word this time.

Looking Subaru straight in the eye, Emilia,

Emilia: “I was lonely, Subaru. —I mean, you left me behind.”

Subaru: “Au... no, that... you're wrong. Abandoning you, or whatever wasn't what I...”

Emilia says nothing.

Subaru: “I'm sure I said this in the letter too, but... there's something I had to do. And so for just a little while, we can't be together. I am so sorry for making you feel lonely, Emilia. I made you feel like that, but I that thing I had to do, I wasn't even able to do properly, and...”

Emilia: “Heehee.”

Subaru piles up the excuses as Emilia's eyes gaze at him. But before he can conclude his excuse, Emilia slips a laugh.

All Subaru can do at that reaction is stare.

While he was talking, and during such a strained situation, Emilia laughed?

What was there to laugh about here? And even before that, Emilia isn't supposed to be a girl whose personality would allow her to choose that reaction.

Emilia: “Nooo need to explain so hard, I won't be angry. Subaru, silly, your face's so pale... hehee.”

Subaru: “E-Emilia...?”

Emilia: “I said it's all ok, Subaru. You left me a letter, and you wrote so much, so much, sooo much

in it all for me. I was lonely, and I did think about crying... but, with all the times I read that letter...”

Emilia's smile deepens.

In that enchanting, lovable smile is a sweet whisper near clutching Subaru's heart. Learning that Emilia had valued his letter, and had even used it as a mental support, could almost make Subaru's heart soar with fiery passion.

But putting the reins on that torrent of passion threatening to drown his consciousness, Subaru inevitably feels a foreboding about the irregularities bubbling up from Emilia. Something was off. Something was strange. This awriness had proceeded to here without a single improvement.

Off, something was. Awry. Even though, Emilia was being this adorable. Even though Emilia was being this adorable, and answering to Subaru.

Subaru: “Emilia... what happened with the TRIAL?”

Emilia: “Trial...”

Subaru: “That's right, the TRIAL. That's why you're in here, yeah? Making you go in alone must've been so painful for you and I am sorry. I wanna apologize for that, and I wanna know what happened. Really, it couldn't bother me in the least whether it was a failure, but being that you're here now...”

Emilia: “Failure, yes, a failure. I can't overcome the first TRIAL, my past. And all this when you were expecting from me, and worried about me, I'm sorry.”

Subaru: “Ah...”

Subaru regrets the husky noise which slips from his throat.

Emilia might have perceived that sound as being disappointment. If so, then that would immediately betray his recent statement of 'Don't worry about it'.

That panic dashes wild through Subaru—when, a smooth touch makes contact with his head. Emilia. Had just stuck her fingers into Subaru's hair. And was patting his head.

Subaru's eyes flit about in shock, uncomprehending of her intentions. Emilia grins at his surprise, her cheeks dying with red.

Emilia: “Subaru, don't you sometimes want to touch my hair? Well I was thinking, sometimes I also want to do things like this to you. Heehee, Subaru, sooo many openings.”

Subaru: “Emi, lia?”

Emilia: “I thought, what if it went on, what if it went on that you abandoned me, and you were always going to be gone, what would I do... I thought about it so, soo, sooo much. I thought that would be sooo scary. And so, when you came back to me, I was happy.”

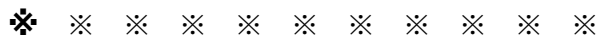
She had only just stated that she had failed the TRIAL, but the only thing Emilia's eyes are seeing is

Subaru. Those fiery eyes, those watery eyes, gazing at Subaru.  
And how Subaru had longed for this day to come.  
How he had yearned for her to call his name with that fire, for her to gaze at him passionately with those teary eyes.

To relish this instant, this passion, was what everything had been for.  
Which was why—

Emilia: “Subaru. Why don't we be together forever? Be with me. Darling if I could only have you, then, there's nothing I would ever need any more—”

—He had never imagined that the day Emilia blindly sang her love for him would terrify him this much.



Subaru still in her arms, Emilia speaks and speaks with fever.

Emilia: “Subaru when, I first heard that you were gone, it was sooo painful. It scared me. I mean, I, couldn't do it right at all. ...And so, I wondered if you were fed up with me. When I thought that, it frightened me and scared me, my body wouldn't stop shaking...”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “But, I saw there was a letter, and of course I knew it was your handwriting, and my fear settled all down. You're amazing Subaru. I thought it was so scary, and you blasted that feeling away for me... mm, and then I thought, I really am always being saved by Subaru.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “And what the letter said, made me happy too. You wrote lots and lots for me so I wouldn't be worried. It took you sooo much time. And that you were using your time for me, and during that, must have been thinking and thinking and thinking about me, also made me happy.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “And lots of times in the letter, Subaru, you said that you—LIKE—me. Back when you told me that in the carriage too, I was sooo happy, I cried... but still when I read the letter, I almost cried again. That's how big the thing you're giving me is... is the thought I had. And then I noticed.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “And so when I saw that you came back to me, I couldn't stop it any more. In my chest, in the deepest part, there's a little me who's calling your name, Subaru. And so, I wanted to reach out like this, touch you, so much...”



Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “Subaru. I'm sorry for up to now. I've always been doing something awful. This is how you felt about me, and I always made you have to cope. That that was something sooo awful of me, right now, I sort of understand.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “Feeling like this, but still having to cope, was really painful for you. You were coping, and I was being so selfish. I was supposed... to want to think about you, to understand you, but I didn't understand you at all.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “But, not any more. Now I'm always thinking about you, Subaru. Always thinking of you. And the same way you said you... like me, how you think that about me... now I might, also... want to think like that, about you, maybe.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “Orr I mean, I'm sorry. That was unfair of me. You might've been scared, and not known what I'd think, but Subaru, you told me clearly.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “And so, me too, I'll say it clearly. —I will state.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “Subaru. I, like you. And, I love you. I want to be with you, thinking about you, only about you, always with you.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “If you could think the same, about me... I'd be happy... yeah.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “Eheheh. Mm, mhm... I like you. Subaru... love you.”

## CHAPTER 66: CRIMSON SNOWSCAPE

—Seeing him exit the tomb alone, Garfiel's antagonism escalates to most pierce Subaru's skin.

Inside and outside the tomb suffer an incredible difference in cold.

Compared to the residual warmth still somewhat present inside, the frigidity of the open SANCTUARY quietly chips away the stamina and body heat of anything standing in it.

Unending blizzard, and blinding curtain of white. The white puffs of Subaru's breath could almost freeze, the shivers welling up from his core unassailable.

Subaru hugs his shoulders, shivering. Garfiel glares at him.

He clicks his bared fangs, focusing his attention on the scene behind Subaru.

Garfiel: “Ain't lookin' like she's gonna be showin' up from 'hind yer back, oi.”

Subaru: “No, she's not. Emilia's inside, sleeping right now.”

Garfiel: “Sleepin', huh?”

Subaru: “She's exhausted. For two days, she's been waking up then doing TRIAL. Waking up then doing TRIAL then waking up then doing TRIAL on repeat, it looks. Her body and mind are spent. And she hasn't been eating. She's pushing herself too far.”

Considering the feelings of an Emilia who unwaveringly made repeated challenges of the TRIAL, but regardless failed to conquer it, Subaru can imagine her frustration and disappointment in herself. Since unmistakably, it would feel equivalent to the powerlessness Subaru himself had confronted on many occasions.

Subaru: “—”

Deep in the tomb, Emilia sleeps in the TRIAL room with her expression blissful.

Recalling her body's heat in her long embrace as she whispered to him her blind amour, Subaru is stricken with a love strong enough for his blood to flare, and a regret strong enough for him to wish to die.

Emilia's voice trembling in passion, cheeks red, as she spoke every word Subaru desired to hear—the entirety of her emotions that she tempted to drown him in—both happenings he now could remember.

And how had Subaru thought—well say suppose he drown in that tender depravity, and sink there together with Emilia? Nobody could know.

Subaru denied the temptations of Emilia, who could entice even gods, and exited the tomb.

He had no intentions of telling Emilia about the circumstances outside. He also had no intentions of allowing her within range of Garfiel's hostility.

In contrast to Subaru's quiet determination, Garfiel's blazing rage shows no sign of snuffing out. He kicks at the snow underfoot, his white fangs clicking and clicking.

Garfiel: “Yer ain't pulled out th'half-witch. Snow ain't lookin' t'be stoppin'. Y'come back with no souvenirs and a face sayin' yer thwarted. Just what're y'plannin' t'give up t'settle this mess?”

Subaru: “—So well Emilia, she said she likes me.”

Garfiel: “...”

Garfiel: “...”

Garfiel: “...”

Garfiel: “...*Huh?*”

Most likely, Subaru's statement is incredibly out of place here. For an instant Garfiel's expression changes, as if he doesn't comprehend what he has just heard. But he immediately judges that Subaru is making a fool of him.

Garfiel: “Seems ain't just th'half-witch who ain't seein' what th'situation is, you ain't seein' it either! Th'fuck're you fuckin' able t'say th't fucking bullshit n' all this, oi! Oi! OI! AHH!?”

Garfiel's rage seethes hot, the snow contacting his body evaporating to white mist. That his body appears to swell in size is no illusion, but occurs because he allows himself to start shifting from human to tiger.

Subaru's expression stays completely unshaken.

It remains identical to when he made his statement, his eyes still dry as he looks at Garfiel. Subaru repeats it.

Subaru: “Emilia, said that she likes me, that all she would ever need is me.”

Garfiel: “—Y'fuckin'...”

Subaru: “With a cutesy face, needy voice, tingly gestures, close enough I could melt, us touching each other within breathing range... she said that, to me.”

Garfiel: “So fucking what! That th'half-witch's glued stuck t'yer 's somethin' y'shoulda goddamn figured out when y'got here! 'F yer sayin' yer want congratulations fer yer two's gettin' on th'same page, my amazin' self's fang's'll explain it well n' clea—”

Roars start joining Garfiel's curses, his animosity urging along the changes in his flesh and near ready to pounce, his words piercing Subaru.

—This was the limit.

Subaru: “...As, fucking if.”

Garfiel: “Eh? Can't hear ya, try speakin' cle...”

Subaru: “—As fucking if Emilia would say she likes me!!”

Garfiel: “—hk”

Subaru screams.

The torrent of emotion is enough to shut even Garfiel's mouth. Subaru glares at the flinching Garfiel, expression agonised as he allows his heart to erupt.

He takes the words they shared in the tomb, their heat, their definite love, and dumps it all.

It's painful. Of course it's painful. But those things, hard as they were to abandon, truly radiate with no brilliance for him.

How nice it would've been if he were foolish enough for that fake gleam to possibly deceive him.

That Natsuki Subaru was incapable of being that much of a fool was his misfortune.

Subaru: “Like she would fucking say that. Emilia telling me she likes me... letting me spoil her, leaving everything to me, if I'm around she needs nothing else... never.”

Garfiel: “F-fuck're you goin' on about, oi.”

Subaru: “She'd never be that kind of dependant on me, never tell me her feelings for me are her everything, ever. —If Puck were here, she would never be engrossed in me like that.”

Subaru didn't know on just what magnitude he longed to be Emilia's number one.

But Subaru lacked the self-worth, and thought not low enough of Emilia, to conceitedly claim that he was presently in that position.

The person Emilia put her greatest reliance in, who she clung onto until the very very end, was Puck.

Puck was not appearing before her now, and so she had chosen Subaru as her secondary target for her dependence. It was nothing more than that.

Subaru would prefer not to believe that her love confession, fevered fingers, shaky breaths had all been lies.

Would prefer not to believe it, but—legitimate, they were not.

Raising his head, Subaru glares at Garfiel. This time, it's Subaru who bares teeth.

Subaru: “Who cornered her so hard that she has to cling to a hopeless loser like me? Where her heart's been broken so many times over and over... but she still thinks she has to keep going, who!?”

Garfiel: “Oh but ain't this something needing doing! Oh but ain't this something chosen 'cuzza you! Y'saying this's my... n' that this's th'fault of the others in SANCTUARY, huh!?”

Subaru slowly shakes his head.

The person who corned Emilia was who?

No need asking. Subaru knew.

Subaru: “There's no question whose fault it was. ...It's my fault.”

Garfiel: “—Hha!?”

Subaru: “It's my fault. That Emilia was that driven into a corner is unmistakably my fault. My fault, your fault, all your faults.”

Garfiel: “...Stop yer bull. If sh'strains under th'load 'n gets crushed, then ain't that just her calibre! With a heart prepared that weak 's was pretty fuckin' impressive what a high goalpost sh'put up, 'course she's gonna wind up gettin' a joke made of her!”

Subaru: “Yeah. You're exactly right. Emilia's too gentle to deal with heavy pressure straight-on. And so since she had nobody she could be open about her burden with, it crushed her. —Even though really, that's what I needed to be doing.”

As if become one with the white snowscape, Subaru can tell his heart is growing cold.  
What it is he has to do feels to have been clearly stipulated.

Subaru: “Right. That was something I need to do. I'm here, for that. ...I'm the one who said those words to you, and what on earth was I doing...”

Garfiel: “Fuck're you just 'greein' t'yerself about, oi. ...No, nevermind. Just never, mind. Sittin' here chattin' along to yer bullshit ain't gonna lead t'nothin'. UNQUENCHABLE IS THE THIRST OF MORDOBA. 'F yer can't do it, then...”

Subaru: “You'll go in the tomb and bring Emilia out... will you? Are you actually able to?”

Garfiel: “...What're you gettin' at.”

Threatens Garfiel, voice low. Though he says these words with intention to overwhelm Subaru, they conversely prompt him to voice his baseless conjecture.

Subaru: “Garfiel, I already know you're an APOSTLE OF GREED. Since that's the only status which gives privilege to hold the Lewes-san doubles' command right.”

Garfiel falls silent.

Subaru: “So inevitably I know that you, an APOSTLE OF GREED, have entered the tomb before. ...No, maybe saying 'have taken the TRIAL before's more correct.”

Garfiel: “—You, fuck.”

Subaru: “You've challenged it, the TRIAL. Dunno why you're being so stubborn about hiding it though. Maybe 'cause of the arrangement where SANCTUARY residents can't enter the tomb, but if not... then for Lewes-san who went inside the tomb to save you.”

Garfiel: “—hk”

Garfiel's complexion shifts.

Yes, family is indeed a sensitive spot for him. Seeing the despair in Garfiel's expression, Subaru

continues crafting his conjectures simultaneously as he voices them.

Subaru: “Frederica told me you'd entered the tomb before. I know Lewes-san's been inside, too.”

Garfiel: “Th, at... snitch! Just leavin' th'place was't enough for her, she's toadyin' t'outsiders again!”

Subaru: “What, there someone out there where it'd be bad for that to get out? And besides, who're the people of SANCTUARY contracted with anyway? The one who made SANCTUARY was the Witch Echidna. So, the people of SANCTUARY're upholding a contract with the deceased?”

Garfiel: “I ain't allowin'—”

*You to say anything more*, is how Garfiel kicks off the ground, becoming wind as he flies at Subaru. At short-range those sharp, steel-rending claws aim for Subaru's face and—

Subaru: “—The one causing this snow is Roswaal.”

Garfiel: “—”

Hitting the core of the matter, Garfiel's claws stop narrowly before they can reach Subaru's face. Stupefaction rises on Garifel's expression. Subaru nods.

Subaru: “It's not Emilia. Puck's not here, Emilia can't do this. Million in one chance, even saying Emilia was the agent for this, it's impossible she'd talk to me without bringing it up.”

Garfiel: “Th, at's... another're, one're your convenient imagination...”

Subaru: “You're right, all I'm doing is believing. Even if she explodes under despair, she's not a girl who'd throw a tantrum messing up everything around her... that's what I believe in.”

Process of elimination. But that said, it's certainly not groundless.

Subaru: “The one binding you all to SANCTUARY's also probably Roswaal.”

Garfiel: “Did Frederica tell you that one, too?”

Subaru: “No way. ...It's me putting together information and circumstantial evidence, and then having enough preconceptions and enough of a bad impression that I don't mind making false charges. —Looks like I was right, though.”

Garfiel: “—”

Subaru sighs.

—This was the exhaustion brought about by person he had thought the mastermind actually being the mastermind. It's obvious that Roswaal has some plotting going on, but what's the purpose of preserving the contract which imprisons the residents of SANCTUARY, and then making them suffer in the snow? Subaru thinks and thinks, but can't find any real answer.

Subaru: “Gotta go directly have his face eat a good whack.”

Mutters Subaru with determination. Garfiel lowers his arm.

Subaru can tell that, just like him, Garfiel's expression is cacophonous with emotion.



Roswaal: “—Why now, yooooou certainly doooooo look mad.”

Says Roswaal to the visiting Subaru and Garfiel from atop his bed. He smiles cheerfully in his clown makeup.

Subaru: “Yeah. Right now, I'm pissed. And nevermind me, you can tell that he's ready to go flying at you any moment now? Be a little careful in what you say.”

Announces Subaru as he stands with arms spread, blocking the doorway. He jerks his chin at Garfiel, who is emitting a low growl.

The bestial cadence to his breathing proves that he's using the last of rationality to keep human form. And although indoors, the low temperature still creeps in through the stonework of the building. Both Subaru and Roswaal are breathing white, Garfiel's alone bathed with enough heat that each exhale could nearly be red.

Roswaal: “An iiiiiiinteresting assemblage. Although, my belief was that you had blustered to rend Subaru-kun apart froooooom top to bottom upon his return, Garfiel?”

Garfiel: “Situation might'a changed 'n inch. I don't confirm 'f I really got it wrong, and I don't know who's okay t'turn t'flesh paste.”

Subaru: “Stop having this horrifying conversation so naturally. And you too Roswaal, don't accept that kind of ridiculous statement like it's normal.”

Subaru's exchange with Garfiel when he departed SANCTUARY for the mansion left him with some horrendous self-loathing as well. Garfiel had more than likely not forgotten that shame, and imagining him slinging curses at Roswaal and Emilia was not exactly difficult.

Roswaal shakes his head.

Roswaal: “Nooo, nooo.”

He closes one eye, gazing at Subaru and Garfiel only with the yellow.

Roswaal: “This is how it is when that is how it is, yooooou see, Subaru-kun?”

Subaru: “Well now aren't I hated. This's making me sad, Roz-chi. Garfiel could gobble me to bits and you wouldn't think a thing.”

Roswaal: “Myyyyyy my, now there was some faintheartedness. Were you and Garfiel to combat, it iiiiiiiisn't a definite that Garfiel woooooould be the victor, yes?”

Subaru: “You think I can win? You hear my battle record, and yes even you'll be trembling in your boots.”

Subaru's been constantly getting new injuries since being summoned to this parallel world, but his experience in prevailing solo in a FIGHT is practically none.

Beating the three stooges, barely managing to fell an ulgarm, and getting the killing blow on a dying Betelgeux would be about it.

Subaru: “Actually that's more successes than I thought, but if I'm up against fit feisty Garfiel I'm a meat wad in two seconds. I can at least do that much self-analysis.”

Roswaal: “I wonder. My belief is it would be a surprisingly good struggle, shoooooould the requirements be arranged.”

Says Roswaal, eyes narrowed as he gazes Subaru from top to bottom. Subaru attempts reflecting on those words, but unfortunately finds nowhere he can agree with them.

He discards Roswaal's statement with shrug, Garfiel near simultaneously stomping the floor broken.

Garfiel: “Nunna that crap matters right now! The shit we need t'be talkin' 'bout is somethin' goddamn else! Are you two asleep?”

Swears Garfiel at Subaru and Roswaal, teeth bared as his heel forms a crater in the floor.

Doesn't seem impulsive Garfiel is fond of bantering to control the conversation before entering the main topic. This is however an unfamiliar and moreso unfitting art for Subaru so called finesse.

Subaru nods, following with Garfiel's stance.

Subaru: “You're who's making it snow outside, Roswaal.”

Roswaal: “—”

Subaru waits quietly for Roswaal's answer. Silence falls upon the room, the only echoes being the howl of the freezing wind outside the window, and the steady clockwork rhythm of Garfiel's clicking fangs.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Yeah.”

Roswaal: “—Did you hear about this from me?”

Subaru: “—”

And the response is a nonsense question.

Subaru had run multiple simulations of what answer Roswaal might have offered.

A bold laugh and a “Well deduced!”. A pattern showing his unease, “W-what kind of idiotic... proof,



show me your proof!”. And what was the most likely contender, “I’m afraid I don’t quite understand what you’re taaaaaalking about,” a dodge.

Roswaal’s response is none of these.

Subaru: “Like damn whatever, we’re talking to you right now about it so how are we having this conversation. That some slip of the tongue or.”

Roswaal: “Hhr, hrm.... Well then. Well then. Weeeeeelll then. ...Unfortunate.”

Says Roswaal, eyes downcast as he gives a weak sigh.

His face is always pale, but somehow now looks even more devoid of strength. Subaru perceives this as unrelated to his wounded physical condition, but resultant from the state of his heart.

Roswaal: “—Yooooou’re correct. A slip of the tongue, that was a slip of the tongue. What I said was ludicrous.”

When Roswaal brings his gaze back up, he immediately retracts his previous statement and gives a thin smile.

His red-painted lips are grinning, but Subaru views it as being different from usual.

However, paying no heed to whatever trifling changes in Roswaal, Garfiel steps forward.

Garfiel: “Not fuckin’ denyin’ it, oi?.”

Roswaal: “You don’t think that, being subject to suspicion, any words I could string together would ring unconvincing and false? I’m furthermore coooooonfident that my usual statements and behaviour, even in the best of circumstances, have not gained me the trust of either oooooooof you.”

Garfiel: “So yer goddamn know it. Then yer should be able t’tfigure my amazin’ self ’s gonna move next... yeah!?”

Spitting a sharp breath, Garfiel’s body turns the distance between himself and Roswaal from ‘several steps’ to ‘zero’.

He reaches out his arm to grab Roswaal’s throat—with the split-second movement, Subaru’s reaction time cannot call out to stop him.

When—

Garfiel: “—You.”

???: “I will pardon no discourtesies to Roswaal-sama, Garf.”

—Ram flies in from the room adjacent, catching both Garfiel’s arm and body in check.

His right arm gripped firm before his chest, Garfiel glares at the Ram in front of him.

Her sudden appearance surprises Subaru, who had not even realised she’d been in the house, but her actions have allowed them to avoid any instantaneous bloodshed. He sighs in relief.

Which is why—

Roswaal: “Ram. Truly, an excellent servant you are.”

Ram: “Yes, Roswaal-sama.”

—Subaru finds nothing strange about their exchange.

Ram had put herself at risk to protect her master, and Roswaal was praising her. There is nothing strange about it. Ram had indeed done her job.

What's the problem here. Subaru looks up, brow furrowed in thought.

Subaru stands in the bedroom doorway. In front of him is Garfiel's back, with Ram's small frame opposite. Behind the two is the bed, where Roswaal is to be lying for his recuperation.

—Since when has Roswaal been standing up?

Subaru: “—”

It had happened instantaneously, Subaru figures.

In the space of a blink, Roswaal had gotten up from the bed, and walked over to the live-coals situation with Ram and Garfiel.

Where he,

Subaru: “—”

What was happening here.

It's almost like there's something, which looks sort of like an arm, sticking out from Garfiel's back. That thing, piercing through his chest and out his back, with its five squirming fingers, Subaru considers as being somebody's right arm.

Garfiel: “Ghbn, bg...”

Garfiel's body shudders violently.

Scarlet starts to ooze into his jacket, and his knees verge on failure. Unable to support him, Garfiel falls to his knees as the arm disappears from his back.

Immediately, having lost its plug, the hole overflows with great volumes of blood.

Garfiel: “—Hh?”

Garfiel hunched on the floor. Looking down at him are Ram and Roswaal.

And sticking out from Ram's chest is—

Ram: “Rauhz...”

Roswaal: “Truly, an excellent servant you were.”

Ram attempts with frail voice to call his name, when Roswaal gently interrupts.

His left hand tenderly strokes Ram's pink hair. Ram, cheeks dyed red and expression intoxicated, accepts it.

—From the corners of her smile leak belated trails of fresh blood.

Well of course.

She's been skewered through the chest from behind.

The arm exits her.

Ram's small body fails to withstand the light shock, collapsing forwards.

What catches her, likewise cascading incredible quantities of blood, is Garfiel.

He holds the collapsed Ram in his arms, hoisting her upright.

Garfiel: "Ghh... Ros... Ra, hm... Ram, Ram, Ram, Ramramramramram!"

The instant of hatred dominating his heart is drowned to nothing by the sight of his love.

Garfiel screams again and again the name of the girl in his arms, roaring up blood as his hands start emitting pale-blue light.

Subaru knows that vivid gleam is what brings the effects of healing magic.

While not his speciality, Garfiel is someone capable of administering it.

Garfiel was presently, with a fatal wound gaping through his torso, pouring his everything into healing Ram.

Matching in rhythm to the beat of his heart, Garfiel's body starts to morph.

Fur blankets his exposed skin, his fangs begin to grow, his pupils instantly slit. His body mass compounds massively, tearing through his clothes.

He's transforming into a simpleminded tiger. His bestial instinct to protect his wounded body is struggling viciously with his rational human desire to keep his beloved alive.

However,

Garfiel: "—"

Roswaal: "Your transforming would truly be a nuisance."

Says Roswaal with a light tilt of the head, swinging his leg with his target as Garfiel.

That long leg becomes wind, flashing to slam exactly into Garfiel's head—there comes the cracking noise of an eggshell, and like a joke Garfiel's head bursts off in crimson.

Garfiel's body, absent the neck up. Blood spurts from his severed nub like a fountain, fouling the room with its stench as his corpse collapses onto Ram.

Ram, now pinned, remains with a thin smile on her face as she lies utterly unmoving.

Garfiel's healing magic resulted to no effect. The instant that Roswaal withdrew his arm, Ram's demolished heart stopped beating.

Garfiel had simply gone without noticing, and strained his entire self for that.

Roswaal: "Eeeeeeeeven I have difficulty utilising other magics when I am casting on the scale of interfering with the weather. —For a court magician, truly a disappointing display."

Rigorously wiping his bloody leg with a nearby bedsheet, this Roswaal who had just killed Ram and Garfiel both unarmed now looks at the perfectly immobile Subaru.

In a tone and bearing completely unchanged from usual, he speaks.

Roswaal: "Now—let us talk. Natsuki Subaru-kun."

## CHAPTER 67: WARLOCK

The only answer Subaru has to the scene unfolding before him is 'incomprehensible'.

Ram submerged in a puddle of blood, and a headless dead Garfiel. At the side of their overlaid corpses stands the one who bare-handedly accomplished this, Roswaal, wiping at his trouser cuff. Even though having witnessed the incredible martial feat, Subaru cannot believe that it was Roswaal who achieved it.

Roswaal L. Mathers was the representative court magician of the Kingdom of Lugnica, who freely manipulated extremely high-level magic, and possessed combat strength equatable to a weapon of war—is what Subaru had heard.

Repeatedly heard. And because he had heard it, he had never imagined that Roswaal would exhibit such destructive capability when unable to use magic.

Roswaal: “Magicians are incapable of martial combat, woooooould be entirely a preconceived notion. Should there have been any who meant to face me as an enemy, naturally all would have figured the same. ...As to what happened to those inflexible thinkers, your eyes caaaaaaan see.”

Subaru unwittingly swallows his breath at Roswaal's perfect reading of his thoughts and his answer. Roswaal traces his finger over the slight bloodspatter on his face, painting over his blue eyeliner with crimson as he smiles.

Subaru: “Wh, y...”

Roswaal: “Hmmm?”

Subaru: “Why, did you kill them... kill Ram? Garfiel's, killing Garfiel's... killing him was, necces...”

Roswaal: “It seemed Garfiel being present would be an impediment fooooooor speaking with you. Regarding Ram, I do believe what I did was inexcusable. But, I'm not so strong as to fight Garfiel in diiiiiirect confrontation. My managing to kill him now was because I struck when he was unguarded.”

Which meant skewering Ram and Garfiel both.

In hearing Roswaal casually announce his reason for killing the two, Subaru's emotions discard their fury, conversely returning to coolheadedness.

Ridiculous answer for a ridiculous situation. If Roswaal is attempting to jangle Subaru around in the palm of his hands, then flying into a rage would be exactly what Roswaal'd want.

Subaru: “...”

Roswaal: “Hrmmmm, uuuuuunexpected. I had thought that saying that would undoubtedly anger you?”

Subaru: “It's done a whole loop around and the anger's flipped. ...It isn't that I'm not angry. Of course I am. Of course.”

Roswaal: “I woouoonder. While this attitude is one I would call desirable, in these circumstances the boy I know as Natsuki Subaru would more thoughtlessly burst howling into a furious insane rage. Woouoouldn't he, Natsuki Subaru-kun?”

Closing his eye, yet again only Roswaal's yellow iris captures Subaru.

Roswaal does this, closing one of his eyes, and looking at the other person always with the yellow. The thought that Subaru himself is being reflected in that blazing yellow is terribly unnerving, and prevents him from keeping calm.

Subaru: “I know that I was stupid, but it's not like I'll never mature. I can at least figure out that flying into a rage here won't accomplish anythi...”

Roswaal: “Noouoooo, but that iiiiisn't it, Subaru-kun. Subaru-kun. Natsuki Subaru-kuuuuuuuun.”

Roswaal smooths down his navy hair with his unbloodied left hand. The grossness of Roswaal's attitude makes Subaru feel something arcane and unfamiliar, but he doesn't retreat. In fact Subaru steps forward, glaring at the clown.

Subaru: “What do you want to say.”

Roswaal: “What do I want to say, is what you ask me and so here is what I would like to tell you. — Congratulations. My welcome. I've been waiting. For you to be standing there, that is.”

A chill like damp fingertips strokes down Subaru's spine.

Roswaal gazes at him, his expression exactly in like with his words, delighted. At that attitude, that delight, Subaru feels an incomprehensible disgust.

Nothing sarcastic at all, Roswaal is overjoyed with Subaru.

Subaru: “You were waiting... for me to be standing here?”

Roswaal: “In this room in in that spot', woouoould be the kind of tedious misunderstanding I'd appreciate you tooooooo discard. I am sure you're capable of understanding that is not what I meant. Since the only one who should be capable of understanding it iiiiis you.”

Subaru: “That only I... can under, stand.”

Bit by bit Subaru's brain pieces together the guide-bereft puzzle. Quietly, steadily, and confused, he links the bits together until he finally starts dimly seeing the completed picture.

Focusing his attention on that picture, the thought of *no way* pierces through Subaru.

Roswaal: “You doooooo understand, yeeeeees, Subaru-kun? Why is it that after witnessing their deaths you can remain calm, maintaining your composure absent any outburst of rage? ...In truth you doooooooo know the reason.”

Subaru: “—”

Roswaal: “You see, their deaths hit you with no great impact. You are surprised that they lost their lives. You surely must be iiiiisindignant. But you feel no woe. Which is why you are incapable of

angering, aaaaaaaand directing at me your fists.”

Subaru opens his mouth to object, but winds up repeatedly closing it without saying anything.

<What the hell would you know!> <You think I'm not sad at their deaths!?!> <Good fucking on you, killing Ram and Garfiel, you goddamn fiend!>

Many contenders come to mind for what to shout.

And in truth, those explosive feelings had already risen inside Subaru multiple times, repeatedly rushing to fly out his throat but instead fading to nothing.

He was mad. He was surprised. He was sad, or should be.  
Should be, but the reason Subaru cannot refute Roswaal is—

Roswaal: “—Because they're recoverable, woooooould be what you're thinking?”

Subaru: “You...”

A shiver enough to freeze his throat clutches Subaru about the heart.

That goes without metaphor, as Subaru truly mistakenly feels his heart being grasped. That is how great of a shock it is.

Raising his head, Subaru reflexively looks about the room, dreading that the black hand may show itself to convey its punishment. This would be the first penalty since rejecting the WITCH OF ENVY. Just imagining what terror the shadow will bring with it overwhelms his heart with a twisting, wrenching pain.

But,

Subaru: “...Won't, come.”

Roswaal: “I don't know what you're so wary about, but... Aaaaaaha, this may be related tooooooo your contract. Iiiiiiii see. In that case, the oddities in your actions and statements until now do make sense.”

Subaru: “Make sense... or no, before that!”

Roswaal nods, hand to chin. Subaru's face pales as his lips tremble.

Roswaal's statements are unmistakably hitting on the core of Subaru, which is to say,

Subaru: “You... noticed my—noticed, what's going on with me!?”

Roswaal: “So long as it stays within the writ, then yes. —You have acquired means to redo. Woooooould be the case, yes?”

Roswaal plainly reveals that he had already known about RETURN BY DEATH.

Subaru swallows his breath, immediately noticing that this situation is dangerous.  
Because now the conditions are exactly the same as in Echidna's tea party.

If Roswaal proceeds to talk casually on about RETURN BY DEATH, the disaster of shadows consuming SANCTUARY will unfold again.

It wouldn't be strange for the witch to, before it happens, in this very instant even, come and snatch Subaru away.

His swallowed breath sinks to his stomach. Subaru gives a deep exhale to get it out, confirming that time has not stopped.

Meaning, the witch's penalty of squeezing his heart isn't occurring. This eliminates the possibility which although unbearable for Subaru, is the most peaceful.

The remaining possibility is—

Roswaal: “—Silence is proven admission, is a phrase I wonder just whoooooo left to the ages.”

Subaru frantically engages in risk aversion as he forces his jumbled head to think. Roswaal seems to get tired of waiting for him.

That statement must have held a rather large meaning to Roswaal, as well. Subaru's wordless ignoring of it makes Roswaal furrow his brows in unusual discomfort.

Roswaal: Weeeeeell, it's all a silly baseless story. Iiiiiiiiis the kind of tiresome obfuscation which in doing you could perhaps say decreases myyyyyyy rectitude.

Subaru: “Y—”

Roswaal: “Oooop, there's fine. My mentioning it is whatever it may be, but should you voice an assenting reply, it will almost certainly prompt nothing good. Which is why you've been unable to reveal your circumstances until tooooooday. Although.”

Subaru bites his lip. Roswaal sends him a glance, his mouth relaxing sickeningly.

Roswaal: “You might've been frightened, of how revealing it would make others regard you.”

Subaru: “—hk”

Roswaal: “Well ooooooof course. Aaaaaaafter all, a power to redo the world is an outrageous, asinine thing. Interfering with time is the pinnacle of the pinnacle of yin magic, and only barely. Creating a stoppage is the best even Beatrice can manage. Running counter to it is surely a dream wiiiiiiithin a dream.”

His unintended true thoughts read into, Subaru remains unable to refute anything. When the sudden reference to Beatrice prompts his face to stiffen in shock.

Subaru's mind flashbacks vividly to that final expression on her face.

Roswaal: “—Seeing that reaction, iiiiit would seem that Beatrice fulfilled heeeeeer role.”

Subaru: “Role... you, about her... right.”

Taking advantage of the conversation's shift away from RETURN BY DEATH, Subaru pulls up his near-overwhelmed consciousness to take a bite out of Roswaal's unruffled face.

Subaru: “So you knew that she was suffering? Always tied to that mansion, clinging to an old promise through some damn contract... which utterly wore her down and she shrank herself up, you knew about her!?”

Roswaal: “Ooooooof course I knew about her. Beatrice and I have known eeeeeeeeach other for a long time. Since birth, in fact. The solitude in her heart is something I have aaaaaaaaaalways known about.”

Subaru: “Then...!”

Roswaal: “Why didn't I do something about it, iiiiiiis something I'd rather not hear. You should know that her sorrow isn't something others can doooooo anything about.”

Roswaal's good logic smacks a bordering-on-yelling Subaru about the heart.

Subaru could reproach Roswaal, screaming to tell him of Beatrice's grief. He could, but it would be utterly pointless.

Beatrice was already dead, and no one could heal her heart's sadness.

Only Subaru, who possessed the sole means to reset, could face Beatrice's final moment indefinite times. But, how to heal her four hundred years of sorrow?

Four hundred years—Not even Subaru had means to travel back that far.

Roswaal gives a small shake of the head.

Roswaal: “Enviably, iiiiiiindeed.”

Subaru: “—Enviably?”

Says Subaru, voice low. Roswaal doesn't notice and nods.

Roswaal: “Yes.”

Roswaal: “She's enviable. Beatrice fulfilled her dearest wish and managed to disappear. That you're here would meeeeeeean exactly that, yes?”

Subaru: “Dearest wish... what? That... dying like that, was her dearest wish—you! You're seriously goddamn saying this!?”

Roswaal: “That would be exactly what Beatrice haaaaaaaad desired. Others have no right to grouse about it, and nobody is able to deny the values of another. Neither you, nor I, have any pardon to sully Beatrice's death.”

Tenable words. Sensible logic. No right, and that was truth.

Beatrice and Subaru were strangers, he didn't understand her wish, and he had never possibly thought in the slightest to attempt to grant it.

But, even so, was Beatrice truly happy with this?



—If she was, then why at the very end did she protect Subaru?

Roswaal: “Beatrice's wish was granted. For me, that is entirely enviable. —As it appears that my wish is not going to be granted wiiiiiiiith me.”

Subaru: “—”

There's something offputting about that phrasing.  
It's not definite where it is. But it is definitely there.

Subaru: “Your... dearest wish, is...?”

Roswaal: “I cannot say. I am in contract where I cannot say, is the only thiiiiiiiing I can say. Speaking this much already is pressing the maximum limit of what I can compromise with the contract. Buuuuuut, this I can say.”

Subaru: “—”

Roswaal: “I am always, always, always devoting my utmost to fulfilling my wish. Not a single one of my actions is without purpose oooooooooor brings me shame.”

Says Roswaal magnificently.  
The bold attitude hits Subaru with a shock. And slowly, inside Subaru a dark, grungy anger boils.

Subaru: “Necessary, you're saying... killing Ram and Garfiel, covering SANCTUARY in snow, all of it... was necessary, you're saying?”

Roswaal: “Hrm, as for the former... no, that would hamper coooooonversation. As for the latter, you are exactly correct, is hoooooow I'll be answering.”

Subaru: “Why!!”

Baring his teeth, waving his arms about, Subaru shouts.

Subaru: “Why the fuck are you doing this! Making it snow in SANCTUARY, pissing around to make the citizens suffer... for what purpose! What is the point in doing this! Go ahead and tell me! Roswaal!!”

Roswaal: “It's entirely obvious. —To isolate Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “—Wh, haa?”

Roswaal: “I will repeat. Snow falls and the residents suffer. Emilia-sama is isolated, and she degenerates into an incredibly unstable mental state. That would be the present situation?”

Says Roswaal as if he's seen it all. Emilia's condition in the tomb is exactly as Roswaal intended. Subaru has no intentions of nicely conveying this truth to Roswaal. Most importantly, Roswaal's statements here are the biggest 'I don't understand' yet.

Roswaal: “This is a witch-related locality, and Emilia-sama is in the middle of taking the TRIAL to liberate SANCTUARY. Shooooould a natural disaster local to SANCTUARY occur during this... just how will Emilia-sama be perceived?”

Subaru: “You...”

Roswaal: “It's at these junctures that guileless Garfiel is useful. He of anyone would immediately doubt Emilia-sama, and proponent that distrust loudly. With the volume of his voice, anyone would think it. —Emilia-sama's actions brought about this disaster.”

Roswaal's readings are correct. Garfiel was dancing right in the palm of his hands.

The foundations for aiming all hostility at Emilia regardless of the presence of SOMEONE ELSE WHO COULD DO IT were present in this locality, in this world.

That was the demon called prejudice which had tormented Emilia for years.

Roswaal: “What happens with the isolated Emilia-sama? Despite everything, Emilia-sama is truly a weak person. It would be no mystery if she wished to entrust all her faith to somebody who would give her approval. And supposing there were some person who also wished to put their everything into supporting Emilia-sama, perfect.”

Subaru: “Wait... wait.. wait, wait waitwaitwait...”

Subaru holds out his arms, attempting to stop Roswaal's talk.

Right now, it felt he was hearing something unbelievable.

Right now, it felt an outrageous truth was being spoken.

Right now, it felt something he mustn't hear was—

Roswaal: “You cannot distance a dependant Emilia-sama. Of course not, you love her. Should your loved Emilia-sama entrust everything to you, you cannot dismiss it.”

Subaru: “That—”

Isn't possible.

That should not be possible.

Subaru had just this loop withstood drowning in a clingy Emilia. Withstood it, and came here.

That did not mean he entirely rejected her temptations, whispers of love.

But, knowing that she did not truly mean it, that creeping engrossment was—

Roswaal: “Is not the present, would likely be your answer. To me, that is merely something unfortunate. There are just a few too many superfluous things with your present self, it'd be then.”

Roswaal takes a single, silent step forth.

His foot lands in the pool of blood, peeling with watery noise. Subaru's body unconsciously freezes.

Subaru clicks his throat at Roswaal's approach.

Subaru: “Thinking to, kill me, then?”

Roswaal: “Killing would be quiiiiiiiiite the bloodthirsty thought iiiiiiindeed. Your dying would be a terrible predicament. As regardless, I need to have you conduct yooooooooour re-dos.”

Subaru: “Whe—?”

For just an instant Roswaal's words dumbfound Subaru.  
But he immediately notices the discrepancy.

Roswaal knows that Subaru can REDO, but not that it is a RETURN BY DEATH which uses DEATH as the trigger.

Thus, his intention is to corner Subaru until he willingly elects to redo. Although that might come alongside more agony than just being instantaneously killed.

If Roswaal has no will to kill Subaru, there's a chance.

Subaru: “—Everyone, inside!!”

Raising his arms, Subaru yells.

The instant that Roswaal's brows furrow, the room's doors and windows, as well as those in the room adjacent and the lounge, simultaneously break. Flying in alongside the frigid wind are small silhouettes—twenty of them swooping down at once, all pink-haired little girls.

Seeing the assembled line of samefaced girls, Roswaal closes an eye as he looks at Subaru.

Roswaal: “I had thought the command right was in Garfiel's possession?”

Subaru: “I was diving into where you the maybe-mastermind'd be. —Bolstered my playable cards.”

—Leaving the tomb, after his exchange with Garfiel.

Subaru persuaded a Garfiel who had intended to immediately proceed to question Roswaal, went to the Lewes Crystal, and overtook the command right from Garfiel.

From there he readied the doubles in wait around Roswaal's recuperation hut, prepared for them to burst in at any moment.

Garfiel's hostage Rem was entrusted to the representative Lewes personality, who brought her to the cathedral where both the evacuees and residents were taking refuge.

Subaru had conceived everything for Roswaal being the perpetrator.

—Although, he naturally hadn't conceived that Roswaal would kill Garfiel and Ram.

Roswaal: “Now what are you planning to do wiiiiiiiiith me surrounded?”

Subaru: “That you're that strong barehanded's a surprise, but here you're outnumbered. If you say Garfiel's transformation's crazy, then numbers'll be tight for you too, though...”

Roswaal's simultaneous piercing of Ram and Garfiel happened because he could not secure victory in a direct fight with Garfiel. That said he is unmistakably much stronger than Subaru, but—

Subaru: “There's twenty so with that strength we'll subdue. Beat you up, pin you down, and have

you talking wholesale about everything you're still hiding.”

Roswaal: “Being under conditions yourself, you should know how important uuuuuuupholding a contract is.”

Subaru: “Bad news, but being that my case's the other guy's just gone off and established it on me, it's the type where attempts to break it get forcibly punished. That it's not coming now means, I'm in the safe line!”

With twenty people gathered in the cramped room, the place is packed. The blankfaced Lewes Meyer doubles follow in accord to Subaru's shout, all with vacant expressions as they leap at Roswaal.

The most that unarmed Roswaal can combat at once is of course two. His manipulating of the weather outside backfires on him, and all that's left is for a magic-incapable Roswaal to be overwhelmed by numbers. It's a narrow victory, but a confident one. However,

Roswaal: “—While indeed I am outnumbered.”

Subaru: “—”

Roswaal: “Confronting a magician opponent with numbers is quiiiiiiiite an incredibly foolish decision.”

Flames race sideways across the room, burning the Lewes Meyer double above its path to nothing. The wall of fire immolates the small, advancing bodies, scorching them head to toe, turning them to garbage and hailing them back into mana.

To Subaru's sight, it was like a wave of red light and heat had swept through the room for only an instant.

Subaru: “You, using magic shouldn't be poss...”

Roswaal: “If I'm manipulating the weather, that is. Uuuuuuunfortunately, I no longer have any reason briiiiiiiing about snowfall. And so, I'd already stopped a while ago. I will say that I'm sorry about noooooooooot mentioning it.”

Subaru: “Wha—ghhu, gaaeh.”

Roswaal flashes to Subaru's side in his instant of confusion, and grabs his throat. Just where do those skinny arms keep all that strength as they easily lift Subaru off the ground? Roswaal pitches the struggling Subaru back and—

Subaru: “Hhgg—”

Subaru crashes back-first through the half-shattered windowpane as he plummets outside the building. The thrown Subaru lands on the snow, tumbles, bashes against a wall to a stop.

Subaru spits the muddy snow from his mouth, shaking his head as he looks up.  
The remaining doubles quietly follow Roswaal out from the house. Being that they were under no orders, the doubles are lost on what to do.  
But Subaru is also lost on what it is he should tell them.

Roswaal: “This much, and you still haven't REDONE. Oooooor perhaps you already have? Thinking about it, what happens to my consciousness when the REDO occurs is a complete unknown. This has become a biiiiiiiiit of a predicament.”

Walking over to Subaru's side, Roswaal tilts his head.  
Amid the pain and choking as he looks up the clown, a sudden question arises on Subaru's tongue.

Subaru: “Rhouz, wahl... you're, asking over and over for me to REDO, but...”

Roswaal: “Hm? You have something important to say? Let's hear, let's hear.”

Subaru: “It's you I've got question with. Acting with presupposition of someone else's REDO, is insane. ...The truth for you, is also?”

Having means to bring your memories over, perhaps?  
It was that way for Echidna in her castle. Perhaps Roswaal also was bringing over memories from previous worlds where Subaru had RETURNED BY DEATH.  
If he wasn't, then Subaru couldn't comprehend his untouchable attitude of desiring a REDO.

Subaru: “If that's right then, fine. But, if it is, then we could...”

Collaborate, couldn't they?  
Being that Roswaal's objectives are mysterious and unknown, he has done many unforgivable things.  
Subaru would surely had no intention to forgive him for killing Ram and Garfiel, or for cornering Emilia. However, Subaru is not blessed enough with conditions where he can rationalize Roswaal's strength as unneeded. Actually, he is very pressured.  
As well be hanged for a sheep than a—or however the saying goes, assuming it applies here, then Subaru is prepared to be hanged for a sheep.

Roswaal: “—It doesn't appear that wiiiiiiiill be happening.”

But Roswaal snaps Subaru's thin strand of hope with a shake of his head.  
Roswaal's gaze has separated from Subaru and his downcast eyes, and his pointing finger—

Roswaal: “Goa.”

—gives rise to a small flame, which sets the region of the forest Roswaal is looking at alight.  
Subaru blinks at the sudden act of destruction, the trees creaking and crackling as they burn, when mixed in with the noise he hears something else.  
—That was the death wail of a very, very small animal.

Subaru: “—No, way.”

Roswaal: “Iiiii see. ...So this is how the end comes.”

Springing to his feet and pale-faced, Subaru gazes around the surroundings. Equally while changing his position on the spot, Roswaal gives multiple sharp clicks of his fingers, each one resulting in the stench of burning flesh and a shrill animal cry running through SANCTUARY. When the scorched *thing* smoulders and drops before his eyes, Subaru understands clearly.

Subaru: “Sizeable, hare...!!”

It's one of the Sizeable Hare.

As the hares begin creeping out from the forest, Roswaal burns them one-by-one with his magic. Groups of them can come out at once, but they are still Roswaal's prey. Faced with a multitudinous opponent, Roswaal lacks the combat power to win. Watching on, a terror grips Subaru's heart and doesn't let go.

He closes his eyes, for the memory of those sharp teeth shredding him to arise. Having his fingers, body, organs, all consumed was a woeful experience beyond description. Subaru hears his soul shrieking at the arrival of the offending witchbeast.

Subaru: “But, it's still the fifth day... there should've been over half a day left!”

Roswaal: “It's the snow.”

Subaru: “Snow—!?”

Roswaal: “It was magic enough to disrupt the weather. Naturally, the mana filling the atmosphere is overwhelming. Further, the snow means everyone in SANCTUARY has gathered in the cathedral. For a nearby witchbeast, it's an iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiincredibly visible hunting ground.”

Subaru shivers.

Subaru: “Then...”

Following that logic, the most dangerous place in SANCTUARY right now is,

Subaru: “Th-the cathedral! We have to hurry to the cathedral!”

Roswaal: “It's too late. The instant they appeared before us and our small number, it meant the arrival of those who had failed to already obtain food. —Eeeeeeeveryone's gone.”

Subaru: “But! That's where...!”

Rem is.

He had entrusted her Lewes, and she took Rem to the cathedral. With the residents of SANCTUARY and all the Arlam evacuees, there would be over one hundred people there. He didn't want to think that en-masse they'd been—

Subaru: “Roswaal! Truce! Okay, to the cathedral! We'll collect the survivors, find them somewhere safe to...”

Subaru closes in on Roswaal, grabbing his collar and yelling.  
But Roswaal gently pushes Subaru's arms away.

Roswaal: “Flee? Where? There's a barrier. The people of SANCTUARY cannot flee.”

Subaru: “Th-that's...”

Roswaal: “There wasn't enough time, Subaru-kun. The residents cannot exit SANCTUARY if the TRIAL is not conquered. Meaning, your wish will go ungranted.”

Crushed, Subaru falls rear-first to the snow.  
The Lewes doubles crowd around the fallen Subaru, on standby waiting for orders in a rather humorous scene.  
Subaru belatedly notices it.

Notices that Roswaal, who had been burning away all the witchbeasts he spotted, had now completely stopped the activity.

Subaru: “Rho-Roswaal! If you slack... you couldn'tve, run out of mana...”

Roswaal: “Nooooooo, I truly haven't? Since in a sense, my mana is iiiiiiiinexhaustible. It doesn't run out so easily. ...What has run out is my reason to live.”

White living fluffballs begin slinking out from the forest.  
They leave little tracks in the snow, same white as their fur, as they indeed approach.

Subaru: “E-even saying I can redo, in this fashion... it should be after we've talked more properly! But maybe you're okay leaving that to the next...”

Roswaal: “It seems you're miiiiiiiiisunderstanding something, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Ah?”

Roswaal: “Even should you redo, I cannot. The present me will not be the me existing beyond your redo. This is my end. —But, thaaaaaat is fine.”

Roswaal's words strike Subaru dumb.

*The redo won't apply to me*, is what Roswaal himself had said. Meaning that Roswaal is merely someone who knows the potentiality that Subaru is RETURNING BY DEATH, and him dying here would mean the end of this Roswaal's awareness.

He accepts that and furthermore is ordering Subaru to redo. Even though he knows that he will not exist in what comes after Subaru returns.

That style of thinking was incredibly,

Subaru: “That's not... how humans think.”

Subaru's consciousness continues. Roswaal is unlike him.  
Roswaal's consciousness does not continue. If he dies, that's the end.  
Recognizing that end, and accepting it like it were ordinary, was abnormal.

Roswaal: "The time will come when you truly outdistance me, Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "Rhos..."

Roswaal: "Liiiiiisten now, Subaru-kun. —It's what's important. The one single thing which is truly, truly important to you. Scour everything but that away. Let go of everything except it, and think only of protecting your single important one to the end."

Subaru: "—"

Roswaal: "You do that, and—"

Roswaal with his fingered raised for lecture.  
At Roswaal's wrist is an approached hare, teeth clamped down. Blood scatters, Roswaal's right arm is gnashed to bits at the wrist—when other jaws sink their fangs into his elbows, shoulders, swooping all down his body, alongside noise of ripping flesh.

Subaru: "ROSWAAAAAAL!!"

Roswaal: "—Even you can be like me."

The body of a hare with its mouth open wide obstructs view of the clown's smile.  
A swarm of hares cloaks Roswaal's body entirely. He falls to the ground, giving no resistance as they devour his flesh. As they devour. Devour.  
Blood showers, meat strews, the white snow dyes with crimson. The hares pain to part even with the crimson snow as they rasp it up too, consuming everything.

Subaru watches simply, silently, as Roswaal becomes nothing.  
He watches the being known as Roswaal disappear from the world, ingested.

—He watches.



## CHAPTER 68: TASTE OF DEATH

—Through a world where everything appears twisted, Subaru frantically runs.

Subaru: “—”

He wasn't sane.

He wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane  
wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane wasn't sane.

In his head, those words repeat and repeat and repeat.

What appears beneath his eyelids as the words replay is the sight of Roswaal's end, felled by the fangs of the Hare.

No resistance, accepting his death so easily, without crying out in pain even once at his shredding flesh, Roswaal allowed his own existence to end.

—Aberrant.

How could this not be called aberrant, and insanity?

If his goal could be achieved in an alternate world, then he was unbothered by his death. Were this a video game, Subaru might have given the player character's death the same significance.

But, it was reality.

How was it remotely possible, in reality, to entrust your life to a different you?

Roswaal had died to the hares. And his consciousness would not return to the world Subaru would reach by RETURNING BY DEATH.

Him staking his wishes on RETURN BY DEATH may be the same as Subaru, but the weight of the levy to get there was overwhelmingly disparate between the two.

Because unlike Subaru, Roswaal could not reclaim the cost.

Subaru: “—eu, gkh,”

He recalls Roswaal's horrendous death as he runs, the nausea plaguing him.

Bile churns, his throat burns with acid. He runs so desperately that even time spent vomiting is a loss, wandering SANCTUARY in hope of survivors.

—Hell was once again unfolding before Subaru.

The snowing has stopped, but nevertheless howling winds whip through Sanctuary.

Subaru grimaces at the skin-shearing cold as he gazes about the surroundings, to hear animal wails from all around, near drowned under the wind.

Grinding, grinding, grinding go the serrated teeth, the whole of SANCTUARY besieged alongside their cries of threat to their victims.

The Sizeable Hare ventures around SANCTUARY in search of prey.

Just how incredible was the hunger, the famine that assaulted them?

Should they sight no prey, and as if finding the time their teeth spent inactive unbearable, they

would stave their starvation by eating their neighbouring compatriots. A genuine, abominable monster.

Hearing the grating noise of gnawing teeth, and the twin cannibalistic wails of death and ecstasy, eats bit by bit by bit away at Subaru's sanity.

Subaru: “—Uawauh!”

Subaru shakes his head to dispel the awful noise, when a hare with jaws open passes over his head. Tooth and tooth click together wickedly. Having failed to catch prey, the hare pivots around with a threatening cry.

Immediately, a Lewes double running alongside Subaru slams her heel into the hare's torso, crushing it. Meat tears and bones rupture, the hare puking its small body's innards out its mouth, dead.

Exhaling, paying the corpse no mind, Subaru resumes his sprint. The Lewes double also gets her feet moving to run alongside Subaru.

Behind them, a short distance away, other hares arrive at the corpse of the crushed. Hearing the noise of the dead body consumed, the bells of ruin inside Subaru ring louder.

Six Lewes doubles remain with Subaru.

Those eleven who had been present after Roswaal died to the hare had had their numbers reduced by half.

Ordered to PROTECT SUBARU, they would counter-attack the incoming hares or otherwise intercept to shield him, returning to mana.

On the topic of ordering the doubles to risk their lives, Subaru's thoughts presently had nothing. Right now all that played on his mind was the safety of Rem at the cathedral, and the presence of Emilia in the tomb, all other topics abandoned somewhere beyond his considerations. That seemed the only way he could either affirm his current conduct, and protect his mind.

Subaru: “The, cathedral's!”

As the snow submerges his steps, as he skirts the hare-infested roads, Subaru takes a huge detour around SANCTUARY to reach the village centre and the cathedral.

In a town devoid any light source, Subaru immediately spots the cathedral.

Of course he would.

—Since amid this world of white, only the cathedral is enveloped in pure-red fire.

Subaru: “—Wh, y?”

Falling to his knees in the snow, Subaru mutters in a hoarse daze.

The crackling of the spreading blaze mingles the sound of snapping wood, Subaru even seeing hares jumping into the flame like moths with intention to eat the prey inside, burning to nothing.

That they are so desperate to enter the cathedral means something to sate their hunger is inside. And that those remain inside the flames, would mean *that*.

Subaru: “—”

Viewing survival as hopeless, and rather than ending eaten by the hare choosing suicide, is a feeling Subaru isn't incapable of understanding. Isn't incapable, but...

Subaru: “Even so, resisting to the end...”

*Fighting, going to the very very end without giving up on living, is what I wanted of you, would be quite the unfeeling words.*

Both Roswaal and the people of SANCTUARY had been treating their lives with excessive neglect. He himself had received that same criticism, thinking his thoughts reasonable—and forgotten the fact. Subaru covers his face, spilling tears.

Neither Roswaal nor Subaru were, for the citizens of the despair-entrenched SANCTUARY or the Arlam evacuees, presences who inspired will to resist until the absolute end while awaiting rescue. Had Subaru built up the trust, they surely would have fought until the very end without abandoning life. —Once again was everything on Subaru's responsibility, and Subaru's wrongdoing.

Subaru: “But, has Rem alone...”

*been saved?* thinks Subaru, putting serial order on the value of life in an act of considerable hubris and pride.

Mentally, Subaru calls out to the double he had instructed to take Rem to the Cathedral—the main Lewes. But, he finds no conspicuous reaction suggesting that she heard it.

—Rem was inside that cathedral fire.

Even saying hypothetically that they escaped, the thought that Lewes could singlehandedly evade the Hare while protecting Rem was not one Subaru's brain was overoptimistic enough to have.

He bites on his molars hard. Tastes blood.

Biting on the taste of blood, biting in the rising bitterness, on his decision does Subaru bite down.

—He should have understood fully that this world was already done for, yet with repeated failures to forsake it, he had wound up here.

Now should be, truly, about time to give up.

Subaru: “—”

He knows the famished monster is approaching.

The hares, who had abandoned the prospect of devouring any prey in the burnt cathedral, had noticed the presence of kneeling Subaru and the Lewes doubles surrounding him.

Standing up, brushing off the snow, Subaru gives a deep exhale.

He does not notice the feeling of the tears on his cheeks. So, he does not wipe them away.

Subaru: “Emilia...”

This world was ending.

Even saying it hadn't ended, Subaru would make it end.

The people he wished to be with, to spend time with, none of which he had saved in this world—for the end, he would at least like to be at the dear girl's side.

Subaru: “Risk yourselves, protect me. —Once we reach the tomb, do whatever you want.”

Reports Subaru emotionlessly to the remaining six doubles, taking one step to flee from the mob of enclosing hares, another step—and running.

Sensing their prey's intention to escape, the hares raise a voiceless cry as slobbering they follow Subaru's snowy footprints.

Lewes: “—”

Two Lewes doubles strike right at the moment of the hurtling hares' launch.

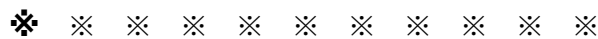
The sound of death wails and crushed flesh echoes, ending with further numbers of hares swarming the doubles.

An instant has the two cloaked entirely in white fur, and the fallen doubles—sustain fatal wounds, their small bodies transforming into a torrent of blueish light.

Their final attack with their disappearance—an explosion of mana—catches the consuming hares, radiance dancing through the night sky of SANCTUARY.

Feeling the doubles' final burst of brilliance on his skin behind him, Subaru shakes his head to dispel those what he deserted, grits his teeth, and runs for the tomb.

—Continuously, runs.



By the time Subaru reaches the tomb, his body no longer perceives the cold.

Snow hazes his vision, and his eyelashes could be about frozen, but as he spills the white breaths from his trembling lips, Subaru pays none of it mind.

The only thing his dull, leaden thoughts envision is a single and solitary girl.

His footsteps ring off the stone corridor, heading for the depths.

In the TRIAL room, a girl will be waiting for him.

???: “—Subaru?”

He discovers the open space, when a silver bell calls his name.

Yet attracted by its chime he directs his course, entering the room. Seeing him, the person standing there speaks with full delight.

Emilia: “Then it was you, Subaru! Gosh, just where'd you go? I was worried.”

Says Emilia as she darts over to take Subaru's hand.

Pouting, Emilia cradles Subaru's hand to her breast, transferring him her tender warmth as she looks up.

Emilia: "...Are you tired?"

Subaru: "Yeah... might, little bit... tired."

Emilia: "Heehee, right. Ok then, ok then."

Emilia laughs, her cheeks dying red.

Still holding Subaru's hand, she sits down on the spot. She folds her legs beneath each other, splaying her shins out to the side, pulling a half-crouched Subaru in closer.

Emilia: "Now, here you go, Subaru."

Subaru: "...A, lap pillow."

Emilia: "Yes. Subaru, you like my lap pillows, don't you? You said so. I remember these things juuust right. Here, aaall yours."

Smiling in proud embarrassment, Emilia slaps at her lap. Subaru kneels down, indulging her invitation as he settles his head on her soft thighs.

His short hair brushing against her supple skin does provoke a provocative "Nnhm," from Emilia, but she immediately gets to stroking his head in practised form.

Emilia: "What number are we up to for me giving you a lap pillow?"

Subaru: "Dunno. ...Third, maybe. Somehow always, when I'm drained ragged."

Emilia: "I have fun fiddling around with like, your hair, or your face, though. Liiike, fiddlefiddle."

Pulling his bangs, poking his cheeks, having a happy Emilia doing this to him, is Subaru.

That she is expressing her love does communicate, so no urge to push her fingers away boils up in the least.

A world already ending—for now, he desired to drown in Emilia's love.

—Because he had already lost the majority of his blood and viscera.

The goriness of Subaru's current state would make anyone normal want to look away.

His back bathed in fangs, with bone probably visible beneath his clothes. Incredible loads of blood spill from his ravaged thighs, and with his efforts in swatting away oncoming hares his defingered right hand remains only with its thumb.

His arrival here amid his foggy consciousness was perhaps the sardonic result of delusional tenacity, and the freezing cold's numbing of his metabolism.

Emilia: "Subaru, did you get a little lighter?"

Subaru: "I'm trying the shed-blood diet. It's... ballast style, dump the weight, unload more, kinda,

like that...”

Emilia: “I don't understand what you're saying, but you did something crazy for someone else again, didn't you? That's the kind of person you are, Subaru. I understand, but... I'm sooo, worried.”

Subaru says nothing.

Emilia: “The truth is, I only want you to do that, for me. But, I know that's being selfish, and a Subaru who acts like he doesn't see other people for me, isn't something I want to see maybe. ...That's also me being selfish, I'm sorry.”

Emilia's voice is growing distant.

Unlike the chill outside, the tomb interior maintains some normal level of warmth. This ironically elevates Subaru's metabolism back to normal levels, his sluggish bloodflow now resuming to a stream.

The stone floor dyes red with fresh blood, which further spews out Subaru's mouth alongside every cough.

Sanguine spatter mottles Emilia's white cheeks. But—

Emilia: “Are you listening, Subaru? I want to talk and hear about so many, so many, sooo many things. Please, come on. Be with me. Hear my voice. Say something, please?”

—Emilia pays no mind to the bloodspatter on her cheek.

Or no, she hasn't even noticed it. Her amethyst eyes indeed look upon Subaru, indeed reflect him—but, they do not accept reality as it is.

When Subaru returned from the mansion, he had been subject to near-torture by Elsa and covered in injury. Getting dragged to the tomb by Garfiel likely worsened the awfulness of his appearance. But Emilia hadn't noticed Subaru's wounds, or worried about them.

Faced with a Subaru eaten by hares and missing various pieces, she responds identically.

Emilia was not presently seeing reality.

And perhaps Subaru was the same.

Subaru: “—”

What Subaru truly needed to be doing was warning Emilia of the danger and getting her away from this place.

The Sizeable Hare has already swarmed the outside of the tomb, and soon will likely surge inside. In which case Emilia has not a hope of resistance.

Like Roswaal, like the villagers and their suicide in fire, Emilia too would no longer avoid a gruesome death.

Subaru knows this, but still is incapable of warning Emilia.

From his self-centred wish to—life soon to depart—meet the end of his time at Emilia's side, he is incapable of escaping.

His regret for allowing Ram and Garfiel to die, Roswaal's words and grisly death, the flux in the

loss of Petra and Frederica, his sense of powerlessness for failing to save Rem and Beatrice, all overwhelm Subaru.

Pain, and even the terror of death, don't matter a damn any more.

—All he simply wanted was to vanish from this world.

Subaru's indolent, selfish wish would come true.

The world begins to cloud, his consciousness and soul gradually growing distant from this place.

Strength leaves his limbs, sensation disappears from his near-wholly departed flesh.

What stays there, stays behind there, unaware of Subaru's departure, is only Emilia.

Subaru: “—”

So, he was leaving Emilia behind?

Able only to rely on Subaru, having lost every single other thing and person to depend on, even her one point of dependability, Subaru, was leaving her behind?

Subaru: “a—”

The regret arrives far too late. Absolutely everything is incorrigibly belated.

Saying nothing, the life vanishes from his eyes.

Emilia goes without noticing it, merely tilting her head cutely at the quietened Subaru.

And she smiles, drawing her face near—

Emilia: “Subaru—”

Subaru: “—”

She has the silent Subaru, and kisses him.

—His first kiss tasted of DEATH, cold.

## CHAPTER 69: LIAR

The hard ground is predictably cold as it drags Subaru's consciousness into sobriety.

Prone, Subaru opens his eyes as he uprights himself and spits the gravelly shit and musty saliva out of his mouth. He looks about the surroundings, to find himself in a dim kind of darkness.

—It's the TRIAL room of the tomb.

Subaru's world begins in the same spot that it ended.

While relieved that he managed to come back, the entrapping feeling of facing a world which might again be hell attempts to constrict Subaru.

At these portentous and uninspiring thoughts, Subaru shakes his head in refusal.

He stands up, brushes the dirt off him, and slowly looks around the area—collapsed in a corner of the room, he finds Emilia.

Subaru: “...”

Subaru calls out and hurries over to her—or intends to, when he hesitates.

What skims through his mind is what happened before his return—Emilia, with a departing Subaru on her lap, oblivious to his expiration as she shared with him a kiss.

Subaru's fingers touch his lips, dry, as he furrows his brows.

With how he'd been puking blood, Subaru's face should have been pretty filthy at the end. There was no way he could've attempted to understand Emilia's mental state in that kiss, but it was surely nothing to leave behind good memories.

It was identical for the Subaru at death's door, for while he could reflect on the happening itself, he could manage no recollection of the physical sensation or his mentality at the time.

Subaru's very first kiss, and also his first kiss with Emilia, had been obstructed by the transience of DEATH and left absolutely no notable emotion.

Subaru: “—”

Though, Subaru did not necessarily regret that fact.

His reflections on the kiss were no act of reminiscence, as his thoughts were more greatly concerned with the danger he felt about that Emilia. —The dependant-on-Subaru, fled-from-reality Emilia.

Puck wasn't showing himself, she buckled beneath the pressure from the villagers and SANCTUARY residents, and she even lost her support known as Subaru. Emilia's mind was broken.

If that Emilia was the outcome of all this, then what had happened to Emilia during all the loops previous?

Subaru: “...”

Subaru has left SANCTUARY to visit the mansion four times now. Only in the last loop did he manage to return for a reunion with her—for the other three times, what had happened to Emilia?



In each of those times, the Sizeable Hare would have already attacked SANCTUARY. Even assuming that Emilia maintained a stable mental state, an inability on her part to combat the witchbeast was surmisable. But, what happened to her mind?

Subaru: “Like there's any fucking 'what happened'... If that's how she turns out when I'm gone, I have to stay around...”

There is nothing in this situation to inspire optimism. He could impose on the future, and distract himself from what was happening, but only pointlessly. For the sake of grasping the optimum future, he must always proceed while supposing the worst future.

The world would prepare what was for Subaru the cruellest, most unreasonable fate. If so, then naturally the problems of Emilia, Beatrice, Elsa and Roswaal, would all arranged in the most difficult format for Subaru.

Subaru: “What, I have to do is...”

Save Emilia's mind, save SANCTUARY's people from the Sizeable Hare, save his buddies in the mansion from Elsa. —Rather the precipitous path.

—Could he do it?

The question comes from inside him, as the weak him prepares escape routes, excuses, safeguards.

—There isn't any can or can't do, all there is is to do it.

Subaru bares his teeth at that weak him, stating his resolve so as not to back out of his pledge.

He just had to try as many times he needed to pick out the obstacles, clarify the win conditions, assemble a chronology, and discern what was the best usage of his time. Even should Subaru's heart abrade with each failure, if doing it would give him a future to grasp, then that was gratification. Even saying hypothetically, that it meant he'd experience things he'd rather not. And so—

Subaru: “—Emilia. Are you okay?”

He reaches out, jostling the shoulder of the fallen, lovely girl. Her eyelids tremble at Subaru's touch, and Emilia's consciousness returns from the TRIAL to reality.

Her eyes open, their amethyst gleam reflect Subaru, tears arise within seconds, and rejecting her past Emilia clings to Subaru. Returning the support-craving Emilia embrace, pledging in words to become her support, Subaru further in his heart vows firm pledges.

—He'll protect Emilia entirely, and save absolutely everyone. And it'd be no other than him. Because this was what Natsuki Subaru needed to do.



Subaru gets to organizing the chaotic information from the lend of last loop.

The most important info was probably the stuff relating to Roswaal L. Mathers.

Roswaal knew about Subaru's RETURN BY DEATH.

While his knowledge wasn't extensive enough to know that DEATH was the trigger, he was aware that Subaru was REDOING.

Subaru can't tell whether he found out after coming to SANCTUARY, or whether he's known since some time earlier, but most likely the information had been writ in Roswaal's gospel.

Subaru had not managed to collect Roswaal's gospel last loop.

Assuming it had been on Roswaal's person, it would've wound up alongside Roswaal inside the Sizeable Hare's stomach. And even had it been inside the recuperation hut, Subaru had not been left with the mental reserves to go blasting in to check.

Thus, he could not get his nosy nose in deep enough to read the text of the gospel.

—What was Roswaal's goal here, ultimately?

If it was to act in accordance with the gospel's writ, then what reason was there for him to abandon his life at the end? —The answer to that, too, was probably in the gospel's text.

Most likely, Roswaal was putting his life on the line to adhere to the gospel's writ.

While Subaru doesn't know just what form the writ of Roswaal's gospel takes, most likely it is identical to Betelgeux's in being a signpost to reach the desired future.

Should circumstances deviate from the cult gospels' writ, Betelgeux could to a certain extent use his own judgement to interpret the text, and strive to ultimately reach a coherence.

This differs from Roswaal's case.

Capable of acting with REDOS in mind, should a future deviating from the writ visit Roswaal, he would expend his own life to make that incorrect timespan a non-occurrence.

Betelgeux, who played by ear to deal with deviations to the writ.

Roswaal, who permitted no deviation to the writ, and strived to protect its writings as definite.

Both shared the status of being troublesome opponents who owned gospels, and their motivations to actualize their gospels' texts were identical, but their stances in approach were entirely different.

Between Betelgeux's manner of reliance, and Roswaal's manner of reliance, Subaru inevitably finds Roswaal's as being the worse.

—The issue here is the text of Roswaal's gospel.

If it's written so far as the conclusions to the issues confronting SANCTUARY and the mansion, then disaster is going to unfold countless times before reaching Roswaal's desired outcome.

The snow in SANCTUARY last loop was probably an action Roswaal took to actualize the gospel's writ. Meaning, that snow was an event that should be coming every loop.

That Subaru hadn't encountered it before was because he had never managed to return to

SANCTUARY after leaving to visit the mansion.

Roswaal's snowfall in SANCTUARY was a means to isolate Emilia.

What on earth was the meaning of doing this?

The unbearable pressure on Emilia should've been more than enough to torment her, even without this roundabout tomfoolery. With her strong sense of responsibility, Emilia would well perceive the expectations of those around her. While bracing herself against her feelings of anxiety and powerlessness, she would repeatedly challenge the TRIAL.

And it all goes on, to the point that should Subaru not be around to be her prop, she loses her foundational supports and goes bonkers.

Making Emilia go bonkers is probably Roswaal's intention.

But if Emilia should stop acting FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S SAKE, SANCTUARY will not be freed.

SANCTUARY not being freed means there is no option of escape in response to the coming Hare.

There are many contradictions between Roswaal's actions and his attitude toward Emilia.

And most important were the words Roswaal spoke at the end, before being eaten.

—Scour away everything except what is truly most important to you.

Do that, and you will be like me.

Leaving aside whether Subaru wanted to be like Roswaal, probing into the underlying implications of that statement would mean: Roswaal had scoured away everything except that important to him, and now stood there.

His resolve was strong enough that he had freely sacrificed his life—there is probably no room for doubt on this.

If Roswaal forces compliance to the writ, drives Emilia into isolation, and secures his desired state of affairs, he'll acquire that one and single important thing of his or whatever the fuck.

Otherwise, what was the real motive behind him announcing those words to Subaru?

Regardless—

Subaru: “Letting go's a no fucking thanks.”

Emilia was important.

But of course, those Subaru wished to protect and wished to have at his side were many and many more in number, too numerous for him to count.

Should there be a single loss in Subaru's constrained world, it would forever turn colourless.

Greedy and self-centered, Subaru could almost certainly not withstand that.

And so, he could not comply with Roswaal's words.

Subaru: “Roswaal, I—am not, going to be like you.”



Subaru comforts a crying Emilia until she falls asleep, takes her along and exits the tomb.

Things go as usual with everyone being surprised at Emilia's situation and failing of the TRIAL, and first wanting to switch settings to Lewes' house to get Emilia in bed.

Along the way there was a little chapter where Garfiel's atmospheric considerations and put-on cheeriness conversely felt painfully pathetic, and Subaru noticed Lewes' meaningful gaze on him, but he didn't mention either topic.

The first one he had purposefully not referenced for the sake of confirming something. As for the second, Subaru already sort of knew what the meaning behind that gaze was.

Garfiel: “M gonna be borrowin' yer fer a bit.”

They entrust sleeping Emilia to Ram, and just after everyone leaves for the night, Garfiel calls Subaru to a stop. Having anticipated this, Subaru responds with obedient affirmation as he follows behind the shorter guy, heading into the forest outside SANCTUARY.

Subaru can't determine whether the spot Garfiel leads him to is the same one as last time, but he does deduce that Garfiel's expression as he looks at Subaru is indeed exactly identical.

Eyes blazing, Garfiel glares at Subaru.

Clearly different from his attitude after leaving the tomb, and obviously hostile toward Subaru. Naturally, the first question out his mouth will be—

Garfiel: “Yer bas...”

Subaru: “You bastard, what did you see in the tomb... yeah?”

His nose scrunches and a vein bulges from his forehead, when the very words he was about to speak get thrown right back at him. Garfiel's eyes widen.

When his expression shows he's been caught off guard, it does away with his more severe impression, letting a kind of puerility peek through. Mysterious.

Garfiel immediately shakes his head at Subaru and his one shut eye, clicking his fangs to compose himself.

Garfiel: “S creepy, but if yer know what's up 's makes things go quick. No hidin' nothin', n' speak everythin' honest. If yer don't wanna be havin' a bad time, that is.”

Subaru: “Yeah. I've got lots of things I wanna check too, busy guy I am. —I'm fine with answering your questions, but can I be getting my questions answered here, too?”

Garfiel: “D'yer ser'sly think yer in any position t'bargain 'bout anythin'? My amazin' self's in th'position of eatin' yer whole, and yer in th'position of throwin' out meat that ain't you t'keep from gettin' eaten. 'S a MEE-JEE LOSES BROTHER OLD, PUTS BROTHER YOUNG TO FORE.”

Subaru: “Out of all the sayings you've said, there's the nastiest one, right there.”

Shrugging, Subaru lowers his gaze and elects for silence.

Garfiel might be impatient, but he's still not rushing Subaru. Subaru takes a deep breath, deciding how he should answer.

Subaru: "Inside I took the TRIAL. I saw my past."

Garfiel: "—! So y'did have th'fucking qualifications... Then, yr'results're..."

Subaru: "Failed. Accepting or denying your past isn't something you can just do that easily. ...I mean with Emilia, it'll be the same thing."

Half-truth, half-lie, Garfiel's reactions to each peek through.

Garfiel's face pales in hearing that Subaru took the TRIAL, but after learning that it didn't amount to success he slumps his shoulders, eased.

Subaru: "Well you sure look pretty fucking relieved."

Garfiel: "Eh?"

Subaru: "I am thinking, he sure accepted Emilia's failure, and accepted that SANCTUARY will not be freed, while looking pretty fucking happy about it."

Brows furrowed, Garfiel gives a sniff as if starting to catch on. He stoops his posture slightly, glaring up at Subaru.

Garfiel: "Y'bastard, what 'n yr'past... no, what n'th'TRIAL did yer fuckin' hear?"

Subaru: "SANCTUARY's background, some of the underlying circumstances. Also, about you and Lewes-san, I guess."

Garfiel: "—! No, w... you, my..."

...past is something you know, is what Garfiel's probably going to continue with. Subaru cuts him off by shaking his head.

Subaru: "I've got no clue what you saw in your past. Do have an idea why you're keeping quiet about having taken the TRIAL though."

Garfiel: "...T'already know this much."

Subaru: "This's coming with my speculations too." something something you're cool to get mad because it's meanie speculation.

In this world, Subaru and Garfiel have only known each other for one day.

The majority of the information Subaru would acquire by interacting with Garfiel was really not anything he should be getting to hear yet.

The same goes for information about the legitimate Lewes Meyer, sleeping in the experiment site.

Thus Subaru was attempting to get through this by saying he had opportunity to learn these things in the tomb, handily utilizing the TRIAL and hinting at Echidna's existence.

Subaru couldn't think of any new information he would acquire or new actions he would take as a result of this conversation with Garfiel.

Right now all he wanted as for this talk to be over.

But—

Subaru: “—Y'know, why won't you reattempt the TRIAL?”

Garfiel: “—”

Garfiel tilts down his head, with no intention of showing Subaru his expression.

His arms dangle at his sides, his wary posture loose and without strength.

And so Subaru judges that no immediate attack is coming.

Subaru: “I really have to feel there's no consistency with you. You pressure Emilia for her to free SANCTUARY, and then you're fucking relieved when she fails. But that said, if you're sincerely trying to blockade SANCTUARY's freedom, your methods are half-measures.”

If he wasn't ultimately considering the consequences, Garfiel could just shapeshift into beast form and kill Subaru and Emilia.

The sentiments of the evacuees and Roswaal and the others would of course plummet, but if Garfiel's goal was truly to hinder SANCTUARY's freedom, then this method would be reliable and quick.

But still, until things hit their absolute last moment of being dicey for Garfiel—until Subaru crosses the line of having the evacuees escape SANCTUARY or some other similar thing—he doesn't do it.

—There is still some boundary line inside Garfiel that Subaru doesn't know.

Subaru: “I'm thinking to hopefully get your help.”

Garfiel: “—Do, n't say th's stupid crap.”

Garfiel raises his head, his usual vigour completely absent from his face as he shakes his head.

Garfiel: “Just like yer said, me and you ain't got int'rests that align. My amazin' self ain't actively gettin' in yer way, but I ain't actively helpin' either. 'M neutral. Neutral, 's fine.”

Subaru: “You do realise that how that position crazy doesn't suit you?”

Garfiel: “It ain't a thing of suit'n er not suitin'. 'S necessary so it's what I do.”

Garfiel annoyedly kicks at the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust as he turns his back to Subaru.

Garfiel: “'F th'half-witch beats th'TRIAL th'n that's that. My amazin' self does understand what with yer bein' caught inside, you have to beat th'TRIAL if yer gonna get out. —But, th'question of whether I'm leavin' th'opened SANCTUARY's entirely somethin' else.”

Subaru says nothing.

Garfiel: “If yer gonna leave, go ahead'n get out. But don't yer try doin' anything here. Don't tresspass into our shit any more th'n yer already fuckin' have. Y'stay by that, and my amazin' self ain't doin' anything.”

Subaru: “Even if I told you that outside, your help is necessary?”

Garfiel: “...Yer lot couldn't possibly give what my amazin' self's after. N'here's where th'talk with me ends. Make sure t'pull no goddamn meddling.”

Ultimately not listening to Subaru's objections, but still rather rational in his conversation, Garfiel leaves the scene.

Garfiel's shown strong rejection in his talks with Subaru up until now, but this time alone he didn't flip out.

Just where did the difference, and his motives lie?

Subaru: “I've got mountains of things to think over... but,”

Sticking his finger in his black hair, the complicated load of information in his head leads Subaru to stop mulling over it.

Although he'd love to sort it, organize it, arrange it, and have it lead to an answer.

Subaru: “This included, thinking over everything alone's gonna get me nowhere.”

Should Natsuki Subaru stray inside the labyrinth of thought, he would again be caught in a spiral of negativity. To prevent that from happening, what Subaru needed now was—

Subaru: “Guess it's time to rely on you again...”

The single person in the world to whom Subaru could reveal his worries, and their thoughts.



As if spurred by some unassailable emotion, Subaru's feet hasten.

After parting with Garfiel, Subaru's walk immediately shifts into a dash.

Breath ragged, brow sweaty, pupils wavering, Subaru runs.

His destination is only, visible under the moonlight, the tomb's inside.

It's after that last conversation.

Having stated he would not interfere with Subaru's actions, Garfiel presents no obstruction.

There is no one to rebuke Subaru as he speeds again for the inside of the tomb.

Having reached the entryway, Subaru stops still as his sleeve rigorously wipes away the sweat.

He takes deep breath after deep breath to settle his winded panting, facing forward as he peers into the darkness of the tomb.

What he has business with is inside—the abyssal castle in a dream, Echidna's realm.

Subaru: “If you wish... that you want to know...”

*You'll be invited in*, the white-haired witch had explained to Subaru.

With his attitude clinging and reliant, Subaru came here trusting in that statement.

The things he wanted to ask, wanted to talk about, wanted to deliberate about together, wanted help to reach an answer for, were numerous enough to be a mountain.

Those things he could only reveal to the Witch of Greed, he wished to reveal to be given a way.

What he needed to do, and what he wanted to do coincided.

Now all he wanted was a method to actualise it, acquired by process other than deliberating over it alone.

Subaru: “—”

Going to Echidna's castle, spewing all his doubts and worries to her, clinging to her kindness, did make Subaru feel somewhat pathetic.

The possibility that revealing everything to Echidna would break the prohibition, and again drown SANCTUARY in Envy's shadows, did prompt his legs to tremble.

But regardless, Subaru had hope.

That the Witch's guidance would be the clue to breaking through this impenetrable dead-end of fate.

Subaru: “Right now... I should be meeting the requirements.”

He was this lost on what to do.

He was this willing to do anything he could.

If the present Subaru was no desiring, wanting Apostle of Greed, then what was he?

Innumerable times would he freely surrender his life. If sacrificing his pride was all it took to settle this, then he would relinquish it.

Because the shameful, pathetic, impotent and ignorant Natsuki Subaru, could manage no better than this.

Subaru: “Counting on you, Echidna!”

Steadying his breathing, Subaru silently motivates himself to finally take the first step into the tomb.

Having already accepted him as a challenger once tonight, he enters the space for conducting the TRIAL—and gazing over the room, proceeds towards its centre.

Subaru: “Really winging it on what spot and what formalities it needs, but...”



The second time Subaru was invited to the dream, other than frantically desiring an answer, he should have been in the same prone posture he had right after RETURNING BY DEATH. It doesn't seem there are any notable, dedicatory kinds of requirements.

Either way, Subaru kneels down on the spot with his hands linked and eyes shut. In his mind he envisions the white witch, calling out to her with enumerations of his emotions.

Subaru: “—”

It continues, the time passing as Subaru waits in silence. He can feel the tomb's cold air caressing his skin, yet regardless also feels the sticky, cold sweat on his brow.

He desired. Desperately.  
He wanted. Earnestly.

If he wanted this much, desired this much, yet still wasn't achieving it, then.  
—Greed perhaps meant an avarice far too immense for human capacities.

Subaru: “—u?”

Just before the faintheartedness can sink in is when the darkness beneath Subaru's eyelids abruptly seems to glow with encroaching white. —Actually no, that isn't a 'seems'.

Subaru: “—”

The white light assaults his vision, steadily and steadily consuming the pitch-dark world. Before he knows it his kneeling body now lies on its side, and he feels his consciousness estranging from reality as it is pulled into another world.

—The invitation to the castle in a dream has begun.

To the castle where Echidna awaits, where this time truly, he wishes to hold a conversation for the purpose of grasping the future.

Amid a hazing consciousness, on only that one single thing does Subaru brood.

<—Witness the uncomeatable present.>

The moment he falls unconscious, he could feel that he heard this.



A grogginess jolts Subaru's nerves.

He doesn't know what happened.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

The sobering of his consciousness hits suddenly. Almost as if switching a television channel.

Dragged along by the tumult of changing from one channel to one completely different, Subaru's awareness switches.

Subaru feels a sensation reminiscent of this right after RETURNING BY DEATH.

The discrepancy between the grisliness of the world where he dies, and the conditions he reaches after RETURNING BY DEATH, is something which carves a sense of awriness into his consciousness, his body, and of course even his soul.

Subaru: <—>

In attempting to speak, Subaru realises that he cannot.

He tries to put his hands his his throat, to belatedly notice that he lacks the sensation of having either a throat or hands.

Subaru: <—?>

Neither arms nor legs, eyes nor mouth, nor even a body exist for the present Subaru.

His consciousness alone floats in space, looking panoramic down at the world, as if he had become only a single point of vision.

It was an unnatural feeling, like being in a dream without any physical flesh.

That he regardless feels this is not the first time he's been in this state is perhaps exactly because the sensation is much like that of dreaming.

That manner of thought leads Natsuki Subaru to try disconnecting his perceptions from the scene before him.

However, this is impossible.

Disembodied Subaru is not permitted to turn his head, nor close his eyes.

All he can do is watch—watch this scene before him, forcibly burned into his awareness.

???: “—ar.”

The voice is hoarse, and quiet.

So frail, that it's difficult to make out what it's saying.

However,

Subaru: <—>

He intuitively perceives.

*This is Bad*, senses Subaru's instinct.

That was a voice he must not hear.

This was a thing he must not notice.

In there was a matter which he must not know.

But no matter how hard he thinks this, the scenery before him remains unchanging. It won't even disappear for him. It merely forces that CONSEQUENCE on Subaru, engraving it in him.

???: “Liar... liar, liar liar liar liar liar...”

The word takes definite form as it repeats, teariness joining the unending murmur. It's a painful scene. Packed with too much grief to deafen out. Watching this, hearing this, was the absolute in suffering.

Subaru: <—>

Why was he here?

Why did he have to notice this?

He erred. He messed up. He blundered in judgement. He ought not have noticed. He ought not have known. He ought not have been informed.

—Should he not think otherwise, then, he.

???: “Liar, you liar! Subaru, you... liaaAARR! LIARRRRRR!!”

A torrent of tears streaming from her amethyst eyes, Emilia screams.

As if accusing a betrayer, as if rejecting the nightmare before her, dishevelled her hair as if a child, Emilia screams as if in frenzy.

—In front of Rem lying on the bed, with a dagger jutting from its throat in suicide, before a hysteric Emilia there lies Subaru's corpse.

## CHAPTER 70: WHAT COMES AFTER HELL

—What on earth was he watching here?

Subaru: <—>

Screaming shrill as she cries Subaru's name is Emilia.

And leaned face-down on the bed is Subaru's body, devoid of strength, its snap-open eyes barren of life.

Naturally. With its throat wrecked by a dagger, and with that much bloodshed, it couldn't possibly be alive.

This was the rare experience of looking down at your own corpse and death.

It was as if he had exited his dead body as a ghost and been made to watch the following spectacle, this twisted sensation.

While the majority of that sensation was inaccurate, the fundamental part was not.

—What Subaru was being shown was unmistakably the scene after his death.

Subaru: <—>

The room's furnishings, the people present here, and the atrocious form of his dead self.

Putting these together, Subaru realises just what scene he is being shown here.

This was after subjugating Cardinal of Sin Betelgeux Romanée-Conti and saving Emilia, when he first learned of Rem's forfeiture, and the results of his impulsive deed.

Subaru had been overjoyed, felling the White Whale, repelling Sloth, saving Emilia and the Arlam Villagers. But learning immediately after that Rem was gone had sent him plummeting into the pit of the Abyss.

He sped in the carriage to reach the Royal Capital—where at Crusch Karsten's manor, after seeing the sleeping Rem, then confirming that her consciousness was absent and nobody remembered her, Subaru instantly committed suicide by stabbing himself through the throat.

It was a knee-jerk reaction, with not a single moment of deep consideration put into it.

He had merely done it to reject the scene before him. Done it to take back what had been lost, clinging to RETURN BY DEATH in an attempted to redo the past.

—However, his rash deed came to no success. The place he returned to after suicide was immediately before he stabbed his neck, already after reuniting with the sleeping Rem.

RETURN BY DEATH's save point had updated.

Heartlessly it stole Subaru's means of recovering Rem, again sending Subaru plummeting into the depths of despondency and despair.

He afterwards firmed his resolve to recover Rem, pledging for her reawakening and now somehow managing to keep standing, but—

Subaru: <This isn't, about me. ...This doesn't have anything to do with me. I don't know this... I

couldn't know anything about this!>

He has never seen this scene before.

Well of course. Subaru had already died in this universe.

Even Subaru, who possessed means to return to the world after losing his life, did not comprehend what happened to worlds after he died. Or no, could not comprehend.

It was not until this moment that he had ever recognized it.

For a Subaru who had died and then returned to walk along different path, successfully evading a dead-end world, said world could bring him no information except WHY DID HE DIE. Nothing more than a crossing point.

Determining these world as checkpoints for reaching his ultimately desired future, and having decided to utilize RETURN BY DEATH, he had regarded even the present world as no more than a waypoint.

Now—that was crumbling.

Subaru: <Stop. Stop stop stop stop stop stop stop it stop it stop it stop it please stop!>

Rejecting the scene before him, Subaru shrieks in silent voice.

But without a throat he produces no sound, he has no hope of averting his eyeless gaze, and he cannot cover his non-existent ears. Into Subaru the world proceeds to engrave these consequences. —Punishment, for the careless deed he committed.

???: “Emilia-sama, what—!”

Hearing Emilia's wails, a new character steps into the horrendous scene.

A fresh butler outfit garbs his toned body, his stride giving no indication of the injuries on this old man—Wilhelm.

He swoops into the room, unwittingly falling silent at the sight before him.

—So even the Sword Demon Wilhelm makes faces that utterly dumbfounded.

Seeing Wilhelm from straight-on, Subaru gets hit with that out-of-place thought.

That was how much Wilhelm's expression in seeing Subaru's cadaver deviated from usual, unable to conceal his shock.

Wilhelm: “What in the world has... no, presently... Subaru-dono!”

But Wilhelm's disarray only lasts an instant.

He shakes his head to promptly suppress his bafflement as he dashes to the crumpled Subaru's side. Emilia remains clinging to the limp body, oblivious to Wilhelm.

Emilia: “Subaru... Subaru... you, liar... you said we'd, be toge, ther...”

Wilhelm: “Emilia-sama, I beg your forgiveness—!”

Emilia condemns Subaru's betrayal like a curse, when Wilhelm pushes her aside and away from the corpse. Without anything supporting her body she hits the floor, but Wilhelm redirects his instant of

attention toward Emilia back to Subaru, wet with fresh and incredible bloodstains as Wilhelm begins resuscitating him.

Wilhelm: “—”

Expression grave, Wilhelm sheds his jacket, using it to cover Subaru's throat as he unhesitatingly yanks out the dagger. Blood spouts to muddy Wilhelm's wicked visage, but he goes without even blinking as he immediately plugs the wound.

The bleeding stopped, Wilhelm presses down on Subaru's stilled chest, stimulating his heart.

Wilhelm: “Felis! Felix! Come quickly!! Emergency! Hurry!!”

Aiming his roars outside the room, Wilhelm applies pressure to Subaru's wound as he continues the resuscitation effort. However, the volume of shed blood is incredibly great. His limbs and face absent of colour, that Natsuki Subaru's soul no longer remains here was a fact apparent to anyone. Regardless, Wilhelm makes no motion to stop.

Felis: “Old Will, what're you yelling ab—*hk*”

Wilhelm: “Hasten, Felix! A knife's stabbed his throat! Every second is critical!”

Felis: “—!”

Felis dashes into the room at the summons. He nods instantly to Wilhelm's instructions, cloaking his hands in a blue aura as he sends healing magic into the fallen Subaru's body.

On the face of the always-unflappable Felix there dwells a seriousness Subaru has never seen before, which he witnesses as he looks down at his own soulless husk.

Subaru: <Just, stop. ...You can't. It won't work. You can't save him any more...>

Anything they could do would be pointless.

Subaru had no memory of being rescued after attempting suicide.

Natsuki Subaru impulsively stabbed a dagger through his throat in rejection of reality, irreparably wounded the hearts of many people, and while feeling no chastisement in the least for that, disappeared.

Those were the facts. The dedicated efforts of these two would come to no conclusion.

Wilhelm: “You shan't pass on! I shan't allow you pass on! If I am to lose a benefactor in this fashion, I could not live with the shame!”

Felis: “Why'd he have to go pulling this stupidity now...”

Putting pressure on the wound, Wilhelm shouts with tenacity. Even while spitting his agitated remark, Felis casts the kindest magic in the world.

This sight, their ripples of emotion, slam Subaru about the heart.

But, no matter how hard they try—

Felis: “—”

Wilhelm: “Felix! Why!? Why have you stopped healing!? Should this go on...”

Felis: “It's over, Old Will. —His soul isn't anywhere any more.”

Wilhelm closes in on Felis. Pushing him away, Felis removes Wilhelm's jacket and uses a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe Subaru's wound. The cut closes cleanly, this body no longer conceivable as having sustained fatal injury, returned back to the several-minutes-prior healthy Subaru.

But neither did its loads of spilt blood nor departed soul remain inside.

Looking down at the pale, dead Subaru, Wilhelm shakes his head.

Wilhelm: “Why... why is this! Why, so easily... Subaru-dono, you were...!”

Slammed with a fist, the floor cracks open.

The blood mixed with the bits of broken floor happens because Wilhelm's punch split his fist open as well. Blood dripping from his knuckles, Wilhelm's incredible regret leads him to bite his lip open.

Opposite the clearly emotional Wilhelm, Felis too looks down at Subaru with a pained expression. His ears droop as he gazes at the not-exactly-peaceful dead Subaru.

Felis: “...Weakling, coward. You just abandoned eeeveryone dear to you. ...Pushing all the pain, and all the suffering onto everybody... are you satisfied nyow?”

Too severe to be sarcasm, too compassionate to be condemnation.

The complexity of the emotion hidden in Felis' voice is beyond the comprehension of the current Subaru consciousness, thoughts frozen.

But, Wilhelm and Felis' attitudes lead him to clearly understand.

—Subaru had stricken the two of them with something irreversible.

Subaru: <—>

His mind stalls absolutely.

What was he being shown here?

He knew. He knew far and long ago what he was being shown.

He was being shown sin.

Wilhelm: “—Emilia-sama?”

The puzzlement in Wilhelm's tone as he suddenly calls her name is likely because Emilia's sobbing cuts off, and her body stops its trembling.

Pain runs through Wilhelm's expression. He had only just experienced the bereavement himself, so how much of a shock would this be to Emilia, who was even closer to Subaru? That breed of

expression.

The old man closes his eyes once, firm. He stands up.  
Then he walks over to the side of the collapsed Emilia, reaching out to upright her.

Wilhelm: “I sincerely apologize for what I have done, Emilia-sama. However, your body shall suffer harm, should you remain like this. Please, with care.”

Emilia: “—told me.”

Wilhelm: “Emilia-sama?”

Emilia: “And he told me he loved me!”

Still on her side as she hugs her knees, Emilia curls into a ball as she screams, crying.  
*That is behaving like a child*, was not a reprimand anyone present could voice. Wilhelm's brows knit as if enduring pain, and even Felis averts his gaze, unable to bear watching Emilia's heartbroken grief.  
When—

Felis: “Whh?”

Baffled, Felis' eyes and mouth open wide as a dumb noise slips from his throat.  
Guided by his voice, Wilhelm follows Felis' gaze, and is stunned.

—Before the two of them, Subaru's supposedly-perished body has uprighted itself.

Subaru: <—!?!>

This spectacle transcending comprehension shocks even Subaru's consciousness.  
His uprighted flesh stretches out its limbs with the choppy movement of a mechanical doll, standing up with its head still bent ninety-degrees sideways, eyes slowly opening.  
Its unfocused gaze, its light-bereft pupils, leer over the room.

Wilhelm: “Fehl...”

Felis: “Impossible! His body was unmistakably dead! The resuscitation failed!”

Wilhelm clings to hope as he calls on Felis, when Felis interrupts by guessing Wilhelm's intentions and shouting his thoughts.  
Hearing this, Wilhelm immediately determines what to do.  
That is—

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono, forgive me—!”

Even without a blade, the Sword Demon suffers no detriment to his skill.  
Wilhelm crouches down to retrieve his jacket discarded on the floor, twists up this thing wet with Subaru's blood, and uses his whole body to spear it forward like a lance.



Riding the speed and heavy with blood, this thing drilling through the air was a cloth spear. Using this impromptu craft, Wilhelm strikes a preemptive blow against the standing Subaru. His aim is true, as the jacket's point jabs straight to pierce Subaru's face and—

Wilhelm: “—Won't.”

—The cascade of shadows bursting up from underfoot consumes the jacket, vanishing Wilhelm's attack.

Witnessing this and its complete lack of forewarning, Wilhelm promptly pulls back his arm—but he cannot avoid damages. Three fingers on his right hand have, alongside the jacket, been plucked off at the first knuckle.

Jumping back, clicking his tongue, blood dripping, Wilhelm takes distance from the stock-still Subaru.

Wilhelm: “Felix! Take Emilia-sama and leave immediately! I shall keep him stalled!”

Felis: “Don't have a swor... all I've got's a dyagger!”

Tumbling back to a corner of the room, Felis tosses the dagger at his hip to Wilhelm. He catches it with his left hand, twisting his wrist to draw it from its scabbard.

Wilhelm: “Feels irregular with short weapons,”

He mutters.

Wilhelm: “Flee the manor, and on Crusch-sama's instructions—no, that won't work now. Felix, go by your judgement. Bring the Knights here.”

Felis: “This'll be dicey on your own, Old Will?”

Wilhelm: “Something equal to the White Whale, potentially... had been cradled inside Subaru-dono.”

Estimating the combat strength of his opponent, Wilhelm swallows his breath as a cold sweat rises on his skin.

Faced with a plainly wary Sword Demon, Subaru's arms remain dangling limp, his gaze puttering about as he looks at nothing, his upper body swaying unsteadily from side to side.

This thing has no rational thought. Most likely its awareness is patchy too.  
The problem here is that regardless of being in this state, it's aware enough for self-defence.

Wilhelm continues the fierce glaring match with the eldritch-turned Subaru.  
Meanwhile, watching all of this, what's caught up in a storm of question marks is Subaru's consciousness.

The situation was clearly changing from what it had been.  
Shown this sin, his heart destroyed, and now Subaru was subject to watching something even more

incomprehensible in this universe after his death.

What in the world was this scene.

Did this actually happen? If not, what was the point of it? Why exactly was his consciousness here, now?

He didn't understand anything. Understood not a thing at all, but—

Wilhelm: “Felix! To Emilia-sama!”

Felis: “I said I got it! Emilia-sama, come he—!?”

Wilhelm urges Felis to hurry, and answering that insistence Felis cuts across the room to hurriedly help the fallen Emilia up. However, a quake instantly rocks Felis' expression.  
Because,

???: “—How dare you make Lia cry.”

Birthing white haze, a small silhouette dives down to the centre of the room.  
Grey-furred, tail as long as its body, small enough to fit in the hand, but the pressure it exerts is intense enough for the thing to be mistaken for a great and ferocious beast.

His first appearance in a long time, the little spirit floats in the room's centre, looking down at Subaru. His expression carries a thorniness beyond simple comprehension, his muttered words laced with hatred.

Puck: “Factoring the barbarism of that body's owner alongside, you're deserving of myriad deaths—you damned witch.”

Frigid bloodlust floods the cramped room. Wilhelm exhales in white. Seeing Puck morph his bloodlust into spearpoints of ice, his expression stiffens.

Wilhelm: “Spirit... Emilia-sama has, not possibly...”

Puck: “Right now, Lia's unconscious. As stated by contract, I'll act on my own judgement. I'm not forgiving the witch. I'm protecting Lia. —That man who made Lia cry, I'm not forgiving either.”

Wilhelm: “But! If we fight here and now, the casualties—”

Puck: “Violated your pledge, and froze my Lia's heart. —It's time enough I end you.”

Ignoring Wilhelm's complaints, Puck's frigid murder more takes more definite form.  
The room fills with white mist, freezing the surroundings, absolutely everything here beginning to die. In a world where even breath could turn to ice, entirely bathed in Puck's enmity, is Subaru.

Subaru raises his head, for the first time seeing Puck.  
Those eyes blind to everything gaze at the floating Puck. When his eyelids twitch.  
And,

Subaru: “—”

He snickers.

Subaru's dead body crooks its cheeks, and snickers at seeing Puck.  
With its face virulent, contorted, and derisive.

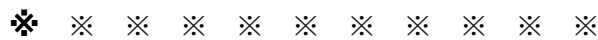
Subaru: <—Sto,>

Seeing this much, Subaru's consciousness cries out prior the definitive calamity.  
But, his cry achieves nothing.

Sweeping his little arm from up to down, Puck births a small-scale glacier inside the room, its absolute zero threatening to consume Subaru's corpse. Shadows burst up from below to beat the ice back—and a torrent of mana throws the small room into disarray, catching Wilhelm and even Felis in the whorling nexus—to explode. Shrieks and wails, freezing ice, cracking and crumbling, all peal out as white demise and black despair intermingle to shroud out everything.

Subaru: <—!!>

Like electricity cut, the world vanishes of all colour.



Subaru: “—buh”

The pain of his face smacking against the ground leads Subaru's consciousness into awakening.

His jaw strikes the damp floor, Subaru tearing up at the stinging pain as he shakes his head.  
And, promptly looking up, he speedily looks about the surroundings. —Nothing is off.

Subaru: “I-inside the, tomb...”

Cold air and dark space, damp floor with the stench of mould. Definitely the tomb.  
Confirming this much, Subaru next clenches and unclenches his hands, checking there is nothing out of place with his limbs. His ragged breathing steadily begins to settle down, pushing deep breaths out his lungs to forcibly regain his calm.  
The trembling sensation in the core of the gut alone does he fail to dispel.

Subaru: “A daydream... 'd be, way too convenient. But, that was...”

just what, exactly?

Unwillingly made to witness the scene, Subaru thinks back on just what situation he's been put in.  
First of all and unmistakably, that had been A SCENE FROM AFTER SUBARU DIED.

Emilia's shrieks at seeing a dead Subaru, Wilhelm and Felis' futile devotion—and the nightmarish clashing of powers at the end.

The scars the first half butchered into his mind, and the apprehensions the second half spawned in his heart, quake his soul with their incomprehensibility and uncontrollability.

Subaru: “Ugh, bhh—”

The second he remembers it, a hideous, wrenching pain in his gut leads him to bend over, the contents of his stomach splattering to the floor.

That said, he had not even really eaten dinner. All that comes out is the small amount of tea he had drunken about an hour ago, and yellowy stomach acid.

He forces his stomach to constrict as he repeats and repeats this vomiting, pretending that he's answered to his body's demands.

Puking and puking and puking and more, Subaru realises that he has a guess as to what the variation in his situation is, and what the cause may be.

If he had not been summoned to Echidna's dream castle, then the number of places he would be called while forfeiting consciousness would amount to one.

Subaru: “No way, the TRIAL? Not the past, the second one!?”

Realising this possibility, Subaru is stupefied.

Subaru had overcome the first TRIAL several days ago now. But that statement only applied to his soul, and for his body the TRIAL had occurred only a few hours prior. Meaning, he should not be meeting the requirements to proceed to the next stage.

If the TRIAL had begun regardless, then the only thing to call it was 'irregular'. And most importantly, according to Echidna—

Subaru: “This TRIAL's not as painful as the one to face your past, is what she said, but...”

—Hypothetically, presuming the scene Subaru saw was part of the TRIAL, then even discounting its superficiality, he felt it an unfolding of the worst.

That scene was, for Subaru, what came after Hell.

Subaru had witnessed Hell numerous times. He was aware of that.

And if it were for the sake of obtaining the optimum future, Subaru had prepared himself to see Hell many times again.

—But, preparation to go even deeper than Hell, to learn of an even worse realm?

<Witness the uncomeatable present.>

Subaru: “—Wha!?”

Faced with a terrifying experience and lost on whether to stay or retreat, a whisper abruptly skims across Subaru's ear.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Startled and body made to tense—exactly in that instant, the loss of consciousness comes to visit him.

Falling to his knees and unable to support himself, Subaru again collapses shoulder-first to the floor. He frantically raises his head in an attempt to keep conscious, but neither his eyelids nor neck manage to counter the invisible force as he is promptly dragged into the Abyssal depths.

—The TRIAL, the deepest pit of Hell, was again welcoming Subaru.

Subaru: <—>

When he opens his eyes, Subaru finds himself in a grassland, at the scene where Julius' sword had sliced open his throat—and again he is forced to witness his sins.

4

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4 These next few chapters are heavy in events which refer to an as-yet unrevealed greater context, or at least seem to. Because of this sometimes I have no idea what the characters are actually referring to, and some parts of the translation will likely get jank(ier). A good rule of thumb is if it's Puck talking, I have no idea what the fuck he's really going on about, but I will try my best.

## CHAPTER 71: ENDING LIST

From the shallow, sharp sword-cut on his skin, Subaru's life slowly spills.

The fresh, gushing blood muddies the green grassland, while in front of the violet-haired man, Subaru's body goes into reflexive convulsions.

Eyes peeled open wide, foam froths from his lips as he retches incredible loads of blood. The intensity of the bleeding gradually softens, and with a noise of escaping air—

Subaru: <—>

—Subaru clearly understands that his past self has died.

It wasn't that his conscious self and past self shared the same senses. But regardless, the vivid sensation of his rended neck echoes without end, even for the consciousness-only Subaru—for the soul-only Subaru.

Julius: “Emilia-sama, I ask you wipe his... wipe Subaru's face clean.”

Emilia: “—”

Julius: “He would desire it not be I, but you. At very least, by your hands.”

Wiping clean his bloodied knightblade and settling it into its scabbard, Julius addresses the stupefied Emilia.

At the feet of the fallen, face-up Subaru, the silver-haired girl falls hard to her knees. Her amethyst eyes lack emotion as they refuse to accept reality, and she goes without wiping away the teartracks wetting her cheeks as they glisten under the light.

Seeing this Emilia, a sharp pain gouges yet once again into Subaru's non-existent chest. Emilia's grieving expression takes the punishment he had avoided witnessing, makes it bare its fangs, and scours away at the thoughtless methods he had been using thus far.

Emilia: “Suhba... rhu.”

Her hand slowly creeps to reach for Subaru's bloody face and its spew, her palm softly wiping his dirtied visage. Barehanded, but heedless of the filth, Emilia determines to make Subaru's agony-bent face into something visible. Once she finishes wiping off the blood,

Emilia: “Why? How come Subaru, how come you, this...”

Emilia asks an empty question to someone who will never respond.

Neither his ears to listen, nor his mouth to answer, nor his anything at all are functioning. The dead Subaru would not entertain a single word of Emilia's ever again.

Subaru: <—>

As he looks down at the scene, Subaru recalls what the context for this was.

—This was after his second fight with Betelgeux where, unable to break through his possession, Subaru's body was destroyed alongside the madman.

Felis' magic had disrupted the circulation of his internal mana, and with the strain it put on his organs and capillaries, his death could certainly not be called pretty. Blistery rashes blemish his visible skin, and the destruction of the blood vessels in his dimly-open eyes have dyed his whites red.

The nosebleed had been enough to coat the lower portion of his face. If Julius hadn't executed him, his death would have been even grislier.

But cleaning his dead face does nothing to save the hearts of those remaining. Especially those who had made it through the fight with the White Whale, and pledged a triumphant return to the Capital following the Sloth battle's end—the dejection and regret on their all faces wrenches the heart.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono... I sincerely beg, for your forgiveness...”

Fallen to his knees, Wilhelm bows his head to the dead Subaru.

Slayer of all the cultists subordinate to Betelgeux, Wilhelm hangs his head at the battle's outcome, his expression one of tasting something keenly acrid. Equally are the elderly knights of the subjugation squad, some grieving like Wilhelm, others striking out at the ground. Some are even so incredibly emotional that tears spill from their eyes.

Seeing his own death be so mourned silences Subaru.

Compared to being shown the post-death events he had attempted not to realise, this impacted Subaru's heart with a pressure potentially even more overwhelming.

Emilia: “How come... even though this happened to you, for me, Subaru, you... why did you?”

Setting her hand on the mute Subaru's cheek, Emilia continues in her fruitless calls.

Seeing her grief, Subaru belatedly realises.

In this universe, Subaru hasn't answered Emilia's question.

Subaru had not given his sincere answer to the query she posited at the Capital: WHY ARE YOU HELPING ME?

And so Emilia does not understand the reason for Subaru's utter devotion.

—While definitively different from the scene he had been shown before, this was nevertheless still the consequence of the irreparable sin Subaru had committed.

Julius: “Perennial tormentors of the world, the Witch Cult—whose vanguard of one, Sloth, has been slain. This constitutes for the world an incredible boon. —However.”

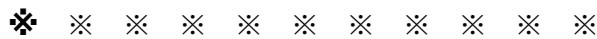
Looking down at Subaru's corpse, Julius raps his fingers against the hilt of his sheathed sword. Over and over, gaps gradually coming to the repeating rhythm.

Julius: “That does not mean I can accept every sacrifice made to achieve this. —I had wished to speak more with you, Natsuki Subaru.”

With that pained mutter, Julius averts his gaze from Subaru's dead face.  
The Knight looks to the sky, his eyes harbouring gloom.

Julius: "I had wished to call you a friend."

Julius' weak and murmuring voice is the end to the grassland.



Again the scene blacks out, and Subaru reawakens with a jolt.

Subaru: "—Dggh, hwa! ...ah, aaaha, aaa!?"

He writhes about, to find himself atop a cold, hard floor.  
With the mossy stench assaulting his nostrils, the tumbling Subaru focuses entirely on engaging in these pointless actions, attempting to flee from the emotions threatening to whip up a storm in his interior.

*What's happening?* Is not a thought he reaches.  
He tumbles, tumbles, his otoliths in pain, torturing his lungs as he wheezes shallow breaths, his consciousness wishing to reduce its allotment spent thinking by even a little, even a hair, to hopefully sink into unconsciousness.

Subaru: "—ugh, guh!"

But even though he attempts to distract himself with these humanity-degrading practices, the moment he crashes into a wall and bounces away, he finds his strategy at a standstill.  
Pain from his stricken back, and blood oozing from his grazed forehead. He takes ragged breath after ragged breath with his face still pressed to the floor, tears having mysteriously welled up at the corners of his eyes.

—Pathetic. Stupid. Hopeless.

Just how many times, to what extent, would weakness continue to overwhelm Natsuki Subaru?  
No matter what the circumstances, no matter what the suffering, an unshakeable and unbreakable heart of iron—just what did he need to do to acquire it?  
So weak, so brittle, and so even until now, Subaru had—

Subaru: "Pretended not to notice, averted my eyes, and the payback... is this..?"

It wasn't that he had never thought of it it.  
In a corner of Subaru's awareness, not only once, but many times had the possibility come to mind.  
That the thought never exceeded just a corner was because unconsciously, he had been refusing to investigate the truth, and refusing to consider it.

The existence of universes after Subaru dies—should Subaru think their presence potentially be



fact, his way of fighting crumbles beneath his feet.  
Everything he had thought to save had deserted Natsuki Subaru.  
Or no, the one doing the deserting was Natsuki Subaru. By abhorrently and selfishly welcoming DEATH, Subaru had deserted multiple universes to escape into new ones.

The worlds left behind by Natsuki Subaru's thoughtless decisions, should they perhaps still exist, would be exactly the scenes Subaru was being shown now.

Subaru: “—You're, kidding me.”

His consciousness once again begins growing distant.  
Unlike sleepiness, this was a sudden whitening of his consciousness to sequester it from reality.

<Witness the uncomeatable present.>

At his ear, again an unidentifiable voice whispers.  
Whose voice was that, desperately wonders his fading consciousness—and he notices.

—That was, without any doubt, his very own voice.



Before the corpse and its pulverised skull, a girl has fallen to her knees.

Fallen from high up, hit with an impact beyond what a fleshy human body could endure, insides of its black-haired head splayed about the ground, a flower of death bloomed in crimson.

Subaru: <—>

This sensation of his consciousness switching states no longer surprises Subaru.  
After the forced conversion in his consciousness, he had figured this phenomenon would happen.  
What he hadn't figured was what scene exactly would be presented to his sobered mind, but—

???: “Speaking nonsense to the very end of the end... now, nothing's...”

Fallen to his death, Subaru lies sprawled against the earth. Standing beside him as she spits her statement is a pink-haired girl—Ram.  
Her usual impeccable grooming is in disarray, the snagged rips and tears in her outfit particularly outstanding. While she consciously attempts to keep her expression blank, some complex emotion and rage still slip though.

An expression lamenting Subaru's death—or actually rather, fury at this outcome.  
Ram rigorously scratches at her head, then turning back.

Ram: “And was this all conforming to your designs, Beatrice-sama? That you blocked my advance was your...”

Beatrice: “—”

Ram's expression stiffens as she goes to reproach Beatrice, her words cutting off. There before Subaru's corpse, Ram's cerise eyes see Beatrice fallen to her knees. Heedless of the dirtiness to her dress, she sits bare on the ground—witnessing Beatrice's state, unrest jolts Ram's eyes.

Ram: “Beatrice-sama...”

Beatrice: “—Why?”

She murmurs.

Paying no mind even to Ram's existence, Beatrice wholeheartedly gazes at the dead Subaru. That from her blue eyes tears are drawing their tracks, even Subaru can see.

—Beatrice was crying.  
At Subaru's DEATH.

That truth plunged a blade called guilt deep into Subaru's heart. Feeling his non-existent eyes grow hot at the heart-gouging pain, Subaru wishes to immediately dash over to that small, little girl, speak something, anything to her.

The legs, the arms, the mouth, the anything to achieve this, do not exist for him.

Beatrice: “I, at least knew that... you aren't, they... but...”

Her expression vanished, Beatrice mutters almost incoherently as the teardrops continue to fall. Ram seems to have abandoned making any further remarks to Beatrice about her heartbreaking visage. She sighs. At Subaru's corpse and the incredible angle of his bent neck, she directs her scornful gaze.

Ram: “Love, wonderful. —Truly, there's nothing to salvage.”

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<Witness the uncomeatable present.>

❖ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

A misty white chill—cold enough to almost freeze the very air—dominates the world.

The frozen forest trees break apart with every gust of the wind, unable to maintain their existence in this mana-wrung environment as they return to dust.

The trees, the towns, the creatures, the world, all turn to thousands of crystalline white particles in the gale, white demise slowly encroaching on the realm.

Subaru: <—>

This time, what Subaru's witnessing is the end of the world.

Just like how his consciousness had turned to white, the world attempts to meet a frigid and merciful end.

However,

???: “—So, you did come.”

A low voice quakes the air as it bellows, its tone one of agreement.

An incredible tremor rocks the earth as the behemoth's downward fall entirely transforms the landscape. Trees snap and topple, the felled things crumbling into snowflakes, the successive shocks morphing the forest into a flatland.

What brought about the destruction of this flattened, frozen woodland was a colossal four-legged beast, coated in grey fur and apparently feline.

Half of the beast's overflowing fangs break, white puffs of air escaping the gaps between the swordlike teeth. With its golden eyes blazing and still collapsed on its side, it turns itself to face frontward.

And, trembling nearly convulsively,

Beast: “Frustrating... I knew this would happen, but still there's nothing I can change about it.”

???: “—I've more or less grasped the situation. And so, I find this truly a regret.”

The beast speaks not to winge about its loss, but in intelligent acceptance of the truth. It is a shockingly clear, beautiful voice which responds.

Even amid the end of the world, this voice suggests not a single detriment to its owner's vitality or health. Standing tall and standing straight, red hair tousled in the white wind, is a blue-eyed young man.

Man: “Neither Emilia-sama nor Subaru would be anywhere anymore?”

Beast: “Lia is sleeping, eternally. Existing in a world without her carries no value at all. I who failed to protect her, and that man, share the same sin.”

Man: “You are attempting to destroy the world because of this?”

Beast: “I knew I'd be obstructed. But, doing this is what I pledge.”

Unsheathed from its engraved dragon-talon scabbard, the glinting steel points at the snout of the beast—at Puck in his true form—as the sword-wielding SWORD SAINT Reinhardt silently shakes his head.

His blue eyes house deep sorrow, and sympathy.

Reinhardt: “I understand your rue. I feel the same thing. But, that does not mean you may use those feelings to lash out at those around you. Your actions, and the outcome of your pledge, will bring chaos to the world. —I am unable to ever allow that.”

Puck: “Because it's unjust?”

Reinhardt: “Yes, because it is unjust. —I am a model of what is just. Sword to rectify error. Consequently, here I shall need to slay you. Great Spirit.”

Nevermind the overwhelming disparity in mass, anyone could tell who had the greater combat strength here.

True-form Puck, without managing to discompose Reinhardt's unruffled expression at all, was at death's door. Should the point of the entrenched sword draw a single arc of silver, then by that alone would Reinhardt's blade slice even a spirit in twain.

The ferocity of his surging swordcery communicated that fact clearly to the surroundings.

Puck: “—Kh.”

And so, that sound leads Reinhardt to furrow his brows.

Even Subaru's consciousness has something arise in his scant emotions coloured with the hue of a question mark.

It's hard to judge just what that short, choppy sound was—as he could not believe that it was what he plainly heard.

Puck: “Kh, kuku... Haha, huhahaha!”

Reinhardt: “—Is there something funny?”

Throat shaking, and on the border of death, Puck's face twists as he bursts into laughter.

Not comprehending Puck's motives here, Reinhardt asks his question. But, as if finding Reinhardt's query even more humorous,

Puck: “Is something funny? Incredibly funny, of course it's funny. Reinhardt, you... nah, I mean **you** don't know anything.”<sup>5</sup>

Reinhardt says nothing.

Puck: “I just remembered. How things're supposed to be. It's super late understanding. And that I know this, and you still don't, is so amazingly funny I can't stop.”

That statement, including the fact the volume of his voice is different from when in his usual form, is incredibly unlike Puck.

This was for Subaru, who had quite a few memories of interacting with the cat-shaped spirit, the first time he had ever seen him speaking to someone with such spite.

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5 Puck's form of addressing Reinhardt changes from 'kimi' to 'omae' (assume all Puck's 'you's from this point on are 'omae').

This was different to when Emilia had been killed, and he aimed his loathing at Subaru and Betelgeux. Back then, Puck should've still been Puck. But right now, as he ridicules Reinhardt, he differs from anything Subaru's ever seen from Puck before, as if he were something entirely different—.

Reinhardt: "...I will be safeguarding against any further casualties now. If you're to resent, resent me."

Puck: "No resenting here, Reinhardt. You're a hero. Heroes have their roles, their deeds, that only heroes can do. With you conforming to that, I'm resenting and faulting nothing."

Reinhardt: "—"

Puck: "You're a hero, Reinhardt. —A hero is all you can ever be."

At the end of the end, and accordingly so, this statement is the one spoken with the most spite.

Hearing it through, Reinhardt swings up his sword, and with one flash of swordcery—following the edge of the glinting sword out bursts an incredible wave of energy. It cleaves through the sky, drills through the air, shatters the ground, roils the ambient mana, rending everything which was in the blade's path in two—the light settles, and the sight before Subaru's consciousness slips.

Subaru: <—>

That world, covered in its frigid chill—after the torrential sword-slash settles, it rebirths. The slippage in the world is rectified, the once-roiled mana forms a ring as it recirculates through the world, the once-shattered earth blooms with flowers, the once-pierced air abounds with gaiety, and down from the once-cleaved sky there shines sunlight.

Simultaneously bringing the end and rebirth of the world, the Sword Saint's strike. The colossal beast stricken with the attack remains as not even a trace, completely extinguished from the universe.

Assuredly present until just a few seconds ago, the behemoth is gone, and no hint of the destruction it caused remains.

Subaru: <—>

Reinhardt sheaths his knightblade in its scabbard. Wind caressing his red hair as he squints up at the sunlight, Reinhardt slips a sigh so faint as to be inaudible.

Reinhardt: "—Felt-sama will be surely be sad."

He murmurs, eyes closed.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

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<Witness the uncomeatable present.>

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<Witness the uncomeatable present.>

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<Witness the uncomeatable—

## INTERMISSION: TEA PARTY

“Parallel universes, is one school of thought. That, separate from the universe you're living in now, different universes which had followed along a similar track exist.”

The voice speaks, its intonation uninflected as utterly possible.  
Alongside the lecture-scented statement, fingertips rap against the table in pleasant, even rhythm.

“This sounds—*huu*—as though it's—*haa*—going to get complicated.”

“The idea's not that complex. You can consider these parallel universes as things being infinitely generated by just one difference in choice. For example, say there's a crossroads on the way to your home. At this crossroads, where either path ultimately leads to your house, there's a you who went right and a you who went left—these two approaches can already be called extremely small-scale parallel universes.”

“What. Then you're saying there's so many universes out there you can't even count them. This's just stupid.”

At the reply to the exhausted voice, a stubborn voice joins in with its hasty response.  
The lecturer smiles wryly, pointing their finger at the rash speaker.

“It isn't anything so ridiculous. While yes, the breadth of that last example may've been too narrow and not communicated the scope of the difference very well... you can assuredly apply this concept to larger situations, too.”

“Bigger situations... like?”

“Such as, right. —If you'd been capable of abandoning the isolated elves on that suicide mission in the Borloid Plains, I wonder just what would've happened?”

“\_\_”

“...Hrm. My predictions had it that you'd be infuriated here.”

“It's simple why I'm not angry. No matter if that scene repeats tens, hundreds, thousands of times, I would always absolutely dive my fists right in. —These parallel universes you're talking about wouldn't happen!”

With that intense assertion, the stubborn voice's owner swings up their legs as they throw their feet down on the table, taking a reclining posture. The lecturer suppresses a laugh. Seeing their smile, the stubborn one's pretty eyebrows pitch sharply down.

“What's so funny!?”

“No, I mean that was very manly of you, but your pants are showing, Minerva.”

Minerva: “Auh, nnuh! What, stupid! I can't even believe this! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! You're so

stupid! Just stupid! Stupid! You are so stupid! You're stupid and, um, stupid!”

While yelling curses which reveal the poverty of her vocabulary, the blonde girl—the WITCH OF WRATH Minerva—brings her feet off the table in tears, shoving her hands down to the crotch region of her short skirt as she closes her legs.

She looks directly up and ahead with rage in her eyes—glaring at the white-haired witch. But,

Sekhmet: “*Haa*—Leaving aside who's correct in this spat and—*huu*—getting to the pants—*haa*—that was just sordid Minerva backfiring on herself—*huu*—Your resenting others for it is disgraceful.”

Minerva: “Sordid, now you're who I don't wanna be hearing that from, Sekhmet. Like you ever wear anything else... how long have you gone without changing out of that robe?”

Minerva's harsh gaze turns to the side of the table—aimed at the WITCH OF SLOTH Sekhmet, her face buried in her long, magenta hair.

Sekhmet shifts her neck, looking at Minerva from a gap in the ocean of hair.

Sekhmet: “You just put it on over your head—*huu*—so this outfit is the easiest and—*haa*—Typhon wipes down my body—*huu*—so it's not as though I'm really dirty—*haa*.”

Minerva: “You go nitpicking about how others look after their appearance, and then about yourself you're just so... augh, aughhh, aughhhh, what do you want!? I'm to blame here? It's all my fault? You want me to punch you all better!?”

Sekhmet goes without answering the riled Minerva, instead looking away.

A vein bulges on Minerva's forehead in response to Sekhmet's lack of energy to speak, but being fully accustomed to Minerva's rages, Sekhmet entirely abandons any intention to care.

Taking over for the spent Witch of Sloth, the first witch to speak with Minerva—the WITCH OF GREED Echidna—claps their hands.

Echidna: “I do understand your anger, and that said I also find it nice. Now, I'm sorta thinking to continue what we were talking about before.”<sup>6</sup>

Minerva: “Hnmpf. You were the one bringing up this stuff about parallel universes so you'd have a reason to get me mad, Echidna. I am so angry. I'm enraged. I'm furious.”

Echidna: “Yes yes. Now, about the parallel universes. If that last example didn't work... right. What do you think would've happened if Flügel hadn't been able to form a covenant with Volcanica?”

Finger to her lip as she smiles mischievously, Echidna asks this question of Minerva. Minerva swallows her breath, her blue eyes narrowing.

Minerva: “If Volcanica and Flügel had no covenant, with only Reid to stop her it wouldn't be enough... the world would've been swallowed.”

Echidna: “Swallowed, and then who knows what. I suppose only a single person, the WITCH OF

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6 Throughout this entire chapter, Echidna uses the pronoun 'watashi' instead of her usual 'boku'.



ENVY, would remain then. Potentially, even a world where that did happen exists out there as a parallel universe. And if it does, don't you just find that incredibly interesting?"

Minerva: "Your eyes get so gross when you're talking about her, Echidna. —I'm really not that mad at her. You're not gonna be getting me sharing that wrath with you."

Echidna: "That is just another possible answer. —Your wrath is truly pleasant. That's why you were the witch most worthy of being loved."

Says Echidna in past tense. Minerva gives a small snort as she averts her gaze and crosses her arms, emphasizing her abundant chest.

Minerva: "I'm not looking to be loved. What I want is for war to disappear from this world, for my fists to exterminate the wails of suffering and sadness and crying and pain. I don't need any path set for me except that. My rage, my wrath, my healing fists—are my everything."

States Minerva clearly, with not a speck of doubt.

Conviction with no indecision, hesitation, worry, trouble, and not any trace of anything to lead her astray.

Indeed this is WRATH—directed at the world, an inexhaustible fury which formed this girl from the roots up.

???: "Well, you could say that, if you want I guess. That you get so ha-ppy, when peo-ple praise you, that you just start grinning so big, is your cute point, Ner-Ner."

A voice cuts in from opposite Sekhmet, that is to say from Minerva's left.

Daphne: "Ner-Ner, your scale of not, be-ing hon-est, is in itself witch-tier. That's something about you I like so much, I just want to eat it."

Minerva: "Shut up, Daphne. You were sleeping until now, why'd you have to suddenly wake up."

Daphne: "But I've been a-wake, e-ver since, you got noisy and flashed your undies. You go around, wearing a t-i-n-y skirt, which shows them off if you par-ade a-bout a li-ttle, and you still have kuh-yoo-tee undies, oh you Ner-Ner."

Minerva: "Y-you're one to talk! You're younger, and yours are nearly obscene! The hell are those, they aren't underwear, it's a string! Stupid! You stupid! You're so stupid! You really are, just, so hopeless and stupid! Stupid! Stupidstupid!"

Face pure red and eyes full of tears, Minerva wails. Happily paying no mind to this is the WITCH OF GLUTTONY Daphne.

She rests immobile in her full-body restraints, her eyes covered by crisscrossing blindfolds, her body settled inside a black coffin. With this thing casually hanging out at the table, to an outsider this tea party would certainly look surreal.

Run out of insults to sling (or really, she just said 'stupid' over and over, but), Minerva plumps back down in her seat, burying her face in her hands as she slumps forward over the table.

Minerva: “Just what, just what, just what!? It's like, am I to blame here? It's not that I'm doing it to get compliments, but of course you're going to be happy if people compliment you. What's so bad about thinking 'glad I did that' when someone tells you 'thank you'? Am I in the wrong? Is this my fault? I'm healing everybody but I want healing too...”

Echidna: “That you can't explode into a violent fit of self-neglect from that, I really think to be part of your charm. —Now.”

Leaving aside Minerva, who descends into a sea of soliloquy as she checks out of the conversation, Echidna directs her gaze to Daphne. Blindfolded Daphne shouldn't be able to perceive this, but she nonetheless gives a few cute little sniffs.

Daphne: “Idna-Idna, what do you want, from looking at me? I'm not like Ner-Ner and Met-Met, I can't en-dure through, a con-ver-sa-tion for you. A-ct-u-a-lly... haa, haa... my calories are nearly burned out already.”

Echidna: “I already learned well enough before death that there is nothing more foolish than seeking cooperativeness from a witch, but... when the conversation is proceeding this poorly, it just makes me want to brag about you all.”

Says Echidna, as she raps the fingers of her right hand off the table.

Instantly, a steaming teacup and a plate of cookies appears before Daphne, who abruptly gets very excited.

Echidna: “Naturally, I have no intention to make you wait, so if you would like to e...”

Daphne: “Snarfbларfomnomnomchewchewchewblahargle.”

Echidna: “Didn't bear mentioning. If you could, I would kind of appreciate you practice your table manners here, but.”

Echidna shrugs, the sight before her being Daphne—with her entire upper-body riding the table as she eats. —For Daphne, meals are quite literally full-bodied.

Her mouth makes eating noises, but in actuality the tea and cookies aren't disappearing down her gullet, rather getting sucked inside directly through her skin. The offered tea, cookies, and teacup all disappear inside Daphne, immediately becoming nourishment for GLUTTONY.

Daphne: “Ahh, so yu-mmy, so ta-sty. ...Ah, I'm sorry. I got a little too en-thu-si-as-tic and gobbled the table.”

Echidna: “It's nothing to worry about. ...Isn't what I could go so far as to say, but from the instant I invited you I was more or less resigned this would happen. There's nothing I'd desire more from you than to be a little more prudent with yourself.”

Daphne: “Idna-Idna, do you go around, or-der-ing, birds not to fly, or fish not to swim?”

Echidna sighs. Daphne rocks her body back upright.

Daphne: “Alrighty,”

Daphne: “My stomach's got, food in it, so I'll have a conversation with you now Idna-Idna. —You were talking about parallel universes, or so-m-e-thi-n-g?”

Echidna: “That's right. Daphne, what do you think about it?”

Daphne: “I don't really think anything? Things went like this be-cause of this, or what would things be, if things ha-ppened here, thinking about that stuff, does-n't fill my sto-mach. Ah, but if I think of a split like, should I have red meat for dinner, or have fish, then maybe it's not re-a-lly a dumb idea.”

Echidna: “I've got no complaints on comprehension level when it's you, Daphne, but... genuinely, it's not pulling your interest enough for a discussion. That's another thing I had expected, though.”

Daphne possesses a very chill personality out of the witches, and she's easy to interact with. The problem is that her existence in itself is a detriment to all living creatures, and that her ferocious constitution is hopelessly not suited for coexistence with others.

Sekhmet: “So ultimately, then. *Haa*. No matter what you speculate about parallel universes—*huu*—it's a thing where thinking about it is—*haa*—entirely pointless.”

Cutting in to this sad struggling conversation is the Witch of Sloth, her body still slumped on the damaged table. Balled up in her own long hair, she says to the onlooking Echidna and onsmelling Daphne,

Sekhmet: “Even supposing you accept this school—*haa*—of thought and those split worlds as existing, you can't know or experience them in actuality—*huu*—Then, that untouchable bubble so called their potentiality of existing—*haa*—bursts and dissipates the moment that you touch it.”

Echidna: “Indeed, if you consider from the realistic perspective that's likely the case. Even if you can consciously recognize the existence of parallel universes, you cannot actually observe them. Parallel, is an apt term for it. Never intermingling, running on two divided lines—that would be an alternate universe deemable as a parallel universe.”

Minerva: “—But that's not what the second TRIAL is, then.”

Says Minerva, cutting in with her lovable face dyed crimson in rage.

Minerva: “If Echidna's going out of the way to talk about it, then this had to be going somewhere mean. Had to. I'm spot-on right. You're thinking I just prodded you somewhere where it hurts. But if you didn't want people probing around at you, then you could've just not done something so stupid as hiding your hurt!”

Echidna: “I didn't say anything, and having you get indignant on me is kind of a problem... but well, not that I can refute you. After all, the second TRIAL indeed uses that kind of mechanism.”

Minerva punches an indentation into the table as Echidna lightly raises her hand, a black-bound book appearing in her fingers.

This was Echidna's forbidden text which chronicled the knowledge of every PAST, FUTURE, and PRESENT in the world—that is, the MEMORIES OF THE WORLD.

Should the Thirst For Knowledge Incarnate Echidna ever feel to, she could learn any and every tidbit of information, knowledge, and history in this world. That said, due to issues of Echidna's personality, she harboured disgust for utilizing the tome's power.

Echidna: “The second TRIAL reads the deepest thoughts of the challenger, seeking juncture points in the path they have walked—or otherwise, moments classifiable as REGRETS—and the Memories of the World reconstructs an IMPOSSIBLE PRESENT resultant from a difference in choice at those crossroads. Compared to the first TRIAL which makes the challenger face symbols of their past mistakes, and the third TRIAL waiting ahead, this one is consequently rather easy to defeat.”

Minerva: “Easy to defeat, which means?”

Echidna: “Essentially it's the same case as for Daphne, a problem of clear rationalization. Sekhmet mentioned this already—but ultimately, parallel universes are untouchable, divided lines. There may be regret, there may be rue for it, but the lines remain beyond our reach.”

Minerva: “What's putting people so close to these unreachable lines is your TRIAL!”

Says an annoyed Minerva. Echidna shrugs, stroking her white hair as she speaks to calm the now-standing Minerva.

Echidna: “Defeating the second TRIAL is relatively easy for the ordinary person. Unlike the first TRIAL where you must overcome a past event which actually happened, the second TRIAL just means touching a something WHICH COULD HAVE HAPPENED. You're at liberty to interact with it while either rejecting or accepting the parallel world, but... all you really need to do is capably affirm your present, actual world.”

Minerva: “Actual, world...”

Echidna: “And so we return to the topic of problems of rationalization. And this rationalization is a simple one where Sekhmet or Daphne, or maybe even you could do it. —If you're capable of that, you can overcome the TRIAL.”

Minerva gives a reluctant, begrudging nod.

Indeed, going off Echidna's statements alone, the content of this TRIAL would not seem anything so harsh.

Should it be any of the witches here—or for argument not even one of the witches, but somebody with an unshakable grasp of themselves—defeating the TRIAL would be easy.

Daphne: “But then why, is Su-ba-ruun, having such a hard time with it? Subaruun didn't re-a-ll-y seem with-out self i-den-ti-ty.”

Echidna: “—So, his case.”

Daphne for some reason makes little chewy motions as she reminisces on Subaru. Ignoring this, Echidna closes her eyes as she considers only Daphne's words.

Echidna: “The second TRIAL is observation of parallel worlds. In a sense, it's the deed of observing what would come after your past regrets. And like we discussed before, you can easily preform a rejection or an affirmation of it. —Because you can explain it away by noting that events did not actually travel along that path.”

Echidna: “However,”

Echidna: “In his case alone, this doesn't apply. Even I hadn't predicted that the second TRIAL would sting him this much. —Truly, beyond my prediction.”

Daphne: “Sniff sniff... Idna-Idna, you smell like you're smi-l-ing, so happ-i-ly.”

Minerva: “I bet she's just happy 'cause she didn't predict it. She's nasty, weird... there's no helping her.”

Echidna: “Birds of a feather. Being that you are my friends, you're not exempt from that either.”

Daphne snickers, Minerva is in an angry huff. When they start hearing sleeper's breathing from Sekhmet's direction, and while watching the other witches' respective reactions, Echidna leans back in her chair. And,

???: “Chidna~—Typhon's hungry too.”

Running down from the meadow up to the table on the hill is a girl, bursting in as she calls to Echidna.

Short green hair and tan skin, her white teeth dazzling as she smiles. It's the WITCH OF PRIDE Typhon. She had gone without getting involved in the tricky conversation, killing her time out in the meadow. Echidna smiles at her.

Echidna: “Sorry for boring you. Typhon, do you want some tea... or perhaps something sweet'd be better. You can eat sweets normally, right?”

Typhon: “Alls good. Running a lot spent my strength—so—drink then eat then rest.”

Says Typhon with incredible energy as she pulls out an empty chair to sit beside Sekhmet. With one hand playing around with Sekhmet's hair, Typhon messily gobbles up the tea and sweets Echidna finger-snaps into existence.

For anyone ignorant of Typhon's nature, it would be charming scene.

Echidna: “You must be tired too, from looking after Typhon?”

???: “Th... that's, n-not true... though? T-Typhon's a, good girl... and, her power... d-doesn't... no, um, it doesn't, get through... so, y-yeah? I-It's all, okay. I'm, just dandy.”

Standing beside Echidna, arriving at the tea party after Typhon, this character gives a faltering reply

as a weak smile rises on their face.

With her pink hair reaching down to her hips, this girl gives a shockingly ephemeral vibe. While her face lacks any outstanding or special features, for some reason it naturally attracts the eye.

More than anything, the way that her actions and expressions are somehow reminiscent of a small animal's tugs at the heartstrings horrifically.

Echidna: “Have a seat, Camilla. —My calling you was intentional, after all.”

Camilla: “I-is, is something... s-star, starting... now? It wo... won't be, s-sc-scary?”

Echidna: “There will be nothing scary or painful. —I'd merely like your help to get the pieces moving.”

Seating herself beside Echidna as offered, Camilla—the WITCH OF LUST—timidly looks at the other witch. Echidna gives Camilla a smile as she easily flicks out her arms.

Echidna: “—Using your love, how about you try saving a lost little lamb?”

Says Echidna to the trembling witch, offering to her her outstretched arms—

## CHAPTER 72: BAD END 1, 5, 11

—Say his heart breaks countless times, would he be forgiven?

???: “And it's already over... this job certainly lacked in anything worthwhile.”

Inside a dark warehouse, gazing down at the three corpses submerged in an ocean of blood, a black-robed beauty tilts her head.

With her bizarre skill she existed in this blood-suffused place without a single drop of the stuff on her, and with her abnormal mentality she observes the slaughter without a single change to her complexion.

Unmistakably, this woman was a monster garbed in human skin.

Her footsteps crossing this floor soaked with blood, the monster looks interestedly at the corpses. A giant old man with his arm sliced off at the shoulder, and incredible bloodflow spilling from his neck. A black-haired boy with a perfect line shredded across his stomach, having died writhing about the floor with his innards spilling out.

—And, sliced in two from her left shoulder to her right hip, a silver girl.

—How many times had he rebelled, voicing his desire not to witness this scene?

Monster: “It's the worst of outcomes for a commission... although, I wonder what all this was.”

Putting a finger to her red lips, the monster mutters in a horrifically out-of-place and casual tone. In the hand other than the one at her lips there wavers a sinister, bloody, crooked blade—a kukri. Leisurely letting sway the weapon that stole three—no, four—lives in this loot house, the monster called Elsa smiles resplendently.

Elsa: “—Oh my.”

Tilting her head, Elsa lightly takes a leap backwards.

Immediately, a blade of ice stabs up from the ground where Elsa had been standing. Frozen stalagmites spear out in sequence as they pursue Elsa's path, these gnashing fangs, pressing in to bite.

Elsa: “Goodness...”

???: “How dare you.”

In the space before Elsa as he evades the iceblades, there concentrates a gathering of dim light, a small spirit forming itself a shape.

The floating cat spirit—Puck—bears an acerbic expression, his rather androgynous voice shaking in rage.

Puck: “You're going to regret taking Lia's life.”

Elsa: “Right, that girl... she was a spiritualist. Truly excellent. I've never opened up a spirit's stomach before. —Though.”

Faced with a battle-ready Puck and his floating ice lances, Elsa smiles indulgently at the portents of battle. But, before she takes fighting posture, she closes one eye.

Elsa: “Why didn't you show up before she died? Spiritualists come with the practitioner and the spirit in one grouping—if I can't enjoy the full experience, it's a detriment.”

Puck: “Shut your prattle, you damned murderer. —If I just weren't bound by the contract, I...”

Shaking his head, Puck's expression twists in vexation.  
He bares his fangs, pointing his little arm at Elsa.

Puck: “I have no intention to talk. I'm turning you to ice, giving Lia's soul its peace. After you're gone will be the country, the world, Dragon and Witch, everything.”

Elsa: “Ahh, so excellent—I'll be enjoying myself, now!”

Springing, Elsa crawls over the ceiling and walls like a spider. With her slender frame as the target, consecutive firings of ice spears bore into the loot house's walls, the atmosphere beginning to freeze, the air raising a shrill shriek.  
Pure white covers the view, rendering everything invisible.

Toppled on the floor with fingers coincidentally intertwined, Subaru and Emilia's cadavers included—everything invisible.



—Say the world betrays him countless times, would he be rewarded?

Rem: “My actions were nothing more than a preventive defence against degeneration of the situation. By the time I had found him, Subaru-kun was already beyond any chance of rescue. —He would have desired to be put down immediately.”

Emilia: “And, so... that's what that, terrible end was, is what you're saying, Rem? Subaru is my benefactor, and there were going to be so many things for us to talk about... and you...”

He hears the quarrelling voices of two beloved girls.  
One voice beckons to Subaru adoration and grief.  
One voice belongs to who, every time she is made to stand through adversary, Subaru wished for her to touch him sweetly, needily, imploringly.

The blue-haired girl and the silver-haired girl face each other, a turbulent atmosphere flowing through the room.  
Setting is the mansion's living room, the two seated on either side of a table in a livewire situation.

Roswaal: “Nooooooooow now, let's go without you getting carried away also, Emilia-sama. Why



doooooooooon't we start by proooooooooooperly listening to Rem's side aaaaaaas well?"

Emilia: "Roswaal... do you understand what's happened? Rem has... your servant has, led my benefactor, and also your guest Subaru, to... to his death."

Roswaal: "I do quiiiiiiiiite understand. Which iiiiiiiis why... we must have a clear discussion on the topic. —For the sake of preventing any misunderstandings in your mutual sentiments, aaaaas well."

Roswaal narrows his yellow eye as he replies. The clown shoots a gaze to the Rem seated beside him, and perceiving the glance, Rem nods.

Rem: "There late last night in the eastern wing... on the floor housing Emilia-sama's room, was an intruder. The warning gems alerted me to this as I promptly headed for the scene, which is where I had discovered Subaru-kun loitering about."

Ram: "Barusu was already under the curse's effects by then."

Rem: "Yes, My Sister is exactly correct. Weakened, Subaru-kun was on the border of death. The curse's effects had sapped his vitality to the absolute limit, and having determined that to save him would be impossible..."

Emilia: "You beat him to death with your flail. —And brutally."

Ram: "Emilia-sama."

Sitting beside her younger sister Rem, having held her hand, Ram's eyes as she looks at Emilia are harsh. But Emilia faces Ram's sharp gaze with strength.

Emilia: "The facts are the facts. ...Subaru's body, his torso and head were in awful condition. If you were just meaning to give him an execution, there had to have been a gentler way. So then, why?"

Rem: "That, would be..."

Rem is stuck for words.

That she does not say anything further is because Rem's personality is not one for telling lies, and because Emilia's statement hit accurately on her motives.

Rem harboured intense distrust for Subaru back then.

After the second loop in the mansion loop series—where Rem had bludgeoned Subaru to death, failed to conceal the fact, and was resultingly having this conversation.

You could also say that Rem's hostility for a Subaru interacting familiarly with Ram had intensified, and she could not keep from actualizing her desire to murder.

—On that upper floor of the mansion, when she swung her flail at Subaru, just what had Rem been thinking?

Perhaps the whole affair was uncertain even to Rem.

Emilia: “—Your aim was off, or it was because you hesitated... those were the answers I wanted to hear.”

Rem: “—hk”

Emilia mutters sadly, her eyes closed. Rem's face jerks up.  
It's unclear how well Emilia's words had perceived what the truth of matters were for Rem. And it would always, forever remain unclear.

Roswaal: “Emilia-sama, to where are you going?”

Emilia stands up, brushing at her skirt's hem. Roswaal's expression vanishes as he asks her his question.

Hearing it, Emilia pats her long, silver hair.

Emilia: “—I'm leaving. It was only for a short while, but thank you for having me. I know I'm incapable of participating in the Royal Selection without the backing of you all. But... I can't trust you any more.”

Roswaal: “Even should you not trust us, do you not believe a relationship of mutual utilization yet beneficial? Abdicating due to a tantrum cannot be called a wise decision.”

Emilia: “Tantrum...?”

Emilia's face stiffens in shock. Then she promptly walks over to Roswaal—

—No one could have stopped that peal of flesh on flesh.

Those white fingers of hers slapped Roswaal across his pallid cheek, hard.

Emilia falls out of breath with that one single strike against that reddened, swelling cheek. The slapped Roswaal doesn't do anything, but instead Ram's face pales as she moves to stand up and—

Roswaal: “Ram.”

Ram: “But, Roswaal-sama.”

Roswaal: “It's fine. You can stay seated. Emilia-sama, my apologies for Ram.”

Emilia: “This is what you're always like to me... but you're still saying nothing about Subaru...”

Biting her lip, Emilia glares at the calm Roswaal. A furious rage churns in her amethyst eyes, but Roswaal's composure remains completely unrattled.

Roswaal: “Leaving the mansion, and returning to the forest—would he have left you with some feeling?”

Emilia: “I was wrong for going along with your wheedling. Atonement... my penance can be done in lots of other ways. I was mistaken about it. And because I was, Subaru died.”

Emilia closes her eyes in response to Roswaal's question, announcing her reply in quiet voice. She gives a slight shake of the head.

Emilia: "I'm bringing his soul with me and placing it peacefully to rest in the forest. —For Subaru and for the rest, no matter how long it takes, I'm devoting my time to their repose. And now, the conversation is over."

Having no intention to speak with them any further, Emilia takes distance from Roswaal. Her hair sways with her departure, Roswaal watching on with his heterochromatic eyes. Still seated in his chair, his arm reaches out for the retreating back—and falls.

Roswaal: "Should this veer from the writ, then here... woooooooooould be where my track ends."

Ram: "Roswaal-sama..."

Whispers Roswaal powerlessly, Ram speaking with concern as she takes his hand. The clown glances at the girl gazing worriedly at him, a weak smile rising on his face.

Roswaal: "Ram, you would appear the winner of oooooooooour bet. Here is where my purposes have likely hit an impasse... in short, the contract can be fulfilled."

Ram: "...Yes. Yes, Roswaal-sama."

With these two having their quiet exchange at the corner of her eye, Emilia proceeds toward Rem, who has stood up to open the door. Before passing her by, Emilia looks at Rem and her solemnly bowed head.

Emilia: "Lead me to where Subaru is."

Rem: "Emilia-sama, that would be..."

Emilia: "I know he's in awful condition. I'll put him back to normal so much as I can... and, take him with me to the forest."

Her expression stiffening at seeing Emilia's horrifically sorrowful face, Rem looks down. In her expression is something like regret, as well something like anger.

*She's surely conflicted on, why did it have to turn out like this?*, he thought.

—*Why did it have to turn out like that?* Nobody could answer.

Emilia: "I'm sorry, Subaru. —I couldn't even do anything."

Murmurs Emilia, at the close.



—Say his foolishness strikes him countless times, would he be capable of understanding?

???: デス、デス！ デスデスデスデス、デス！！

Out echoes the high, shrill cackle.

Chest swelled, mouth agape, drool dribbling from their lips as they hoot, the young redhead girl violently musses her hair.

With this woman's repellent behaviour, and more importantly with the mad gawking of her bloodshot eyes, she is clearly lacking in decent humanity.

Girl: “To love! Of love! By love! In love! To repay love! Is to what EVERYTHING AMOUNTS! Aaah! Oh Witch! Oh Witch And Well Beloved! Oh Site Of My Love's Harbour!”

Fallen to her knees with arms stretched to the sky, tears torrent from her eyes the girl extols love.

In the environs of this crazed girl are many cadavers scattered in a sea of blood. Limbs plucked, necks gouged, corpses violated of their human dignity.

Among them is the corpse of a black-haired boy, who stuck himself through the throat with a sword.

Pools of blood drown the ground of Arlam Village, every member of the armed subjugation squad too lying prone, their lives extinguished in entirety.

The moment the surprise attack felled the squad's primary powerhouse, the Sword Demon, the trend was set.

What remains is a massacre brought by UNSEEN HANDS, death wails ringing out in turn as the last of the numbers meet their end.

Girl: “What ought my diligence! What ought my downing of the slothful be called, if not a deed OF LOVE! Aaah! The Fidelity Of My Love, The Fidelity Of My Creed, My Love Never To Waver! Receive it! Accept it! I beg it be YOUR ENSCONCER!!”

This woman screaming loves, trailing tears, howling in a sea of blood—her flesh stolen and mind invaded by the fiend, Betelgeux Romanée-Conti.

The madman had caught Subaru's group in one fell swoop, and despite having lost his cultists, he continues stridently shrieking love.

When—

???: “—Something's happened?”

Says a winded girl, running down from the path continuing out from the village.

She annoyedly gets the silver hair sticking to her forehead out of the way, her amethyst eyes looking over the slaughter. —Emilia's eyes shoot open at the villagers drowned in an ocean of blood, and she notices—

Emilia: “Suhba, rhu?”

—That collapsed in the middle of the carnage is a boy she knows of well.

Just what was the emotion which flicked through Emilia's mind in that instant? The feelings churning in her wide-open eyes are too complex, that not anybody, and not even herself would know.

Emilia's lips simply tremble as she,

Emilia: “Why, is... Subaru, sleeping th... huh?”

???: “Lia! Huge trouble, it's the Witch Cult! The sins're... why at this timing!?”

Her expression stunned, Emilia fails to accept reality. In contrast to her, Puck flies out in a terribly panicked state.

He flies around Emilia's surroundings as he fixes his glare on Betelgeux, the only one left standing in the carnage. Puck's black eyes host intense wariness and hostility.

Puck: “Lia! Right now, really right now! Get away from here right now! Meeting that thing... meeting a Cardinal of Sin is an absolute don't! The Trial'll start! If you're saddled with that, it's gonna be something terrifying!”

Emilia: “Puck?”

Puck: “I remembered, just now, finally! Meeting that... meeting him finally made me remember! Why did I forget about this... and there's so many things I still can't recall... so long as it's not like this, make it so I can't remember... but if that's true!”

Facing the sky, stretching his little body out as far as it will go, Puck screams.

Puck: “You said different—ECHIDNAAA!!”

His voice echoes loud with panic, loud with loathing. He shakes his head with his breathing ragged. The complete change in this person so familiar to her strikes Emilia speechless.

Having heard the scream, the madman, slowly, stands upright.

Beet: “What have we here... Why, I am pleased to MEET YOU!”

Betelgeux's upper body slants aside as he violently yanks at his hair, bustles pulled at out the unmoderated force, droplets of blood welling from his scalp.

Witnessing this self-injury, terror and disgust flash through Emilia's eyes.

Beet: “I am Witch Cult Cardinal of Sin, Bishop of Sloth—Betelgeux ROMANÉE-CONTI!”

Cackling, the madman retains his slanted posture as he stares, observing Emilia's neck, upper body, practically licking her over.

Beet: “...In, credible.”

He lets slip a sigh of wonder.

Peal—the sound of applause. Betelgeux claps his hands, directing his applause at Emilia.

Beet: “INCREDIBLE! How such a form so suited for the vessel! How such a visage so reminiscent of the Witch in life! Should a vessel of such vivacity have been prepared then there is not a single moment TO DEBATE! The Trial! To determine whether the witch factor shall take root, the Trial!”

Puck: “Shut it, madman! You just try taking a single step closer to her! I'll make you regret being born! Entirely!”

Beet: “In face of love, ache and fear and all sum become offerings of sacrifice... you propose no rationale FOR STOPPING!”

With laggard steps the madman approaches—but Puck merely trembles, unable to do anything.

Puck: “Wh, y. Why, does this moment have to be where I... no, that's wrong. I'm remembering. Wrong. Right, that's wrong, wrong! Wrong! I'm... I-**I**...”<sup>7</sup>

Emilia: “Puck! Wh-what should I... what should I do!? I-I'm... I mean Subaru, over there he's...!”

Beet: “The Trial! I choose the terminus for this diligent soul AS HERE! An occupied vessel will influence the SOUL INJECTED! These innards—ARE UNNEEDED!”

Emilia frantically calls for the distressed Puck. Betelgeux walks on without any hesitation, approaching the confused pair.

Twiddling all his fingers in very strange motions, licking his lips, Betelgeux triggers all of Emilia's internal danger signals to full throttle.

Seeing his crazed eyes, Emilia swallows her breath, and with her voice weak—

Emilia: “No... dad, I'm scared...”

She murmurs, clinging for someone to rely on.

Seeking help in a voice so quiet, no one would hear it.

Betelgeux completely ignores the whisper, reaching his arms out for Emilia. Next would be him outstretching the invisible UNSEEN HANDS of his Authority of Sloth.

He goes to catch Emilia's rigid body, ready to actualize his evil plot—

Puck: “—Get your filthy hands away from **my** daughter!!”

—And a wall of ice, possessing incredible thickness and height, appears before Emilia.

The wall divides the space between Emilia and Betelgeux, with more of them bursting from the earth to expand the divide.

Instantly, Betelgeux with his once-outstretched UNSEEN HANDS jumps backwards in retreat.

Beet: “What—!”

Puck: “Finally, I remembered the most important thing... If it's to protect this, then contracts and bindings and goddamn whatever don't matter for crap. Got bound to this worthless thing, and now, I remember it.”

---

<sup>7</sup> Puck's pronoun changes from his usual 'boku' to 'ore'. Bold **I**'s from Puck are 'ore', italics are 'boku'. I's that are neither bold nor italic mean the line had no pronoun in the Japanese and I added it to make more readable.

Puck's speaking style changes drastically on some lines from this point. If pressed to describe it, I would call it 'a lot like Subaru'. For other lines it sounds more like normal Puck.

Betelgeux's voice trembles, shaken as the cat quietly announces his piece.  
All signs of his previous disarray are gone as the spirit glares at the madman, expression liberated.

Puck: “I remember why it's that I'm like this. It's to protect my daughter, finally—if the confine for doing that was this, that damn asshole.”

Emilia: “Puck—a,”

Emilia reaches her fingers out for an irritated Puck, when her throat freezes.  
At her breast is a crystal emitting green light. That is the homespace for the spirit Puck, a precious stone tying him and Emilia together.  
That crystal, even though she had not touched it, crumbles to dust.

Emilia: “Th... wh-why!”

Puck: “I... I broke the confine, so the dues've started. So from the beginning it was taken into consideration even that it'd turn out like this... but that said.”

Turning around, Puck floats down to meet eye level with Emilia.  
Emilia's eyes waver in confusion at Puck's actions. As he gazes at her, Puck's expression takes the hue of looking at something beloved.

Puck: “Lia, this's goodbye.”

Emilia: “Wh...”

Puck: The confine's broken, I can't stay tied to this body any more. The compensation for staying at your side is stolen too, it's impossible. —I'm sorry.

Emilia: “N-No, Puck, don't... I mean, everyone, everyone's gone away... Subaru's, he's... everyone's gone. They're gone! If you go away too, Puck, I... I, alone forever, I... don't wanna...”

Whining like a child, horrendous tears trail from Emilia's eyes.  
Puck's long tail wipes away her tears, putting his lips to the point of his crying daughter's nose.

Puck: “Be a good girl and listen now. Ram's still at the mansion. Betty's around. If you absolutely need to, rely on Betty. She'll definitely have to accept this request. Though that said I think it's pretty unfair, knowing that and still requesting her.”

Emilia: “I! On someone other than you, I...”

Puck: “—Goodbye. My most cherished in the world, cutest, lovely Emilia.”

Emilia: “Wai—”

Before Emilia can say anything, Puck's little body presses hard against her forehead.  
Unable to withstand the unexpected force, Emilia's body goes swimming through the air behind her

—when instantly, a tear in space swallows up her slender frame.

Emilia: “Wh—”

Within a blink, Emilia's form disappears from the village.

—Watching all this to the end, Puck gives a long sigh.

Puck: “Sorry for pushing you to this, Beatrice.”

He says, offering his apologies to the culprit behind her sudden disappearance.

Puck turns around, looking at the Betelgeux staring at him.

Puck: “Just sitting there quietly watching... pretty good manners for a religious crazy, huh.”

Beet: “It appeared that the instant I lifted a hand, you would be struck with urge to DESTROY ME. Should I proceed to the mansion events will be entirely the SAME REGARDLESS. Purposeful aggravations were ENTIRELY UNNECESSARY.”

Puck: “Got it. You go around like a crackpot, but your head's in surprisingly decent working order. —You damned scum.”

Spits Puck, scaling the wall of ice to reach Betelgeux's end.

Not even Betelgeux pulls anything so reckless as attacking with UNSEEN HAND halfway through Puck's migration.

They face each other, keeping a fixed distance between them.

Puck: “There's no time. —Get it started quick and get it ended quick. Everything afterwards I'll be dumping to my trusty little sister.”

Beet: “Your tempo feels to HAVE CHANGED. For a spirit, you stink of human.”

Puck: “—Yeah probably would.”

Puck rubs his little hand against his pink nose, smiling cynically.

Puck: “This's what I'm like now, but before my arms and legs were just a little longer, and if you can believe it my face wouldda been handsome. When my daughter's that cute, don't you think that's only natural?”

Beet: “...Your statements ADDLE ME.”

Puck: “Well, nevermind it. You don't need to understand it... since anyway, you're dying here.”

Puck points his arms towards Betelgeux as his body begins turning white.

He is running out of mana, and losing ability to keep ahold of his body. This would be influenced from his breaking of ties with Emilia, and probably also have to do with the breaking of the confine he mentioned.



Either way, the contours of his form begin to fade—

Puck: “Before I'm gone, you're gone. My partner in death's a religious nut, gross.”

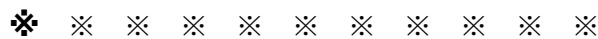
Beet: “I REGRET TO TELL that for bringing about my cessation, abolishing this body accomplishes —”

Puck: “I'm freezing your soul alongside. —I do that, and then what happens?”

Up until now having kept an unshakable, fearless smile, Betelgeux's expression freezes. The madman's eyes shoot open wide. Puck smiles as if in utter enjoyment.

Puck: “Ahha—now there's the face I wanted to see, moron.”

Simultaneous with the outline of the spirit unlacing, a white radiance blasts forth, and—



—Forced to witness ended worlds in sequence, Subaru lies toppled on the ground.

He couldn't exactly tell where he was anymore.

Was this reality, or was it a dream? Was he having one of the repeating nightmares? Supposing he determined them as nightmares, would he be permitted to sort everything up and away?

Were they purely just potentials? Or did they actually happen? Or weren't they just Subaru's brain coming up with very convenient worlds? If so then what was with them, flowing with all this information Subaru obviously didn't know?

Worlds born from delusion? Were the differing realities encroaching on each other? Whichever possibility it was, the torment to Subaru's heart was colossal.

So colossal that he could not stand, not straight, not raise his head, not at all.

And so—

???: “Are you no longer able to stand? Subaru-kun?”

He hears someone at his side, speaking words to tenderly uplift his heart.

That was the voice of someone precious, he feels.

Subaru: “—”

The hot track of a tear which should not be spilling draws its trail down Subaru's cheek.

## CHAPTER 73: WEAKNESS'S HIDEAWAY

—How long had it been since he had last heard that voice?

In reality, she had not been sleeping for that long a time.

At best a week—a conceivable timespan for going without seeing friends or family. —But Subaru could not think that way.

For a Subaru who abandoned his life continuously and continuously to redo time, actual timespans held no meaning. By his soul's internal clock, a much more gargantuan span had passed since that voice had last made tremble his ears, his heart.

???: “—Please wake up, Subaru-kun. I would be happy to see your face.”

Words rain down from above as he lies face-down on the ground.

The affection brimming in that voice, that passionate fondness, swiftly fill Subaru's heart with something warm. The parched, empty vessel what was his heart, permeates with heat.

By just two sentences spoken by that gentle voice.

—Just how much strength was it that she gave him?

Subaru: “...You're joking.”

Her: “No, it is not a joke.”

Subaru: “You can't be here.”

Her: “Should you desire it, Subaru-kun, I will be at your side at any moment.”

Subaru: “When I most want something done, and only then... you'll always, come to me... as if, something that... convenient could...”

Her: “Well, I am constantly seeking to be your most convenient girl, Subaru-kun.”

His voice laced with sobs, Subaru lets spill his pathetic whining.

But this voice was assuredly not looking down on him, or failing to perceive him.

She knew. Her.

Knew that Subaru was weak, hopeless, so brittle that he could not live without something to cling to, always without confidence, always in doubt.

Because this was the girl who, regardless of Subaru's incapacity to be strong, told him she loved him.

Subaru: “—Rem.”

Rem: “Yes. This is Subaru-kun's Rem.”

He raises his head.

Blue arises in his teary vision.

He roughly wipes his eyes with his dirtied sleeve, abolishing the tears. He looks.  
At the sight of the girl, standing before him.

At the sight of darling Rem.

Subaru: “Rehm...”

Rem: “Yes, this is Rem. A maid who will unfailingly be within arm's reach whenever Subaru-kun wants her there.”

Subaru: “Y, ou...”

Tilting her head, playing with Subaru in a rather joking manner, is Rem.  
Before he can say anything about her attitude, Subaru feels the air peacefully escape from his lungs.  
The heaviness in his heart drops away with a thunk.  
His breathing eases, the tiny wailing him inside his skull vanishing to somewhere.

So easily, so so easily saved, Subaru is stunned.  
He had believed himself so absolutely without hope and deadlocked, and simply by having this one single girl before him, everything comes unravelled this easily.

Subaru: “God you're amazing, Rem...”

Rem: “I appreciate that very much. You're incredible too, Subaru-kun.”

The words she speaks as she smiles fit together with how they, as usual, don't really fit together.  
Inadvertently feeling happiness even at this back-and-forth, Subaru fails to keep enduring it, coming close to crying.  
Still seated slovenly on the ground with his eyes downcast, Rem kneels down before him.

Rem: “Do you feel all right? Are you, worn out?”

Subaru: “Who knows... am I worn out? ...But I haven't done anything yet.”

This loop has seen Subaru battered around entirely, without him reaching even a single correct answer. He was in no position to be saying that he was worn out.  
Everyone would anguish more. Everyone would hurt more. Why did everyone have to suffer? The answer there was obvious.

Subaru: “Because I'm weak.”

Rem: “—”

Subaru: “Because my ability is lacking.”

Rem: “—”

Subaru: “If I were stronger, smarter, a man who could do more... things'd be over without everyone suffering, sorrowing, hurting...”

If Subaru were strong enough to do everything, absolutely everything on his own, then working with Emilia to face her past, soothing of Beatrice's heart abraded over four hundred years of isolation, rescuing of Petra and Frederica otherwise murdered, protecting SANCTUARY's people assaulted by the Sizeable Hare, coming to understanding with Garfiel as he attempts to distance the outsiders, would all be within his ability.

Everything, all of it, from start to finish, was Subaru's fault.  
And so with that final balance sheet of weakness, Subaru needed to scour away his own soul.  
—Is what he had thought, and still.

Subaru: “Is there anybody... that I saved?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “If worlds continue after I die, then how many times, places, people... did I leave everyone to die?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “How many times did I let you die? How many times do I... need to kill you?”

Rem: “—Subaru-kun.”

With dread trembling up from the core of his body, Subaru rapidly confesses his sins. Spit them all out, and immediately, hopefully get his pronouncement. Before he could wrack his own mind to nothing, he desired that someone, nearby, sentence him. He desired that someone smack this colossal idiot—who while pledging to no longer make mistakes, had tread down the wrong path on their very first step—and let them know what a hopeless moron they were.

Rem: “—”

—But what the punishment-seeking Subaru receives, is a kind, enveloping embrace.

Subaru: “Re, hm.”

Rem: “Everything is okay. You're okay, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “But, noth... nothing is, okay...”

Subaru had accomplished absolutely nothing.  
There were many people who would go unsaved if Subaru didn't rescue them. There were many people who would meet horrific ends. And Rem too, was someone Subaru needed to save. She was entirely qualified to lambaste the eternally inadequate, insufficient, weak Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “You should... at me...!”

Rem: “—I love you.”

She meets her forehead to his, and simply, whispers her love.

Subaru: “—”

No words will exit him.  
There is nothing he can say now.

So near, as those blue eyes gaze entirely straight at Subaru.  
He could drown in the depths of the mercy in those eyes.

Rem: “I love you, Subaru-kun. —And so everything is all okay.”

Subaru: “Th-at... isn't, an answer...”

Rem: “Yes, it is. Why is it I am here? Why is it I forgive you? Why is it that I hold you? —All of it, is entirely that.”

At range close enough to feel her breath, Rem's smile grasps Subaru's heart with an invisible hand. He can't move. He can't even twitch. Reaching around his back, the small hands grip hard onto his clothes, strong and even stronger, so strong the two could be one, as she hugs him.

Rem: “It must have been rough, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “—”

Rem: “All alone, being this hurt... it must have been hard, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “—hk”

Rem: “You don't need to experience this sadness any more.”

Rem's sweet enunciation continues.  
Gently unravelling Subaru's heart, melting away his obstinacy.

Rem: “All of your hurt, your pain, your weakness, I will shoulder as substitute.”

Subaru: “...”

Rem: “Everything you willed to protect, to fight, to complete... I ask you will entrust to me.”

Subaru: “...”

Rem: “There is no necessity at all for you to carry every single burden. —Task everything to me,

for now you may rest peacefully, and sleep.”

Subaru: “...I,”

Rem: “Please show me once again the Subaru-kun that I love.”

With her hand set against his cheek, Rem raises Subaru's head to look at him straight on.  
Her lips pause maybe in hesitation, and slowly, her face approaches his.  
Even his laggard consciousness can comprehend what she is doing, and what will be done to him.

Immediately near, within breathing range, the lips of a darling girl loom in.  
Would it not be fine to overlay, to intertwine, luxuriate, acquiesce and drown?

—She was already pardoning him whether he was right or wrong.

Just to what extent had Rem's words gently permeated Subaru's heart?  
His frayed emotions, his soul shrieking for someone to reach out, were by this girl who understood everything of Subaru, right now, saved again.

To powerless Subaru, Rem offered her hand.  
To brittle Subaru's back, Rem offered her support.  
To foolish Subaru's path, Rem offered her escort.

Imposing on those, clinging, depending completely—if that would guide to the correct answer, then...  
Where was the point in struggling alone?

He was abraded wholly, he didn't know where his footing lie, he no longer knew which was the direction to walk, and so, on absolutely everything, just give up, yield—

???: <It is easy to give up.>

Subaru: “—”

???: <But.>

Subaru: “—”

???: <—It does not suit you.>

A voice.

Rem: “—Subaru-kun?”

Rem's voice, puzzled, from in front of him.  
But of course it would, as her face so close, once mere moments from touching him now has its path blocked by a hand.

Distant from the touch of their sweet, supposedly to-entwine tongues, a somewhat wounded glint lights up in Rem's wavering eyes.

Gazing at that shaking light from between the cracks in his fingers, Subaru speaks.

Subaru: “—Who are you?”

Rem: “Huh?”

Subaru: “I just asked, who are you?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun, what are you... asking who, is...”

Rem's throat seems to cramp as Subaru's low-voiced question leads her to falter.

The dim anguish in her eyes grows thicker, traces of misery etching themselves into her expression.

Incredibly, that felt to be clawing at onlooking Subaru's chest from inside and out.

To distract from the sensation Subaru presses down on his heart, baring his teeth.

Subaru: “When... I'm hopeless at the end of my rope, seriously wishing that someone'll do something, thinking maybe it's impossible and about to give up... you would come to me. I seriously believed that.”

Rem: “—”

Subaru: “When it's you then surely, when I'm so stuck, here hugging my knees, ruminating and irresolute, then you'd hold yourself against me, you'd be kind to me. I believed that.”

Rem: “—”

Subaru: “You'd listen to my whinging, let me spew out my whining, let me wring myself out on tears and everything until the tap's all dry...”

Rem: “—”

Subaru: “—And say, stand up.”

Natsuki Subaru remembered with all his soul the daintiness of her fingers, the warmth of her skin, the scale of her love.

And so crystal clear, to this Rem—to this imposter, he'd well damn say it.

Subaru: “She would not say 'rest now.'”

Rem?: “—”

Subaru: “She would not say 'give up, task everything to me.'”

Rem?: “—”

Subaru: “Loving me, loving her, kind to me, in love with me—and more than anyone in the world

strict on me, unsparing to me, that girl is Rem!”

Springing to his feet, Subaru howls as he takes distance from this Rem before him, keeping her in his sights.

Still on her knees, Rem looks up at Subaru from her low position wordlessly. Even now he could about drown from the sadness in her expression at being rejected.

Rem: “No, no no. Please listen, Subaru-kun! I, I was wrong. Just, I couldn't bear watching you in suffering... and so, I merely, I wanted you to forget the pain and rest for now, that was all!”

Subaru: “I'll let you see my weakness. I'll let you see my frailty. I'll let you see that I'm a pathetic, worthless bastard. —But I'll never let you see me giving up.”

*Subaru is a hero*, Rem had said.

*I will act being as Rem's hero*, Natsuki Subaru had decided.

Ever since they shared their promise, Subaru had resolved.

—That in this world, this universe, the only time he could show his weakness, was when with Rem.

When with the Rem who knew Subaru was weak, but even so believed in his efforts to act with strength, was the only time Subaru could go without hiding the fact he was weak.

Not to Emilia, not to Beatrice, not to anyone else could he show it.

The only person could a Subaru who needed to be strong show his weakness to was Rem.

Subaru: “My weakness belongs to Rem. She hides all of my weakness, and in exchange even if I have to grapple it in tight, I'm not letting my surrender happen.”

Rem?: “—”

Subaru: “Fuck off, you fake. —Don't goddamn coddle me wearing my Rem's face and voice!”

That firmly declared, Subaru jabs his fist out at Rem—at the imposter.

The listener is lost for words. They cast their gaze down, standing silently on the spot.

~~Rem~~: “Th-this, was, wasn't... what sh... she, t-told... me.”

Subaru: “Ah?”

Tilting their head with blue hair swaying, the imposter stutters out her words.

Hearing it rises questions for Subaru, when—

~~Rem~~: “—”

Right before him, her form seeming to blur, Rem's visage turns unclear.

A storm of television-haze static drowns out his vision, and in a blink at that spot there appears someone completely different.

—Someone he's never seen before.



Her pink hair stretches halfway down her back, her mien gentle—or more rather, timid. Her facial features are attractive, but that did not mean her face as a whole was outstandingly beautiful. Something more of an ordinary, normal-person kind of cuteness.

She wears a long-sleeved white outfit, her hands not peeking out the ends as she puts her palms to her cheeks, looking at Subaru nervously.

Subaru: “Who're you?”

Rem: “I-I'm the WITCH OF LUST.... Camilla. Ni... nice to, meet you... mm.”

Subaru inadvertently swallows his breath.  
She's introducing herself as the WITCH OF LUST. Meaning,

Subaru: “This weird unexplained room... is in Echidna's dream, then.”

Camilla: “Yes, but also, no... maybe. Echidna-chan's, watching the... TRIAL, and TRIAL's always... kind of, like a dream... mhm... yeah.”

Subaru: “That's not really getting to the point or actually no before that...”

Camilla's manner of speech irks Subaru. Seeing his gaze spontaneously turn harsh, a huge shudder runs through Camilla's body as she winds up hugging her head.

Camilla: “Sto... d-don't, hit me...”

Subaru: “I'm not gonna do that. Not gonna do it, but... what were you plotting with that?”

Camilla: “With... that?”

Subaru: “Putting on Rem's shape, and standing in front of me! Is that what your power is!?”

All of these witches crowned with deadly sins inevitably will have some kind of ridiculous authority.

If the WITCH OF LUST is no exception, yes indeed she should have an authority. If her transformation from before was it, then—

Subaru: “Man transformation's a really orthodox power compared to the other witches.”

Camilla: “I-I was, wasn't... transforming... though? I-If I look... looked like, someone else then... that's b-beca... because, you wanted to see... that... yeah?”

Subaru: “What?”

Camilla: “I, mean... I didn't even... w-want to, meet you. E-Echidna-chan, told me to... come, so... and she, lied... too...”

Mumbles Camilla, her words exacerbating Subaru's annoyance.

The way she talks, the way she glances around, the way she lowers her eyes when she senses his gaze on her, absolutely all of it grinds his gears. And that sissyish way she speaks, and her sulky complaints.

Being that what she's trying to say isn't communicating clearly, she could not know how important a thing for Subaru she had just stomped all over.

Irritating. Aggravating. He'd like to start raving, make her know it.

Subaru: "Do you... do you understand what the fuck it is you just did?"

Camilla: "Echidna-chan, said... I-I, just had to... spoil him, but... and that, doing that... it'd all work... out fine, but it was... like that... a-and I, I even told her I... didn't wanna."

Subaru: "Listen to me!!"

Camilla: "E-everyone's... ganging up, to... pick on me, is what... they're doing. Echidna-chan's d-doing it. She's, is, she's awful... aw... awful."

Subaru: "Can you not hear that I'm telling you to listen!!"

Subaru attempts to shout, when he notices that his lungs are squeezed of air and his voice is frail. Notices it, but his lovebent rage is far more important and instantly dispels that fact from his considerations.

Suffocation was a trivial matter when faced with something so annoying it makes him want to claw at his own chest.

He'd shut that whiner's mouth, slap her with all the anger and suffering he had, make her comprehend just what she had d—

???: "Any more than that'll be life-threatening."

Subaru: "—!?"

That instant, Subaru hears a voice whispering at his ear as he regains his sanity.

The moment he does, what assaults him is the agony of being on the border of total asphyxiation for having been kept in a state of oxygen deprivation, and the pain of his dry eyes for having kept them continuously open.

Subaru: "Aau—ah, hahhh?"

???: "They were drastic measures, but just as long you're back. —When faced with Camilla, with Lust's FACELESS GODDESS, people forget to breathe. Ultimately, forget even for their heart to beat."

Subaru: "Eghu, ghhah... ha, haa."

The choking prompts Subaru to spit as he falls with all limbs to the ground, his thoughts strobing. But the voice does pass into his ear, and the meaning of its words does communicate to his brain.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Thus Subaru wipes his mouth with his sleeve, looks at up the one who supposedly set up everything about this station, and scowls.

Subaru: “What th—what the fuck were you plotting, Echidna?”

Faced with Subaru's hateful gaze, the white-haired witch strokes at her hair as in the now meadowlands she puts her elbow to the table and her cheek to her palm.

Echidna: “Isn't it a given? —I'm a witch. The plot's something nefarious.”

She says, smiling.

## CHAPTER 74: WITCH'S PLOT AND PROPOSAL

Panting in asphyxiation, Subaru belatedly realises that his hands are on a meadow's green. The thick scent of grass skims up from the ground his limbs are touching and into his nose. Like a grassland bathed in sunlight after rain, the chokey and natural air wraps fleetingly around Subaru.

Turning his neck, Subaru sees Echidna before him.

Like usual, she is arranging preparations for a tea party on the meadow's hillock with its table and chairs as she waits for her guest—for Subaru.

Like usual. —Just like usual.

Echidna: “I'm sure you have things you want to say and questions you want to ask, but... first how do you feel about sitting down and having a cup of tea?”

Subaru: “...Do you think, having considered what you just did to me, that I'm going to cordially sit in that chair? Or comply with your tea party at all?”

Echidna: “You'll comply. You're someone capable of giving mercenary, faux-calm rational thought precedence over your instinct to fly into self-abandoning rage. Right now, a profitable conversation with me has more benefits to you than shirking a conversation with me... would be what you've concluded, right?”

Subaru: “—”

Subaru speaks low with suppressed anger. Echidna's carefree attitude stays healthy as ever. Her words come spoken from above, as if mocking Subaru and his attempts to engage in an obvious ploy. They strike a perfect bullseye, Subaru unable to choose either affirmation or denial. The thing she had trampled over was not so cheap that Subaru would so easily acquiesce.

Subaru: “Echidna... tell me you didn't mean it.”

Echidna: “Hm?”

Subaru: “That... thing with the Witch of Lust, tell me that you didn't mean for that. Please say it was your bad.”

Echidna: “...”

Subaru: “Say that it was unavoidable. That you didn't anticipate it, that it shouldn't've gone like that. Please tell me this. If you do... I won't fault you.”

What Echidna's saying is correct.

If he was to proceed ahead, then he needed her knowledge, her cooperation.

But the unforgivable is the unforgivable. Echidna's utilization of the Witch of Lust to trespass into Subaru's inviolable and precious domain—his SANCTUARY—was reality.

And so as far as Subaru was concerned, this was an essential requirement for forgiving Echidna, and complying to a profitable conversation with her.

Echidna: "...Just when I was wondering what you'd say."

In this instant, Echidna must have come to comprehend Subaru's inner weakness and obstinacy. Echidna's mutter was an inadvertent one. Subaru bites his lip as he waits for her reply, Echidna looking at him as she leisurely fiddles with the ends of her white hair.

Echidna: "Exactly as your wish states, that was the Witch of Lust Camilla running amok. I tried to stop her, but she didn't listen me. She took advantage of the TRIAL with intent to beguile you, unveiled the places you least want touched, and attempted to submerge you."

Subaru: "—"

Echidna: "You narrowly managed to escape just as she was about to trick you. Having failed her in beguilement, Camilla let down her guard, which is when I stole back predominance and summoned you to my castle. You could call it a godsend that we're able to face each other right now."

Subaru: "—"

Echidna: "...supposing I told you all that, would you be satisfied?"

Lining up everything Subaru wants to hear, Echidna undermines all of it at the end. Subaru wordlessly looks upward, separating his gaze from Echidna.

Subaru: "...What were you trying to do, goading that witch on like that."

Echidna: "Camilla didn't say? That with how the TRIAL had near entirely abraded your heart, she wanted to save you?"

Subaru: "That wasn't what the Witch of Lust was really thinking. If what she said's right then that was what I wanted Rem to tell me, the definition of self-issued weakness. The Witch of Lust's got no reason be fond with me. ...You instructed her."

Echidna: "It's impressive you got this much off so little information. ...In that case, doubt excuses will work here."

Echidna easily stops with the glossings over and gives a shrug. Ferrying her teacup to her mouth and taking a sip,

Echidna: "Just as you suspect, sending out Camilla, and her presentation as a girl in your heart, were both on my instruction. It being penetrated and failing to carry to the end is more of a problem on Camilla's end than mine, though."

Subaru: "...Why did you pull that?"

Echidna: "Hearing it said straight-out is probably going to make you mad. —Because it was the most efficient method, and more importantly the method with the highest probability."

Subaru's expression vanishes. Echidna continues without hesitation.

Echidna: “It was outside even my predictions that the second TRIAL would catch you at this timing. But most importantly, that its contents would stab into you so deeply was, speaking with entire honesty, something I hadn't envisioned at all until I actually witnessed it.”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “Oop, I'd appreciate you overlooking that I was peeping on the TRIAL. I'm pretty sure I told you about this back at the first TRIAL too, but you do get that these are TRIALS set up by a witch? The mean-spirited punchline comes included. ...and such and such fault-finding I don't really enjoy.”

Subaru: “...Get back to explaining.”

Echidna: “Anyway, while I was watching you brave the TRIAL, I had a thought. —If he's made to keep challenging the TRIAL alone like this, it won't be long before he's entirely eroded. ...There's the thought.”

Her stance on this is likely no exaggeration, but really what would've happened.

Subaru had been paying enough attention to his situation that he could not refute her.

The second TRIAL—the uncomeatable present—and the scenes, events, tragedies he was forced to witness. This thing was more than enough to utterly destroy Subaru's bravado, stubbornness, and misconstrusion.

Echidna: “And so I intervened. Your complete erosion is yet another possible result. I execute trial and error on everything there is, experiment everything possible. Because my curiosity is constantly wailing its desire for theoretical conclusions without ever getting bored of it. To sate my insatiable greed, I seek every single result out there. —The result of you challenging the TRIAL, and breaking, is no exception.”

Subaru: “Then why'd you intervene? If my breaking is one of these results you're looking for, you shouldn't've minded just leaving me there. If you get the result that actually that was all I amounted to after all, that should've satisfied you, yeah?”

Echidna: “Of course I have a perspective of accepting things as yet another possible result. ...I do, but that doesn't mean I'll do nothing to get the results I desire.”

Subaru: “What?”

Echidna's tone drops as she speaks.

Hearing it, Subaru for the first time here knits his brows in something other than anger.

Scrutinizing the meaning of her words, and putting them together into definite shape, that means—

Subaru: “To reject the result of me eroding and disappearing to nothing... you set up that situation, is what you're saying?”

Echidna: “...And as a result, I trespassed on territory precious to you, and I have no excuse for that. If you're going to shower me with insults, I will resignedly accept it. Your anger is correct, and my

selfishness is incorrect. That's all that's happened here.”

Setting her cup on the table, Echidna gazes straight-on at Subaru at the foot of the hill. The silliness and caprice she had shown until now is entirely gone, as the Witch of Greed faces Subaru with all of her sincerity.

Her attitude, her stance, her words, overwhelm him.

His heart had been entirely occupied with inexpressable fury and distrust toward Echidna, but now those emotions seemed horrifically egotistic and self-serving.

While a strong reluctance to call the previous situation as Echidna's help still remains, just what state would Subaru's mind be in if Echidna had not acted?

On the tomb's cold floor, mind broken, pulverised, in an impenetrable darkness without even the faintest of light, disappeared entirely. Not a difficult scene to imagine.

He can't convey her any words of gratitude. But, he could not think her someone who deserved a showering of anger and curses. —That was his emotional compromise.

Subaru: “—”

Wordlessly standing up, Subaru brushes the grass off him as he heads for the hilltop.

Sitting in her chair, a pained look flashes through Echidna's expression as she watches Subaru approach. It seems that not even the centuries-old witch can determine just what words Subaru's about to pummel her with.

Thirst for knowledge incarnate. WITCH OF GREED. The fact he could make twist the expression of even someone like this gives Subaru's mind a slight relief.

Echidna: “—au,”

Echidna cries out slightly in surprise as Subaru pulls out the chair opposite, and sits.

He certainly isn't bringing his cup to his lips, but he is expressing intention to talk. Echidna looks at Subaru with unease as he puts his elbow to the table and his cheek in his hand, averting his gaze from Echidna.

Subaru: “No appetite for 'Chidna tea. ...But I will be getting a profitable conversation out of you.”

Swallowing down his unbearable emotions, Subaru displays tolerance enough to comply.



Subaru: “So what was the second TRIAL, actually?”

Still with cheek in hand, Subaru asks without looking at Echidna.

Echidna shifts the position of her seat as she responds, slanting forward to get into Subaru's view.

Echidna: “What do you think it was?”

Subaru: “Dodging the subject... or actually you're not. This you saying I'm asking too much in

suddenly trying to get an answer, really?”

Echidna: “I’m not considering anything so mean-spirited. It’s since I wound up doing something which would make you angry. I’m just thinking to check that we can have friendly conversation, but also that I want to hear your voice some more.”

Those were incredibly embarrassing words for someone to hear.

If Subaru had been braving this conversation in his baseline mental state, with no hustle at all, then he would likely have been discomposed and wound up getting stuck on his words.

But Subaru’s present mentality is one that surely wouldn’t be giving Echidna the reactions she wants. He gives a small sigh as his reply.

Subaru: “The TRIAL’s opener is WITNESS THE UNCOMEATABLE PRESENT. That’s the preface, and that’s the scenes it shows. ...Uncomeatable present probably means a PRESENT which, sometime during the period it took for me to wind up where I am now, went down a different path than what leads to the current situation.”

It’s the same kind of idea as a visual novel.

The player chooses down which path to proceed at important moments, opening different storylines and possibilities. Think about it somewhat extravagantly, and visual novels are magnificent games wherein whole lives themselves unfold.

Echidna: “They’re universes you fundamentally shouldn’t be able to witness. They may be infinitely happier than the real PRESENT, and you’ll regret that things aren’t like that universe. Or perhaps they may be infinitely sadder than the real PRESENT, and you’ll feel grateful that you are where you are now. —The reality of the second TRIAL is to witness these differing PRESENTS, and see if you can affirm the PRESENT which correctly should be, is about what it is.”

Following off from Subaru, Echidna succinctly explains the second Trial.

It’s practically identical to what Subaru had envisioned. If you exclude the part where it wound up being a deeply, violently penetrating ordeal for Subaru and only for Subaru.

Subaru: “—Do the alternate PRESENTS I saw actually exist?”

Echidna: “...”

Subaru: “When I die, I RETURN BY DEATH right there. So I’ve never seen what happens after my death. ...and even before that, I’ve never considered that the world continues on after my death. ...No, I’ve been trying not to consider it.”

Well, of course.

Subaru’s RETURNING BY DEATH occurs when the world has fallen into an unsalvagable checkmate. By affirming RETURNS BY DEATH made for the sake of breaking through the deadlock, saving those dear to him, and reaching the optimum future, he had put up with the sensation of spending his life.

If worlds exist after his death, that pulls the fundamental portion of his premise out from under him. While also to keep himself mentally stable, believing that NO WORLDS THAT I HAVE LEFT BEHIND EXIST allowed Subaru to save the people of the maybe-present WORLDS LEFT BEHIND.



And so,

Subaru: “Even after I die, the world goes on... maybe? My choices make worlds diverge, and there in the world where I blundered and miscarried everything, everyone I didn't protect is there...?”

Echidna says nothing.

Subaru: “What is it, Echidna. ...Please tell me.”

Having lost the option to keep abstaining from looking at her, Subaru pleads as he directs his gaze to the forward-slanted Echidna.

Wordless, and bathed in Subaru's attention, Echidna thoughtfully rubs her chin. She closes her eyes.

Echidna: “There's one thing I have to put out there about the TRIAL.”

Subaru: “...”

Echidna: “The presents in the second TRIAL are entirely a phenomena which show scenes from fabricated worlds. The challenger taking the TRIAL... that'd be you this time. Taking influence from all the way into the details in your memory, the MEMORIES OF THE WORLD withdraws the people who make up your surroundings, the world, the atmosphere, even the mana, and aligns the necessary past, present, and future information to create a PRESENT.”

Subaru: “...”

Echidna: “Meaning that is entirely a well-made UNREALITY. The degree of their reconstruction is on an entirely different dimension from your self-produced imaginings and delusions, and as a fake reality those things would potentially occur. But, they're start-to-finish ARTIFICIAL UNREALITIES. If questioning whether they really happened, the answer is not affirmative.”

Subaru: “Th-then...”

Echidna: “However.”

Hearing Echidna's explanation, Subaru raises his head in hope. But Echidna faces out her palm, interrupting him.

Echidna: “The details behind the principles of your RETURN BY DEATH are unclear. It's almost certain that the agent for your RETURN BY DEATH is the Witch of Envy, but as to how the WITCH OF ENVY is making you RETURN BY DEATH leaves questions unending. It may be a power which uses your death as a trigger to rewind the world. Potentially, it may be that it overwrites the you in a maybe-there-maybe-not alternate universe so called a parallel universe, with the present YOU.”

Subaru: “Au...”

Echidna: “Hypothetically assuming that the latter principle is truth, then worlds in parallel universes exist, and even after your death, the worlds without YOU would continue.”

Subaru: “W-ways to confirm that would be...”

Echidna: “—None.”

Echidna shakes her head.

His eyes open wide, Subaru's jaw drops as he is struck dumb. Echidna gives Subaru a sympathizing kind of gaze, rapping her fingers on the edge of the table.

Echidna: “If we're to assume there is a way to confirm, it would be to get the answer out of the WITCH OF ENVY herself. But I'm sure you're already well aware that that would be difficult?”

Echidna must be talking about Subaru's memories from when he first truly met the WITCH OF ENVY. After leaving the tea party and exiting the tomb, there the WITCH OF ENVY welcomed him. Stole Emilia's body, tore Garfiel to bits, consumed SANCTUARY itself in shadow, a genuine monster. —Subaru suddenly remembers some doubts he had about the circumstances of the thing's appearance.

Subaru: “Ri, ght... Echidna. Before, after the tea party ended... outside, I saw the Witch in SANCTUARY. What was that? Just what was that?”

Echidna: “You already know this, but that was the WITCH OF ENVY. Although, that was a knock-off far removed from the real thing. The flesh-vessel it chose was immature, and most importantly the seal hasn't moved an inch. With its witch factor impaired, it's inconceivable it could act with the power it had in its heyday.”

Subaru: “That was far removed from its heyday...?”

Although having been a monster that made short work of transformed Garfiel and killed absolutely everything without sustaining even a scratch, that had been nothing comparable to the real WITCH OF ENVY.

Just how much of a hell had it been 400 years ago, when the Witch was actually parading about the place?

Echidna: “Just as you have imagined, the trigger for its exiting outside was the tea party. Not even that *thing* can bind you by the taboo here. Thus it went crazed with jealousy, left to vent its resentment outside, had a tantrum and went ballistic.”

Subaru: “Did you know that'd fucking happen?”

Echidna: “I certainly did not. I'm speaking about the outset. Seeing how things had turned out, the outset probably came from that. ...is the hypothesis that I reached. That I can make no conclusions without truly witnessing the outcomes is a point where even I, the Witch of Greed, am no different from you all.”

Subaru: “—”

Subaru is lost for words at Echidna and her objective stance, which shows no signs of collapsing. He could reproach her, but nothing would come of it. Despite being aware of this fact, there is a

vexation to be had.

If she just felt like it, if she just felt like collaborating with Subaru, then potentially—

Echidna: “I doubt there's any great reason behind why your loved was chosen as the vessel. Her body's also a half-elf, so maybe there might've been some ease of adaptation there, but I'd say the biggest reason would be nothing other than ENVY.”

Subaru: “Envy...?”

Echidna: “When you're a witch trying to monopolize your affection, how is it strange to hate someone who's so enthusiastically getting your attention, and want to destroy them?”

Loving someone insanely meant desiring to be loved by them in equal turn. If that someone directed their love at another, then the hazard known as LOVE could prompt acts of insanity done to redirect the someone's focus onto oneself.

So that was why the Witch of Envy keeps materializing, then?

Echidna: “Everything you're puzzling over is likely something only the WITCH OF ENVY would know.”

Subaru says nothing.

Echidna: “You can mull over it endlessly, but in honest opinion, it's unlikely you'll reach an answer. Not about that spectacle which cornered you in, and most importantly not about those MAYBE-THERE-MAYBE-NOT PRESENTS, will you get a true conclusion.”

Subaru: “Th, at is...”

There's really nothing to call it except Subaru's cruel reality.

He wanted to be clearly refuted. “These post-death worlds you saw don't exist.”

If that was no good then he wanted a definite affirmation. “Your conceit has sacrificed many.”

Whichever answer it was, Subaru would have surely kept the response as a precept, as a lynchpin, as something not to forget—then grit his teeth, spill tears of blood, and even with his soul wailing its misery, step onward.

—Getting an answer saying that no answer existed was remarkably cruel.

Still without any affirmations or denials, with matters of the world still inconclusive, live!

Without knowing whether he had trampled over what he had trampled over. Without being able to acknowledge that he has abandoned what he has abandoned. Was being unable to acknowledge his sins as sins his punishment?

Had Natsuki Subaru committed a sin so accordingly great, that no one could forgive it?

Nobody was capable of casting judgement on Subaru. Couldn't denounce him either. He understood that.

—But would nobody let even Subaru himself do it?

Echidna: “I think it's harsh. But, I also think all there's possibly to do is rationalize.”

Overwhelmed and without words is Subaru, when Echidna addresses him. He lifts his head sluggishly, looking at Echidna with his eyes empty. Echidna swallows her breath, and with a serious expression,

Echidna: “Speaking in extremes, the second TRIAL is to accept WHAT THERE ONLY IS NOW, and rationalizing that the PRESENTS other than the PRESENT are entirely unreachable alternate worlds.”

Subaru says nothing.

Echidna: “For you, who has reason more than other challengers to recognize that perhaps these alternate worlds may truly exist, I'm sure it's difficult. But still, it's time to switch.”

Subaru: “Switch?”

Echidna: “Your choices indeed may have left numerous sacrifices in their wake. I'm sure that among those you've left behind, there are many which are beyond reclamation. But spending your life entirely counting those you've left behind, those who are gone, is miserable. It's empty. It's painful, wouldn't you think?”

Subaru: “If we're just going to be talking off emotion logic, how about we don't. ...It's really something saying this but do you actually think run-of-the-mill counselling's enough to do something about this experience?”

Echidna's words are pleasant, comforting ones.

Were they in response to a shallower wound, a less serious crime, to a lower-scale event, perhaps they may have had some effects.

Potentially he would have felt saved, and been capable of that SWITCH.

But,

Subaru: “That doesn't change that the payback for what I've done is unworkable. It doesn't change that I thought everything I left behind disappeared, didn't exist, and from that I've been piling sacrifices is possible.”

Echidna: “...You're correct.”

Subaru: “What do I have to do so I can approve of myself in this situation? Is there something I can do so that I can forgive me? I pushed aside the deliverance you offered me. I don't want to be saved by a counterfeit Rem. I'm bringing the real Rem back, eventually. —But.”

Taking a breath, Subaru's face twists into a mess.

Subaru: “—Is the Rem I eventually bring back, truly going to be the same Rem I want to save?”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “So long as that question goes unanswered, this mental deadlock's not changing. ...Are you seriously telling me I can do something about that, ordering me to rationalize it?”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “Rather than counting who I haven't saved, live while counting those I have... that, is seriously what you're telling me?”

What followed in the statements Echidna wished to tell Subaru was a kind of hope.

Those words would even for Subaru, perhaps bestow hope.

—However, the darkness into which Subaru had declined was not shallow enough for him to consider them as hope.

Subaru: “With this run-of-the-mill emotional logic, you're seriously... telling me to, fight...”

Echidna: “—I am.”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “I, am, telling you, that.”

Dispelling the words of comfort, Subaru cries out from the depths of despair.

Echidna speaks—slowly, piece by piece, looking Subaru straight in the eye.

Echidna: “Rather than counting the many you may not have saved, you should count the many you have saved. The path you've travelled in getting here, I have been watching.”

Subaru: “You, what're... what could you, about me...”

Echidna: “I have been watching you live doing your utmost, your very best, and arriving to this moment. And so I can say it. Indeed I can.”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “On the path you have walked thus far, not a single thing you have done has been worthless. Nobody has the right to call your utmost INSUFFICIENT. You've gone throwing out everything you can do, and ventured here to this point. —That is something to be proud of.”

Echidna's sincere words strike Subaru's empty heart. Something inside his hollow chest resounds.

—But, it isn't enough. Those words would not spur him to stand.

She could say it was something to be proud of, but in reality Subaru had miscarried on many things. Things he should have been able to do something about. If it were someone other than Subaru working with the same conditions, they would've done it fine. But since the person in those places had been Subaru, many had gone without rescue.

That was Subaru's crime. Subaru's wrongdoing. The sin for Subaru to accept, and indemnify.

Subaru: “There is no one who can forgive me.”

Echidna: “I will forgive you. Who knows of this, I will.”

Subaru: "There is no one who can judge me."

Echidna: "I will judge you. Me, who knows your sin, I will."

Subaru: "—There is no one who can validate me."

Echidna: "If you cannot validate yourself, then allow me to invalidate the you you cannot forgive."

Subaru: "—"

Echidna: "If you will validate your sin, I will invalidate your sin."

Every one of Subaru's words, Echidna persistently attempts to dispel.

Why was the witch so insistently denying Subaru's sin?

Why was the witch so repeatedly trying to cast this darkness from Subaru's heart?

Subaru: "Why, are you... trying so hard to do something for me?"

Echidna: "...Making a girl say this kind of thing is just slightly overly mean."

Echidna, who had not faltered even once until now, for the first time gets vague with her statements. With her face still tinted slightly red, Echidna coughs.

Echidna: "—Will you form a contract with me, Natsuki Subaru?"

Quiet, but suggestive of strong volition.

Subaru blinks, letting the words sink into his brain, taking all the time necessary to comprehend.

Subaru: "Con, tract...?"

Echidna: "Yes, a contract. A formal contract with the WITCH OF GREED. —Are you interested in tying one?"

Subaru: "We form this... say we formed this, what happens?"

Echidna: "It's simple. —From now on, whenever you run into an obstacle you can't surmount, I will ponder on the barricade together with you. Whenever you wish to hear someone's words, I will endeavour to give you the words you desire. Whenever your sins are close to crushing you, I will eliminate those crushing sins together with you."

Spoken all at once, a bashful smile rises on Echidna's face.

Echidna: "Do you want to form this contract?"

Subaru: "...You're dead, and so, aren't you incapable of interfering with reality?"

Echidna: "I've probably transcended the capabilities of the dead. Call it belated and yes it's belated, but I don't think such a wrong. ...If you'll forgive it, that is."

Hand to her chest with her head hung, Echidna's words vibrate Subaru's eardrums. The vibration follows to his body, a heat steadily warming his blood as it transmits through his whole.

To his numbed fingers, sensation returns.

His arid tongue regains some moisture and mobility, his unblinking eyes filling with something hot to cast out the dryness.

This offered hand, proposition, proposal, assistance, has him lost on how to answer.

Echidna: “Not meaning to brag, but I'm confident about my information load. I can prepare counter-approaches for most all problems you'll encounter, and no matter how absurd a situation threatens to befall you, unlike your peers there is absolutely no necessity to toil in persuading me. And most of all, I can comprehend your RETURN BY DEATH.”

Subaru: “Are you hitting me with a surprise fast-lipped sales pitch?”

Echidna: “As the one seeking it, I do kinda think it natural to note out the benefits of tying a contract with me. If this has helped bring some ease into your heart at all, then perhaps you could call that another benefit.”

Taking advantage of Subaru's words, Echidna turns even them into part of her pitch. Seeing her acting in a way she never has before, Subaru's cheeks unwittingly loosen into a smile. Feeling the air in his lungs peacefully exit, Subaru sighs.

With the meadow wind bathing the back of his neck, Subaru leans against the chairback as he looks up at the sky.

In the artificial sky, he sees the white clouds floating.

Whenever he's stuck, whenever he's lost for answers, whenever he encounters hardship. —If under this azure sky, he could once again trade words, seeking a solution...

Subaru: “Maybe, it wouldn't be so bad...”

Echidna: “—Which would mean?”

The chair squeaking as she stands up, her hands unwittingly balled into fists, Echidna looks down at Subaru. With Subaru gazing at her while still leaned against his chairback, Echidna's face changes colour in embarrassment at what she just did.

Echidna: “Ah, um... right, if you mean you're desperate for it, then I guess that contract's something we could...”

Subaru: “Way too late for patching this up. Or actually, I'm not the one looking for this, it's you... no, in this situation, saying that is incredibly crude.”

Echidna is the one proposing it, but the entire thing is to save Subaru's heart.

Said plainly, it's a witch's kindness. That the whole affair won't take shape as Subaru simply clinging to that kindness is definitely because the witch is acting with consideration for Subaru.

No matter what he does, no matter who it is, is he always going to wind up getting saved?

With the rocking of the chair-back pitching him forward as he uprights himself, Subaru stands up. Echidna stands within range to touch, looking up at the now-elevated Subaru, her expression uneasy.

*This witch's minutest actions are cunning*, he thinks.

Being that he is she is delivering him, he is unmistakably in no position to say anything.

Subaru: “How do you tie a contract?”

Echidna: “—For tying a formal contract, you and I will be connected with a pass. I'll deal with attaching in the detailed itinerary... but for now, your palm.”

Echidna raises her right hand, facing her pale palm to Subaru.

*Like this, place your palm to mine*, is probably what it means.

Seeing the witch standing opposite Subaru and her grin, unable to hide her happiness, Subaru feels a sort of dumbfoundment as he sighs.

Subaru: “Now, let's hope things're gonna start changing...”

Filled with more than a few expectations for the future, to Echidna's hand does Subaru place his—

**BAM.**

A shattering noise rips through the air as the white, cup-bearing table beside Subaru explodes. The impact which broke the table transmits on to the ground, the earth collapsing as it births a crater, the quakes and rumbling jolting Subaru violently as he squawks in surprise.

???: “—I'm putting a stop to this contract.”

Fist to the ground as she magnificently speaks is the blonde, blue-eyed girl.

—The WITCH OF WRATH glares at the two, in rage.



## CHAPTER 75: THEY

Unwittingly stumbling back at the shock, Subaru's eyes open wide as he sees the blonde girl glaring at him. Her azure eyes brimming with incredible fury, a witch with crimson colouring her beautiful face—it's Minerva.

Bringing her sharp gaze off the paralysed Subaru, Minerva redirects to look at Echidna, standing opposite Subaru and entirely composed.

Minerva: "Repeating myself, but I'm putting a stop to this. I'm not acknowledging this contract."

Echidna: "...Hrm. This'd best be called a development outside what I anticipated."

Too intimate for enmity, too bloodthirsty for anger. That emotional gaze concentrates wholeheartedly onto Echidna as Minerva crosses her arms inside the crater she made, hoisting up her abundant chest, biting her lip.

Echidna: "A witch's contract—you should be capable of understanding what significance these hold. That you've regardless interrupted us means... not possibly, you also want to tie a contract with him? Then here I suppose we'd be having a case of jealousy."

Minerva: "Can't you at least tell that my anger is not for such a peaceful reason? I'm furious. I'm incensed. I'm vehement with boiling rage."

The redness to Minerva's face intensifies as she replies to Echidna. Her peaking emotions turn into a teardrop at the corner of her eye, giving an innocent, childlike kind of obstinacy to her features.

Her young face is terribly mismatched to her voluptuous body—and her very presence is something Subaru inevitably must accept, although with a great jumble of surprise.

Subaru: "Why're you here?"

Minerva: "What. Are you saying I'm not allowed to be?"

Subaru: "Well no. I'm not, but... I mean, Echidna's right there."

Says Subaru as he points at Echidna, Minerva puffing out her cheeks in displeasure. She tilts her head as if not understanding the problem here at all, but Echidna seems to catch on, giving a light clap of her hands as she nods.

Echidna: "Ah, I see what you're having a problem with. —You must be mystified as to how another witch has manifested, even though I'm present and standing right here."

Subaru: "Th-that's it. I mean, every time I've met a witch up to now it's been one-on-one... like it was guaranteed they were appearing swapping out in your place. Didn't you..."

Minerva: “She never said we can't be out together, I bet. That kind of mean pointless trick is just how this nasty witch does things.”

Minerva angrily squares her shoulders as she easily destroys Subaru's objections. Subaru mutters a 'no way' to himself as he looks at Echidna. But Echidna gives no particular signs of refuting it.

Echidna: “I'd like you to not misunderstand, though. That I didn't call any other witches here is because it's a big responsibility and a big risk for me. Depending on the circumstances, it's possible another witch will steal predominance over this place, and even if they don't it takes some considerable effort to recreate powerful beings such as them.”

Subaru: “And so then... but, no, you...”

Echidna: “I have never told a single lie. That alone, I will assert.”<sup>8</sup>

Echidna's sharp statement slices through Subaru's stuttering words.

She's right. Looking back through his memories, Echidna has never made any statement about this present phenomenon which could be deemed as a lie.

Subaru had just assumed that had been it. So speaking in extremes, Echidna technically had not deceived Subaru at all, but.

Echidna: “I didn't really want you to know that the other witches could manifest all over the place, and have them take you from me.”

Subaru: “Wh, aeh?”

Echidna: “You are truly the first guest in a long time for me. I haven't had conversations that thrilled me as much as ours so commonly whether before or after my death. Are you going to curse me, say that my desire to hog you is miserable?”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “I know I'm repeating this again and again, but I think of you fondly. And so I wanted to avoid it that, by the others having more allure, or by being a more cooperative witch, your interest would shift away from me and toward them. —I don't mind if you laugh.”

It's a horrific, hideous desire to monopolize—is how Echidna is explaining the details behind her secrecy. Listening to Echidna's somewhat-excuse, with her fixation aimed right at him, he wonders: *what about me that warrants this fixation?*

The WITCH OF ENVY is the same case. Why was Echidna, too, with Subaru so—

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8 With this line in mind, if Echidna has ever told anything construable as an outright lie in these summaries, assume it's because I bungled the nuance of what she was saying or otherwise didn't catch a double meaning. The same applies to Lewes and Garfiel.

Minerva: “You are just getting wheedled in so easily.”

Subaru: “—Dhah!?”

A soft fist bumps the back of Subaru's head just as he goes to consider it.

He puts his hand to his head and turns around, to find Minerva behind him. She takes the hand he's pressing down on his head with, and with a flowing motion twists his arm to wrest him down to the ground.

Subaru: “A, auh! Wai, this hurts this hurts this hurts... or not?”

Minerva: “When I directly touch something living, no matter what action I take it turns into something restorative. I could punch with all my strength and it'll close wounds, I could wrestle someone while trying to wrench their limbs off and it'll cure their chronic diseases, and if I keep someone held in a lock their shoulder aches will disappear!”

Subaru: “A-and so that's why the aching over my body's... not.”

While his body savours the incredible merit of the Witch of Wrath, Subaru frantically twists his neck to look at Minerva as she locks him in a hold.

Regardless of the fact that she's twisted him around in a way which should invite pain and jarring to his bones, he feels no ache but in fact a pleasant warmth spreading through his body, and consequently an incredible awriness. A mysterious authority which turns all acts preformed on a human body into something positive, and the witch exercising it. Certainly Subaru's had no negative impression of Minerva up to now, but...

Subaru: “What the hell're you trying to do here...”

Minerva: “I don't do this, and it looks like you're gonna get happily cajoled into contracting with Echidna. Your quick decisions and airhead attitude're really making me mad!”

Echidna: “Cajole, makes it sound bad. I'm sure I did explain the benefits of what a contract with me would be, and devise to put us on even grounds of mutual understanding...”

Minerva: “It's that attitude where you act like you totally followed through with your responsibility to explain here that's getting me. You did explain all about the benefits. You did... but, when it comes to the inconvenient stuff the contract'd cause, you didn't say a thing!”

Leaving herself to her rage, Minerva swings her leg down. Where her heel lands is Subaru's behind, and he gets to experience the incomprehensible phenomenon of feeling a heel driving into his rear, as the force transmitted through his bottom bores an indentation into the ground.

Feeling some sense that the strike to his ass has improved his bowel functioning, Subaru realises the significance of what Minerva is saying, and is stunned.

—His conversation with Echidna had not touched on the detriments of the contract at all. And now he

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

understands the carelessness of his own self who had not even noticed the fact.

Subaru: “No, but... saying detriments... something, that kind of serious...”

Minerva: “Wouldn't come up, is what you think? You're sure taking contracts lightly. Even though the contractor is a witch—and the one who of the seven sin witches tied the most contracts, had contact with the most people, who meddled the most in history, the WITCH OF GREED.”

Echidna: “All those laurels are laurels of my life... though it's true that not every one of them was what you'd call honourable. It's true that forming a contract with me did not necessarily save absolutely all of them.”

Minerva comes through with that fact Subaru was ignorant to. Echidna follows on from her, entirely stressing her absence of ill intentions toward Subaru.

Stuck between these two as they assert their stances, the turmoil in Subaru's head peaks.

He didn't know which one to trust.

Ever since Subaru got involved with the Trial in this tomb, his multiple meetings and times spent deliberating over his worries together with Echidna have led him to consider her a kind of comrade in arms. And so when Echidna proposed to tie an organized collaboration in the form of this contract, Subaru had even felt a sense of security.

On the other hand, his time spent interacting and speaking with Minerva, compared to Echidna, is sparse. But whenever Subaru was in danger she would swoop in with her mighty arms to heal him, and without even demanding a 'thank you' zoom past like a typhoon, a merciful character.

Minerva had no reason to be deceiving Subaru, and if the matter was actually great enough that she would purposefully manifest to interject, there is probably more time to be spent mulling the whole thing over.

Or no, actually, rather than deliberating like this, what he should do was ask this question:

Subaru: “Echidna. If we form the contract, you'll need compensation.”

Echidna: “...Yup, you're right. Contracts do need those. Like how I am offering my knowledge in response to your demand, you need to present compensation in response to my demand.”

Subaru: “Course. Yeah. —So, what're you demanding from me? If I contract you, what is it I need to offer you?”

For getting Echidna's help when stuck in a hopeless situation, what was it he needed to pay?

Echidna's cheeks loosen into a smile.

Echidna: “It's nothing worth being wary over. What I'm demanding from you isn't anything so complex. Actually, for how I'm not trying to take anything precious physical or non-physical as compensation, you could even call this evenhanded.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Subaru: “—Say, your, demand.”

Echidna: “It's very simple. —What you feel, what you create, what you know, what you do, what you think, what you retrospect, what fruits called UNKNOWNNS your presence incurs, I want to savour always.”

Says Echidna, her cheeks red and expression that of a young maiden with a crush.  
Fruits called UNKNOWNNS—Subaru furrows his brows at the poetic phrasing.

Subaru: “Hell's that. You mean, pull out my emotions and memories and recollections, and hand them over? If so then...”

Echidna: “Didn't I say? It's nothing so risky. I just want to witness the sights you see, the melodies you hear, the story you weave, all from a special box seat. All I want is to perceive this. I want to be in a position to know the UNKNOWNNS you create. By that and just merely that alone, I can be fulfilled.”

To dispel Subaru's concerns, Echidna plainly defines her demand.  
She just wants to watch Subaru walk his path. See the same thing he sees. To know what he feels, what he knows, the results of his actions.  
Thirst for knowledge incarnate, the Witch titled GREED, wanted merely that.

Subaru: “You're, not lying right?”

Echidna: “Lying about contracts'd be absurd. While also for the sake of being myself, I pledge that I will never do anything to betray those words. I'd stake my life on it.”

Concludes Echidna with her hand to her chest, the joke being 'Though, I'm already dead.'  
Subaru senses no lies from her words or behaviour. Or perhaps he just wanted to believe that.

Subaru: “Minerva. This's what Echidna's telling me. And so what I'm doing is...”

???: “I-it's, all... true, but th... that doesn't, mean sh-she's... she's told you, everything.”

Subaru attempts to demand Minerva release him from the hold, when somebody new on the scene addresses him. This voice was one he had heard just a few quarter-hours ago—and spoken in a diction Subaru felt absolutely nothing positive for.

Subaru: “Camilla... the WITCH OF LUST!”

Camilla: “Do... d-don't, look at me with... with those scary, eyes. I, I'm not... not even, doing any... thing... you're, a-awful...”

Subaru: “The nasty eyes're inborn. I'm not making any specially harsh expression or anything.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

Subaru held grappled to the ground, with Echidna standing opposite him. Minerva behind him means the three form a straight line, with a pink-haired girl sitting in the meadow a short distance away—Camilla. She timidly hides her face away from Subaru's gaze, sporadically glancing over. The attitude's annoying as always, but by consciously averting his attention from her, Subaru manages to avoid CAPTIVATION TO THE POINT IT'S LIFE THREATENING.

Subaru: “But anyway, what were you talking bout? I'm not gonna complain this late about witches showing up, but if something's...”

Camilla: “E-Echidna-chan is... hiding, lots and lots... of, things. S-she isn't, lying but... she's hiding, lots... of things...”

Subaru: “Hiding things?”

Thinking over Camilla's words, Subaru imploringly looks to Echidna. Echidna closes an eye as she looks over at the suddenly-present Camilla.

Echidna: “Suddenly show up, and here you immediately come with the aspersions. Or more actually, how is it that he's stirred up your attentions? You're not like Minerva, you shouldn't have any reason to back him. You're supposed to have disliked him.”

Camilla: “A, r-rea... reason, like... Minerva-chan? No I, do... don't have any... proper, one. But, Echidna-chan, you... you, tricked... me, didn't you?”

Camilla looks down as she responds to Echidna's accurate statements, speaking in frail and stuttering voice. However, contrary to her diction, the actual words she is saying carry no weakness or compromise at all. Camilla putters her fidgety gaze around, setting her glance multiple times on Echidna.

Camilla: “I-I, don't... like him, but, I... I'm not on your... side when you, tricked.... m-me Echidna-chan, ei... either. People who, t-trick me, hate... me, d-do mean, things to me... I WILL NEVER FORGIVE.”

—That last statement alone is spoken with incredible clarity.

So much that Subaru needs some time before he can recognize that it came from the mouth of this girl beside him. That was the extent that that single phrase diverted from Camilla's atmosphere up until now.

Camilla: “—”

Wordlessly, but assuredly without ever looking away, Camilla stares at Echidna. In her eyes there churns a near indescribable whirlpool of emotions—something dark and grudgelike, entirely unforgiving of any bastard who would aim at her something resembling hostility. Apex of narcissism—are the words that skim through Subaru's brain.

Echidna: “While it may've been a necessary measure, it seems acting in a way contrary to Camilla's desires was a mistake. Make an enemy of you, and there's no bigger nuisance out there.”

Camilla: “E-everyone is, on my... side so, ha-having me... hate you, is, really... awful. Y-you can apol... apologize, but, I won't.... forgive you.”

Camilla's personality is introverted and timid enough that she cannot even communicate with others sufficiently—but that has nothing to do with the intensity of her rebellion toward hostility.

Subaru: “What've you all... what have you all been talking about!?”

And, butting in to the witches and their tense situation, Subaru finally speaks up.  
Feeling the attention of the three witches focusing on him, Subaru frantically turns his neck as he,

Subaru: “This's enough of you all talking while leaving me out! I'm the one who's choosing here! Say it in a way I can understand! Echidna, what're you hiding!? You two, what is it you know that's making you try to stop me!?”

Minerva: “Even saying that you're in a mentally frail position, stopping all thinking and immediately going to grasp an offered hand is totally naive... and what guided him into doing that was all of your so careful planning!”

Echidna: “A wound to my respectability. That sounds liable to make him misunderstand things. If we tie the contract, with my assistance I will lead him to, no matter what, reach the optimum destination that he desires. To know of the things he sees, sounds he hears, information he learns over this process is my demand. Not a single one of the things I am saying is fallacious.”

Minerva launches her words at the roaring Subaru with her voice shaking in rage. Echidna's composure remains entirely in place.

Feeling the coolness laced through Echidna's voice, Subaru also begins feeling something awry. Having transcended his up-until-now state of near delirium, he very deliberately scrutinizes over Echidna's words. Over her attitude, and over why the two witches are stopping him.

Was there something off? She wasn't saying anything off. The other two witches had acknowledged she wasn't lying. Then, where was the problem?

Echidna: “I will repeat it, Natsuki Subaru. Should you choose me, contract with me—I will, without fail, lead you to the place you desire.”

???: “—'Ultimately', is the disclaimer word guaranteed to come attached to this promise—*haa*.”

Echidna makes her statement with her hand outstretched to Subaru, when a listless voice speaks.  
He looks, to find a monster of magenta hair seated opposite Camilla—on the ground, buried in her long, long hair, the WITCH OF SLOTH has appeared.

The multiplying in witches doesn't surprise Subaru any more. What Subaru does pick up is,

Subaru: “Ultimately?”

Sekhmet: “I'm sure Echidna—*huu*—is guaranteed to fulfil the contract—*haa*—But, so long as she upholds entirely the reality that—*huu*—she did fulfil the contract—*haa*—she'll likely do whatever during the process to get there.”

Subaru: “Do, whatev...”

Linking together Sekhmet's words to the previous awriness he felt, one single hypothesis comes to Subaru's mind. But that hypothesis is one overwhelmingly hard to accept, and as Subaru's face stiffens in shock, he looks at Echidna and her closed eyes—and speaks.

Subaru: “Echidna, if I contract you... without fail, you will take me to the optimum future, you said.”

Echidna: “Yes, I did say that. And it's true. Without any doubt, I will carry out that contract to the end. With my knowledge and your attribute, we will assuredly be able to achieve it.”

Right, exactly, that was entirely the way of a completable contract.  
Echidna's words present no lie. Should Subaru collaborate with her, they will be capable of unfailingly saving everything, and arriving to the future. However,

Subaru: “Will your cooperating in getting me to the optimum future—use the optimum path?”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “For me to reach my desired destination, will you truly, help me the best you can?”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “Why're you saying nothing. Answer me, Echidna—no—WITCH OF GREED!”

Raising his head, Subaru screams his throat hoarse.  
While still held against the ground, and still stuck in a lock. But Subaru pays that fact no care as he wholeheartedly, undividedly, glares at Echidna. Faced with that sharp gaze, Echidna slips a small sigh.

Echidna: “—If it is to reach the optimum future, sacrifices along the way are permissible. Would this not have been what you resolved, Natsuki Subaru?”

Subaru: “—hk”

Echidna gives neither a directly positive nor negative response to Subaru's question.  
But, Subaru senses.

That Echidna's words were assuredly not any that would dispel his doubts.  
Far from it, and as if to help him understand her thoughts, she spreads her arms wide.



Echidna:

“This attribute you have, RETURN BY DEATH, is an incredible authority. In the truest of meanings you cannot comprehend its utility. Not permitting the ends contrary to your desires, conducting countless redos, reaching for the future countless times—for a researcher, this is near the ultimate ideal. I mean, wouldn't it be? The result of any event will fundamentally, once a single result has been reached, remain put. If you are still midway through the process of reaching a result, you can make varied hypotheses as to what the result will be. If using this approach, or otherwise if using these conditions, varied hypotheses and varied investigations are possible. But, if you are to experiment with the purpose of producing a result, then the results, testable hypotheses, and investigations will inevitably subsume into a single aggregate. Recreating completely, and I mean completely identical conditions is impossible. No matter what conditions you arrange, you cannot recreate the exact same conditions as you previously did. If you tried different methods back then, what result would you now procure? That question is one us researchers will never attain the answer for, nothing more than a dream existing in the forward path of what is ideal. For me and my MEMORIES OF THE WORLD, I indeed have means to KNOW the answer, I certainly do. Do, but I don't consider using that method, utilizing that method, as anything good. It's that I want TO KNOW, not TO HAVE KNOWN. The thing creates this terrible contradiction, for me you could call it abominable. But I'm getting off topic here so returning back to the point... right, we researches have to accept results as being entirely singular, and for us who possess only one means of observation, your existence, your authority, is something we desperately crave. You can run DIFFERING INVESTIGATIONS under IDENTICAL CONDITIONS, you can see SEPARATE RESULTS differing from the FUNDAMENTAL RESULT. That is the ultimate authority—how could you not want it? With this power right in front of you, how could you not test everything? Though of course, I have no intention to force you to do that. It is entirely that, for you achieving your own purposes, you will utilise RETURN BY DEATH a lot. And I will also devote my best so that we reach the future you desire. During that process, I would like to get your extensive contribution to sating my curiosity. When that is all I'm asking I'm sure there's no punishment to be invoked. You will get to witness answers. I will get to sate my curiosity. Our mutual interests coincide. Since I don't know the answers either, there of course could be no instance where I purposefully lead you down an incorrect path, and you consequently meet a gruesome demise. I don't initially know the correct answer when faced with a problem, and in that sense I am entirely the same as you. In the sense of us puzzling over the same problems, struggling on, attempting to reach an answer together, I am sure you should call us unmistakably comrades. I can state that firmly and not with the slightest of embarrassment. I think very fondly of you, in the sense that you give me more methods for preforming investigation, and so I pledge that I would never do anything that would be improper consideration of you. But of course, I'm sure we will naturally encounter problems where even with my assistance, easy surmountation of the problem will be impossible. While I may be able to assist you as a font of knowledge, that doesn't mean I can at all interfere with reality. Should we face a physical obstacle blocking your path, that sort of problem where force is necessary, I will not be able to help you. Times upon times, potentially even hundreds or thousands of times, your mind and body may be broken. But even should that hypothetically happen, I would sincerely wish to preform your mental care. That that desire is without any intermingling from my researcher's interest to not part with something useful is not something I can assert. But that said, it is entirely truth that I think of you and your existence fondly, and that I want to aid you. I don't want you to think badly of me. And I know I'm repeating myself, but I can say with pride that I am a presence useful for achieving your goals. Yes, just as I am considering in a sense to utilize you for the purpose of sating my greed

called curiosity, you can likewise utilize me for your goal of REACHING THE OPTIMUM FUTURE. To be that kind of overly convenient girl you can take advantage of, for me, is entire satisfaction. If doing so will motivate you, then I will gladly submit my being to you. Although the question of whether you're interested in this deceased and impoverished body would have to be another topic. Oop, saying that might've been a foul against your loves. Your loves—the silver half-elf, and the blue-haired oni girl. The girls you will save no matter what, who you will stringently protect, having from your heart pledged to do so and through your actions exhibited that volition. Putting my thoughts on the state of your heart and the way it harbours such strong emotion for two girls aside as something I will not state here, I will assert that the height of the walls you must scale will be beyond imagination. How many unmanagable obstacles do you have lined up before you in present reality just that you know of? Your resolve to try and surmount these problems by yourself is honourable, and incredibly tragic. I want to be your aid on this path, with my hopes to be that aid not being anything fabricated in the least. You should definitely utilize these desires of mine. You need to take everything you can possibly have, use everything that you can possibly utilize, and by doing entirely that save the people with which you have bonds. That is the firm conviction you yourself had pledged, which you have fully understood as being a necessary and painful path. And so I will question you, I will repeat with you, I will have feelings for you. The path you walk by throwing away your life is something that ironically only just got certified in the form of the second TRIAL. With how you could almost mistake that TRIAL as having been there to make you comprehend what it is this path you have walked, you could perhaps even think the thing necessary. Of course the reality is it wasn't necessary, and it was the kind of experience which damaged your mind. But if it's between a state of not knowing and a state of yes knowing, no matter how grievous a truth it is, I'd consider the latter more valuable. Up until now, and also from now on, you will need you present your life as compensation for RETURN BY DEATH, and in doing so wrest in the future. That there are perhaps people who've been sacrificed for this purpose, and that these worlds in this fashion PERHAPS MIGHT EXIST was something necessary for you to have put in mind. Someday, you'll cease to feel any emotion when it comes to paying with your life, your human emotions will wane, you'll cease to be rattled by the DEATHS of those precious to you, you'll submerge into a life of impassive, indifferent inertia, and even should you reach the optimum future, you will be reaching it as an impaired version of yourself—for the sake of avoiding this kind of future, where the only thing that remains is a feeling of vain, it was necessary. No, there is not a single worthless thing in the world, everything is a necessary route taken, a needed piece to the puzzle. The TRIAL was necessary for you to comprehend that. If you require a tenable rationalization and pretext as to why you have hit a standstill, then adopt this stance. And I will validate that stance of yours. If my words can give you the strength you need to continue forward, then my words will I give to you. Whether they be comforts, tough motivators, whispers of love, provokers of loathing, if they will give you assistance then without any hesitation will I exercise them for you. And although you might detest it, you unconditionally need the assistance of someone like me on your path forward. If you're to proceed along a road of unavoidable pain and solitude, you absolutely need someone to walk alongside you without ever taking their eyes from the path. And if the person we're talking about to fill that role is me, not anyone else, but me, then I can walk that road alongside you without any problem at all. I will repeat it, I will restate it, I will convey it countless times until it reaches you. —You must need me. And I absolutely need you. Your presence is essential. My curiosity simply cannot be fulfilled without you. You are the only being which can sate me. You, you will surely grant me the quenching of my unquenchable GREED. Your presence is already indispensable for me as I dwell in this closed world. If you should wish to be somebody's hope, to execute your power to clear the world open, could my piteous self perhaps not partake in your leftovers? If you could concentrate any of that great kindness unto me, then I'd hesitate not a

second to devote to you my being, my knowledge, my soul. I'm begging you. I want you to trust me. That I hadn't attempted to communicate you my true motives was assuredly no attempt to deceive you, nor any attempt to hide it from you. It was just a matter of choosing the right time. If here, at this instant I appealed with a fragment of my true intention, you surely would've left me. That would be an unbearable loss for me. And of course for you also, in the sense of distancing yourself from the future you seek, it undoubtedly should be regarded as a definite loss as well. Someday, being that you have your attribute of RETURN BY DEATH, you will surely reach the future you seek. But, it's obviously best that the compensation you pay in reaching that future be little. If it's me, when it's me, a greater sparsity is possible in that compensation. Everything goes so long as ultimately you reach the desired future—and such kind of inhuman thinking, ignoring the small goals for the large ones, is what I'd prefer you not mistake this for. Being caught by a temptation, and so desiring to view the outcome of some certain situation, I may notice something necessary for reaching the optimum track but not mention it—is the kind of action I absolutely would not do, is not how great a check I have on my cravings to be able to plainly assert. I will acknowledge that. But, I will not deceive you. If hypothetically we assume that I do dip my hands into some trust-betraying deed like that, I would under no circumstances do anything to keep it hidden from you. I would absolutely reveal it to you. And I would devote everything I have to you to make up for that damaged trust. No matter what happens, I will assuredly send you off to your desired optimum future. Absolutely, unconditionally. And so having rationalized this clearly as a necessary measure, won't you choose me? Once the contract is made, I will follow along exactly exactly as your desires and demands there state. After that comes the conversation of just how much you can devote yourself to your wish, your wanted wish, your desired wish. My resolve is just as I stated. Now is to hear what is your resolve. I want you to prove to me that you, having formed a contract with me and acquired my collaboration, have the mettle to without fail reach the future. Once you accomplish so then for the first time, you may boast that you bested the second TRIAL. And from there proceed to the third TRIAL, overcome it, and complete the liberation of SANCTUARY. When you consider the calamity to befall your loves and those precious to you, this is indeed exactly a TRIAL you must surmount. I want you to show me that you have the strength, the resolve to overcome it. And from there you will plunder me, utilize my knowledge, and procure what lies ahead. What I desire of you, demand of you, and can offer you in return is there at a full stop. I sincerely, honestly, willed here to reveal you everything. And so now with everything stated what is it you will decide? —That answer is what I'd like you to tell me. For the sake of sating a fragment of my curiosity too, of course.”

—Says Echidna, smiling sweetly.

Her snow-white hair sways and her cheeks redden slightly in fervour as she peers up at Subaru, waiting for his answer.

Her eyelashes tremble with trepidation for his reaction, the fingers anxiously held to her chest fidgeting about. Her lips make many attempts to say something, but she hesitates, and the action ends merely with a wetting by her tongue.

Subaru looks up. He meets eyes with Minerva, restraining him.

Having locked gazes with Subaru, Minerva gives a small sigh as she finally releases Subaru's arm.

His shoulder escapes from the restraints, freed, as Subaru rolls his arms and stands up.

Just as Minerva said, the aching in his shoulders is gone. In fact, he even senses keenly that his somewhat taut hips and other places have been purged of their fatigue. The authority of the WITCH OF WRATH truly was healing to be feared.

Subaru: “—”

Rotating all of his body about, Subaru confirms his bodily sensation as he puts his thoughts in order. About what he had only just heard, no hiding anything at all, Echidna's truest of true intentions.

Subaru: “Echidna.”

Echidna: “Yes?”

Subaru: “You're... going to use me?”

He is going to be used. That was the term Echidna had repeated, again and again, throughout what she just said. Hearing that, Echidna nods without hesitation.

Echidna: “I am. And you can use me too. The contract would be something of a precaution, to ensure neither of us stray from that principle. If you're going to criticise me for attempting to use anything I could to keep you, I will resignedly accept it.”

Subaru: “I didn't consider anything, 's actually not the case. I at least understand that, said in extremes, this's just what you get with pro-con interest-sake relationships. That you'd help me 100% off your goodwill... though I hoped for it, I was at least prepared to the accept the reality that you wouldn't. But.”

Standing before Echidna, Subaru buries his face in his hands, facing upwards.

Subaru: “It just, wasn't there...”

Echidna: “It, being?”

Subaru: “Every single one of your actions up to now, looks faded to me. Everything of your friendly interactions with me, which started me trusting that maybe you weren't a bad guy after all... all of it, is faded.”

Everything from their first meeting to this very moment thuds to a collapse, crumbling. Their first tea party, the scene during the Trial, interrupted by reality, when he countless times he clung to her wisdom, her words. When he thought he could not regret forming a contract with her. —Everything from that time heartlessly laughs its ridicule at the foolishness of Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “Was this your intention all along?”

Echidna: “I don't really understand what you have a problem with. If it means that ultimately you'll reach the optimum, you'll rationalize the path you used to get there—didn't you decide this? You yourself validated that thought, and I'm sure I pushed you along saying that was okay...”

Subaru: “And for me to rationalize like that... not that I have but, you're saying that inducing me to go along that trend... was entirely according to your plan, then?”

Echidna: “I'd prefer you not misunderstand. That conclusion is entirely one that you had produced

yourself. All I did was give your conclusion just a tiny, slight prodding. That you're desiring for the responsibility behind your own words and conclusion to lie in someone else is indeed not impressive. Not impressive, and I'm not so simple as to bear it for you."

Protests Echidna, her expression pouting and sulky. The childishness she's expressing here, or more rather how out-of-place it is, makes the awriness Subaru has been feeling compound further. What to call it—a misfit in degree of emotion.

The way Echidna expresses emotion is not incorrect. She's indignant when she is doubted, she smiles when there's something to be happy about, grief slips through in her face in response to sad things. That is all correct, and not mistaken.

But still, this awriness, and the distrust it produces. The solution—

Subaru: "All your behaviour feels synthetic, it is superficial."

Echidna: "—"

Subaru: "When you're joyed, even when you're angry, the way you express emotion is childish and shallow. I mean right now, far from being enraged all you did was pout. Broad-minded, or whatever isn't the problem here. That behaviour... all your behaviour's been weird. I just thought you were brash and easily accepted, easy to get along with, but..."

Echidna: "—"

Subaru: "You're actually not. You—You are someone who can't understand others' emotions."

Recollect back on all of Echidna's behaviour thus far, and everything tones in sepia. Every attitude of hers that he had found appealing was a boon of her shallow emotional expression—wind up perceiving it as such, and all of their interactions fade of colour.

And although showered in these unsparing words, Echidna's expression remains unchanged from that previous pout. As if she knew no way to express any greater discomfort.

Subaru: "You're allowed to be angry here."

Echidna: "...I see. So here I should raise my voice, and shower you with curses. Understood, that was useful. Supposing another chance comes, let's see I do that."

Echidna's expression vanishes.

Expressionless—something Subaru had never seen of the Echidna he knew, the first-time-seen visage of the WITCH OF GREED.

Echidna: "Want to sit? I'd like us to iron out the details about the contract."

Subaru: "...In this situation, do you think I'll still readily consider a contract with you?"

Echidna: "No way, you're rejecting me over a little disagreement in opinion? What on earth is the meaning in doing that? Having your emotions temporarily overwhelm you, and so failing to take the

correct choice can't be called wise. I recommend looking at reality, and electing for rational thought.”<sup>9</sup>

At Echidna's words dead of emotion, Subaru closes his eyes and holds his breath. What Echidna's saying is correct. Subaru is the one losing his temper—would be irrefutable if said. It made logical sense. She was not lying. All Echidna did was hide her true intentions from Subaru. All she did was keep silent on mentioning the benefits she acquired from the course of Subaru's ventures. Should they tie the contract, most likely, Subaru would reach the correct path. Echidna's lack of frugality in providing this cooperation would also be unmistakable truth.

Subaru: “There's one thing I wanted you ask you when I next saw you.”

Echidna: “—Hrm, now what could it be?”

Subaru: “Once I hear this question's answer, I'll know if I can choose.”

Echidna waits to hear Subaru's question. This was a question Subaru was bringing up as a touchstone. A question to which Subaru yet saw not a single scrap of the answer for, which Echidna certainly had some relation to.

Subaru: “—You know about Beatrice, Echidna.”

Echidna: “...Yes, I do. Since I was deeply involved over the process of her creation. Did something happen with her?”

Echidna replies without ill will. Her answer lacks any hidden implication, and comes loaded with questions. Subaru closes his eyes, envisions the young pigtailed girl.

The last Subaru had seen of her, she had been stabbed from behind, disappearing. Her long, long time spent in isolation and the darkness it had spawned—his collision with this just prior her disappearance had remained constant and heavy in his heart. Pushing Subaru aside, protecting him from the blades, the expression on her face in that final instant—that was still burned inescapably into his memory. And so,

Subaru: “Beatrice has, because of the contract, always been waiting for *THEY*. Are you who tied that contract? Are you who bound her to the mansion?”

Echidna: “I don't remember specifying a location, but... the one who arranged for her to guard the Forbidden Archive and wait until their coming was indeed me.”

Subaru: “Then, who is *THEY*? What can I do to free her?”

Through her 400 years of solitude, Beatrice had constantly been waiting for *SOMEONE*. Not even Beatrice herself knew who that *SOMEONE* was. Neither did Subaru have any clue. But if he asked for the answer from Echidna herself, who had arranged this appointment with that

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9 Echidna's pronoun reverts from 'boku' to her usual 'watashi'.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT PHASE 3

SOMEONE—

Echidna: “Now, I really wonder who?”

Subaru: “—Wh, ah?”

Echidna: “No, I'm not even joking or anything, I truly, sincerely wonder. Who do you think the THEY Beatrice is waiting for is?”

Asks Echidna, as if she has been presented with a question she does not know the answer to.  
Stunned, Subaru shakes his head.

Subaru: “Even you don't know who it is Beatrice is waiting for?”

Echidna: “Nope, I don't. I do not know who the THEY Beatrice is waiting for is.”

Subaru: “Wh, y? But, you're the one who told Beatrice to wait in the Forbidden Archive, aren't you?  
If you don't know... no way.”

Echidna, who instructed Beatrice to wait in the Forbidden Archive, was someone separate from who imposed the time limit that she wait until THEY's visit.  
If so, the one who would know the solution would again be somewhere else—

Echidna: “Wrong, you're mistaken.”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “The one who instructed Beatrice to wait for THEY was me. There's no mistake in that.  
Where you are mistaken is in a more fundamental area.”

Subaru: “Fundamental?”

Echidna: “Now just why in the world did I tie that contract with Beatrice? That is where you're misunderstanding. I had Beatrice guard over the Forbidden Archive so that she could give its contents over to THEY, would be what you're thinking, right?”

Subaru doesn't see what she's getting at.  
It's just a natural thought. Giving instructions to hand something over to someone.

But, at Subaru and his entirely ordinary thoughts, Echidna shakes her head.

Echidna: “That wasn't my instruction to Beatrice. I tied her to contract, making her wait for THEY... while waiting for the result of just who she would choose as THEY.”

Subaru: “—”

—.

\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_—what?

Echidna: “You see, she was created for a specific purpose. But necessity came up for her to stay alive in a fashion differing from her original objective... and for that sake she was distanced from here, where she then needed to be given a goal. It's in the sense of giving that hollow, empty girl a purpose for living, but yes it's necessary. And so I tied a contract with her.”

Subaru: “—Th, at.”

Echidna: “Preservation of the Forbidden Archive, and its complete transference to the eventually-coming **THEY**. There's no limitations. Although, that's because they're conditions with no correct solution. She stays alive just as planned, and I can look into the solutions for other research. Don't you find it very logical?”

Subaru: “—”

Echidna: “Naturally, going four hundred years without choosing anyone is yet another result. As is her not easily choosing **THEY** from any of those she met through her days. Potentially even her deliberating over whether to violate the contract, and desiring her own **DEATH**, is yet another result.”

Subaru: “What, do you think of that?”

Echidna: “—? I think it's wonderful.”

Says Echidna, tilting her head, as if she had just been asked a question with an incredibly obvious answer.

Echidna's answer, her attitude, and the expression of the girl arisen in Subaru's mind, lead him to the solution.

Got it. Decided. Clearly understood.

—His miscomprehension about just who, here, he was dealing with, is rectified.

Subaru: “Echidna... you are a witch.”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “An indecipherable, unfathomable aberration.”

Echidna: “—”

He communicates it. The answer, he had in his heart.

He pulls back his arm, and as to who he would reach out to, this time he truly decided.

Subaru: “I... I can't take your hand. I've already decided whose hand it is I'm taking.”



Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “Done without malice, done without ill will, there is a girl whose four hundred years your binding words pilfered. —Decided. I am taking that girl's hand. I can't go with you.”

He announces their farewell.

He shakes away the hand of the one he had once thought to walk alongside him.

Subaru raises his head. Looks forward.

Beneath his eyelids, the final expression from that girl arises.

—Face twisted in fear of disappearing and dying, near crying, but nevertheless with relief in her eyes that Subaru had been protected.

To take the hand of the girl who mourned for his DEATH is what Subaru decides.

Echidna: “—”

Echidna's eyes narrow.

A look of cogitation flashes through her eyes, her intent being to fling some sort of words at Subaru's decision.

But, before she can, the change occurs.

Minerva: “—She's here.”

Camilla: “Oh, no, I... I've... got noth... nothing to do, with this... any more.”

Sekhmet: “At a troublesome spot, a troublesome person, is here to cause some trouble—*haa*.”

The three witches all give their respective reactions.

And, overwhelming pressure from behind him.

Echidna's eyes, seeing what is behind Subaru, lightly snap open. Following her surprise, Subaru turns around, and sees it.

???: “—”

With pitch-black darkness cloaking everything from the neck up, there stood the WITCH OF ENVY.

## CHAPTER 76: ≠SATELLA

—This was the first time Subaru had ever met face-to-face with the WITCH herself.

Witch of Envy—it was a name he had heard countless times, and the threat she presented was something he had confronted himself during the dusky loop in SANCTUARY.

His defiance of the rules she had imposed on him had earned him more than one or two experiences of heart-crushing pain. To harbour a positive impression of this witch, who had overtaken Emilia's body and destroyed SANCTUARY, was indeed difficult.

And especially so after his last conversation with Echidna, which had unwittingly spawned in him an aversion to the very word WITCH. But,

Subaru: “Yeah... the other witches don't compare.”

Faced with the pressure exerted by the witch standing before him, Subaru mutters in hoarse voice.

She's a thin woman.

Her arms dangle loosely as she stands without vigour, apparently looking at Subaru. An ebon dress—sewn from shadows arising underfoot—garbs her, its flesh pulsating almost as if in rhythm with her heartbeat.

From wrists forward of the long sleeves of her dress Subaru sees her strangely pale fingers, and manages to estimate that the WITCH OF ENVY, like the other witches, possesses a countenance of more than according beauty.

But, to confirm that, the most vital piece of information is missing.

Subaru: “Seen it a bunch of times now, but... what's the deal with this?”

A sable shadow cloaks everything from the witch's neck up, making visual confirmation impossible. Unlike the ebon dress robing her body, this shadow wavers like mist, concealing the WITCH OF ENVY's visage from Subaru.

Subaru's question is somewhat taken aback. But the witch gives no reaction.

A sense of peaking, impatient panic burns at Subaru's chest as sweat arises on his brow—when he glances over the area, spying the other four witches in silence.

Subaru: “—”

Seeing the changes in their expressions, Subaru feels a surprise.

Going by Subaru's knowledge, the relationship between them and the WITCH OF ENVY is the one of murder victim and assailant. Meeting their own killer. Subaru did have an idea of what mental burden that would bring.

But, all of the witches' expression differ from Subaru's predictions.

One is a gentle smile, one is gaze of commiserating pity, one is an indifference suggesting absolute lack of concern, and the last one is—

Echidna: “So you cut through my boundary and managed to get in. Brazenly trespassing even into

my dream castle... always the egotist, aren't you.”

Only one person, the Witch of Greed Echidna, glares with hostility in their eyes. Seeing loathing, or something close to it, coming from no other but Echidna surprises Subaru. He had only just voice their final parting, thinking that she lacked such emotions. Seeing her blatantly exhibiting emotion, Subaru begins doubting and wondering if perhaps he was wrong.

But time to realistically flag that as a problem has passed.  
Right now, the problem is how to deal with this motionless witch in front of him.

Subaru: “Why is she even here in the fir...”

Minerva: “I’m sure she’s mad ‘cause you went gossiping on and on saying stuff you shouldn’t. Blabbermouth men like that are ones I don’t think very highly of. I kinda get her indignation.”

Subaru: “Tell me that but I don’t get it. Or actually, you’re taking her side? From you and the other witches’ perspective she’s meant to be your foe.”

Minerva: “My foe, is such a stupid-sounding thing to hear. ...I’m going to be checking now if what you’re saying’s valid.”

Narrowing her eyes, Minerva’s blonde hair sways as she moves to action.  
She cuts into the Witch of Envy’s line of sight, interrupting her wholehearted staring at Subaru.  
Minerva pushes out her voluptuous chest as she boldly faces the witch. And,

Minerva: “Can you hear this? It’s me, Minerva. The WITCH OF WRATH Minerva. If you remember me, and can hear my voice, say something.”

Subaru: “—! No, wait! Far as my knowledge goes conversation doesn’t work on her! If you do anything else which’d provoke her...”

Sekhmet: “Try to keep quiet—*haa*.”

Subaru can only perceive Minerva’s speech as reckless. But it is words from Sekhmet, still existing as a hairball on the ground, which stop him.  
Subaru glances back at her. She stirs, the magenta hairball shifting in size.

Sekhmet: “The time we’ve spent together with that is—*huu*—multitudes greater than what your short interactions have been—*haa*. Your trepidation is natural, but—*huu*—try leaving this one to Minerva—*haa*. Thoughtless actions are... indeed what she does sometimes—*huu*—but this time I suppose she’s probably not acting without thinking—*haa*.”

Minerva: “I can hear you, Sekhmet! If you don’t want me to mess up the talk and for all of us to get swallowed, don’t say things that’ll make me mad! I am teeming with furious ire!”

Sekhmet: “When talking about you—*huu*—who’ll use someone breathing in your vicinity as a reason to anger—*haa*—that’s quite a pickle—*huu*.”

Even while getting hit with this ruthless opinion, Minerva averts her attention from the threat before

her not at all.

That little back-and-forth should have spurred some kind of action from the WITCH OF ENVY. But she stands there doing nothing as she merely stares through the WITCH OF WRATH, and at Subaru.

Indeed, you could perhaps say there is a definitive departure from the split-second practical reactions the Witch has given up until now.

But all that meant was that she hadn't immediately taken hostile action. Whether or not a conversation would come to be still seemed another matter.

Sekhmet was leaving the entirety of the dialogue up to Minerva. Then, the other two—

Camilla: “We... well, I think... t-think, it's fine if... Minerva-chan's going to, to try... her best to, do it. But if s-she... umm... mm, she gets Minerva-chan... I-I'll kill, her.”

Echidna: “That's a dependable-sounding statement, but I'm sure I've told you countless times that your affinity with that thing is abhorrent. If there's anyone here who can resist it, it's only Sekhmet. —You do understand?”

Echidna endeavours to keep her voice calm as she chides the stuttering-but-belligerent Camilla. The white-haired witch glances at Sekhmet, who trembles as if replying at all is a nuisance.

Sekhmet: “It won't be possible for me to continuously seal its movements.” You should know that power-wise it's not suited to that.

Echidna: “Indeed I know. And so you just have to pulverise its limbs and throttle its neck. If you physically seal its movements and choke it, I can have it expunged from this space.”

Echidna projects enough fierce hostility to make Camilla's statements look cute. And although she says it with an aloofness, the utter disgust seeping into her words makes what what she's saying sound like nothing joking.

With this livewire conversation going on in the background, Minerva continues to face the WITCH OF ENVY. In fact, as if trying to keep the WITCH OF ENVY from hearing the other witches' back-and-forth, she takes a step closer.

Minerva: “—”

Subaru swallows his breath as he watches Minerva's advance.

All Subaru can consider Minerva's actions is reckless—but he can't even tell for what purpose the WITCH OF ENVY materialized here in the first place.

If this accords with the previous cases, then the reason for her showing up would be because Subaru violated the taboo. But the abuses the witch has done so far in response to the violated taboo have entirely been materializing arms to squeeze Subaru's heart, and materializing in physical reality to swallow everything in shadow.

Friendly interactions were an of course not, but the WITCH OF ENVY hasn't even really expressed what her intentions are. Her goals yet remain completely unapparent.

The question of how the Witch will respond to Minerva is thus an absolute unknown to Subaru.

—If Minerva is swallowed by shadows, the other three will move instantly.

If the hopes Echidna's put on Sehkmet are sound, then the WITCH OF SLOTH will use her authority to pulverise the WITCH OF ENVY, and Echidna can expel the weakened WITCH OF ENVY.

But, if that's the case—

Why weren't they immediately doing it now?

Subaru: “—”

Call things strange, and this situation where Minerva's been tasked with first contact with the WITCH OF ENVY in itself is already strange.

Camilla's ready to attack if anything happens, Sehkmet doesn't want proactive hostility, and even enmity-laden Echidna is taking no preparations for pre-emptive attack that would run counter to Minerva's desires.

Just what on earth were they all—

Echidna: “You look like you can't comprehend us witches' intentions and are being tossed around and toyed with.”

Subaru: “...”

Echidna: “Although, believing that you could easily see through to our... oop, I mean *our* thoughts would be a discredit to the name of witch. On that you can't take us so cheaply.”<sup>10</sup>

Subaru: “Stop it with the fake bokukko. —All I'm thinking is if you seriously want to distance the WITCH OF ENVY, here where she's defenseless's your best chance.”

Echidna: “I see. So that's how you perceive this situation. Goodness... well, right. Personally, I'm all for full agreement with your stance. What I'd really like to do about now is bash that thing with every authority I could have, annihilating it without leaving a speck of dust behind, but...”

Cutting off there, Echidna narrows her eyes.

This attitude isn't like her—that said, as if he really knew her at all—but, sensing a kind of shame which is rather not like her, Subaru waits for her to speak.

After a short silence, Echidna does.

Echidna: “Doing everything I can to eradicate that thing, and then having the other witches turn on me is cart before horse. Nevermind Minerva, if we're talking a bet which'll make enemies of Sehkmet and Typhon, there's little worth gambling.”

Subaru: “I'm not getting it. Why would trying to eradicate the WITCH OF ENVY make you enemies? She's your foe, that's something everyone's agreeing...”

Camilla: “You're, wr... wrong.”

Camilla, who had kept silent up until now, is the one to butt in on Subaru's question. She goes

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<sup>10</sup> Echidna switches her pronoun from *watashi* (first *our*) to *boku* (second *our*) for the rest of the chapter.

without looking at Subaru as he startles, instead watching Minerva's confrontation with the WITCH OF ENVY.

Camilla: "That ENVY is... is, e-everyone's foe, is... is right, but, t-that... thing and her, are... d-different, cases... mm?"

Subaru: "...I don't understand what you're saying. What're all of you..."

Sekhmet: "So long as we don't know which one that thing standing there is—*huu*—more than us being unwilling to act, to do so'd be unreasonable—*haa*."

Subaru: "Which one?"

Sekhmet gives a reply. But even that only throws Subaru into further disarray. What on earth were they all talking about? —When, the solution arrives from a different angle.

Taking another step, Minerva further closes distance on the WITCH OF ENVY. She spreads her arms wide, showing a posture of non-resistance, and says to the WITCH OF ENVY:

Minerva: "—Are you the WITCH OF ENVY? Or are you Satella? Which?"



Subaru senses he has just heard something that flips everything he has known on its head.

What Minerva just said hugely differs from the truth Subaru knows. But that Minerva's statement is no random bluster or empty joke is validated by the wordlessness of the other witches, who had lived in their same generation.

For the first time, the WITCH OF ENVY's shoulders tremble. The black mist concealing her head squirms. It seems she has turned her body to face Minerva.

—This is the very first moment that the Witch becomes conscious of Minerva.

Subaru: "—"

*What did that statement mean?* Is not a question Subaru is given any opening to ask. And more importantly, the taut and overwhelming tension swiftly parches his throat dry. And with the witches affirming it, that only makes the utter contradiction of his beliefs worse.

—WITCH OF ENVY Satella. The character so called this—may in fact be someone else.

No. That was thinking way too far off too little data.

How many times had he had terrible experiences because he made decisions based off of only superficial information, and kept stubborn with them? Even if he is constantly considering the possibility, he must not get irrevocably attached to the idea.

And more importantly, he best not divert his attention from the scene in front of him for even a second.

Minerva: “If you're not suddenly attacking at the first question... then it means there's still a chance.”

Says Minerva, as she closes further distance.

The distance remaining between the WITCH OF WRATH and the Witch is five steps.

Minerva: “Though if you were the WITCH OF ENVY, it wouldn't be weird for you to instantly strike with BEGRUDGE the moment I stood in his path, so I wasn't really worried about that.”

Four steps.

Minerva: “But then it would've been fine for you to say something right at the start. I know it's hard to have this face-to-face with our relationship. There's no way anyone could forget what my last expression when you swallowed me was.”

Three steps.

Minerva: “Though, I think it's way better that it's me than the other five. Nevermind Typhon, outside of her, I was... your closest friend, is what I thought.”

Two steps. Head bowed.

Minerva: “Is, what I thought... and because I did, it's...!”

Crouches down. Two steps away, Minerva leans forward, puts her strength in her back leg. And,

Minerva: “Do you understand how being ignored feels, when it's been so long—!?”

The ground explodes as the single rush obliterates the two steps of distance.

Minerva charges forward with dust clouds in her wake, twisting her body for a full-force punch pistoned back from the shoulder. Her fist drills through the air, breaking the sound barrier, booming toward the Witch's head. The attack zooms for her shadow-cloaked visage and—

Minerva: “—See, knew it.”

Minerva's fist miraculously stops just before contacting the Witch's face.

That's not to say that the Witch's shadows stretched out, and entangled her arm. Minerva, of her own volition, stopped her arm before it would reach.

Still with her fist brandished in the Witch's face, Minerva leans back upright with her blonde hair swaying.

Minerva: “See, look. She knew there wasn't any need to dodge my punch, that's Satella, not the WITCH OF ENVY. Echidna, your caution's pointless.”

Echidna: “...I wonder. I will honestly praise your pluck in staking your own body in an attempt to confirm this, but these stories are disparate. If it's simply discerned that your presence is no great threat, obviously it wouldn't act. And so, Sekhmet.”

Sekhmet: “Trying any reason possible to get me to act—*huu*. You're the same way in being terrible at determining when to quit, Echidna—*haa*. Accept it, that's Satella—*huu*.”

Sekhmet sighs at the stumped Echidna.

Continuing unchanged as a ball of hair, the witches' ultimate weapon shows no signs of acting. Close enough for their hands to touch and facing the Witch—facing Satella, Minerva turns back to Subaru.

With her azure eyes staring at him, and still unable to really accept the reality that she was standing directly beside a huge threat, all Subaru can do is dumbly stand there.

Minerva snorts at him, her expression dissatisfied.

Minerva: “What're you spacing out about. Come on, get over here.”

Subaru: “Get over here... you can say that, but...”

Minerva: “What, you're not a man at all. I've proven that it's all okay, so shouldn't you come striding over as well? No? Then all this table-setting I've done still isn't enough? If you're saying you won't cross the stone bridge even if someone taps it for you, how're you ever gonna lose your caution enough to cross it!”

Subaru: “Stop getting yourself heated up! It's not that I'm not going there 'cause I'm freaking out! I'm not going there because I don't know why I should!”

Yelling back at an indignant Minerva in the same tone of voice, Subaru objects to this situation of being left in the lurch.

Pointing at Satella, who is no longer an immediate threat, Subaru looks over the witches as they relax from combat posture.

Subaru: “And actually, what does the WITCH OF ENVY and Satella being separate even mean! You're talking about it like it's obvious, but this's already diverged well from what my understanding was!”

Echidna: “Wholly. If you forcibly introduce a witch factor into a being with no affinity, you do get these afflictions. The witch personality that spawns from the factor's influence, and the original self conflict... is perhaps what to call it. Though, my view is they're the same being, so I can't really see the point in differentiating them like the others do.”

Subaru: “Split, personalities!? Then, what? The one who swallowed all you and did the wrongs to get her lasting in history was one personality, and the other personality's harmless, is what you're...”

Echidna: “Now that's wrong.”

Subaru attempts to deal with it alongside his surprise at this information, but Echidna stops him. She shakes her head, and amending Subaru's theory,

Echidna: “The consuming of half the world, and the consuming of us six witches of sin, was entirely by SATELLA's actions, not the WITCH OF ENVY.”



Subaru: “Wh—!? No, but that doesn't make any sense! If the one who swallowed you was Satella, and that's Satella standing over there... this...”

Sekhmet: “It does fit. And so—*haa*—we won't forgive the WITCH OF ENVY—*huu*—but we have no grudge against Satella—*haa*. That's all it is—*huu*.”

Camilla: “I-I, do... don't like, S-Satella-chan... ei... either, but I... guess she's, bet... better than, the Witch... so...”

Sekhmet and Camilla give their agreement in a way which only makes Subaru's questions multiply. The witches appear to have general consensus, but Subaru can't understand it. The person who destroyed them has two personalities, and they forgive the personality which destroyed them, but not the one who didn't—what did it mean?

Echidna: “I've always been advocating that the distinction's pointless, but... agree to disagree. I can't ignore that opinion and eradicate the thing. My frail mental-bodied self wouldn't stand any chance if the others hoist the petard on me after I eradicated it. Even I, when in a state of being only a soul, won't return if blast to pieces.”

Subaru: “B... ut, wouldn't that be seriously risky for the other five too? You're the one entrusted with the other five's souls. If you disappear, the other witches'll...”

Echidna: “They comprehend and affirm their own DEATHS. And so they have no especial attachment to prolonged existence as only a soul. —If it's between yielding and surviving, and being destroyed sacrificing themselves for their ideals, they'd infinitely favour the latter. It's because they think this way that they're witches.”

Sekhmet and Camilla speak up for no denials of that.

Resolute—is not quite a word that fits with how resigned an opinion it is, but regardless the harshness of the witches' lifestyles leaves Subaru without words.

*If I could be like this, I wish that I were like this*, and such kind of aspiration was something everyone did.

But to die and nonetheless stick through with one's principles after death was not a stance everybody could confidently claim.

Subaru: “And Minerva...”

Probably the same.

She was the one who, by the hands of the WITCH OF ENVY, had likely been destroyed before anyone else. But nevertheless Minerva trusted the Witch, who had done absolutely nothing all along her getting to within arm's reach, which consequently proved that trust.

Subaru didn't know the relationships between these witches.

If they had bonds enough to trust enough other, then why did the WITCH OF ENVY destroy the other six witches? And why did the witches forgive it?

Echidna's thoughts on it were the ones Subaru could still understand.

But, even so—

Subaru: “I get that this's what you're like. And fully comprehend... ing it's hard but, I can understand it. But, I still haven't heard what it is she's come here for.”

Witches: “—”

Subaru: “I get that she isn't going to unconditionally indiscriminately attack. That one I'll fully comprehend. ...But that doesn't mean she's safe. If the one I've been seeing all up until now was the WITCH OF ENVY, then what is it Satella wants to do with me? The WITCH OF ENVY to me is someone who is entirely a pest. You can tell me abruptly that my view's wrong, but understanding it's beyond me.”

And if you put the witches' statements all together, the person here is unquestionably Satella, who consumed the others. Then even assuming that the one who swallowed SANCTUARY was the WITCH OF ENVY, it would suggest that Satella is entirely capable of comparable things. Who could blame him for feeling danger, being wary, and keeping away?

Subaru: “What she wants to do, and why she came here. So long as I don't know that...!”

Minerva: “If that's what you want to know, then just come over here.”

Just as Subaru goes to raise his voice, Minerva interrupts. She puts her hand on her hip, and makes no attempt to hide her irritation as she scowls at Subaru.

Minerva: “You've had enough with the wordy excuses and drawing defences. I'm here standing right next to her, and nothing's happened. And also, the reason she came here's to see you. If you're saying you're such a loser you can't even get close to her, then we can do that's left is file this away as us making an entire misestimation.”

Subaru: “Like you have fucking anything to misestimate! Don't just make your speculation about me! Stop pushing your crap on me! What the hell would you all know about me!?”

Having someone push their image of him onto him, and then acting exactly in line with that image was a no thank you.

Once, when Subaru yelled this exactly same thing, there came a voice who answered him. He remembers what they said. And back then, those words had been his support.

—If he wasn't going to betray his past self, saved by those words, then...

Subaru: “Just, fuck... you're thinking stupid here, me...”

Nothing rational, making decisions entirely off his emotional momentum.

He'd done no reflection on the terrible experiences that doing that exact thing had given him. He would pay greater vigilance to the slightest of changes, suppress his emotions, and coolly act not off his mental impulses but according to definite truth—he would preserve an unshakable heart of iron.

Was meant to be his precept.

Minerva: “You're being slow.”

Subaru: “How scary it is to approach someone you've wrangled almost to your death with is... shit, actually you do know that. It's hard.”

Minerva: “It's not that we don't have our thoughts on this either. Sekhmet and Camilla are just way more mature, unlike me. I've got a reason to back her.”

Subaru clicks his tongue as he walks over, Minerva giving a shrug. She presents him no time to ask about her reason or whatever, instead handing the scene over to Subaru.

The WITCH OF WRATH moves aside, and what results is Subaru facing the Witch—facing Satella—at extreme close range.

Subaru: “—”

Subaru unwittingly gulps, the strangeness of the creature before him catching him lost for words. He was supposed to have recognized this as he viewed her from afar, and as he saw her in his approach here, but regardless he cannot dispel her emitted pressure and the visual sense of awriness. The dress of shadows clinging to her form traces out her curves and body with horrific sensuality, and the invisibility of everything from the neck up conversely creates an inverse kind of lusciousness.

Those impressions drown utterly away thanks to the dissonance of her entirely uncognizable head.

Subaru: “—”

Looking at her from up close, Subaru realises that the thing obstructing his cognizance is nothing physical.

What looks like a shadow covering her face is not actually because a shadow falling over that area is blocking it from view.

That he can't see her face originates from a more mental, more primordial reason.

No physical obstacle is keeping her face from view. It is something instinctive, NOT ALLOWING HIM TO SEE IT.

Echidna: “Everyone wishes to avert their eyes from their most repulsive, spurious delusions.”

Subaru: “...”

Echidna: “If you can't see that face, it's due to a problem of your own heart.”

Useful advice comes flying in from behind to back up Subaru's deduction.

Managing to withstand his urge to click his tongue, Subaru ignores Echidna—or more rather, he remains without any leeway to devote her any attention as he continues facing Satella.

Satella still has yet to make any kind of action.

The only thing Satella has done is appear here. The people around her kicked up a fuss by themselves, getting frantic in an attempt to protect against escalation in damages resultant from her actions.

That by simply being present she fostered so much fear in itself displayed the vivid truth of her hazardousness. That would probably be no exaggeration.

And, the instant Subaru grows impatient with the lack of motion, it happens.

Subaru: “—hk”

Satella: “—”

Seeing the two arms presented out to him, Subaru's throat freezes.

For not a single second, not even a single blink had Subaru shifted his attention away from Satella. He wouldn't know what could happen after any instant—was the tension, which the movement of these nigh out-of-nowhere arms easily toys with.

His surprise is not for a failure to see the movement. Subaru had very clearly seen Satella's arms move. What surprises him is his own consciousness, which had regardless watched silently over the motion until it reached its end.

Subaru: “What, really... are you? What do you want with me?”

He had not been able to take any useful action in response to her presented hands. More or less unconsciously understanding what meaning that held, Subaru promptly comes up with words. To end this without accepting the truth, to end this without facing her, strangled out his mouth.

Subaru: “If you're the one giving me the power to redo... why, is that...”

He doesn't understand what Satella's intentions are.

And he doesn't understand his body, which although facing Satella, standing within range to touch her, unconsciously screaming again and again that she is dangerous, won't listen to him.

—The reaction of his body, which is unconsciously attempting to feel RELIEVED when faced with Satella.

Satella: “——u,”

Subaru: “—Ah?”

Unable to accept his body as it goes defying his will, Subaru is slow to react to the sound hitting his eardrums. This time was unmistakably a correct reaction which had come with no intentions attached.

Swallowing his breath, Subaru waits for her to continue.

With her yet-invisible face still faced toward Subaru as he holds his breath, waiting for her, the time slowly, slowly passes on—and Satella speaks.

Satella: “—ou.”

Subaru: “—”

Satella:

“Always you. Always only you, am I in love with.”

## CHAPTER 77: A LONELY...

What to call the shock that slammed Subaru's entirety the second he heard that confession of love?

A lightningbolt jolt courses down from his crown to his toenails.

His open-pored flesh tingles with goosebumps, the blood running through his veins seething to an eager boil. His thumping heartbeat flushes him from the neck up in crimson. Slipping a ragged breath, Subaru retreats a step.

He cannot keep standing here.

He keeps standing here, and his breathing will reach her. His fingertips will reach her.

If he fails to open distance between her in this juncture where his reason is still holding back his instinct, all breaks are off.

And should that happen, Subaru will drown to LOVE.

Subaru: "Stop..."

Satella: "I am in love with you."

Subaru: "Please stop..."

Satella: "You—only you—will I always, always be in love with."

Subaru: "I told you to fucking stop!"

Shaking his head, swinging his arm, Subaru pulls his attention away from her hot, entangling gaze. Of course, Satella's expression is invisible to Subaru. Just what kind of fire her gaze held as she stares at Subaru is nothing he can figure.

But nevertheless, the feverish pounding in his chest shows absolutely no signs of stopping.

By consciously holding everything restrained, frantically speaking out, thrusting her with a rejection ragged enough to near make him spit blood, Subaru manages to preserve his fundamental self.

Literally, if he does not endeavour in an effort to maintain his consciousness like this, he is convinced that the fundamental core of his being will distort. And that was an overwhelmingly terrifying image.

Blatantly rejecting her, displaying such open disgust, and stricken with this truth is Subaru, who Satella faces by standing exactly stock-still as before.

Her invisible face, a veil of darkness enveloping her expression. He can't discern it. Shouldn't be able to comprehend it, but he inadvertently understands that his words have just hurt Satella, and probably she cast her gaze down. His heart thinks its desire to gently stroke her hair, speak words to ease her pained face, whisper loves to her and make her smile.

And although he denies it this much, his heart continues to urge that he LOVE Satella.

Subaru: "Y... what are you!? What did you put in me!? Something like with RETURN BY DEATH, you put something in me to manipulate my heart!?"

Subaru flings his distrust for his heart, failing to abide his will, at Satella. His heart, which was abruptly now showing reactions wholly beyond his understanding. If this witch and her supernatural powers were interfering with his powerful emotions, that was overwhelmingly horrifying.

Twisting people's hearts to suit her will—that was a deed abhorrent, less than human.

The first resplendent hope vested on Natsuki Subaru in this world was his LOVE'S AWAKENING for Emilia.

Subaru had been lost and blind without any guideline or landmark. His indebtedness to Emilia as she offered him her hand out of his predicament, and the memory of the grace to his near-wholly abraded heart, had even now lost none of their lustre as they yet proceeded to illumine her.

During his time sucked into repeating loops of death, struggling solo as he surmounted various adversities, the ones he held dear and desired to protect had multiplied. With the accumulation of words he had shared with these people, these bonds, these feelings, the multitude of what Subaru harboured compounded.

He could no longer say that his feelings for Emilia were his only motivator, even as a lie.

But nevertheless, Natsuki Subaru's first light had been Emilia. And Satella was coercing on Subaru a LOVE'S AWAKENING on equal par to what he felt for Emilia.

Neverminding the lack of words shared between them, no warmth of mutual touch, no time spent passed together, no bond built, the utter lack of anything between them in their relationship, Satella was attempting to extort only FEELINGS OF LOVE.

What to call this if not horrendous?

Subaru: “You, and Echidna... you're both nuts! This... this place's just full of incomprehensible bastards! I'm sick of it!”

Yells Subaru without hiding his repulsion for the faceless witch before him, and the white-haired witch behind him.

Satella who compelled feelings of love contrary to his inner will, and Echidna who would entangle strangers with her unempathizable curiosity. Both were aberrations beyond Subaru's comprehension.

Echidna: “It does sting to be equated to that thing. Even should you treat us under the single category of 'witch', my view has that thing as a vulgar creature a witch's inferior. Incomprehensible, is a judgement where you're not wrong, though.”

Subaru: “Just be quiet. I haven't forgotten your insidiousness in pretending to be friendly. ...Enough. There's no point being here. Let me out. I don't wanna be involved with you people any more!”

Responding unkindly to Echidna's words, Subaru grabs his head as he pleads to be released from the castle in a dream.

He didn't want to be around Satella and Echidna for even another second. He already had innumerable things he needed to do, and now was not the time to be compounding that count. Being not omniscient, Subaru had a limit on what he could deal with. He already had obstacles surpassing his limit obstructing his way, so why was it that even more problems had to come one-

after-another adding themselves on, too?

Subaru: "I'm not taking your help. I'll do something about all the problems outside by myself. — And what was ever wrong with that idea! That's what I should've been doing from the start..."

Minerva: "And? So it's back to dying over and over, making heaps of people cry while spouting excuses how THIS IS INFORMATION GATHERING, NOTHING TO DO ABOUT IT. Wow. Amazing."

Says Minerva, snorting at Subaru as he speaks his definite farewell. Subaru shoots her a glare. Minerva's nonplussed expression begins reddening.

Minerva: "What. Trying to make me repeat?"

Subaru: "Like it has anything to do with you. The pain, the anguish, the hurt, the wear from RETURN BY DEATH is all my problem. You've got nowhere to complain about it."

Minerva: "Saying you're ready for hurt and pain and anguish sure lets you be at ease. No matter what the people watching you spitting blood with your flesh shredded and bones broken think, you can always use the excuse that you're the one suffering most."

Subaru: "What!?"

Minerva: "If you bear the most obvious, showy and visible wounds, you can end everything without those wounded by the aftermath of your behaviour being able to say anything. After all, you're the one suffering most. You're the one hurting most. You're the one in the most pain. ...That the others around you would shut up their snivelling's just natural."

Perhaps with rage building up over her speech, Minerva's intonation gets stronger as she proceeds. Subaru bares his teeth. Spoken to with such spite, Subaru being Subaru cannot possibly go without objecting.

Subaru: "You! You're saying that I'm drunk on overblown tragedies so that I can shut everyone else up, huh!? That this stalemate I'm in is just part of the act!?"

Minerva: "No, that's not where I'm going. But the logic of I JUST NEED TO BE HURT MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE is coward's logic. I don't think a lot of Echidna's maliciousness, and I couldn't even hope to understand how roundabout Satella is, but... to me, compared to a witch the way you're twisted is heaps more sickening."

Subaru: "—"

Minerva: "Above all else, with my lifestyle of beating everything wounded into health, your lifestyle isn't so much an antithesis as a nemesis. —She isn't exactly being repaid."

Jabbing her fist out at Subaru, Minerva finishes her statement with even her nose's breathing ragged. Following that she appends her last statement in a whisper, her azure eyes aimed at Satella. Ever since Subaru showered curses on her, Satella has simply remained there standing still in silence. She gives no affirmations or denials, showing no stance at all about this little exchange.



Subaru sees Minerva's eyes narrow, somewhat sadly.

Subaru couldn't give a crap about their emotionalities right now.

Subaru: “Sickening... unrepaired...?”

Catching the last words of Minerva's statements, Subaru faces down as his shoulders start to tremble. The tremble escalates, and when he raises his head, he is smiling. It was all entirely too fucking asinine, he couldn't go without laughing.

Subaru: “The fuck is that. Say sickening or anything, I've gotten to be choosing the methods I am because why? I've gotten to be thinking in this so-dubbed twisted mentality because why? My methods and mindset—when you consider what I have this's just the innate consequence—that's what it goddamn is.”

Satella: “—”

Subaru: “You! Are! Who did this to me!”

Screams Subaru, throwing his rage at Satella, as she attempts with silence to escape from her responsibility.

Having received RETURN BY DEATH, used this attribute to overcome obstacles, then confronted many and varied troubles, Subaru had managed to run as far as here.

Every time the oft-experienced despair known as DEATH etched itself into his soul, he transformed that misery into the power to step forward, and with that he had dashed to here.

—It was Natsuki Subaru's injury-fraught experiences that had allowed Subaru to reach these thoughts.

Subaru: “The pain and the suffering! All of it, all only on me! Finish it all with me, and how is that not grand! I grit my teeth, stifle my ire and my woe and my all and my every, and no matter how terribly I die, the despair doesn't get to touch anybody else! Beginning to end all the hurts only on me, and what is wrong with that! How is anything to fault with that!”

By repeating RETURN BY DEATH, following the end of much trial and error, Subaru is capable of finding the truly optimum path. It is exactly as Echidna said. He wouldn't follow along with Echidna's curiosity-driven temptations, but he was okay to continually attempt to same thing solo. Unlike Echidna who was attempting to take a roundabout course, Subaru was devoting his absolute all to directly uncovering the optimum route. His retry attempts would be overwhelmingly fewer than if he were cooperating with Echidna. Naturally he did expect for the retry count to be outrageous. But even so there was merit in trying.

Provided where injury-laden Subaru's outstretched arm reached was a future where no one was hurt.

Subaru: “Mentioned 'incomprehensible, sick of it' before, didn't I. Well sorry, that was my bad there. Those feelings aren't a lie even for an instant, but there's still something I am thankful to you for. Totally forgot. Forgot it, and isn't ingratitude just another thing I'm great at.”

Satella: “—”

Subaru: “There's exactly one thing I am thankful to you for. Huge appreciation for letting me RETURN BY DEATH. That's all I'm thanking you for. I wouldn'ta protected even a single important thing without it. And from now on I'm gonna be depending on it too. And so for this one single thing alone you are getting my thanks.”

He was already prepared for the continuous trial and error.  
The option to flee from this fate was long ago abolished.

Has been ever since he took her hand and proposed to run, to be rejected.  
There is no option to flee. He can only keep fighting. That is what he pledged. That was what she expected of him. Believed in him. That Subaru would keep fighting, without running.  
Subaru is a man who always gets back up. And if he was not, he could not continue being Rem's hero.

Subaru: “So here's my thanks for this power you gave me. By your esteem, even an utterly meritless prick like me can in these hopeless situations...”

Satella: “—Don't.”

Subaru: “Hopeless, situations...”

Subaru showers her with the fire stored up in his heart, spewing it all out—when Satella breaks her silence with a murmur.

Hearing that one fragment, Subaru's words dull of their momentum. His face stiffens, and that murmur he just heard, he desires to hear again.

What did she just say? It almost sounds like there was something she didn't want to hear.

Subaru swallows his breath as Satella lets the time pass, and again, speaks.

Satella: “—Please don't cry. Please don't hurt. Please don't suffer. Please don't, look sad.”

Whispers Satella to Subaru.

Her statement rocks his heart violently. With rage, with surprise, with a jumbling of every single unidentifiable emotion he had.

Subaru: “Y, ou... that...”

The maelstrom of emotion is much too big, and he has not a clue what to say.

His intense feelings block his throat as he flaps his mouth open and closed, looking at Satella in shock.

Satella proceeds in her jolting of the shaken Subaru.

Satella: “So, now you love.”

Subaru: “Ul, timately comes back to that, then. ...You're just all about twisting my emotions to get

me to eventually love you. What your saying's..."

Satella: "—No."

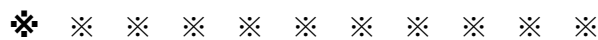
Satella interrupts Subaru's unsteady words with a shake of her head.

Her expression remains invisible. But by his skin Subaru can perceive just how Satella is looking at him from behind the curtain of dark.

—Satella, right now, she was

Satella: "—Now you love yourself, more."

Surely, gazing at Subaru with mercy.



It requires Subaru quite a bit a time for the meaning of those words to sink into his brain. What dominates Subaru's heart the instant the meaning does permeate is a formless, shake-provoking wave of emotion.

Subaru: "Fuck... are you, saying."

Satella: "...Please don't hurt. Be more dear to yourself."

Subaru: "And when you're the one who gave me RETURN BY DEATH. And when the power you gave me's what's given me this method of advancing."

Satella: "—I love you. So please, love yourself as well, protect yourself."

Subaru: "If my piteousness leads you to steal this method from me! What the fuck will be left for me!!"

In rejection of Satella's unending whispers of love, Subaru shouts at he puts his hand to his chest.

Subaru: "You have to know too, don't you!? I am completely powerless! No wits, no skill, I have no special powers at all! The only thing my inconsequential self has is the RETURN BY DEATH which you gave me! My life is the only possible payment I have to offer!"

Satella: "Please don't sorrow."

Subaru: "I've already sussed that it'll be painful, that I'll meet fates like death. And I'm fine with that, I am fine with that! If the only one who has to hurt in this is me, then I am fine with that!"

Satella: "Please don't suffer."

Subaru: "If I get damaged more than anybody else, I experience more than anybody else, go around to protect everyone, then it's all settled with nobody except me going through anything painful!"

There's nothing more I want!”

Satella: “Please don't cry.”

Subaru: “It sure doesn't fucking matter what happens to me! Like it would bother anybody what happens to some ass like me! However torn up I get, so long as everybody can reach the future safely, then...*hk*”

After all, if Subaru failed to continue being wounded at the front lines—

Subaru: “If we can welcome the future, without losing anyone, then...*hk*”

—He might irreparably lose somebody again.

Subaru: “...Rem is, gone.”

Satella: “—”

Subaru: “If I were smarter, had more ability, spent myself more liberally, placed myself at risk in the lead... we would've avoided it.”

The dolour and despair from back then remained binding Subaru always.

And so Subaru had elected, without relying on anyone, to continue being wounded fighting solo. Doing so was the most correct course, is what he had believed.

Subaru: “I have to believe... I have to believe there's some way I can do something...”

Believe that RETURN BY DEATH is a means that will solve everything.

Believe that if he could just use it well, he could end this without losing anything.

Believing this ethic, instructing himself of that, and so being wounded were all necessary. If he did not convince himself this was true, how could he possibly confront that despair again?

Subaru: “I! Don't want to lose anyone like how I lost Rem any more—!”

Grabbing his head, Subaru shrieks in rejection of every audible sound.

Before he knows it, he's squatted to the ground. Forgetting even to distance himself from Satella as he retreats into his shell, Subaru curls up as he denies her sweet whisperings.

Poison. She was poison. Everything of Satella's existence was a will-melting poison for Subaru.

Subaru's heart, supposedly having pledged to stay strong, fractures.

Inside the cracks there slips a cold despair, bringing back the memories of that day's dolour to pulverise Subaru's heart.

Sekhmet: “What a child.”

Mutters a voice.

Seeing Subaru screaming and crying, obstinately sticking to his self-made beliefs, shaking his head

like 'I don't wanna, I don't wanna', one of the silent witches mutters.

Sekhmet: “Crying, bawling, throwing a tantrum, taking everything upon himself... it's exactly like what...”

Subaru: “—”

Sekhmet: “—A lonely child would do.”

Is how Sekhmet appraises Subaru, in sympathetic and pitying voice.  
The silent witches make no action to refute Sekhmet's mutters.

The WITCH OF SLOTH had made an incredibly apt judgement.  
For Subaru's visage presently was that of a small, weak, pitiable child.

## CHAPTER 78: THESE SOUNDS TO SHED TEARS

Sekhmet: “Curling up, being stubborn... like a child. It's painful to see, and I can't bear to watch it—*haa*.”

Hearing Sekhmet's words as she appraises him as a child, withdrawn small inside his shell, Subaru thinks: *You might be exactly correct.*

Getting obstinate, believing he was right, paying no mind to what others said in his stubbornness—but even said, his methods were indeed the ones with least causalities, and reliable.

Imposing on repeats of the world to attain countless opportunities, Subaru could infinitely fight so long as he kept paying his life in exchange. Over the process Subaru's heart would assuredly weather again and again, come to the border of completely abrading.

But—for those times where he was brittle, near broken to pieces, Subaru already had been given the words to right and inspire him.

???: <—You're my hero, Subaru-kun.>

There. That was all Subaru needed.

If following his soul's erosion he had those words and everybody's presence, then he could desire nothing more.

Just what was so wrong with that?

???: “—Baru's crying?”

A young voice rings through the silence of the scene. The witches swallow their breath.

A small little hand pats the head of the curled-up Subaru. Glancing up, Subaru sees through his tear-blurred vision the dimly-reflected sight of a tan-skinned girl.

Subaru's frail gaze has landed on the WITCH OF PRIDE.

Typhon: “He's crying lots—poor sad boy. ...Who made him cry?”

Typhon gets up from bending over as she glowers at the other witches as they wordlessly stand there.

Her eyes host a fierce gleam as she looks over the other witches in sequence, her eyebrows raising as she lastly notices Satella's presence.

Typhon: “Tella? Tella's here? Why? Been lots of time.”

Typhon gives a wave as she calls to Satella, but the belligerent light in her eyes remains vivid. The first one to address this Typhon is Sekhmet, who gives a languid sigh as she uprights herself.

Sekhmet: “Typhon... *Haa*—He's having a retreat right now, so—*huu*—don't prod the boy—*haa*. Come over here—*huu*.”

Typhon: “Mom—did you do bad to Baru? Mom—are you a baddie?”

Sekhmet: “Your mom—*haa*—doesn't have the energy to be a bad person—*huu*. I've got no impulse to make either you or me do any work, you see—*haa*.”

Typhon gives a small nod, but shows no signs of distancing from Subaru as she was told. This time it's Minerva she looks at.

Typhon: "Nerva? Did you bully Ba... nah."

Minerva: "How come you're not asking me. It's totally not right. It's not like I'm always all about healing people, every so often I leave myself to the seething emotions of violence in my heart and... maybe, I... sometimes could hurt... hurt people, or something too."

Echidna: "It's pretty hard to imagine that someone who pales just by envisioning it could commit an act of violence."

Echidna shrugs as she teases Minerva and her rather implausible reply. Minerva glares sharply at Echidna, Typhon's gaze following the same path to likewise land on her. Typhon's young face twists into a frown.

Typhon: "Chidna. Chidna—did you do something bad again? Chidna—you're the baddie?"

Echidna: "Now what could it mean that it sounds more like a conclusion when it's asked to me. I'm thinking I'd like to ask her foster parent about that one in rigorous detail but, your thoughts?"

Sekhmet: "It's what you always do—*haa*."

Sekhmet exhaustedly puts her hand to her forehead. Typhon remains unseparated from Subaru's side, vigilantly looking to find 'the baddie who made Subaru cry'. Narrowing her eyes at the young witch's pep, Echidna mutters.

Echidna: "That aside."

Echidna: "With Typhon also showing up here, we've almost got a full assemblage. If Daphne showed up as well, it'd be a memory of four hundred years ago..."

???: "Did some-bod-y, just call for me?"

As if in response to Echidna's wonder, a black coffin abruptly appears in the meadow. Fully bound by restraints inside the coffin with blindfolds over her eyes, this is the WITCH OF GLUTTONY Daphne. She gives a small sniff, and having figured out everyone present by her sense of smell,

Daphne: "Ne-ver-mind Su-ba-ruun, Tella-Tella's here too? How amazing is this. Seven witches of deadly sin all together, and then even a sage candidate..."<sup>11</sup>

Echidna: "Daphne. —He's not there yet."

Daphne: "...Ahh, well, that's, apologies. But a-ny-way... sniff, sniff. I smell some-thing sal-ty, is someone crying? Is it Ner-Ner?"

---

11 Unclear if sage candidate should be 'a' or 'the'.

Daphne's failure to consider what's going on and floaty-toaty speech casually whack the tension of the scene.

This scene of the seven witches all together, including Satella, was not a sight that occurred so often even four hundred years ago.

The seven witches who once thrust the world into chaos—now in this livewire situation, powers liable to reshape the world itself were assembled together here.

The WITCH OF PRIDE—looking to cast judgement on the one who had made a small boy cry.

The WITCH OF WRATH—clenching her fists, looking for her close friend's feelings to bear fruit.

The WITCH OF SLOTH—paying heed to everyone's movements, languidly prepared to instantly attack if anything should happen.

The WITCH OF LUST—preserving her uninvolved demeanour, ready to protect only herself should matters escalate into a split-second situation.

The WITCH OF GLUTTONY—already unconcerned about any changes in the situation, puzzling over whose fingers would be best to munch.

The WITCH OF GREED—although displeased with the presence of one witch, her eyes sparkle with curiosity for whatever could possibly happen next.

And not the WITCH OF ENVY, but Satella—

Satella: “I am in love with you. —Because you gave me light. Because you took me by the hand, and taught me the world outside. Because through nights where in solitude I shivered, you kept by my side with your hands around mine. Because, then being alone, by your kiss you told me I wasn't. There are so many things you've given to me. ...And so, I love you. Because you—you gave me everything.”

Subaru: “—”

Subaru has not a single memory of any involvement in any part of Satella's whisperings.

He isn't part of it, doesn't know any of it. He has never met Satella, never spoken with her, never overlaid his warmth with hers. Everything she is talking about is the fruits of her delusion. This woman insane with sentiment had lined up empty daydreams where she simply watched a fantasy of Subaru.

Is what this should be, but NATSUKI SUBARU does know this.

Subaru: “Why're this... inside me, what is this? I don't want to feel this. Don't tether me with, non-existent memories... I... I damn... I goddamn...”

*Hate you*, is all he has to say.

All he has to do is stab the one giving him their feelings with the announcement that he held not a single speck of fondness for her. Then would be spectating just what expression the one egotistically trying to distort his emotions would make. Bet the pain to her heart would have her face twisting magnificently.

—How are you capable of doing that to her?

Typhon: “Baru?”



Sekhmet: “Oh, kid...”

Camilla: “H-He's...”

Minerva: “You...”

Daphne: “Subaruun?”

Echidna: “—Ah, that is yet another possible choice. Natsuki Subaru.”

The witches call to Subaru in their various ways, Echidna giving a small nod at this outcome.

Subaru: “—ghh, bhg”

—Still squatted curled up on the ground, Subaru bites to sever his tongue.

The witches had cornered him in, and he had no idea of what was anything anymore.  
In these conditions where his heart feels near to twisting, what remains for Subaru if even his volition is no longer free to act at will?  
If his stubbornness had simply been negated, then even that would still be okay.

*If interacting with Satella makes him accepting even of being negated...*  
The thought terrified Subaru.

—When happens, when you lose your life in a dream?

Subaru's body should still be inside SANCTUARY's tomb.  
What had been called here was Subaru's mental body, or perhaps said soul. If his mental body dies here, would that cause feedback on his physical body? Would his soul die?  
He didn't care. If it was a death to reset, he was ready for it.

He would not take the witches' help, he would scour himself down greater than he ever had before, cut away everything superfluous, and if he remained simply and wholeheartedly enthusiastic, the path would surely open. —He did this, and he'd...

Minerva: “That, idiot!”

The instant she notices Subaru's attempt at suicide, Minerva rolls up her sleeves and dashes, running to slam her healing fists into him. But, cutting in to stand between she and him is Typhon.  
The young witch stretches her little limbs out wide, blocking Minerva.

Typhon: “Baru chose it himself! Nerva—no interrupting!”

Minerva: “Wounding or suicide or murder or injury are nothing I'll allow before me! Mental anguish is goddamn nothing I care about! I couldn't give less of a crap about invisible wounds! And instead! Visible wounds alone I absolutely won't overlook!”

The ground caves in beneath her single step, Minerva's fist drilling through the wind as it closes in on Typhon's face.

The plummeting fist carries enough force to rupture a mountain, but the moment before it strikes a living creature that destructive energy converts to healing energy. However, the impact of the shockwave and blow itself do normally affect the target of the punch.

The boom resounds, the strike from Minerva's outstretched arm sending Typhon soaring.

The undeveloped girl shunts away easily as a leaf, dancing high through the meadow's false sky. It's a scene devoid of mercy—but Typhon is not the only one suffering damage.

Minerva: “—!”

From the shoulder down, Minerva's right arm shatters like ice crystals.

This was the result of having touched the judgement of the WITCH OF PRIDE, and her deed having been determined as evil.

Minerva looks to the sky, pained at the loss of her aim, opening her mouth wide to shriek—

Minerva: “A scratch!!”

—or not.

The WITCH OF WRATH, highly attuned to the pain of others, infinitely disregarded her own pain.

This was exactly playing ignorant to Natsuki Subaru's lifestyle, and disregarding herself for later.

Minerva: “Anyway, now I—!”

The obstacle gone, Minerva wrenches back her left arm as she bounds for Subaru. From above him her mighty arm aims to smash Subaru and—

Sekhmet: “I'll be getting in your way next—*haa*.”

Her blonde hair swaying to the motion, it takes a single instant for Minerva to slam into the ground. Her body pressed down to the earth as she creates a human-shaped crater in the meadow, Minerva raises her furious-red face as she screams at the seated Sekhmet.

Minerva: “Stop getting in the way! Sekhmet!”

Sekhmet: “That I won't be doing—*huu*. Sentimentally speaking, I'm on the kid's side—*haa*. And to add to that, I'm also on Typhon's side—*huu*. I have no reason not to get in the way—*haa*.”

Minerva frustratedly bites her lip at Sekhmet's battle declaration as she looks to the other witches. But, Daphne and Camilla are neutral to this fight unfolding, while Echidna is an onlooker surveying what results the spat will each. And Satella—

Satella: “Ahh... auhh...”

Crumbled to her knees as she sees Subaru spewing great loads of sanguine out his mouth, her voice trembles.

With the overflowing blood and his severed tongue blocking his throat, Subaru undergoes the

feeling of drowning as he catches Satella in a corner of his consciousness.

Crying, wasn't she.

She looked immeasurably shaken, witnessing Subaru's DEATH.

Satella: "Why haven't you realised...? That of everything you wish to protect, of course you should be included."

Why was it she thought this way about Subaru?

In her delusions, just how much of a support was Subaru for her heart?

Satella: "As it does to those struggling in the dead-end of fate, of course it would visit you too. But just because you alone have possibility of overturning it... you're someone who should be saved too, so why?"

She's entirely wrong.

Subaru was a hopeless fuck, unable to succeed even in the things he thought himself capable, unable to save those he wished to save, entirely a half-measures never-there prick, and he would never escape from that.

Had he not pledged? To escape from that, and to stop doing things halfway?

Had he not decided? To pretend to he was any better?

—His weak self, and his self desiring not to be weak, fight inside him.

Nobody may witness Natsuki Subaru's weakness now.

The strong, dignified, resolute lifestyle of a hero was what Subaru needed to live.

There was a girl who desired such of him. Subaru had placed a curse on that girl, and responsibility was on him to repay that girl his curse had bound. —No. Responsibility was nothing in the picture. Just, if she was believing in him, then he wanted to be as someone who would gain that belief. Because that girl told Subaru she loved him, Subaru wished to be someone who would continually gain her 'love you's.

Yes. That was it.

That was it.

If hypothetically saying for assumption that there were somebody who would mourn Subaru's DEATH, it'd be her.

Choosing DEATH was a betrayal of the girl who had believed in him. Of course, Subaru had no intentions to end merely with DEATH. He was prepared to use even DEATH as a stepping stone to abolish the reason behind the DEATH, and regain everything.

But, what happened to the people the DEATH-electing Subaru had left behind?

He mustn't think of it.

He mustn't know of it. Those thoughts were dangerous thoughts.

It was fine. Natsuki Subaru, as he was, was fine.

He mustn't think that somebody out there was mourning him.

He wasn't anybody worth such a thing. Subaru's life was a consumable item. Use it, use it, use it up, and ultimately reach the end—that was the single-merit consumable it ought to be.

Utilize dying practically and with effect. Absolutely do not face his own DEATH. Rationalize. He is fine to think nothing. For salvaging what he wished to salvage, determine to throw away what must be thrown away. Everyone does it. Subaru, too, ought to.

He saves those precious to him, those who ought to be saved, then this was all fine. If he could only do that, then Subaru—

Satella: “What on earth was it you saw, in the second TRIAL...?”

Trial. —Trial. Trial, TRIAL. TrialTrialTrial, TRIALTrialTrialTrial, Trial—?

Shock and insufficient oxygen dull his thinking incredibly. His vision blurs and blurs in a world flickering red, a storm like television noise running through his head, as he dimly thinks that the end ought to get on with it.

The end was coming slowly. What number was he on for times meeting DEATH? Counting was a nuisance, but that was okay.

Eventually, he would have to repeat and repeat his deaths until counting it was sickening. He doubted he could keep living maintaining a mentality which would bother tallying his deaths.

Heart of iron. Entirely unshakable, a heart of iron, in hand—

Slowly and slowly, Subaru's consciousness departs. And, fades,



???: <I'm expecting things from you, son.>

A sound. From beyond the noise, amongst the din, a horrifically clear sound.

???: <—Come home safe.>

Again. A different sound, but again. Bringing about the same thing to his chest, a sound.

???: <I had wished to call you a friend.>

Different sound. A changed feeling to it, too.  
This one terribly agitated him. But, it also had a pleasantness to it.

???: <Subaru-dono... I sincerely beg, for your forgiveness...>

Different sound again.  
Between the sombreness and near-aspiration crossing in his chest, a sound to guilt at.

???: <I, at least knew that... you aren't, they... but...>

A sound to constrict his chest.  
He hears this sound, and he cannot restrain himself. A sound near to tears. A sound which must not come to tears. A sound he must protect. Sound. Sound. Sound.

???: <Show me how awesome you can be, Subaru-kun.>

The sound of something inside him thumping to a high beat is his reaction to this sound.  
His body heats. A sense of duty spurs him to motion. This sound, had always been supporting him.

And,

???: <Thank you, Subaru.>

This sound.

???: <—For saving me.>

—This sound, which announced the beginning of everything.



He was probably crying.

If the people Subaru thought dearly of knew of his death, would they grieve for him?  
Those irreplaceable people he had left behind in the worlds where he had selfishly experienced DEATH, had they lamented Subaru's death, and grieved for him?

Those who had lost Subaru as he mourned his insufficient strength, repeating RETURNS BY DEATH in search of the optimum, failing at the final step—had they mourned for him?

There were people who he thought of as precious.  
There were people who he believed he must protect.  
There were people who he implored he must save from the dead-end of fate.

—Did he possess enough worth that those precious people would mourn him?

It was him, but he was enough for his precious ones to think him someone precious.  
So was his conceit, but was it okay?

It was him, but he was needed enough for those he wished to protect to wish to protect him.  
So was his inadvertent belief, but was it okay?

It was him, but he had enough worth for there to be people who would cry at his passing, that he could reach out to for rescue.  
So was his inadvertent wish, but would he be pardoned it?

—Was it okay for him to think it?

*I don't want to die.*

*I don't want to give up, thinking this method is the only one.*

*I don't want to disappear as I be the cornerstone for protecting the future of those precious to me.*

*In the future where they're protected, there alongside those precious to me, I want to be too.*  
He could think like this, but was it okay?

Did he have these qualifications?  
If he did, then—

Subaru: “I don't, wanna die...”

Alongside the sound of splurting blood and escaping air, he speaks.  
His supposedly tongue-clogged throats opens, his mouth flapping as he gasps for air. His lungs expand, oxygen cycles through his brain, his faded vision starts returning.  
And,

Minerva: “There's his real thoughts...”

—Her face fully red as she heals Subaru with a headbutt, the WITCH OF WRATH reaches him absent her legs, but on willpower.

## CHAPTER 79: END OF THE DREAM

The moment he realises that air is passing through his windpipe, Subaru gives an incredible cough to expel the remaining blood in his throat.

Still collapsed face-up on the ground as he pants, taking ragged breath after ragged breath, Subaru seeks oxygen, seeks the nourishment of life.

His heart has no timeslot to ponder on how wretched he looks right now.

But he does think that his weakness, unhesitatingly clinging to the path of rescue presented before him after severing his tongue in a bid for DEATH, is miserable.

Subaru: “My...”

Minerva: “—Hm?”

Subaru: “My life has value...? Without dying... value other than in dying over and over... exists, for me?”

RETURN BY DEATH, and in doing so save everyone from the grips of despair.

This outcome was one he could attain by paying his life, and he had believed it the only value to Natsuki Subaru.

But, maybe, could it be okay to think otherwise?

Subaru: “This person, me, has value other than in RETURN BY DEATH... is that okay for me to think? That the people I like... like me back too, can I... can I think, like that?”

Minerva: “...All that's nothing I could care about.”

Says Minerva bluntly as she averts her gaze.

She nimbly drags herself away from Subaru using only her left arm, having lost her right and her legs, as she turns to face her right shoulder—and bites. Immediately, droplets of light regenerate Minerva's missing arm.

Clenching and unclenching the fist of her now-sleeveless right arm, Minerva next goes for her legs—each missing from the thighs down. She punches at the root of the severance, and just like her arms, both her legs regenerate.

Her already-short skirt has grown even shorter, and with her bare right arm her appearance is very risky, but regardless the WITCH OF WRATH Minerva has returned to fighting fit condition.

She stands well on her regained legs, crossing her arms in a pose which emphasizes her voluptuous breasts, and looks down at Subaru.

Minerva: “Your value or whatever has nothing to do with me. But, she's wishing for you to stay alive, so... and, didn't you see it too, in the second TRIAL?”

Subaru: “...But, the second TRIAL was my mistakes, the sins I committed.”

Minerva: “Are you stupid? That wasn't something to make you take responsibility for the worlds where you messed up. That was something showing you how sad everyone was as a result of your

mistakes. —And wasn't that the answer you wanted?"

Subaru: "—hw"

He remembers.

A voice, crying. A voice, rue stifled. A voice giving strong farewell. A voice giving the usual, kind goodbye.

Whispers of love from who believed in him. The words of beginning, what were Subaru's motivation to fight.

None of which he was supposed to have had in his life.

Still possessing nothing, still having lost what should have been in his possession, was how Subaru believed he had been summoned to this world.

To prove his own worth, he needed to keep fighting. To protect those precious people he had acquired over that period of fighting, he needed keep walking further in solitude.

Only ever receiving from others—had been his supposition, but was he safe to think otherwise?

Would they cry for him?

Would they lament their powerlessness for him?

Would they desire to see the future, and see it with him alongside?

Would they allow him the qualifications to stand, smiling, at the side of those precious to him?

These qualifications, of questionable possession.

But surely if he walked to the end of the road that he had been, obstinate and alone, he would not be permitted to have them.

At the end of his fight, conducted with a heart of iron and entirely unshakable mental fortitude, he would surely forfeit the tenderness required for any smile to rise on his face.

And so, was he allowed to believe?

The option to procure a future for those precious to him, at cost of losing his own heart.

The option to frantically guard his own heart, at the cost of losing the road to proceed.

Was he allowed to believe in neither, and instead in some greedier option?

The option to see the future of those precious ones, while simultaneously remaining Natsuki Subaru, was an option that existed—was he allowed to desire this, to believe this?

Satella: "—You're allowed."

Subaru: "—"

These are the feelings of Subaru, not left voiced as he sheds only tears.

But the timing fits perfectly, as if they had been communicated in sound.

Still collapsed on the ground, Subaru moves his head to look beyond Minerva—where he sees her, still fallen to her knees on the grass, the tears left unwiped on her face as she smiles.

Subaru still cannot see her face.

A veil of darkness blocks it, and Subaru remains unable to determine her expression. But, the fact



that she is smiling does communicate.

Echidna had said it. That the reason Subaru could not see her face was because he was not accepting her. That her smile communicates is because his unconsciousness is determining something he truly is seeing as something he is not seeing.

Satella: “You saved me. And so, I will pardon that you be saved. I am wishing for you to be saved.”

Knowing that Satella's words, her voice, are permeating his fractured heart leads Subaru to bury his face in his arms. The tears had already made it a mess, and unmistakably there would be no way for his face to get more unpresentable this late in the game, but regardless he wishes for nobody to see it.

After his incredible badmouthing of her, how was it that Satella's words still brought him relief?

And how could he possibly show how his expression softened?

But that said, it was true that Satella's arcane words of LOVE or what call them had allowed Subaru to truly understand the TRIAL.

Echidna: “...It's surprising that Minerva broke through Typhon and Sekhmet's obstructions, but personally what surprises me more is you two.”

Mutters Echidna quietly as she places Subaru aside as another matter.

Looking first at Minerva and her restored limbs, Echidna shifts her gaze elsewhere—to Typhon pinned beneath the claws extending from the black coffin, and the coffin's owner Daphne as she faces down Sekhmet.

Daphne: “It's un-mis-ta-ka-ble that I'm, the one with best a-ffin-i-ty, against Ty-Ty. The cen-ti-pede coffin has, no brain to think with, and it's my arms and legs. Ty-Ty's authority has ter-ri-ble compatibility.”

Typhon: “Aug—stop it—Phinnie! Hnn! Auug!”

Sekhmet: “And so—*haa*—you're using your real body for holding me in check, then—*huu*? I'm not Echidna—*haa*—but just why are you pulling this stunt—*huu*? Unlike with Minerva, I don't understand your reasoning for this—*haa*.”

Sekhmet scratches rigorously at her overwhelming, overflowing head of hair. With Typhon practically taken hostage, not even Sekhmet can be careless here.

Daphne smiles, her pigtails swaying.

Daphne: “We-ell,”

Daphne: “So silly Subaruun, he talked some p-re-tt-y big lip to me. A-ppa-ren-t-ly he, killed the White Whale, and next is the Sizeable Hare? Then, so I was thinking, I want him to at least make, it to challenging them.”

Echidna: “An interesting stance. If he ever feels the urge, he can indeed achieve that. You should be aware of that, too... do you mean you want the Sizeable Hare to be destroyed?”

Daphne: “Whatever? The mo-ment it split, a-way from me, its hunger stopped having a-ny-thi-ng to do with mine. It can be de-stroyed and it won't really bother me, but... maybe I am a little in-ter-es-ted in how the Sizeable Hare, my very in-ex-tin-guish-a-ble starvation itself, will end.”

*After all*, says Daphne.

Daphne: “If ending means being fulfilled, that's a happiness com-plete-ly un-known to me.”

For a Daphne constantly tormented by endless hunger, fulfilment was an eternally unreachable dream.

The Sizeable Hare reflected her unending starvation, and was deemable as another version of herself. —Although, Daphne had absolutely no such sense of closeness to it.

Should the Sizeable Hare meet an end differing from the one Daphne did, would that end be a satiating one? Would there have existed chance for her to be fulfilled? Was the rare non-hunger kind of interest in her smile.

Echidna nods to Daphne's reply with full satisfaction, then turning her attention not to Subaru, nor Satella, nor Minerva. Not to Daphne and Sekhmet, not to Typhon, but to a somebody standing in a spot isolated from the commotion, as Echidna was.

Seeing the WITCH OF LUST Camilla, Echidna lightly strokes at her white hair.

Echidna: “What about you, Camilla? Do you maybe have a reason, like Daphne did?”

Camilla: “I-Is, there... some... something you're, t-trying to... say? E-Echidna-chan?”

Echidna: “It's simple. —You called to his consciousness as it was in the grips of death, moments before its extinguishment. You would have known what would come of it, when it was you with your authority FACELESS GODDESS doing it.”

Camilla: “—”

Echidna: “Your call would have held every significance for him. And you would have understood that. And so I ask. You didn't think fondly of him. Why did you?”

Camilla puts her hand to her mouth, her gaze puttering about. That she directs her eyes to Daphne and Minerva is an action hoping for others to come in and back her up.

But there is no WITCH in this place that will be seduced by the all-beloved Camilla.

Camilla bites her finger in a 'nothing going' kind of way, her eyes watering as she looks at Echidna.

Camilla: “Th-there... wasn't, really... a reason? H-he, turned down... down, your t-temptations, so, I'm... all satisfied... a-and, even though every... everyone is, mad and... fighting, it's not... affecting me, so... but,”

Echidna: “But?”

Camilla: “L-LOVE is, so... important? I-It's bad t-to, ignore that... mm, you mustn't, do that. He might... be thinking he, d-doesn't want to... see it, but, there is... LOVE there... and when something's, there... I won't let, it... be denied. A-and, also, t-to me... null reciprocity is a hell no.”

Camilla speaks the final point alone with frightening clarity. Echidna shrugs.  
The WITCH OF GREED, smiling wryly, looks over the witches one by one.

Echidna: “Sekhmet and Typhon acted to respect his will, Minerva respected life and healed him. Daphne assisted in his prolonged survival for the sake of seeing his fighting spirit or what-to-call-it through, while Camilla utilized her authority to inform him of the love he'd constantly ignored. — Everyone and everybody has their various platforms, from which they attempted to aid Natsuki Subaru.”

Is how Echidna appraises the witches' actions, prompting the witches' expressions to shift. Pride tilts her head, Sloth gives a listless sigh, Wrath snorts as she crosses her arms, Gluttony eats a leg from the coffin as she smiles, Lust's face twists in disgust. And, having seen these reactions, Greed puts her hand to her chin.

Echidna: “It truly is interesting. —Don't you agree?”

Echidna's mouth relaxes, a blissful smile rising on her face.  
Her statement is aimed at the one directly before her—his body wavering as he stands up, Subaru.

Wiping his still-wet teartracks with his sleeve and having managed to stand, Subaru gives Echidna's question no reply.  
His eyes look passionlessly over the witches.

Subaru: “Seriously... just what are you all.”

Witches: “—”

Subaru: “Curiosity. Sympathy. Pity. Duty. Disgust. Expectation. ...Basically none of your reasons for supporting me make any real sense. I get what the title of 'witch' means, here.”

Echidna: “If you're back to speaking insults, then have you perhaps regained your spirit?”

Subaru: “...I don't know.”

Mutters Subaru as he puts his hand to his chest.  
Those words very succinctly expressed all of Subaru's present feelings.

Subaru: “What I have to do is supposed to have been decided. Those things I have to do haven't changed at all. That's definite. Definite.”

*But*, he says, speaking to himself rather to anyone else,

Subaru: “I'd decided that this was the only method for doing it. That's what I chose... what I had resolved to choose. But even despite that, here the TRIAL broke me.”

The second TRIAL, the uncomeatable present—which speared Subaru with the consequences of his actions, while the reality he had used the word 'resolve' to distract from ripped his heart to shreds.

Having been shown that, Subaru further sought a clear rationalization, and had attempted to stick through with his resolve. And realistically, that was supposed to have happened.

Subaru: “But, learning your true motives after having once thought you someone whose help I could accept, and then right afterwards having Satella appear... my head is frazzled. All of you, stop going off just doing all these things. What I ought to do is something I am saddled with. Is what it's meant to be, but...”

This late, now made to cling to the life he had rationalized expendable, what was he meant to do?  
This late, now made to feel attachment to the life he had determined to use, what was he meant to do?

This late, now made aware that he was loved, what was he meant to do?

Subaru: “I have just, no idea what to do any more.”

*If you don't die, you can't protect everyone!* screams Subaru's rationality.  
*There are people who will grieve over your scouring yourself away,* Subaru's memories tell him.  
He doesn't die, and people will sorrow. He does die, and people will sorrow.

Echidna: “—I will present you this question once again, Natsuki Subaru.”

Says Echidna, her tone low.

Subaru looks up, to find Echidna standing directly before him, her finger raised.

Seeing herself reflected in Subaru's eyes, Echidna nods slowly.

Echidna: “Should I collaborate with you, you will without fail arrive at a future where those you want to save are saved. You'll surely lose the need for deliberation. Speaking in extremes, I will be reliable for solving the problems you will face. All you need to do is concentrate fully on implementing those solutions, and only on overcoming the barricades. If continuous deliberation is painful for you, the option is available for you to entrust all of that to me. I will not fault you for it, and in a sense I will welcome it. And so, I will present you with this question once again.”

Subaru says nothing.

Echidna: “Having no clue what to do any more, would you let me guide your hand? My promise is that, without fail, I will bring you to the future.”

Says Echidna gently as she presents her hand to Subaru.

Looking down at her pale fingers, looking up at her awaiting face, Subaru's breath freezes.

This is the same proposal as what he has just rejected.

Subaru had learned of Echidna's true nature then, and been terrified of her mentality which operated only off of nigh-frightening curiosity.

But, how about now? Having had a short break, and then thinking calmly over what she is saying, how about it?

Treating his life as a consumable, going through every pattern of trial-and-error, forcibly

surmounting the obstacles in his path via a rather heavy-handed method. Subaru's state after accepting Echidna's aid would be one of continuous fighting while his heart erodes—but that said, even should he decline her help, how would his state during his solo efforts differ at all?

Subaru had been stubborn, and unable to stomach his repulsion for her attitude, he had rejected Echidna.

But if he had the resolve to truly abandon everything and make himself a sacrifice, if he could just ignore Echidna's nature, what he should do is utilize her just as she proposed.

But even that his integrity had rejected. If he was headed along the exact same path regardless—then what exactly was the point of Subaru's relentless refusals?

He ought to take that hand.

Should he have the resolve to keep fighting without any fear of being hurt, swallowing down his pain and suffering, he ought to take that hand.

And so,

Subaru: “Echidna.”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “I'm afraid of being hurt.”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “I hate pain, and suffering, and sadness. I don't want to go through awful experiences, I don't want to see others meet terrible fates. —I don't, want to die.”

Echidna: “—”

Subaru: “And so, your hand which presupposes sacrifices—I can't take anymore.”

Not even Subaru exactly knew what it was he could do here.

But he no longer seemed capable of choosing a path with the same premise as Echidna's.

He had wound up being aware that he did not want to die.

He had wound up learning that there were people who would accept him even without his death, when he had thought himself useless outside of dying.

Natsuki Subaru was a man whose worth was not only in dying.

Because the people who mourned Subaru's DEATH were not people mourning him while seeing worth in his DEATH.

So then, there was SOMETHING about him which made them mourn?

Subaru: “I still don't know what that something is. —But, I'm thinking to find out. Once I know what it is, I think I'll be able to repay everyone in a way other than DEATH.”

Echidna: “...However, there lies a path of thorns, Natsuki Subaru. While it is truth that rationalizing death as a tool to cut open the way, proceeding along the route while scouring yourself down, is a

rugged path—it unmistakably remains as the shortest road for reaching the future. The only thing you need to offer is your heart. To deny this, and intend to keep your own heart as well as the future of those precious to you, is an act of extraordinary difficulty, and above all—

Cutting off there, Echidna takes a breath.

And, with the most resplendent smile she has ever shown rising on her face,

Echidna: “—Greed.”

Affirming his desires, the WITCH OF GREED accepts Subaru's decision with her expression pleased. This witch, having had her proposal denied but still smiling happily, is indeed beyond Subaru's understanding. But,

Subaru: “That you saved me countless times alone is truth. ...Even if it was entirely all you thinking of me like some lab rat or whatever, that is truth.”

Echidna's presence had been a mental support, by which he had overcome troubles. For being given those spaces of time to protect his mind, he was indeed grateful.

Echidna: “—Foolish, pitiful Garfiel is scared of the outside world.”

Subaru: “...huh?”

Echidna: “What he saw in the first TRIAL has always been binding him. If you're to break through this situation by yourself, I'd say you'd need to undo that curse on him.”

Subaru: “Echidna?”

Echidna: “The other witches have been very friendly with you, and if I then present you nothing, what an outrage it'll be. Having you think THE WITCHES WERE ALL FUNDAMENTALLY GREAT GUYS, EXPECT THAT ECHIDNA SHE WAS JUST THE WORST is truly nothing I want. I may be me but I am still a girl, and that I'm fond of you is truth.”

Speaking quickly, Echidna lightly pokes Subaru in the chest.

Pushed a step back by the momentum, Subaru looks up to find Echidna averting her gaze. Her white hair swaying, the WITCH OF GREED steps away from Subaru.

The other witches, too, watch Subaru silently.

Subaru: “...You guys are all a bunch beyond anything I can understand.”

Witches: “—”

Subaru: “You throw my head into so much disarray I could go crazy, and even now I'm still fuming pissed about what you said. This whole time I've been thinking 'stop talking over my head about things I don't know', and I will never come to like you guys.”

Sincere thoughts.

The witches all had their respective and ironclad values, which Subaru—no, which any ordinary

person—would unmistakably conflict with.

And so Subaru could not comprehend them, or accept their actions with understanding. But just like what he thought with Echidna, an inability to comprehend, and gratitude, were separate.

Subaru: “Thank you for trying to let me die. Thank you for trying to not let me die. Thank you for letting me hear these important voices. —For these, thank you.”

As he bows his head to the witches one by one, the way they swallow their breath is rather satisfying.

Subaru then turns, walks.

Ahead of him, a girl remains on her knees on the grass—it is Satella.

She looks up at Subaru and his approach, her breath holding to a stop.

Seeing her frightened, seeing her in exactly the state of a small young girl, Subaru loses his speech.

Why was it that when faced with someone he had thought abhorrent, his heart fills with warmth? What were these emotions he harboured for someone he had never even touched before?

This place had given Subaru far too many questions lacking answers.

Still without a single answer and choosing the option of CONTINUE DELIBERATING, Subaru offers his hand to the seated Witch.

She looks at his offered hand, lost and uncertain.

Subaru: “I... have no idea what you are. I don't understand why you're telling me you love me, or what you're... or what you mean when you say that I saved you.”

Satella: “Ah...”

Subaru: “But that the RETURN BY DEATH you've given me has saved me is fact. That I've fully relied on it, and doing so managed to get here is also truth.”

Satella: “—”

Subaru: “RETURN BY DEATH is an option available to me... is what this all is?”

Satella: “—”

Subaru: “I won't make any simple rationalizations of it. —But, that you who gave me RETURN BY DEATH, are what's made me feel I don't want to die, is unmistakable.”

And so,

Subaru: “Like you said, I'll try... just a little bit, try liking myself more. Try treating myself dearly. I have no idea what'll happen once I'm doing that but, that's okay.”

Satella: “...Will you be all right?”

Subaru: “Yeah. Compared to dying, it's nothing.”

Subaru answers to Satella's worried voice as he crafts a weak smile.  
Seeing his expression, Satella worriedly takes hold of his hand.

Instantly, the noise of the world breaking comes to Subaru's eardrums.  
The sky's blue and meadow's green fade in colour, signalling Natsuki Subaru's release from the castle in a dream.

Subaru: “—Back outside, then.”

What he's doing, and why he's here, are vague.  
He will exit, and then what should he do first? The issues of his heart had made even this question into something unclear.

Satella: “Don't deliberate alone. Please, with those who think you dear alongside...”

Subaru: “—”

Satella: “With the people who don't desire your death, the people who desire not to let you die, fight alongside. ...And when even that isn't enough, die without forgetting what it is to fear death.”

Subaru: “—”

Satella: “Please don't forget—that there are people, who will grieve your death.”

The world is cracking to pieces.  
Satella's voice grows distant. That fact rips at Subaru's heart terribly.

This palm in his hand is frightfully hot.  
He must not let this hand go, is the feeling he has.

Subaru: “—I,”

He cannot get the words out to call her.  
His call to her, his call of her name, is not coming. *You must not voice that name*, says his desire to reject her, as it fights with his desire to accept her.

The sky is falling. The ground is breaking. Light abounds, the surroundings no longer the shape of the castle in a dream.  
The other witches have vanished from here, leaving this world to only Subaru and Satella.

He was fading. And beginning.  
—Directly before him is Satella, Subaru unable to say anything as he keeps her in his gaze.

Subaru: “—”



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The veil of darkness falls.

The ebony he had supposedly been unconsciously rejecting is dispelled.

Revealed from beneath is her face, which in seeing, Subaru swallows his breath.

Satella's silver hair sways, her amethyst eyes narrow, and with tears falling from their edges—

Satella: “And one day—no matter what, come to kill me.”

Departing.

Disappearing.

The world vanishing, even the sight of the girl before him falling invisible.

Subaru: “I, no matter what—”

But gripping down firm on the warmth of her palm, Subaru—

Subaru: “—Will save you.”

Facing the unseen, darling girl, that alone does he assert.





## INTERMISSION: THE GUEST OF HONOUR HAS LEFT

Sekhmet: “Have to wonder whether you're—*haa*—okay letting them leave like that—*huu*.”

Echidna: “It was his decision, his choice. And I would prefer to respect that ...Though that he left while taking the hand of that thing is something I do have some unkind thoughts about.”

Echidna shrugs in reply to Sekhmet's listless voice.

As always the two are inside the castle in a dream, the blue sky above suffering not a single alteration. The fresh breeze blows past, caressing the hair of the witches again without change.

—After the fracturing world swallowed Subaru and Satella, freeing them from the dream, the world immediately reconstructed.

Well of course. This indestructible space tied to Echidna's soul would remain in this state so long as Echidna existed. The whole thing amounted to nothing more than an extravagant production, with the two being cast offstage.

Echidna: “That said, when you fire off shots so helter-skelter I do have to feel some fatigue. It'd be a great help if you could practise a little more moderation when you're going berserk with the healing.”

Minerva: “I was just following my credo, healing wounds where I could see them. There's no discrimination between humans or witches or creatures or birds or fish or bugs or witchbeasts, the wounds of anything living are my enemy!”

Echidna: “Yes, but unlike when in life, the burden for your actions gets placed on me. When you were alive the world was made to shoulder the burden, so then I'm sure even your imagination can figure how tough it is for me alone to bear it?”

Minerva: “Fatigue, or whatever kind of invisible blah I really couldn't be bothered about. I heal wounds. So it shortens the life span of the world or whatever, not like that's my problem.”

As she crosses her arms, emphasizing her abundant chest, the other witches smile wryly at Minerva. From a glance, the WITCH OF WRATH Minerva would be the witch of sin who was easiest to like—you could even call her a harmless witch.

The entirety of her actions are only healing, and to enumerate number of lives she saved during her lifetime would require more than a 5-digit number.

—However, the one that brought about casualties of equal measure was also Minerva.

All the destructive energy from punching, kicking, biting and so on would be converted to healing energy once expelled from her. This algorithm was the authority of WRATH, and thus only Minerva was capable of performing this. Even Echidna, who understood its construction, could not reproduce it.

Minerva's healing attacks distanced every living creature from threatening threats. —In a sense her authority seems supreme, but such thinking would be mistaken.

The healing power triggered by Minerva's fists was the result of a coercive algorithm which twisted karma, and required an immense mana cost for each strike. That mana requirement was not any volume a single human could shoulder, and even for the witch Minerva and her magical groundings, the load was impossible.

So where does she get the mana for her attacks? The answer is simple: she steals it from the nexus of the world.

Ordinarily when people use magic, they inhale the mana in the atmosphere through their gates, convert it into magical energy, and again release it through their gates to cast magic.

In Minerva's case the gate isn't the atmosphere, but a direct linkage to the core of the world. Said in more complicated terms, the core of the world is a supernaturally great concentration of mana—call it the place where mana is created.

Minerva's attacks withdraw mana from that, converting it into strikes of healing.

Through continued repetitions of this act, mana which should be provisioning someplace in the world becomes unable to reach it. With a starvation of the mana which is important in constructing the world, an extremely dangerous possibility spawns for these unsupplied regions to suffer natural disaster and calamity.

The number of people Minerva had directly punched into health exceeded five digits.

—But the number of lives she had indirectly snuffed by bringing about natural disaster was on equal par.

And so the WITCH OF WRATH Minerva was the witch most regarded as dangerous, and considered an enemy by every nation.

Minerva: “When we're here, the only mana I can draw is the amount that Echidna has. I'm only able to cure and heal up until you're basically run dry, which is so lame.”

Echidna: “There shouldn't be any reason for injured people to be happening here in the first place. But with all the ruckus that's gone on here lately you could almost forget that.”

Minerva: “Right... yeah. There was a ruckus, for a little while.”

Minerva's energy fades, her loveable face sinking into obvious gloom as she looks up at the sky.

Minerva: “Do you think he'll do okay? I am soo worried.”

Echidna: “What would unmistakably go okay was my hand which he rejected. Regardless, he'll be struggling frantically for everything to go well. Doesn't seem he can get the answer yet, though.”

Minerva: “What is that, that phrasing. You guided him so that he'd reject you, and then you're trying to hide your feelings from us, when we know what you're really thinking? That's just pointless.”

Echidna: “It wasn't really that I was trying to be rejected. —Since whether he declined or accepted, I would've been glad with either.”

Echidna seats herself at the regenerated table, clicking her fingers to produce a teacup, ferrying the steaming thing to her mouth.

Echidna: “I affirm choices, and the outcomes of those choices. I don't much think the particulars of how that choice came about as a problem. The reality of having chosen, the reality of having not chosen, those are what is important. Whether the outcome be bad or good, I can brag of my dispositional ability to enjoy either.”

Daphne: “But that doesn't, mean you don't, have your pre-fer-en-ces.”

A black coffin leisurely comes to stand beside the tea-toting Echidna. Daphne has at some juncture nested herself back inside the coffin, devouring the sweets on the table like a dog.

Daphne: “You say that you'll re-spect out-comes, but Idna-Idna wouldn't hes-i-tate to guide toward an outcome that Idna-Idna wants to see. That you're glad with either is pro-ba-bly truth, but that you're glad it was this I bet wouldn't be truth.”

Echidna: “You have so very little interest in others, and yet you still manage to hit to the point, don't you, Daphne.”

Daphne: “Compared to the hunger con-stant-ly tormenting me, this just doesn't bear thinking. Haa, haa, munchmunch.”

Daphne surpasses the just sweets as she winds up eating the plate too. Echidna sighs at her, then turning her attention to the other witches as they start seating themselves at the remaining chairs. Listlessly, plainly indignant, timidly—and one with an extraordinarily stern look in their eyes.

Echidna: “You do look angry, Typhon.”

Typhon: “Cause you're not honest—Chidna. Not being honest—means you're a liar? And liars are baddies? Chidna—you're a baddie?”

Echidna: “I act sincerely in accordance to what it is I want. Telling lies is something I have no present recollection of doing.”

Echidna's roundabout phraseologies do not work on the young Typhon. Should Echidna get Typhon in a bad mood, she knew that everyone present would consequently be in danger.

Condemning criminals and judging sinners amounted to nothing more than a fragment of Typhon's authority of PRIDE.

But, seeing Typhon puff out her cheeks in assent with Echidna's mental tightrope walking, the next one to speak is a witch buried in a ball of hair.

Sekhmet: “Hiding your real intentions while speaking—*haa*—makes what you're saying not a lie—*huu*. Very convenient for you—*haa*.”

Camilla: “E-Echidna-chan... is, is really such... a huge, pain... i-isn't she...”

Echidna: “You two...”

Echidna scrunches her face beneath the concentrated attack. In seeing it, the other witches smile. The only one whose brows are still peaked low as they watch on is Minerva.

Sekhmet: Are you planning to be crotchety forever, Minerva? Of course we'd all be talking together. You knew this'd happen if a sage candidate came...

Minerva: "Yeah I know, shut it. I'm saying I agree with having a real talk. Just, unlike you guys I'm not in a position where I can rationalise about it. I'd like you to understand that."

Daphne: For Met-Met who hangs out all the time with Ty-Ty, she wouldn't understand. Everyone just spends way too much of their life on things that aren't eating.

Minerva and Sekhmet snort displeasedly at Daphne.

While the tea party between witches does preserves its kind of equilibrium, the attendants here are still all people with egotistic dispositions. More often than not they fail to see eye-to-eye with each other, and that the conversation turns into spats like this is nothing rare.

Notably Minerva, prone to jabbing out at anyone, and Sekhmet, who dislikes conflict, had more than a few verbal skirmishes. Every time, Daphne would interrupt with her disregard to conversational mores, hitting right to the heart of the matter. That the conversations would end like this, without any real conclusion, was ordinary.

Minerva gets mad, Sekhmet entertains her conversation, Daphne comes in with teasing, Camilla soothes Typhon so that she doesn't explode, Echidna watches on happily from aside—and Satella watches over them, smiling at the safety of the six others.

Those were the days from four hundred years ago, never to come again.

Satella went mad from the witch factor, Minerva died insane in a trap, Camilla burned to nothing in a great fire, Daphne wasted to death in a sea of sand, Typhon drowned in a flood, Sekhmet fell down the Great Cascade as she decimated the Dragon, Echidna gathered their souls and yet remains bound to the present world in soul only.

This was an imperfect reproduction of those forever-gone days.

Camilla: "Y-you look, sad... Echidna-chan. You look, very... sad."

Echidna: "Hm? There's no reason at all for me to be sad. You're here, and I get my chances to interact with the outside. —No necessity, at all."

Camilla: "A-are, you... okay, with that? We're... w-we're just, souls, so... we're not, really us. We're... mm, al-already... dead. There i-isn't, anyone... really with, you... Echidna-chan."

Camilla's stuttering words strike Echidna momentarily silent.

—Echidna's power was what gave the witches, lost of their flesh and existing only as souls, their temporary forms in the form of mental bodies.

Echidna prepares vessels, and houses the souls in there.

But the souls are frozen in the state they were when they died, with not a single change afterwards.

Was the Camilla Echidna was gazing at a visage that truly belonged to Camilla?

Drawing from their souls their pre-death reactions, manipulating their bodies to put on a show—could this not some form of playing dolls, instigated by Echidna's desires?

The witches did share Echidna's knowledge.

And how to explain that if not with the statement that their existences were produced from inside Echidna? —That said, this quandary was one Echidna had already thought to death countless times over.

Echidna: “Bundle of narcissism that you are, regardless of you being my friend it's unusual for you to be worried for me. ...Could his boisterousness and simpleness have influenced you, too?”

Camilla: “Au, gh... I don't, care, any more... Echida-chan you, idiot.”

Says Camilla, her expression disappointed, in response to Echidna distracting herself from her feelings.

Echidna involuntarily clicks her throat as she laughs at Camilla's reply.

Echidna's attitude attracts the gazes of those witches who had not been paying her focus. Showered in their attention, Echidna spreads her arms.

Echidna: “Now, I'm sure the tea party will go back to belonging only to witches for a while. His—Natsuki Subaru's—trespass in this place likely won't be happening again.”

Minerva: “And you're okay with that? Not like I'm really worried about you being lonely, but you did say that something at the end there. You're supposed to be really annoying about getting compensation or whatever for that.”

Echidna: “Compensation... right, there was that. That was my parting gift for him and his foreseeable tribulation. —If I told you such a thing, would you maybe laugh at me?”

Echidna puts her hand to her chin as she ponders. The other witches share a glance. And the witches nod, all simultaneously opening their mouths to speak—

Witches: “—Nope.”

Echidna: “Goodness, more people have recognized goodness in me than I thought...”

Minerva: “After all, you getting no compensation and just helping for helping's sake would never happen.”

Says Minerva with her arms crossed, to which the other witches nod.



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Echidna closes her eyes at their consensus. She gives a cough.

Echidna: “My thought was I had incredibly many cases requiring of careful discussion with you all. Truly, what is that you think of me?”

Witches: “—”

Echidna: “But, well.”

Before the silent witches, Echidna drinks dry her cup, her red tongue licking salaciously over her lips.

Echidna: “—You're not wrong in the least.”